

Essay 16.07.25. Gabriella Kountourides

'Grabbing your attention': media plurality and the digital ecosystem

Abstract

At every transition of media, from print to radio, and now to digital, the same questions have emerged: Who controls the narrative, how do we preserve media plurality. While the platforms have changed, the core concerns have not. Digital algorithms and global platforms compete with newspaper proprietors as the owners and disseminators of information. Drawing on historical patterns from radio, television, and early internet transitions, this essay shows that today's challenges: algorithmic influence, regulatory fragmentation, and liability asymmetries represent familiar problems in new forms rather than entirely novel threats. It contends that national and international regulatory bodies must adapt to address algorithmic dominance, blurred lines between curated and user-generated content, and increasingly globalised information systems. Far from being obsolete, regulation must become internationally coordinated, algorithmically informed, and adaptively robust to uphold democratic discourse and prevent the rise of personalised monopolies.

Essay

"The owners of the press determine which persons, which facts, which versions of the facts, and which ideas shall reach the public." This warning from the 1947 Hutchins Commission remains as relevant today as it was almost 80 years ago, though the 'owners' of the press have changed. Between each major media transition, from print to radio, radio to television, and television to digital, the same questions have emerged: How do we maintain freedom of expression? Who controls the narrative? How do we ensure democracy is protected?

These are essential questions, but the pattern of repeating them at each transition is reassuring, not alarming. Today's digital ecosystem presents a familiar challenge to media plurality in a new form. At first glance, social media appears to be the ultimate ecosystem for plurality- the public seem to have infinite choice, millions of creators, countless websites, and global access to information. Surely this is media plurality in its purest form? Not exactly. The power to shape public opinion has shifted from the hands of newspaper owners and editors to the algorithms that decide what (and when) we read, hear and see information.

National regulatory policies for media pluralism are not obsolete; they remain as important as ever, and this challenge demands more, not less regulation and international cooperation. However, like all good policies, they must evolve. While media plurality was established with a

focus on ownership and providing 'choice to the public'¹, today it must address who controls the feed. Rather than proprietors of newspapers, the threat comes from algorithms that create what I call "personalised monopolies", where each user experiences a single narrative explicitly tailored to them, in direct opposition to the idea of media plurality. We are driving our own monolithic feeds. National regulation must adapt to address a changing digital world, but this evolution is a natural next step. As communication methods continue to evolve, and users express concern about over personalisation, our regulations adapt and our cooperation increase.

Familiar Problems on New Platforms

Understanding today's challenges in regulation demands an understanding of patterns that preceded them, so we are continually building on previously established policies and practices. Each wave of new technology has changed the way that people consume news, prompting new or updated regulation, which inevitably adapts again at the next wave of innovation. For example, the Radio Act of 1927 mandated that stations had to demonstrate they were in the "public interest". America's 1949 Fairness Doctrine developed out of concern about a potential NBC, ABC and CBS monopoly, and required that broadcasters devote time to airing contrasting views. South Africa's Broadcasting Act of 1999 mandated 'a plurality of views and a variety of news, information and analysis from a South African point of view'².

Each transition involved similar debates about innovation versus regulation, and democratic protection. While the challenge today may be on a larger, more dynamic scale, it is not new. This should provide confidence rather than instil fear; these challenges are ones that regulators have already navigated. Social media fundamentally changes how information is disseminated, but the underlying challenge remains the same: ensuring consumers have a choice over what they see, and that diverse, accurate information reaches the public. Whilst for example the scale of a viral X post has a much larger reach than what is seen in print or a news channel, and fears of ever more clickbait articles to maximise attention are realised, this is no different from traditional media's need to attract audiences. Algorithms optimise for engagement metrics, just as traditional outlets do for circulation, or ratings. However, unlike traditional media, algorithms operate globally and instantly, requiring international oversight to hold them to account.

