

Committee: UNESCO

(United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization)

Topic: Restoring confidence in information and democracy

Chairs: Sofía Adrados de Pablos & Sophie Demicoli



More than a year after the US presidential elections, still a third of Americans, and an overwhelming majority of the Republicans, question the 2020 election results, despite what happened on January 6th at the Capitol. In Russia, when Putin justifies the military intervention in Ukraine to denazify the country and “to protect people who for eight years now have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime”, not all Russian citizens buy this alternative narrative, but enough do so, which keeps the Russian people quiet overall. And Russia Today, the official Russian media outside Russia is also quite successful in convincing people in African countries such as Mali that it is time to get rid of the French and European military and economic presence. Fake news, misinformation, alternative facts or truths... what does this new vocabulary tells us about the way our political systems are challenged, even undermined by the media system?

One of the merits of the democratic system is that individuals are given freedom of speech and the media can be viewed as an outlet of said freedom, allowing voting citizens to engage in public discourse and express their opinion. The main purpose of the media is to provide accurate and reliable information to all types of views enabling citizens to educate themselves on a large variety of subjects. While the mainstream media plays an increasingly significant educational role in society, misinformation and fake news can be shared and spread easily, harming democracy.

The epistemic crisis in media and politics threatens the integrity of democratic processes, diminishes trust in public institutions and aggravates social divisions. It is a crisis of knowledge where the difference between true and false claims regarding elections integrity and other political matters are increasingly difficult to spot, resulting in general confusion and a misinformed public. The massive amounts and speed of information, and the new forms of knowledge deriving from digital technologies are some of the main causes of the crisis. However, the way to overcome the epistemic crisis remains unsolved. Is transparency the key to regaining trust in the media and democracy?

In politics, transparency is used as a means of holding public officials accountable and fighting corruption. It also allows citizens to inform themselves from accurate data, enabling them to have reasoned opinions, improving the overall functioning of democracy. Transparency also offers reliable media allowing data to get to the public without any alterations that could affect its integrity. However, how can we promote transparency without interfering with each country's approach to governing? Furthermore, how can we achieve this reliable media? The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's main objectives are to enable the conditions for dialogue among cultures and peoples, and to ensure respect for commonly shared values to achieve sustainable development while embracing human rights, mutual respect, and

the alleviation of poverty. With increasing digital exposure and development of communication technologies, the scale of accessible information has magnified, increasing the urgency of the epistemic crisis we are facing.

Democracy is a founding principle of UNESCO which is supported through Human Rights, Development, Peace and Security. In 2002, the Commission declared that “Free, independent and pluralistic media” is an essential element, sometimes referred to as the “fourth pillar of democracy”. Therefore, it is the right forum to raise these issues and confront our views about the best ways to diminish the tensions between states and communities created by this “information warfare”.

I. Status Report

“In these complicated and unpredictable times, a glance at the state of the world today reveals a grim picture. [...]

Polarisation both within and between countries continues to grow, the weakening of multilateralism, of the international legal order – and of international law itself, with immense consequences on human rights. Democracy too is ailing.

In 2021, the level of democracy enjoyed globally by the average person was down to 1989 levels. This means that democratic gains of the last 30 years have been greatly reduced. Last year, almost a third of the global population lived under authoritarian rule. And the number of countries leaning to authoritarianism is three times that of those leaning to democracy.”

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, August 2022.

With these alarming words, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, started her speech on the Status of democracy and human rights in the world last August.

Democratic institutions face multiple challenges, one of which is a lack of trust. Though this varies across different countries, there has been an overall decline in institutional trust which is sometimes attributed to economic insecurity in the recent decades.

These challenges are more pressing issues as new ways to inform one another have boomed over the last decades. The multiple offers available online are a challenge to viewers who might feel lost in the ocean of information. This offer is impacted by the national policies of States.



Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner
for Human Rights (2018-2022)

A. Online sources and Social Networking

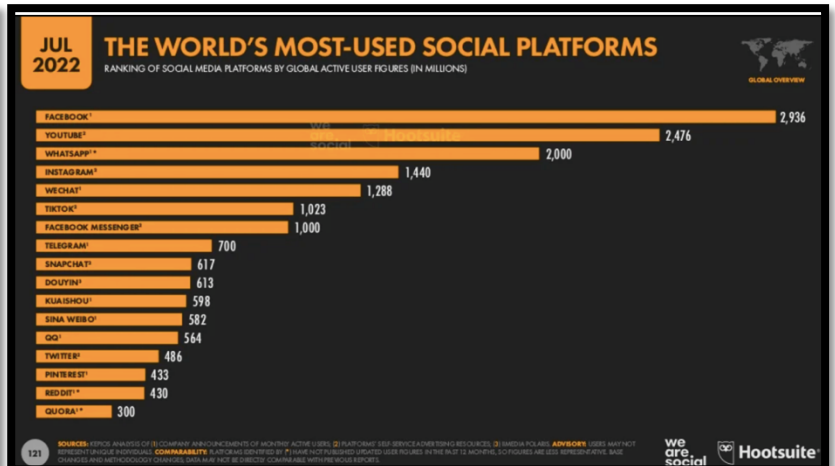
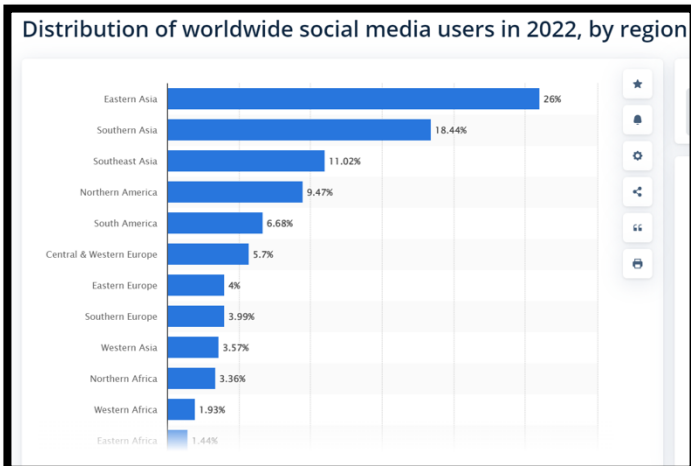
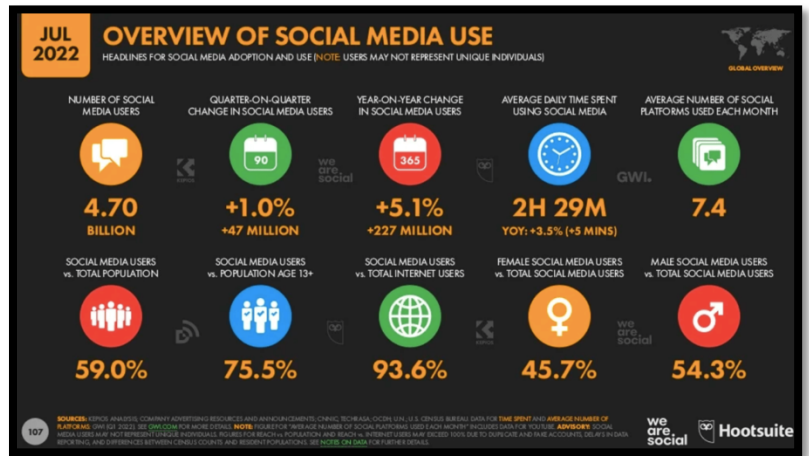
“Unlike disinformation and hate speech, information is a key ingredient of peace, inclusion, and effective governance,” said Tawfik Jelassi, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Communication and Information in his opening remarks of the virtual conference ‘Countering online disinformation and hate speech to foster peace’ organized on 21 September 2021.

