

D i g i t a l D e m o c r a c y

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The primitive forms of media go back to prehistory where humans used cave painting as a medium to transmit and store information and knowledge. One of the first forms of mass media was conceived through Gutenberg's invention of mechanical printing systems around 1439. Traditional media or old media consists of industries like cable television, radio, newspapers and magazines, whereas new media is composed of the Internet and the World Wide Web. In the last decade, there has been a constant uprise of the newer media through the widespread adoption of the Internet. This new medium is more democratic than its traditional counterpart in the sense that it allows anyone to communicate to a worldwide audience and engage in discussions freely and easily, while it can also be used as a tool for exercising our democratic rights and exposing unethical behavior in governments.

The Internet has a diverse number of news sources that generate content every day. According to *Technorati Media*, there are over 112 million blogs on the Internet with over 1.6 million posts per day (2008, p. 2). The diversity of these news sources justifies some of the aspects of the Internet as a popular and democratic medium. Indeed, it reflects the people's stories and opinions all over the globe and gives the masses an equal right to be involved in writing stories and generating various content. Furthermore, Ed Callaway points out that, "*by viewing a large number of sources one may avoid (or at least detect) the editorial bias in any individual source*" (2006, p. 2). This means that the diversity of sources available through new media lets us detect propaganda and preconceived ideas. Traditional media, however, is exposed to a state of oligopoly through media consolidation. The fact that most of its outlets are property of a few companies and conglomerates makes it prone to anti-democratic and monopoly practices. A quick look at the *concentration of ownership* of the traditional media reveals that eight companies dominate the whole media in the United States, of which are Disney, AOL-Time Warner, Viacom, General Electric and News Corporation (*Columbia Journalism Review*, 2006). (See **Appendix A**)

Moreover, the entry-level cost for the new media is relatively low. One only needs a computer and access to the Internet. Statistics show that the number of Internet users has had a growth of over 300% from 2000 to 2008 counting over 1.4 billion users worldwide (*Internet World Stats*, 2008, p. 1). This makes the Internet an accessible medium, not only for a wide audience but also for a big number of participants through the social nature of the Web(2.0). Traditional media on the other hand has a very high entry-level cost. With many licensing fees to pay and expensive equipment to

buy – for example, the machines to equip a TV station – it is not surprising that there are a handful of content-generating sources as opposed to the new media.

Furthermore, power is fairly distributed among Internet peers. This makes the users less prone to pressure, thus avoiding self-censorship. Despite many privacy issues, anonymity on the Internet is still achieved far more easily than in printed media. This equal-distribution of power is reminiscent of the ancient Greek agora where citizens communicated and did business freely. It is also the concretization of free speech, one of the fundamental values of a democratic society. Anyone with Internet access can now express him or herself freely and communicate with people that are thousands of miles away, sharing opinions and receiving comments from people living on the other side of the world.

What's more, new media is defined on a worldwide scale and is not limited to a country or region. This international aspect of the new media makes it very hard for governments to control information. Many measures have been taken to control the Internet in China with the conception of its Great Firewall. However, Chinese bloggers are still out there reporting the atrocities the regime is committing. They achieve this with the use of digital privacy tools and information tunneling techniques that allow them to transmit data through the government's censorship software. The Internet here has been used as a voice against oppression and anti-democracy. Without it, information and proof of the misanthropic actions of the Chinese government would have taken years to get out and the pressure from the international community would have not taken place. Additionally, the fact that this new media is international lets us observe different viewpoints from different countries, regions and ethnicities. Let us take the 2008–2009 Israel–Gaza conflict and the role of new media in it. Journalists have been banned from the strip, leaving the news reports to local citizens using blogs and microblogging services like Twitter (*Asteris Masouras*, 2009, p. 5). Riyaad Minty, a senior analyst at Al Jazeera's New Media Unit thinks that, "*people are using new media as an outlet to express what they are feeling*" (2009). Furthermore, he points out that by going online you expose yourself to different ideas from all over the world, "*providing a truly global perspective of how people are dealing or interpreting the situation in Gaza*" (2009). Finally, he affirms that new media provides us with a "*platform*" to transmit our views and the way we "*think people should react [to this conflict]*" (2009). The Internet can therefore be eye-opening medium, something essential for an open and democratic society.

