

The Role of Social Media in Democratic Societies: from Freedom to Censorship

Flavius Ghender*

DOI 10.56177/jhss.2.16.2025.art.10

Abstract:

The promise of civil liberties lies at the heart of the development of social media in democratic societies. Initially, the effects of social media on the quality of democracy were viewed with enthusiasm: overcoming institutional barriers, reviving democratic citizenship in the digital space, limiting forms of censorship, and establishing a new “agora” that gives citizens a voice. Recent developments, however, show that freedom of information brings numerous risks, opening the way to manipulation and unfair practices. New forms of government control are needed to counter the vulnerabilities of the new communication system. In this article, I analyze the evolving mechanisms through which democratic deliberation is pursued, focusing on how developments in technology and transformations in communication systems influence political decision-making processes that may result in various forms of censorship or limitations on individual freedoms.

Keywords: social media, Populism, censorship, democracy, hybrid media system

Social media and the idea of freedom

The last decades have brought profound transformations in the dynamics of relations at the planetary level. With the fall of communist regimes, a wave of optimism led to the idea of the end of ideologies (Fukuyama, 1992: 323-324), in the sense of imposing Western democracies as a universal model of development. The process of globalization implies an interconnection of communities at an unprecedented level and the imposition of new non-state actors on the world stage (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, Perraton, 2004: 486-488) and the increasing importance of supra-state actors such as the European Union. Old political structures were put into question, including the redefinition (and limitation) of nation states, the emergence of global citizenship, the broadening of the scope of human rights, the redefinition of cultural identities.

The evolution of digital technology has played an essential role in this process, through easy access to information, the provision of new

* Lecturer PhD, “Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad, flaviusghender@gmail.com

platforms for expression to the general public, along with the development of social media. The Internet has accelerated the speed of information dissemination and opened up new opportunities for interaction between the general public and communication actors.

The promise of absolute freedom of expression brought by new technologies (smartphones and social media) produced a huge sense of optimism: a new wave of democratization and the abolition of dictatorial regimes seemed very likely developments. Numerous revolutionary movements created or supported by online communication in Europe, Asia and Africa fueled this optimism.

Efficiency in audience measurement and preferential targeting of news flows have contributed to major changes in communication. The explosion of Facebook and the development of social media after 2008 have produced other revolutionary changes, in that from that moment on, citizens were simultaneously both consumers and producers of content in public communication (Ghender, 2021: 46). The result has been a hybrid media system, in which information circulates very quickly and freely in various environments, in which the traditional role of the mass media (gatekeeper) of filtering information gives way to a polycentric system. There is a permanent exchange between traditional mass media and social media in which information is constantly taken over, transformed and redistributed. Influencers are emerging as new stars in public communication.

Andrew Chadwick (2017: 5) introduced the concept of the hybrid media system, he argued that political communication today is best understood as an interdependent system where old and new media interact, compete, and coevolve, shaping power relations in society. The hybrid media system is not simply about “*old media*” (traditional press) versus “*new media*” (digital, social media), it is about the way these coexist and interact. The system is hybrid because actors (politicians, journalists, activists, citizens, corporations) use combinations of both old and new media logics. Old media and digital media use different sets of rules which mix and adapt in the hybrid media system. The news dynamics is changing: a viral social media story may push mainstream media to cover an issue, and traditional media coverage may then reinforce its spread online. The hybrid system is dynamic, constantly shifting as technologies evolve, audiences adapt, and actors learn new tactics.

Smrdelj & Pajnik (2025: 7) pointed out that hybridity isn't inherently progressive: hybrid media systems may amplify authoritarian or populist tendencies, reinforce inequalities, enable disinformation, etc. Sometimes hybridity undermines democratic norms, besides the assumption that hybridity is always opening new possibilities.

Paradoxically, however, technological developments have the capacity to act in a double sense: both for free information and for disinformation. Thierry Wolton (2023: 12) has very well noticed this paradox: new communication technologies open the way to freedom in societies under dictatorship, but in democratic societies “*technology becomes an unparalleled instrument of control*”. And, we could add, a tool of manipulation within the reach of political actors or national entities involved in hybrid wars through which they aim to weaken trust in Western governments: there is increasingly consistent evidence showing the involvement of Russia in particular but also of China in such campaigns in the Western space. Thierry Wolton, an author who has deeply analyzed the ideological resources of communist regimes, noted that in the last century political extremes have captured much of the world, also in a context in which changes in technology and economic crises have led to identity crises and major social changes.

