EDITORIAL
Politics and Society after De-Massification of the Media

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As Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) develop and are more widely adopted, news and current affairs media are moving away from being mass-media, with increasing audience fragmentation, and media targeting specific niche audiences. Patterns of opinion formation are changing with these changes. Broadcast mass-media had the potential to moderate the intensity of political disputes in a way which is being threatened by these changes. There is a danger that there will be a diminishing of the effectiveness of any remaining public space in which opposing views can be fully and fairly aired, and some balanced view of what is happening, and has happened, can be formed. If such a public space ceases to exist or ceases to be effective, key elements to the democratic process may be under severe threat in some polities.

INTRODUCTION

For most of the last century, media have been mass-media, where the same message is broadcast to a large population, who thus to a significant extent have a common understanding of what is happening in the world around them. This has had both good, and bad, effects.

The age of the Internet, digital and cable television, has allowed 'narrowcasting' (Smith-Shomade, 2004, p70), where communication moves towards being 'many to many', and two-way and away from the broadcast model of 'one to many' communication which was essentially one-way. Novel "communication formats, like the Internet and the telephone, become incorporated into social relationships, forming new infrastructures that enable different patterns of opinion formation" (Robinson *et*

al. 2002, 285). This editorial seeks to examine possible consequences for politics and for society.

NEWS SOURCES

Professional

It has been judged that one of the hallmarks of a 'free society' has been the existence of varied and independent media sources (see, for example, Binyon, 2002, 461). A century ago, these were newspapers (hence variety and independence of media sources has traditionally been spoken of as a 'free press'). With newspapers the fixed costs of production (George & Waldfogel, 2003, 766) and the costs of timely distribution combined to limit the number of titles available to each reader.

As the century progressed, sound and picture broadcasting became more significant, (with moving pictures of news being distributed first through the proxy of cinema newsreels and then using radio waves). The marginal costs of distribution were even lower than for newspapers, but the fixed costs remained high (Bourreau *et al., 2002*)[1] (notably – but far from exclusively – the costs, financial or political, of obtaining permission to broadcast). Thus the number of broadcasters in any place was very limited, and in many jurisdictions there was regulation to ensure concentrations of media ownership did not undermine the desired variety of media sources (Harcourt, 1998, 373-4), since "Politicians and their economic advisors … assumed that the quality and diversity of media products is best assured by means of competition." (Fog, 2004, 31). By contrast, where there wasn't a 'free press', the limited number of media outlets made it relatively easy for a determined regime to manipulate the media for propaganda purposes.

Now, there is a new dynamic: it manifests itself in a variety of ways, but underlying them is a common core of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT).

A combination of new technology and deregulation have taken us from having television stations that could be numbered in single figures to a situation where many viewers – and an increasing number – have access to digital and cable television with stations numbered in the hundreds. To some extent the costs of production have limited the true number of stations (duplicates broadcast at, say, an hour displacement, cannot truly be classed as extra stations). But at the same time, costs of production have fallen enormously, with cheaper and more forgiving cameras, and material of far lower technical standards and production values being put on air. Television news has to a significant extent moved from being an item in the schedule of a channel that sought broad appeal to being the subject to specialised channels (such as CNN, al-Jazeera or BBC News 24, depending on the viewer's taste).

The Internet has not yet had a dramatic effect on television, but it is having such an effect on radio, where the more limited requirements for bandwidth enable many listeners to download material at least as fast as they can listen to it. This has resulted both in an increase in the amount of audio programming being produced, and more dramatically in the amount of audio programming available to any individual with a fast Internet connection, with radio stations making their output available via the Internet as well as over the airwaves. No longer is the reach of a radio station limited by the reach of the radio waves from their transmitter.

The fixed costs of production of newspapers have fallen considerably, meaning that lower-circulation newspapers are economic, but other changes have not meant that this has led to a significant increase in the number of newspapers being produced. Rather the number has been more-or-less maintained in the face of greater competition from radio, television and the Internet. This does not mean, however, that changes in newspapers are irrelevant to our consideration. Falling (paid-for) readership is relevant, as is the proportion of newspapers that make some (or all) of their content available on the Internet. Again, with newspaper content available on the Internet the amount available to readers with Internet connections has increased out of all proportion. At the same time falling paid-for readership means that newspapers need to retain the loyalty of a smaller, more distinctive, readership.

