

DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS AND MEDIA RESPONSIBILITY

Rajesh C. SHUKLA

Associate Professor & Director of the School of Public Ethics
Faculty of Philosophy
Saint Paul University
Ottawa, Canada
rshukla@ustpaul.ca

Abstract

Media plays an important role in all democratic elections. On the one hand, it keeps voters informed about the priorities and programs of different political parties and candidates. Unless the voters know which candidate stands where on which issue they will not be able to exercise their electoral rights properly. On the other hand, media can also educate voters by providing them with a comparative analysis of relevant issues. Many have dismissed the above role of media as idealistic and unrealistic, arguing that the regular day-to-day reporting of events is full of ‘fake news’ and fails to meet the requirements of good journalism. In this paper, I discuss the above conception of media and its associated criticisms as well. Following J. S. Mill, I argue that a free and fair exchange of ideas is crucial not only to the exercising of electoral rights but also to the very idea of democratic citizenship. I also take up the issue of consumerism and marketization in the media, arguing that media needs to establish a fine balance between the interests of democratic citizens and the reality of consumer culture, making sure that the interests of the former are not sacrificed for the latter.

Key Words

Democracy, media, citizenship, J.S. Mill, Marketization

Résumé

Les médias jouent un rôle important dans toutes les élections démocratiques. Ils informent les électeurs des priorités et des programmes des différents partis politiques ; ils peuvent également éduquer les électeurs en leur fournissant une analyse comparative des problèmes et des outils nécessaires pour enquêter sur la véracité des affirmations de leurs dirigeants politiques. Beaucoup ont rejeté le rôle des médias les considérant comme idéalistes et irréalistes, arguant que les reportages quotidiens sur les événements fourmillent de «fausses nouvelles» qui ne répondent pas aux exigences du vrai journalisme. Dans cet article, je discute de la conception des médias et de ses critiques associées. En me basant sur J. S. Mill, je soutiens qu'un échange d'idées libre et équitable est crucial non seulement pour l'exercice des droits électoraux, mais aussi pour l'idée même de citoyenneté démocratique. J'aborde la question du consumérisme et de la marchandisation dans les médias, arguant que les médias doivent établir un juste équilibre entre les intérêts des citoyens démocratiques et la réalité des besoins des consommateurs, en veillant à ne pas sacrifier les intérêts des premiers aux seconds.

Mots-clés

Démocratie, médias, citoyenneté, J.S. Mill, commercialisation

INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental aims of democratic elections all over the world is to provide electorates with a legitimate opportunity to exercise their political rights and vote for the political parties and candidates of their choice, supporting their social and economic policies, and future priorities and programs. A meaningful exercising of the above choice, it would seem, requires, among other things, 1) a free and fair media that can report on the politics of the day in an unprejudiced manner; 2) an examining of the political agenda and the platforms of different political parties and their candidates; 3) the ability to publish these views via different media formats i.e., online news, newspapers, and television; and 4) an informed citizenry that has respect for facts and is open to human reasoning, logic and rational persuasion (Mill 2002, 43-44). Considered in this way, fact-based reporting and the facilitation of public discussion so that there is a ‘telling of truth to power’ can be easily regarded as important characteristics of a free and fair media in liberal democratic states.

However, despite the above public utility and relevance, the media has come under serious attack in democratic countries. Many elected officials and politicians have decried media as “dishonest and fake”, raising serious questions regarding the media’s impartiality and objectivity.¹ My task in this paper is to reflect over such criticisms so as to understand the factors that are driving them. Given that these days most media outlets are either owned by corporations or operate under other economic interests, it seems almost impossible to decouple the working of media from economic incentives; and I do not wish to do that. I shall argue, more precisely, that a free and responsible media must have adequate regard for facts and objectivity, and that it should be willing to call out politicians and people in the positions of power when they mischaracterize facts or engage in construction of ‘alternative facts’. Following J.S. Mill, I shall argue that a free and fair media is essential to the functioning of a democratic society and government, and that it can serve as a bulwark against the use of illegitimate power and coercion (Mill 2002, 3-4). Finally, I shall also show that the news media as well as other democratic institutions are expected to perform a dual function by catering the needs of citizens as well as that of consumers, and that they should not overlook the interests of citizens in favor of the consumer.

