

# Social Media, Journalism and the Public

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## ABSTRACT

This paper draws on the parallels between the current period and other periods of historic change in journalism to examine what is new in today's world of social media and what continuities there are with the past. It examines the changing relationship between the public and the press and how it is being continuously reinterpreted. It addresses the questions of whether we are the beginning or end of a process of revolutionary media change.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

A.1 INTRODUCTORY AND SURVEY

## Keywords

Journalism, Media history, Mass media, Press, Social Media

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media is seen by many as a fundamental change in the relationship between journalists and the public. But that debate has echoes in the past, where technological revolutions that created the mass media led to fundamental rethinking about the relationship between the public and the press. At the same time, the history of these technological revolutions suggest that they have unexpected consequences for the development of news – and that it takes decades for the nature of those changes to become clear.

## 2. LESSONS OF HISTORY

We are now living through the third technological transformation of the mass media. The first one, c 1880-1920, led to the creation of the mass circulation newspapers; the second, c 1920-1950, led to the emergence of a mass audience for broadcast news. In each case contemporary observers were unable to anticipate how the media would be transformed. It is an open question whether the third technological revolution will be any different.

## 3. TRANSFORMING JOURNALISM

### 3.1 The Origin of the Mass Media

The creation of the mass circulation newspapers involved fundamental changes in production, distribution and newsgathering. The invention of the rotary press, the railroad and the telegraph allowed the widespread distribution of mass

circulation newspapers and provided up-to-the-minute news, while increased literacy, urban concentration, and affluence provided the mass market. Mass newspapers increasingly sought the views and participation of the public as eyewitnesses, participants and opinion makers. The rise of the broadcast media was even more unexpected. No one foresaw that radio telephony would become the basis of a mass medium, much less the main source of news –and it took the onset of World War II to encourage the live broadcasts that are now central to TV and radio news.

### 3.2 Journalists and the Public

Both technological revolutions involved a fundamental change in the relationship between journalists and the public. The rise of the popular press led to worries that the mass audience could be easily manipulated by politicians, companies and governments. In the 1920s commentators defined the role of the journalist as a crucial gatekeeper who interpreted the complex world for the general public in the interests of truth. Broadcast journalism raised even greater worries about its ability to “set the news agenda” through its dramatic pictures, and some worried that it was radio propaganda that made possible the rise of fascism, and talk radio that provided an echo chamber for right-wing political views. But later research suggested that these fears were overblown; the public depended more on the views of opinion formers in their social circle to interpret the news. Mass media seems to reinforce existing attitudes as much as transform them.

### 3.3 The Future of Social Media

What does all this have to do with the rise of social media? Firstly, many of the same debates have re-emerged in a different form. Social media moves the role of the opinion former online while collaborative filtering changes the nature of distribution. Social media is also creating its own small group of gatekeepers, some drawn from existing media, who tend to set the agenda for discussion. And the debate on the influence of the social media, both on the public, and the content and the process of journalism, is still underway. All three revolutionary periods share some characteristics. It takes a long time to fully understand the effects of the technological revolutions that have unleashed – and 30 to 40 years for those to be fully realised. They incorporate rather than supersede previous transformations. And they change the relationship between the media and the public. On this reckoning, the social media revolution may be the way station rather than the end point of this transformation.