Being one of the most popular online activities, over 4.7 billion people worldwide are using social media in 2022. This number is only predicted to rise globally as a result of the growth in popularity of mobile phones.

Increasing by over half an hour since 2015, users spend on average 149 minutes a day on messaging and networking apps. This increase spanned over all age groups; social media now have a large influence on everything from “communication around the globe” to “political deliberation” also providing as a source of information for everything from news consumption to health.

Without any surprise, Asia has the largest number of users as it concentrates over half of the world’s population.

Social networking is one of the most popular digital activities worldwide and it is no surprise that social networking penetration across all regions is constantly increasing. As of January 2020, the global social media usage rate stood at 49 percent. This figure is anticipated to grow as lesser developed digital markets catch up with other regions when it comes to infrastructure development and the availability of cheap mobile devices. In fact, most of social media’s global growth is driven by the increasing usage of mobile devices. Mobile-first market Eastern Asia topped the global ranking of mobile social networking penetration, followed by established digital powerhouses such as the American Continent and Northern Europe.



This extensive increase in media usage directly influenced the high fragmentation of society on networking platforms witnessed in the modern world. This divide between communities is nourished by algorithms used across all major platforms which are tailored to giving content of high interest to each individual user.

Due to the huge amounts of daily content, these platforms use algorithms in order to filter through and distinguish the more interesting from the posts deemed irrelevant. This process takes into consideration each account's individual activity and interaction history.

Algorithms in social media platforms can be defined as technical means of sorting posts based on relevancy instead of publish time, in order to prioritize which content a user sees first according to the likelihood that they will actually engage with such content. For example, the posts which are recommended to a viewer when he/she scrolls through his/her Instagram feed, or the stories of friends that appear first on the dashboard, are determined by algorithms.

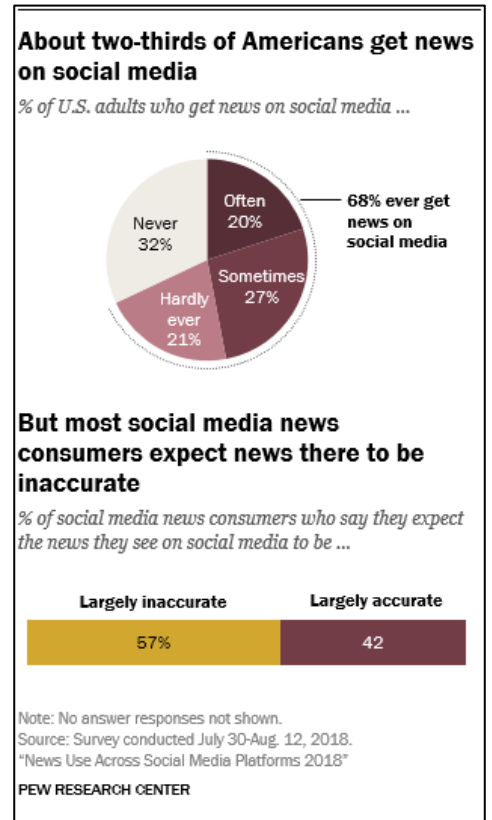
Algorithms come with both negative and positive effects. Though they are sometimes created with the wish of increasing awareness and understanding of digital society on specific matters, their design brings with it a certain controversy. A lot of this controversy is regarding privacy issues; however, the problem of fragmentation arises when algorithms limit exposure to a larger range of sometimes conflicting ideas. This creates a risk of trapping individuals in their own like-mindedness since algorithms are biased by nature and are prone to constantly feeding information that pleases over informs, which further encourages social and political divisions, generating a greater feeling of belonging within each group.

Using shadow bans, algorithms may give rise to information gaps, as they hide or neglect certain posts, while prioritizing revenue-inducing content. This aspect of algorithmic design is controversial because it carries the pretense to determine which content users should find important or worth of appreciation. This may lead to a non-objective and polarized decision of who and what gets in the spotlight. As a result, algorithmic design inevitably influences the spread of culture and shapes the digital society in a certain way: it decides which type of content or topic should be given priority in each individual feed, and which artists, content creators or brands deserve to gain more visibility than others.

