

Media and Human Development-The Evolution of Media Corporations and the Challenges for Public Policy

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze changes affecting media industries with special emphasis on the role and changing characteristic of media corporations. It is pointed out that a human development strategy must include an understanding of recent changes and a policy agenda that takes into account the emergence of a new communication paradigm and the fundamental transformation of media industries and the global information and communication system. Access to information, media development and quality of content are crucial factors for the operation of the economic and political system and the expansion of human capabilities. However, the emerging information and communication system is characterized by contradictory trends and huge imbalances, while cyberspace is a contested terrain. Against this backdrop, then, five priority areas in the field of media essential for a human development strategy are identified.

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Introduction

The human development paradigm adopts a holistic approach and put people at the centre of its concerns. According to Mahbub ul Haq [1], Sen [2] and the economists working for the United Nations Development Program, the central objective of development is to expand the capabilities of people to lead the sorts of lives they desire. A person's capability refers to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for him/her to achieve. Three broad types of functioning are identified: physical functioning, political and social functioning, intellectual and aesthetic functioning. Clearly, important developments in the information and communication system affect both political and social functioning and intellectual and aesthetic functioning thus changing development prospects and the questions public policy has to address.

Mahbub ul Haq distinguishes four essential components in the human development paradigm: (1) Equity in access to political and economic opportunities, (2) sustainability of all forms of capital-political, human, financial and environmental, (3) productivity which requires investments on people and an enabling economic environment, and (4) empowerment of people who must participate in the activities that shape their lives. The operation of the markets, equal access to economic and political opportunities, the ability to participate in community activities and exercise political, economic and cultural freedoms all crucially depend on access to information and the operation of the mediatic system.

Although the news media present themselves as detached observers of market events, they are themselves an integral part of these events. Furthermore, news coverage by media companies is a commercial product that emerges from market forces, not a mirror image of reality [3,4,5]. Significant market events generally occur only if there is similar thinking among large groups of people, and the news media are essential vehicles for the spread of ideas [6,7,8]. Quantitative research has found evidence of relationships between trading volume and communication activity [9,10] and has been argued that news media content can predict movements in broad indicators of stock market activity [11].

In his effort to liberate economics from the doctrines of the Neoclassical approach John Maynard Keynes emphasized the importance

of psychological factors in economic decision-making¹, and pointed out that "animal spirits" -a spontaneous urge to action guided by instincts and emotions rather than rational, unemotional thinking-often influence the operation of markets and human behavior [12, p. 161]. Mainstream economics have minimized the importance of this aspect of Keynesian analysis and prefer to ignore the role of psychological and sociological factors in the operation of the economy. In its formal analytics neoclassical orthodoxy treats human behaviour as a manifestation of universal characteristics which can be fully captured within the individualistic, rational-choice, utility maximising model and seeing market equilibria as being relevant to all circumstances regardless of the historical, social or cultural context. Within this framework the impact of changes in the information and communication system on economic and development processes is ignored. However, recent developments in the money and capital markets, the near collapse of the financial system in 2008 and the economic crisis that followed, has led to a resurgence of interest in the importance of psychological factors and the impact of information and communication systems in shaping human behaviour and thus economic developments [13].

Asymmetries of information have also important consequences in corporate governance [14,15] and in political processes. Just as such asymmetries give managers the discretion to pursue policies that are more in their own interest than in the interest of shareholders [16,17], so they allow government officials the discretion to pursue policies that are more in their interests than in the interests of the citizenry. Improvements in information and the rules governing its dissemination can reduce the scope for these abuses in both markets and in political processes.

¹Among the important independent variables that affect employment Keynes recognized three fundamental psychological factors namely, the psychological propensity to consume, the psychological attitude to liquidity and the psychological expectation of future yield from capital-assets (Keynes, 1973: pp. 246-7).