Alternative

A hundred years ago, pamphlets and public meetings provided alternative media, where population densities were sufficient to allow. However, the costs of production and distribution of pamphlets limited their size and effectiveness against the newspapers, and travel times limited the reach of public meetings.

The era of broadcasting impacted alternative media, but did not transform them. There were unauthorised and cross-border broadcasts, but the costs of transmission and enforcement actions were significant inhibitors of the number and range of such broadcasts. In the other direction, mass entertainment (whether cinema or television) generally took away much of the audience of public meetings, and thus they declined in importance. Pamphlets remained part of the alternative media scene, with production costs falling, but distribution remained a major inhibitor.

Developments of the information age have, however, transformed alternative media. No longer are distribution costs such a significant barrier for alternative media. There have been developments in text-based, audio and visual media.

The main developments in text-based alternative media have come in two phases: firstly textual websites and then later web logs – 'blogs'. Both flavours of text- and web-based alternative media have enabled a single individual or small group to publish writing, still photographs, and graphics that can, potentially, be accessed by significant

proportions of the electorate in countries anywhere around the world. No longer are the problems for alternative media limited reach or costs of distribution[2]. The problems are attracting and retaining the attention. Attention can, to some extent, be attracted and especially be retained by having content that appeals to the worldview of the intended audience (see below).

Alternative audio has made use of two formats – the audio file of limited length distributed using the Internet; and Internet 'radio' stations with more-or-less continuous transmission. The costs (whether financial or in terms of effort) of maintaining continuous transmission have restricted, and can be expected to restrict, this form of alternative audio, and may result in a blurring of the distinction between professional and alternative audio. The audio file of limited length pre-dates the iPod, but has been rejuvenated as 'pod-casting', where files are distributed over the web to be listened to on personal audio players. As with text-based websites and blogs, a major issue is attracting and retaining the attention of listeners.

Alternative media using moving images have largely centred on two phenomena: webcams and open access television. Neither of these phenomena has had a very strong news/current affairs element to it thus far, perhaps because there are greater costs of production than for other alternative media. These greater costs of production have often compelled producers to seek an income – whether from premium rate telephone calls or subscribers – in ways that are not easily open to alternative news media.

Cross-cutting these delivery patterns is the technique of 'viral' promotion or 'viral marketing' whereby an audience is attracted using the combination of word-of-mouth and ICT, whereby people tell their friends (whether face-to-face or virtual friends) of a particularly interesting/funny/outrageous item or stream of content. While the technique itself can be considered 'alternative' it can be used equally by either commercial or alternative media as a promotional technique. Indeed, while alternative media may need to rely on it more, professional media may have the resources to produce materials that mobilise 'viral' marketing more effectively.

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD

Interpretations of news are made through a lens of prior understanding of the world (e.g. see Gadamer, 1989). This is constructed in a number of ways. One key factor is those media that attract the individual's attention: news that recently has come to

their attention is interpreted against a background of what had previously come to their attention. But people's understanding of the world is not solely determined by the media that they pay attention to. Other influences include parenting, schooling and social circles. The understanding of the world of parents and social circles can itself also be influenced by various factors including the media (Barker & Knight, 2000, 151). By contrast, whether media influence through schooling will depend on how teachers are trained and a multitude of other factors. Thus while other factors have an influence, media can have a considerable impact on shaping understandings of the world.

A shared understanding of the world implies some shared understanding of the nature of the problems, and thus leaves open scope for a shared understanding of the possible and desirable solutions to those problems.

In saying this, however, it must be remembered that the relevant media in shaping understandings of the world are wider media than the news/current affairs media whose output those understandings then shape. Understandings of the world are powerfully shaped by explicitly or apparently fictional and entertainment productions as well as news media (see, for example, McCombs, 2002, 16).

