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Digital media and local democracy: news media, local governments and civic action

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Abstract

The study of digital media and political action must consider variations in media ecologies to account for the ways in which contextually specific circumstances influence the character of local democratic participation. This article argues for this need by synthesising the disconnected literatures on Australian communications infrastructures, municipal governments and local news media. It reveals uneven levels of connectivity, restricted digital government practices and a decreasing capacity of local newsrooms and journalists to cover local politics. These problems coalesce to create risks of ill-informed citizenries, illegitimate local decision making and minimally accountable local governments. This situation contributes to the democratic marginalisation of communities, with political power remaining embedded within the hierarchal decision making system of Australian local government.

Introduction

On March 4, 2016, the Victorian Ombudsman (2016a) announced it had launched an “own motion” investigation into the transparency of local government decision making. This announcement followed an inquiry into the actions of Victoria’s largest council, the City of Casey, located on Melbourne’s south-east suburban fringe. Casey neglected to notify 37 property owners of their right to object to a local road-sealing scheme through which each owner would be levied between \$15,308 and \$20,807. The council opted not to utilise its social media presence or online discussion forum for consultation on the issue, and the public notices on Casey’s website and in local newspapers failed to inform citizens that the interest rate payable on the roadwork charges could be altered. The interest rate was increased in a closed council session, further preventing citizens from participating in – and objecting to – the decision. Casey Council was subsequently found guilty of unreasonable, unjust and illegal conduct (Victorian Ombudsman, 2016b).

The Victorian Ombudsman (2016b) noted that a lack of transparent decision making is a widespread occurrence among authorities. Casey provided evidence of overarching confusion, arbitrary processes and inadequate communication with local citizens, and the Ombudsman recommended that Casey release all relevant information to the community through its website.

Digital visibility of local government actions is important for Casey's citizens as three of the municipality's local newspapers have ceased operations in the past three years, meaning that contentious local political issues do not receive sufficient news media attention and scrutiny to ensure accountability of decision making.

The state of local democracy is fundamentally shaped by the political systems and news media through which civic engagement takes place, as the opening example indicates. Digital technologies add another significant layer to these dimensions, including new opportunities for democratic participation, consumption of political news and greater government transparency (Keane, 2009). The impact of digital media is, however, contextually specific. This article argues that there are deficits in understandings of digital democratic engagement which overlook the complexity of local circumstances and the interrelationships that exist between communications and media technologies, local institutions and political action.

This argument is supported by an analysis of existing scholarly literature that examines Australian communications infrastructures, municipal governments' digital practices and local news media. It demonstrates the impact of variable levels of connectivity between metropolitan and rural and regional areas, the restricted and unresponsive nature of local digital government practices and a decreasing capacity of local newsrooms and journalists to cover local politics. Integrating evidence from these mostly disconnected studies of Australian local contexts uncovers crucial connections that exist across and between the fields. This approach results in a more detailed understanding of how local media and political settings coalesce to shape democratic engagement. Our discussion is complemented by international perspectives, particularly from Europe, where the research agenda in these areas is more developed (Hess, Waller & Ricketson, 2014). These perspectives offer insights that are currently lacking in Australian case studies, as well as indicators of future research that needs to be completed on Australian local settings. The synthesis of these literatures reveals a problem that demands ongoing investigation – local political power remains concentrated within the hierarchical decision making processes of municipal governments. This situation risks the marginalisation of those communities lacking the resources and news media required to achieve democratic renewal in an age of connective action.

Digitally mediated politics

Digital media are altering the communication practices that underpin the foundations of governance and democracy. Political participation – the capacity to become informed about, involved in and influence decision making – is increasingly conceptualised around digital interactions, with mobile and social media continuing to grow in importance (Keane, 2009; Chadwick, 2013; Papacharissi, 2015). The deliberative and participatory features of these technologies can be used to shape power relations through new forms of direct communication between citizens and governments. The legitimacy of decision making is augmented through collaboration and dialogue, with external contestation and scrutiny leading to demands for greater visibility and transparency of political actions to improve government accountability (Keane, 2009). The intensifying mediatisation of political communication is also changing relationships between governments and news media. While digital technologies provide news media with exponential opportunities to disseminate messages and interact with audiences, it is also the case that governments are able to bypass journalists as intermediaries and affect the filtering and gatekeeping of political messages (Djerf-Pierre & Pierre, 2016).

