1.1 - Social media, echo chambers, and polarisation

Access to information

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*Traditional media, **once** the primary news and entertainment source for millions worldwide, <u>have **been** profoundly **transformed** over the past few decades</u>.*

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*The advent of the internet and the rapid growth of digital technology have revolutionised **how** information and entertainment <u>are consumed</u>.*

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*As a result, traditional media, including newspapers, magazines, television, and radio, have significantly declined **in terms of** relevance and influence.*

Freedom of speech & Social media

Freedom of speech is **guaranteed by** the First Amendment in the USA, and by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. It is usually **understood as** the right to express oneself freely, meaning without being punished by the government.

The Internet was designed as a **free**, **decentralised**, and **emancipating** place.
- *Free from control*, allowing individuals to publish ideas without government or corporate control, through websites and forums with little to no rules and moderation. It encourages the culture of **open sharing**: free information (Wikipedia), open-source softwares (1950s/60s: virtually all softwares were created by academics and placed in **the public domain** ; then, the development of a private software industry ; 1991: the release of the Linux kernel by Linus Torvalds, offering a computer's operating system).
- *Decentralised*, as in a space where power and control are not in the hands of several actors, but spread across many independent actors, in the absence of authority.
- *Emancipating*, because it was a tool for **empowerment**, giving a voice to marginalised groups, allowing access to information outside traditional, privately-owned media, **enabling** activism.

Freedom of speech & Social media

Today, the main platforms **hinder** *freedom* by setting rules, moderating and removing content, and deciding on visibility. Speech is therefore shaped via algorithms and advertisers, since online activity is tracked and monetised.

These platforms **dominating** the Internet (social networks, video-sharing platforms) *centralise* content on their servers, and each decision by these companies affect millions of users at once..

The age of emancipation is therefore **compromised**, as harassment, misinformation and polarisation can silence people.

→ Therefore, because of these automated systems regulating visibility, and because of **digital violence** making people react and **engage**, Internet users entrench themselves in places where they (and their ideas) can be heard and respected.

Freedom of speech & Social media

An ***echo chamber*** is an environment where people mostly **encounter** opinions that **match their own**. They are often seen as safe places because they are created by human users.

→ *Subreddits, Discord servers, etc.*

A ***filter bubble*** are algorithm-driven content based on the content consumed by one person. Over time, this **filters out** opposing viewpoints, often without the user noticing.

→ *TikTok or Instagram feeds, YouTube recommendations, Google search results, etc.*

Confirmation bias is the human tendency to prefer information that supports what one already believes. Echo chambers and filter bubbles limit understanding, reduce empathy, and make disagreement feel threatening rather than normal. This sounds like someone's way to fight the polarisation of society, by it also participates to it.

Twitter's 2022 buyout by Elon Musk

E. Musk bought Twitter for around $44b., after having a vocal critic of the platform's moderation policies, and after trying to define himself as a "free speech absolutist". He promised fewer restrictions on the platform. At the time, many hopes for the reinstatement of Donald Trump, banned from most social platforms after the 2021 invasion of the US Capitol, on January 6th.

This resulted in increased concerns that extreme opinions would be **amplified** on the platform, along with **misinformation, harassment,** and echo chambers / filter bubbles.

→ Should one billionaire have such influence over a major communication platform therefore affecting democracy, political discourse and the visibility of marginalised groups?
→ Is less moderation equal to more freedom of speech?

Today, the platform **is ridden with** sexually explicit content, and with AI-generated information due to the implementation of *Grok*. However, tools to report misleading information and abusive content have been cut. Many critics also say that liberal accounts are "shadowbanned", suppressing dissenting voices.