

Does the media undermine or enhance democracy in Britain?

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



Does the media undermine or enhance democracy in Britain? Democracy means 'rule by the people' and for this to function properly, it requires an informed public. Media provides this information to the public and therefore, the very definition of media suggests it is a democratic device; The media includes all organizations such as television, radio and newspapers, which provide news and information for the public. media informs and empowers all members of society, therefore enhancing democracy. However, there are several arguments towards its undermining of democracy, are we really making our own decisions? Or are other people deciding what we see, read and hear? This essay will examine these arguments to assess if media undermines or enhances democracy. Most people in Britain will come into contact with the media in their everyday life, whether it be through newspapers, TV, magazines, radio or the internet. In contrast to television, newspaper owners have the freedom to decide which party they want to support. Partisanship and newspapers go hand in hand; depending on which paper you read, you will be given biased information in favour of the party that paper supports. The Conservatives have always received support from the Express and the Mail while Labour has always been supported by the Mirror.(reference) Other newspapers tend to change their party allegiance regularly. The Sun even went as far as commenting its belief that it was the papers support that had won the 1997 general election for Labour.

(reference) This allegiance to different political parties allows newspapers to present news in a biased way and exercise heavy powers of persuasion upon the public, therefore undermining the democratic process as readers are only seeing one particular view rather than a neutral and impartial one which

would allow them to make their own judgements and decisions. However, privately owned newspapers have long been seen as a critical check upon the power of government. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, newspapers and pamphlets were a primary channel of communication, through which the mass of unenfranchised people kept in touch with political developments. (Dunleavy and O'Leary 1987 p. 37) Therefore, traditionally, newspaper have always been seen a government watchdog and thus critical for democracy. Democracy relies on the public having information and therefore any media that provides information can be seen as a good thing. However you have to look at the purpose of the media, is it really the main purpose of the media to provide information? It could be argued that the main purpose of the media is to make money by selling information. This means that if, for example, a newspaper faces competition, it must make what it's selling more appealing to the consumer. Even if this means altering information to make it more exciting or heart wrenching or dangerous than it necessarily is. This is what happens when news is sold for a profit and therefore ultimately private ownership of media outlets can destabilise democracy. An example of this can be seen through the Leveson enquiry. It is an on-going enquiry into the British press following the phone hacking scandal in 2011. The phone hacking scandal occurred when employees of The News of The World were accused of engaging in phone hacking and police bribery. In other words, they were going to extreme lengths in order to publish stories. Phone hacking happened because the newspapers needed to sell more to make more money. News of the World was shut down in 2011 but this is just one example of how newspapers' main purpose is to make

money by selling information rather than provide correct and unbiased information to the public in aid of the democratic process. This is an argument for further state control of media. However, there are still issues with this. Many fear that state control simply means media will be used as propaganda outlets for the party that is in power, an issue that many currently have with the BBC. Television is an example where this state control has been exercised. Ownership and control of television in Britain is now partly exercised not by private owners but by state organisations. This is because broadcast media is widely perceived as a potential instrument of decisive propaganda, especially if used unscrupulously. Radio in the 1920s, and TV in the 1940s, seemed far more capable of changing people's attitudes than the press. (Dunleavy and O'Leary 1987 p. 39) Regulation was seen as essential to prevent manipulative power falling into the hands of any one interest. 'State control alone could secure political coverage which is 'impartial' between major parties and responsibly exercised in 'the public interest'. (Dunleavy and O'Leary 1987 p. 39) This highlights the argument of whether media needs to be regulated in order to ensure it remains neutral and not a force for propaganda or if this simply creates a situation where powerful groups have the ability to control all access to the news? However, despite these issues of state control versus private ownership, television is often seen as a more democratic form of media. TV is a good way for political parties to broadcast their ideas. An example of this can be seen in the TV debates in 2010 which gave millions of people the opportunity to scrutinise the three main political parties on live television, these debates meant people could watch and make their own decision on which party they

would like to follow without any bias influences. Media creates a system which generates the information necessary for effective citizen control over politicians. Political news is more available and more detailed than ever, and the media's techniques for discovering public reactions to their coverage (through opinion polls and TV ratings) are also more sophisticated. (Dunleavy and O'Leary 1987 p. 41) Therefore, it seems media is important for the functioning of democracy. However, it can be argued that media in fact undermines democracy. Politicians have the ability to manipulate the media or to withhold certain information from the media ' Politicians can learn to feed the mass media successfully.' (Dunleavy and O'Leary 1987 p. 41) Therefore, they change the quality of control citizens have. It can be argued that politicians have the power to make the media concentrate on certain things rather than others meaning that so called ' media democracy' is undermined. Despite all the positive views surrounding TV debates, there are downsides. It can be argued that these debates produce not revelations, but silence or pre-rehearsed blandness. (Lloyd 2011 p. 188) ' Estelle Morris, the former British education secretary who resigned in 2003 because — among other reasons — she could not bear media pressure and intrusion, said in a later interview that ' we live in a time when (senior) politicians and celebrity are one and the same. I need more privacy than I found myself able to get. Society has to ask itself: does it want to have politicians who act like they must when they're under media spotlight? Politicians would like to be more frank, more honest — but they can't — because then they're slaughtered by the media.' (Lloyd 2011 p. 188) This illustrates how the media's pressure and criticism of government, forces politicians to become more reserved and

provide the public with rehearsed and side-stepped answers and in turn, means the public actually know less about what is going on than would allow for effective democracy. The internet is increasingly being used as a source of political information and it can be argued that this is enhancing democracy. Information is more accessible and there is a much larger amount of information available. 'Newspapers' may become screen-based centres... for entering into vast stores of information accessible by individuals at times of their choosing — rather than a menu fixed for a day of what an editorial team considers as important. (Lloyd 2011 p. 73) This highlights how people would have an opportunity to read or watch what they want, when they want giving them more freedom within the political system and therefore enhancing democracy. However, it is possible that people would be missing out on the kind of quality control which guides the professional media. Journalists have standards they have to stick to and what they write is subject to checks and quality control. In contrast to this, anyone can write on the internet and it can be full of biased or incorrect information which can then be used irresponsibly. The internet also contains masses of information which can be difficult to filter. Some sort of content control is necessary to ensure that the public are provided with the correct information. (Lloyd 2011 p. 186) Each individual source of media has its democratic downfalls. However, it can be argued that despite the bias held in different forms of media, these are kept in check by the availability of other news sources. (Dunleavy and O'Leary 1987 p. 40) Media comes in many different forms and people are likely to watch the news as well as read the newspaper or listen to the radio and because of this it is possible that

they counterbalance each other. Although the newspaper a person reads may be biased, the fact that they have access to media in so many other forms allows them to make partial and subjective decisions. Therefore, it is important that there is a diverse range of information providers in the media so that the public receive a broad spectrum of information from different sources that are not tightly controlled, biased or filtered. Access to these varying sources of information prevents misinformation and gives the public the opportunity to make their own judgements and form their own opinions. It is vital that the public are able to act and decide alone without biased influence for democracy to be effective. However over the years there has been a narrowing of the range of voices expressed to the public, media ownership is increasingly in the hands of fewer corporations meaning these corporations are in a position to influence the general public according to potentially self-interested agendas. On the other hand, individuals' distinctive personal knowledge, past experiences, habits and interests should not be underestimated. These will have an effect on what media individuals will view and how they will be affected by it. For example, an individual who has been personally affected by crime in the past may be more apt to read newspapers which take a certain slant on crime. The content of media is only one factor among others that will shape the public's judgement; people are not entirely blank slates and to some extent will have their own pre-existing points of view despite the media.

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