

LESSON 9 – NEWS MEDIA & THEIR PLACE IN A WORKING DEMOCRACY

PART I: Introduction and overview

Democracies that work well rely on the free flow of information and freely made choices.

The ways of gathering, organising and sending information to help political choices are called the news media. Or simply 'the media'.

When citizens know enough about politicians' policies and how they will make policies happen, they can make informed choices about them.

[An independent news media is therefore essential in a working democracy.](#) For such a media can shine a light on what actions and laws are planned – and on the ways they are carried out. See Bckgrndr 9-1.

Free news media as the 'fourth estate'

An essential skill in a democratic society, therefore, is the ability to explain what citizens need and want for their lives, what is involved in policies and laws, and how citizens can influence them.

According to UNESCO research findings, a free media always has a positive influence on the economy and on governance. A free news media:

- increases participation in political decision making beyond a small inner circle
- [holds governments accountable](#) (See Bckgrndr 9-2).
- makes transparent all government actions.

One of the older names for news media is **the fourth estate**.⁶³ How news media can be an organised source of power or 'estate' requires an understanding of how democracies' checks and balances on power work.

When the power of public opinion is expressed at election time, leaders are rewarded by being voted into political power. And if these leaders are responsible in government, the people they serve are rewarded by effective politicians.

⁶³ Originally there were three **estates**: the first **estate** was the clergy, the second **estate** the nobility, and the third **estate** the commoners. The **fourth estate** is the mainstream press, and was coined in 1837, reflecting their increasing prominence and power. William Dutton argues that the Fifth Estate is the blogging community, as well as all 'networked individuals' enabled by the Internet in ways that can hold the other estates accountable. Dutton, W. H. (2009), 'The Fifth Estate Emerging through the Network of Networks', Prometheus, Vol. 27, No. 1, March: pp. 1-15.

However, when information is missing, is biased or is merely propaganda, a leader may be chosen not on merit but by manipulation. This manipulation may be of the minds of voters' or of the voting process, or both.

Today's 'fifth estate'

Today there are many sources of information and ways of accessing it. To ensure it is reliable, balanced, and easily accessible to citizens, news organisations have arisen to gather and spread it.

In the last 20 years, however, computer technology and access to the Internet have made educated citizens into amateur journalists with [blogs and social media](#) sometimes referred to as **the fifth estate**.⁶⁴ (See Bckgrndr 9-3)

Mass media reach masses of citizens

Since high-speed printing presses and electronic media able to reach masses of people, news services have also been called the mass media.

Today, the dominant medium is still television but other forms are print media (mainly newspapers), radio and the internet, with the later now rivalling TV.

Radio and mobiles in low income countries

In low-income countries, newspapers are often a much smaller influence – or are absent. However radio and smart phones are popular means to send out and receive information.

There are governments, including democracies, in which rulers control, block or suppress information.⁶⁵ These are called **authoritarian governments** or states. Or if they allow some freedoms, they are called **competitive authoritarian** or **hybrid governments**.

Although not a necessary feature of low-income countries, it is a fact that authoritarian states are most often found in these countries.

Information can be controlled, restricted or manipulated

There are many ways governments can control or limit the flow of information needed for good decision-making.

⁶⁴ Dutton, W. H. (2009), 'The Fifth Estate Emerging through the Network of Networks', *Prometheus*, Vol. 27, No. 1, March: pp. 1-15.

⁶⁵ The word 'liberal' is now used before democracy to describe governments that do have this 'free flow of info'.

Before reforms of the 1990s [most sub-Saharan countries controlled information](#) (See Bckgrndr 9-4) by one or more of these methods⁶⁶:

- declaring lengthy states of emergency which formally limited media freedom
- passing broad libel laws that can be selectively applied
- threatening the withdrawal of government advertising
- selectively restricting access to newsprint
- requiring journalists and publications to be licensed
- taxing printing equipment at a high rate
- requiring a bond to be deposited with the government before new publications can launch.

Reasons for the vulnerability of low-income countries

The reasons low-income countries are particularly vulnerable to information blockage and censorship include:

- limited resources limits professionalism – either through inadequate training and/or salaries
- restricted means (for organisations or individuals) means reduced initiative and vulnerability to pressure
- the increased likelihood of impoverished journalists to publish favourable stories – or not write critical ones (**self-censorship**)
- ‘Big Man-Little Boy’ **clientelism** reduces the felt freedom to report anything seen to undermine traditional ways or values.

In **Islamic-majority states** or post-communist ones in central Asia there may be quite different ideas about the role of the press, or of the media in general. Approaches to media here are closer to models where ‘social stability’ is defined by governments and limits are imposed accordingly.

In these states the media may be expected to play the role of upholding social or religious values, or both.

Free flow of information seen as a threat

⁶⁶ Bourgault (1995) Mass Media in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; p. 180).

In such countries the free flow of information is often seen as a threat to state stability or personal morality – or both – and is controlled by:

- Blocking social media (The ‘Great Firewall of China’, for example, can still block any information on the Tiananmen Square massacre, or on Tibet)
- use of tax laws which put financial pressure on media organisations
- compulsory registration of media
- use of laws forbidding insults to those in high places⁶⁷. For instance, Russia has more than 100 laws governing media conduct) or bringing the country or authorities within it into disrepute (North Korea, UAE, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia)
- placing supreme value on unchallengeable social goods such as ‘nation building’, ‘economic development’ and ‘social stability.’⁶⁸
- emphasising that a free press gives licence for disharmony or disunity
- the domination of broadcast coverage by leading political forces
- social values that favour populist or ‘strong’ leaders (dominant media coverage encourages poor and illiterate people to seek political salvation through ‘their leader’)
- intimidating journalists with strict use of libel laws and jail sentences (Egypt)
- giving privileged access to television in particular
- the dominance of TV as a medium
- internal censorship

PART II: Media reflects changing values

Free media – within a cultural context

The role of the media can in many ways be decided by a political culture – or lack of it. For example, scholars suggest Russia’s authoritarian culture traditionally centres on security and order. Thus it has only limited support for democratic principles.