Regulatory Fragmentation is a Weakness

Traditional media, despite its flaws, maintains editorial processes that provide some quality control. Radio and television have short delays for editorial review; television can issue corrections; newspapers have fact-checking procedures. In contrast, social media content goes viral before fact-checkers can respond, and corrections rarely achieve the same reach as the original misinformation. The speed and scale have changed, not the fundamental challenge.

The commercial drivers are familiar too. Traditional media operate on advertising, subscription, or license fee models that created incentives for audience retention and credibility. Online platform revenues are driven by clicks and 'likes,' similar to the way traditional media relies on engagement metrics. These metrics inform advertisers; the more engagement, the better the revenue. Both engagement and revenue depend on retaining audience attention.

¹ <https://www.unesco.org/en/media-pluralism-diversity/media-pluralism>

² https://www.saflii.org/za/legis/consol_act/ba1999122/ [part 1.6.4.c].

Regulatory fragmentation isn't new, different authorities have always claimed jurisdiction over overlapping aspects of media services. What's changed is that a single platform can now host news, Artificial Intelligence (AI) outputs, advertising, and user-to-user engagement, triggering multiple legal regimes such as competition authorities, data protection, and intellectual property. This can lead to duplication of work on the regulator side, but also overburdening platforms with regulation.

If poorly managed, simple layering of new regimes over old ones can create a difficult compliance environment and confusion over which regime ultimately holds responsibility. This is what we are seeing the European Union (EU) grapple with at the moment, with potential overlapping legislation including the Digital Services Act (DSA), Digital Markets Act (DMA), Digital Fairness Act (DFA), General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the new AI Act. This has a particular impact on smaller services, which feel the compliance burden more strongly, and could ultimately sell out to larger conglomerates, reinforcing the issue of concentration. These overlaps highlight the need for coordination, not only of policy, but of enforcement.

Critics argue that overlapping regulation stifles innovation. The dynamic nature of digital content has indeed created regulatory complexity, which can slow platform updates and increase compliance costs. Again, this issue is not unique to online spaces, and regulators have coordinated in other cases to ensure better efficiencies. The Digital Regulation Cooperation Forum (DRCF), which is made up of the Information Commissioners Office, Ofcom, Competition and Markets Authority, and the Financial Conduct Authority, was established specifically to coordinate across regulators. Overlapping jurisdiction can be managed through institutional cooperation rather than abandoning it altogether. As more countries develop regulatory bodies for the digital environment and specific programmes such as transparency requirements seen in the EU's Digital Services Act, Singapore's online safety laws, and Ofcom's Online Safety Act, platforms will likely demand coordination, and regulatory bodies will adapt.

There is also an argument that democratic discourse, public opinion and even health are not areas where innovation should come at the cost of public safety. We do not test new medicines on the general population without regulatory oversight, even though this slows medical innovation. Should this not also apply to algorithms that can influence elections and public health responses? When we raise 'innovation drag', it is worth considering what we're talking about. Are the innovation delays ultimately delays to platforms accessing better ways to keep consumers attached, clicking, and increasing advertising revenue? If the price of regulation is slightly slower engagement growth for platforms, but the reward is a safer, more democratic online environment, then the trade off is a worthwhile one.

The asymmetry between traditional media liability and platform safe harbours represents, again, a series of old questions about publisher responsibility. Fragmentation issues are exacerbated by unclear legal responsibilities. Traditional outlets operate under strict legal obligations for accuracy, data protection, defamation and copyright, and are liable for the content they publish. The digital world has much more limited liability, with platforms often benefiting from longstanding safe harbour provisions under the e-commerce directive (ECD 2000), for example. This means their accountability is far more limited, and the results of this are becoming increasingly evident as Generative AI (GenAI) models are rolled out. GenAI providers have yet to be held accountable for the legality of their outputs, including how they obtained the inputs. This, despite litigation pending in the UK, EU and US for complaints and accusations of breaching privacy, consent copyright and lack of transparency. As these platforms act increasingly like traditional editors, collecting, summarising, and repackaging

content for the general public, the regulation of them has been unable to keep pace. This discrepancy distorts competition, with traditional media bearing compliance costs whilst platforms operate with limited liability.

