

>THE NEW MEDIA'S ROLE IN POLITICS



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Image: It has reached a point where the mass of information causes laughter and fear in equal parts, as exemplified this costume at the Halloween Carnival in Hollywood.



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The new media environment is dynamic and continues to develop in novel, sometimes unanticipated, ways that have serious consequences for democratic governance and politics.

New media have radically altered the way that government institutions operate, the way that political leaders communicate, the manner in which elections are contested, and citizen engagement. This chapter will briefly address the evolution of new media, before examining in greater detail their role in and consequences for political life.

New political media are forms of communication that facilitate the production, dissemination, and exchange of political content on platforms and within networks that accommodate interaction and collaboration. They have evolved rapidly over the past three decades, and continue to develop in novel, sometimes unanticipated ways. New media have wide-ranging implications for democratic governance and political practices. They have radically altered the ways in which government institutions operate and political leaders communicate. They have transformed the political media system, and redefined the role of journalists. They have redefined the way elections are contested, and how citizens engage in politics.

The rise of new media has complicated the political media system. Legacy media consisting of established mass media institutions that predate the Internet, such as newspapers, radio shows, and television news programs, coexist with new media that are the outgrowth of technological innovation. While legacy media maintain relatively stable formats, the litany of new media, which includes websites, blogs, video-sharing platforms, digital apps, and social media, are continually expanding in innovative ways. Mass media designed to deliver general interest news to broad audiences have been joined by niche sources that narrowcast to discrete users (Stroud, 2011). New media can relay information directly to individuals without the intervention of editorial or institutional gatekeepers, which are intrinsic to legacy forms. Thus, new media have introduced an increased level of instability and unpredictability into the political communication process.

The relationship between legacy media and new media is symbiotic. Legacy media have incorporated new media into their reporting strategies. They distribute material across an array of old and new communication platforms. They rely on new media sources to meet the ever-increasing demand for content. Despite competition from new media, the audiences for traditional media remain robust, even if they are not as formidable as in the past. Readers of the print edition

of *The New York Times* and viewers of the nightly network news programs far outnumber those accessing the most popular political news websites (Wired Staff, 2017). Cable and network television news remain the primary sources of political information for people over the age of thirty (Mitchell and Holcomb, 2016). Consequently, new media rely on their legacy counterparts to gain legitimacy and popularize their content.

Ideally, the media serve several essential roles in a democratic society. Their primary purpose is to inform the public, providing citizens with the information needed to make thoughtful decisions about leadership and policy. The media act as watchdogs checking government actions. They set the agenda for public discussion of issues, and provide a forum for political expression. They also facilitate community building by helping people to find common causes, identify civic groups, and work toward solutions to societal problems.

New media have the potential to satisfy these textbook functions. They provide unprecedented access to information, and can reach even disinterested audience members through personalized, peer-to-peer channels, like Facebook. As average people join forces with the established press to perform the watchdog role, public officials are subject to greater scrutiny. Issues and events that might be outside the purview of mainstream journalists can be brought into prominence by ordinary citizens. New media can foster community building that transcends physical boundaries through their extensive networking capabilities. Although legacy media coverage of political events correlates with increased political engagement among the mass public, mainstream journalists do not believe that encouraging participation is their responsibility (Hayes and Lawless, 2016). However, new media explicitly seek to directly engage the public in political activities, such as voting, contacting public officials, volunteering in their communities, and taking part in protest movements.

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At the same time, the new media era has acerbated trends that undercut the ideal aims of a democratic press. The media disseminate a tremendous amount of political content, but much of the material is trivial, unreliable, and polarizing. The watchdog role pre-new media had been performed largely by trained journalists who, under the best of circumstances, focused on uncovering the facts surrounding serious political transgressions. *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein inspired a generation of investigative journalists after revealing President Richard Nixon’s role in the break-in at the Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate Hotel, forcing his resignation (Shepard, 2012). Much news in the new media era is defined by coverage of

a never-ending barrage of sensational scandals—be they real, exaggerated, or entirely fabricated—that often are only tangentially related to governing.