⁶⁷ Laws forbidding insults to those in high places – often referred to as *lese-majeste* (insulting royalty) or *desacato* (contempt of authority/public officials) – are used globally to protect reputation, dignity, and authority of government officials, monarchs, and state institutions. While sometimes justified as maintaining public order, these laws are frequently criticized by human rights organizations as tools to stifle dissent, shield leaders from legitimate scrutiny, and violate freedom of expression.

⁶⁸ Egypt’s government pre-2013 expected the press to ‘uphold the security of the country, promote economic development, support approved social norms’ – Lesch (2004, p. 610)

In non-democratic Islamic cultures a free media can be presented as an alien 'Western' idea that leads to licence and the pursuit of self-interest rather than social harmony.⁶⁹ In some cases, so-called authoritarian rule is seen more as an expression of a home-grown cultural tradition inherently opposed to Western liberalism or permissiveness. (See Bckgrndr 9-5).

Limits to freedom reflects history of type of governance

An opposing view puts the actual situation as happening the other way around: culture reflects rather than promotes the basic nature of a regime. Using Russia as an example, this view sees lack of political trust as "reflecting the country's non-democratic history – as well as the corrupt nature of its contemporary governance."

70

That is, rather than Russian government reflecting the longer term political culture, the political culture in Russia reflects the long-term history of top-down governance there.⁷¹

Politics and the development of ways of communicating are closely connected. The development of newspapers and the broadcast media of radio and television in the 19th and 20th centuries have had the biggest impact.

Political technology neutralises free expression

As in other competitive authoritarian regimes, Russia's dark arts of neutralising potential threats in the media, and in business, have over time become recognised by citizens. Aware ordinary Russians sometimes call these 'arts' **political technology**.

This produces the necessary silence by removing from office a few media opponents. Such technology⁷² only happens where there are weaknesses in the rule of law, the market economy and civil society generally. But it contributes to a winning electoral strategy.

For it can cripple independence within media ranks well before votes are actually cast. If these technologists have done their jobs, the result of the election is over by

⁶⁹ The Prime Minister of Malaysia Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003) condemned so called Western democracies (Australia, Malaysia's south eastern neighbour, is one such example) where "political leaders are afraid to do what is right, where the people live in fear of the free media which they so loudly proclaim as inviolable".

⁷⁰ "The authoritarian traditions of Russia mean that people are not used to democratic behaviours and values, such as welcoming pluralism in thinking and behaving, tolerating dissent and supporting seemingly less efficient methods of democratic decision-making. They do not easily see the advantages of debate, discussion and non-conformity, and not deferring to a class of superiors." Gitelman, Z. (2005) 'The Democratization of Russia in Comparative Perspective', in *Developments in Russian Politics 6*, ed. S. White, Z. Gitelman and R. Sakwa (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan) pp 241-56.

⁷¹ Gitelman (2005)

⁷² McFaul, M. (2005) 'The Electoral System', in *Developments in Russian Politics 6*, ed. S. White, Z. Gitelman and R. Sakwa (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan)

election day. Accompanied by media dominance typical of such regimes, these are also outside the usual terms of reference of 'free and fair' election monitoring.⁷³

Social media as a catalyst for change

Clever, devious and sometimes ruthless ways of blocking information are used. However, increasingly aware citizens – especially urban ones – are beginning to use new social media to protest and push for change.

Even when authoritarian governments win elections in these ways, this awareness often leads to widespread loss of legitimacy. And group awareness of this can be a catalyst for future change.⁷⁴

In low-income and divided countries, modern forms of communication are having a revolutionary effect. However the continuing effect of television, because it is a widespread and largely free medium, cannot be underestimated.

Authoritarian regimes dominate the major broadcasting channels. This can not only crowd out communication from potential challengers but also shut out all dissent.

⁷³ McFaul (2005) pp. 61- 79: "At the same time the state's larger role gave incumbents enormous advantages, be it national television coverage, massive administrative support from regional executives or enormous financial resources from companies like Gazprom." (McFaul, 2005, p. 77)

⁷⁴ Hague, R., Harrop, M. (2013). *Comparative government and politics: An introduction*. 9th edn, Basingstoke: Macmillan. [Now in 12th edition]

Communications revolutions in low-income countries

In low income countries, both radio and TV have two major advantages over print media:

- they are accessible on simple devices without need for any paper distribution
- they do not require literacy.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATION MEDIA IN 20 th AND 21 st CENTURIES	
Later 19 th to early 20 th century	Popular newspapers emerge, often with mass circulation. New railway networks allow national distribution.
1930s	Radios golden age, For the first time, politicians broadcast directly into electors' homes.
1950s–1960s	Television becomes the most popular, & usually the most trusted, medium in Western countries. By regulation or state ownership, politicians secure access to the medium. Entertainment programmes from the USA are widely exported, diffusing American values
1970s–1980s	The television audience begins to fragment, with an increase in the number of channels, distribution by cable and satellite, and widespread use of video.
1990s	Internet access reaches more affluent and educated groups in Western democracies, representing a further expansion of international communication. Mobile telephony emerges.
2000s	Mobile telephone access becomes standard, bringing telephony to many low-income countries for the first time. The Internet reaches the mass population in Western societies. Sharp decline in readership of printed newspapers.
2010s	Continued expansion of digital social media, further extending horizontal communication among citizens, In 2012, Facebook claims a billion users per month. Internet is increasingly accessed via smartphones.

Villagers can gather round a shared radio set to hear the local news or tune in on their phones.

Many low-income countries developed broadcasting networks (TV and radio) without passing through the stage of mass circulation newspapers. And have widespread microwave networks which do not require fixed wired infrastructure. (See Bckgrndr 9-6).

It is now possible for politicians in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America countries to reach rural, and even nomadic populations, via mobile telephony and TV.