But extending liability to platforms isn't original, it is simply applying existing principles to new actors. AI developers and platforms tend to 'move fast and break things'³. But why should content amplification be treated differently if it is through the use of AI rather than media? Should they not bear the same responsibilities, even more so because the reach of online is so much greater. Liability should align with the function performed, whether by humans or AI systems. Editorial-like activities should carry comparable responsibilities. Platforms must clearly label machine-generated content and provide source attribution. Safe harbour protections should be reassessed for platforms that actively control content delivery rather than passively hosting it.

How Potent Are the Risks: Traditional vs Algorithmic Concentration?

Ofcom defines media plurality as "a core component of a well-functioning democratic society where citizens are able to consume a wide range of viewpoints and no single media owner, or voice, is able to exercise too great an influence over the political process"⁴. Current UK merger and anti-concentration laws reflect this thinking, but they fall short in the digital landscape, where news media publishers compete directly with social media platforms and AI-powered search engines.

Platforms act as gatekeepers to influencing public views, controlling distribution infrastructure and advertising markets without owning newsrooms (and the legalities that accompany this). For example, TikTok's algorithm seems to offer exposure to millions of creators, millions of voices far more diverse than any newspaper or television channel could provide. However, this creates a false sense of plurality.

Algorithms are designed to maximise engagement, which often results in serving users content that supports their existing interests and beliefs. Unlike television channels, which must cater to broad audiences with a mix of content, social media algorithms deliver highly targeted content that can trap users in ever-narrowing echo chambers. Even when you choose a television channel with a strong editorial slant, or a single issue channel, viewers are still exposed to some diversity in the mix of programming. The channel needs to attract and retain a broad enough audience to stay competitive, so it airs a mix of content: different news segments, sports, and commentary. Someone could watch shows at two different times on the same channel, and watch entirely different programmes depending on the channel's schedules.

Like traditional media, the aim is to maximise engagement. Unlike traditional media, social media use algorithms that serve content aligned with each user's existing interests and beliefs. This creates what I call 'personalised monopolies': where each user is shown a narrative tailored specifically to them, repeatedly amplified, until it forms a reinforcement loop. The attention, once captured is then commodified. Unlike television, when all those watching a

³ 'Move fast and break things; an internal motto coined by Mark Zuckerberg, used by Facebook internally. <https://www.businessinsider.com/mark-zuckerberg-on-facebooks-new-motto-2014-5>

⁴ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/multi-sector/media-plurality/discussion-media-plurality.pdf?v=328775>

programme see the same broadcast, social media delivers an individually curated reality at the expense of exposure to different views. The result is a kind of algorithmic vortex, where the longer one stays online, the narrower the perspective becomes. The monopoly up for debate has shifted from media proprietors to algorithms.

Journalist Marianna Spring, the BBC's disinformation and social media correspondent has shown this through her investigative work, by creating fake online personas with different characteristics (gender, age, political leanings), she showed how much the content served can differ between profiles. A profile created to be a populist conservative from Texas ('Britney') had engaged with anti-vax rhetoric, which escalated into conspiracy theories claiming President Trump won the 2020 election.

This shift, from editorial monopoly to algorithmic monopoly means that two people in the same country, even the same household, can be living in completely different sets of realities, algorithmic choices they cannot easily control. The content they see is not curated for accuracy or legality, but rather to reach the highest possible personal relevance, regardless of accuracy. Traditional media outlets are explicit about editorial positions. Readers know The Guardian leans left, the Telegraph right, however platforms seem to offer a false sense of neutral security, while their systems steer users towards content that compounds their views.

