

DIGITAL MEDIA ETHICS

DGM 723

Prepared by:

Dr. Sherihan Mohamed

Lecture 7



DMG 723

DIGITAL MEDIA ETHICS

Chapter 4

Friendship, Slow/Fair Technology, and Democracy

Prepared by:
Dr. Sherihan Mohamed

Lecture
6

Remember:

- ** Friendship online? Initial considerations**
 - Privacy Paradox and social media
 - Ethics and social media.
 - Ethical challenges with social media use.
- ** Slow/Fair Technology:**
 - Fairphone as a type of slow/fair Technology.

Lecture
7

Outlines:

- ** Democracy, Freedom and Truth at a Time of Digital Disruption:**
 - Freedom of information and freedom of expression: a conceptual and legal framework.
- ** “Information, the key to democracy”:**
 - Media at the intersection of democratic culture and technological progress.
 - Information and the need for truth.

Lecture
7

Democracy, Freedom and Truth at a Time of Digital Disruption



Lecture
7

Democracy, Freedom and Truth at a Time of Digital Disruption

The pattern of a knowledge-based society relies to a large extent on digital technologies and intangible outputs and generates considerable transnational financial flows and gains.

These technologies also play a key role in ⁽¹⁾providing free access to data and information, ⁽²⁾ encouraging citizen participation in public decision-making, ⁽³⁾ fostering transparency and scrutiny of government action and ⁽⁴⁾mobilising new players capable of identifying alternative means of civic and political participation worldwide.

At the same time, the **increasing impact** of **online platforms** in manipulating **transnational public debates** and the **surge in extremist groups** using the **digital ecosystem** to incite hatred, hostility and violence are **warning signs** that these modes of communication may be having an Adverse Effect on Democracy, and that the boundary between fact and fiction is not as clear as we may like to think.

Lecture
7

Democracy, Freedom and Truth at a Time of Digital Disruption

The **misleading stories** about the **EU** in **2015** following Russia's hybrid war campaign in Ukraine, the **US presidential election campaign** and the Brexit referendum in 2016, the **theories about COVID-19** that have flooded the web since 2019, the terrorist attack against French teacher Samuel Paty on 16 October 2020 and the cyber-attack against Microsoft which seriously affected the European Banking Authority in March 2021 are just some examples that new types of communication may be having an **Adverse Effect on Democracy**.

Lecture
7

Democracy, Freedom and Truth at a Time of Digital Disruption



What can be done to tackle the situation? How should democratic states with new forms of private power intervene in an algorithmic society? Where should the line be drawn between freedom of expression and media pluralism on the one hand, and intrusion and censorship of dissenting opinions on the other? How should information be defended as a fundamental right?

How can we create an environment that is conducive to inclusive, pluralistic public debate? How can we equip citizens to develop a critical approach and take informed decisions? How can we balance innovation with the need to ensure transparency and fairness? Could we be witnessing a situation in which algorithms are “dissolving” democracy?



Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, recognised by the United Nations General Assembly in 1946 and by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose **article 19** states that [“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”].

Lecture
7

Freedom of information and freedom of expression: a conceptual and legal framework

Freedom of expression is inseparable from the principle of freedom of information, as enshrined in many international legal instruments, including the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (1945), which calls for the “**promot[ion of] the free flow of ideas by word and image**” the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966).

Freedom of information and freedom of expression: a conceptual and legal framework

Regional regulatory frameworks recognising freedom of expression have also emerged, such as the US Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) (1967), the American Convention on Human Rights (1969) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1987).



The principle of freedom of information, whose origins can be traced back to the 18th century is an **integral characteristic** of pluralist democratic societies. It **states** that **all information** held by governments and their various institutions must be public and generally accessible, and **may only be withheld** for a “legitimate reason” such as respect for privacy or safety issues. Some restrictions are therefore admissible, as long as they are regulated and comply with international law.

Lecture
7

Freedom of information and freedom of expression: a conceptual and legal framework

In recent decades, the right to information has been increasingly recognised worldwide and implemented by means of specific legislative instruments. This trend has been driven in particular by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which recently launched an “Open Government” initiative with the aim of implementing legal, regulatory and institutional frameworks that encourage transparency, participation and access to information in member countries.



For the OECD, the right of access to information is both a driver for inclusive growth and a challenge for democracy and public governance, with the potential to promote interest in public policy issues and encourage citizens to get involved in decision-making in this area. While only 13 countries had national laws on freedom of information in 1990, now some 127 countries have adopted laws on access to information.