In higher income countries: greater choice – and ‘fragmentation’

In higher income countries the 21st century has, on the contrary, led to greater fragmentation. This means citizens can choose their own political programming. Or none. (See Bckgrndr 9-7).

National audiences reached by leaders’ televised ‘fireside chats’ are no longer possible. More channels and on-demand choice has meant the world is more a global village.

But it has also led to the decline of public broadcasting and traditional forms of participation in politics.

A connected global village – accessing different media

Newer cable, satellite, internet and mobile broadcasting services have meant there is now a more splintered or fragmented audience.

Single national broadcasters are rarer and the viewer has become less a citizen and more a ‘consumer’. Younger people now rely less on television as they can access a range of media.⁷⁵ Political programmes are still available for the interested. But are no longer the only choice for those who are not.

As the timeline above shows, the global dominance of transnational broadcasting networks owned by ‘media moguls’ grew out of the ‘newspaper barons’ whose influence held such sway over nations in the nineteenth century.

PART III: Facts, impacts, and context

⁷⁵ Young Americans are more likely now to use the Internet rather than TV: Murrie, M. (2006) ‘Broadcasters Getting Online, Staying On Air’, *ejournal USA* (11), <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itgic/0306/ijge/ijge0306.htm>, accessed 28 April 2006.

Knowledge of media impacts reveals importance of context

These four types of media impacts are a reminder that information always comes with a context.

Probes into inconvenient truths frequently trigger **pushback** from the guilty and implicated innocent alike⁷⁶. Both can feel that their perspective has been mis- or under-represented.

The prime responsibility of the media in liberal democracies is to the **public interest** in, and need for, trustworthy information. However, any information can be misused or misinterpreted.⁷⁷ Although libel and defamation laws apply, there is always a tension between these and freedom of speech laws.⁷⁸

The priming impact of television

A common response to the impact of television is that it primes voters to base decisions more on personalities than policies. Research has certainly shown that party leaders are increasingly important in the visual media-based campaigns that feature strongly in countries where television or devices are in most homes.

Despite this, there is little evidence that images of leaders, or their personalities, are the key influence on winning elections.

However, if the broadcasting studio is now the main site of the battle for the mind and hearts of voters⁷⁹, television does confirm status and recognition on candidates. Also, where the primacy of television has been established, dominance of the media is a major factor in return of incumbent leaders.

Significantly, in countries where there have been limited TV channels, the resulting balanced treatment of politics by aware programmers has contributed to a weakening of party loyalties.

⁷⁶ 'Incrimination by insinuation' is an expression for statements that destroy reputations ('oft got without merit and lost without deserving': *lago*) by smearing by association. These can be used by irresponsible politicians, commentators or even journalists. Often it is a form of 'blame-sharing' through unproved (and/or unprovable) accusations designed to deflect heat from the guilty, retaliate for stinging truths or even provide smokescreen cover, consciously or unconsciously, for exposed ignorance.

⁷⁷ 'Ambiguity, like humility, is endless.' – Nelson Mandela

⁷⁸ Defamation laws may come into tension with [freedom of speech](#), leading to censorship or [chilling effects](#) where publishers fear lawsuits. Cultural differences exist in definitions of both offence and actions bringing others 'into disrepute.' The power of the internet to disseminate comment, which may include malicious comment, has brought a new focus to the issue. Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights permits restrictions on freedom of speech when necessary to protect the reputation or rights of others. Jurisdictions resolve this tension in different ways, in particular in determining where the burden of proof lies when unfounded allegations are made.

⁷⁹ 'The empires of the future will be the empires of the mind.' Winston Churchill (1943)

This **partisan de-alignment** is stronger if there are few channel choices. This effect was demonstrated in 1950s Europe when it was discovered that television provided a new common ground for Dutch citizens.⁸⁰

Newspapers still better for context?

While visual media can tell viewers what happened, newspapers (print or electronic text in 'online papers') are still better able to put events in context. For this reason even low circulation newspapers can be influential.

Responsible politicians monitor quality newspapers both for a survey of current events and for background on topical issues. 'Doing the papers' gives feedback from the articulate and socially motivated. This includes critique of policies and performance by way of editorials, articles by columnists and opinion pages. Letters to the editor function not just as a safety valve for disaffection and concerns, but also as a channel for any citizen's suggestions or ideas.⁸¹

Internet AND newspapers

Amongst younger people in particular there has been a widespread shift to the internet. News is available from newspapers own sites, from news agencies, or globally from sites dedicated to news from many sources.

Paywalls restricting news to paid subscribers has happened only with quality newspapers. Even here there is a mix of paid and free articles as only the best papers can afford the risk of readers shifting to free sites.

LESSON 9 FURTHER READING:

Parts IV and V are readings on the impacts of technology changes on the media and democratic practices. To keep lessons user-friendly they are here as hypertexts.

They give examples of how parties can organise themselves, how they can adapt to local conditions, and how they can be regulated and/or restricted

⁸⁰ Catholics saw that Socialists were not the dangerous atheists they had been warned about. And Liberals found orthodox Protestants were not the bigots they were supposed to be. Wigbold (1979) *Television and Political Life*, ed. A. Smith; London: Macmillan) p. 201.

⁸¹ Some newspapers have a 'Rants and Raves' column that allows citizen-readers a few sentences to vent displeasure or express gratitude or appreciation for something done well ('Bricks and Bouquets' is older language for this in English.)

Ways to measure press independence in Africa & globally

A free press always has a positive influence on the economy and on governance, according to findings in a UNESCO report.⁸² It expands participation in political decision making beyond a small inner circle, holds government accountable, and makes their actions transparent.

The Global Expression Report 2025 monitored 178 nations and revealed that over the last decade 5.6 billion people have experience a decline in their freedom of expression. Scores have sunk in 77 countries, and only 35 are now ranked as 'Open'. Of these 77, 18 were significant (score drops of at least 20 points). The largest declines took place in Bukino Faso, El Salvador, and Hong Kong (China), at 49-point drops each. Of 15 improved scores, four were significant: Gambia at 64 points experienced the greatest, Sir Lanka 32 and Fiji 24. Somalia, according to this index, at 134 is above such nations as China, India, Ethiopia, Uganda, Yemen and the UAE, while the US at 56 lies between Sierra Leone and Gambia.

