How has the role of mass media in political communication changed in recent years and what implications do these changes have on democratic institutions?"

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Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a real honor for me to be here today and to be able to share with you my thoughts on political communication in the digital sphere. I am not an academician but have focused on the role of media in political communication intensively for the last 20 years as a researcher and practitioner, working on various media monitoring projects, primarily during elections. As such, what I would like to share with you today is based on my practical experience working in the framework of election observation missions with OSCE/ODIHR and other international organizations as well as my most recent work focusing on the role of social media during elections.

Let me start by giving you some statistics and comparisons. Worldwide, there are some 2,2 billion people who use Facebook, which is about the number of conventional followers of Christianity. There are about 1.8 billion users of YouTube, which is about the number of conventional followers of Islam. Millennials check their phones approximately 150 times per day. While there are apparently no precise dates determining who should be included in the group of millenials, when it comes to my age, a brief look at my hair indicates that I am most likely not included. When it comes to checking my phone however, I am a Millenial – as well as my three kids. The only "normal" person in our family is my wife whose usage of the phone is much more measured. She usually checks the phone only a few times per day – and about half those times, it is when she is trying to find the phone. The above-mentioned numbers demonstrate to what extent social media have intruded our lives. Do they threaten democracy? Let me share with you my thoughts on how has the role of mass media in political communication changed in recent years and what implications do these changes have on democratic institutions.

There is no doubt that the role of media in providing access for political contestants to communicate their messages and in presenting news about

political parties, political leaders and matters of political importance is vital for the integrity of the electoral process as we gain essential information about politics through mass media.[1] In addition through reporting on the performance of incumbents, providing a platform for debates among candidates, allowing candidates to communicate their message to the electorate, and reporting on campaign developments, the media should inform voters on how to exercise their rights, monitor the electoral process and report the results to the public.[2]

Various types of media are under different obligations when it comes to election-focused reporting but in general, the international norms and standards foresee that media give equitable access to election contestants so that they can convey their messages to voters and provide the electorate with ample information based on which it would be possible to make a well-informed choice on election day. At least this is how we have seen the role of the media up until now.

However, the media landscape has changed significantly in the last few years, particularly given the expanding Internet media and rapidly growing role of social media. There are growing concerns that the changing media landscape and the expansion of Internet media has changed the impact of media on the democratic decision-making process.

New media is a broad term that describes a range of media that are utilised for many different purposes, consisting of the Internet, mobile phones, social media networks such as blogs and micro-blogs, social networking websites, video-sharing sites, and others. Unlike traditional media, new media are usually interactive, they use digital, online and mobile technology and are often audience-created and user-driven.[3] In addition, they function in real-

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[1] Norris, Robert and Merloe, Patrick. "*Media Monitoring to Promote Democratic Elections*", 2002, pp.11, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/1420_elect_media_02_1-31_0.pdf.

[2] OSCE/ODIHR Handbook "On Media Monitoring for Election Observation Missions, 2012 pp. 13, http://www.osce.org/odihr/92057?download=true.

[3] According to the European Audiovisual Observatory in their study called *Media coverage of elections: the legal framework in Europe*, while "online" indicates internet accessed through computers, smartphones and tablets, there are at least three different types of online media. In the first group, there are online news media, and as the Reuters study indicated, many of the most influential online media in the Council of Europe member states are the online versions of a broadcaster or newspaper (such as *Spiegel*, *Le Monde*, and *BBC News*). In the second group, there are online news media which developed as an exclusive online presence, such as the *Huffington Post* and *Buzzfeed*. In the third group, there are online social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, which are used to access and share news. Notably, in the Reuters study, 51% of respondents said that they use social media as a source of news each week, but only 12% said that it is their "main source" of news. In addition, of those aged between 18 and 24, 28% said social media was their "main source" of news.

time, are usually borderless and more difficult to regulate. The line between traditional media and social media is often blurred, with most 'traditional' journalists using the internet as a key source of information for stories, and many traditional media creating online editions or transforming into fully multi-media outlets.

Moreover, traditional media also utilise 'citizen journalism' pieces and rely on personal mobile phone images and video to cover certain stories where they do not have their own reporters.[4] The rise of new media provides further possibilities for participatory citizenry, information and knowledge sharing, inclusion and empowerment. Both traditional and new media can play a vital watchdog role and serve as a campaign platform, a forum for public debate and as a public educator, ultimately strengthening democracy.

At the same time, however, new media can pose serious challenges to the integrity of election process mainly due to the emergence of so called *fake news*.

Is fake news a new phenomenon? Not really, when it comes to digital disinformation, I think it is just an old wine in a new bottle. It has been around since news became a concept more than 5 centuries ago when Gutenberg developed a printing system. It should be mentioned that the concept of fake news has been here a lot longer than the concept of verified and objective news, which emerged only a little more than a century ago. It appears that with the emergence of social media, we have entered a new phase - which I would call a world of alternative facts in which hoaxes spread with scary speed and invite angry reactions from people who take what they read for granted. If I am not mistaken it was Mark Twain who once said "A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes."