Lecture
7

Freedom of information and freedom of expression: a conceptual and legal framework

Recognising the importance of improving universal access to information and knowledge, the 2015 UNESCO General Conference, followed by the 2019 United Nations General Assembly, proclaimed an International Day for Universal Access to Information, held every year on 28 September, with the aim of strengthening open science, multilingualism, ICT and media and information literacy, and reaffirming press freedom.

So **freedom of information** and **the free circulation of ideas** are inherent to respect for human rights and central to the notion of democracy. Exercising **the right to access information** has a **Multiple impacts**: it **encourages** all **citizens** – civil society as a whole – **to**:

- * get involved in the public sphere.
- * participate in decision-making on public policy.

Lecture
7

Freedom of information and freedom of expression: a conceptual and legal framework

- * scrutinise and evaluate the performances of institutions and leaders.
- * the economic system and the use of public money (and to identify instances of corruption);
- * it also prompts public authorities to be more transparent and open in the exercise of public governance, more responsive to signals from citizens, more attentive to the needs and criticism of society and therefore more open to reform.



The **adoption** of **legislation** to guarantee freedom of information **poses** a significant challenge for democratic countries worldwide. **Moreover,** the presence of international and national legal and regulatory frameworks ensuring this right **Does Not** guarantee their consistent or permanent implementation.

Lecture
7

Freedom of information and freedom of expression: a conceptual and legal framework

The **content** and **scope of laws** in this area **vary**, and their application **depends** on several factors, including the wider constitutional framework, the level of dedicated funding and human resources, the dynamism of civil society, and the ability of citizens to make use of the law.



Although **legal provisions** may be in place, access to information can still be obstructed by **complex retrieval processes**, poor management and preservation of records (including archives), excessive bureaucracy, and opaque systems. **Therefore**, it is crucial to **shift** from a “**culture of secrecy**” to a “**culture of transparency**” within the public sector while also raising awareness among civil society about the need for stricter standards in information management.

Lecture
7

Information, the key to democracy



Lecture
7

Information, the key to democracy

In the contemporary cross-disciplinary sense, the concept of democracy has several interdependent dimensions, three of which are seen as foundational: **citizenship**, the **representativeness of political leaders**, and the **limitation of state power by means of fundamental rights**.



In this context, **citizenship** serves as a **leaven for democracy**, reflecting the desire of citizens (states, districts, communities, even the world – “global citizens”) “**to act responsibly in public life**” to exercise their right to contribute to the way in which society is managed, and also to share their stories, culture and general concerns.

Lecture
7

Information, the key to democracy

The practice of **citizenship** fundamentally requires the presence of a "Public Space," which can be understood from four perspectives:

1- **An intangible political space** where citizens engage in discussions, debates, and the exchange of ideas, allowing them to compare arguments and strive for consensus on matters of general or collective interest.



2- **A social space** where individuals explore “ways of coexisting” and promote “mutual recognition.”

3- **An economic space**, embodied by “the market,” which operates under objective rules and mechanisms but can also serve as a platform for collective action with political aims.

4- **A tangible physical space**, structured across various spatial levels, interconnected by multiple networks, and offering glimpses of diverse “possible futures.”

Lecture
7

Information, the key to democracy

Over the past three decades, the **physical space** has **gradually become** a space for citizenship and politics, **insofar** as social, political, protest and even revolutionary movements have emerged in the streets and taken over symbolic sites (squares, parks, gardens, etc.), with the aim not only of achieving physical visibility but also of **expressing ideas, exchanging experiences, spreading messages and creating symbols**. As well as serving as the agora, the public space has therefore also become a space of public opposition.

Examples of this phenomenon include the “Arab Spring” (a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in 2010–2011), “Occupy Wall Street” (New York, 2011), the Gezi Park protests (Istanbul, 2013), Serbian Anti-Government Protests (2025), South Korean Protests Regarding Presidential Impeachment (2025), Albanian Opposition Protests Against TikTok Ban (2025).

Lecture
6

Media at the intersection of democratic culture and technological progress.

The notions of information and communication are **inseparable** from that of media, a term whose primary definition – means of communicating information – is surrounded by multiple additional facets relating to the techniques used to process that information, to content itself and the way in which it is organised, presented and formatted, and to the regulatory frameworks governing these processes.

Lecture
7

Media at the intersection of democratic culture and technological progress.

New processes based on information and communication technologies began to be developed, driven by the emergence (1969) and global spread of the Internet, the arrival of the World Wide Web in the mid-1980s and the advent of the information society, bringing about a **paradigm shift**. Non-instant communication (of written, visual or audio material) was replaced by communication in real time.

As technological innovations accelerated, they **facilitated** the rapid circulation of **information** across emerging platforms, **reshaping** both the **technical** and **social aspects** of content usage. This evolution also transformed how the public perceives, processes, and consumes information.