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Developed media systems in which independent companies play a significant role not only make abuses of governmental powers less likely, they also enhance the likelihood that people's basic social needs will be met. Amartya Sen [18,2], for instance, has argued that countries with a free press do not experience famine because the free press grows attention to the problem, and people will view a government's failure to act in such situations as intolerable. Similarly, work at the World Bank [19] has shown how pollution disclosure requirements can be an effective mechanism for curbing pollution levels. Public opinion can force democratically elected governments to take some actions and circumscribe them from taking other actions. On the other hand, pressure and funding by powerful interest groups, in particular oil companies, can influence editorial policies and spread environmental scepticism (Jackes et al, 2008) and confusion among the public².

Clearly then, a human development strategy must include an understanding of recent changes and a policy agenda that takes into account the fundamental transformation of media industries and the global information and communication system. What is required is "an integrated analysis of economic, social and political activities, involving a variety of institutions and many interactive agencies" [2, p.xii]. The media are important institutions that affect human capabilities and economic, social and political processes while, at the same time, are influenced by state policies and public intervention.

A New Communication Paradigm

Media industries worldwide are in a process of transformation under the impact of technological, economic, regulatory and political developments of crucial importance [20-22, 5, 23]. Led by developments in broadcasting at the beginning and the internet later on, there has been in the past three decades an 'explosion' of media outlets and the creation of new markets, factors which contributed to the rapid growth of media companies, and, gradually, the emergence of a new communication paradigm.

The decisive move as far as broadcasting is concerned was the multiplication of television channels, leading to their increasing diversification. Development of direct satellite broadcasting and digitization, dramatically expanded the spectrum of transmission and led to an explosion of television programming and the formation of new networks. Inevitably, governments lost their absolute control in broadcasting leading to deregulation and a new media landscape [25,26].

The advent of internet as a global phenomenon changed the media landscape forever and created a basic infrastructure for the emerging Information Society. The number of internet users increased from only 16 millions in December 1995 or 0.4% of world population to 359 millions in 2000 (5.8% of world population) 2,032 millions in 2010 (29.4% of world population) and about 2,923 millions in 2014 (40.4% of world population)³. Of course, internet penetration varies substantially between countries and sections of the population. This is the problem of digital divide which constitutes a major concern for international organizations and national governments⁴.

²One study that analyzed US newspaper and television coverage of human contributions to climate change from 1988 through 2004 concluded that: "influential mass-media newspaper and television sources in the United States have misrepresented the top climate scientific perspective, and thus have perpetrated an informational bias regarding anthropogenic climate change" [24: p. 1191].

³Data obtained from <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

⁴At the end of June 2012, internet usage was estimated at 78.6% in North America, 67.6% in Australia/Oceania and 63.2% in Europe but only 27.5% in Asia and 15.6% in Africa. Within continents there are also major differences between countries. Data obtained from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>.

In recent years internet has entered a new phase of its development, often described as Web 2.0. This term is commonly associated with web applications which facilitate interactive information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design and collaboration on the web. Examples of Web 2.0 include web-based communities, hosted services, web applications, social-networking sites (e.g. facebook and myspace), video-sharing sites (e.g. YouTube), wikis, blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter) and folksonomies.

In the era of networking and digitization the media do not act in isolation but in conjunction. They constitute a whole articulating with each other in networks depending on the dialectics of objectives between those who appropriate them and those who manage them. In general we can talk about the emergence of a new communication paradigm characterized by connectivity, interactivity and convergence that tends to replace the mass communication paradigm that dominated during the 20th century.

The new communication paradigm is hypertextual, in the sense that several devices connect to each other. Thus, is "characterized by the fusion of interpersonal communication and mass communication, connecting audiences, broadcasters and publishers under a hypertextual matrix linking several media devices (from newspapers to videogames)" [22, p. 145]. As a result the characteristics of news production, distribution and consumption are changing dramatically in recent years. Audiences now consume news in new ways. They hunt and gather what they want when they want it, use search to comb among destinations and share what they find through a growing network of social media.

Inevitably, "traditional" media companies, despite their strength and expansion in recent years, are threatened in their core business and traditional model: mass production of content. This is especially true for newspapers but broadcasting is also affected by the emergence of mobile platforms, YouTube, web-radio, web-TV and the various opportunities offered by internet.

