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Knowledge Democracy

Consequences for Science,
Politics, and Media

10 Media, Democracy and Governance

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to present a conceptual framework for the functioning of the media, democracy and governance. Politics function like a television reality show in which the media frame the debate. Mediocracy has its own language and rules; it simplifies content. Cyber democracy has increased the participation of the creative user, who co-creates the content. These developments create the conditions for the reality show. This chapter contributes to an understanding of the media, democracy and governance. It contains both hope and a wish – the hope for more democracy, but also a wish to improve this institution.

10.1 Introduction

In the novel “1984” written by George Orwell in 1949, he presents his vision of the future and introduces the concept of “Big Brother”. Two aspects of his vision are relevant for this chapter. First of all, in his book, there are cameras everywhere and people are monitored 24 h a day, 7 days a week (24/7). Secondly, he writes about the Ministry of Truth of the imaginary inter-continental super-state, Oceania, undertaking content management while the content is altered all the time. Our current society reminds us of Orwell’s vision. Our wireless Internet society connects everybody, with a wide range of gadgets including smart phones and small digital cameras, and with applications and platforms like Google, Google Earth, YouTube, I-reports, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. Cities like London and Johannesburg are protected by surveillance cameras. But that is not all. Global Positioning Systems (GPS) make it possible to locate people and objects anytime and anywhere. Next to this, there are many databases containing personal information, including financial records, consumer preferences, behaviour on the Internet and even medical records. Some of these databases can be connected. Society has indeed become a society in which Big Brother might be watching us.

Big Brother is also the name of a successful franchised television reality show. Reality television uses ordinary people in unscripted situations. The participant co-creates (Tapscott and Williams 2008) the content. This is a relatively inexpensive concept, which makes it attractive for today’s commercial television. The “Big Brother Show” was first aired in 1999 in the Netherlands. The concept is as follows: 12 persons are placed in a house together, without contact with the

outside world, for a 100 days. This group can be observed 24/7 via the Internet, and the highlights are displayed on television daily or weekly. Once a week, some inhabitants of the Big Brother house are nominated to leave the house and go home. The viewers get involved by voting for the nominees on the Internet or by text messaging (SMS). The last remaining candidate wins a sum of money.

The question addressed in this chapter is whether the concept of the reality show has become a metaphor for today's political system. Politics have become a 24/7 activity that is permanently monitored by citizens via the media. Political decision-making is framed by the media. Election campaigns and elections increasingly look like a casting for the reality show of politics. The polls fulfil the function of providing voting opportunities for the public in order to choose who leaves the reality show, and talk shows and call-in programmes are a chance for the public to get involved during the reality show. By examining this extended metaphor of the reality television show, this chapter will examine the governance of the media, identify the role and evolution of the media and its contribution to democracy.

Some use the term "perpetual campaign" to indicate that politics have become a reality show. But the model of the reality show is not limited to the world of politics. The reality show model is also applicable to media coverage of the world of sports and entertainment, war and natural disasters (Klein 2007), to name just a few areas. The so-called Balloon Boy incident in Colorado in the United States of America is good example of the reality show model. On 15 October 2009, the father of a six-year old boy reported that his son had taken off in a homemade helium balloon. All resources were mobilised to rescue the boy and the events were covered live by the traditional corporate media, the new media and social networks for hours. After several hours, to the relief of everybody the boy turned out to be at home and not in the balloon. The family ended up on the "Larry King Live" show that evening. During that interview the six-year old answered a question of the host Wolf Blitzer, stating he did this for the media show. Soon it became clear that the whole thing was a hoax (Reuters 2009). Andy Warhol's prediction, "In the future everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes", is more true now than ever.

10.2 Framework

The reality of the interplay between media, democracy and governance is complex and dynamic. To study this reality, the development of a conceptual framework is needed to structure this complexity. A conceptual framework is used in research to outline possible courses of action or to present a preferred approach to an idea or thought.¹ A conceptual framework is an intermediate theory that connects aspects of the research and so it provides logic, order and consistency between the different elements. The framework to understand the media, democracy and governance

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conceptual_framework. Accessed on 13 November 2009.

starts with the normative frameworks of De Tocqueville and Habermas and develops via different stages into a model for cyber democracy and networks.