Improvement can be made through legal reform, government accountability, international pressure, civil society engagement, and ensuring the physical safety and independence of journalists. Some countries like Namibia, Ghana and Cabo Verde are making consistent progress, although others remain stagnant or are regressing. Eritrea, for example, maintains tight control over all media and often imprisons journalists without trial.

A decade ago the 2015 World Press Freedom Index, produced by [Reporters Without Borders](#), ranked the performance of 180 countries according media independence, respect for the safety and freedom of journalists, pluralism, and the legislative, institutional and infrastructural environment in which the media operate.

If 2025 was a big decline for freedom of information with deterioration of press freedom worldwide, the previous two decades saw a gradual decline. A decade ago the 2015 World Press Freedom Index, produced by [Reporters Without Borders](#), ranked the performance of 180 countries according media independence, respect for the safety and freedom of journalists, pluralism, and the legislative, institutional and infrastructural environment in which the media operate.

⁸² <http://www.theafricareport.com/Columns/what-is-the-link-between-press-freedom-and-development.html>

Influences such as censorship, armed conflict, surveillance and national security were taken into account. Some of the findings by Reporters Without Borders:

- More countries are using prohibitions on blasphemy and sacrilege to censor political criticism.
- 2014 saw increased violence against news providers covering protests.
- Governments most often cite security as the grounds for trampling on fundamental freedoms and gagging the media.
- Many governments and non-state players used control and manipulation of media coverage as a weapon of war in 2014.
- Journalists faced violent threats from non-state groups in 2014. The world's most repressive countries found ways to reinforce and improve methods of censorship and repression.

Finland had ranked No. 1 on the index out of 180 countries for five years in a row, followed by Norway and Denmark. At the other end of the scale, Turkmenistan, North Korea and Eritrea performed worst.

In 2015, France ranked No. 38 (moving up one place), while the U S ranked 49th (down three places). Russia went down four places to No. 152. China, at 176th place, went down one place. Japan ranked 61st (down two places), Brazil ranked 99th (up 12 places), and Iran, at 173rd place, remained unchanged.

In the Americas, the US was down three places reflecting a decline continuing to the present day. Contributing to this decline in 2014 was the Obama administration's war on information in Wikileaks, and New York Times journalist James Risen coming under government pressure to reveal his sources, according to Reporters Without Borders.

Wars, violence during demonstrations, economic crises, the growing threat from non-state operatives — all resulted in media freedom then declining on all five continents. Reliable free press indicators a decade ago show that two thirds of the 180 countries surveyed for the 2015 World Press Freedom Index performed worse in 2014 than in 2013. Violations of freedom of information in 180 countries increased 8 percent in 2014 to 3,719 violations, and almost 10 percent compared with 2013, according to the annual global indicator.

In 2025 there are few nations unaffected by the continuing influence of giant social media platforms, distortion of information due to the rise of state as well as non-state actors (along with authoritarian governments), and to impacts of the collapse

of newspapers' financial model in this wake. If Ghana's measures to ensure information security were a positive, the US's are not.

TOP 15 AFRICAN Best Press Freedom in 2025



	COUNTRIES	SCORE	WORLD RANK
1	 SOUTH AFRICA	75.71	27
2	 NAMIBIA	75.35	28
3	 CABO VERDE	74.98	30
4	 GABON	70.65	41
5	 SEYCHELLES	68.56	45
6	 MAURITANIA	67.52	50
7	 MAURITIUS	67.31	51
8	 GHANA	67.13	52
9	 LIBERIA	66.61	54
10	 SIERRA LEONE	66.36	56
11	 THE GAMBIA	65.49	58
12	 IVORY COAST	63.69	64
13	 CONGO REP	60.58	71
14	 C. AFRICA REP	60.15	72
15	 SENEGAL	59.43	74

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Press freedom & development in sub-Saharan Africa

Welfare economist and Nobel prize Amartya Sen has observed that there not been a famine in a democratic society.

What then is the link between a free and the world's poorest region? The Press Freedom and Development UNESCO report concludes "all the findings confirm the importance of freedom for development".



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Role of free press in ridding Africa of poverty

African nations are usually placed at the bottom of any list measuring economic activity and human development. But a free press has been shown always to have a positive influence on poverty and on governance. For it holds government accountable, makes their actions transparent and expands participation in political decision making beyond a small inner circle.

Lack of democracy and rampant corruption are still major obstacles to progress. It is not by chance that the continent, except very few exceptions, is still ruled by **authoritarian** and **hybrid regimes** that place serious restrictions on information available to their citizens and the free operation of the press. And despite a lack of basic social services, military forces are often well financed.

Poverty is man-made and some people bear responsibility for this human tragedy that continues to ravage lives in the 21st century. In this region, a big percentage of the population cannot safeguard even the most basic human needs. As James K Boyce and Léonce Ndikumana put it: "In most financial scams, the victims simply lose their money. In Africa, some lose their lives".

However, a free press can promote democratisation and economic development on the African continent. It can be a crucial instrument for socio-economic development in the same way that investment, infrastructure and education are.

Freedom of expression is basic

Philosopher Emmanuel Kant concluded that an enlightened and developed society of free and independent individuals cannot be created unless all its members have their freedom of expression.

Specific findings from UNESCO's 2008 report note that no country in the world has a free press and a high percentage of its population living below the poverty line. And that the weaker the constraints on the press the more developed the country will be.

It goes on to say no country has a low GDP or High Inequalities and a free press. Free press has a positive influence on the provisions of social services for the public.

'No country has a free press and a very high percentage of people with no access to safe water or a high percentage suffering from malnutrition. Improvement in press freedom is associated with a drop in infant mortality and an increase in life expectancy at birth as well as general increase on the health status of the population. By allowing debate and different opinions to be heard the country becomes more stable, less violent and more democratic.'