These algorithms create risk for democratic discourse and public health, and they do not pause at the border. No single regulatory regime can address these challenges alone. Regulation at a national level can ensure accountability, data collection and content labelling, but with international cooperation this becomes much more powerful, regulating how information flows across borders. Fraud offers a clear precedent, as cybercrime rose with the increase of global digital platforms, but international cooperation through frameworks like the Financial Action Task Force helped to coordinate cross-border enforcement. Algorithmic harms need the same level of coordinated global relations and cooperation.

Why Source Matters

The evidence suggests that where we get our information from matters more than ever. Research from Pew Research Centre shows that the number of US adults getting news from TikTok tripled from 3% (2020) to 10% (2022). This statistic raises questions about the role of journalism in a democratic society, and to what extent social media platforms should be treated (in context) in the same way as news providers.

While AI chatbots and social networks offer convenience and speed, they cannot replace the societal role of independent, accountable journalism. Encouraging people to engage directly with these traditional media sources, whatever the political leaning is not about nostalgia for 'the good old days of a single news channel', but about preserving the diversity of public thought, which in turn preserves a free and democratic system.

A 'well-informed public is key to a well-functioning democracy'⁵, but it also relies on citizens being able to engage with one another on the basis of some shared, rather than personalised, truths. Editorial media play a watchdog role, holding governments and institutions to account. They invest in expensive investigative reporting, and provide space for public debate, but social media, and AI platforms do not perform these civic functions, unless (as traditional media is)

⁵ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/multi-sector/media-plurality/annex-9-charles-river-report.pdf?v=328774>

incentivised by regulation. While X has been described as the ‘global town square’⁶, the default ‘for you page’ may be global in reach, but it is much less diverse in opinion, and less consistent in its fact-checking. Having diverse sources of news is important, as single sources can be easily controlled and manipulated. As a result, democracies have generally chosen either not to regulate (e.g. in the case of British newspapers) or to set up independent bodies (e.g. Ofcom) to ‘regulate’ the news space to promote plurality.

Neither social media nor AI chatbots serve this function. While they can challenge narratives, and provide access to minority voices, they will not do so unless the content is rewarded in the algorithm for that specific person.

National Regulatory Policies are needed to Protect Media Pluralism

Though regulation has its challenges, it has shown a number of success stories. Ofcom's work led to global TikTok and Meta changes to safeguard children online. As a result of the UK's Children's Codes, teenage accounts now default to private accounts, they receive fewer personalised ads, and face messaging restrictions. Regulation has not only protected teenagers in the UK, but created global impact, clearly regulatory policies are not obsolete.

What is needed now is not deregulation, or abandonment but improved coordination. Initiatives like the EU's Digital Services Act and the UK's Online Safety Act offer opportunities for alignment while respecting more local and national level needs. Global coordination is possible without compromising local contexts. The model provided by the DRCF shows that regulatory bodies can work together to streamline oversight and reduce burdens on industry. This kind of collaboration will need to scale internationally.

Conclusion

The challenges we face today; algorithmic influences, service concentration, and accuracy of information, are not new, each generation grapples with ‘who’ controls the narrative. Today's personalised monopolies are the latest step on this ladder. They present the need for national regulation and international coordination to ensure citizens can consume high-quality information from a range of sources.

The Hutchins Commission's warning remains relevant, but the "owners" have moved on, from columnists to code. The shift from traditional media concentration to algorithms doesn't demand brand new thinking, but the same regulatory environment that has successfully addressed previous media transitions, and we must adapt our approaches to prevent them from becoming ‘obsolete’.

The choice isn't between innovation and regulation, but between regulation that preserves democratic discourse and systems that erode viewpoint diversity. Today's solutions lie in updating existing frameworks rather than abandoning them. The DRCF's coordination across UK regulators, alongside international demonstrates that national regulation and global cooperation can coexist successfully.

⁶ <https://x.com/X/status/1730309839929110846?lang=en-GB>

In an age where attention is the most valuable currency, the pressing question is no longer whether diverse voices exist, but whether we are able to hear them, or only the amplified echo of our own.