

Social Media and Freedom of Thought

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ABSTRACT: Freedom of thought, viewed as a natural right, has become a topic of interest in the context of the threat of human dignity by media warfare, due to the degree of globalization of the media. This fundamental right must be an essential component of any democratic information society. The general idea from which this article starts is circumscribed to the *social media* phenomenon and its effects on freedom. Thus, it is considered how certain aspects of this phenomenon can restrict the user's right to freedom of thought with his own mind, in relation to democracy. One of these and the most common is manipulation, the behavior that the new media user should become aware of. A balance must be struck between the need to respect human dignity and the right to freedom of critical thinking and the need to preserve the right to store, process and disseminate information and ideas.
KEY WORDS: communication, social media, conventional media, freedom of critical thinking, manipulation, democracy.

Introduction

Lately there have been major changes both in the communication strategies obviously of those who initiate the message and in the ways of transmitting the message, creating an information society where production and consumption of information are the main type of activity, and the informational environment is considered an existential one. By analyzing the flow of digital information that assaults the individual, and implicitly the phenomenon of manipulation and misinformation through social media, the question arises inevitably about the individual's degree of freedom to think

critically and to filter truthful information. In other words, does greater access to the Internet and communication 2.0 stimulate civic responsibility or does it increase social manipulation? The theme of freedom of thought in an information society and the relevant issues from a democratic perspective represent a current theme for the developing community, especially from the perspective of using new media. Because it refers to the freedom to pass the information through the filter of its own reason and in addition, because this right seems to be threatened by certain strategies of social propaganda, misinformation and psychological manipulation.

Freedom of thought in interrelation with social ethics

The relationship between morality and democracy remains an extremely important topic even in the context of an information society. In other words, given that the whole social space cannot be legalized, and even more when it comes to the online space, and the ethical support of democracy is diluted, the good functioning of democracy is conditioned by a social reality with high standards of morality. Democracy and, implicitly, the values that accompany it - the right to freedom of expression and the right to freedom of critical thinking - must be in an upward trend in the ethics behind the common sense and the legislative process. Unfortunately, reality indicates a lowering of standards and implicitly the need for regulations to regulate the behavior of those who manage online knowledge.

From a historical point of view, legal philosophy enshrines both freedom of thought and the freedom to disseminate information as natural rights. Today, these rights are regulated in the Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “every person has the right to freedom to seek, receive and disseminate information and ideas by any means and independent of state borders” (Article 19); “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” (Article 18). Globalization and unethical use by those who manage the information of new media show that legislative guarantees can also be minimized by a tense context.

General considerations

Defining Terms

In an already-formed information society, the concept of social media is already in use. It is predominantly associated with the so-called Web 2.0

(Communication 2.0), which refers to “second-generation Internet services, services that offer new possibilities for communication and social interaction in the online environment.” (Guțu-Tudor 2009, 23)

Lon Safko and David K. Brake state that the social media is assimilated to the online community’s activities and behaviors, namely, the creation and dissemination of information through Web 2.0. (Safko and Brake 2009, 6)

Manipulation is the action by which an individual or a group is determined to think and act in a way that is compatible with the interests of the initiator and not with his or her own interests. Le Petit Larousse gives us the following definition of the word *manipulation*: “handling for deception. *Election manipulation* - Manipulation of crowds: the influence exerted on numerous groups, on opinion, through massive propaganda.”

Webster’s defines the word *manipulation* as “managing a situation, especially for its own advantage. Use of psychological influence on a person or situation to achieve a result.”

Manipulation does not mean a broader understanding of the situation, but the induction of an agreement in accordance with the manipulator’s intentions that remain hidden to the one who is manipulated, thing done by using unethical techniques.

Noam Chomsky notes the existence of ten new media manipulation strategies without which you cannot have an overall understanding of long-term social media effects on the user’s right to think with their own mind.

1. Continuously distracting public attention from real social issues, this in turn being captured by unimportant topics.
2. Causing problems and then offering solutions. This method is also called “problem-response-solution” (eg, the organization of attacks, then following them, the public should demand repressive laws, at the expense of freedom).
3. The strategy for the progressive implementation of a brutally unacceptable measure (eg immigration, precariousness, restriction of certain rights).
4. The action strategy with different dates (eg getting the public agreement now so as to use it in the future for an unpopular decision).
5. The direction towards superficial thinking, with predisposition to informational intoxication.
6. The target audience has to be disordered to question the existing reality and to act under the impulse of emotions.
7. Keeping in ignorance through a minimal level of education.
8. Restricting access to full and objective media, hiding credible, truthful sources.
9. Inducement of individual sense of guilt. Replacing revolt with blame.

10. The system knows the average individual better than he knows himself, it knows the psychology of the individual and the crowd, having control over them. (Timsit 2010)

The informational war has entered a new stage with the emergence of new media. Special media warfare programs have been launched, centered on the informational mistrust of broadcasting and the subordination of their messages to precise ideological and social targets.

Few people using the new media are aware of how important the role of those who disseminate information is, and how much they can influence the formation of public opinion beliefs and the perception of the reality by the Internet user.

The idea of freedom and democracy runs counter to any form of misinformation and manipulation, of any act of intrusion into an individual's mind to form an opinion or to induce an attitude without him being conscious and giving his consent. That is why there should be an honest and transparent relationship between the Power, those who administer the information, and the citizen, and there should be no justification for such behavior using a lie. The contrary limits freedom and democracy.