Flawed democracies serving mostly elites

The African continent has been undergoing the process of democratisation for about 30 years now. This process has been imposed from abroad and it is not sound. It has resulted in electoral democracies, whereby authoritarian regimes hold fake elections and create political parties that only serve the interest of the dictator.

External debt versus capital flight

In most financial scams, the victims simply lose their money. In Africa, some lose their lives. It is high time more emphasis is placed on the links between extreme poverty, authoritarianism and corruption on the continent. The local media should emphasise who is gaining and who is losing from the effects of globalisation and liberalisation on the continent.

Although Africa has witnessed some growth in the last few years, the economic growth was not being distributed along all segments of the population. Very high rates of unemployment and inflation make everyday life extremely difficult for slum dwellers in big cities and lack of investment on infrastructure, irrigation and agriculture makes survival a dodgy business in many rural remote areas.

Some people gain, especially the ones close to ruling regimes, at the expense of others. Whilst much has been written for the huge unpayable debt of African nations, there has been little discussion in local newspapers about capital flight out of Africa.

Need for justice, not charity

In 2012 sub Saharan Africa experienced an exodus of more than \$ 760 billion in capital flight since the 1970's, a sum that surpasses the region's external debt of \$ 175 billion. More should be done to identify looters and accomplices and to

repatriate stolen funds. The region needs justice and not charity. Money sent to the continent as aid is misused by leaders who spend it on weapons, enrich themselves or invest on few prestigious projects in the capital city.

Little is being spent on social services such as education, health care and pensions. The region remains among the top for on-going conflicts, and a vast percentage of the population dies yearly from preventable, most of the time water-borne, diseases.

Blame it on something

Despite all the malfunctions of several African governments the press has remained silent. I have worked in three different countries in Sub Saharan Africa, where I tried to follow the news as much as possible via local newspapers and the radio, as a teacher. But I found it sad that most journalists preferred to play the government's game and blame outsiders.

Sometimes these outside factors included past events like colonialism, which is being blamed for most misfortunes on the continent. I am the last person not to agree that colonialism was wrong and brutal but that does not explain the current situation on the continent. Lebanon, Greece, Vietnam, India, Libya, Philippines, Bolivia and Argentina, as well as many other countries in Asia and Latin America, have being colonised in the past and are doing relatively well.

Another popular blame among journalists is climate change. In recent times, the list is being enlarged by including China and 'global terrorism.

Lack of analysis of policies means no force for change

Sometimes, it is a cruel bad war leader such as Kony, Bemba, Shankow or Taylor. In some cases it is a foreign or neighbouring government. I remember long discussions on Sierra Leonean radio about the negative influence played by the Liberian government and Nigerian troops during the local civil war. There was no analysis of the Sierra Leonean government's policies since the 70's, and there was no serious criticism about the lack of democracy in West Africa.

It is not by chance that the poorest region of the world is also the most authoritarian region. The government has an interest in remaining strict and brutal since it can only remain in power by so doing.

Press freedom in Africa is blocked as a result of a general lack of democracy. The 2010 "Press Freedom in Africa" report published by the Federation of African Journalists (FAJ) focused on the control of the African media by the state. It concludes that for the year 2010 "12 journalist have been assassinated, five killed

accidentally, 34 jailed and hundreds continued to be threatened, intimidated, attacked, wounded, and forced to into exile".

Free communication of thoughts and opinions is among the most precious of the rights of man. It is essential to examine closer what exactly happens to those who criticised their government for the misfortunes of their societies and were not comfortable in blaming colonialism, the Chinese or Islamists.

Journalists require popular support even more than courage

In Somalia three journalists lost their lives in criminal conditions and Eritrea remains, globally, the biggest prison for journalists. Currently the Eritrean state holds more than 20 journalists in prison, some of them having been in jail for close to 10 years. In Rwanda, Jean Leonard Rugambage was shot as he was preparing to publish a critical article on the government.

In Angola Alberto Cravus Chakussanga was shot down by unidentified individuals. Chakussanga's radio had been very critical of the regime. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where a journalist is killed every year, Patient Vhebey Bankome was brutally murdered by assassins in military uniform.

In Nigeria three journalists were murdered in cold blood and in Burundi one journalist faces life imprisonment for expressing his views about the dangers of Al-Shabaab to Burundi, after the deadly terrorist attacks in Kampala, Uganda. Both Uganda and Burundi sent troops to Somalia in support of the transitional government, which Al-Shabaab has been fighting tooth and nail to overthrow.

Only popular movement can overcome climate of fear

Most local newspapers and radio stations on the continent have failed to report on corruption and abuses perpetrated by the government because they are afraid for their lives.

I don't think that the ills of the continent will be overcome without a strong indigenous movement that will demand democracy on the continent With current upheavals in the Arab Countries, southern Europe and in some areas of the United States, it is time for Sub Saharan Africa to demand more.

Parents, bosses and children: growing up means speaking out

Currently, however, democratic values are not so strong among African populations. A research conducted by Afrobarometer in 2009 that tried to find if democrats were emerging in Africa. It found that "a solid majority (60 percent) see their government more like a parent and their own role as children rather than bosses" and less than half believe that citizens should be held responsible their governments.

Afrobarometer's report concludes that the development of democratic citizenship among Africans is still relatively weak. Nonetheless, it should not be taken in its pessimistic approach that nothing can be changed in the region, although, after living for so long under authoritarian states, most people have become apathetic and afraid of politics.

Additionally political knowledge is not widespread among the population. And for their survival many rural residents depend more on family members, or on International non-governmental organisations – which tend to depoliticise their poverty and precarious situations – rather than on their own governments.

A free press can re-politicise poverty: know what they do with your money

With more people having access to one kind of a media or another, the press can play an active role in re-politicising poverty among locals. Instead of searching for white heroes in NGOs, and for demons of the past, the press should spread political knowledge. The press should be active in the struggle against corruption, nepotism, tribalism and it should promote democratic values in any way it can. It should report human rights abuses perpetrated by the state against civilians, corruption, misuse of aid and criminal links between governments and international multinationals that are grabbing anything they can from the continent.