A basic feature of the new communication paradigm is the increased ability of individuals to produce content and disseminate information. For the first time in human history authorities and citizens coexist in the same information environment and compete for attention leading to new phenomena such as public diplomacy and "citizen journalism" as well as new forms of social interaction, political activism and conflict. Mobile viewing, the sharing of stories on social networks and video sites, and posts on a multitude of microblogs are becoming more widespread while earlier tools like e-mails and RSS remain popular. By compiling, sharing and customizing the news they consume, people in a sense are becoming not only their own editors, but also critical agents in the trajectory of a news story.

Manuel Castells calls these new forms of communication mass self-communication because they can potentially reach a global audience while, at the same time, the production of the message is self-generated. As he points out: "The rise of mass self-communication, as I call the new forms of networked communication, enhances the opportunities for social change, without however defining the content and purpose of such social change. People, meaning ourselves, are angels and demons at the same time, and so our increased capacity to act on society will simply project into the open who we really are in each time/space context" [27: p. 8].

Indeed there are contradictory forces in operation. Social actors and individual citizens can use mass self-communication to defend their interests and promote their agenda but global multimedia business networks are also expanding their reach and ability to manipulate audiences on a global scale. The internet enhances freedom of expression and communication but privacy is threatened, governments often try to curtail the flow of information and surveillance by secret services is a grim reality. Digitization and networking permit the development of a global culture but the existence of too many choices is fragmenting audiences and can trigger closure and social isolation. Within the broader parameters of the McLuhanian language, it can be argued that the global village is becoming a reality but is characterized by increased inequalities. Cyberspace is a contested terrain of crucial importance in which contradictory trends are developing.

The Emergence of Global Multimedia Corporations

Until the mid-1980s, almost all US and European leading media companies were specialized, national companies producing mainly for audiences and readers in their own country. However, the story of the international media and content industries during the past 25-30 years has been one of accelerating merger and acquisition activity as content companies, telecommunication operators and technology companies have sought to secure distribution channels, achieve presence in strategic and emerging markets, and for the largest, build a platform for a multimedia strategy. Since Time merged with Warner in 1989 to form the biggest “traditional” media conglomerate, the international media and entertainment industries have been undergoing a progressive process of internationalization, differentiation and concentration of capital [28-32, 23].

The internal structure and mode of operation of media corporations has also changed. We can identify four major interrelated trends [33,21,34]:

1. Growing levels of internationalization and increased concentration within and across industries. These trends have been underpinned by moves toward increasing deregulation and relaxation of regulatory caps on ownership limits.
2. Media companies are now able to deliver a diversity of products over one platform as well as one product over a diversity of platforms.
3. This fluid movement of communication products across platforms encourages the customization and segmentation of audiences in order to maximize advertising revenues. And finally, the success of these strategies is determined by the ability of internal media networks to achieve optimal economies of synergy that take advantage of the changing communications environment.

Large media organizations now not only own more properties than ever before, but the content that these companies create is delivered via an increasing number and variety of platforms, many of which they also own. It is also important to emphasize that not only the leading media conglomerates but also many medium, by international standards, companies have been transformed into highly differentiated, multi-national corporations.

All of the leading firms are vertically integrated. Vertical integration has increased largely because the ability to distribute products across a wide array of platforms has become a precondition for the success

of more and more cultural products. Not surprisingly, today, this integration increasingly includes the internet. Media organizations are moving into the internet, while internet companies are creating partnerships with media organizations and investing in streaming video and audio functionality. America Online's (AOL) merger with Time Warner in 2000 for a record \$165 billion remains a landmark in this process [21 35].

In recent years, the blurring of boundaries between the internet, media, and telecommunications companies has accelerated. In 2005, News Corp. paid \$650 million for the MySpace social networking site but in 2013 Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon, paid only \$250 million for the leading US newspaper Washington Post. The transaction is a reflection of how much has changed in the news industry in just a short time amid the rise of online media⁵.