¹ Daisuke Wakabayashi and Linda Qiu’s column “Google Serves Fake News Ads in an Unlikely Place: Fact-Checking Sites” in *New York Times*, October 17, 2017. Wakabayashi and Qiu show that Google has been feeding false information regarding the US political leaders and their families at various reputable sites: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/17/technology/google-fake-ads-fact-check.html>

I. FREE MEDIA IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

In its 2016 report on the freedom of the press, Freedom House provides us with some sobering numbers: 1) A startling forty six percent of global population does not have access to a free press, 2) forty one percent of global population has access to a partly free press, and finally 3) only thirteen percent people in the world have access to a free press “where coverage of political news is robust, the safety of journalists is guaranteed, state intrusion in media affairs is minimal, and the press is not subject to onerous legal or economic pressures”.² The same report also shows that press freedom declined globally in the year 2015 to its lowest point in twelve years—Bangladesh, Turkey, Burundi, France, Serbia, Yemen, Egypt, Macedonia, and Zimbabwe being the worst impacted countries. Most countries in the above list have faced accusations of continuous repression and do not allow press freedoms.³ However, the inclusion of France to this list is a significant matter.

The decline in press freedoms in France is not associated with any governmental policy or crackdown. The French government and its institutions accord maximum freedom to the press, consistent with democratic values and political philosophy. The attack on free press in France—and some other liberal democratic countries too—seems to be occurring from two very different sources, and is symptomatic of a global problem. First, some militant groups and individuals marked with religious fervor have questioned, criticized and even attacked publications that are not in line with their privately held religious beliefs and convictions. Violence against journalists in a European country sends chilling signals to others, and has a perverse impact on press freedoms globally.⁴ Secondly, the press has also come under heavy criticism from politicians and ideologues all over the world for taking sides in political arguments and elections, and also for inaccurate reporting: “It [fake news] affects both the right and the left. It affects educated and uneducated. So the stereotypes of it being simply right-wing and simply uneducated are 100% not true” (Jeff Green quoted in BBC Trending, April 15, 2017).⁵ Whereas the use of violence from militant groups and individuals borders on insanity and can have no rational justification, political criticisms of the press are much more complex, requiring further understanding and explanation as well.

It would be simplistic to think that all politicians who criticize their press coverage are somehow anti-press or do not recognize its value in a liberal society.⁶ Many critics, I take it,

2 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2016>

3 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2016>

4 In her report “Press Freedom in 2015: Battle for the Dominant Message”, Jennifer Dunham writes: “Even in the much more open media environments of Europe, journalists faced unusual levels of pressure from terrorists and, to an extent, their own governments. In a year that began with the shocking murder of eight cartoonists and editors at the Paris offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, media freedom in the region was threatened by violence, new surveillance and antiterrorism laws, and verbal attacks or interference from politicians and government officials” (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2016>)

5 <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-39592010>

6 In her *Salon* online report “The press has not done its job: 3 ways the media has failed our democracy in covering the elections”, June 26, 2016, Sophia A. McClennen outlines the shortcomings in media and news coverage, suggesting that “very few of us are inclined to consider the mainstream news as a source of real knowledge these days”.

https://www.salon.com/2016/06/22/the_press_has_not_done_its_job_three_ways_the_media_has_failed_our_democracy_in_covering_the_election/

believe that press is crucial to the functioning of democratic governments and institutions, and regret that it has become too involved in the politics of the day, compromising its primary purpose of fact-based reporting of the news, and keeping the public informed. In a moment, I will show that there is some truth in the above criticism but its overall trajectory remains problematic. Anyways this critique usually has three important aspects.