In 1830s, Alex de Tocqueville was one of the first to identify the importance of the free media (press) as a powerful force for the promotion of democracy (Graber 2003). Habermas (1962) formulated the concept of the *public sphere* between family life, business life and the state: a sphere where citizens could engage in rational dialogue, free from power, shaping their lives. He states that the proliferation of commercial media has destroyed this public sphere. Some argue that the new media will rescue the public sphere (Bardoel 2003).

The media are defined as “communication channels through which news, entertainment, education, data, or promotional messages are disseminated”. The media include every broadcasting and narrowcasting medium such as newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, billboards, direct mail, telephone, fax, and Internet.² In today’s world media corporations combine traditional platforms like radio and TV with the Internet, using websites and social networks like Facebook and Twitter.

The media have evolved from the marketplace to newspapers and magazines, the radio, television and the Web, versions 1.0 to 3.0. Every time a new medium emerged, some people claimed that the new developments will kill the existing media. But to date, we have seen that the emergence of new media transforms the other media and the media landscape, rather than destroying anything.

According to the literature and the definition given above, the media have several functions:

- To inform the citizens;
- To criticise situations in society;
- To express opinions and let others express their opinions on issues;
- To entertain;
- To educate citizens;
- To promote commerce: the media are just a business (Reinders 1996, Maduro 2004, Goede 2006, Graber 2003).

Some of the functions of the media might conflict with each other, for example the entertainment and the information functions (Prior 2007). That is why in the past, the media differentiated themselves according to their core function and in their programming. Today it is more difficult to distinguish between the different functions. Politicians appear in entertainment programmes. Who does not remember presidential candidate Obama’s dance moves in the “Ellen DeGeneres Show” on 30 October 2007?

Many consider that the media play an important role as a watchdog and as a part of the system of checks and balances in a political system (Gerstl-Pepin 2007). Castells (1996) elaborates on the relationship between politics and the media in his trilogy on the network society. The network society is an Anglo-Saxon

² <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/media.html>

worldview (Meuleman 2008). The media are the main source of information. Citizens base their actions on this information, but they do not do this blindly, because despite concentration, the media are still too diverse for that. Citizens do not receive the information passively; they actively process the information from their own perspectives. Communication is a complex process and those who try to influence public opinion via the media are always confronted with unforeseen effects. The media frames the political debate and thus influences it.

10.2.1 Mediocracy

In 1975 Kevin Philips, in his book *Mediocracy: American Parties and Politics in the Communications Age*, introduced the concept of mediocracy, arguing that in a democratic society those who rule the media (indirectly) rule society, and also suggesting that the media, as a collective actor, rule the country. In this system politicians stop thinking and listen exclusively to the media to identify issues. Since the media are in the hands of corporations, or are financed by corporations, the corporations rule.

Mediocracy has its own language and rules; it simplifies the content, it is about image building, about the personification of politics, about the spreading of rumours, and about character assassination of political rivals and public figures. It is in this light that scandals should be evaluated. Mediocracy is expensive and this fact makes politics dependent upon financial contributors and lobbyists. Castells states that in the United States this interdependency is partially responsible for the fact that there is insufficient regulation of party funding.

Because of the media, citizens are more involved, but nevertheless their trust in politics has been diminishing. Citizens express their concerns through mechanisms that are outside the system of parliamentary elections, or vote for alternative parties and candidates. In this context the Internet, or new media in general, play an important role. It provides platforms for citizens to contact each other and creates alternative ways for funding politics (Hertz 2003, Castells 2009).

The relationship between government, society, citizens and organisations and the role of political parties and the media are illustrated in Figure 10.1. This model is based on the System Analysis Model of David Easton (1965). It is a greatly simplified model of reality, as it is limited to the national level and does not include multinational media corporations and the Internet.

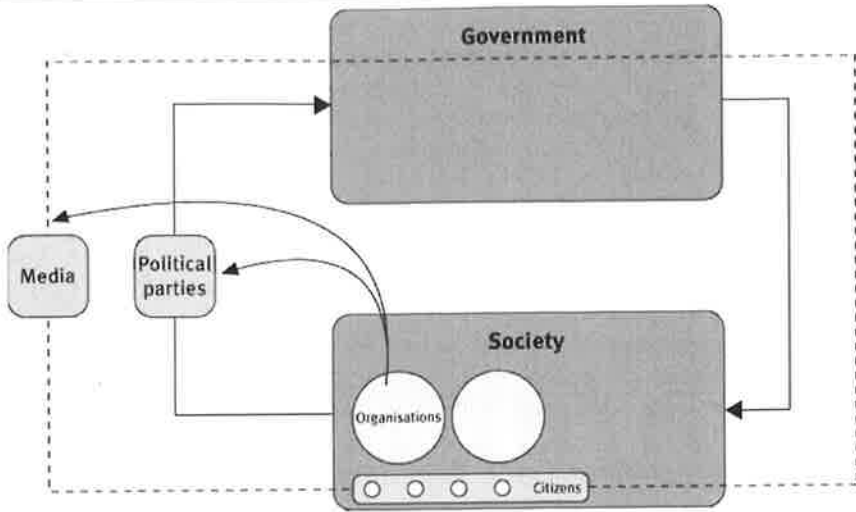


Fig. 10.1 The framing of politics by the media.