Online media torrent, with the multitude of non-identifiable source or non-verifiable information, can modify the online community's *mentis stage* later on to the detriment of critical thinking. And history confirms the fragility of keeping things under control when it comes to manipulation and propaganda, misinformation and fake news, and hatred-sending messages. Social media can always lead to incitement to intolerance and violence, to the restriction of certain freedoms and racism, to murder and wars. In the context of becoming aware of such a reality, one realizes that, in fact, the greatest freedom of man is thinking.

The impact of new media on society

Major changes in the media are irreversible, leading to the formation of an information society, where production, processing and consumption of information are the main type of activity, and the informational environment is considered an existential one. Clearly, such a society has undeniable advantages. For example, Henry Jenkins (2006) notes that members of these online communities can migrate from one community to another, depending on the interest they have at that time and can exchange knowledge. (Jenkins 2006) Going in the same direction, Pierre Levy launches the concept of "collective intelligence" when he analyzes the new types of knowledge that appear in cyberspace: "No one can know everything, everybody knows something" (Levy 1999, 26).

If we were to think about the advantages, new media enhances the possibilities of direct communication by sharing things or information like decoding and encoding signals in messages or as expressions or life experiences that we attach the same meaning to. It also facilitates secure interaction and creates a free environment for the individual to share their views with other individuals with the same views. “The Internet generates a framework of direct interaction with citizens, putting into practice one of the ideals of Athenian democracy, namely direct participation.” (Momoc 2014, 45)

Jeff Jarvis also points out that “when we open up to the world on the Internet, we gain new chances to learn, experiment and collaborate. Through tools such as TripAdvisor or Wikipedia, Google’s search or Facebook share, we benefit from the wisdom of the crowd ... Google has become our personal memory and our universal bookstore.” (Jarvis 2011, 86)

The use of new media enables individuals to react and engage in conversations. Mădălina Botan argues that “instruments such as blogs constitute a new form of democracy”, as public participation is needed, based on equal access to information (in the *Policy Area*, 15).

On the other hand, one cannot deny or overlook the disadvantages of creating an information society, the risks posed by the media war inherent in it and the negative influences of these new media on the freedom of critical thinking, privacy and even security.

“The unlimited possibilities of the online environment for anyone with a computer and an internet connection considerably increase security risks, all the more so as anonymity and false identities have begun to manifest themselves more and more pregnant.” (Șerban 2016, 35)

“The individualized or ‘enclosed’ content consumption of new media reduces the number of common experiences that heterogeneous media audiences have had. The consequence of isolation in exclusive online communities, where members listen to the echo of their own voices, is called social fragmentation, cyber-Balkanism: in a social and cultural heterogeneous society, it will be harder for people to understand and accept each other.” (Momoc 2014, 33).

In postmodernism, especially through technological evolution and as a result of the formation of an information society, through social media, the individual is minimized and quite easy to manipulate. The society induces a sense of impotence, of self-deprecation, which he can hardly control. In this way, the individual becomes a well-established target of information experts. The desired effect is to manipulate his views with socio-political-economic goals.

In the information society, due to fierce competition, it is extremely difficult to have an excessive media presence (in the search of which are the opinion makers, for example) to be supported only by real-time storytelling, so it is quite difficult to make the difference between the plan of reality that of opinion about reality. For example, there are countless sites specifically designed to disinform and manipulate, especially in election campaigns, sponsored by certain political groups. Obviously, they are not impartial and have the exact purpose of cosmetizing reality and issuing and promoting conspiracy of all kinds.

This media influence can be limited by the critical thinking of the individual using social media. As a protection, the individual has the power to distinguish the truth from misinformation; he still has the ability to select true information and to own it. He still has the dignity to use reason to accept what is convenient and in principle coherent with already accepted ideas, filtered by a logic. He is left, in fact, with the freedom to think.

The ability to filter information is determined by several factors: the level of education, the influence of the group the individual belongs to on the perception of the individual who accesses the digital information and also the opinions already acquired. These complex factors are speculated by political parties for electoral gain or other entities or people for well-defined purposes.

Conclusions

Although the coincidence of inventions in public space presents a risk and sometimes minimizes the importance of the notion of democracy through misinformation and manipulation, all these must be seen as the response of the society at the present time - the freedom to reason critically.

The information society represents a new stage of human civilization, with a major social impact, causing new consequences for society, the most important being the process of globalization. And critical, selective thinking that makes a distinction between truth-based and false-based information is more and more difficult to accomplish, though not impossible, given the free will with which man has been endowed with to enable creation and the moral scriptural merit.

However, the current challenges in social media remain of major importance, requiring vigilance and sustained effort as well as solidarity in order to continue to respect human dignity and the right to critical thinking and fundamental freedoms for man.

I personally like it when the philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu talks about the *Madness of thinking with your mind* – “the art of living freely in the horizon of your own thought.” Madness consists of a thought that is detached from what has already been thought of, from what has already been processed. “It is not this thought that is ‘crazy’, but the whole journey that leads to it, the desideratum of thinking something not necessarily unimaginable, but with a thought that has surpassed its freedom. Madness is both a form of courage and promptitude, insofar as this thought involves meeting with oneself, with one’s own” (Liiceanu 2016, 30).

This freedom of critical thinking cannot exist without respecting the laws that protect it and the norms of common sense. Freedom is a fundamental right of man. To live free is actually to submit to your own reason, to think with your own mind.

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