This chapter begins by briefly addressing the evolution of new media in the United States to establish the core characteristics of the current political media system. We then will focus on the role of media in providing information in a democratic polity, and will examine the ways in which new media have impacted this role. The diversity of content disseminated by new media has created opportunities, such as the ability for more voices to be heard. However, the questionable quality of much of this information raises serious issues for democratic discourse. Next, we will discuss how the new media are integral to political coverage in a post-truth society, where falsehoods infused with tidbits of fact pass as news. Finally, we will contemplate the ways in which the watchdog press is being overshadowed by the mouthpiece press which serves as a publicity machine for politicians.

The Evolution of New Media

New media emerged in the late 1980s when entertainment platforms, like talk radio, television talk shows, and tabloid newspapers, took on prominent political roles and gave rise to the infotainment genre. Infotainment obscures the lines between news and entertainment, and privileges sensational, scandal-driven stories over hard news (Jebiril, et al., 2013). Politicians turned to new media to circumvent the mainstream press' control over the news agenda. The infotainment emphasis of new media at this early stage offered political leaders and candidates a friendlier venue for presenting themselves to the public than did hard news outlets (Moy, et al., 2009). During the 1992 presidential election, Democratic candidate Bill Clinton famously appeared on Arsenio Hall's television talk show wearing sunglasses and playing the saxophone, which created a warm, personal image that set the tone for his campaign (Diamond, et al., 1993). The fusing of politics and entertainment attracted audiences that typically had been disinterested in public affairs (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011). It also prompted the ascendance of celebrity politicians, and set the stage for a "reality TV" president like Donald Trump decades later.

Political observers and scholars contemplated the advent of a "new media populism" that would engage disenfranchised citizens and facilitate a more active role for the public in political discourse. New media had the potential to enhance people's access to political information, facilitate wider-ranging political discourse, and foster participation. Initially, the public responded positively to the more accessible communication channels, calling in to political talk programs and participating in online town hall meetings. However, new media's authentic populist potential was undercut by the fact that the new political media system evolved haphazardly, with no guiding principles or goals. It was heavily dominated by commercial interests and those already holding privileged positions in politics and the news industry. Public enthusiasm eventually gave way to ambivalence

and cynicism, especially as the novelty of the first phase of new media wore off (Davis and Owen, 1998).

The next phase in the development of new media unfolded in conjunction with the application of emerging digital communications technologies to politics that made possible entirely new outlets and content delivery systems. The digital environment and the platforms it supports greatly transformed the political media system. Beginning in the mid-1990s, new political media platforms quickly progressed from the rudimentary “brochureware” website, used by Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign in 1992, to encompass sites with interactive features, discussion boards, blogs, online fundraising platforms, volunteer recruitment sites, and meet-ups. The public became more involved with the actual production and distribution of political content. Citizen journalists were eyewitnesses to events that professional journalists did not cover. Non-elites offered their perspectives on political affairs to politicians and peers. Members of the public also were responsible for recording and posting videos that could go viral and influence the course of events (Wallsten, 2010). In 2006, for example, the reelection campaign of Republican Senator George Allen was derailed by a viral video in which he used the term “macaca,” a racial slur, to refer to a young man of Indian ancestry who was attending his campaign rally (Craig and Shear, 2006).

A third phase in the evolution of new media is marked by Democratic candidate Barack Obama’s groundbreaking digital campaign strategy in the 2008 presidential election. Obama’s team revolutionized the use of social media in an election they felt was unwinnable using traditional techniques. The campaign made use of advanced digital media features that capitalized on the networking, collaboration, and community-building potential of social media to create a political movement. The Obama campaign website was a full-service, multimedia center where voters not only could access information, they also could watch and share videos, view and distribute campaign ads, post comments, and blog. Supporters could donate, volunteer, and purchase campaign logo items, like tee shirts and caps. The campaign was active on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as a range of other social media platforms that catered to particular constituencies, such as BlackPlanet, AsianAve, and Glee. The campaign pioneered digital microtargeting tactics. It used social media to collect data on people’s political and consumer preferences, and created voter profiles to pursue specific groups, such as young professional voters, with customized messages.