In the first place, it is said that reporting in the press is no longer objective and that it fails to fulfil the basic requirements of good journalism. Objective reporting is essential for building public trust in journalism; and once it is compromised, public trust is bound to decline. What is objective, and what is not, is itself a great epistemological question. Questions regarding objectivity often slide into the conceptions of meaning and truth, and cannot be settled easily.⁷ Yet for our purposes, it may be helpful to differentiate between two types of objectivity: philosophical and empirical. Philosophical objectivity pertains to establishing the true nature of things on both a meta and normative level, if they have such a nature, or denying its possibility by ruling out all rational constructions. In other words, philosophical objectivity triggers crucial questions at a fundamental level i.e., whether the human self is real or not; or whether the world is an objective or subject play of impressions. I am not sure if philosophical objectivity in the above sense informs disagreements regarding free press. Unlike philosophers, the common public seems convinced about the existence of the world as well as its material structure, allowing the possibility of religious and spiritual differences, and focusing more on practical questions pertaining to daily life, work, economy and jobs etc.

Empirical objectivity, on the other hand, can be associated with practical things in life, pertaining to the nature of events, as we ordinarily know them. Whether it was a sunny day in Washington D.C. on January 20th 2018 or not, is a question that can be easily answered by the people who were in the D.C. that morning. Similarly, the questions regarding time and distance from one place to another can be resolved through proper objective assessment. Empirical objectivity, in other words, has a factually verifiable connotation and that cannot be contested imaginatively. This does not mean, however, that all instances of such objectivity are straightforward and that their implications are always clear. Empirical objectivity acquires problematic connotations while dealing with political realities relating to race, sex, gender and class differentiations that involve subjective interpretations and input. For instance, what the best way to solve a poverty problem in a particular ethnic group or class of citizens is can have multiple answers, each of them claiming their own objectivity. Political disagreements often fall in this category. As a result, an individual can easily reject something that is considered objective by another, calling it subjective manipulation of the truth.

Next, media is also said to be lacking in fairness.⁸ News media has become notorious for cherry picking the stories that they like so as to boost their ratings, stature, and economic

⁷ David Allen remarks: "Objectivity is thus an epistemology that has become the methodology for turning everyday occurrences into news...Objectivity has become the accepted ideology to the extent that even as journalists discover the limits of the methodology of reporting the news, the public insists that they live up to their goals. In many ways, ideology has become an ideological trap" (Allen 2005, 58).

⁸ The question of unfairness in media has been brought up repeatedly by the US President Donald Trump. Trump believes that no politician has been treated as unfairly as he: <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/05/17/donald-trump-coast-guard-graduation-unfairly-treated-president-238505>

profit. However, a preferential promotion of stories turns media outlets into a sort of eco-chamber, feeding on a particular type of narrative and clientele. Most surveys show this bias.⁹ For instance, in the United States the people watching Fox news are more inclined to vote Republican. For the MSNBC viewers, the opposite holds: Most of them sympathize with the Democratic Party. Explicitly or implicitly, Fox and MSNBC have taken sides in a political argument and keep pressing for their side, and this behavior raises questions regarding their news reporting and coverage.¹⁰ Moreover, both channels reject the idea of moral equivalence in their coverage and presentations, claiming the higher moral ground for one's own news channel, respectively. It is not surprising that Fox news channel markets itself "fair and balanced".

Finally, many in positions of power criticize the press for doing exactly what it is supposed to do: the publication and circulation of information that is relevant to the public. The functioning of a government and its public officials, including presidents, prime ministers, senators or bureaucrats, may or may not be in the spirit of laws, posing questions of impropriety or unethical behavior from time to time. Investigative reporting on such improprieties and cases of corruption are essential to holding powerful people accountable; but it has come under pressure.¹¹ The best way to undermine a news report, it seems, is to discredit the source itself. This strategy is even more manifest when a politician has a select group of committed supporters who can repeat his talking points in public arena. I am going to show in the next section, following J.S. Mill, that a free and open discussion and respect for truth are necessary for the functioning of a democratic society and that they must be protected against the onslaughts of power and prejudice (Mill 2002, 44).

