

“Electoral Processes and the New Media: How to Navigate this Space”

Lecture given at Taras Shevchenko National University
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Kyiv, Ukraine
May 23, 2017

Greetings and many thanks for the organizers for being able to address you here at Taras Shevchenko National University today. It's both a pleasure and an honour to be back in one of my favourite cities in the world and to be able to talk to you about this important subject.

I also want to thank my friend and colleague Rasto Kuzel, who has been a firm proponent of media freedom in democratizing countries for more than two decades. His organization, MEMO98, was at the forefront of transformations in his own country, Slovakia, and I've had the pleasure of working with him on various election missions over the years from Sarajevo to Ukraine and many places in between.

For me, media is a key component of a viable democracy and is essential to citizens being able to make an informed choice of who will represent them in government and make policy decisions on their behalf. Yet, the media landscape today has changed radically from that of the 90s when Central and Eastern European countries were first facing these democratic challenges and even more so from when the first modern democracies were being constituted in the U.S., Poland and France more than two hundred years ago.

When the founding fathers argued the finer points of democratic structuring in the late 1700s, the main source of information was the leaflet or pamphlet, accessible of course to only a limited subset of the population at that time, but setting forth the pros and cons of various options both in constituting the state as well as how its representatives would be elected in great and sophisticated detail.

The Federalist Papers, which remain some of the most important documents in terms of democratic thinking, were widely read by those making decisions at the time in terms of the government system in the U.S. and were informed by the philosophical discourse of their time, taking in thinkers as far back as the Ancient Greeks and Romans, but also informing academic discussions around the world today.

The advent of broadcast media, first radio, then television, brought information to a wider swath of the population, which has also been more inclusively involved in the democratic process since the early 1900s. Yet, physical limitations of frequency and bandwidth meant that the proliferation of media was still rather limited and heavily influenced by the state, especially in certain more socially-oriented societies.

In countries like the U.K., broadcast media was seen to have an educative role, which was spearheaded by the British Broadcast Corporation, which rather tightly delineated what information was presented to the British public and how. Similarly, in the U.S. and in other Western countries broadcast regulators ensured that most citizens were receiving their information from a discrete set of sources, which may have been different in content and coverage, but were still largely consumable and comparable by the average citizen seeking information. Although self-regulation was the model mostly used by both systems, in extreme cases, the state retained the possibility of sanction for extreme or deliberately misleading information being broadcast.

With the proliferation of new and social media in the late 90s and early 2000s, this media landscape has shifted dramatically. Today, citizens can receive and re-transmit information in real time, across country borders, consume what they want, discard what they don't, and all in limited text or soundbite tailored for the modern audience.

This has made the information we receive both incredibly extensive, but also incredibly shallow and superficial. Today's media consumer rarely reads beyond the headline, is easily led by computer predictor systems towards information that reinforces existing beliefs and opinions, and tend of engage with analytical and investigative reporting more rarely than ever. In reverse, the new media sphere caters to this sound-bite information space in a competition for advertising and revenue, reifying this process even further.

There is a lot of talk of late about media bubbles, in which individuals self-select the articles that reinforce their worldview, without often encountering information to the contrary that would test of possibly change those notions.

At the same time, the obligation and the ability of the state to involve itself in this new media space has declined considerably. While some engage in censorship in a futile effort to stem the flow of information, in other states, self-regulation is being explored as a viable option for trying to shape this new media space in a way that encourages this sectors liberalizing potential while limiting its destructive elements.

But I wanted to focus today on the onus on the citizen to wade through this new media environment. In many ways, this role has not changed considerably since the 1700s when democracy was first tested in practice. Even back then, pamphlets and leaflets proliferated, often drafted by anonymous authors and the responsibility lay on the citizen and consumer to read and wide range of opinions and topics, consider the arguments being put forward, weight the various options being put forward and come to a decision on the balance of evidence that each person considered. Many propositions were flawed, wrong, or even intentionally misleading. Yet the fundamental premise that underlay the democratic thinking was that every person has the intellect and ability to decide for themselves, to make an informed judgement.

