

The Media & Democracy

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In 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi, a food vendor, went to his usual spot to sell some of his goods, but was stopped by a government employee. She told him that he had to pay a fine in order to continue his business. Mohammed tried to pay this fine, but couldn't because of government corruption under the 20-year rule of Ben Ali. Angered by this, he lit himself on fire in front of his local government building. This incident sparked a revolution throughout the Middle East which would not have been as widespread as it was if not for the Qatari-based network, Al-Jazeera, and its coverage of the Arab Spring. The media is considered an ally of Democracy by its supporters, but is also considered a propaganda machine for fascist and communist governments by its critics. Which of these concepts are accurate in describing the media? Well, it's much more complicated and nuanced than that.

If you look up media in the dictionary, it's definition would be the main means of mass communication (broadcasting, publishing, and the internet) regarded collectively. Media can be a news broadcast on Times Square, a podcast from NPR, the Sunday Newspaper, or a post on

social media. Media is divided into three categories: traditional media, mass media, and social media. Traditional media is the traditional means of mass communication, such as the newspaper and the word of tongue. The word of mouth has been a staple means of news for thousands of years and is still used today. Written news, on the other hand, has been around for 2,000 years, with the rise of the newspaper in the late 1500s. Unfortunately, with the rise of the internet, newspapers have been facing a decline in profits and have attempted to move online with some to little success, some of the reasons being paywalls and a lack of sponsors. The second form of media is mass media, which comes in the form of broadcast stations and the radio/podcasts. These forms of media are often referred to as the press, and have been around since the early 1900s. They had their beginnings from news-hungry hyenas on Speed into big corporations like CNN and Fox News. These forms of media are influenced by sponsors, ratings, bias, and (sometimes) the government. They are usually funded by multi-billion dollar companies like Amazon or Wells Fargo to name a few. Government officials, like Ronald Rump,

often take advantage of the celebrity-est atmosphere of press conferences and often stage their public appearances. Recently, cable news, like the newspaper, has been in a state of decline. Fortunately for these news corporations, they can easily switch to the Internet and make their money through ad revenue.

Traditional media (newspapers, radio, television, word of mouth) has been around for thousands of years, with the written inscriptions of Hammurabi, to the runners of Ancient Greece, the town criers of yore, to the birth of the newspaper in the 15th century. Back then, news used to travel over the course of weeks, months, and sometimes years. It was easier to control the media with it being so primitive, reasons usually being political, religious, and/or social, but it was inevitable that at one point in time, something will fall through the cracks that would end the rule of a scandalous monarch or a complete dynastic change.

The earliest form of news, called "folk news," has been around for millenia, and is found in

every culture in the world. Folk news is usually the town crier, a traveller, or anyone that gave out information by word of tongue. News would usually be heard and told to others, who would tell other people, and so on. This pattern would repeat until the news would spread all over the region, being shared by travelers, the clergy (usually monks), and merchants. The news was also spread in public places like the bath houses of Rome and the Greek forum. The coffee houses of the Islamic and later Western World were places where information was spread, even being the birth of ideas of democracy and being a major source of news in England. The masjid was and still is a place where information is spread in the Muslim world. People who travelled on the Silk Road usually stayed at roadside inns to rest on their journey, and were often an easy way to gather information about the world. In late Mediaeval Britain, reports (called "tidings") of major events like an inauguration of a new ruler, the execution of an infamous person, the death of a monarch, a wedding between two royal families, a great battle that was fought, a visit from a great ruler from afar, albeit many other events of great

Importance, were of great interest to the public, as recorded in the House of Fame, written in 1390 by Geoffrey Chaucer, along with other works. Media was also utilized by the governments of yore, with the Law of Hammurabi and the publicization of Julius Caesar's victories in Gaul by his government. The most popular form for the government to spread information was edicts and official government bulletins that were posted in the town centers of the country. When Caesar became Dictator of Rome, he started publishing government announcements called Acta Duma, which were carved in metal or stone and placed in public places in the Roman Republic.