II. REVISITING J.S. MILL'S ARGUMENTS FOR FREE PRESS

In his book *On Liberty*, Mill provides us with an eloquent defense of the freedom of press, arguing that free press is essential for the workings of democratic governments and politics. Writing within the broad spectrum of human liberty, Mill contends that liberty is easily compromised when it is defined narrowly in relation to the pursuit of familiar ideas and opinions (Mill 2002, 13-19). Every society seems comfortable with individuals who follow established social rules and practices, supporting prevalent viewpoints. This social preference for familiarity, never mind its deep-rooted bias, can lead to the domination of the majority and suppression of the minority. The minority may be a big section of people in a given society or simply one individual, but neither of the above stands a chance in front of the majority's professed beliefs and possible transgressions. Mill writes: "The will of the people, moreover, practically means, the will of the most numerous or the most active part of the people; the majority, or those who succeed in making themselves accepted as the majority; the people,

9http://www.slate.com/blogs/moneybox/2017/01/18/fox_news_was_the_dominant_news_source_in_the_2016_election_pew_survey_finds.html

10http://www.slate.com/blogs/moneybox/2017/01/18/fox_news_was_the_dominant_news_source_in_the_2016_election_pew_survey_finds.html

11 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/13/us/politics/donald-trump-jr-wikileaks-emails-democrats.html?rref=collection%2Fnewseventcollection%2FThe%20Trump%20White%20House&action=click&contentCollection=Politics&module=Collection®ion=Marginalia&src=me&version=newsevent&pgtype=article>

consequently, may desire to oppress a part of their number; and precautions are as much needed against this as against any other abuse of power” (Mill 2002, 3).

Needless to say, that the truth of an opinion has very little to do with its popularity. Mill points out that many popular opinions do not stand our rational examination and turn out to be completely false when analyzed; and on the contrary, some obscure view may meet all the requirements of truth in terms of its utility and social function¹². He cites numerous examples in the history of humankind when force and social pressure was used to put down unfamiliar opinions and promote false beliefs (Mill 2002, 40-45). The challenge then is to create necessary social and political conditions that can lead to the realization of freedom in our public life (Ryan 2012, 298-299). In his discussions, Mill situates freedom of the press in the same context i.e., in the context of human liberty, offering some persuasive arguments to the same end (Mill 2002, 13-15).

First, he argues that censoring the opinion of others assumes one’s own infallibility. When an individual or society tries to put down opinions that are not publically condoned, they seem to assume their truthfulness without making room for their mistakes (Mill 2002, 14-15). However, a simple reflection over human judgments would show that none of them are so perfect as to close the possibility of further deliberation (Robson 1998, 362-365). Even if they are true, they still need to be debated so that they can remain on the front of our social considerations and are not lost in historical progression: “The fatal tendency of mankind to leave off thinking about a thing when it is no longer doubtful, is the cause of half of their errors” (Mill 2002, 35). Accordingly, Mill suggests that free and unbiased thinking are essential to avoiding unnecessary errors.

Mill is aware that the majority becomes uneasy when an established opinion or social practice is called into question, but insists that such questioning is essential not only to the exploration of truth but also to the development of society itself (Mill 2002, 23). He recognizes that a true opinion can be put down once, twice, or many times, but it can never be completely extinguished and that forces for truth will, over time, conspire to bring it back into our considerations over and over again. In other words, it cannot be productive to suppress contentions of truth. Moreover, if the prevalent opinions are correct, they will survive all challenges and scrutiny and present themselves more authentically in our public consciousness after their examination. And if they are incorrect and flawed, their adherents will have an opportunity for self-reflection and correction after criticism. It is intrinsic to Mill’s argumentation here that human beings are progressive beings in that they cannot remain hostage to their own prejudices and that once such prejudices are pointed out, they have an obligation to correct themselves (Mill 2002, 48).