DE-MASSIFICATION

The result of the technological changes is that there is far more competition for the attention of the audience. Yet "While concentration of ownership and insufficient competition is readily deplored in theoretical discussions of media performance, the consequences of excessive competition are barely recognised as a problem" (Fog, 2004, 31). Under excessive competition, very few, if any, media can afford to continue to aim at the broad sweep of the audience in their geographical reach. Those that try are already losing audience share. The many newer entrants are much more likely to attempt "the targeting of specific niche audiences" (Smith-Shomade, 2004, 70), and larger media organisations may attempt to package output so that each of a number of ways of presenting output is targeted at a different niche audience. Few of these niche audiences are likely to wish to receive their news in the way news was traditionally broadcast. Increasingly news does not come to he who waits, so much as he or she who seeks.

As news increasingly comes to he or she who seeks there is parallel competition for the attention of those who are seeking news. "The use of fear and danger as attention-catching devices often has the

side effect that people fear the wrong things" (Fog, 2004, 33). This can have serious political consequences as "Drastic measures are taken to combat statistically negligible dangers while other much more likely dangers are largely ignored." (Fog, 2004, 33) In turn, "The media-created fears sometimes develop into moral panics … with the result that principles of human rights, civil liberties, and fair trial are eroded" (Fog, 2004, 33).

More and more media are compelled to seek an audience by appealing to the audience on the audiences' own terms – to position themselves for that market (George & Waldfogel, 2003, 779-781). The impact of this is that "the goal of democratic performance cannot be achieved when unrestrained market forces control the media." (Fog, 2004, 32) While there has long been pressure in this direction, increased competition can be expected to increase the tendency. If there is another media outlet available of equivalent quality and delivery pattern (whether audio/textual/video, or at particular times) that appears to some members of the audience to better match their understanding of the world, and their interests, that other media outlet can be expected (ceteris paribus) to gain the attention of at least a proportion of those members of the audience. Few, if any, media outlets can afford to be unconcerned by such a development. In the end, the way to retain some audience may be to appeal to the pre-existing attitudes and dispositions of that audience.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

The extent to which demassification of the media has political and social consequences will vary from place to place. Crucial questions are the extent to which social divisions, or cleavages, reinforce or cross-cut each other (see, for example, Lipset, 1983, 240), and how that reinforcement or cross-cutting is affected by the changes in the media.

It has long been understood by political scientists that a crucial factor in the intensity of a political dispute is the extent to which the people involved have, and recognise, that they have something in common with those on the other side of the dispute. Thus, where divisions in economic status cross-cut cleavages around religion and language, for example, those divisions are less likely to lead to intense political hostility than where the divisions in economic status are reinforced by differences in religion and language.

This can extend to perceptions about current affairs. Where knowledge of current affairs is shaped by a near-universally accessed broadcaster, or where society is mixed so that social interaction means that people who get their worldview from different media sources talk to and influence eachother, the consequences will be less than in from societies where people get their knowledge about current affairs from very different sources and people mix (either physically or virtually) almost entirely with others of a similar worldview, with media sources and social interaction reinforcing (differing) understandings (Lipset, 1983, 262).

Thus for members of the public who, in a world of narrowcasting, select their current affairs medium to match their pre-existing attitudes and dispositions, the medium reinforces their worldview, and reinforces the division between them and other members of the population with different attitudes who select different current affairs media that reinforce their differing worldview. As "the customization of the communications universe increases, society is in danger of fragmenting, shared communities in danger of dissolving" (Sunstein, 2001).

Linguistic cleavages are particularly likely to be relevant: if there are linguistic differences, people are likely to choose a news source in the language that they are most comfortable with (see Fernandez-Maldonado, 2001, 4-6, for example), and especially so if there are other cultural differences accompanying that linguistic cleavage. It may be argued that the resulting effect is one caused by the linguistic cleavage, rather than demassification of the media. The argument here is not that demassification is the root cause, so much as a possible catalyst in such situations.

There may also be a counter-trend of some choosing to widen their view of the world in a way that wasn't previously possible, but the suspicion must be that fewer will make use of the opportunities opened up in this way than will gravitate to media that match their pre-existing worldview.

The existence of such a counter-trend seems to be supported by Robinson et al. (2002, 300). They found that "where differences existed, they were in the direction of Internet users being more supportive of diverse and tolerant points of view than nonusers." However, this evidence is only tangential to the matter of concern to this editorial: their research related to Internet use in general, and was Internet-specific, rather than looking at all demassified news/current affairs outlets, whether Internet-based or television-based.