In medieval England, declarations of Parliament would be given to local sheriffs, who would publicly display and read to the masses in the marketplaces. Town criers were the most important means of information for people who resided in the cities. In Florence, town criers called baditori would go to the marketplace on a daily basis and proclaim political news, invite the people to a public meeting, or make a call to arms against an invading force. They were

usually paid and followed a strict set of rules. They could also be used to advertise a product if

paid by the producer. In the Ottoman empire, messages of the Devlat ("state" in Turkish) were

handed out at the masjid, by dervishes, and town criers. These criers usually went to the

marketplace and other public places to read these messages, which were sometimes

commands and consequences for disobedience. Many cultures had special runners to spread

news in Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas. In West Africa, storytellers called griots would spread

the news and would sometimes be aligned with the government. Early news networks were

common in the prehistoric world and were connected to the political power of empires, with the

Royal Road of the Assyrians and the *cursus publicus* of the Romans. Optical telegraphy, a

system of stations used to propagate messages between each other, was also used in history,

from fire signals and smoke, to telescopes and semaphore codes, which were used in the late

18th and mid 19th centuries by the Big Three in Western Europe (Britain, France, and Germany)

and Japan. The first form of written news originated in the Spring and Autumn period of China

(8th Century BCE) in which reports were amassed by government officials into the Spring and Autumn Annals, which were credited to Confucius and were available to the public. The Han dynasty created some of the most systematic surveillance and communication networks in the Ancient World. Tipao, government newspapers, were distributed amongst the court in the late Han dynasty. The Kaiyuan Zao Bao of the Tang published imperial news and had a Committee of Official Reports to centralize news in court. There were even early privatized public news sheets as far back as 1582 in Ming China. The Japanese had the Taika Reform of 646 and the Kamakura period between the late 12th century to the early 15th century, which depended on runners called hikyaku who relayed messages between stations over the course of days. The Europeans also had a system of runners and were usually sent by elites to relay messages, and would cover an average of 33 kilometers a day or more. In 1556 Venice, the government authored and released to the public the Notizie scritte, which cost one coin a pop. These news sheets were usually written anonymously and would convey political, religious, and economic

news, and was usually consumed by the clerics, bankers, diplomats and their staffs, royal families along with many other groups of people. The Emperor Maximilian I of the Holy Roman Empire in 1490 gave two brothers, Francesco and Janetto of the Tasso family, to build a communication system consisting of riders. The system, called Tumb und Taxis by the brothers' descendants covered much of Western and Eastern Europe, connecting with the British system in 1620 and the French system around the same time.

These networks allowed easier access to the news, with items written by hand stating the dates and the origins of these items. From Russia and the Balkans to France and the Netherlands, anyone could know the go-ons in the world thanks to this German-based network. This system was also used by businesses to list current pieces to their customers, and the happenings of other businesses. Businesses also wanted to know about shipping events and political developments like a war or a royal coronation. This system of correspondence was still popular

even after the rise of newspapers amongst businesses, deciding the fate of enterprises. The spread of paper and the printing press in Eurasia in the 1500s paved the way for major advances in the propagation of news, with a shift from hard facts and accurate economic news, to a more emotional and nonchalant way of conveying the news. The first newspapers came from early 1600s Germany with the Relation aller Furnermmen und gendenckwürdigen Historien of 1605, with similarities dating back to the acta diurna of Caesar's time. The new format of writing in these early newspapers, which smooshed together unrelated and often doubtful reports from foreign lands, created new and interesting experiences for its readers, who guzzled it up like the bookworms they were. From this explosion of new and fascinating came the single-story tales, to compilations and overviews of recent events, and personal and impersonal types of news analysis. The Newspaper was at first tightly controlled by governments , which was reminiscent of the modern-day surveillance states of China and Turkmenistan, with the licensing systems that

were established in 1530 England which banned “seditious options” against the state, and restricted publications of these newsletters to presses approved by the king’s court. This was made known in the London Gazette with the subtitle “Published by Authority.” This licensing system was finally lapsed in 1695, giving rise to Whig and Tory newspapers. French censorship was even worse, causing many Frenchmen ,along with their counterparts in Europe to read foreign newspapers, especially from the Dutch Republic, which did not have strict censorship laws like the rest of Europe. The United States saw a rise in newspapers starting from the Revolutionary Era, as Newspapers were used to rally support for the revolution, and reported on a lot of the events that happened leading up to the revolution, like the Boston Massacre and the Boston Tea Party. In fact, some of the Founding Fathers were newspaper writers and publishers, a famous example being Benjamin Franklin, whose first profession was being a printer apprentice for his brother. He also wrote his own newspaper called the Pennsylvania Gazette, which he bought from Samual Krimer with his friend Hugh Heridench. The

Pennsylvania Gazette also had an insert of Ephraim Chambers' Cyclopaedia, or Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences, which was one of the first encyclopaedias that were printed in English. Under the ownership of Franklin, the newspaper rose to success in the colonies, with Ben usually posting about his discoveries with electricity and his political views which were for the colonies to unite against France in the French and Indian War in the 1750s with the political cartoon "Join or Die" and the editorial "A Disunited State" along with his revolutionary ideas from the 1760s-onwards. The demand for newspapers increased with the debates over the government of the newly established America and funding for the government thanks to a bill passed in 1792, and lasted into the 19th century. American newspapers often plagiarized each others' reports, making the Postal System rich with the exchange of newspapers between companies. The newspaper was also very popular in the West, with San Francisco rivaling New York in newspaper varieties.