Digitally-based organizations like Google, Yahoo!, Microsoft, and Apple have stepped up their efforts to compete with more traditional multi-media conglomerates in order to access offline as well as online-audiences. The creation of the U.S. cable news channel MSNBC, launched as a joint venture of Microsoft and NBC in 1996, was only the first landmark in this trend. In October 2006, Google purchased the user-generated streaming video site YouTube for \$1.65 billion. That same year, Apple launched Apple TV, a device that makes digital online media content (including YouTube videos) available via traditional TV sets. And in 2007, Google initiated a partnership with Panasonic to launch a high definition television set that will broadcast both traditional television programming as well as internet content [36,37].

Traditional barriers between “old” and “new” media companies are disappearing as corporations seek to diversify their portfolios [38]. The digitization of all forms of communication means that the barriers between mobile, media, and internet networks are decreasing relentlessly. The ability to produce content via mobile devices and upload, exchange, and redistribute this content via the web both widens access and complicates the traditional roles of sender and receiver [39].

Media organizations control a broader number of platforms with which to deliver audiences to advertisers; but the process of targeting, distributing, and controlling messaging is simultaneously becoming more complicated. Platform diversification, particularly strategic acquisitions of online properties and partnerships with internet companies like Yahoo! and Google, represent both an attempt by media companies to hedge their bets on what will be the central gateway to audiences and an effort to take advantage of the ability to segment and target audiences.

The multiplication of media outlets is associated with the expansion of media corporations but also with the increased ability of audiences to generate content and the phenomenon of mass self-communication. This has prompted some analysts to declare that in the new digital environment there is a shift in control that enhances the power of the

⁵In his letter to the employees of the newspaper Bezos pointed out: «I won't be leading The Washington Post day-to-day,.... There will, of course, be change at The Post over the coming years. That's essential and would have happened with or without new ownership. The Internet is transforming almost every element of the news business: shortening news cycles, eroding long-reliable revenue sources, and enabling new kinds of competition, some of which bear little or no news-gathering costs. There is no map, and charting a path ahead will not be easy. We will need to invent, which means we will need to experiment» (http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/jeff-bezos-on-post-purchase/2013/08/05/e5b293de-fe0d-11e2-9711-3708310f6f4d_story.html).

individual [40] and that “we become all equal” [41, p. 49]. If these assertions are correct there is no need to worry about concentration of capital in the media sector, diversity of content and pluralism of information.

In fact the opposite is true. Effective business strategies of multi-media companies combine centralized control and decentralized delivery. The increase in the absolute number of offers do not necessarily lead to more diversity, i.e. different offers, instead it may lead simply to ‘more of the same’ [42-44]. This happens because companies attempt to maximize synergies [30,33] i.e., among other things, their ability to use centrally produced content across different media and different countries⁶. Thus, the emergence of global multi-media global networks has “induced growing standardization of content under the semblance of differentiation” [23, p. 60].

A Policy Agenda

The new communication paradigm has led to a quantum leap in the production, dissemination and consumption of news and information and has transformed media corporations and the mediatic system in general. Our analysis has shown that contradictory forces are at play: mass self-communication, interactivity and social networking deepen pluralistic possibilities but, at the same time, concentration of capital has increased and the business strategies of global multimedia corporations promote the standardization of content. Cyberspace is a contested terrain in which individuals, companies and public institutions compete for attention and try to lock-in audiences. Even worse, governments and secret services attempt to control information and expand their surveillance of the web. Access to information, media development and quality of content are crucial factors for the operation of the economic and political system and the expansion of human capabilities. Five priority areas in the field of media essential for a human development strategy can be identified.

Support pluralism and independent media

The recognition of the importance of free, independent and pluralistic media for the operation of a democratic society is not new⁷. However, digital convergence and the advent of transnational media conglomerates which operate in the wider information sector have made the question of how to regulate the media market more important and, at the same time, more complex and difficult to answer [45-48]. As the ability to produce and disseminate content is increasing in the contemporary environment, the ability and desirability of controlling the supply and demand sides are diminished. Broader perspectives on promoting pluralistic content and its consumption are needed and an array of new approaches and tools are necessary so that effectual measures can be adopted.