Social media has brought with it a sense of community. Groups and forums allow people to connect over what they have in common making it easy to create a group of friends.

A 2021 study of the Australian Journal of Psychology identified key aspects:

- Social media is a primary means of communication for adolescents and young adults in developed countries around the world. More than 90% of youth regularly subscribe to social media platforms.
- Previous research suggests that use of social media may be detrimental to more intimate social relationships that are dependent on face-to-face interactions.
- Excessive use of social media may ultimately lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation among youth.



And concluded that:

- Social media communication is a legitimate means of developing social connections and can foster a sense of belonging among youth.
- Whether social media serves as a boost or deterrent to positive social relationships is dependent upon a wide range of factors including personality style, extent of use, and responses from others.
- Social media use and its impact on socialization among youth is a rapidly evolving field, deserving of the attention of social scientists and mental health professionals. There is a need for time-series or longitudinal studies and studies addressing cultural differences in social media use.

Social media has also managed to start and witness new divisions in our society which tend to cause political polarization as well as controversies around the world. This is heavily due to what is being referred to as “echo chambers” which is a type of digital environment where people only encounter ideas and information that strengthen their point of views, amplifying their opinions. These “echo chambers” and the growing role of “influencers” are increasing current political polarization.

In social media, networks tend to be *centralized*: a small number of people, or perhaps just one person, at the “center” of the network is connected to lots of other people in the “periphery.” The multitudes in the periphery of the social network have only a modest number of connections, while the few—the so-called “influencers”—at the center of the network are connected to nearly everyone. This puts these people into the powerful position of being able to exert a disproportionate level of “influence” over the group.

Social Networks have been struggling with bias and polarization for a long time. But the issue is about to get much more urgent. As debates heat up, biased viewpoints will undoubtedly become entrenched in communities with powerful influencers at their center. If we want to eradicate, or at least lessen the impacts of some debates or conspiracy theories, we should rethink how our online communities operate. The solution to these problems is not to eliminate echo chambers. Rather, it is to be intentional about the social networks in those echo chambers. The more equity in people’s social networks, the less biased and more informed groups will become—even when those groups start off with highly partisan opinions.



A supporter of former President Donald Trump screams at President Biden supporters outside the Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando on Feb. 28, 2021.
Chandan Khanna / AFP via Getty Images file

B. States: Course situation of different political regimes

According to the Democracy Index, political regimes can be divided in four main groups:

- Full democracies: Countries in which not only basic political freedoms and civil liberties are respected, but which also tend to be underpinned by a political culture conducive to the flourishing of democracy. The functioning of government is satisfactory. Media are independent and diverse. There is an effective system of checks and balances. The judiciary is independent and judicial decisions are enforced. There are only limited problems in the functioning of democracies.
- Flawed democracies: These countries also have free and fair elections and, even if there are problems (such as infringements on media freedom), basic civil liberties are respected. However, there are significant weaknesses in other aspects of democracy, including problems in governance, an underdeveloped political culture and low levels of political participation.
- Hybrid regimes: Elections have substantial irregularities that often prevent them from being both free and fair. Government pressure on opposition parties and candidates may be common. Serious weaknesses are more prevalent than in flawed democracies—in political culture, functioning of government and political participation. Corruption tends to be widespread and the rule of law is weak. Civil society is weak. Typically, there is harassment of and pressure on journalists, and the judiciary is not independent.
- Authoritarian regimes: In these states, state political pluralism is absent or heavily circumscribed. Many countries in this category are outright dictatorships. Some formal institutions of democracy may exist, but these have little substance. Elections, if they do occur, are not free and fair. There is disregard for abuses and infringements of civil liberties. Media are typically state-owned or controlled by groups connected to the ruling regime. There is repression of criticism of the government and pervasive censorship. There is no independent judiciary.

According to The Democracy Index, less than half (45.7%) of the world's population now live in a democracy of some sort, a significant decline from 2020 (49.4%).

Even fewer (6.4%) reside in a "full democracy"; this level is down from 8.4% in 2020, after two countries (Chile and Spain) were downgraded to "flawed democracies".

Substantially more than a third of the world's population (37.1%) live under authoritarian rule, with a large share being in China.

Democracy Index 2021, by regime type

	No. of countries	% of countries	% of world population
Full democracies	21	12.6	6.4
Flawed democracies	53	31.7	39.3
Hybrid regimes	34	20.4	17.2
Authoritarian regimes	59	35.3	37.1

Note. "World" population refers to the total population of the 167 countries covered by the Index. Since this excludes only micro states, this is nearly equal to the entire estimated world population.

Source: EIU.

In the 2021 Democracy Index, 74 of the 167 countries and territories covered by the model, or 44.3% of the total, are considered to be democracies.

- The number of “full democracies” fell to 21 in 2021, down from 23 in 2020;
- The number of “flawed democracies” increased by one, to 53;
- 59 are “authoritarian regimes”, up from 57 in 2020;
- 34 are classified as “hybrid regimes”, down from 35 in 2020.

While more governments use social media to manipulate public opinion, this issue is becoming a rising threat to democracy. To influence said opinion they often target the individual's emotions such as guilt and maintain them uninformed, which is achievable thanks to the disconcerting relationship between large technology companies and governments.