From the start, fake news has tended to be sensationalist and extreme, designed to inflame emotions and prejudices. And it has often provoked violence. What has changed now is the form of how disinformation is spread. I will give you an example. I worked in 1999 in Ukraine focusing on how the media cover the presidential election. There was little doubt that the then incumbent president Leonid Kuchma would be reelected in the polls – something which was repeatedly promoted by almost all national media in

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[4]https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/me/meb/mab02e.

the country. Among a very few exceptions was a newspaper called Silski Visti which can be translated as agricultural news and which was read by about half a million of people. This paper offered some platform to his opponents who were able to unite against the incumbent. We included this paper into our monitoring so I was able to read it daily. It contained a lot of positive coverage for Kuchma's opponents and fierce criticism of the incumbent. One day, I am reading the paper and I thought the world has turned upside down. There were very critical articles against the opposition candidates. I first thought it was a problem with my Russian. Wrong – it was not perfect but good enough to read and understand. The second thought was that I was reading a different newspaper. Wrong – it was the real newspaper. At least that was what I could see. It actually turned out that someone printed 600.000 copies of fake Silski Visti newspaper – which looked exactly as the original but with a completely different content. This was probably the first case of fake news (or fake newspaper, to be more precise) that I observed – and many more followed, primarily in the former Soviet Union countries. When you compare the ability to reach local audiences in traditional media with the ability of social media to reach millions of people within a few seconds – the difference is obvious.

According to a report by Freedom House published in 2017, "manipulation and disinformation tactics played an important role in elections in at least 17 other countries than the US in 2016, damaging citizens' ability to choose their leaders based on factual news and authentic debate."[5] The report further highlights that "over the last few years, the practice has become significantly more widespread and technically sophisticated, with bots, propaganda producers, and fake news outlets exploiting social media and search algorithms to ensure high visibility and seamless integration with trusted content."[6] It is of concern that "the effects of these rapidly spreading techniques on democracy and civic activism are potentially devastating."[7] It should be mentioned that these actions contribute to the declining confidence in international alliances and organisations, public institutions and mainstream media. The main goal appears to be destroying trust, polluting the information space and attempting to destroy public discourse and democratic institutions.

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[5] Freedom House, Freedom of the Net 2017: Manipulating Social Media to Undermine Democracy, 2017, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2017.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

According to another research conducted by the Oxford University, "political campaigns, governments, and regular citizens around the world are employing both people and bots in attempts to artificially shape public life."[8] The researchers consider computational propaganda to be a phenomenon connected with "recent digital misinformation and manipulation efforts" and define it as "the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks. Computational propaganda involves learning from and mimicking real people so as to manipulate public opinion across a diverse range of platforms and device networks." [9]

In their description of bots, the Oxford research indicates that bots are "automated programs integral to the spread of computational propaganda" and "intended to perform simple, repetitive, robotic tasks. Moreover, "bots are used to computationally enhance the ability of humans to get work done online. Social media bots are automated identities that can do routine tasks like collect information, but they can also communicate with people and systems. They are deployed to do legitimate jobs like delivering news and information. They also are used for more malicious activities associated with spamming and harassment. Whatever their uses, they are able to rapidly deploy messages, interact with other users' content, and effect trending algorithms—all while passing as human users. Political bots, social media bots used for political manipulation, are also effective tools for strengthening online propaganda and hate campaigns. One person, or a small group of people, can use an army of political bots on Twitter to give the illusion of large-scale consensus." [10]

It should be mentioned that autocratic regimes use political bots to silence opponents and to push official state messaging. Moreover, political bots have been used during elections to influence the vote or defame opponents. The research also warns that "anonymous political actors harness key elements of computational propaganda such as false news reports, coordinated disinformation campaigns, and troll mobs to attack human rights

[8] Woolley Samuel, Howard Phillip, University of Oxford, Computational Propaganda Worldwide: Executive Summary, 2017, http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/06/Casestudies-ExecutiveSummary.pdf.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

defenders, civil society groups, and journalists. Computational propaganda is one of the most powerful new tools against democracy."[11]

The responsible journalism practiced in traditional media include a filter in the form of editorial decisions, attempting to prevent information pollution and offering people news which are relevant and important for their ability to make informed choices. This type of model does not seem to work in the online media world yet – quite the opposite, people tend to click more on articles which contain conspiracies, hoaxes and lies. This is another big challenge for traditional journalism - the fact that social media platforms have swallowed much of the advertising revenues that once kept traditional media companies afloat.

According to an article in the Guardian, "by acting like technology companies, while in fact taking on the role of publishers, Google, Facebook and others, have accidentally designed a system that elevates the cheapest and 'most engaging' content at the expense of more expensive but less "spreadable" material. Anyone who wants to reach a million people with a poorly produced conspiracy theory video is in luck. If, however, you want to run a well-resourced newsroom covering a town of 200,000 people, that is not going to be sustainable."[12]

It is relevant to ask a question to what extent have the mentioned changes in advertising encouraged the growth of disinformation. We know of examples when spreading fake news to attract more hits to websites became profitable during previous elections. The word 'platform' suggests that the big tech companies act in a passive way, posting information they receive, and not themselves influencing what we see, or what we do not see. This is not true. The tech companies do control what we see, by their very business model. They want to engage us from the moment we log onto their sites and into their applications, in order to generate revenue from the adverts that we see.