Next, Mill argues that even if a minority opinion is erroneous in that it does not adequately capture all attributes of a situation or idea, its public expression can still be instrumental in clarifying things. Implicit in Mill’s argument is his belief that human beings stand to gain more from an honest expression of their views, even they are wrong, than the suppression of their ideas. Moreover, it is impossible to ascertain *a priori* what is true and what is false while dealing with dynamic propositions regarding human life and actions. One must situate them in a concrete context to find out their overall utility and associated claims regarding their truth value. Mill writes: “...though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any object is

¹² Mill writes: “The truth of an opinion is part of its utility” (Mill 2002, 19).

rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied” (Mill 2002, 43).

Finally, Mill also insists that the majority’s opinion and conceptions of truth, even if they are correct, require continuous analysis and deliberation, and exposure to new and opposing viewpoints, otherwise they will turn into blind spots. The distinction between truth and prejudice could not be more obvious in this context: Truth remains open to analysis and criticism, whereas as prejudice thrives on blind support and fanaticism.¹³ In other words, the majority must allow the expression of opposing opinions, not only on the grounds of toleration but on the grounds of strengthening its own contentions. Mill elucidates the issue thus: “...even if received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds” (Mill 2002, 43).

Accordingly, Mill concludes that freedom of thought and expression are crucial to human beings as progressive beings and that in the absence of such freedoms they will not be able to realize their full human potential (Ryan 2012, 295-296). By using her own thinking and creativity, an individual differentiates herself from others and becomes her own person. Customary ideas and opinions, no matter how thoughtful and profound, cannot facilitate the full realization of human faculties unless they are approached with an open mind, thinking and imagination. This is also because customs and traditions are results of others’ experiences, symbolizing others’ convictions, and have very little grounding in an individual’s own life and thinking. More strongly, it is possible to follow a custom in a blind way, without educating oneself or sharpening one’s mind; but such actions would not only be inconsistent with freedom, they would also go against one’s core individuality. Using Mill’s conception of human freedom, I am going to argue in the next section that there is a continuum between the freedom of thought and freedom of the press, and that both freedoms are necessary in a democratic society (Ten 2008, 375-377).

III. DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS AND MEDIA RESPONSIBILITY

Democracy as a form of government implies 1) that in a state, final power and authority reside with the people and, 2) that the governments and public officials can be changed or removed from office after a stipulated time period and as per the process laid down by law.¹⁴ Democratic elections are instrumental to the realization of above commitments. On the one hand, elections give sovereignty back to the people by providing them a chance to exercise it. In a democracy, citizens are supposed to wield the final power; but in the day-to-day functioning of democratic governments and institutions, the above power is exercised by elected officials and their delegates, not necessarily by the people themselves. Elections restore power to the people. On the other hand, democratic elections

¹³ Alan Ryan remarks: “The only ground we have for believing in the truth of what we believe is that it has been or can be exposed to attempted refutation and that it has survived or will survive it” (Ryan 2012, 301).

¹⁴ It has been remarked that “in the end, we need to realize that how we define democracy says a lot about how we envision public life. Democracy comes in many forms, from its elitist models to its more participatory forms” (Allen 2005, 7). I shall understand democracy in its liberal democratic manifestation, focusing on the rights of citizens to participate in electoral processes while exercising their sovereignty.

also provide citizens with an opportunity to elect their representatives and governments. Citizens can use their ballots to change their government and representatives.¹⁵ Media plays a crucial role in the exercise of the above electoral processes.

To understand the full implications of the media's role in democratic elections, it is essential to bear in mind that role of the media has continuously evolved along with historical and cultural factors, conceptions of citizenship, and most importantly with the invention of new tools and technologies. Some decades ago traditional media platforms such newspapers and magazines, and radio and television, used to be the main sources of information (Gilder 2010, 15 & 28-33). However, currently we notice a considerable decline in their popularity and an increase in the use of online media and news sources. This decline is particularly evident in the case of print media. Many newspapers and magazines have stopped publishing in the past decade. While television channels still remain an important source of news and entertainment, many of them have struggled to keep themselves profitable and on air. This is because technological changes in the means of human communication such as smart phones, the internet, online connectivity, social media, and computers have transformed the process of information flow, its delivery and consumption: "It is truism to say that media have historically coevolved with the public that uses them, as well as with the larger economy of inscription" (Dijk 2013, 5). As people have started using more and more social media in their lives, their electoral behavior and preferences have also started reflecting this change.