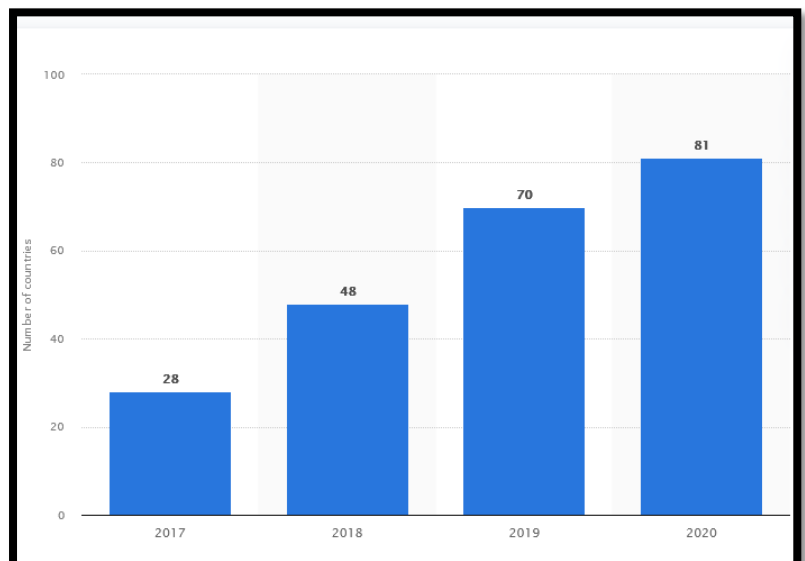
In 2020, it was found that the number of countries using social media to spread computational propaganda and disinformation about politics was at an all-time high. Governments and political parties of 81 countries were using social media manipulation to influence public attitudes and to spread disinformation.

According to the University of Oxford's Computational Propaganda Research Project, the use of algorithms, automation, and big data to shape public opinion has become our new normal, as in the past two years there's been a 150% increase in the number of countries using social media to launch manipulation campaigns. 56 countries are using the media to manipulate public opinion, attack political opponents and spread polarizing messages to divide societies, being Facebook the main platform used for such activity.

Modern authoritarians shape political narratives by restricting space for independent media outlets, relying on state-friendly or state-owned media assets, sponsoring fake think tanks and policing the internet. They often intimidate journalists by dismissing the ones with opponent ideals and making illiberal clauses of the Press Law, the Penal Code and the Anti-Terror Law, preventing any type of critical content. These measures were followed, for example, by AKP.

The Oxford Internet Institute (OII) shows that democracies are more involved in manipulation through social networks and social media than authoritarian states. This is due to the fact that democracies have some use for perceived consent from their citizens, whereas for authoritarian states, traditional censorship and propaganda tactics. However, authoritarian states use social media to interfere with elections in democratic countries, for example, it seems certain that the Russian-based Internet Research Agency employed social media bots to inflame public discourse in the run-up to the 2016 American election.

Number of countries with evidence of using social media to spread computational propaganda and disinformation about politics from 2017 to 2020 - statista.com



Case study: 'Is there a link between Climate Change Scepticism and Populism?'

A study by Oxford University and the Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences – January 2021

Key findings include:

- Supporters of left-wing and right-wing populist parties are more likely to visit news websites for climate change information than non-supporters of populist parties
- Right-wing populist supporters are twice as likely to consume hyper-partisan media content (20% of their top 50 website domains) than left-wing supporters (9.5% of their top 50 website domains)
- Science related websites account for over a tenth (11%) of non-news domains visited by right-wing populist party supporters
- Non-supporters of populist parties are more likely to visit non-news website domains such as climate-related organisations websites

The study also looked at the effect of populism and country of residence on attitudes towards climate policies.

Key findings include:

- Trump supporters have a lower probability of believing in human-made climate change and taking personal responsibility for tackling climate change
- Spanish supporters of right-wing parties are more likely to trust climate experts than their peers in other countries
- Right-wing populist party supporters in France are more likely to oppose tax increases on fossil fuels than in other countries
- Germans ranked climate change as the most pressing issue facing the country (21% of respondents) compared to all other social issues
- Brits rated immigration (16%) as the most important social issue affecting the country, closely followed by climate change (13%)

II. Challenges

A. Traditional Media and Institution Reaction

Traditional media, sometimes referred to as legacy media, includes all types of mass media before the “Information Age” or before the internet. The most common types of traditional media include newspapers and magazines, billboards, television, and radio.

The digital transition in the 21st century has significantly impacted the field of this type of media however traditional media still remains relevant due to its longer relationship with the consumer therefor allowing those who are not part of this transition to access the news. This being said, traditional media has the added challenge of evolving to catch up with the rhythm of technological advancements.

Traditional media also has in place what is known as a gate keeper method meaning someone monitors and has control over what eventually gets released to the public. For example, in a newsroom the editor decides what will be published in each edition of their newspaper. This is an important feature as more modern types of media, such as social media, allow anything to be published without being reviewed or fact checked first.

Ever since the early 2000s a process named “Fact checking” began in the United States by independent organizations to limit the spread of misinformation and verify facts. This global response to fake news has now over 300 fact checking outlets operating worldwide and online and has become an industry worth million. Fact checking has been more present in journalism in the recent years as it forces us to remain sceptical.

“Social media increasingly rely on independent fact checkers to help them free their platforms of disinformation. But, while fact checkers seek to help users trust quality information, their relationship with traditional media becomes strained when fact checkers question the work done by journalists. Strengthening the relationship between independent fact checkers and traditional media has therefore become a new focus of our work in a project to build trust in media,” said Adeline Hulin, Project Officer at UNESCO EU Liaison Office in Brussels.

Journalism plays an essential role in the way in which traditional media operates as it is the method used to gain information when it comes to newspapers and magazines. Although newspapers are said to be the more reliable type of media as they are trackable and sometimes more affective, this practice has suffered in the past few years as it has been discredited by the public opinion. The new wave of social media has created a constantly changing, untransparent playing field in which journalist have a disadvantage. This is because it has abolished the idea of journalists as the primary truth tellers, and as a result, journalism is losing its reputation and the field is becoming less competitive.

In 2020 media consumption was at an all-time high with a global pandemic, turbulent US presidential elections and protests happening all over the world. In a “Gallup” survey on trust in the mass media around 60% of participants stated that they have absolutely “no trust in [the media] at all”. There is also an issue with local journalism since as they often have a lower budget, they are under threat from the digital wave. With progressively few local newspapers, journalists are congregated in big cities meaning they do not sufficiently represent the full population, for example, individuals in more rural areas.