There are other challenges brought by the new media environment and notably by the social media during elections. These include inflammatory and hostile language, lack of good quality reporting and analytical coverage.

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[11] Woolley Samuel, Howard Phillip, University of Oxford, Computational Propaganda Worldwide: Executive Summary, 2017, http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/06/Casestudies-ExecutiveSummary.pdf.
[12] Taylor, Lenore, Decent, trusted journalism is worth fighting for. We have to find a way, The Guardian, 6 May 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/may/06/decent-trusted-journalism-is-worth-fighting-for-we-have-to-find-a-way.

Moreover, perhaps even more invasive than disinformation is the relentless targeting of hyper-partisan views, which play to the fears and prejudices of people, in order to influence their voting intentions and their behavior. We are also faced with a crisis concerning the use of our personal data, including its manipulation for malicious purposes.

There is a general lack of meaningful debate with Internet users being split into "filter bubbles" of like-minded people who are locked in echo chambers that reinforce their own biases. These trends contribute to the decrease in critical thinking among audiences. I consider disinformation created for profit or other gain, disseminated through state-sponsored programmes, or spread through the deliberate distortion of facts, by groups with a particular agenda, including the desire to affect elections, a serious problem with negative implications on democratic institutions.

There is yet another new phenomenon which I want to mention. While according to various surveys, television still remains the main source of political information during elections, social media are gradually increasing their impact on the public opinion. They enable political parties and candidates to pass on their messages "directly" to the electorate, and act as means for their supporters to disseminate those messages.[13]

The influence can affect the voter's decision making behavior by the content shared about candidates on social networks. Candidates can also use the social media more personally to reach their followers as we can see with Donald Trump in the States or with Geert Wilders in the Netherlands – they both use their Twitter accounts to create a one-on-one connection with their supporters. Let's have a closer look at this kind of direct political communication.

In a recent article on the upcoming midterm elections in the United States, New York Times wrote that "social media has been Trumpified". Political groups and candidates — whether for city council or the Senate — are imitating President Trump's raw and combative style online. Many are attaching themselves to contentious national issues like illegal immigration which tend to gather more attention online than narrower local issues. Another tactics is giving their opponents mocking, Trump-style nicknames.

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13   http://website-pace.net/documents/19871/4500923/20180925-MediaFreedom-EN.pdf/f2368513-74a2-4c62-9181-d8b570362ed8

For example, Senator Claire McCaskill, Democrat of Missouri, has been called "Crooked Claire" and "Millionaire Claire" by two Republican groups opposing her candidacy. It should be mentioned that Facebook and Twitter are filled with attacks that rely on a similar formula: inflammatory rhetoric combined with nicknames. Primitive anger travels further online than inspirational messages, and the way to get noticed on the internet is to be loud and provocative. This is what Trump did during the 2016 elections when his tactics was to utilize such methods to steal the public attention. The mentioned examples also show that the pressure to perform on social media makes candidates move towards more polarizing topics and avoid talking of real policy issues, such as the heath care or economy, which would not be so popular on social media. It remains to be seen if the negative nicknames and provocative campaign messages, apart from getting more attention, will help candidates to connect with their voters.

Given the existing legal gaps, the various forms of malicious online communication endanger the smooth and fair conduct of the electoral process and, ultimately, of democracy itself. As already mentioned, there is sufficient proof that autocratic regimes and anonymous stakeholders use social media to manipulate public opinion with false news, co-ordinated disinformation campaigns, and trolls or bots, to attack not only candidates in the opposing camp, but also human rights defenders, civil society groups, and journalists. Moreover, even though recent research seems to show that social media users are exposed to more diverse information sources than those not using online sources, "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" may hamper the potential benefits of such positive exposure, fragment information flows, and undermine internet users' ability to think critically thus reinforcing prejudices.[14]

As the recent experience with elections in different countries shows, the growing distrust of the public towards mainstream political parties could result in people voting for populist or more radical alternatives. As such, our democracies are at risk, and now is the time to act, to protect our shared values and the integrity of our democratic institutions.

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[14] http://website-pace.net/documents/19871/4500923/20180925-MediaFreedom-EN.pdf/f2368513-74a2-4c62-9181-d8b570362ed8

In my view, the good quality journalism is the best response to the emergence of fake news and disinformation, it is important, first of all, to provide more support to the existing functioning models which proved to be successful. We should not forget that information remains to be a valuable asset and it appears that the media sector is currently not capable to fully monetise that value. I also believe that the current crisis of confidence in the traditional concept of media is an opportunity to reinforce the role and mission of the public service media. High quality, credible, trustworthy information is a cornerstone of a strong democracy.