The mass media is defined as media technologies that are used to spread information on a massive scale. The mass media is considered one of the tell tale signs of a healthy democracy, with state media considered a staple of a dictatorship, and independent media a sign of a democracy in good shape. In America, the media is considered the fourth branch of government because it's famous for keeping democracy in America as a whole in check. A good example of this is the Watergate, in which Richard Nixon sabotaged the Democratic Party to maintain power on the three branches. It was eventually leaked to the Washington Post who ran the story. This eventually led to the impeachment and retirement of Nixon. The Mass Media has had a long history of influencing politics, with the exaggerated yellow journalism of the 1890s which led to war with the Spanish and the annexation of the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, to the on the ground news in Vietnam which saw the horrors of war in-person and a US withdrawal. In general, the mass media is often seen as an entity that exposes any attempt at undermining democracy. But, with the monopolization of the media by corporations and the declining trust in

it is telling of a democracy on its knees. In some cases, the mass media becomes a propaganda tool for a politician. Take, for example, Fox News' relationship with Donald Trump. In an article from the New Republic, Alex Shepherd writes that Trump "does what he does every morning: watch Fox News, gets worked up, then tweets," and that "Trump retweeted Fox and Friends 4 times that morning." He also promoted a Fox News anchor's book, implying that Fox News had an intimate relationship with Trump. Another news agency, Breitbart, had connections with Trump to the point where Steve Bannon, the President of the company Steve Bannon, was Trump's chief strategist for the first months of his presidency. From 2016 till the present, Trump is constantly mentioned in a positive light to the point where Bret Baier, a lead news anchor, in 2018 said to the New Yorker that Fox News has become state media for the former Trump Administration. In a conversation between Sean Illing of Vox and Tom Rosenstiel, a media scholar and executive director at the American Press Institute, Tom said that "there are parts of Fox News that are now (in 2019) a propaganda arm of the government." When questioned by

Sean to explain, Tom replied that “ the fact that he (Trump) is watching (Fox News), and they

know it, and

know that he is in turn tweeting out things they’re saying while the show (Fox and Friends) is still

on and they are picking up on those tweets. This is an active collaboration, and it’s conscious

and direct.” He also commented on Sean Hannity, an Fox News anchor, and his relationship

with Trump: “The same thing is true, but even more so, of Trump and Sean Hannity. Hannity and

the president reportedly talk almost every day. Hannity advises Trump on messaging. Hannity

then echoes much of that messaging on his program.” When asked about the difference

between partisanship and propaganda, he said that “ Partisan journalists are interested in

getting people to consider ideas. Propagandists are interested in pushing the public to a

particular opinion to achieve a particular outcome.” Tom also referred to himself as a “partisan

journalist,” which may raise questions at his credibility by the opposition (i.e. Pro Trumpers.)

There are many forms of mass media in the world, but the main ones are state-run media, state

funded media, and privatized media. State-run media is your Al-Arabiya, which is considered an “arm of Saudi foreign policy,” and your Ruptly, which is especially famous for its propaganda, in 2017 bragged about a Putin-themed burger that didn’t even exist. Another famous example of State-run media is the CCTV of China, which suppresses mention of Falun Gong and the concentration camps of East Turkmenistan and ironically portray themselves as “allies on the Muslim world,” taking advantage of the gaping hole left by Western “intervention” in the Middle East and North Africa.

The intention of state-run media is to control public opinion and push their agenda onto their people and, in some cases (RT and CCTV are great examples) other countries, particularly countries in which the government intends to influence. The second form of mass media is state-funded media, notable examples being Al-Jazeera, a Qatari-based news agency known as “the voice of the Middle East” by its supporters, and PBS, which is famous for its media programs such as Ken Burns’ “The Vietnam War” and Frontline, a series of documentaries