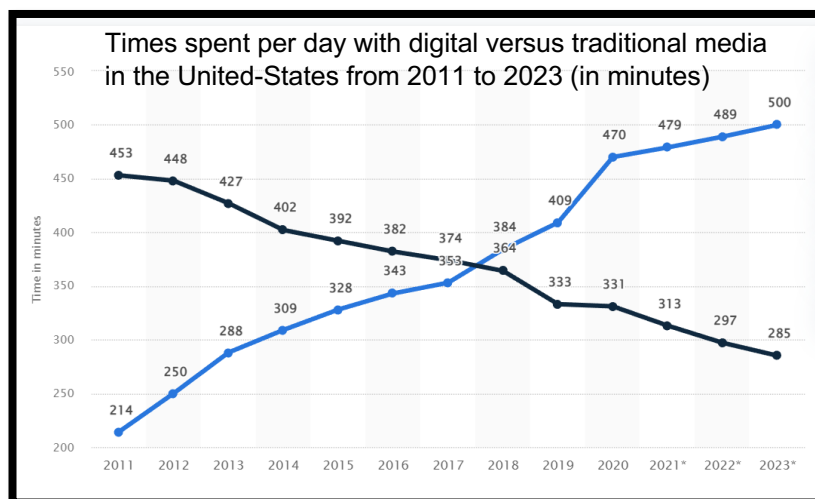
HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS

- CONSIDER THE SOURCE**
Click away from the story to investigate the site, its mission and its contact info.
- READ BEYOND**
Headlines can be outrageous in an effort to get clicks. What's the whole story?
- CHECK THE AUTHOR**
Do a quick search on the author. Are they credible? Are they real?
- SUPPORTING SOURCES?**
Click on those links. Determine if the info given actually supports the story.
- CHECK THE DATE**
Reposting old news stories doesn't mean they're relevant to current events.
- IS IT A JOKE?**
If it is too outlandish, it might be satire. Research the site and author to be sure.
- CHECK YOUR BIASES**
Consider if your own beliefs could affect your judgement.
- ASK THE EXPERTS**
Ask a librarian, or consult a fact-checking site.

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions

Case study: Unites States of America

The average daily time spent with digital media in the United States is expected to increase from 470 minutes (seven hours and 50 minutes) in 2020 to over eight hours in 2023. Higher online media consumption in 2020 was partially attributed to the coronavirus outbreak, and more daily time with traditional media such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines was also recorded for that year. Media consumption in 2020 was overall higher due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing changes to daily life.



Impact of COVID-19 on media consumption

In-home media consumption grew sharply in March 2020 in the first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 40 percent of U.S. respondents reported spending more time watching shows and films on streaming services, and 25 percent were reading books or listening to audiobooks more than usual. Despite predictions that this spike in media usage would fall after the initial implementation of shelter-in-place orders, consumers also continued spending more time with media in the summer of 2020.

The same survey, held in July that year, also asked participants about their plans to continue with their increased media consumption after the pandemic has run its course. This garnered different responses, with only a handful of U.S. adults planning to carry on investing more time in most media activities. Again though, watching movies and shows on streaming platforms and reading or listening to books were the most popular options.

With a higher exposure and utilization of the media, public opinion has become a political weapon and in order to keep control over the public data can be manipulated. From political parties to social movements to corporations, many kinds of groups are actively trying to get control over the media narrative and do so using multiple tactics such as disinformation or amplifying and planting misinformation.

B. New democratic practices

Due to globalization, there has been a change from the traditional methods of spreading political ideas to a media centred system, where the public opinion and its exposure through media has a greater influence on the political outcome.

Political life has been transformed in different ways. The concept of each political parties' program has lost its credibility in a world dominated by uncertainty, in which local crises (specific to each state) and international events (such as the war happening in Ukraine or the global energy crisis) must be dealt with on a daily basis.

As a consequence, communication and cooperation between citizens and the institutions have greatest importance to achieve general satisfaction. Some of the needed factors to attain said goal are: campaigning and advocating, accountability and transparency, participation of citizens and most importantly trust.

However, there's a rising mistrust in the institutions that leads the people to feel unrepresented and therefore to be less compromised with the traditional system.

Disinformation vs misinformation

Disinformation is false or misleading content that is spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain, and which may cause public harm. Misinformation is false or misleading content shared without harmful intent though the effects can be still harmful.

The spread of both disinformation and misinformation can have a range of harmful consequences, such as threatening our democracies, polarising debates, and putting the health, security and environment of world citizens at risk.

A great example of this lack of trust is the last presidential elections of the United States, where 70% of republicans believe that the elections were rigged and felt unrepresented by the results, not being content with their representative government.

Due to this lack of commitment between citizens and political parties, people take actions into their own hands, building from the ground their own social movements and obtaining popular support through the media. Aggravating said cooperation and communication issue.

Social political movements as the Yellow Vests reflects the mentioned ideas. The movement started in France after an online petition was posted in May 2018. Rising crude oil and fuel prices, high cost of living, economic inequalities, as well as the burden of taxation falling on working and middle classes, especially in rural and peri-urban areas, started mass demonstrations by the people feeling unheard and unrepresented by their government. Protests go on to this day.

Another example of the public taking social political matters in their own hands is the youth for climate movement. As the impact of climate change intensifies over time, Greta Thunberg, a Swedish girl who was 15 at the time, sparked a global movement of school-age students demanding greater action from governments to fight climate change. The movement has been growing since its start, in 2018, and has now millions of followers who march and speak up.

Outside the initiatives of the conventional political parties, popular protest movements emerge creating new social leaders. Leaders who aren't linked to any political parties. These independent leaders do not feel listened to or represented by the politicians in place, as a reaction they promote social actions, followed by millions of people with the same concerns and united by the media.