The role of algorithms and the capacity of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in directing information flows raised numerous concerns and questions. Do the algorithms according to which an information, person or entity is visible or not work according to transparent criteria? Do media giants have the ability to decisively control the flow of information that further generates currents of opinion? Can media giants or state actors decisively and non-transparently influence citizens’ opinions and further their choices, including at the electoral level? There is much data that confirms the possibility of pessimistic answers to this series of questions. Today, social media and AI can be fertile ground for fake news, manipulation, lies, disinformation (Ghender, 2025: 67).

Despite the initial optimism, new developments seem to confirm the degradation of the climate of democratic debate. Social media often favors radical and aggressive language, intolerant opinions, summary judgments to the detriment of nuanced rational analyses. In the political sphere, populist figures who propose a theme hostile to pluralism and diversity often win: Donald Trump in the USA is the best-known example, announced however by the victory of populist figures in Hungary, Poland, Italy and the very high score obtained in Germany, France and Romania.

Obviously, technology itself – including social media platforms – does not inherently generate positive or negative effects in society; it depends on how it is used and on the dominant political culture within each community. Nevertheless, technological developments encourage certain types of interactions and influence the way people communicate and access information. In this context, recent transformations bring back into focus the issue of citizens’ political culture and their ability to navigate and cope within the digital space.

The quality of democratic debate under discussion

Political scientist Giovanni Sartori (1999: 34-35) considers that democracy pivots between values and facts, between the compromises of reality and the struggle to approach ideals. The etymological definition of democracy that shows that power belongs to the people remains a basic principle regarding the sources and legitimacy of power, “government exists for the people and not vice versa” (Sartori, 1999: 54). In another classic work on democracy, political scientist Robert Dahl (2000: 33-34) proposed another term, polyarchies, which better reflects the difference between the democratic ideal and the realities of power in society. He outlined a set of institutional guarantees for the functioning of polyarchies, a set of freedoms that guarantee a climate of free opinion, the right to association and political participation. In this system, the binomial contestation – participation is essential and differentiates between hegemonic or oligarchic regimes (which nevertheless have apparently democratic institutions) and polyarchies that guarantee citizens’ opportunities to participate in public life and to contest political power (Dahl, 2000: 28-29).

The Western philosophical and political tradition considers pluralism, tolerance and inclusion fundamental to the proper functioning of democracies and an adequate climate of freedom. According to this tradition, individual freedom brings public benefits and represents the basic guarantee of the functioning of democracy. Democratic institutions must be supported by values rooted in society, by a political culture oriented towards pluralism and diversity (Putnam, 2001: 20-21). This intellectual tradition sees individual freedom, democracy and human rights in a relationship of close dependence (Mastellone, 2006: 15-17).

The theoretical tension observed by Sartori between the democratic ideal and political reality is at the heart of analyses of the political phenomenon that reconfigures the space of political communication and competition in democratic societies: populism. These movements start from a sense of fear of accelerated changes and of the threat to traditional identities, considered under siege. The rise of populist parties also comes in the context of the decline in the trust of a significant segment of public opinion in national governments and in the way they deal with successive and sometimes overlapping crises: Covid 19, migrant crises, the war in Ukraine, economic crises. Populist movements take different forms in different societies but have found as a unifying factor the claim to return to an authentic democracy and the will of the people, seriously affected by corrupt elites or international entities. The claim of populist movements to revive authentic democracies and return to the sovereign will of the people (seen as a homogeneous entity) obviously departs from the respect for pluralism considered a fundamental principle of democracies. Throughout the Western world,

political competitions between the political left and the political right have given way to another competition, between traditional and populist political parties.

Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017: 6) defined Populism as “thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”. As strategic approach, Kurt Weyland (2001: 14) defined Populism as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers”.

Social media and new technologies play a central role in the rise of populist movements, through several fundamental characteristics. The segmentation of public opinion into “information bubbles” based on user references, the erosion of the gatekeeper role played by media institutions, and the increased capacity to produce fake news have eroded the quality of information relevant to democratic debate.

