

## Unit 10

# The Role of the Mass Media and Social Media

Joseph Vancell

### Synopsis

Citizens in democracies enjoy freedom of speech and expression. This unit discusses the significant role of the mass and social media in contemporary societies. It argues that the media give citizens and politicians a space where they can share their ideas and perhaps protest against injustices and wrong policies. The media also help in keeping the people's representatives and leaders accountable. The new social media have penetrated deeper into our social lives and, thereby, they have become extremely important in democracies.

### Keywords

**Mass media:** those means of communication that reach and influence large numbers of people. These include newspapers, magazines, radio and television. These are also referred to as the 'traditional media'.

**Social media:** those means of communication that are primarily hosted by the Internet. They include popular networking sites, like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram. They also include blogs, wikis and websites that allow individuals to engage in conversations.

## Learning Outcomes

- » Describe the role of the media in a democracy.
- » Distinguish between the mass media and social media.
- » Describe the benefits and challenges of the media in a democracy.

*The transformation of communication from mass communication to mass self-communication has contributed decisively to alter the process of social change. As power relationships have always been based on the control of communication and information that feed the neural networks constitutive of the human mind, the rise of horizontal networks of communication has created a new landscape of social and political change by the process of disintermediation of the government and corporate controls over communication. This is the power of the network, as social actors build their own networks on the basis of their projects, values, and interests (Castells, 2014, p. 143).*

## Introduction

One of the most significant aspects of the 2016 electoral campaign in the United States of America (USA) was Donald J. Trump's use of Twitter, which as most social analysts agreed, was part of a strategy which helped him win the American Presidency against all odds. Trump managed to master Twitter in a way no presidential candidate ever had, "unleashing and redefining its power as a tool of political promotion, distraction, score-settling and attack – and turning a 140-character task ... into a centerpiece of his campaign" (Barbaro, 2015). Today, Trump has 27.4 million followers on Twitter, 21.8 million followers on Facebook and 6.4 million followers on Instagram, making him the most popular politician on social networking sites.

Another important feature of the 2016 campaign was that Trump, a former television personality, turned sour to the traditional mass media – television, radio and newspapers – which previously made him famous. During his long-running campaign he regularly denounced journalists from established media outlets that enjoyed international audiences, including CNN, the



Set of popular social media icons: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tango, BlendGenie Group Mess, Opinion, CircleMe, Knit, Learnist.

Image Credit: tanuha2001/Shutterstock.com

BBC and The New York Times, as “scum”, “illegitimate” and “horrible people”. He encouraged crowds at his rallies to heckle reporters, accused media outlets of being part of a ‘global conspiracy’ to prevent his election and promised that he will make it easier to sue journalists (Garrahan and Murphy, 2016). Currently, President Trump is still at loggerheads with the mass media institutions that either disagree with his policies or do not believe his stories. Similar stories of politicians ditching the mass media for the new media unfolded in Britain during the Brexit campaign, and in other European electoral campaigns. Why has this happened? Why is the social media so much more important for politicians today? What are the advantages of the social media over traditional mass media? Why are the media important in a democracy? These are some of the questions which this unit will now seek to answer.

### **The role of the media in a democracy**

Traditionally, in America and Europe, as elsewhere in the free world, the mass media constituted one of the most important pillars of democracy. Democracy and the media are dependent on each other. In Malta, for example, the freedom of expression and, thereby the freedom of “broadcasting, television or other means of communication”, including newspapers, are



enshrined in Article 41 of the Constitution of Malta. Puddephat (2006, p. 14) notes that the freedom of expression “is protected in all significant international and regional human rights treaties” including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 19), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 19), and the European Convention on Human Rights (Article 11).

One of the core principles of democracy is that governments must be, as Abraham Lincoln put it in his Gettysburg address, “of the people, by the people, for the people”. In order for this to happen, governments must pay attention to public needs and opinions, which are often communicated via the media. The media must also offer a space to politicians to explain complex policies and decisions to the citizens in order to build the necessary public support.

The media, through its journalists, must also identify successes and problems in government policies and actions, and serve as a medium for discussion. It keeps the government accountable to its citizens by reporting any unethical, criminal and undemocratic behaviour perpetrated by the elected representatives, and creates grassroots pressure for their rectification. In other words, the media must act as a watchdog and guardian of the public interest within a democratic state. Therefore, the media must alert and mobilise public opinion to humanitarian causes and injustices and allow pluralism to express itself by presenting different political and ideological ideas.

Leaders of authoritarian regimes do not want the public to read, hear or see news that scrutinises their behaviour. They do not want journalists to identify, delve into and publish stories about any abuse of power. If this happens, the public might engage in protest and challenge their authority. These regimes, therefore, censor and control those involved in the media and do not allow them to work in freedom. Cases in point are the authoritarian Communist regime of China and the despotic dictatorship of North Korea who have long kept strict controls and checks on traditional and new media in order to stop any potential challenge to their power. Lately, human rights groups have noted that the supposedly democratic governments of Turkey and Azerbaijan are strongly curtailing investigative journalism, and concurrently diminishing citizens’ rights and accountability.