The use of social media has many positive consequences for democratic elections.¹⁶ First, social media platforms have contributed immensely to people's freedom of expression, globally. Given that all such platforms are open to common public and joining them carries no annual fee or cost, anyone in a free society can easily get online and become a member of a prominent site (Gillespie 2010, 500-501). Once a member, such sites allow an unimpeded freedom of expression in the sense that anyone can send a message on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Google etc. Recalling Mill's argument on freedom of speech and thought, no previous generation of human beings had such a wide reach in terms of sharing one's ideas and benefiting from the suggestions of others. Such mediums also allow citizens to express their opinions on political parties and candidates, sharing them with others while participating in the democratic process.

Next, social media along with online connectivity is reshaping our conceptions of time and space to a great degree. The transmission of information, that used to take days and months, only a few decades ago, has become instantaneous now. Within a matter of seconds, a Tweet can reach millions of people all over the world. In other words, no time is lost in the articulation of a thought or policy i.e., news, and its diffusion on a global scale. As a result, many leaders have started using Twitter and other online sources as the main tools of communication in reaching out to their supporters all over the world.

¹⁵ It can be argued that this characterization of citizens in terms of voters is minimalistic and does not capture the full implications of democratic politics: "Votes are very imperfect ways for citizens to inform representatives of their preferences" (Weithman 2004, 72). Weithman draws a distinction among three main notions of citizenship: Citizens as 1) voters 2) constituents and 3) equal constituents. He believes that even the US polity does not meet the requirements of his third type i.e. citizens as equal constituents. For my own understanding, I take the voter model as a necessary condition of democracy, leading to more substantive engagements wherever possible.

¹⁶ Arielle Emmet raises question regarding the intimacy of news and social media: "News outlets and social media may be happy newlyweds, but can this marriage last?" Citing sources, she offers a positive answer to the above question. For the details: <http://ajrarchive.org/article.asp?id=4646>

Finally, social media and online networking have contributed significantly to the empowerment of people. Any action or event can be easily recorded or relayed live on social media worldwide without incurring any financial cost. This access to information diffusion through recording and live streaming has an impact on political processes and elections. On the one hand, political leaders and candidates have started using social media to connect with their constituents, and publicizing their policies and programs.¹⁷ On the other hand, electorates too have started forming online groups to discuss political and economic proposals, and their impacts as well. Moreover, in countries with fringe democracy or no democracy, oppressed citizens have used online tools to connect with one another and share their concerns.

As much as social media and online connectivity have led to the democratization of news and information, they have their own challenges. By nature, social media and online connectivity are free and spontaneous modes of communications, having no editorial control. In other words, the information available on social media and online portals cannot be vetted and is not vetted, except in some cases where the host site has professional editorial commitments. This lack of vetting has opened doors for massive misinformation campaigns in elections in name of news feed and is justified on the grounds of lack of objectivity in news creation and production in the traditional media: “How can completely independent news programs, operating free of political influence, come to exactly the same conclusions night after night about what constitutes news? Recognizing that news is a human creation—something that is made rather than simply discovered—this lack of diversity becomes even more complex problem” (Allen 1995, 55). Candidates and their proxies have used social media to question particular versions of the news and supplied their own alternative accounts based on their experiences, perception, and gut feeling (Dijck 2013, 78).

