

## Pluralism after scarcity: the benefits of digital technologies



*In this latest post in our series on the role of digital intermediaries and media plurality, Peter Barron, Google's head of communications for Europe, Middle East and Africa, and his colleague Simon Morrison, Public Policy Manager, argue that the Internet and digital technologies have only increased media pluralism.*

It seems strange, at first glance, that we still debate whether the Internet is good or bad for media freedom and media pluralism. After all, in the era of the Internet and social media anyone with a smartphone in his or her pocket can consume, gather and break news; anyone with a point of view can find an audience. The Internet, with its open, global structure, seems tremendously well-suited to meeting media policy's goals of promoting a diversity of voices, local cultures and high quality content.

Yet there is still plenty of debate about the role of new technology in increasing or decreasing media pluralism. **Some argue that by enabling greater personalisation**, online platforms limit the diversity of views the typical citizen consumes. Others suggest that, while there is an abundance of available works, sources and opinions online, the quality of this material is lower than in a previous era. **One version of the argument** says that citizens find material from non-traditional sources less trustworthy, **another that** there is less rigour and fact-checking on social media than on traditional media. And of course there are wider and important concerns about the future of the news industry, given the challenges the Internet has posed to traditional business models.

These are all relevant questions, but there is a danger of failing to recognize the tremendous benefits the Internet and new media technologies have brought for pluralism, media freedom and democracy.

### Diversity of views is flourishing online

Today, the Internet has reduced production and distribution costs dramatically and many new forms of journalism are emerging. Players like **ProPublica**, **Mediapart**, **VICE** and others are pioneering new business models, finding large audiences, and creating high quality journalism online. Players large and small can now reach global audiences numbering hundreds of millions. Consumers can choose from a wider variety of news sources than at any time in history. Via Google News, for example, they have access to over 65,000 publishers. More than 300 hours of video are uploaded each minute to YouTube. And we have seen the role that Twitter and other social media platforms have played in mass popular uprisings around the world.

And despite fears about personalisation and the 'filter bubble', studies show people are reading news from more sources than ever before. Before online news, consumers in many countries were likely to read just a single newspaper on weekdays. Thanks to the Internet, **British and German consumers now consume news from an average of eight sources**, often with diverging viewpoints. **A 2013 Pew study found** that Facebook encourages people who do not normally engage with journalism to read news stories, exposing them to ideas they otherwise would not have encountered, and Facebook readers have a high tendency to read news from sources that do not share their point of view.

### Locally-produced work is flourishing online



Studies also show that local content production is rising rapidly because of the web. As a [2012 Unesco report](#) found, local content is growing around the world, equally so in more- and less-well developed countries; and there is a strong correlation between the development of network infrastructure and the growth of local content.

The Internet also makes it easier for local players to reach local and international audiences. [A 2012 BCG study](#) found that Australians vastly preferred local online newspapers to content from foreign providers. At the same time, online videos produced locally were receiving eight times more views overseas than in Australia, and twice as many views from the U.S. as from Australia.

## Quality is flourishing online

Finally, while ‘quality’ is a difficult category to measure, there is encouraging evidence both about how the public is contributing to news coverage and about the online public’s appetite for serious news. [A Pew report on online news video](#) shows the extent to which eyewitness footage of newsworthy events such as natural disasters and civil unrest is feeding into professionally produced news content. The study, published in 2012, also showed that the most-watched news videos dealt not with frivolous subjects, but with the Japanese tsunami, Russian elections and Middle East unrest. The empowerment of the consumer is changing the way news is created, consumed and disseminated. [A report on the value of online media](#) calculated that the consumer surplus European citizens gained from having access to this media was equivalent to €1100 per year.

It makes sense that we should continue to be concerned with safeguarding pluralism and media freedom, aiming to ensure that consumers are empowered and informed. Given however that the benefits of the Internet, social media and new technologies are so apparent, the relevant questions seem to be: how can we ensure greater access and greater innovation to keep the tide of quality and diversity rising; and what are the new business models that will ensure the traditional players continue to thrive and participate?

*This article gives the views of the authors, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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