The new media trends established in the 2008 campaign have carried over to the realm of government and politics more generally. Social media have become a pervasive force in politics, altering the communication dynamics between political leaders, journalists, and the public. They have opened up wider avenues for instantaneous political discourse and debate. Research indicates that people’s access to social media networks has a positive effect on their sense of political efficacy and tendency to participate in politics (Gil de

Zuniga, et al., 2010). However, there also has been backlash when social media discourse has become too nasty, and users have blocked content or dropped out of their social media networks (Linder, 2016). Social media allow people to efficiently organize and leverage their collective influence. Thus, political leaders are held more accountable because their actions are constantly probed on social media.

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At the same time, legacy media organizations have come to rely on aspects of new media. Newspapers, in particular, have experienced financial hardships due adverse financial market conditions, declining advertising revenues, and competition from proliferating news sources. The size of traditional newsrooms in the U.S. has shrunk by more than 20,000 positions in the past twenty years, and global newsrooms have experienced a similar decline (Owen, 2017). Legacy news organizations have cut investigative units, and only around one-third of reporters are assigned to political beats (Mitchell and Holcomb, 2016). Alicia Shepard, a former media ombudsman and media literacy advocate, opined, “When newspapers can’t even cover daily journalism, how are they going to invest in long-term, expensive investigative reporting?” (2012). Still, journalists working for legacy organizations continue to do the yeoman’s share of serious news gathering and investigative reporting. Mainstream journalists have come to rely heavily on new media content as a source of news. These trends have seriously influenced the quality and nature of news content as well as the style of political reporting, which has become more heavily infused with infotainment and quotes from Twitter feeds.

Providing Political Information

The complexities of the new media system are reflected in the diversity of available content. The information distributed via the vast communications network runs the gamut from fact-based, investigative reporting from professional journalists to brash fabrications or “alternative facts”—to use the term coined by President Trump’s advisor Kellyanne Conway—proffered by the alternative press (Graham, 2017). In the new media era, the boundaries that separate these disparate types of information have become increasingly muddled. Professional media editors who regulate the flow of information by applying news principles and standards associated with the public good have become scarce (Willis, 1987). They have been replaced by social media and analytics editors whose primary motivation is to draw users to content regardless of its news value. Audience members have

to work hard to distinguish fact from fiction, and to differentiate what matters from what is inconsequential.

A number of explanations can be offered for the shift in the quality and quantity of political information. The technological affordances of new media allow content to propagate seemingly without limits. Social media have a dramatically different structure than previous media platforms. Content can be relayed with no significant third-party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgement. Individuals lacking prior journalism training or reputation can reach many users at lightning-fast speed. Messages multiply as they are shared across news platforms and via personal social networking accounts (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

In addition, the economic incentives underpinning new media companies, such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter, are predicated on attracting large audiences that will draw advertising revenue. Political content is used to drive consumers to social media products, rather than to perform the public service function of informing the citizenry. Commercial pressures lead media organizations to feature incendiary stories that receive the most attention. Further, while platforms proliferate, similar content is dispersed widely as media power is concentrated in a small number of old and new media corporations (McChesney, 2015). Search engines direct users to a limited selection of heavily trafficked and well-financed sites (Hindman, 2009; Pariser, 2011).

Other explanations focus on the nature of the American political environment that has become extremely polarized, prompting the emergence of political agendas that promote rogue politics. A 2017 Pew Research Center study revealed that the gap between Democrats and Republicans on core political values, including the role of government, race, immigration, the social safety net, national security, taxes, and environmental protection, have grown to epic proportions for the modern era. Two-thirds of Americans fall solidly in the liberal or conservative camp, with few holding a mix of ideological positions (Pew Research Center, 2017; Kiley, 2017).

Speech on new media reflects these stark political divisions, and frequently devolves into expressions of hostility and ad hominem attacks. President Donald Trump used Twitter to ignite a controversy over NFL players who protested racial oppression during the playing of the national anthem before games. He used a derogatory term to refer to players, who are predominantly African American, and urged team owners to fire those supporting the demonstration. Trump's social media blasts accused the players of disrespecting the flag and the military, which misrepresents the protest agenda and has divided the public along political and racial lines.