The press should report on how well the political and economic elite live in the capital city at the expense of the majority. It should highlight where the elite send their children for studies and how they spend their weekends. By so doing Africans will understand the injustices and the cruelty of the elite. More access to information is more likely to make them want to change the political situation rather than hoping for more charity. Freedom of the press and access to information is a human right. Article II of the Universal Declaration of Human and Citizens right stipulates that "the free communication of thoughts and opinions is among the most precious of the rights of man, every citizen, may speak write and print freely".

Freedom of the press is linked with all aspects of development in a positive way. A free press is related to higher GDP; higher human development measured by the Human Development Index (HDI) and a more equal and fair society.

Brave African journalists need support

International conferences and donor–recipient meetings should pay more attention to the precarious situations brave African journalists face. Any progressive human being who understands poverty to be a human crime should emphasize, with all his or her strength, the need for more freedom of press in Sub Saharan Africa. This will eventually lead to a more democratic and more economically prosperous region.

Blogs and social media as a Fifth Estate

Blogs have potential and real influence on contemporary policymaking, especially in the context of elections, reporting from conflict zones, and raising dissent over corporate or congressional policies.

Based on these observations, Al-Rodhan suggests moving beyond traditional thinking that limits the “estates of the realm” to governmental action and proposes a broader perspective in which civilians or anyone with access to a computer and the Internet can contribute to the global political change and security.

Of all the blogs on the Internet, continues Al-Rodhan, only a few have a real power to influence the [policy-making process](#), specifically political and current affairs blogs with large and involved audiences. These blogs can help organize the public to take a stance on an issue, be used in political campaigns, help cultivate [grassroots movements](#), and assist in fundraising.

Furthermore, blogs have several unique features that give them potential influence in policymaking: a lack of editorial supervision, low barriers to entry, difficulty for governments to censor or control content, and the ease of responding to events in real time.

Blogs can affect policy-making by providing insider information, facilitating [communication](#) between experts, promoting grassroots efforts, discrediting political figures, and setting policy agendas.

Blogs as “*the fifth estate*” can also negatively influence [global security](#). They can contribute to [terrorist](#) plots by facilitating cross-border communication and by connecting people whose ideas are outside of the mainstream, by propagating hateful or violent messages, or by encouraging [organized crime](#).

Advocates for social justice, like the [Code Pink](#) movement argue that this is an unfair characterisation, since the [Executive Branch](#) wages current existing war at a significant cost of loss to society – and routinely without being charged with the same accusation.

Despite of evidence of multiple war fronts appearing to support this claim in the early 21st century, Al-Rodhan concludes, governments must increase surveillance of blogs and develop legal, administrative, and technological tools to dissuade bloggers from posting potentially harmful information. Such as calls to incite terrorism. On a more positive note, blogs have also the potential to prevent governments from adopting hasty and misjudged decisions.

Building on this work, Wallsten empirically assessed the impact of political bloggers as a "fifth estate" during the [2004 presidential campaign](#). Specifically, he used [time-series analysis](#) to determine the extent to which political bloggers followed the mainstream media's agenda or set the mainstream media's agenda.

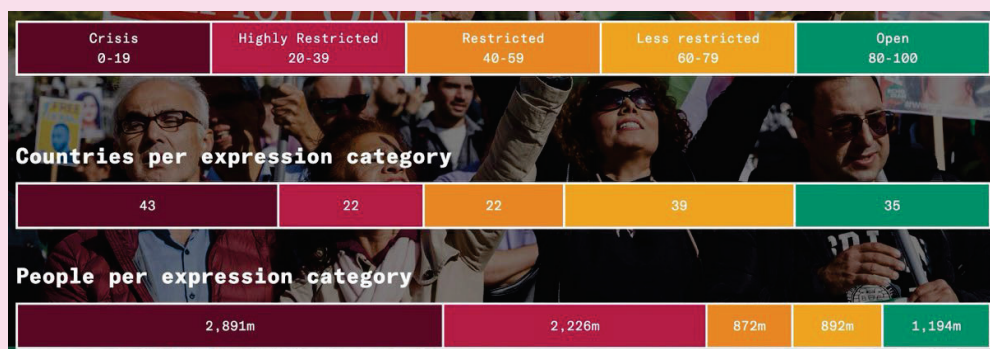
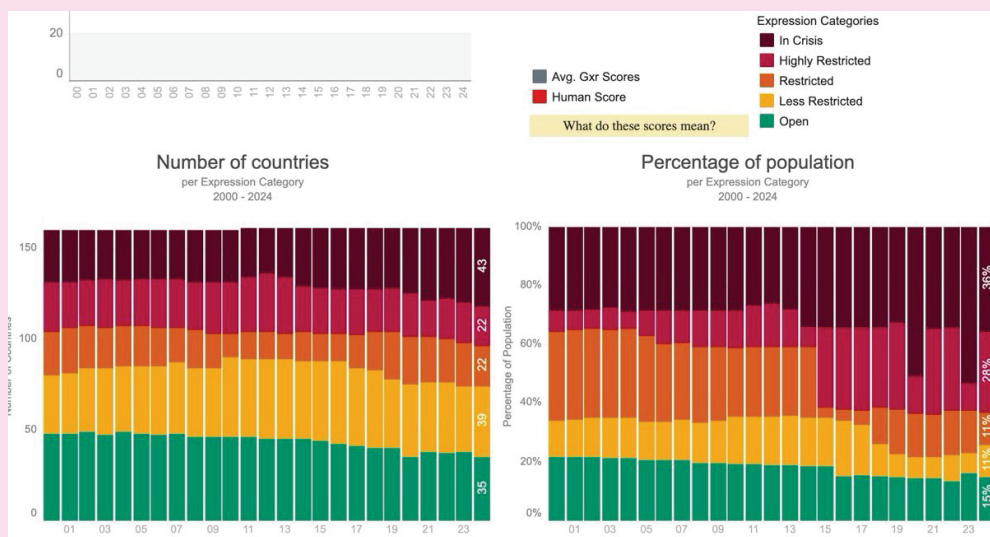
Wallsten found that there was a complex, bidirectional relationship between mainstream media coverage and blog discussion rather than a unidirectional media or blog [agenda setting](#) effect.