Further, Robinson et al.'s evidence (2002, 300) was that "tolerance did not always increase the more one used the Internet", which would be

paradoxical if Internet use were causing the increase in tolerance. Indeed, they accept (2002, 285) that "Early adopters of innovations are notably distinguished by…greater attention to news media". Such a pre-existing tendency to greater attention to news media than the general public may mean that changes in popular news delivery affect their attitudes less than the effects of the same changes on more typical members of the public. This would be because those with a pre-existing tendency to greater attention to news media already made a conscious choice of news media, even prior to adopting use of the Internet.

Israel/Palestine

Despite inhabiting much the same space, Israeli media and Palestinian media are clearly and dramatically distinct (Jamal, 2000), and refer to the same "people, places, events, actions and things" using different names (Peteet, 2005, 153, 154). This results in very different perceptions of the same incident. The two populations are aware of different subsets of the potentially newsworthy events in the area. Even if there were no other influences, this could be expected to result in very different political perceptions. As it is, the different news perspectives reinforce other differences, differences of worldview that have in part been shaped by different media, differences of religion and language, and differences of economic status. The net result is that there is little understanding, very little fellow-feeling, and a widespread feeling on both sides that violence is legitimate against an unreasonable opponent.

Ukraine

The Ukraine has been another society with relatively clear division between language groups. "Generally, analysts draw a line along the Dniepr river, dividing the country into a Russified and heavily industrialised East, and a more ethnically Ukrainian, Western-oriented West." (Kubicek, 2000, 273), although other analysts have portrayed it as "a three-way divided society with no majority … (Russophone Russians, Russophone Ukrainians and Ukrainophone Ukrainians)" (O'Loughlin & Bell, 1999, 4).

On 21st November 2004 there was a presidential run-off election in the Ukraine, in which there was a distinct geographical split in support between Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovych. The declared election result, a victory for Yanukovych, did not match the perception of a very large proportion of the population of the capital city, and other parts of the Ukrainian-speaking West of the country, and popular protest led to the election being declared invalid (ISIS, 2004, 12). This in turn led to protests in the East of the country (BBC, 2005a). The election was re-run on 26th December, with Yushchenko being victorious (ISIS, 2004, 12). It is clear that given the size of Ukraine, and the three-way split of society, the protestors whose protests led to the election being re-run had no independent way of being certain that the declared election result of 21st November was a victory for the wrong candidate. Much of their information will have been coming from Yushchenko – supporting media (see BBC 2005b). In the same way, the protestors in the East of the country had no independent way of being certain that the subsequent result of the 26th December re-run was correct. In both cases they were making judgments about which sources of news to trust, and which not to trust.

Saudi Arabia

The example of Saudi Arabia is rather different, and interesting, in that a traditional division of society is being broken down by many-to-many communication. Does such a counter-example invalidate the thesis of this editorial?

The division in question is the division between males and females (Weckert & Al-Saggaf, 2003, 21). Why is many-to-many communication breaking down a division, rather than reinforcing it? One of the key factors here would seem to be that the gender division was one that did not result from cultural differences between the genders so much as a common cultural observance of a form of Islam. Families have naturally and almost inevitably provided a bridge across that divide. It also seems that for a proportion of young people (at least) there is a desire for communication across, or regardless of, the divide between males and females (Al-Saggaf & Begg, 2004, 48-49). So long as there is genuine desire for communication across a divide accompanied by practical means to bring that communication about, the depth of that divide may be reduced.

Wider Implications

People who have distinct and differing sources of news and current affairs informing their opinions

can have different opinions about what is politically important, what has happened, what the causes of those events have been, what aims the polity should be aiming to achieve and how to achieve them. Many of these differences have long been possible, but the thesis of this editorial is that demassification of the media and narrowcasting may have made them more common and/or more likely.

Democracy depends on there being disagreement, and differences about what aims the polity should be aiming to achieve and how to achieve them are important in a healthy democracy (Lipset, 1983, 1).

Democracy also depends, though, on the intensity of disagreement being moderated (Lipset, 1983, 70-71). Factors that moderate the intensity include cross-cutting cleavages and, importantly to our case, a common understanding of the world and (at least the basics) of current affairs. If cleavages start to align more closely, if there opens a simultaneous gulf in the way the world is understood accompanied by a parallel gulf in perceptions of what has happened, and what the causes of those events have been, disagreement can intensify.