which ,in recent years, has been mostly on America's Wars in the Muslim World. Unlike state-run media, state funded media has more freedom of opinion and can speak out against the government's action at home and abroad. Its intention is to inform the people of the go-ons in the world with a (somewhat) unbiased standpoint. State-funded media can of course fall into meddling by the government. In a video by Tom Nicholas in 2020, he analyzed a report by the BBC, a state-funded media service based in the UK, on immigrants coming from France . The report portrayed the immigrants as violent and only interviewed experts and politicians aligned with the Labor Party, the conservative wing of the British Parliament, the reason for this being that a large number of executives of the company had connections or were former members of the Labor Party. The BBC, unlike its counterparts DW and Aljazeera, operates more as a corporation, with subscription services and TV shows, so it functions more like the free media, which is a third form of media. This form of media is divided into two kinds: corporate media and independent media. Corporate media are media networks that are owned by large corporations,

examples being MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News. These news outlets (or broadcast stations) are

usually owned by the big five in America: Comcast, Fox/NewsCorp, Disney, Warner Media, and

Paramount Global. Based on the 1988 book by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky titled

“Marketing Consent,” these outlets are influenced by five “filters”: Size, ownership, and profit; the

advertising license to do business; sourcing mass media news; Flak and the enforcers; And

Anti-communism and the War on Terror. The first filter relates mostly to the free media and its

ownership by corporations, and it states that the corporations that fund the free media also

influence their reporting. Basically, everyone in the outlet knows who pays them and divert from

criticizing their parent companies. An example of this filter is Amazon’s influence over

The Washington Post, which in every article about the delivery giant, states that it is owned by

Jeff Bezos. A writer of the Columbia Journalism, Matthew Ingram, suggested that while the some

Articles on Amazon are not exactly flattering of Amazon, there is a sense that it treated the

company more favorable than others, or “pulls its punches” to say the least. The second filter

“ Advertising License to do Business,” states that news outlets are also highly reliant on advertising, being that funding by corporations does not cover the costs. Not only do they have to appeal to the general public, they also have to appeal to advertisers. For example, sponsors will not sponsor a new outlet that does reports on the exploitation of child labor by companies or how a majority of Congress members are funded by corporations to give them more tax breaks. Advertisers are more likely to back outlets that defend the status quo, like Vice News pushing an American Imperialist Agenda by implying that the far-right in North America and Europe are working in tandem with Islamic militant groups with videos of conservative pundits praising the Taliban for kicking the Americans out, although in reality they did it out of spite of Joe Biden, given that Donald Trump was planning to withdraw after the 2020 elections.

The third filter, ‘Sourcing Mass Media News’, states that the sources of information for news outlets also influence them to give satisfactory reports on the source. For example, in America, a lot of news outlets have reporters that are permanently assigned to government

offices, the White House, the Capital. This gives them around the clock coverage of these places and gives them opportunities to ask questions to important government officials, bureaucrats, and people with inside knowledge of the go-ons in that facility. But, it is also favorable to those groups, being that they have more access to the press and can easily “leak” stories that are favorable to them. An example of this is when Trump announced the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in detail, stating that “Last night (October 26, 2019) was a great night for the world,” and “He died like a dog. He died like a coward. The world is now a much safer place.” This statement is clearly a popularity booster for him and his former Administration. These groups also have the media on a leash: if they criticize the government too much, that tie could easily be cut. In 2017, the BBC, CNN, the Guardian, BuzzFeed, the Daily Mail, among others, was denied access to the White House for an off-camera press briefing, only allowing an “expanded group of journalists’”, a handful of which being from conservative news outlets, pacifically Fox News, the Washington Times, Breitbart (its former owner being in

the administration at that time), One American News, etc. The BBC and its compatriots were well known for condemning Trump in 2016 and early 2017, when this incident happened. In short, the relationship between the source and the press is more beneficial to the source than the press. The fourth filter, "Flak and the Enforcers," refers to the matter in which people with cultural, political, and economical power are able to organize campaigns against the press if they deem themselves being discussed in the media in a negative manner. A recent example of this is Trump's accusations of "fake news." Throughout his presidency, Trump has often referred to the media (save for conservative media that often praises him) as "fake news" and have told his supporters not to trust them. This has caused trust in the media by Republican to go from 70% in 2017, to 35% in 2021. In response, the media often hardened their stances against Trump, which, in the end, caused the deaths of thousands of people to the coronavirus, being that the media often told viewers to take steps against the virus by taking preventive measures.

