

# Media Freedom in the Age of Social Media and Citizen Journalism

*Dr Peter Coe, School of Law, University of Reading; Information Law and Policy Centre, Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, University of London, UK*

## OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE

In 2010 97 million people used social networks worldwide; by 2020 this had increased to 3.8 billion, and by 2023 it is projected that social media use will have grown to 3.43 billion people.<sup>1</sup> Currently, more than 3.2 billion images and 720,000 hours of video are shared daily on social media platforms.<sup>2</sup> These figures illustrate the exponential growth of social media. In a little over a decade, it has developed from crude and relatively small and exclusive online communities to the platforms that we associate with it today. As a result, the likes of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, among many others, have become intertwined within our cultural and social fabric, to the extent that these platforms, permeate every aspect of our lives:<sup>3</sup> in the words of Marshall McLuhan, they have become an ‘extension of man.’<sup>4</sup>

The growth of social media, and the way in which it has emerged as a new infrastructure for speech, has stimulated two phenomena that are the focus of this course. Firstly, by facilitating the convergence of audience and producer, it has encouraged the growth of citizen journalism, and other online news publishers. Secondly, a symbiosis with the traditional institutional press, in which citizen journalists, often operating online, increasingly act as a ‘source’ of news. A ‘side-effect’ of this symbiotic relationship is that false information published by citizen journalists can have an even greater impact, as it is often ‘recycled’ by the institutional press. In turn, the fact that a newspaper has published it serves to justify and support the false information. Ultimately, the cycle becomes self-fulfilling. Thus, arguably, citizen journalism, and its symbiotic relationship with the institutional press, has not only permanently altered the media ecology, but has shifted the media paradigm.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, during the course students will consider the following questions and issues:  
(i) the notion of the ‘free press’, and the extent to which this concept is, or is not, an

---

<sup>1</sup> Statista, ‘Number of social network users worldwide from 2010 to 2023’

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/>.

<sup>2</sup> T.J. Thomson, D. Angus and P. Dootson, ‘3.2 billion images and 720,000 hours of video are shared online daily. Can you sort real from fake?’ *Inform* 13<sup>th</sup> November 2020.

<sup>3</sup> P. Coe, ‘The social media paradox: an intersection with freedom of expression and the criminal law’, *Information & Communications Technology Law*, (2015), Vol. 24, Issue 1, 16-40, 25; J. Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity A Critical History of Social Media*, (Oxford University Press, 2013), 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> See generally: M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (MIT Press, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> Although this course considers, and takes into account, news journalism in its broader sense, to encapsulate journalists working for other news media organisations that are predominantly found on television, radio or online, its focus is on the implications of the relationship that citizen journalists and social media platforms have with the press, than it is with the broadcast media. This is because, as I argue in my forthcoming book (P. Coe, *Media Freedom in the Age of Citizen Journalism*, Edward Elgar, 2022), the impact of the internet and social media, including their facilitation of citizen journalists, has been most greatly felt by the institutional press, which has had a profound impact on its health and viability, and on the public sphere more broadly.

'illusion'; (ii) the early hopes for the internet's and social media's transformative effect on the democratisation of the public sphere; (ii) how the internet and social media have changed how we consume news, and the impact that this has had on the viability of the institutional press; (iii) how social media in particular has *distorted* the public sphere in other interrelated ways that can inadvertently affect the ability of all journalists to contribute positively to public discourse; (iv) the *positive* impact of the internet and social media on public discourse, in their facilitation of citizen journalism. In looking at these issues, we will also consider the difference between individual freedom of expression and media freedom and what this means in practice, and the interpretation and application of the philosophical foundations of free speech and communication theories, in the context of offline and online journalism, and how these apply to the notion of responsible journalism.

### GRADE EVALUATION

- Participation: 40% of the overall grade.
- A final examination lasting no longer than 45 minutes that will consist of essay-style question(s).

### CLASS FORMAT

During class meetings, in addition to lecturing, I will ask questions and invite discussion.

<b><u>Date</u></b>	<b><u>Topic</u></b>
28 <sup>th</sup> June (5-7pm)	<i>Freedom of expression and media freedom: an introduction</i>
29 <sup>th</sup> June (5-7pm)	<i>Is there really such a thing as a 'free press'?</i>
30 <sup>th</sup> June (4-5pm)	<i>The internet, social media, citizen journalism and increased access to the public sphere: a new reality for free speech or just an illusion?</i>
30 <sup>th</sup> June (5-7pm)	<i>The philosophical foundations of free speech in the age of social media and citizen journalism</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> July (3-4pm)	<b>Consultation (student debate):</b> <i>Critically analyse the role played by the internet, social media companies and the press in the spreading of misinformation and disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> July (4-5pm)	Examination

## REQUIRED READING

Bechtold, E (2020) 'Has the United States' response to the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the marketplace of ideas as a failed experiment?', *Communications Law* 25(3) pp. 150-160

Koltay, A (2020) 'Constitutional protection of lies? Fake news, freedom of expression and democratic procedures', *Communications Law* 25(3) pp. 131-149

Coe, P (2020) 'The Good, The Bad and The Ugly of Social Media during the Coronavirus Pandemic', *Communications Law* 25(3) pp. 119-122

Coe, P. (2018) '(Re)embracing social responsibility theory as a basis for free speech: shifting the normative paradigm for a modern media'. *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly*, 69 (4). pp. 403-431

Coe, P. (2017) 'Redefining 'media' using a 'media-as-a-constitutional-component' concept: An evaluation of the need for the European Court of Human Rights to alter its understanding of 'media' within a new media landscape'. *Legal Studies*, 37 (1). pp. 25-53

## OTHER SOURCES YOU MAY FIND USEFUL

Wragg, P (2020) *A Free and Regulated Press: Defending Coercive Independent Press Regulation* (Hart Publishing)

Koltay, A (2019) *New Media and Freedom of Expression: Rethinking the Constitutional Foundations of the Public Sphere* (Hart Publishing)

Weaver, R.L (2019) *From Gutenberg to the Internet: Free Speech, Advancing Technology, and the Implications for Democracy* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Carolina Academic Press)

[Ofcom, News Consumption in the UK: 2020](#)

[The Cairncross Review, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2019](#)

Charney, J (2018) *The Illusion of the Free Press* (Hart Publishing)

Oster, J (2015) *Media Freedom as a Fundamental Right* (Cambridge University Press)

Fenwick, H and Phillipson, G (2006) *Media Freedom under the Human Rights Act* (Oxford University Press)

Barendt, E (2005) *Freedom of Speech* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Oxford University Press)

Schauer, F (1982) *Free speech: a philosophical enquiry* (Cambridge University Press)