Al-Rodhan, Nayef R.F., *The Emergence of Blogs as a Fifth Estate and Their Security Implications*, Geneva, [Slatkine](#), 2007

Wallsten, Kevin (2007):

[Agenda setting and the blogosphere: An analysis of the relationship between mainstream media and political blogs](#), [Review of Policy Research](#).

HYPertext - P3 Press freedom: global, Africa



source: [2025 World Press Freedom Index](#), [AllAfricaReport](#)

RSF World Press Freedom Index 2025

<https://rsf.org/en/rsf-world-press-freedom-index-2025-economic-fragility-leading-threat-press-freedom>

Economic fragility a leading threat to press freedom

Report: Although physical attacks against journalists are the most visible violations of press freedom, economic pressure is also a major, more insidious problem. The economic indicator on the RSF⁸³ World Press Freedom Index now stands at an unprecedented, critical low as its decline continued in 2025. As a result, the global

⁸³ Reporters Without Borders/Reporters Sans Frontières), founded in 1985 (non-profit from 1995) is an international non-governmental organisation headquartered in Paris.

state of press freedom is now classified as a “difficult situation” for the first time in the history of the Index.

At a time when press freedom is experiencing a worrying decline in many parts of the world, a major — yet often underestimated — factor is seriously weakening the media: economic pressure. Much of this is due to ownership concentration, pressure from advertisers and financial backers, and public aid that is restricted, absent or allocated in an opaque manner. The data measured by the RSF Index’s economic indicator clearly shows that today’s news media are caught between preserving their editorial independence and ensuring their economic survival.

“Guaranteeing freedom, independence and plurality in today’s media landscape requires stable and transparent financial conditions. Without economic independence, there can be no free press. When news media are financially strained, they are drawn into a race to attract audiences at the expense of quality reporting, and can fall prey to the oligarchs and public authorities who seek to exploit them.

When journalists are impoverished, they no longer have the means to resist the enemies of the press — those who champion disinformation and propaganda. The media economy must urgently be restored to a state that is conducive to journalism and ensures the production of reliable information, which is inherently costly.

Solutions exist and must be deployed on a large scale. The media’s financial independence is a necessary condition for ensuring free, trustworthy information that serves the public interest.”

– Anne Bocandé, RSF Editorial Director

US case study – role of media: security restraints or censorship?

Case Study: Tension between responsibility to publish & emphasis on ‘prior restraints’ on grounds of security or obscenity

Generally, the First Amendment in the United States of America prohibits ‘prior restraint’ - that is, restraint on a publication before it is published.

For instance, in a landmark decision in *Near v. Minnesota* (1931), the Court held that the government could not prohibit the publication of a newspaper for carrying stories that were scandalous or scurrilous. However, the Court identified three types of publications against which a prior restraint might be valid:

- **those that pose a threat to national security**
- **those that contain obscene materials**
- **those that advocate violence or the overthrow of the government.**

The government argued that publication of certain material posed a threat to national security in the so-called *Pentagon Papers* case, *New York Times co. v. United States* (1971).

There, the government sought an injunction against newspapers that were planning to publish classified material concerning US policy in Vietnam.

The Court found that the government had not proved an overriding government interest, or an extreme danger to national security if the material were to be published. The justices reiterated their position that a request for a prior restraint must overcome a heavy presumption of unconstitutionality.

Why are ‘prior restraints’ regarded as most serious infringement on US constitutional freedoms

The short answer is because of the importance put on justice for all. The Court holds that prior restraints are among the most serious infringements on First Amendment freedoms and that attempts to impose them must be strictly scrutinized.

In *Nebraska Press Ass'n v. Stuart* (1976), the Court overturned a state court's attempt to ban the press from a criminal trial. The Court held that gag orders, although not per se invalid, are allowable only when there is a clear and present danger to the administration of justice.

Powers and responsibilities of the Press

Freedom of the press, like freedom of speech, is not absolute however. Notwithstanding the limitations placed on it, the press exercises enormous power and influence, and therefore has commensurate responsibility.

Because journalists generally have access to more information than the average individual, they serve as the eyes, ears, and voice of the public. Some legal scholars even argue that the press is one of the most important forces in the democratic system of checks and balances.

Government pressure on media in name of patriotism and national security

In the wake of the September 11th attacks in 2001, the White House placed pressure on the five major television networks not to broadcast videotaped statements by terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden and his associates. The networks had shown a videotape of bin Laden, and this angered the White House. In early October 2001, the networks agreed not to show such statements again without reviewing them first.

This decision came after a conference call among US national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and the heads of the networks. The White House feared that broadcasts from suspected terrorists could contain anything from incitement to coded messages.

This agreement aroused concerns that the press was forfeiting its responsibility to report all of the news. Commentators noted that the rest of the world would see the bin Laden tapes via television and the internet, and that the security concerns raised by the US government thus would have little impact.

Balance between restraint and responsibility

The balance between restraint and responsibility continued to be tested during the 'war against terrorism' and the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In contrast to the 1991 Gulf War, where the press was kept away from the battlefield, the war in Iraq featured "embedded" journalists, who travelled and reported in real time among the US forces. However, the press was restricted to disclosing only certain types of information due to "security concerns". Also close contact with their own forces contributed to reporters' self-censorship – either through empathy or lack of objectivity.

2015 – 2025 Update

US press freedom in the 2020s is marked by a decline in rankings, increasing government pressure, potential self-censorship, and legal challenges, despite First Amendment protections. Concerns include White House restricting access, threats to

journalists, lack of federal shield laws and moves to limit access to public spaces, creating a chilling impact that hinders investigative reporting and accountability, with partisans viewing the situation differently depending on the administration.