Another issue arising out of the pervasiveness of social media relates to an individual’s privacy. Mill has shown in his *On Liberty*, that an individual’s actions can be categorized into self-regarding and other-regarding and that a democratic society must not interfere in the self-regarding actions pertaining to an individual’s private preferences, ideas, and actions. In subsequent liberal thought, privacy has become a hallmark of democratic governance.¹⁸ However, the arrival of new technologies has consistently challenged the above separation between private and public, placing many things that were considered private before a public arena. A few decades ago, when the information technologies were still not dominant in our social communications, critical questions regarding privacy dealt with government’s intervention and use of technology in public functions (Etzioni 1999, 121-126), now that focus has shifted to the acts of uninhabited self-disclosure among the users of social media and the use of acquired metadata by corporations. There is hardly any effective resistance to the acquisition of an individual’s private information by corporations and governments; and most questions regarding such information focus on its marketing and use: “In fact, by logging on to the site, users commonly agree to surrender their data for mining and reselling. Since online platforms are a relatively new space for social traffic, the law does not yet cover all concerns of this territory; consequently, the boundaries of what the allows and what users accept are constantly tested” (Dijck 2013, 39).

17 <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/01/did-america-need-a-social-media-president/512405/>

18 Jean L. Cohen elucidates: “In sum, privacy rights are meant to ensure domains of decisional autonomy for every individual, not an atomist or voluntarist conception of the individual (Cohen 1996, 198).

One may not like the buying and selling of one's personal information but it is almost impossible to avoid it. The buying and selling of data has become an important aspect of contemporary business practices, generating billions of dollars in trade and revenue.¹⁹ Metadata is equally crucial to catering the needs of the market, identifying consumers, supplying them with desirable products, and making profit. When an individual visits an online portal and clicks on a particular news story, algorithms are used to assess the nature of her liking and preference. Acquired information is compiled in a broad data base and used later on for the purposes of targeted advertisement and marketing. Furthermore, security agencies globally have started using metadata to fight all sorts of crimes and terrorism. The retention of metadata globally can be very helpful in retracing the steps of criminals and terrorists and capturing their accomplices and networks. It is feared that the acquisition of metadata can be in violation of privacy laws and open to abuse as well. As a matter of fact, many security agencies have been caught amassing huge amount of metadata without providing consumers with adequate guarantee that such data would not be misused. Some governments have started making laws to deal with these issues²⁰.

One of the main challenges confronting democratic governments and societies regarding the use of social media, it would seem, pertains to protecting the rights of citizens in online interactions, trade and commerce, and their overall national security demands. I have argued in the first section of this paper that social media corporations understand users i.e., the people who use their portals, in terms of consumers, and chalk out their business strategies accordingly. The difficulty with such thinking is that it prioritizes the interests of consumers without saying much about the interests of citizens: "Consumerism arose in response to the alienating nature of industrialized society – as a way to give citizens something to do, something to achieve, and something to look forward to" (Allen 2005, 24). As a result, the debates regarding online networking and social media often gets skewed in favor of instant connectivity and consumerism, neglecting the demands of democratic citizenship²¹.

The demands of citizenship require that all media platforms, including print media, social media, radio, television, and all other online portals, strike a fine balance between the needs of consumers and the needs of citizens, prioritizing the needs of citizens over consumers if necessary (Gillespie 2010, 356-357). This shift in emphasis would have at least two major implications for the role of media in the democratic elections. In the first place, the exercise of free speech in online platforms would not be completely inconsistent with

19Sandy Parakilas' op-ed "We cannot Trust Facebook to Regulate Itself" in the *New York Times*, November 20, 2017. She writes: "The more data it has on offer, the more value it creates for advertisers. That means it has no incentive to police the collection or use of that data — except when negative press or regulators are involved. Facebook is free to do almost whatever it wants with your personal information, and has no reason to put safeguards in place". For the details:

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/19/opinion/facebook-regulation-incentive.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-left-region®ion=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region&_r=0

20 Matthew Doran and Henry Belot's column "Metadata capture beings but information not be used for civil cases" in ABC News Australia, April 13, 2017:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-13/data-retention-laws-start-but-information-not-for-civil-cases/8442068>

21 What does it mean to be a democratic citizen is itself a contested question? Without engaging in any polemics, I shall take it that such citizens would have a sophisticated conception of common good and would be willing to promote it. For details, see chapter three "conceptions of democratic citizenship" in Weithman's *"Religion and Obligations of Citizenship"* (Weithman 2004, 67-92).

available facts. Some facts may be open to interpretation but some can be easily established if approached with an open mind. More strongly, all disagreements regarding facts and opinions must be addressed in an honest and genuine spirit without invoking sophistry in argumentation, suppression of facts, manipulation of truth, and stigmatizing the opponent (Mill 2002, 44).