Such intense divisions have been (and will remain) more likely to occur (ceteris paribus) where there are linguistic differences to separate social circles and propel different audiences to different news media, but history has shown that linguistic differences are not necessary for intense differences to build up between populations that inhabit the same geographical space (eg Lipset, 1983, 138-148).

Also relevant is the extent of desires for communication across the cleavages. Such communication has been seen as crucial to a healthy polity, where opposing views can be fully and fairly aired (Sunstein, 2001). The concern must be that, whether or not linguistic differences are a factor, increasingly segmented audiences will form different worldviews and different perceptions of news and current affairs in a way that will intensify disagreements beyond the capacity of democracy to reconcile those disagreements, and in such a way that desires to maintain communication across the divides are weakened or made ineffective.

A result of this intensification may be that election results do not match perceptions of what they should be sufficiently to be accepted as genuine. Individual voters uninfluenced by the media are rarely in a position to get a feel for what the correct election result would be among an electorate of more than 10,000 if the contest is remotely close. Indeed, if individual voters mix exclusively in like-minded social circles and have minimal contact

with those of a differing political persuasion they may tend to overestimate the level of support for their chosen party or candidate.

Thus for any national election that is reasonably closely contested, perceptions of whether the result is correct will depend on how news media report any opinion polls, the balance of opinion (Mebane, 2000, 53) and shifts in that balance. The danger is that if different sections of the electorate access distinct news media that are seeking an audience by reporting news that reflects the pre-existing world-view of their narrowcast audience, these distinct news media may also reflect different perceptions about what the balance of opinion is, and how it is shifting. The may also present partisan interpretations of the balance of opinion and shifts in it as if they were objective.

In seeking media attention "an increasing number of populist politicians … talk about simple causes and implement simple cures in complete disregard for … experts who know better" (Fog, 2004, 32), while where society is deeply divided, those in power may feel a need to retain popularity with their power-base on one side of the divide by pursuing the interests of that side of the divide to the exclusion of the interests of the marginalised group.

Populations thus excluded from power may cease believing that they have a chance of getting their interests taken into account, or (rightly or wrongly) of their representatives coming to power.

At first glance, it may appear that this de-massification will work against global cultural homogenisation (Fairweather & Rogerson, 2003). However, the two trends can rather easily coexist for many years. Indeed, global cultural homogenisation may lead to a cleavage between those who resist it, using their native language, and those who embrace it, communicating in English. The cleavage may well eventually be resolved by those who embrace global cultural homogenisation becoming dominant. Whether or not this is desirable, it seems possible that it will not happen before a worryingly deep division has opened up between them and those who resist (at least some aspects of) global cultural homogenisation. The likelihood of such a worryingly deep division will, in turn depend on whether there are sufficiently strong cross-cutting cleavages, and on the desire for dialogue across this new divide.

CONCLUSION

While the effect is not inevitable, predictable changes in the way that we receive news and current affairs may not result in a fragmentation of

politics, so much as a deepening of divisions. This is not to say that the root cause of such a deepening of divisions would be necessarily be the changes in the media – they may be caused by the many other causes of social division, but changes in the media and causes of social division could mutually reinforce.

There is a danger that there will be a diminishing of the effectiveness of any remaining public space in which opposing views can be fully and fairly aired, and where a balanced view of what is happening, and has happened can be formed. Despite the possibility that some will use ICTs to initiate communication across divides, and open up a new public space, it is possible that under some circumstances and in some polities, such a public space will cease to exist or cease to be effective. If this happens, increasingly segmented audiences may form different perceptions of news and current affairs in a way that could intensify disagreements beyond the capacity of democracy to cope. We have a responsibility to guard against this, not least by promoting communication across divides.

NOTES

1. This holds even if Bourreau *etal.* (2002) are correct in their thesis that there is a relationship between programme production cost and the audience it attracts.
2. There may still be costs associated with production, such as costs of research, if there is to be quality material produced, and the production of quality material may, in some cases at least, be relevant to whether an audience is attracted or retained.

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