Recent US administrations have been criticised for demonizing reporters, creating lists of media “offenders”, banning these from media conference, eroding trust and creating a fearful environment. Journalists themselves report hesitation to speak out, fearing repercussions while sources become more reluctant to talk, impacting the flow of information.

Note: Israel banned unembedded journalists in its two-year-long beseiging of Gaza from October 2023, on grounds of their own security and Israel’s. Reporters without Borders recorded that more than 230 journalists were killed in Gaza since October 7, 2023, 67 in 2025. It called on governments to be more courageous in protecting working journalists.

Ukraine, Mexico and Sudan are also dangerous with nine, three and four respectively killed in 2025. RSF also records numbers of journalists jailed for their work. China is the leading offender with 121 jailed. Russia 48 and Myanmar 47, are the next most repressive countries. As of December 1, 2025, 503 journalists were being detained in 47 countries.

<https://freedom.press/>

<https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-press>

<http://www.wifp.org/>

Case study: Use of internet in Somalia

The “state of digital” in Somalia in 2026

Here are [DataReportal](#)'s essential headlines for the adoption and use of connected devices and services in Somalia in 2026:

- A total of **11.5 million** cellular mobile connections were active in Somalia in late 2025, with this figure equivalent to **58.1 percent** of the total population. However, note that some of these connections may only include services such as voice and SMS, and some may *not* include access to the internet.
- There were **5.47 million** individuals using the internet in Somalia at the end of 2025, when online penetration stood at **27.6 percent**.
- Somalia was home to **3.51 million** social media user identities in October 2025, equating to **17.7 percent** of the total population.

These headline stats offer a great overview of the “state of digital” in Somalia for 2026, but in order to make sense of how digital trends and behaviours have been *evolving*, we need to dig deeper into the data.

<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-somalia>

HYPertext - P7A Social media & their influence on political discussions

Facebook's 'echo chamber' really can make you narrow minded

People can use sites to seek out opinions that confirm what they already believe



- **Facebook users commonly create 'echo chambers' across social media**
- **In this effect, like-minded networks will spread common ideas and sources**
- **World Economic Forum listed 'digital misinformation' as a threat to society**

By Cheyenne Macdonald

When a big news story breaks, social networks are often awash with misleading information as people either inadvertently, or deliberately, share the story.

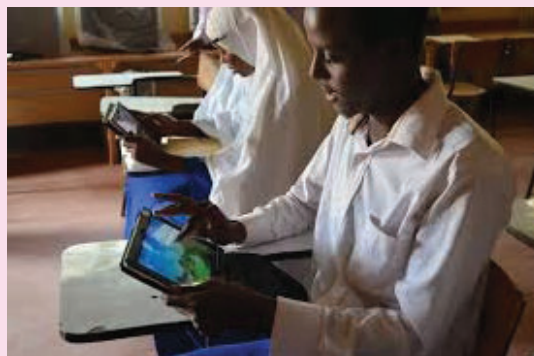
This creates what is known as an '**echo chamber**'.⁸⁴

Researchers from Italy and the US found that people have the tendency to look for news that confirms what they already believe. And this in turn creates a network of like-minded people who will spread these common sources and accept them as truth.

Researchers from Italy and the US found that people have the tendency to look for news on Facebook that confirms what they already believe. This in turn creates a network of like-minded people who will spread these common sources and accept them as truth and what's known as an 'echo chamber'

Facebook users were found to gather news selectively, limiting exposure to information that goes against their ways of thought.

Consumers of both scientific and **conspiracy information** engage in type of behaviour, but the spread of



this

⁸⁴ Or sometimes information 'silos'.

unproven rumours can lead to naïve social responses.

Once an idea has been accepted as truth by an individual, it will spread rapidly throughout the 'community of interest'.

The research, published in the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#), analysed publicly available data from Facebook's Graph interface between 2010 and 2014.

Information was categorized into three distinct groups: science news, conspiracy rumours, and **trolling**.

Facebook users were found to gather their news selectively, limiting exposure to information that goes against their ways of thought.

Consumers of both scientific and conspiracy information engage in this type of behaviour, but the spread of unproven rumours can lead to naïve social responses, the authors write.

'Massive **digital misinformation** is becoming pervasive in online social media to the extent that it has been listed by the World Economic Forum (WEF) as one of the main threats to our society,' the paper says.

'Whether a news item, either substantiated or not, is accepted as true by a user may be strongly affected by social norms or by how much it coheres with the user's system of beliefs.'

In the paper, they point out that the main distinction between scientific news and conspiracy is the ability to verify of the content.

Scientific information can often be traced, with data and methods readily available, while the origins of conspiracy theories, like the belief that vaccines cause autism, are difficult to identify.

In the 'echo chamber effect' Facebook users were found to gather their news selectively, limiting exposure to information that goes against their ways of thought

But, once an idea has been accepted as truth by an individual, it will spread rapidly throughout the 'community of interest.'

'Our findings show that users mostly tend to select and share content related to a specific narrative and to ignore the rest,' the paper says.

The researchers write that this effect may explain how certain phenomena become widespread, like the rejection of global warming evidence, or the Jade Helm 15

conspiracy, in which alarmists spread panic about a false impending civil war in the US.

In these like-minded communities, the researchers write that common ideas are shared and reinforced, fostering confirmation bias.

'This comes at the expense of the quality of the information and leads to proliferation of biased narratives fomented by unsubstantiated rumours, mistrust, and paranoia,' the authors write.

This behaviour can create **diverging communities**, as people across social media surround themselves with information that confirms their preconceptions on a subject, while rejecting other viewpoints.

To break an echo chamber, the research suggests it would be more useful to project to a larger audience, in lieu of infiltrating small subgroups with truthful information <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-3386052/Facebook-really-DOES-make-narrow-minded-Researchers-warn-echo-chamber-effect.html#ixzz47ShT2apq>

Retrieved 10 January 2016