Yellow Vests in the streets of Paris, January 12, 2019. Ludovic Marin / AFP

III. Actions Against Information

A. Should freedom be controlled?

Freedom can be considered as an emancipatory ideal—and with good reason. Throughout history, the desire to be free inspired countless marginalized groups to challenge the rule of political and economic elites. Liberty was the watchword of the Atlantic revolutionaries who, at the end of the 18th century, toppled autocratic kings, arrogant elites and (in Haiti) slaveholders, thus putting an end to the Old Regime. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Black civil rights activists and feminists fought for the expansion of democracy in the name of freedom, while populists and progressives struggled to put an end to the economic domination of workers.

While these groups had different objectives and ambitions, sometimes putting them at odds with one another, they all agreed that their main goal—freedom—required enhancing the people’s voice in government.

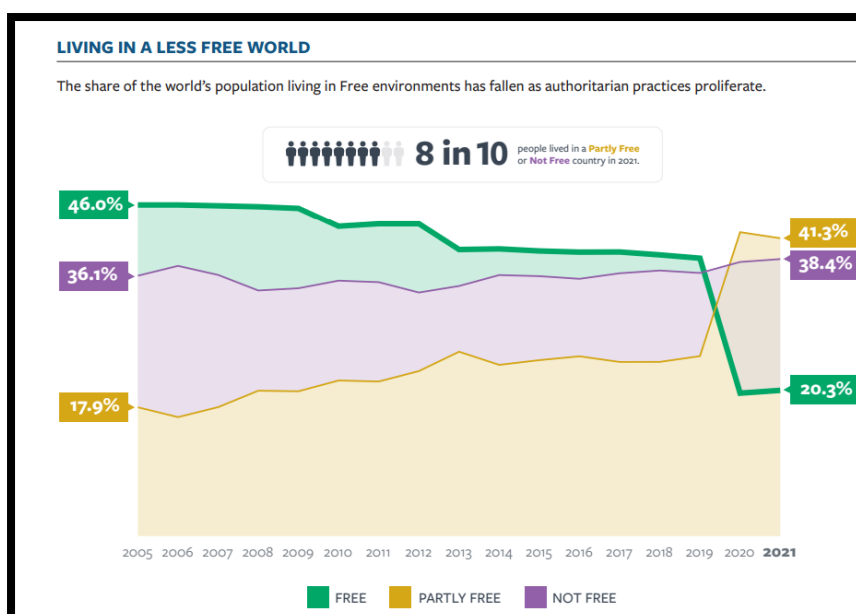
There is another side to the story of freedom as well.

Over the past 250 years, the cry for liberty has also been used by conservatives to defend elite interests. In their view, true freedom is not about collective control over government; it consists in the private enjoyment of one’s life and goods. From this perspective, preserving freedom has little to do with making government accountable to the people. Democratically elected majorities, conservatives point out, pose just as much, or even more of a threat to personal security and individual right—especially the right to property—as rapacious kings or greedy elites. This means that freedom can best be preserved by institutions that curb the power of those majorities, or simply by shrinking the sphere of government as much as possible.

There are several ways to control freedom, but when it comes to freedom of expression the most prominent way which censorship, an action that is a huge concern for the press.

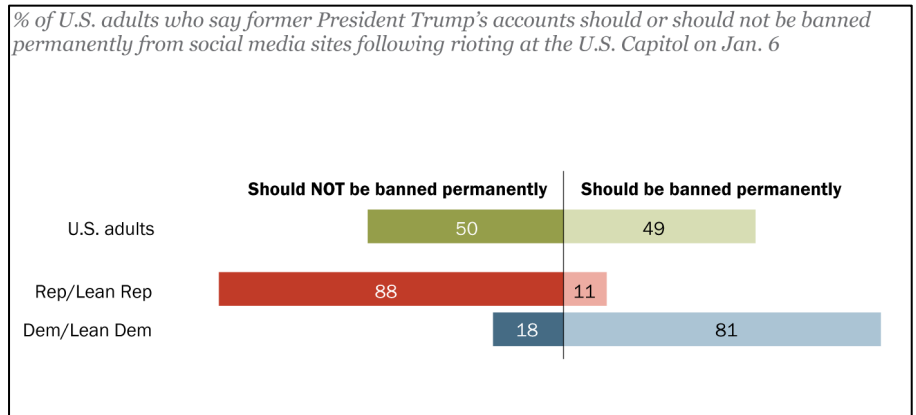
Censorship occurs when any form of controlling body such as the government or private organization withholds or restricts information, public communication, speech (etc.) with the belief that the material is politically unacceptable, offensive or a threat to security.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) protects freedom of expression and opinion as it states under article 19 that every individual has the right and freedom to “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”. Otherwise stating that it is fundamental to be able to both receive information and other people’s opinions as well as to be able to communicate your own opinions through any kind of medium.



Exercising these rights is fundamental to living in a free and open society; if people are to form a democracy, for it to be self-governing, they must have full exposure to all information and opinions.

Laws regarding censorship:



United States of America: The first Amendment of the United States Constitution condemns government censorship, or any censorship imposed by the law and protects freedom of speech.

People's Republic of China (PCR): The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which is the ruling party in the PRC authorizes government censorship. Internet censorship is considered a legal right within the Chinese territory. Freedom of press is harshly restricted as events that are considered controversial are censored from all news coverage. Referred to as the "Golden shield project" censorship in the PCR is concerning the media and does not breach the right to free speech.

Russia: Freedom of speech is protected under Article 29 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation. Censorship, however, still occurs in the press and on the internet. In 2010 Russia was engaging in selective filtering political and social information and 2020 the European Court of Human Rights governed that Russia had violated freedom of speech by censoring critical government websites.

France: Freedom of press is protected by the French constitution and government censorship is limited.

United Kingdom: The Human Rights act declares that freedom of speech is a fundamental right of the UK populace. Exceptions include behavior with the intent of causing harassment, distress of any form of breach of peace.