⁶For instance Bonnier, the Swedish media corporation, describes its strategy as follows: “The basic concept is the successful publication of cross-border magazines. This entails a magazine being published simultaneously, with largely the same contents, in several languages and in several countries. The largest magazine, *Illustreret Videnskab*, continues to find new readers in Scandinavia as well as in Iceland, Greece, and, as of the autumn, Latvia.....During the year, a new cross-border title was launched, *Illustreret Videnskab Historie*, which is now published in Norway, Sweden and Denmark” (Bonnier Annual Review 2005: p.14). For an analysis of Bonnier and its diversification strategies see Leandros (2008), particularly chapter 6.

⁷Freedom of expression is a fundamental element of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Also under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, democratic states are obliged to protect and, when necessary, to take positive measures to ensure diversity of opinion in the media. The United Nations, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe have all underlined, on many reports and resolutions, the special democratic role of the media.

It is important to emphasize at this stage that diversity in the ownership of media outlets is not sufficient per se to ensure pluralism of media content. This is also affected by internal factors which determine how resources available to the media are managed. Generally speaking we can differentiate between external or structural pluralism and internal pluralism [49,50].

The former relates to the plurality of undertakings active in the market, with a belief that a monopoly or oligopolistic dominance of the market by a few major players constitutes a threat to pluralism. Regulatory practice is focusing on ownership structures and their potential impact on the news and information markets.

The latter refers to quality and diversity of content and variety in the sources of information. The fair and diverse representation of and expression by the various cultural and social groups, the co-existence of different media types and genres, the access by the public of the whole spectrum of political and ideological viewpoints and the representation of local communities and interests are important aspects of internal pluralism.

A holistic approach on media pluralism requires the development of new monitoring tools which will measure both structural and internal pluralism. They will help to identify risks and shape policies for the various stages of the media value chain: supply, distribution and use. Legal and economic measures must be implemented to support the development of independent and community media, promote competition and avoid government interference. Successful regulatory responses to the problems of media concentration and cross-ownership will promote the special democratic role of the media and the related need for pluralism, tolerance and openness.

Digital inclusion and access to ICTs

On a global scale, internet growth has been extremely high but there are great disparities in internet hosts between high and low income regions. The overwhelming majority of internet hosts are in developed countries, suggesting that wealth and education are major factors driving the progress towards the network society. The differences, regarding the level of economic and social development, determine, to a great extent, the ability of each country to participate in the process of technological change and to exploit the opportunities offered by the emergence of the network society. These differences are enormous and in general they tend to increase even further. In fact, there is the danger of a vicious circle whereas social and economic underdevelopment downgrades the position of a country in the International Division of Information and Communication Wealth and this undermines the chances of development even further⁸.

Although the digital divide is symptomatic of a broader social and economic divide, countries with similar levels of per capita income and economic structures exhibit wide variations in their performance with respect to the diffusion and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Public policies are important in that respect. Pro-ICT policies that appear to be causing these differences in outcome include investment in human capital, low levels of government distortions, ability to generate public and private investment and a climate of civil liberties that is conducive to innovation and technical progress [51,27,52].

⁸The relevant discussion has its origins in the demands expressed in the ‘70s and ‘80s, for “A New World Information and Communication Order”, but at the present juncture it assumes a different importance. Primarily it concerns the digital divide, the underlying causes and the policies that could be used to improve infrastructures, connectivity and achieve digital inclusion.

Of course, the digital divide exists not only between societies but also within societies and all the available evidence shows that internet usage is highly stratified. Internet use is much more common among younger rather than older people, urban rather than rural dwellers, people with higher levels of education and income and, usually, men rather than women. Many studies focus on the availability and accessibility of telecommunications infrastructure, internet penetration and access to computers and data services as a key determining factor. However, research also recognizes that the economic conditions, the availability of sufficient human resources and the development of relevant content affect the ability of individuals at different socio-economic levels and whole societies to exploit the opportunities offered by advanced information and communication technologies.