Social media helps populist movements by amplifying their anti-elite message, lowering barriers to communication and mobilization, rewarding emotional narratives, and creating feedback loops with mainstream media. Using social media, populist leaders can bypass traditional gatekeepers, they can speak directly to “the people” avoiding filters of journalists, editors, or established institutions. The logic of social media amplifies emotional and polarizing content, which is an advantage for populist leaders who thrive on “*Us vs. Them*” framing, crisis narratives, and emotional appeals. Also, algorithms on social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and X reward engagement, often privileging outrage, fear, and identity-based content. Social media provides cheap, fast tools for mobilizing supporters, organizing protests, and coordinating campaigns without heavy party structures, which represents an advantage for newly formed political parties without territorial bases.

Hashtags, viral videos, and livestreams help frame movements as authentic, grassroots, and people-driven. Populist movements often distrust mainstream media: through YouTube channels, Telegram groups, podcasts, and meme culture, they build parallel media ecosystems that reinforce their narrative and identity. Populist messages that gain traction online can force coverage by traditional media, amplifying their reach. Conversely, controversies covered by TV or newspapers can be re-circulated and reframed by populists online: this is exactly what Chadwick (cited above) describes as the hybrid media system in action.

Although populist movements claim to represent the people and are hostile to foreigners, an international solidarity movement is emerging. In this regard, we are witnessing a transnational diffusion of populist strategies, slogans, and memes across borders through social media, allowing movements to learn from each other.

Some authors believe that we are in a post-truth period, in which the veracity of facts matters less and in which citizens consume a mix of information, fiction, fake news and opinions often unfounded on facts. In a post-truth society, facts matter less than feelings (McIntyre, 2018: 11). People are more likely to accept a claim if it fits their emotions, values, or identity – even if the claim is false (d’Ancona, 2017: 25-27).

Algorithms and AI are increasingly playing a role in controlling the flow of information to citizens, a reality that raises questions about the transparency and fairness of these systems. There is increasing evidence suggesting the involvement of state actors or other entities in electoral campaigns or key events that shape public opinion at important times. The cancellation of the 2024 Romanian presidential election due to image campaigns conducted on social media is a strong signal. A virtually unknown candidate won the election following an aggressive campaign on TikTok, for which he reported zero expenses. Official accusations suggest the involvement of state actors (Russia) who conducted illegal manipulation campaigns by paying opinion leaders (influencers) and manipulating algorithms to increase the candidate’s visibility. The European institutions have launched an investigation on whether TikTok violated EU laws by facilitating the use of paid political advertisements and whether its algorithms unfairly promoted certain political content.

Beyond political and legal aspects, there are several topics of interest for political communication: the possibility of manipulating algorithms and distorting the communication framework; the large space for manipulation and the triggering of a hybrid war; the reduced capacity of public institutions to intervene to stop incorrect practices, especially when events take place in a relatively short time, as is the case with electoral campaigns. The question arises whether the current communication framework in Western societies is truly free, whether democratic debates are truly possible?

Guaranteeing the framework for free expression vs. new forms of censorship

Western societies are faced with a dilemma: building a system of guarantees regarding the fair and transparent practices of media giants (Meta for Facebook, Instagram, ByteDance for TikTok) implies adopting restrictions that can be interpreted as new forms of censorship. The debate is complicated by the fact that beyond the technical aspects,

political interpretations regarding government control over individual freedoms inevitably arise.

US Vice President JD Vance said after the annulment of the Romanian presidential election that Romanian democracy is weak if it can be destabilized with a small amount of money spent on the electoral campaign on TikTok. However, the practices of this platform were also under investigation in the US at the time, where the legislative framework for government control and transparency was developed.

In the following section, I conduct a critical analysis of recent legislative developments in the United States and the European Union, formulated in response to the growing threats to the free framework of democratic debate, with particular attention to the increasing regulatory oversight of social media platforms and their societal impact.