Political divisions are reflected in the presence of media "echo chambers," where people select their news and information sources based on their affinity for the politics of other users. Modern-day new media echo chambers began to form during the first phase of new media, as conservative talk radio hosts,

like Rush Limbaugh, attracted dedicated followers (Jamieson and Cappella, 2010). Social media has hastened the development of echo chambers, as they facilitate people's exposure to information shared by like-minded individuals in their personal digital networks, with 62% of adult Americans getting their news from social media platforms. Even politically disinterested social media users frequently encounter news articles unintentionally as they scan their feed (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016). The ability of social media to isolate people from exposure to those with differing viewpoints exacerbates political polarization.

A significant segment of the public perceives journalists as removed elites who do not share their conservative values. Political analyst Nate Silver (2017) contends that the national press has been operating in a politically homogenous, metropolitan, liberal-leaning bubble that has become attached to "Establishment Influentials." He maintains that the mainstream media are out-of-touch with a wide swath of the public. During the recent election this became clear as legacy media institutions are unable to connect effectively with the frustration and anger of people outside of high education and income circles (Camosy, 2016).

Some scholars argue that new media are closing the gap between distant journalists and the mass public by giving voice to those who have felt left out (Duggan and Smith, 2016). The Tea Party, a conservative political movement focused around issues about taxation and the national debt, used social networks for political mobilization in the 2010 midterm elections. Tea Party candidates employed social media to reshape public discourse around the campaign, forging a sense of solidarity among groups who previously felt disenfranchised (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, 2011). Candidates pushing an extreme agenda have amplified this trend. Highly partisan, flamboyant congressional candidates, on both sides of the aisle, who spark political disagreement and indignant rhetoric garner the most supporters on Facebook. They use social media to solidify their political base (Messing and Weisel, 2017).

Post-Truth Media

American author Ralph Keyes (2004) observes that society has entered a post-truth era. Deception has become a defining characteristic of modern life, and is so pervasive that people are desensitized to its implications. He laments the fact that ambiguous statements containing a kernel of authenticity, but falling short of the truth, have become the currency of politicians, reporters, corporate executives, and other power-brokers.

Journalist Susan Glasser (2016) argues that journalism has come to reflect the realities of reporting in post-truth America. Objective facts are subordinate to emotional appeals and personal beliefs in shaping public opinion. The public has difficulty distinguishing relevant news about weighty policy issues from the extraneous clamor that permeates the media. The work of investigative journalists has in some ways become more insightful and informed than in the past due

to the vast resources available for researching stories, including greater access to government archives and big data analysis. However, well-documented stories are obscured by the constant drone of repetitive, sensationalized trivia-bites that dominate old and new media. Reflecting on coverage of the last American presidential contest, Glasser states, “The media scandal of 2016 isn’t so much about what reporters fail to tell the American public; it’s about what they did report on, and the fact that it didn’t seem to matter” (2016).

Evidence that Glasser’s concerns are well-founded can be compiled by examining media content on a daily basis. Post-truth media was prominent during the 2016 presidential election. Media accounts of the election were infused with misinformation, baseless rumors, and outright lies. False stories and unverified factoids emanated from fabricated news sites as well as the social media accounts of the candidates and their surrogates. Republican nominee Donald Trump used his Twitter feed to push out sensational, unverified statements that would dominate the news agenda, a practice he maintained after assuming the presidency. He alleged that the father of Ted Cruz, his challenger for the nomination, was involved in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and perpetuated the false claim that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States (Carson, 2017). False news stories infiltrated reports by legacy media organizations as they relied heavily on digital sources for information. Cable news organizations like CNN and MSNBC amplified Trump’s unfounded claims, such as his allegations that Muslims in New Jersey celebrated the fall of the World Trade Center on 9/11, even as they criticized their veracity (Shafer, 2015).

Contrived controversies detract from coverage of important issues related to policy, process, and governance (Horton, 2017). In October of 2017, President Donald Trump and Senator Bob Corker (R-TN) exchanged a series of insults as Congress considered major tax reforms. The feud dominated coverage of the battle over tax legislation on new media, and commanded the front page of *The New York Times*. Among the many insults slung over the course of several weeks, Trump referred to Corker as “Liddle Bob,” and tweeted that Corker “couldn’t get elected dog catcher.” Corker called the White House “an adult day care center,” and labeled Trump “an utterly untruthful president” (Sullivan, 2017).