A number of studies criticize the overriding importance often attached to the issues of physical access to the basic telecommunication infrastructure and point towards the need for a multi-level and multi-faceted approach [53-55]. Within this framework, physical access must be seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition for narrowing the digital divide. So we can distinguish between formal and effective access to ICTs and the internet. The former refers to the physical availability of infrastructures, applications and appliances, while the later refers to the consumer's capacity to find, process, evaluate and consume the information needed.

Media and information literacy and capacity building of professionals

In countries with high levels of connectivity and internet penetration cognitive access, content access and financial access appear to be much more relevant than physical availability of infrastructures as explanatory factors behind the ability of users to retrieve high-quality information, exploit the interactivity potential of ICTs and generate content. Taking into account the development opportunities offered by the emergence of a cyberspace domain, a number of researchers have argued in recent years that the diffusion of ICTs could stimulate a 'leapfrogging' over process of accumulation of human capabilities and fixed investment, thus reducing the productivity gap separating countries at different levels of economic development. Literacy and education, however, cannot be leapfrogged despite their crucial role in reaping the greatest advantages from the emerging digital era. The promotion of education and literacy generally, and digital literacy in particular, is a key challenge facing all countries.

Quality of content, editorial integrity and autonomy of media and journalists from government and business interests are essential for the development of human capabilities. Clearly, these depend on legal provisions and regulatory frameworks but also professional ethics, peer review systems and job security. In recent years, the deteriorating economic conditions in many segments of the media sector have led to cost reductions and staff cutbacks negatively affecting content quality.

Many newspapers in particular narrow their reach and reduce the space, resources and commitment devoted to a range of topics. 'Generic' editorial is increasingly being off-shored while syndicated and centralized newsrooms are being set up to create content which may be tailored at a niche market. A more streamlined, almost "industrial" and less edited mode of news production is adopted, which bases its value proposition less on the status or validity of the author-journalist and the analyses she/he is able to convey and more on its ability to deliver just in time, up to date content. Emphasis

in speed, deteriorating working conditions and customization, in many instances, affect negatively thematic differentiation, depth and accuracy of reporting and journalistic standards alike [56,57].

New issues concerning "citizen journalism", operation in the multi-platform environment of global media corporations, security and privacy have also emerged in recent years. Improvements in journalism education and training are necessary to safeguard professional ethics and the quality of information emanating from the news media [58]. The role of organizations that promote autonomous journalism through advocacy, training and monitoring as well as the strength of professional organizations are also important.

Media accountability and independence of public service broadcasting

In addition to education and training media accountability must also improve. Different measures can be taken in that respect. They can be internal to media or external to them. They can involve processes of self-regulation, complaints bureaus and press councils, media observatories, ethics and disciplinary committees, public debates, annual reports, research and data gathering, panels of media users, prizes and rewards, media-related websites and publications, newsroom committees and ethical auditing. In all cases, their aim must be to improve quality of content and empower journalists to resist political and business pressures. Although none of these measures is sufficient they can complement each other thus engaging media, professionals and society in a constant and fruitful dialogue [59,60].

A fundamental characteristic of successful media accountability systems is their democratic nature which means that they are able to achieve a systematic and meaningful participation by different groups of professionals and their organizations as well as by citizens' organizations and the general public. Proposals and measures are initiated, with few exceptions, by the profession or the public, not by the state. International cooperation and a bridge between professional training, academic research and awareness programs and actions is also important to promote quality of content and accountability.

The operation of regulatory authorities, whether they are placed outside the administrative hierarchy and are autonomous from political influence or controlled by the government has a significant impact on editorial integrity. As far as the public broadcasting company is concerned it is important to establish a regulatory framework which guarantees editorial independence as well as a business model that entails income from a licence fee or other sources, which insulate journalism from market pressures that might otherwise lead to distortions or the neglect of unprofitable content. It is true that editorial independence has remained virtually non-existent in many countries, due both to absence of adequate legal and regulatory frameworks as well as direct government interference. Also the restructuring of media industries worldwide has resulted in commercialization, privatization and a decline of the role of public broadcasters in other countries. However, it must be pointed out that although their independence from business and political influences remains a challenge, public service media (as distinct from government-controlled broadcasting) can provide important citizenship service and promote pluralism of sources and content [61,43].