In US, after a long investigation, a special legal framework was created to ensure control over the good practices of the Chinese-controlled company. In 2022, USA banned TikTok from being used, installed, or maintained on federal government devices, in order to prevent potential leaks of data or vulnerabilities via devices owned by government and to reduce risk of foreign surveillance (No TikTok on Government Devices Act). In 2024 Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act (PAFACA) defines “foreign adversary controlled applications” (explicitly including ByteDance/TikTok) and requires divestment (sale) of TikTok’s U.S. operations. If ByteDance doesn’t divest, TikTok could be banned from app stores and hosting in the U.S. The U.S. government argued that China (via ByteDance) could access U.S. user data, manipulate content, influence users, or be forced by Chinese law to cooperate with the Chinese government/security services.

The US Government’s actions are supported by the justice system. The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld laws requiring ByteDance/TikTok to divest or face ban in the U.S. Courts have rejected arguments from TikTok that such ban laws violate free speech, etc. The courts have generally weighed national security as a compelling governmental interest and found the laws constitutionally permissible under that. The support for the American justice system is noteworthy given that the First Amendment to the American Constitution guarantees freedom of expression:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

(The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1791 as part of the Bill of Rights)

In this way, legislation that can be described as restrictive with regard to the limitation of the right to free expression actually tries to protect these rights from the interference of private companies. In the era of digital communication, the pluralism of the information media is no longer sufficient to ensure free access to information of general interest (a mandatory condition for freedom of opinion). It is a major challenge for the Western democratic framework. Although the political and judicial systems have formed a common front on this issue, general agreement at the level of American society is far from being achieved: there are numerous voices accusing the authorities of establishing a censorship regime.

The Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act is complemented by a proposed framework arrangement between the US and China that would allow TikTok to remain operational, but under majority American control and with oversight over the algorithm and user data. Private American investors are set to step in and take control of TikTok in the US.

The U.S. government's actions regarding TikTok have sparked a significant debate over whether such measures constitute censorship. This issue centers on the balance between national security concerns and the protection of free speech.

The European Union has taken less drastic measures, but is concerned with decisions that ensure a fair framework for debate in the digital space. European Union (EU) has implemented several initiatives concerning TikTok, focusing on data privacy, cybersecurity, and compliance with EU regulations. These measures do not constitute an outright ban, like in US, but they reflect significant regulatory actions.

EU adopted legal and regulatory measures, such as Digital Services Act (2023), which obligates platforms to deal with illegal content, disinformation, risks to elections, requires transparency about algorithms, content moderation, advertising, gives users more control over what they see online. EU Commission opened formal proceedings against TikTok for election risks under the DSA (in connection with Romanian presidential elections). For example, in May 2025, Ireland's Data Protection Commission (DPC), acting on behalf of the EU, fined TikTok €530 million for unlawfully transferring European users' personal data to China. The DPC found that TikTok failed to ensure adequate protection of this data, violating the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

As in the US, the European Commission, European Parliament, and EU Council banned TikTok from official devices due to cybersecurity concerns, in 2023. These measures were implemented to protect data and avoid information leakage. We can see that the EU is

taking significant steps to regulate the platform, focusing on data privacy, transparency, and compliance with EU laws.

The European Commission adopted the European Democracy Action Plan in 2020, with the aim of making EU democracies more resilient to digital challenges, disinformation, foreign interference, and threats to media freedom. Its main objectives are: promoting free and fair elections, strengthening media freedom and pluralism, combating disinformation, enhancing civic engagement and citizen participation. In the field of political advertising, the Commission has sought to improve transparency regarding who pays for ads and how they are targeted, as well as to establish mechanisms for electoral resilience through cooperation to detect threats, disinformation, and cyber risks. The Defence of Democracy Package, building on the Democracy Action Plan, aims to reinforce democratic institutions and processes by addressing emerging threats – particularly foreign interference – while also promoting citizen participation and safeguarding free and fair elections.

Conclusions

Through this analysis of recent developments in media and technological ecosystems, I have sought to demonstrate how the accelerating convergence of digital platforms, algorithmic mediation, and political communication has transformed the conditions under which democratic debate takes place. My examination reveals that these transformations, while enabling unprecedented access to information, simultaneously generate new asymmetries of power and control that risk undermining open deliberation. On the basis of these findings, I argue that there is an urgent need for coherent legislative intervention to establish regulatory frameworks capable of safeguarding transparency, accountability, and fairness in the digital public sphere, thereby ensuring the integrity of democratic discourse.