The model illustrates the functions of the media. They inform the citizens and so frame the discourse in society. They criticise situations in society and give opportunities to citizens to express themselves and so act as the gatekeepers of the political agenda. But the media also educate and entertain the citizens. This is only possible if the media generate a healthy profit or are subsidised (Bardoel 2003).

Some observers argue that politicians are more and more inclined to listen to business groups, organised interest groups and the media. The voice of the people is lost, even if they are shouting in the many daily talk shows on the multitude of radio and television stations and web logs. Genuine dialogue is not possible; the media are just a billboard of opposing views. It is in this context that the media present themselves as the voice of the people, keeping the politicians honest. But is this really true? The question is: who controls the media? (Scheuer 2007). The media are funded by the same interest groups that fund the political parties (Castells 2009). But other observers argue that journalists are leftist liberals and thus anti-corporate (Gerstl-Pepin 2007).

The citizen cannot break the triangular relationship between politics, business and the media, just as he or she cannot break the triangular relationship between politics, business and the unions (NRC 9 July 2004):

The public is clearly dissatisfied with the current political media offerings. While many Americans consider themselves to be “news junkies” and express a strong need to keep informed, they don't trust many news sources. A majority of citizens believe that the news is unduly influenced by powerful business and political interests who play into the media's own desire to make profits. Further, they consider the news to be too sensational and scandal-ridden. The public feels that the press is intrusive, and goes too

far in invading people's personal lives in the interest of getting a story. Audience members are concerned about the accuracy of reporting, especially as media organisations compete to be the first with a breaking story. In fact, journalist norms of sourcing and fact-checking largely have become a thing of the past, as the pace of news reporting has accelerated (Owen 1999).

Graber (2003) warns against stereotyping the (American) media. She argues that, although many of the criticisms on the media are legitimate, "on balance, American democracy has managed to sustain its chief goals despite the imperfections of its tools" (Graber 2003).

In conclusion: there is an imbalance between the values People, Planet and Profit as dictated by the philosophy of sustainable development when it comes to the media. The focus is too much on Profit or market (Bardoel 2003).

10.2.2 The new media and cyber democracy

A specific topic that is widely discussed is the penetration of the new media. *Time* magazine, in December 2006, declared "You" as person of the year. This you highlights the emergence of Web 2.0 (Grossman 2006). As a consequence of the new media, young people read less and watch less television (Broertjes 2006, Scheuer 2007, Gaber 2007, Bardoel 2003). In July 2009 a 15-year old intern at Morgan Stanley presented a research note on how teenagers consume the media. The report shook the City of London and beyond. In his report he states, among others things, that teenagers do not read newspapers on a regular basis and that they do not listen to the radio very often. On the other hand, almost all teenagers have a PC with access to the Internet and a mobile phone, but they do not use the Internet on the mobile phone because this service is too expensive. Teenagers watch television very selectively (guardian.co.uk 2009). Many people think that the new media will change everything when it comes to the power of media corporations and thus democracy. This development is illustrated in Figure 10.2. The share of the old media has been reduced to less than 30% in 10 years.