In acknowledging these widespread developments internationally, an important fact is frequently overlooked in the study of emergent forms of “connective action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) and the impacts of digital media and communications networks on political systems and the news media. The democratic processes enabled by digital media are not equally applicable

to all levels of governance. Clusters of connective activity exist, but they are scattered both geographically and socially (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). As such, this article is concerned with the ways in which digital media are changing the political information environments – the information available about public affairs and how this is used to guide democratic engagement – of local communities (Nielsen, 2015).

The media ecologies¹ that facilitate connective action and digital political engagement vary considerably, with distinct implications for local news and government (Wilken, Nansen, Arnold, Kennedy & Gibbs, 2013; Djerf-Pierre & Pierre, 2016). Government-media relations at the municipal level differ from those at state and national levels, and digital media often play a comparatively limited role in local politics. For example, Djerf-Pierre and Pierre's (2016) study of all 284 local governments in Sweden found that digital (social) media reinforce existing patterns of communication and boost authorities' interactions with local news media, particularly the local press. They argue that digital media contribute to an intensification of the mediatisation of local governance, rather than replacing the longstanding role of newspapers and broadcast media in disseminating political messages.

Concepts and theories of digital political action need to pay greater attention to significant variations in media ecologies, especially if they are to account for the role of digital media and news and journalism in localised forms of political participation. Municipalities are prime sites for investigation and analysis in this regard, having long been recognised as important spaces for news and democratic engagement (Hess, 2013; Barnett & Townend, 2015). The following sections start down the path of showing why this is the case, first by examining the variable levels of connectivity that exist in different municipalities.

The Australian local context

Connectivity considerations

Emerging research into local news and digital government, such as the use of mobile applications and social media, is predominantly conceptualised around urban spaces and notions of ubiquitous, always-on internet access (see, for example, Goggin, Martin & Dwyer, 2015; Mossberger, Wu & Crawford, 2013). This research highlights that the use of digital media for political involvement is a contextually specific phenomenon, cutting across socio-economic factors, political cultures, geography and personalisation practices. Connectivity is shaped by the features of specific localities, acting as an enabler or barrier to digital participation and democratic engagement depending on the circumstances in question.

In Australia, the digital gap between capital cities and country areas is widening, although it is unevenly distributed according to access, affordability and digital skill levels (Thomas et al., 2016). For rural and regional communities, access to reliable digital communications infrastructures is a persistent problem because small populations offer less commercially viable telecommunications and consumer technology markets than urban centres. This is an issue yet to be fixed by national broadband plans (Middleton & Park, 2014). The availability and quality of internet and mobile access decreases as remoteness from cities grows. The fixed wireless and satellite connections servicing 1.6 million rural and regional Australians cost more and deliver less, including higher carriage and service costs for limited bandwidth, intermittent and patchy coverage, bottlenecks and latency issues, and inferior uploading and downloading speeds (Middleton & Park, 2014). Australia's uneven levels of connectivity have been shown to exacerbate rural/regional-urban socio-economic disparities, and have prevented small communities from participating in digital engagement opportunities (Alizadeh, 2013; Freeman, Park, Middleton & Allen, 2016).

Discrepancies are also escalating between rural and regional areas that received broadband in the first stages of national rollout and those yet to be serviced (Alizadeh, 2013). For example, in terms of local digital government practices, the Kiama Municipal Council (population approximately 21,000) on the New South Wales coastline provides a community video sharing platform, video conferencing of council meetings and free public wi-fi, with the council's digital presence supported through additional federal funding. In contrast, the Shire of Boorowa (population approximately 2500) in rural NSW still lacks internet and mobile coverage in remote areas. Its townships are limited to fixed wireless and ADSL internet, with 3G mobile coverage often only available through Telstra (Freeman et al., 2016). Boorowa's local government is reluctant to advance its digital practices in this environment and faces dual challenges. It lacks the infrastructure and resources to implement improved digital mechanisms, and wants to avoid the disenfranchisement of local citizens unable to access high-bandwidth media services. Local citizens already experience significant difficulties in accessing government websites, including compliance matters when they are forced to use federal services available only in digital form (Freeman et al., 2016).

This situation is disheartening given that connectivity is increasingly necessary for exposure to and creation of diverse news content (Dwyer, Martin & Goggin, 2011). Inaccessibility of online news and information in rural and regional communities undermines public information needs (Dwyer et al., 2011), and likely contributes to rural and regional audiences' continued preference for local news through traditional media formats such as newspapers (ACMA, 2013). Moreover, with smaller populations, lower digital literacy levels and comparatively limited connectivity in their communities, rural and regional citizens are less likely than their metropolitan counterparts to use digital technologies to become self-organising mobilised issue publics. Accordingly, opportunities for political action and digital democratic engagement vary considerably in municipalities outside the state capitals across the country.