State with high levels of censorship:

- North Korea

North Korea is probably almost everyone's first association when discussing internet censorship and political repression. The internet in North Korea is completely censored. No foreign media is allowed, internet pornography is banned, and VPNs (Virtual Private Networks = a "secure" private network is achieved using encryption over a public network, typically the internet) are blocked. Messaging apps from outside of North Korea are not available, and the only options users have are those made in the country, which are most likely closely monitored. The only type of news available is censored news.

Only those in power or closely related to the political elite have the luxury of using the internet. Some schools and institutions use a form of the internet called Kwangmyong, and - as expected - it's tightly controlled.

- China

Netizens across the world will typically read the news, look up the traffic information and check on their friends through social media, all before lunch.

For those living in China, this goes a bit differently. Google is banned in its entirety, and so are Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube. This is not to say that there are no options to do all these things in China. However, these options might look slightly different. Popular choices are Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin social media platforms.

Some people still manage to surpass the restrictions via one of the VPNs that still work well, as China prohibited the use of personal VPNs in 2017. Some users were even faced with authorities coming to their homes and asking them to delete their social media posts.

In 2017, the government also decided that websites or social media accounts can't publish news without the permission of the appropriate government body. During the sweep, locking foreign social media, search engines, news media, and other content and applications is enforced by legislative actions and technologies called the Great Firewall. Government censorship is present on the internet but also in the media. Along with Iran and Eritrea, China is notorious for journalist imprisonment.

- Iran

Countries with internet censorship, such as Iran, allow only those VPNs approved by the authorities, making them almost entirely useless. While foreign VPNs are banned, torrenting is not completely blocked. Social media is tightly restricted, and this trend is on the rise, while pornography is wholly forbidden. Youtube, Twitter, and Facebook are also blocked, with likely banning of other social media websites in the future.

Although banned, some VPNs work relatively well and can be used for accessing some of these websites or apps. Many messaging apps are blocked, but those developed in Iran and subjected to censorship are available to all. Political media is completely censored and controlled by the state.

Countries that restrict the internet enforce strict measures throughout critical events. During the anti-government protests in 2017, the Iranian government decided to shut down the internet and used hacking campaigns against the reporters. Iran is one of the countries that doesn't hesitate to jail those considered the state's enemies.

- Belarus

On election day in 2021, the Belarus government shut down the internet for 61 hours nationwide. The administration continued with internet shutdowns, mainly because the anti-government protests took place every Sunday after the elections.

Belarus has also restricted the use of social media and VPNs and severely censors political media. Since 2009, all media outlets need to register with the state or risk getting blocked.

When the Mass Media Law was amended in 2021, tighter restrictions on the free flow of information ensued. Live reporting was banned, and the number of officials blocking access to online material was broadened, leaving Belarus with even more censored news and more internet restrictions.

How far can we control freedom of speech and what are the boundaries that need to be put in place?

Case study:

The Egyptian authorities have increasingly consolidated their grip on the media in recent years through online censorship, raiding and closing independent media outlets and controlling content in both public and private media.

Since 2013, the authorities have arbitrarily arrested, detained, prosecuted and/or convicted journalists and other media workers simply for expressing critical views or carrying out their media work. At least 23 journalists remain behind bars, including six who were detained during the last five months, simply for exercising their right to freedom of expression.

4 independent journalists have been arrested in relation to an article on a pro-government party's alleged corruption.

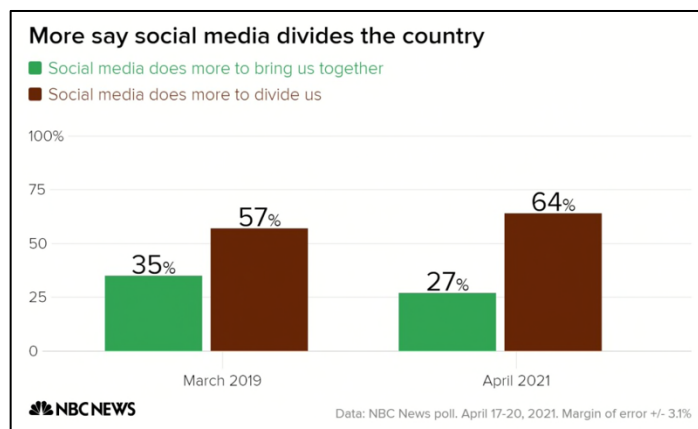
“This latest attack on journalists who dare to deviate from the official narrative in Egypt further exposes the chasm between the Egyptian authorities’ self-declared commitment to human rights, including ‘free speech’, and the grim reality. Harassing one of the few remaining independent media platforms in Egypt reinforces concerns over the ability of independent civil society actors and others to voice their opinions without fear of reprisals at the fast-approaching UN Climate Change Conference to be held in Sharm al-Sheikh in November.” Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Research and Advocacy Director at Amnesty International.

B. Reduce polarisation of opinions

Political polarisation is the divergence of political views away from the centre, towards the ideological extremes. At the core of this polarisation we find citizens holding strong attitudes about political and social issues. Said strong opinions create political intolerance towards competing views, which fuels the “us versus them” perception of society (for example, liberals versus conservatives in the US).

Mass media has aggravated political polarisation as it has induced a movement of the public from a more even-toned programming to one more antagonistic and one-sided. These programs tend to appeal to partisan viewers who find a self-confirming source in this polarized programming.