The Ascendance of Fake News

The most extreme illustration of the concept of post-truth reporting is the rise of fake news. The definition of fake news has shifted over time, and continues to be fluid. Initially, the term “fake news” referred to news parodies and satire, such as *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Weekend Update* on *Saturday Night Live*. During the 2016 campaign, the concept of fake news was attached to fictitious stories made to appear as if they were real news articles. These stories were disseminated on websites that had the appearance of legitimate

news platforms or blogs, such as *Infowars*, *The Rightest*, and *National Report*. A 2017 compilation documented 122 sites that routinely publish fake news (Chao, et al., 2017). Authors are paid—sometimes thousands of dollars—to write or record false information. Some of these authors are based in locations outside of the United States, including Russia (Shane, 2017). They make use of social media interactions and algorithms to disseminate content to specific ideological constituencies. Fabricated stories are spread virally by social bots, automated software that replicates messages by masquerading as a person (Emerging Technology from the arXiv, 2017).

Fake news stories play to people’s preexisting beliefs about political leaders, parties, organizations, and the mainstream news media. While some fake news stories are outright fabrications, others contain elements of truth that make them seem credible to audiences ensconced in echo chambers. Conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and lies were spread efficiently through Facebook, Snapchat, and other social media, and reached millions of voters in the 2016 election (Oremus, 2016). For example, a fabricated story on *The Denver Guardian*, a fake site meant to emulate the legitimate newspaper, *The Denver Post*, reported that an F.B.I. agent connected with an investigation into Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton’s emails had murdered his wife and shot himself. Other erroneous reports claimed that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump and that Hillary Clinton had sold weapons to ISIS (Rogers and Bromwich, 2016).

“OBJECTIVE FACTS ARE SUBORDINATE TO EMOTIONAL APPEALS AND PERSONAL BELIEFS IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION.”

Conditions in the new media age have been ripe for the proliferation of fake news. The new media system has lifted many of the obstacles to producing and distributing news that were present in the previous mass media age. While vestiges of the digital divide persist, especially among lower-income families (Klein, 2017), barriers to new media access have been lowered. The cost of producing and distributing information on a wide scale have been reduced. The logistics and skills necessary to create content are less formidable. Social networking sites make it possible to build and maintain audiences of like-minded people who will trust posted content. Fake news proliferates widely through social media, especially Facebook and Twitter. In fact, fake news stories are spread more widely on Facebook than factual mainstream media reports (Silverman, 2016). Audiences are fooled and confused by fake news, which confounds basic facts about politics and government with fiction. A 2016 Pew Research Center report found that 64% of the American public found that made-up news created a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current events, and an additional 24% believed fake news caused some confusion (Barthel, Mitchell,

and Holcomb, 2016). Finally, legal challenges to fake news and the distribution of false content are much more difficult to pose, as it is costly and time-consuming to sue publishers for spreading false information.

An alternative meaning of fake news emerged after the presidential election. At his first press conference as President-elect, Donald Trump appropriated the term “fake news” as a derogatory reference to the mainstream press. Pointing at CNN journalist Jim Acosta, who was attempting to ask a question, Trump exclaimed, “You are fake news!” Trump and his acolytes frequently employ the “fake news” moniker when attempting to delegitimize the legacy media, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, for reporting they consider to be unfavorable (Carson, 2017). Weary of Trump repeatedly invoking the “fake news” label, CNN launched a “Facts First” campaign in response to “consistent attacks from Washington and beyond.” A thirty second video shows an image of an apple, with the voice over:

This is an apple. Some people might try to tell you this is a banana. They might scream banana, banana, banana, over and over and over again. They might put banana in all caps. You might even start to believe that this is a banana. But it’s not. This is an apple.

Facts are facts. They aren’t colored by emotion or bias. They are indisputable. There is no alternative to a fact. Facts explain things. What they are, how they happened. Facts are not interpretations. Once facts are established, opinions can be formed. And while opinions matter, they don’t change the facts. (https://www.cnncreativemarketing.com/project/cnn_factsfirst/)

Watchdog Press or Politicians’ Mouthpiece

The notion of the press as a political watchdog casts the media as a guardian of the public interest. The watchdog press provides a check on government abuses by supplying citizens with information and forcing government transparency. Public support for the media’s watchdog role is substantial, with a Pew Research Center study finding that 70% of Americans believe that press reporting can “prevent leaders from doing things that shouldn’t be done” (Chinni and Bronston, 2017).