Local government

Australia's 559 municipalities have populations ranging from just over a hundred citizens to more than a million, and geographical coverage from 1.1km² to approximately 371,000km² (Williamson & Ruming, 2016). Over half of these councils govern small and geographically dispersed rural and regional populations of less than 15,000 people (Freeman, 2016), meaning Boorowa's experiences outlined above are far from unique. The size of Australian local governments influences the ways digital media are used and for what purposes (Williamson & Ruming, 2016). The use of digital government mechanisms can, for example, be inhibited by low digital literacy levels among citizens, unequal levels of financial and staffing resources and limited or uneven technological infrastructures (Howard, 2012; Morris, 2012).

Councils in major cities and sizable regional urban hubs have comparatively well-developed websites in terms of usability, although these often offer only one-way information and restricted two-way service delivery practices due to the efficiency gains these mechanisms offer governments. The result is an extension of familiar government communication practices rather than new avenues for improved transparency or political participation (Chugh & Grandhi, 2013; Williamson & Ruming, 2016). All capital city local governments have council news, media releases, downloadable forms and digital payments available through their websites (Chugh & Grandhi, 2013). The percentage of smaller rural and regional authorities that offer these practices is considerably less, at 82 per cent for council news, 40 per cent for online media releases, 72 per cent for downloadable forms and 47 per cent for digital payments (Freeman, 2016). More advanced forms of two-way digital civic participation, which often bring higher development costs and require more staff time for managing deliberations, are significantly less likely to be used by either urban or rural and regional authorities.

In terms of interactive practices, 29 per cent of capital city local governments offer discussion forums and 86 per cent use social media (Twitter and Facebook). In comparison, only 0.3

per cent of smaller authorities provide discussion forums, 6 per cent use Twitter and 26 per cent use Facebook (Freeman, 2016). The use of social media has been the biggest change in local digital government in recent years due to its minimal costs and ease of use in comparison with other interactive platforms (Mossberger et al., 2013). But the capacity of social media to enhance reciprocal political dialogue remains underutilised, as authorities predominantly use these tools to post media release headlines, promote local events and enable users to like, follow or share posts (Macnamara, 2012; Holland, 2015). Other government-supplied spaces for online political dialogue facilitate citizen-to-citizen interaction, although these are often outsourced and government involvement is lacking. Civic queries and discussion can remain unanswered, and appear to have little or no impact on formal decision making processes (Freeman, 2016; Macnamara, 2013).

The externally facing digital communications practices of local governments are often uncoordinated and developed on an ad hoc basis (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015). Dialogue opportunities are characterised by a failure of local governments to fully consider their purpose, or to implement them with predetermined policy outcomes (Howard, 2012; Firmstone & Coleman, 2015). A facade of participation can also be used to mask manipulation through tokenistic attempts to placate the community (Scott, Redmond & Russell, 2012). In instances where participation is not reciprocal or afforded consideration in decision making, councils risk creating disenfranchised citizens who distrust their government (Macnamara, 2013; Firmstone & Coleman, 2015).

One of Australia's most innovative authorities in terms of its digital presence is Randwick City Council (population approximately 134,000) in eastern Sydney. Randwick launched a mobile application (available on Android and Apple devices) that is integrated with social media in an effort to improve interactions between citizens and the local government and encourage participation in local decision making. Among other functions, the platform facilitates community consultation on local issues such as the development of a light rail system and is combined with traditional means of keeping the community informed (local newspaper advertisements, community forums, letterbox drops). However, the government's actual engagement with citizens through digital means remains limited. Of the 767 comments posted in the light rail forum (with over 42,000 views), the single post from a council affiliate contained only a picture of the proposed route (Freeman, 2016). This example illustrates that, even in advanced cases, key opportunities for authorities to stimulate political dialogue with constituents are ignored.

Digital engagement practices are stunted when authorities view technologies as disruptive to formal processes and/or a threat to the control of political information (Howard, 2012). The visibility of digital actions, separation of digital initiatives from the everyday activities of authorities and perceptions that online civic involvement is not a genuine form of political participation all contribute to a reluctance on the part of local government to digitally engage with citizens (Holland, 2015; Freeman, 2016). In many cases, digital spaces are not widely accepted, let alone embraced as formal or legitimate ways for communities to interact with governments (Aulich, 2009). Given the limited opportunities for citizens to engage directly with authorities and impact local decision making, it is essential that journalists monitor and report on the actions and decisions of elected representatives.