### **The new computer and internet-mediated media**

As argued in the chapter about the Information Revolution (refer to Unit 7, Module 4) in the past thirty years, there was a rapid development in computer technology, including the Internet (Castells, 2009, p. 65). This

created a profound change in communications: while traditional media continued to deliver knowledge, the new social media are now sharing knowledge created by both the traditional media platforms (for example, online newspapers and television stations) and citizens. The latter are now equipped with computers, tablets and smartphones and can easily upload and share text-based news, podcasts and video recordings of personal stories, opinions, experiences and witness accounts. Through social media citizens are therefore no longer passive receivers of knowledge. They are, according to (Castells, 2009, p. 63), now engaged in 'mass self-communication' because any Facebook post, Tweet, blog entry or YouTube upload, can potentially reach a global audience. The available technology, particularly smartphones, have the capacity to turn ordinary people into broadcasters.

In 2017, the number of Facebook users stood at 1.9 billion, while China's population was 1.4 billion. Internet commentators note that if Facebook were a country, it would be the biggest country in the world. With their sheer number of users, Facebook and other social networking services have therefore become very important democratic tools.

### The challenges of traditional and social media

Important scholars, including Manuel Castells and Zygmunt Bauman, argue that the mass media are often commercial and big profit-making enterprises controlled by transnational entities who share the global objective of reinforcing neoliberalism. State-sponsored traditional mass media, particularly in countries which have dubious democratic credentials, are often also a threat to democracy. Puddephat (2006, p. 4) also notes that the traditional news media often report stories in ways which are not helpful for local and international communities to solve conflicts. He explains that



"The Internet: transforming society and shaping the future through chat". – Dave Barry

Image Credit: Rawpixel.com/  
Shutterstock.com





### Strengthening our role as citizens in the Information age

This unit argued that the traditional and new mass media play very important roles in the organisation, shaping, and dissemination of information, ideas, and values in a democracy. These changes in technology, media, and democratic society, however, as Kellner and Share (2007, p. 3) contend, “require the development of critical media literacy to empower students and citizens to adequately read media messages and produce media themselves in order to be active participants in a democratic society.”

### Review Question

In their book *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky argued that:

The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfill this role requires systematic propaganda (1988, p. 1)

Is this still relevant today? How can the social media work against the propaganda created by the mass media?

### Referer

Barbaro, M

Retriev

trump-

Bauman, Z

July

democ

Bauman, Z

Castells, M

Garrahan,

sours

conten

Herman, I

New Y

Kellner, I

educat

York: I

Puddepha

Retriev

ims-vo

The Con

Downl

### Further

Polonski,

at htt

us-632

European

a socia

vestage



## References

- Barbaro, M. (2015). Pithy, mean and powerful: How Donald Trump mastered Twitter for 2016. Retrieved July 2, 2017 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/us/politics/donald-trump-twitter-use-campaign-2016.html>
- Bauman, Z. (2012). Do Facebook and Twitter help spread democracy and human rights? Retrieved July 2, 2017 from <https://www.socialeurope.eu/do-facebook-and-twitter-help-spread-democracy-and-human-rights>
- Bauman, Z., & Lyon, D. (2013), *Liquid surveillance: A conversation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Castells, M. (2009), *Communication power*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Garrahan, M., & Murphy, H. (2016), 'Trump's relationship with traditional media groups sours further'. *The Financial Times*. Retrieved July 5, 2017 from <https://www.ft.com/content/4b34e8b2-b0ba-11e6-a37c-f4a01f1b0fa1>
- Herman, E., & N. Chomsky (1988), *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. New York: Pantheon.
- Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2007). Critical media literacy, democracy, and the reconstruction of education. In, D. Macedo & S. R. Steinberg (Eds.), *Media literacy: A reader* (pp. 3–23). New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Puddephatt, A., (2006). *Voices of war: Conflict and the role of the media*. International Media Support. Retrieved July 5, 2017 from <https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ims-voices-of-war-2006.pdf>
- The Constitution of Malta. Retrieved July 5, 2017 from <http://justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8566>

## Further Reading

- Polonski, V. W. (2016). Are internet populists ruining democracy for the rest of us? Available at <https://theconversation.com/are-internet-populists-ruining-democracy-for-the-rest-of-us-63229>.
- European Commissioner Margerethe Vestager's speech of 7 June 2017: A healthy democracy in a social media age. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/vestager/announcements/healthy-democracy-social-media-age\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/vestager/announcements/healthy-democracy-social-media-age_en).

edia, Edward

bols to  
m, and  
hat will  
a world  
his role

ganda created