New media have enhanced the capacity of reporters to fulfill their watchdog role, even in an era of dwindling resources for investigative journalism. Information can be shared readily through formal media sources, as local news outlets can pass information about breaking events to national organizations. News also can be documented and shared by citizens through social networks. When a vicious category 5 hurricane devastated Puerto Rico and the American government’s response was slow, journalists were able to surface the story as residents and first responders took to social media to provide first-hand accounts to national journalists who had difficulty reaching the island (Vernon, 2017).

However, there are aspects of the media's watchdog role that have become more difficult to fulfill. Countering outright lies by public officials has almost become an exercise in futility, even as fact-checking has become its own category of news. *The Washington Post's* "Fact Checker" identified almost 1,500 false claims made by President Trump in just over 250 days in office (www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker). Sites focusing on setting the record straight, such as PolitiFact, Snopes, and FactCheck, can barely keep pace with the amount of material that requires checking. Despite these efforts, false information on the air and online has multiplied.

There is evidence to suggest that the new media allow political leaders to do an end-run around the watchdog press. In some ways, the press has moved from being a watchdog to a mouthpiece for politicians. This tendency is exacerbated by the fact that there is a revolving door where working journalists move between positions in the media and government. Some scholars maintain that this revolving door compromises the objectivity of journalists who view a government job as the source of their next paycheck (Shepard, 1997).

The media act as a mouthpiece for political leaders by publicizing their words and actions even when their news value is questionable. President Donald Trump uses Twitter as a mechanism for getting messages directly to his followers while averting journalistic and political gatekeepers, including high ranking members of his personal staff. Many of his tweets are of questionable news value, except for the fact that they emanate from the president's personal social media account.

Donald Trump's Twitter account not only communicates decisions and sets goals but also responds aggressively to accusations.



Yet the press act as a mouthpiece by promoting his tweets. A silly or vicious tweekan can dominate several news cycles. In an interview with Fox Business Network’s Maria Bartiromo, President Trump gave his reason for using social media to communication with the public and the press that supports the notion of the mouthpiece media:

Tweeting is like a typewriter—when I put it out, you put it immediately on your show. I mean, the other day, I put something out, two seconds later I am watching your show, it’s up... You know, you have to keep people interested. But, social media, without social media, I am not sure that we would be here talking I would probably not be here talking (Tatum, 2017).

Successful news media such as *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* are often accused of publishing fake news when that information is not of the interest of some elites.

When rumors and conspiracy theories are believed, they can have serious consequences. This point is illustrated by the “PizzaGate” conspiracy theory that spread on social media during the 2016 presidential election. Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and her campaign chairman, John Podesta, were accused of engaging in satanic rituals where they personally “chopped up and raped” children. Wikileaks released personal emails from Podesta’s account indicating that he enjoyed eating at a pizza restaurant Washington, D.C. The Twitter hashtag #pizzagate began trending. Rumors alleging that the restaurant’s owner was running a child sex ring began circulating. Believing the rumors to be true, a man drove from North Carolina to liberate the purported



child sex slaves. He fired an assault rifle inside the pizza restaurant as staff and patrons fled. He is currently serving a four-year prison sentence (Aisch, et al., 2016; Fisher, et al., 2016).

Conclusion

New media have both expanded and undercut the traditional roles of the press in a democratic society. On the positive side, they have vastly increased the potential for political information to reach even the most disinterested citizens. They enable the creation of digital public squares where opinions can be openly shared. They have created new avenues for engagement that allow the public to connect in new ways with government, and to contribute to the flow of political information.

At the same time, the coalescence of the rise of new media and post-truth society has made for a precarious situation that subverts their beneficial aspects. Presently, it appears as if there are few effective checks on the rising tide of false information. Substituting scandal coverage for serious investigative journalism has weakened the press' watchdog role. The ambiguous position of the media as a mouthpiece for politicians renders journalists complicit in the proliferation of bad information and faulty facts. It is important to recognize that American journalism has never experienced a "golden age" where facts always prevailed and responsible reporting was absolute. However, the current era may mark a new low for the democratic imperative of a free press.

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