A bill of rights for the web

The world wide web has created an alternate space in which we work, communicate, develop social relations, engage in political activities and spend more and more of our time. Inevitably, there are many questions concerning how we shall live in the virtual age. How we can deal with threats associated with the dissemination of offensive material from pornography to nazi propaganda without hindering freedom of expression. More significantly, how we can stop the erosion of our privacy and democratic rights from the expansion of surveillance and censorship.

In the new digital era there are unprecedented opportunities to spread information and organize networks of collaboration and conversation which mobilize citizens for political goals and social issues. For example, social media have played a crucial role during the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, in the Arab Spring uprisings and, more recently, in the campaign to free the schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram in Nigeria. On the other hand, surveillance targeted blocking and filtering of politically sensitive web content by governments is also on the rise across the globe [62, 63]. Following revelations by Edward Snowden we have learned that intelligence agencies of many Western countries are secretly intercepting the private communications of millions of civilians. Also exposed were details of the PRISM program through which the NSA collects information on foreigners using products and services offered by US technology companies.

Such trends violate fundamental human rights, lead to self-censorship and undermine the basis for democratic participation. In December 2013, 112 civil society organizations and many individuals, including Tim Berners-Lee the inventor of web, signed a statement of concern on secret mass surveillance. They are calling on governments to overhaul privacy laws, protect whistleblowers who lawfully reveal abuses of state power, and increase “transparency on the mechanisms for surveillance, on exports of surveillance

technologies, aid directed towards implementation of surveillance technologies, and agreements to share citizen data among states”⁹. Since then Tim Berners-Lee has been systematic in promoting the Web We Want campaign asking everyone to play a part in defining the web’s future. He emphasizes the need for a bill of rights for web in order to protect the openness, privacy and neutrality of the system which comes under increasing attacks by governments and corporate interests.

Conclusion

Empirical research shows that there is correlation between free, pluralistic and independent media and sustainable development. Conceptually, we can also identify the normative functions of a media system that supports good governance and social inclusion. For example, a human-centered development strategy clearly requires, among other things, a great deal of accurate, diverse and analytical information that will help policymakers to decide as well as citizens to mobilize around issues in order to change what has to change and protect what needs protection.

Media industries and the global information and communication system are in a process of rapid and dramatic transformation. A new communication paradigm is emerging characterized by contradictory ⁹<http://3ehspg3e85cn1oz25ebdof7cd3.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/CSO-OGP-statement-17dec2013.pdf>

trends and huge imbalances. Networking, mass self-communication and the potential of ICTs make it possible to build a world where everyone can create and disseminate content, utilize and shape information and knowledge thus enabling people to increase their capabilities.

However, the potential autonomy of citizens is shaped, controlled and curtailed by the growing concentration and interlocking of corporate media and the rising tide of online censorship and mass surveillance. Furthermore, in many countries and sections of the population, there are acute problems of affordability and accessibility to ICTs, lack of appropriate web content and insufficient cognitive skills hindering the effective use and social utility of the web. If human societies fail to address satisfactory these problems the transformation of media and the world information and communication system may amplify the voices and increase the power of those who already have control over knowledge and access to influence.

Consequently, human societies are at cross-roads. A human development strategy needs a comprehensive and multi-dimensional policy agenda that will support pluralism and independent media, promote digital inclusion, strengthen media accountability and safeguard user’s rights to a free and open web. Given that in the new communication environment demand and supply side regulations become less effective, education of all citizens on digital rights and skills assumes a critical importance. Greater citizen participation in the management and control of media, networking and interactivity can offset the threats in the domain of information and communication arising from centralization of economic and political power and the abuse of this power. In the digital era social change accelerates but the direction of change is not pre-determined. It depends on the ability of societies to regenerate the democratic process, avoid large scale exclusion and reduce inequalities both in the real and the virtual world.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interest exists.

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