Simultaneously, “No medium exists or holds meaning in isolation; rather, **it continuously interacts with other media**. **Radio** not only reshaped the structure of news stories but also influenced the visual dynamics of early sound films. Similarly, **television** brought significant changes to radio programming and the format of documentaries and novelistic storytelling.”

Lecture
7

Information, the key to democracy

The media represent an **organisational system** that takes these notions (**information and communication**) and incorporates them into various spheres: **economic** (supporting businesses), **technological** (boosting the quality and quantity of dissemination) and **symbolic** (serving citizen democracy).



The following points can therefore be observed:

1) Given that all members of civil society (citizens, politicians, businesspeople, associations, etc.) **interact with** information, the media can only exist in the public space, where they target both individuals and the community, with an impact that is both global and local, general and specific. In the public space, information becomes a common good, a source of democracy.

Lecture
7

Media at the intersection of democratic culture and technological progress.

2) Over time, information has become more than just a source of knowledge; it is a **product** in its own right, a commodity that is subject to economic logic and the rules of the market.



When he wrote “for the eye sees not itself, but by reflection, by some other things” Shakespeare was making the point that we only perceive reality by the way in which it is represented. The media do not offer us a “mirror of the world” by means of a neutral transposition of a series of facts, but rather a “showcase of the world”, in other words a view determined by a specific selection of information that is prioritised and presented in a specific way.

Lecture
7

Media at the intersection of democratic culture and technological progress.

These processes [“are governed by the **journalist’s habitus**, as stimulated by changing circumstances: an event-driven view of reality, an individualistic view of the social sphere and a relative allegiance to the ruling elites, with which many journalists are in contact, both because of the routines of their profession and because they belong to certain circles for decision-making and discussion that shape current events and opinions. Roughly speaking, all we know of the world is what the media tell us”].

In **democracy**, information is a **common good**, a resource belonging to the public space and to the realm of public debate, which must be based on a need for truth. But in the **past twenty years**, the informative role of the media has undergone a number of **major shifts**, which have had an impact on the very notions of truth and democracy.



Lecture
7

Information and the need for truth



The first shift is technological: digital technologies have prospered at a rate never before witnessed in the history of technology, bringing about changes in the production, management, dissemination and consumption of information – in short, the way in which we relate to information – for society as a whole (information professionals, politicians and citizens.)

The second shift involves practices and uses, which have resulted in a new type of relationship between information/media and their audience. [“The rise of social networks and their effect on mediated communication in present societies, as well as mobile communication, artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality, and transmedia strategies, have encouraged the search for experimental and innovative responses. which encourages extensions of the person for services, personalisation of content, and [an] updated meaning of place and time.

Lecture
7

Information and the need for truth

The third shift has occurred in the realm of information itself, which has been democratised beyond censorship, is now shared instantly across borders and has been radically liberalised, to such an extent that any individual, often anonymously, can produce and share information and opinions and can judge and take a stance on the basis of their own truths and values.





In its 2020 edition, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report– which examines long- term trends in media use worldwide and analyses the role of social media in the context of online news usage – **highlights two main observations.** **The first** is that news consumption is changing – news sources on the internet are gaining in importance, especially social media, which plays a vital role among young people.

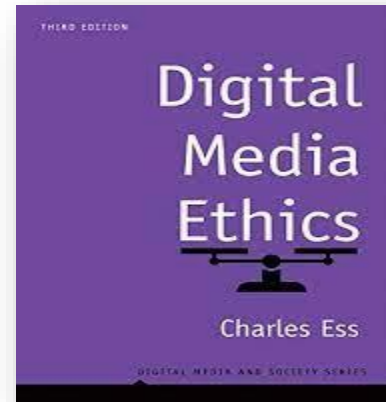
Lecture
7

Information and the need for truth

The second is the rise of intermediaries – “brokers of information” that position themselves between producers and consumers while altering the flow of information.” An in-depth look reveals that in 2020, in many European countries, the proportion of the population using social media as a news source ranged from about 30 to 60%, and thus algorithms are becoming the dominant news source.



Digital Media
Ethics (Digital
Media and
Society Series),
3rd Edition, by
Charles Ess



Intro

Recommended Reference



Lecture
7

Outlines:

- ** Democracy, Freedom and Truth at a Time of Digital Disruption:**
 - Freedom of information and freedom of expression: a conceptual and legal framework.
- ** “Information, the key to democracy”:**
 - Media at the intersection of democratic culture and technological progress.
 - Information and the need for truth.



Thank You

DIGITAL MEDIA ETHICS

Lecture 7

DMG 723

Prepared by:
Dr. Sherihan Mohamed