The fifth filter, "Anti Communism and the War on Terror as a Control Mechanism" states that red scare tactics are used to portray criticism of the US, its government, and the capitalist system as being 'unpatriotic, unamerican, and Islamo-fascists,' a term often used against leftists in France. Herman and Chomsky write that even 'liberals [...], often accused of being pro-Communist or insufficiently anti-Communist, are kept continuously on the defensive in a cultural milieu in which anticommunism is the dominant religion'. Examples of this is the coverage of social democratic politicians in the media. They are often shown as extreme manics who want to upend America and turn it into a communist state. So how does this relate to the media and democracy? Relating to the first filter, mass ownership of news outlets can make people oblivious to the control of these corporations on the political process (i.e tax breaks, lobbying, loss of privacy, etc.) and cause them to not be able to represent themselves, their opinion being manufactured by the corporations. Relating to the second filter, people would not be able to see news about social

injustice because that news outlet can't get sponsors if they put out information about these injustices. Relating to the third filter, the sources will use the media to push their own agenda and are in turn going against Democracy. Relating to the fourth filter, criticism of the media might make the people more distrustful of the media and will ignore the media's warnings of a populist upending democracy until it is too late. Relating to the fifth filter, the people might think that, based on the media's claims, that their government backing dictatorships, fascists, military juntas, and weak and corrupt democracies in its imperialist adventures, killing and raping civilians, and the torture of men and women handed to them by warlords to "feed their families," is for the "pursuit of freedom," and anyone who questions these actions are Islamo-Communist extremists. So how does the media combat these filters? Some of the ways they can do this is to reject being bought by corporations, giving them more freedom in their reporting. An example of this is on the front page of Popular Front, which states that it's not funded by corporate

sponsors. They should also have alternate sources of information, which is how we found out about Abu Ghraib and Watergate. The press should also avoid over reliance on one source, which makes it easier for the source to portray itself or its backers in a positive light. The press should NEVER fall to disinformation campaigns by powerful people.

The Internet is one of the purest forms of free speech in the world. It has toppled governments, leaked the secrets of superpowers, and is home to millions of propaganda fronts of all shapes and sizes. No wonder the internet is referred to as the “Wild West” by critics and supporters alike. Some of the many benefits of the internet is that news outlets have more freedom with alternate ways to receive funding like selling merchandise and through websites like Pateron and ko-fi. Another benefit of the internet is that information can get out to a much larger audience and does not require a paid sponsor to propagate their message. On top of that, it makes it easier to gather information on what is going on, with access to multiple sources online. But, like other forms of media, the internet also has its flaws. Along with the abundance

of information comes with the spread of disinformation, or “fake news,” a term popularized by Donald Trump. A poll taken in 2019 stated that 68% of Americans believe that fake news has a big impact on their trust in the government, 54% said it affected their confidence in other Americans, and 51% said that it influenced political leaders on their actions. Another issue with the internet is the rise of censorship by media giants like Facebook and Youtube. On platforms such as Instagram and the latter, you cannot use words such as Taliban, ISIS, Hilter, and Nazi, among other terms. These actions prevent conversation about the rise of fascism in the West and the neutering of war criminals, a famous example being “the Austrian painter,” a reference to Hilter’s failed art career and a term used by fascists to gloss over the wrong of the Butcher of Europe. While we can list the many failures of the Chinese state whilst showing their flag, calling Hitler by his name or criticizing Nazi Germany, any mention of the events in the Middle East by non-corporate entities, anti-Nato and pro-Russian opinions, and mentions of

widespread fascism in the Ukraine's government and military will be immediately censored or

restricted by

these companies. Supporters of censorship claim that it would curb the rise fascism online and

help the spread of information, while opponents claim that censorship of the internet would give

the state more power over the people and prevent information from being spread, an example

being China with its people obvious of the persecution of Muslims in East Turkmenistan and the

protests of the Tiananmen Square and the massacre that followed in 1989.

In conclusion, the media can be both a savior of democracy and its downfall.As we have seen

with the mass media, the press can be influenced by a variety of factors, such as funding and

sources. If these factors have too much sway in the press, it could lead to an increase of

disinformation, which will drive democracy into a state of decay. Alternatively, if the media fights

back and establishes autonomy against these factors, then it would lead to a much stronger

democracy with a well-informed audience. The same can be said for the internet, but it being more open makes disinformation more of an issue, but relying with massive censorship would only make the problem worse. Some of the best ways we could combat disinformation without the oppressive hand of censorship is twerking the algorithm to not depend on bias. The media is constantly evolving like other technologies, and as the common people have more and more freedom to express themselves to a wider audience, we should make sure that we can combat reactionary and fascist movements that would bring democracy to its knees, while also preventing government encroachment on our freedom of speech. The Founding Fathers, be they flawed, biased, and racist as they were, did have some good policies in their work, the most important being the freedom of speech. The Constitution says that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

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