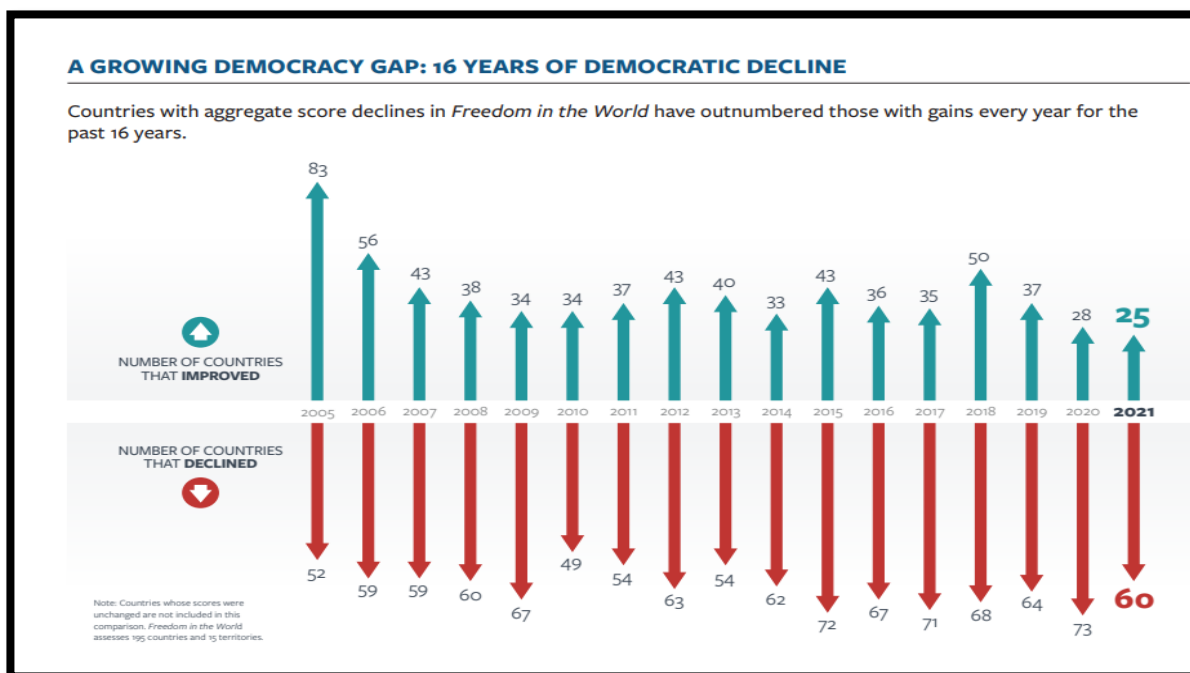
Political polarisation can manifest itself through political extremism, people identifying with left- or right-wing ideologies and relatively radical political parties. Moreover, as soon as moral or political issues become associated with said parties people tend to polarize even further as moral and emotional language is spread through media and by the political parties to glorify one side and directly antagonize the other.



- Nicaragua's incumbent president won a new term in a tightly orchestrated election after his security forces arrested opposition candidates and deregistered civil society organizations.
- Sudan's generals seized power once again, reversing democratic progress made after the 2019 ouster of former dictator Omar al-Bashir.
- As the United States abruptly withdrew its military from Afghanistan, the elected government in Kabul collapsed and gave way to the Taliban, returning the country to a system that is diametrically opposed to democracy, pluralism, and equality.

At the same time, democracies are being harmed from within by illiberal forces, including unscrupulous politicians willing to corrupt and shatter the very institutions that brought them to power. This was arguably most visible last year in the United States, where rioters stormed the Capitol on January 6 as part of an organized attempt to overturn the results of the presidential election.

But freely elected leaders from Brazil to India have also taken or threatened a variety of antidemocratic actions, and the resulting breakdown in shared values among democracies has led to a weakening of these values on the international stage.



Furthermore, how can we reduce the polarisation of opinions?

Intergroup contact could lessen said polarisation. "Citizens Assemblies" where representative citizens are brought together to deliberate over challenging social or political issues can bring citizens supporting different political parties to find common ground and therefore be more accepting of the others. In addition to this, perspective talking could enable one to see things from another's point of view reducing the "us versus them" perception.

Another solution could be voting for policies instead of parties. As mentioned previously associating social and political issues with parties increases polarisation, therefore, holding direct referendums on specific issues could reduce this general political polarisation.

Another proposal could be to increase turnout, the higher the voter turnout the more opinions would be heard, increasing diversity of the results.

Case study:

In Brazil, the right to information is under attack when one of the candidates – the current President – has consistently used an anti-human rights discourse ever since the previous elections. It is even more at risk given that Jair Bolsonaro is running for re-election and has not only persisted in making such speeches, but has intensified the impact through his actions in government and has used a discourse that questions the legitimacy of other fundamental public institutions in ensuring people's rights and the guarantees of due process, such as the Federal Supreme Court and the Superior Electoral Court.

Candidates are free to express their ideas and mobilize those who support them, but this freedom of expression carries obligations and has limits, and this is particularly important in the case of senior public officials.

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights, for example, has determined that when senior public officials issue statements about matters of public interest, they are “submitted to certain limitations since they must verify in a reasonable, but not necessarily exhaustive, manner the facts on which they base their opinions”.

Therefore, those who hold public office “should do so with a diligence even greater to the one employed by individuals due to their high investiture, the ample scope and possible effects their expressions may have on certain sectors of the population, and in order to avoid that citizens and other interested people receive a manipulated version of specific facts.”

In addition, the Court has stated that those who hold public office must take into consideration that “as public officials they have a position of guarantor of the fundamental rights of people and, therefore, their statements cannot ignore those rights or constitute forms of direct or indirect interference or harmful pressure on the rights of those who seek to contribute with public deliberation through the expression and diffusion of their thoughts.

This duty of special care is specifically true in situations of greater social conflict, alterations of public order or social or political polarization, precisely because of the set of risks they may imply for certain people or groups at a given time.”

“As public officials, candidates have a position of guarantor of the fundamental rights of people and, therefore, their statements cannot ignore those rights.”

Inter-American Court of Human Rights

In the highly polarized context, which is clearly present in Brazil, it is therefore the responsibility of all candidates, and especially those who currently hold the office of president, to live up to this responsibility. They must ensure that both their government proposals and their public discourse are in line with human rights and set out advances – never setbacks – in this area.

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