Populist movements are taking full advantage of the global context marked by overlapping crises (health, economic, war) and the favorable context offered by new communication technologies and are experiencing a strong rise. Their presence in the space of political communication is reconfiguring political competition, is shaping the way in which political information is produced and interpreted in Western societies.

There is growing evidence that these recent developments are complicated by the hybrid warfare unleashed by state actors (Russia, China) that seek to undermine the trust of citizens in democratic societies in national and international institutions, such as the European Union and NATO.

The analysis I have carried out on recent events highlights how the new technological capabilities that dominate the logic of social media – big data, algorithms that sort and direct data, the use of AI – bring numerous benefits for users but also major risks. Part of these risks are represented by the ability of some companies or entities to influence the climate of opinion in a non-transparent and illegal way and further to affect the quality of democratic debate.

In this context, the need for special regulations on information management, freedom of information and freedom of expression arises. A tension is thus emerging between the need for protection and security on the one hand and the fear of the reintroduction of more or less subtle forms of control and censorship.

The shift in perspective on social media, from an instrument and promoter of democracy to a potential vulnerability, is contested by a part of society, which is why regulations in the field are met with protests and resistance. The need for government interventions shows the vulnerability of democracies to unexpected challenges.

Further developments will show whether the US government's measures to control the TikTok platform are effective or not, whether they can be reasonably enforced or not. The dynamics of relationships between media systems, citizens and public institutions will also indicate whether the quintessentially free digital space can be regulated without losing the trust of citizens or not.

The complicated situation brings back to the attention of Western societies the issue of political culture and the values that underpin or should underpin the proper functioning of democratic societies, based on open dialogue, pluralism and respect for human rights. Recent debates also show the urgent need to form new skills and competences of citizens in a democratic society.

REFERENCES:

- Anderson, C.W., *New Ecosystems*, chapter 28, in Witschge, T. Anderson, C.W. Domingo, D. Hermida, A. (edited by), *The SAGE Handbook of Digital Journalism*, SAGE Publication, 2016.
- Chadwick, A., *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (2nd ed.), Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Dahl, R., *Poliarhiile. Participare și opoziție*, Editura Institutul European, Iași, 2000.
- d'Ancona, M., *Post Truth: The New War on Truth and how to Fight Back*, Ebury Press, 2017.
- Fukuyama, F., *Sfârșitul istoriei și ultimul om*, Editura Paideia, București, 1992.
- Ghender, F., *Democrațiile virusate de noile tehnologii: mai poate fi garantat un spațiu liber de informație și dezbateri în era digitală?*, în C. Bențe, F. Chirodea

(editori), *Security Challenges in an Interconnected World*, Editura Universității Vasile Goldiș, 2025, p. 61-71.

Ghender, F. *The Rise of Digital Populism in Romania*, „Revista de Studii Media / Journal of Media Studies”, Nr. 10, 2021.

Held, D., McGrew A., Goldblatt D., Perraton, J., *Transformări Globale. Politică, economie, cultură*, Polirom, 2004.

Mastellone, S., *Istoria democrației în Europa. Din secolul al XVIII-lea până în secolul XX*, Antet XX Press, 2006.

McIntyre, L. *Post-Truth*, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2018.

Mudde, C., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C., *Populism: A very short introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2017.

Müller, J.W., *Ce este populismul?*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2017.

Putnam, R.D., Leonardi R., Nanetti, R.Y., *Cum funcționează democrația?*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2001.

Sartori, G., *Teoria democrației reinterpretată*, Polirom, Iași, 1999.

Smrdelj, R., Pajnik, M., *Enhancing the Hybrid Media System Model: The Role of Critical Theory*, in „European Journal of Communication”, 2025.

Wolton, T., *Noile drumuri ale servituții noastre*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2023.

Weyland, K., *Clarifying a contested concept: Populism in the study of Latin American politics*, in „Comparative Politics”, 34(1), 2001, p. 1-22.

Surse Web

https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy_en?utm_source=chatgpt.com Accesat 20 septembrie 2025

https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/7521/text?utm_source=chatgpt.com Accesat 19 septembrie 2025