In the second place, a shift in emphasis from consumerism to citizenship would imply that online news and advertisements regarding elections are properly vetted and that they are not patently false. Advertisements, election advertisements in particular, should not be allowed to run simply because they are economically profitable to the sites that host them. It is quite possible that an advertisement brings revenue but is completely fabricated and false. In the US Presidential election in 2016, the presence of such advertising became a serious factor and its repercussions are still being discussed in various Congressional Committees and other security organizations as well.²² We may also want to bear in mind here that in the virtual world it is not easy to fact-check all advertising and publicity, because 1) their volume is so high²³ and 2) the efforts to correct them can easily slide into a form of arbitrary control or censorship. However this should neither stop corporations nor governments from taking measures against false online propaganda and interference in the electoral processes.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that a free and fair media can play a significant role in democratic elections. It can educate voters regarding the issues of the day and help them understand and debate the priorities and programs of various candidates and political parties. In addition, social media has a tremendous advantage in reaching out to millions of people instantaneously, helping the proliferation of news and views in contemporary democratic societies. However, this instant access to millions of people comes with a responsibility. Using Mill's theory of liberty and freedom of the press, I have argued that it is neither possible nor desirable to seek control over publication of views, even if they do not meet the known standard of truth and objectivity. Assuming that what is objective can be a puzzling normative question, I suggest, following Mill, that the questions regarding objectivity in media must be approached with openness, showing regard for known truth and democratic values. In sum, media should not allow its commercial interests to prevail over the demands of democratic citizenship.

²² It has suggested that approximately 126 million Americans might have been impacted with such advertising in the November 2016 Presidential election: <http://money.cnn.com/2017/10/31/media/facebook-twitter-google-congress/index.html>

²³ In the US Senate hearing on Russian inference in the 2016 Presidential election, Senator John Kennedy from Louisiana said to the Facebook's general counsel Colin Stretch: "I'm trying to get us down from la la land here. The truth of the matter is you have 5 million advertisers that change every month, every minute, probably every second. You don't have the ability to know who every one of those advertisers is, do you?". Stretch replied: "To your question about seeing essentially behind the platform, to understand if there are shell corporations, of course the answer is no. We cannot see behind the activity." For the details of above exchange, see Seth Fiegerman and Dylan Byers's column "Facebook, Twitter, Google defend their role in election" in CNN online, November 1, 2017: <http://money.cnn.com/2017/10/31/media/facebook-twitter-google-congress/index.html>

REFERENCES

Allen, D. S. (2005). *Democracy Inc.: The Press and Law in the Corporate Rationalization of the Public Sphere*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Dijk, J. V. (2013). *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Emmett, A. (2008). Networking News. *American Journalism Review* 30. 40-43.

Etzioni, A. (1999). *The Limits of Privacy*. New York: Basic Books.

Gillespie, T. (2010). The Politics of Platforms. *News Media & Society* 12 (3), 347-64.

Gilder, G. (1994). *Life After Television*. New York: Norton.

Mill, J. S. (2002/1859). *On Liberty*. New York: Dover Publications Inc.

Mill, J. S. (2010/1863). *Utilitarianism*. Roger Crisp (Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Robson, J. (1998). *Civilization and Culture as Moral Concepts*. In John Skorupski (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ryan, A. (2012). *The Making of Modern Liberalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ten, C. L. (1998). *Democracy, Socialism and the Working Class*. In John Skorupski (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weithman, P. J. (2006/2002). *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



Cette œuvre est mise à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.