

## **INFORMATION: PUBLIC GOOD, INSTRUMENT OF DEMOCRACY AND WEAPON**

*Information is a public good. The more knowledge is available about societies and how they are governed, the better democratic systems can function. However, the digitisation of the public realm and the overabundance of content have disrupted the democratic conversation. Information disorder threatens fundamental freedoms, including the rights to freedom of thought, to hold opinions without interference, to privacy and to political participation. Information empowers, but its manipulation has further exacerbated social and political polarisation.*



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Information is both a right in itself and a multiplier of other rights. In 1991 only 12 countries in the world had laws guaranteeing citizens' access to government information; by 2009 the number had risen to 40, and by 2019 it was up to 126. UNESCO recognises **free access to information** as an indispensable tool for democratic participation, as it helps promote government accountability and transparency and enables a more robust and informed public debate. Access to information also forms an integral part of freedom of expression, promoting the rule of law and building trust. Information is therefore **a public good**. But the advent of digital communication has altered the flow of information, changing our individual relationships with the production and consumption of content and, in turn, affecting democratic processes.

In the "**Age of Information**" (Castells, 1996) and hyperconnectivity, the overabundance of content has plunged us into what Stephen Sloman and Philippe Fernbach (2017) call a "knowledge illusion". The internet has multiplied our information possibilities, but we lack the

tools to discern the veracity of so many often contradictory messages. When information circulates untethered to reality, truth is in crisis. Belief in factuality is lost (Byung-Chul Han, 2022: 71).

We are living through an information revolution bringing changes at global scale that have transformed our immediate surroundings and daily lives. The digitisation of information, along with innovation, access to multimedia content and the rise of the internet as a free and easily accessible distribution channel have undermined the standing of journalism. The role the traditional media played as intermediary with a monopoly on interpreting reality has been replaced by

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algorithmic intermediation that determines the relevance of content based on categories that have little to do with quality information and genuine public interest. Social media, with its bubble of filters and microtargeted political information, did the rest.

Our everyday reality is being influenced by personalised information flows that reinforce preconceived ideas. Today's public sphere is as global as it is fragmented into wholly separate universes of information. Economic globalisation and the deterritorialisation of the

internet have triggered social and cultural processes with distinctly local impacts, just as local media is going through a problematic transition to digitalisation. Journalists –“the custodians of the public sphere”, as Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa calls them–, are experiencing their own crisis around information access, management and monetisation, as they face the pressure of immediacy and the fierce competition for users' attention.

### **Local information**

The Reuters Institute's [Digital News Report 2021](#) confirmed the correlation between a sense of attachment or belonging to a community and high readership of local news, as well as the high levels of trust across much of Europe in local and regional news. In overall numbers, however, local news consumption is low across the continent and much local media output is threatened by digitalisation and the economic difficulties brought about by the crisis in the business model. The same is true of public media, which is meant to operate without political or commercial influence, but which is also subject to market competition and political and economic pressures.

As the [Nieman Report](#) says, “when local journalism declines, so does government transparency and civic engagement”. In short, “less local news means less democracy”. As Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2015: 1) confirms, local media are an important part of collective representation, having traditionally “helped people imagine themselves as part of a community, connected in part through their shared local news medium, bound together by more than geographic proximity or politically defined administrative boundaries”. When done properly, local journalism can be the accountability mechanism that is closest to citizens. According to Nielsen’s research in several European countries, it helps reduce government corruption and encourages public participation in local politics. In the United States, various [studies](#) show how the crises and closures taking place in local media have contributed to the electoral polarisation that now reflects the partisan clash that shapes the political game in Washington (Darr, 2008).

**THERE IS A CORRELATION BETWEEN A SENSE OF ATTACHMENT OR BELONGING TO A COMMUNITY AND HIGH READERSHIP OF LOCAL NEWS, AS WELL AS THE HIGH LEVELS OF TRUST ACROSS MUCH OF EUROPE IN LOCAL AND REGIONAL NEWS.**

A decade of economic and financial crisis and the dramatic rise of digitalisation and its impact on traditional business models have brought about a devastating collapse of the local press in the United States. In 2006, US newspapers sold over \$49 billion of advertising, still employed over 74,000 people and reached some 52 million readers across the country on a weekly basis. By 2017, advertising revenues had fallen to just \$16.5 billion (down 66%), newspaper staff had shrunk by 47% to just over 39,000 workers, and weekday circulation had fallen below 31 million.

Added to this weakened position a process of polarisation has been holding back the press in general. A study by the organisation [More in Common](#) found in 2019 that “the more news people consumed, the larger their Perception Gap”. Among people who said they read the news “most of the time” the perception of reality was almost three times more distorted than among those who said they read the news “only now and then”, suggesting that media coverage in the US was fuelling misperceptions.

Democracy is a regime of opinion; a conflict between interpretations; a conversation between voters and politicians (Innerarity and Colomina, 2020). But for this to hold, shared narratives and information are necessary preconditions of democratic public discourse. Democracy depends on citizens’ ability to make informed decisions. But “polarized media doesn’t emphasize commonalities, it weaponizes differences” (Klein, 2020: 149),

and social media has contributed to destroying our shared reality, the locus of democracy (Ressa, 2023: 18). Digitalisation has increased citizens' vulnerability to hate speech and misinformation, enhancing the ability of state and non-state actors to undermine the right to free and fair elections and the right to freedom of expression.

"In a world flooded with irrelevant information, clarity is power" – so begins Yuval Noah Harari's *21 lessons for the 21st century* (2018). But the process of digitalisation has altered the very concept of power to the advantage of the large technology platforms. They artificially push content

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that provokes reactions from users, reaping economic benefits by selling users' attention to advertisers. Information –and content in general–, has become the ultimate expression of a product to be exploited, regardless of its quality or veracity.

A public good should not, by definition, be hostage to rivalry and speculation. But the digitisation of the public conversation on privately owned social networks and the manipulation of truth viralised via the superabundance of content available on the web are accelerating things in the opposite direction. This raises questions about the right to information and the internet as a key space for content distribution and individual and collective socialisation, but it also impacts the

ability to access quality information and trustworthy content.

The [UN's Special Rapporteur on the Internet, Frank La Rue](#), has acknowledged that the process of digitalisation has paradoxical implications for citizens' rights. Rather than creating a new human right to the internet, La Rue is in favour of building on existing human rights, like freedom of expression and freedom of association, in relation to internet use. But he also recognises that internet access is fast becoming an indispensable economic and social enabler in a hyper-connected world. A lack of access to the internet makes it increasingly difficult to take full advantage of existing human rights – whether that be freedom of expression, political rights, or social and economic freedoms. Hence our paradoxical current situation. The internet has "become a key means by which individuals can exercise their right to freedom of opinion and expression", according to La Rue. Social networks provide platforms for citizen mobilisation and creating collective

awareness; but they are also multiplier spaces for an “information disorder” made up of disinformation, falsehoods, decontextualisation, biased leaks, orchestrated campaigns and censorship. This overabundance of content set loose amid the blurred lines between information and opinion, the essential and the anecdotal, has profoundly undermined the spaces for democratic discussion.

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