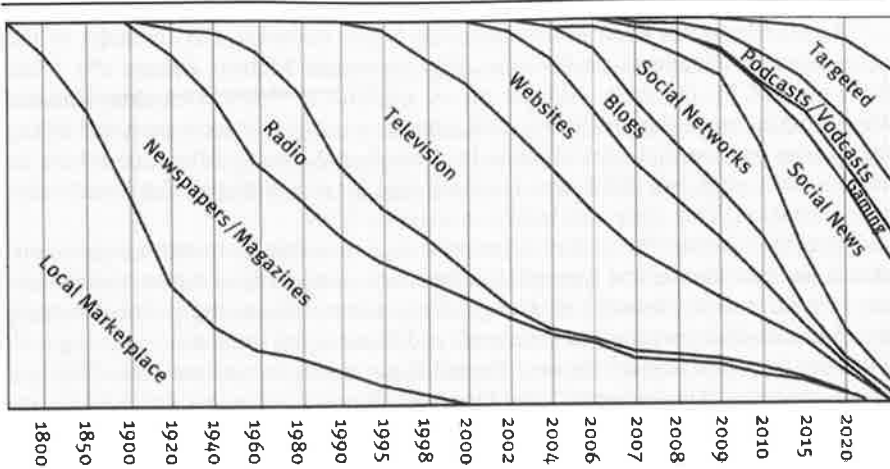


Fig. 10.2. The development of the media through time (Baekdal 2009).

... today, the new Internet is completely dominating our world. The newspapers are dead in the water, and people are watching less TV than ever. The new king of information is everyone, using social networking tools to connect and communicate. Even the traditional website is dying from the relentless force of the constant stream of rich information from the social networks (Baekdal 2009).

At this stage some believe that the new media have fundamentally changed the model of mediocracy (Baekel 2009, Friedman 2005, Tapscott and Williams 2008, Anderson 2009). Gaynor uses the term *Cyberdemocracy*. Others use the term digital democracy. Some *cyberutopians* (Gaynor 1996) point to examples like the so-called Iranian Twitter Revolution to make their case. He states that the new media, especially the social networks, played an important role during the presidential election campaign in Iran. When the outcome of the election was published on 13 June 2009, hundreds of thousands protesters who voted for reformist presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi took to the streets denouncing fraud by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The regime tried to shut down the protests by closing down the media. The people had to bring their story to the world using social networks like Twitter. Twitter had to postpone their maintenance to support the movement. CNN installed an Iranian desk to bring these images to the mainstream media (Schectman 2009). But this desk disappeared into the background on 25 June 2009 when www.tmg.com announced the death of Michael Jackson on their website and the mainstream media took over the story. The Michael Jackson story dominated the media for months. The latest event in this saga is the release of the movie "This is it" in October 2009, based on recordings of his last rehearsals. In November the Iran desk appeared again.

The case becomes even more interesting when analysing the coverage of the *coup d'état* in Honduras on 28 June 2009. President Manuel Zelaya was lifted from his bed by the army and put on an airplane to Costa Rica. Mr. Roberto Micheletti assumed the presidency. All American presidents were involved trying to resolve the conflict. An attempt by President Manuel Zelaya to return to Tegucigalpa on 5 July 2009 was televised live by, for example, the Venezuelan state television. This story was barely covered by CNN.

What the Twitter Revolution illustrates is that media corporations have enclosed the new media, and that without the media corporations the new media are very weak. It also illustrates that media corporations frame the political debate, and that entertainment and news compete and blend at the same time.

Apart from the role of the new media, these examples are not new. The live broadcasting of "Desert Storm", the First Iraq War in 1990 and 1991, brought reality TV to a whole new level. The war could be viewed live on CNN all over the world. The Second Iraq War was a direct consequence of the attacks of 9/11 on the Twin Towers in New York: the impact of the second airplane into the tower was broadcasted live on television. The "War on Terror" was started based on misleading information on weapons of mass destruction. The media framed the story creating and maintaining public support for the war (Bennett et al. 2007). The new media were not able to reframe the war. On the contrary, corporate media used the new media to frame the story. New media were used by embedded mainstream reporters.

10.2.3 Adjusting the framework

Prior (2007) presents, in his book *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, a Conditional Political Learning model (CPL) that describes the tendency for popular acquisition of political information to be dependent on the availability of television programmes. Simplifying reality, the model states that people have stable, competing preferences for news or information and entertainment. The increased availability of entertainment leads to a decrease in the number of people following the news. The fragmentation of audiences due to the proliferation of media, especially television, leads to polarised elections because news junkies attend to political news while less interested citizens flock to entertainment (Prior 2007).

The CPL is a simple model, just like the models of Philips and Easton. A more complex model is presented by Castells. In his book *Communication Power* (2009), Castells argues that communication is the central power in today's society. This confirms Philips' account of mediocracy.

The model that Castells (2009) offers to describe governance in today's global network society consists of four forms of power:

- Networking power: The power of actors and organisations included in the networks. It is about inclusion and exclusion.
- Network power: The social coordination between multiple networked actors. It is about imposing a protocol in a network.

