

# Media



In his autobiography, President Mandela recounts a stopover he made north of the Arctic Circle at Goose Bay where a group of young Inuit had come to him:

“... in talking with these bright young people, I learned that they had watched my release on television and were familiar with events in South Africa. ‘Viva ANC!’ one of them said. The Inuit are an aboriginal people historically mistreated by a white settler population; there were parallels between the plights of black South Africans and the Inuit people. What struck me so forcefully was how small the planet had become during my decades in prison; it was amazing to me that a teenage Inuit living at the roof of the world could watch the release of a political prisoner on the southern tip of Africa. Television had shrunk the world, and had in the process become a great weapon for eradicating ignorance and promoting democracy.”<sup>36</sup>

The process skilfully described with one single image by President Mandela is that of an exponential acceleration in the diffusion of the various media. A little over a century ago, in 1895, Marconi sent the first wireless message; two decades earlier Edison had invented the phonograph. Recent decades have seen technical progress accelerating after the invention of radio and television and subsequently broadcasting in both media. How this broadcasting is currently taking place was difficult to foresee when in October 1957, the Soviet scientists launched the Sputnik, the first spacecraft to go into orbit, a metallic sphere two feet in diameter that was designed to determine the density of Earth’s upper atmosphere. In this case, the event was broadcast through radio and the satellite circled Earth for only three months. Twelve years later the United States of America would broadcast by television the images of our planet as one single body and of the first man to set foot on the moon.

Today, the idea of “one world” and of satellite/parabolic communication has acquired a central role in addressing key global as well as local issues. The first international satellite system, Intelsat, was put in place in 1965. Since then, space-age telecommunications, information technology, and optical electronics have converged with conventionally understood “mass media” to give people an unprecedented array of tools - from the simple cellular telephone to

## Related activities

- “Draw the word” game, page 120
- Fighters for rights, page 130.
  - Front page, page 135.
  - Picture games, page 188.
- The impact of the Internet, page 222.
- When tomorrow comes, page 250.

the Internet - to diversify their perceptions, to express their opinions, to interact with others and to understand and react to change.

In the media sphere the simple perception of change is undergoing a radical transition. It took the radio 38 years to reach 50 million users, 13 for television and 16 for personal computers, but only 4 years for the world wide web, the dominant browsing mode on the Internet.

### Challenges of a media-rich world

The Unesco Commission on Culture and Development that helps to analyse modern communication trends and the central role of Western culture within the globalisation process describes new technologies as offering unheard-of scope for the media. Traditional forms of censorship have become increasingly difficult, the media can reinforce a sense of global solidarity and multi-media technologies are creating new artistic and intellectual challenges. The ease of reproduction and transmission has made it much more difficult for any government to control - let alone censor - the information people receive or send. The media of today are helping to sustain people's movements as well as to create a better-informed citizenry. They are also strengthening the sense of global solidarity, without which no global ethics could begin to crystallise. "Media images of human suffering have motivated people to express their concern and their solidarity with those in distant places by contributing to relief efforts and by demanding explanations and action from governments."

Negative aspects have to be stressed as well. It is probably an underestimate to say that at this moment over 100 journalists are being held in prisons in over 20 countries for exercising their ostensibly guaranteed right to freedom of expression, not to mention those who have paid with their lives for exercising their profession.

*The availability of means* is another problem that has to be mentioned. How can the communications revolution reach the billions of people without electricity in hundreds of thousands of human settlements in the developing world? They are still the *have-nots* of the information revolution. The *haves* are a minority, mostly citizens of developed countries and urban residents elsewhere, who can hope to be connected to satellite television or the international information networks.

### Key dates

**21 November**  
World Television Day

**17 May**  
World Telecommunication Day

### Did you know that...

For developing countries, the weak link in the infrastructure chain is often the "last mile" from the local exchange to the household. Some African countries are indeed so poor in telecommunications that there is less than a single telephone line per 1000 people. Or, to put it more starkly still, there are more phones in Tokyo or Manhattan than in the whole of Africa. The 1999 Human Development Report provides a comprehensive comparison of the availability of telephone lines, TV sets, faxes, PC and Internet hosts world-wide. Developed countries have an average of 502 telephone lines, 595 TV sets, 45 faxes, 204 PC and 35 Internet hosts for every 1000 people, while poorer countries, for every 1000 people, have an average of 4 telephone lines, 36 TV sets, 0.2 faxes and no significant presence of PCs or Internet access. Presently, the radio remains the only medium which is sufficiently wide-spread across the globe and responds to the need of oral cultures as well.

### What effects do these rapid changes have on our perception of world events?

Three crucial dimensions in the changing nature of media can be highlighted:<sup>37</sup>

- I. The rapid development of telecommunications and media technologies has changed the very nature of the media. In terms of both space and time they are becoming an integral part of events taking place. Live coverage itself has been transformed into a new event. Examples of this are the landing of United States marines in Somalia and

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

- Haiti and the assault on the Beli Dom and the Ostankino television station in Moscow.
2. Politicians have a powerful and crucial influence on the media in non-democratic regimes and unconsolidated democracies. In democratic societies, politicians endeavour to influence the media as much as possible by spin-doctoring. On the other hand, the media themselves are able to exert an increasingly decisive influence on the behaviour and decisions of politicians.
  3. Commercialisation suppresses the diversity of programming, as well of programmes relating to minorities, alternative culture and subcultures. The pursuit of higher audience ratings is reflected in the reporting of news and current affairs. News presentation, the selection of excerpts from reality presented by media to their audiences is now characterised by the trivial, the bizarre and the scandalous. As a consequence of this, hard news now occupies less space in the media. There is less willingness to cover the expenses of public service broadcasters which are now being forced into commercialisation. In the process, the public has the most to lose – it loses its sources of information.