Moreover, new media is a two-way media. With the rise of Web 2.0 and collaborative websites, interaction with the news-issuers has become one of the main aspects of this growing phenomenon. It provides a platform for dialogue between the journalists (amateur or professional) and the masses. For example, someone can easily comment on a blog post to provide additional details to a story or article. This can also be used by governments to interact with a global audience. It is the case with the Israeli government when on December 30th 2008, it held a “Citizens’ Press Conference” over the microblogging platform *Twitter* to allow people all over the world to ask questions regarding the situation in Gaza (*Israeli Consulate in New York City*, 2008, p. 1). The collaborative nature of the social web is very important vis-à-vis democracy since *any* Internet user can easily denounce propaganda and false information in a news article by commenting on it or writing about it on his or her weblog. Moreover, “placebloggers” as Johnson calls them in his article “*It’s All About Us*” are amateur journalists who bring us information directly from their neighborhoods. These journalists are generally more reachable by other users, meaning that netizens can effortlessly interact and provide input on the blogger's story (2007, p. 6). Even though some magazines do include a “Talk Back” section, it is a one-time reply whose destiny relies on whether the editor chooses to publish it or not. It is therefore reasonable to say that the traditional media is like a waterfall, hammering information on you, whereas new media is a water pump, you have your say in what you absorb and can interact with it.

News diffusers do not have to be professional journalists to take part of the new media. They can be engineers, scientists, artists or salesclerks coming from a variety of backgrounds, cultures and professions. This heterogeneity permits us to get exposed to multiple viewpoints before taking a stance making us much less susceptible to propaganda and false information. One of the most prominent attempts at collaborative journalism is a project called “*The Observers*” by the Paris-based international news TV station France 24. All content published on the project’s website is generated by eyewitnesses and amateur enthusiasts after being verified by the station’s own professional journalists, ensuring original and quality content. This project is therefore an osmosis of the benefits of both new and traditional media. On one hand, France 24 benefits from original and hands-on content, while on the other hand, any person can get TV exposure to an issue that concerns him with the use of new media. We can therefore talk of the democratization of a traditional medium through the use of new media.

New media is often used as a tool to exercise our democratic or human rights. People are now wielding the social nature of Web 2.0 sites to collaborate easily and transparently. Facebook, a social networking platform renowned for its potential as a management tool (Shlender, 2007, p. 3) – is increasingly being used to organize and coordinate global demonstrations. On September 25, 2007, thousands of Buddhist monks led anti-government protests in Myanmar because of the exorbitant fuel prices. These local protests were followed by worldwide demonstrations where tens of thousands of people were expected to participate. These rallies were fueled by a 300,000 member Facebook group entitled *Support the Monks' Protest* in union with experienced lobbying groups such as Amnesty International and The Burma Campaign UK. Both lobby groups asserted that the mobilization of people through Facebook helped them recruit volunteers that handled much of the workload (Stirland, 2007, p. 4-6). This shows the potential of Facebook and social networking sites in general, as a platform to exercise an important democratic right, that of getting out on the streets and protesting against what the public opinion thinks should not be happening. Critics may argue that a Facebook group does not help spur on eagerness for a cause, as it is absurdly easy to join one. However, the purpose of Facebook groups – at least, the successful ones – is more to gather the existing militants of a cause linked to the *offline world* and to give them a framework to collaborate on, rather than recruiting new members (Faris, 2008, p. 8). Hossam El-Hamalawy, an Egyptian activist against the Mubarak regime asserts this saying that, “The internet is (...) a medium and a tool by which we can support our ‘offline’ activities” (2008, p. 5). Indeed, by pooling their resources through cyberspace, people have a better shot at fighting oppression and exposing their government’s shortcomings.

Moreover, new media can help people expose unethical behavior in their institutions and governments. One way to do it is through public disclosure, particularly using a website called WikiLeaks.org, founded in 2006. The primary aim of this website is to uncover totalitarian governments through public leaking of sensitive documents. It describes itself as an “*anonymous global avenue for disseminating documents the public should see*” (2009). Through the use of cryptographic technologies, WikiLeaks guarantees untraceability and anonymity of its whistleblowers and informants. A document leaked before the December 2007 Kenyan elections uncovered looting and other corrupt practices by ex-President Daniel Arap Moi which reportedly affected the elections. Another document that surfaced in November 2007, exposed a US policy to hide several prisoners from the International Red Cross in Guantanamo Bay (Singel, 2008, p. 5-7). Both of these leaks have revealed undemocratic activities that would have been otherwise kept secret from the

populace. The new media has therefore played a democratic role by encouraging good governance. Like the protagonist says in the movie *V for Vendetta*, “people should not be afraid of their governments. Governments should be afraid of their people” (*Wachowski & Wachowski, 2005*). What’s more, the new media can be used to overthrow a whole government. It was the case in Indonesia, where the Internet played a big role in taking down the Soeharto dictatorship. Through a pro-independence campaign that underlined the oppression undertaken by Soeharto’s regime, the Indonesian people used the Internet to successfully launch a democratization process (*Hill & Sen, 2006, p. 352-355*). New media has therefore acted as a catalyst in Indonesia’s politics and has given the Indonesian people a first step into democracy.