In this sense, the modern world is very like that older system. While the mode and platform of information provision has changed, the onus is still on the individual to not just take at face value what is being presented, to look beyond the media sources immediately available and reflecting of one's own opinions, and to test their thinking through exposure to various points of view that they actively seek out.

This taps into the discussion of fake news, which has been quite prominent of late. This has been a huge issue in the last U.S. election and quite a lot of discussion has taken place about the impact that it may have had on the results. Various media, including Facebook, have taken step to identify 'fake news' and to sometimes seek it removed. And this is in line with previous regulatory practices to try to limit knowingly false or incendiary information.

Yet, here too, citizens have a role of play. Already in many places, civil society organizations have sprung up to identify potentially false information, to check it against other news sources, and to present their findings in the public space so that people can knowingly know what they are consuming. Some

broadcast media have taken similar steps to identify and 'name and shame' fake news. Nevertheless, the onus is also on the citizen to take in what they read and see with a healthy degree of scientism and to cross-check this against other information sources to see if it stands up – only with this level of comparison and investigation can citizens really decide what is true and what is fake news.

This is somewhat problematic in the modern media environment where citizens have become somewhat lazy in their interface with both traditional and new media. They have some to assume that whatever is presented to them on the television or on the computer screen must be true to some extent; otherwise, it would not be allowed. But this is a mistake in a free media environment. This type of environment assumes that people make their own decisions on what they consume and to what level they trust them. A little like junk food, it can be enjoyable and amusing in small doses, but in large amounts, it's not good for us and we need to learn to identify the ingredients ourselves and decide whether it's good for us or not.

I attended a lecture discussion myself a few weeks ago with a former U.S. Secretary of State. She talked about the need for a robust information environment and here the role of quality journalism is key.

Throughout the history of media development, it is analytical and investigative journalists, trained and professional, that have helped audiences guide their way through the wheat and the chaff. Who have helped differentiate and analyse the various merits of different points of view, often with evidence presented to support their case. And this is something that needs to be continued and nurtured. If citizens in countries around the world are to stand a chance of navigating the new media space, they require credible and hard-hitting journalism to help guide them. This is indispensable, although still somewhat nascent in many countries throughout the world. But if one thing has given me heart in the course of the last half-year of U.S. political developments, its that it has really brought out the best in American journalism from credible sources like the Washington Post or the New York Times – media sources that take their time, gather evidence, piece the puzzle together, and then present it in a meaningful and cohesive way for readers to understand. You may not always agree, but at least you have the facts to base your decision on.

And with this I would like to close and say that everyday citizens, together the credible and professional journalists, is the way forward through this new information space. IFES for its part has been working with media across various sectors in Ukraine. This has involved training journalists on key issues involved in the recently political finance reform taking place in the country. IFES has also conducted a series of masterclasses for journalists in the regions of Ukraine; this has included Lviv, Odessa, Kyiv, Kharkiv, Vinnitsa and Dnipro, which included more than 90 representatives of both print and web-based media, focusing on key aspects of legislation governing national and regional elections. IFES has also organized a press breakfast on the national referendum law to better sensitize the media to the details of this legislation.

As well, in order to raise the professionalism of journalism in Ukraine, IFES has engaged in media contests on electoral and political finance reform, awarding two key journalists in this field. IFES has also conducted training on communication strategies and good practices in engaging with public relations departments of government agencies. Topics covered through this included electoral systems, European standards, public financing, and gender quotas.

As such, IFES makes efforts to include this key component of media and elections in the technical assistance that it offers in Ukraine. Through focus on such important elements, it is hoped that the

media sector continues to grow and become more robust in Ukraine, developing the professionalism and transparency that is necessary to buttress the democratic principles that the country has espoused and to have the conditions that are necessary to incorporate new media into the fabric of a vibrant society in a way that is contributive rather than destructive.