### Article 11 of the European charter for regional or minority languages (1992) on Media

The Parties undertake, for the users of the regional or minority languages within the territories in which those languages are spoken, according to the situation of each language, to the extent that the public authorities, directly or indirectly, are competent, have power or play a role in this field, and respecting the principle of the independence and autonomy of the media:

- A. to the extent that radio and television carry out a public service mission:
- i. to ensure the creation of at least one radio station and one television channel in the regional or minority languages; or
  - ii. to encourage and/or facilitate the creation of at least one radio station and one television channel in the regional or minority languages; or
  - iii. to make adequate provision so that broadcasters offer programmes in the regional or minority languages.

#### A need for alternatives

Especially at the time of tensions and violent conflicts such as those affecting, for example, the Balkan region, “new channels for the free flow of information could and should contribute to pluralism, economic and social development, democracy and peace ... Training programmes on journalistic ethics should sensitise journalists to prejudices and discrimination”.<sup>38</sup>

One of the leading Internet portals promoting information about human rights, One World ([www.oneworld.net](http://www.oneworld.net)), has summarised in the following way the present four main challenges to democracy in the media:

1. *Freedom of speech.* Traditionally, many discussions of media democracy have focused on the right to freedom of expression. Particularly during the Cold War years, Western governments made much of state censorship in the Soviet bloc as a useful contrast to the supposed freedom of their own press. Yet, although free speech is still a right denied in many instances across the world, concentrating exclusively on that aspect has obscured issues even more fundamental to media democracy in many countries today.
2. *Voice projection.* In the media, democracy is much more than just “being able to say what you like”. Media democracy is about voice projection - making yourself heard. While technology has made it easier than ever to publish your own magazine (or record your own video news), it has become ever more difficult to reach even the smallest audience with that material. Even if you can find a distributor to take it round to the tiny number

of independent outlets still open and willing to stock it, the fact that you can't spend millions on advertising each year means only a hardened few will ever pick it up.

3. *Concentration of ownership.* In its more sophisticated form, censorship is achieved not through legal repression but through capitalist institutions working together to maintain the hegemony of their beliefs. Control of the most powerful new media tools is still concentrated in the hands of a few (nationally or internationally), in private ownership or under governmental monopoly. This means that the majority of media businesses are owned by a tiny number of industry giants. Whether in individual countries or - increasingly - on a global scale, these cartels effectively control the images and stories through which we understand the world. Instead of a true democratic diversity, we are offered infinite versions of the same product (with slight variations in the packaging).
4. *Keep it safe.* This lack of variety has serious consequences, as it becomes increasingly difficult to voice alternatives to the mainstream media's orthodoxy. How much coverage was given to the hundreds of thousands in North America and Western Europe campaigning against their countries' assault on Iraq in the Gulf War? Restricted media democracy leads to restricted political democracy, as alternative ideas are deliberately kept away from public attention (especially if they might offend the advertisers).

#### Freedom of expression - much remains to be done

"Many journalists around the world, including Europe, are still harassed, prosecuted and sometimes even murdered when trying to report on matters of public concern, said Council of Europe Secretary General Walter Schwimmer in a statement to mark World Press Freedom Day (3 May 2001)."<sup>39</sup>

### Concentration of ownership

"Two nuclear power plant manufacturers own two of the USA national TV networks – General Electric owns NBC and Westinghouse owns CBS. The other network is owned by a cartoon company: Disney owns ABC", alerted USA presidential candidate Ralph Nader. One advertising group is able to corner today 40% of the market. The concentration of power as witnessed with the fusion of American On Line (AOL), Time Warner and the Turner group raises the spectre of cultural hegemony.

**?** Do you think that being subjected to the continuous commercial propaganda through mass media takes away from us our capacity to make free choices?

**?** Do you think that youth exposure to inappropriate material with violent or racist content, for example, on television has an influence on its thinking and attitudes?

### NGOs and media

1. The Baltic Media Centre is an independent, non-profit foundation (NGO) promoting democracy, social development, and a peaceful international co-operation through the active participation of the media, [www.bmc.dk](http://www.bmc.dk)
2. AIM (Alternativna Informativna Mre•a / Alternative Information Network) is a network of independent journalists in former Yugoslavia and the southern Balkans, which provides a service of in-depth information in the local languages and in English. [www.aimpress.org](http://www.aimpress.org)
3. *Reporters sans Frontières* is an organisation that provides information on reporters who wrote freely and are in jeopardy worldwide. It organises petitions and letter writing campaigns in defense of threatened journalists. For more information, see [www.rsf.fr](http://www.rsf.fr)

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