New media is therefore democratic through the plurality of its sources, its collaborative aspect and the fair power-distribution among people. Furthermore, it can be used for democratic purposes by exposing shady government practices and organizing global protests. Finally, one can wonder if the progressive adoption of new media will eventually kill the traditional medium, or if old media companies will utilize new media in a way so as to evolve into a newer form of mass media.

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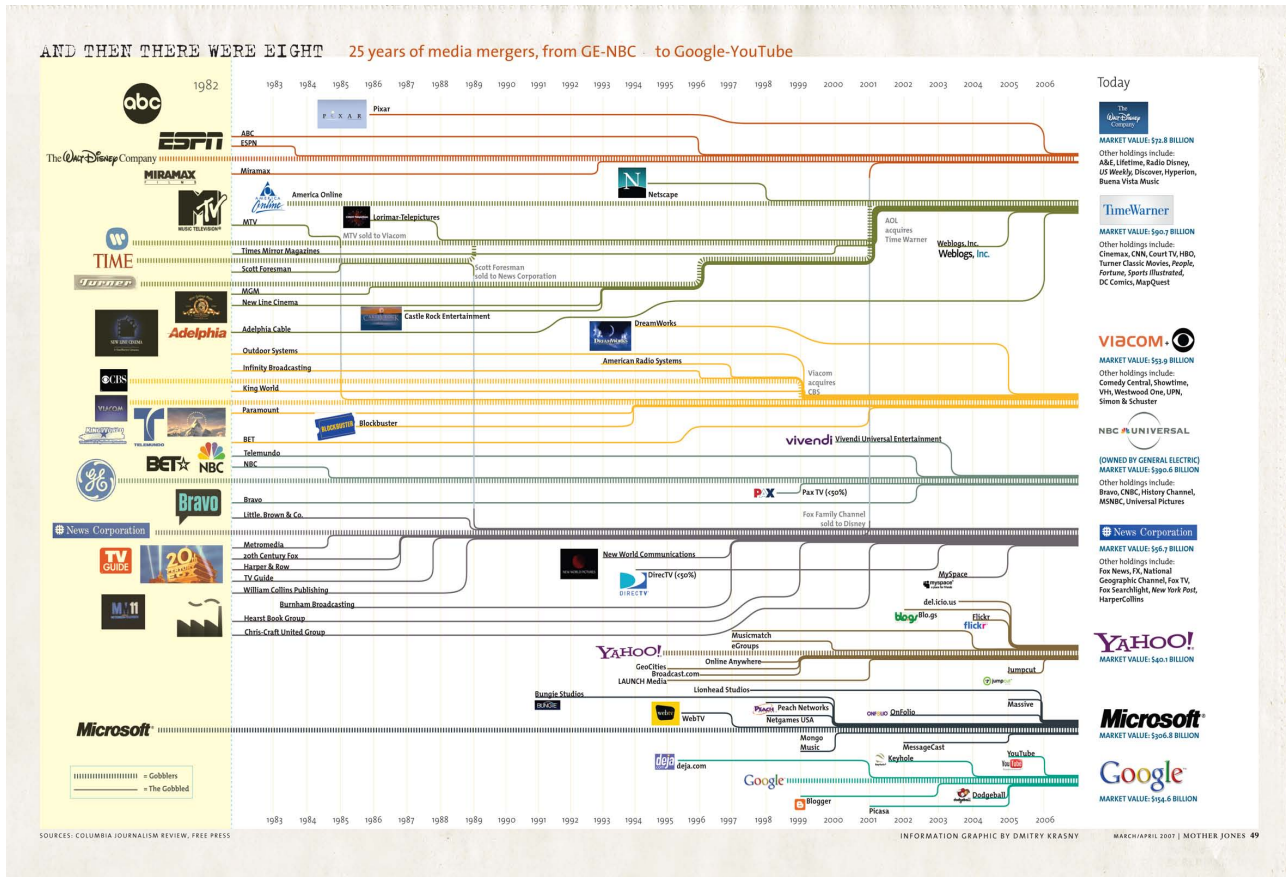
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Appendix A.



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