- Networked power: Who has power in the dominant networks? This is not a simple question. Many have power; it is not in the hands of any specific person.
- Network-making power: The most crucial form of power is the competence of Programmers and Switchers. The Programmers state the agenda of the network and the Switchers connect separate networks.

Switching (connecting) different networks requires the ability to construct a cultural and organisational interface, a common language, a common medium, a support of universally accepted values: exchange value. The all-purpose form of exchange value is money. Programming is the ability to generate, diffuse and affect the discourse that frames the human action. Discourse shapes the public mind via communication networks that organise socialised communication. Programming and communication networks are the decisive source of cultural materials that feed the programme goals of any network. Alternative discourse has to go through the same programming and communication networks. "Power in the network society is communication power" (Castells 2009: 53). In other words the networks of communication, finance and politics are interlinked. Together they create a climate for mediocracy and mediocracy in which populism rises. The creative audience tries to reprogramme the networks but has to go through the same communication networks.

Global social networks and social networks of social networks enabled by global digital communication are the fundamental source of power and counter-power in present-day society. There is a contradiction between multinational corporate media networks and the creative audience, framing and counter-framing the news. The corporate media try to commodify the Internet and the creative audience tries to establish a degree of citizen communication power. Power is differentiated in the network society. Power is not fully determined by one group or one kind of power structure, but whoever has enough money, including political leaders, will have a better chance of exerting power. An example of this is Mayor Michael Bloomberg whose election campaign for a third term as mayor of New York cost \$64,756,118.47 (Lisberg 2009). Another example is Prime Minister of Italy, Mr. Berlusconi. It is said that he maintains his political position thanks to his economic power and the power of the media in Italy. President Obama also won the election thanks to the huge budget at the disposal of his campaign. Some state that his story is different because a significant part of the budget was from small donors who donated via the Internet (Castells 2009). Some believe that the Obama campaign is an illustration that the new media can lead to more democracy. But the fact is that candidate Obama needed money to ensure access to corporate media.

Singapore is also an interesting case for analysis in terms of the media, democracy and governance. Singapore developed from a third world county to a first world country in one generation. The PAP political party has been in power since the 1960s. This has been possible because it restricts the media. The question is: why did the new media not change this? Could the answer be that in Singapore hierarchical structures are still in place? (Kuan Yew 2000).

The question is whether mass self communication – Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 – will shift the balance of power between multinational corporations and the creative audience. According to Fuchs (2009) there is no empirical evidence that Web 2.0 is autonomous from the power of capital. The trends towards increased economic concentration, diversification of platforms, customisation and segmentation of audiences, and economies of synergy continue. But there is also potential for counter-power within Web 2.0. Mass self-communication allows citizens to watch the powerful. But the powerful have made it their main concern to enclose these alternative platforms. The competition is unequal, but there are examples of successful counter power ventures. In fact, there is a stratified online economy devoted to managing attention, in which the trademarks of the established media play an important role in attracting attention. The creative audience remains fragmented. The power relationship between the corporate media and the creative user is asymmetrical, to the advantage of the corporations. In other words, the world is not flat (Friedman 2005) but it is potentially flat.

The model developed by Castells models today's globalised network society, powered by the Internet, where there are basically no frontiers for actors. The role of the state has therefore diminished.

10.2.4 Reality show

Power in media politics is exerted by triggering emotions. This is done by the mainstream media via sensationalism, theatrical politics, personification, dramatisation, the fragmentation of information and audiences, negative stereotyping, attack politics, and the creation of scandals. A blend of the traditional media and the Internet is a new phenomenon: co-creation. Stories enter the traditional media almost as they happen via the Internet, filtered by the corporate media. This creates reality media. The same mechanisms that can be seen in a reality show apply to media politics.

For Castells, there are the following new aspects of media politics: the use of the Internet in political campaign (p. 230), the multiplication of entry points of political reports, on which an interaction between mainstream media and the Internet is based (p. 234), an unprecedented prevalence and significance of scandal politics (p. 246), the easy and immediate diffusion of scandal politics over the Internet by everyone (pp. 247f), an increase of publicity and perception of corruption and the impact on public trust (p. 289). The result would be a worldwide crisis of political legitimacy, a decline in public trust, and a crisis of democracy. These crises could possibly, but not automatically result in depolitisation, and would in many cases also create a desire for insurgent politics, social movements and new political space (Fuchs 2009: 98).

