

HISTORY REPEATING? THE RISE OF DIGITAL MEDIA

In the 20th century, news was largely a one-way flow. Traditional media reported the news. For the most part, audiences consumed it by reading the daily and weekly newspapers, and watching or listening to news on TV and radio.

The internet changed that.

Today, news is a very participatory affair. Traditional media outlets continue to report the news. But now, people are able to instantly share what they read with the world, along with their comments or opinions about the articles. And they are instantly able to have conversations with reporters on social media about the stories they write.

An even bigger change is how virtually anyone can create and post their own news. In the past, this was an expensive and ambitious undertaking. A television or radio station could only be established with a licence from the government. Newspapers and magazines were easier to set up, but still required considerable resources to print and distribute. Today, anyone with a computer and an internet connection can create and distribute news.

The expansion of online information reminds us of our right to freedom of expression. We are all free to report the news, so long as we do not engage in libel (false statements that damage a person's reputation) or hate speech. A side-effect of all this news and information, however, is growing skepticism with what we read.

MORE SOURCES, MORE SKEPTICISM

Major media organisations—especially traditional media—have editors and boards who scrutinise the work of their reporters. Editors and boards are not perfect, but they act as a second set of eyes. We can be reasonably sure that reports from the CBC, *The National Observer*, or the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix*, for example, are accurate even if at times they are not perfect.

On the other hand, some publications—especially ones that popped up in the internet era—can have strong biases. This is not necessarily a bad thing. However, a few of these publications are not only interested in providing different perspectives: they are also interested in stirring up our tempers. By showing little regard for fairness and using inflammatory language, public discussion is poisoned. This approach undermines the democratic ideal: it does not encourage us to find common ground, but rather it pits us against each other.

Such problems with online media are not limited to news and opinion publications. Consider how we have moved towards relying on tweets, blogs, message boards, and other social media tools to gather information. First-hand reports posted on Twitter or reddit, for example, could be completely accurate.

Or they could be completely made-up. The problem is that there is no editorial board to screen social media posts beforehand. Adding to these complications is the simple fact that there is often a tendency to be argumentative and rude when posting online.



HISTORY REPEATING?

The way we share news and information in the digital era may not be radically different from how we did it in the past. Consider these examples of how information spread in the past:

The 15th- and 16th-century rise of the pamphlet

The invention of the printing press made it easier to share information. Waves of pamphlets began to spread across Europe, promoting various ideas. They were short, often unsigned, and usually written in common language. The philosopher Erasmus worried that the popularity of pamphlets undermined learning, especially when compared to the more in-depth approaches of books and formal education.

- How was the pamphlet's simplification of knowledge similar to the ways we share information today?

The 16th-century spread of Martin Luther's ideas

Martin Luther's idea on religious reform spread rapidly, in part due to the printing press. Luther was not paid for his writing, and editors did not review it for accuracy. Nevertheless, many people found his ideas interesting so they reprinted his pamphlets and passed them along.

- How was the spread of Martin Luther's ideas similar to the ways we share information today?

The 17th-century coffeehouse culture of London

Coffeehouses became London social hubs in the mid-1600s. For the price of a cup of coffee—about a penny—people congregated to learn about and discuss issues. Coffeehouses provided patrons with pamphlets and newspapers. Social class was left at the door, and travellers from afar were welcome. Unlike the ale-drinkers at rowdy taverns, coffeehouse-goers were expected to be polite and respectful.

- How was London's coffeehouse culture similar to the ways we discuss information today?

The rise of the printing press, the pamphleteering of Martin Luther, and the rise of London's coffeehouse culture suggest that even if history does not repeat, it can echo. In less than twenty years, the world has experienced dramatic changes in how we gather and share news and information. Nevertheless, the dramatic changes of today have many similarities to the dramatic changes of the past.



Who Gives a Tweet?

Political discussion is prolific on Twitter. Given that 22% of Americans and 18% of Canadians use Twitter, it would seem to be a good place to understand public opinion. However, this is not the case.

A recent Pew Research Center study found that Twitter is not representative of society. Compared to the general population, Twitter users are younger, have higher levels of education, are wealthier, and lean further to the political left than society as a whole. The only way that Twitter users look like society is in ethnicity and gender. Further skewing reality, a handful of Twitter addicts steer the conversation: 80% of posts are made by a mere 10% of users.

Pew's study is one of many that raise questions about politics and social media. For example, *The Perception Gap* found that social media users tend to hold distorted views of their political opponents.

Such findings have led political scientist Yascha Mounk to conclude:

It is not the mental health of Twitter addicts that concerns me, though; it is the well-being of the nation they collectively rule. To decision-makers who spend most of their days ensconced in an elite bubble, Twitter can seem like a way out, a clear window into pure public opinion. In reality, it's an extreme distortion.¹

Twitter can be many useful things. A tool to gather information. A space to keep up with friends. A portal for occasionally-productive debates. But Twitter is not the real world.

¹ "The Problem Isn't Twitter. It's That You Care About Twitter." *The Atlantic*. April 29, 2019 <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/political-leaders-should-stop-caring-about-twitter/588004/>

Discuss

1. Private companies like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube can pick and choose who gets access to their platforms.
 - a) Do you know of anyone being suspended or banned from social media? What happened?
 - b) Who makes the rules for behaviour on social media platforms?
 - c) What are the possible consequences of too few corporations controlling too many social media platforms?
2. Think about access to technology and wealth disparity.
 - a) Who is excluded from using the internet and social media?
 - b) Is access to technology vital for citizenship today?

