

MY PHONE; MY CHOICE

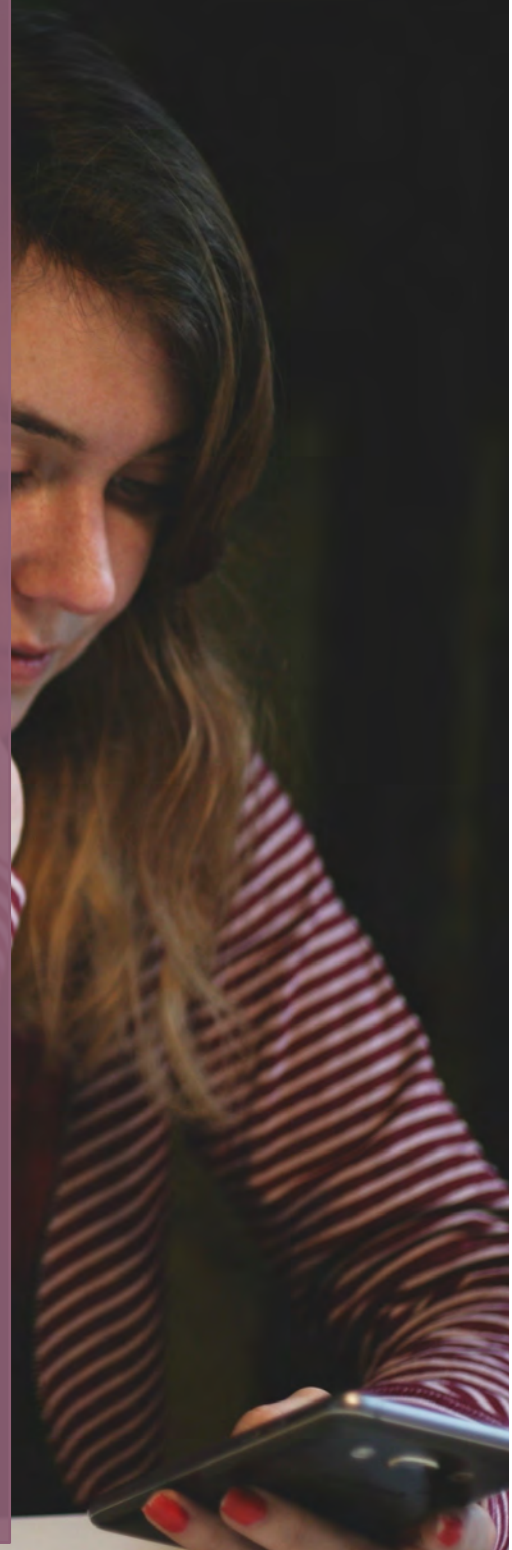
Should there be *any* limits to free speech?

In the beginning there was the printed press, then the wireless, then the “telly”: newspapers and magazines were printed in ink, rolled off presses, and were distributed via road and rail to distant parts; television and radio stations were distributed over the air on frequencies through the electromagnetic spectrum, and received through a rooftop or internal aerial. Starting with the BBC in 1922, most of the 20th century saw a very gradual growth in radio stations and TV channels.

In the 1980s, new cable and satellite technologies transformed broadcasting, while new computer technologies transformed the printed press. Underground fibre optic cable networks were built which allowed many more channels of TV to be transmitted into the home. Satellites could broadcast yet more channels via roof-mounted satellite dishes. Where previously all TV and radio was “free” – funded either by the BBC licence fee or advertising – now a variety of sport, film and other channels were available for a monthly subscription. Meanwhile, the press was revolutionised by computers which enabled journalists to input stories directly rather than on to heavy metal plates.

Finally came the transformative impact of personal computers, first as desktops with limited power and gradually evolving into the much smaller and more powerful devices we see today: laptops, tablets and smartphone which gives us access to an almost infinite variety of content – paid-for and free – on the move.

But with convergence of content distribution alongside the rise of giant streaming services like Netflix and huge global social media and online search companies like Facebook, Twitter and Google come profound questions about responsibilities of publishers, of individuals, of governments and regulators: how do we ensure that American material does not overwhelm national and local cultures? How do we protect data privacy? How do we safeguard children from having easy access to harmful material? What limits should there be – if any – to absolute free speech, who makes those decisions, and on what basis? These are issues dealt with by the field of media policy.



KEY IDEAS

We live in a democracy. At the heart of any democracy is the concept of free speech where every citizen has the right to express opinions and make arguments without censorship or constraint. Equally, every democratic society accepts that interventions may be necessary to protect society against potential harms and to promote the values that we hold dear.

Those interventions are the area of policy making. They consist of rules, laws, regulations and organisations that promote free speech, a healthy democracy and a vibrant culture while protecting vulnerable groups, personal privacy and national security. Within the U.K. we are affected by policies at international, national and local level.

For example, there are international and European rules on copyright to protect an author's rights to their creative work, and on data privacy to ensure that organisations are fair and transparent about the information they have about us. There are national rules on our right to fair trial which should not be compromised by one-sided reporting, on how our broadcasters should cover politics impartially, and on what material should be accessible to children. There are rules to prevent any single individual or company having too much control or influence over media output and information. The BBC – its funding, operation and independence from government – is a major policy intervention, paid for by all of us. Even at the local level, there are initiatives to help local and community journalism to thrive, and rules about campaigning during elections.

Almost without our knowing, media and communications policy affects every part of our lives. Whether it be the kind of news that we get from social media, websites or television; how social media companies are allowed to exploit our private data; the arguments we hear and conclusions we reach about major political issues like Brexit, climate change or crime prevention; what kinds of material our children are exposed to; and to what extent minority groups are protected from grossly offensive or harmful reporting. These are the outcomes from decisions that are made by politicians, courts, regulators, editors and corporate leaders. Studying that decision-making process and its impact on all our lives is the stuff of media policy.

ACTIVITIES

1. Think through some of the following question and discuss your opinions with a group.
 - i. Should the state be able to “read” your private Facebook posts to determine if you’re a potential security/terrorism threat?
 - ii. Should there be public interest exemptions for potential breaches of national security? Do journalists deserve special exemptions?
 - iii. Do you agree that there should be limits to protect against offensive material and public harm?
 - iv. Who decides what is so offensive as to deserve inhibition or even censorship?
2. Can you think of a recent case in the news that highlights these questions?
3. Think about your own media use – at local level, how do your school policies affect your mobile phone or social media use?

KEY READINGS

Curran, J. and Seaton, J. (2018). *Power without responsibility: the press and broadcasting in Britain.* 8th ed. London: Routledge.

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