The Clinton Lewinsky scandal in 1998 is an illustration of scandal politics. This happened in an era when Internet proliferation was relatively low. It led to the second attempt to impeach a president of the United States. In retrospect it is

unclear what it was all about. It started with the investigation of the Whitewater deal in 1970s and 1980s. The scandal affected the election campaign of Al Gore, who lost the election against president George W. Bush.

Within the format of the reality show, created by the blending of traditional corporate media and new media, there is the possibility for hypes and hoax. Hype is extreme publicity resulting in tumult. Hoax is an act intended to mislead or scam. The death of Michael Jackson is an example of hype, and the Balloon Boy is an illustration of a hoax. Other hypes are the millennium bug or Y2K bug in the late 1990s; SARS in 2002; and H1N1 in 2009. Through the media global panic is created for unclear reasons. Some state that it is done to serve the interests of specific industries.

A recent example of reality show politics is the bankruptcy of the DSB Bank, a small bank in the Netherlands in October 2009. The DSB went bankrupt when a financial expert, Peter Lakerman, stated in a talk show that the bank was exploiting mortgage costumers. He advised the clients to take their money out of the bank. This started a run on the bank, leading to its bankruptcy.

The meltdown of the financial markets in the last quarter of 2008 had several noticeable media events that illustrate this theme. The first was when the former chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank confessed to the Senate that he was wrong in his belief in deregulation and self-regulation of the financial market. Another moment was when the CEOs of the automobile corporations of Detroit flew to Washington in their corporate jets to ask for a bailout.

The consequences of reality show politics are that the political campaign has become permanent, undermining representative democracy and creating the illusion of direct democracy. The campaign is not about issues and content, but about emotions. Campaigning is about packaging, branding and marketing. There is no room for long-term objectives and ideology. Political parties have become marketing machines, financed by stakeholders, catering to the needs of voters. The electorate has become extremely volatile. This creates the conditions for a radical shift in the electoral outcome, meaning that politics as a rational means of sustainable governance is further away than ever, despite the potential of the new media. The ability of politicians to lead has decreased. The (new) media have weakened representative democracy. The possibility of knowing the likely public reaction to possible policy has led to a twisted direct democracy. The new media have led to permanent elections. Political effects of proposed policy are constantly measured. This leads to pressure, even within parties, who aim to improve their ratings. In other words, there is a climate for populism (Pehe 2009, Gaber 2007).

10.3 Conclusions

The media have changed over time and so have the frameworks to apprehend them, from the models based on checks-and-balances of representative democracy of De Tocqueville and Habermas, to the mediocracy of Easton and Philips, to cyber democracy. To cope with the proliferation of media, especially television and

radio, the Conditional Political Learning model was presented. Castells' network society provides a framework to fit new media into the way the media are understood.

The United States and other western countries are concerned about the concentration of the media as a consequence of liberalisation of media regulation and the operation of the market (Jackson and Stanfield 2004). This applies to some other countries as well (Trakhtenberg 2005). According to Champlin and Knoedler (2006), the media should educate and inform, and so strengthen democracy. Because of the pressure of the market, the media have become primarily focused on generating revenues, and the audience is primarily interested in entertainment. But increasing competition is not an automatic cure for the present imbalance between the three Ps (Planet, People and Profit).

One consequence of the oversupply of (new) media is that the media are very accessible. This leads to the paradox that democracy diminishes because the media corporations became dependent upon the advertising revenues from the business community. New media look like an alternative but they are enclosed by corporate media. Some commentators argue that the Internet has democratised information, while others argue that the Internet has merely created information overload (Gaber 2007).

The fact remains that the media play an important role in disclosing cases of bad governance. However, the media do not stick to the role of presenting the news, but in many cases make the news, and in some cases the media have become the news. The emergence of the new media has not changed this pattern. In fact the media have transformed society into a reality show, with their many talk shows and call-in programmes. The question is: who watches over the watchdog? The media are no longer the watchdog of society but are a part of the whole system of checks and balances in the fragile democracy. The question is whether citizens will use the new media as a part of the system of checks and balances on the media.

After observing global trends one might conclude that the convergence of politics and the media towards a reality show is now universal. The words "reality show" and "mediacracy" have a negative connotation to them. But this is not totally correct, because although they have drawbacks, they also hold the promise of a direct or participative democracy in which the people play an active role in their own governance (Coleman 1999, Cover 2004). This all might bring us closer to President Lincoln's "government of the people, by the people, for the people", a goal that will be advanced by the further development of ICT and with it elections. But there still is a long way to go.