Local news

Local news media have long held pivotal roles in the development of informed civics. Journalists and news outlets act as intermediaries between communities and governments, thereby facilitating democratic engagement and processes of political accountability (Richards, 2014; Nielsen, 2015). Australia has a diverse local news media landscape, with nearly 300 non-urban newspapers, 190 commercial, public and community radio stations and 57 regional television stations (Hess, 2014). The proliferation of digital technologies has been a contributing factor to changes in local news ownership (run by corporations) and the production, distribution and

consumption of news. Market pressures and government policy further contribute to institutional changes in the structures and features of news media (Hess et al., 2014; Young, 2010).

Transformations impacting the information received by communities include altered business models, differing and competing news agendas and editorial approaches, audience fragmentation, reductions in circulation and readership figures, decreasing advertising revenue, the consolidation of newsroom resources and centralisation of production facilities in metropolitan areas (Hess, 2013; Hess et al., 2014). For example, in late 2015 Fairfax Media closed three of its regional newspapers in Western Australia as part of a centralisation plan: the *Wagin Argus* (a masthead over a century old that had been independently owned until 1993), the *Merredin-Wheatbelt Mercury* and the *Central Midlands & Coastal Advocate*. While Fairfax's *Farm Weekly* now serves these areas, significant concerns exist about the adequacy of local news coverage for smaller outlying communities (Christian & Asher, 2015).

Even Australia's public service broadcaster, the ABC, has negatively impacted communities through its restructures and regional programming changes. The Wellington Shire Council (population approximately 41,000) in eastern Victoria recently highlighted the declining number of dedicated local radio news bulletins, with those that are available produced in Melbourne. Local events now receive intermittent and limited exposure and often lack relevant information. Particular concern was directed at crisis situations, such as the bushfires in the municipality in 2014 and 2015 when the community struggled to source vital information. These events may constitute small stories in the national purview of the ABC, but this does not mean they are any less critical to the communities affected. The council recommended the ABC focus on ensuring the accessibility of news in rural and regional areas affected by poor connectivity and with ageing populations, rather than continuing to transfer more content online (Wellington Shire Council, 2016).

Digital media also contribute to reconfigured local journalism, with broad implications for the relationship between news, public interest and politics. Journalists identify interaction with audiences and technological innovations as the most acute changes impacting reporting practices, as well as expressing concern over drops in journalistic standards and credibility (Hanusch, 2015). Journalism practice and content are being modified to suit digital and mobile media and novel news-gathering methods (Goggin et al., 2015). News media also now need to offer diverse online content through multiple platforms that shape the form, style and temporality of news (Young, 2010; Sheller, 2015; Goggin et al., 2015). Narratives are altered through location-specific and platform-dependent versions, with journalists often having to write multiple versions of stories, and audience consumption more reliant upon the capacity for reciprocity in content creation (Øie, 2016; Holton, Coddington, Lewis & Gil de Zúñiga, 2015). In areas with advanced connectivity, digital media are contributing to a participatory culture of news (Holton et al., 2015), with citizens able to shape its content and nature through journalistic coproduction and community-based platforms.

However, there is uncertainty about the demand and interest of rural and regional audiences in digital engagement with local news media (Bowd, 2014), with journalists working for non-metropolitan local press also the least likely to digitally interact with audiences or governments (Djerf-Pierre & Pierre, 2016). Citizens with inferior connectivity have less capacity and fewer incentives to participate in digital content creation and may be unable to capitalise on digital-first and digital-only news production approaches (Holton et al., 2015). Demand for local news and information through print and broadcast media subsequently remains persistent in rural and regional areas (Hutchins, 2004). Television (56 per cent) and local newspapers (47 per cent) are the most frequently used for local news reports, and local newspapers (66 per cent) and radio (21 per cent) rank highest for access to information about community events. In comparison, websites are used by 17 per cent of regional Australian audiences for local news and 19 per cent for community event information (ACMA, 2013).

The ability of local rural and regional newsrooms and journalists to produce quality news that contributes to democratic public engagement has been called into question (Hess et al., 2014; Bowd, 2012; Richards, 2014; Firmstone, 2016). Significant reductions in resources and locally based staff, escalating consolidation of small companies, the centralisation of newsrooms in distant metropolitan centres and the closure of outlets all impact local democracy. There exists a reduced capacity for local news media to undertake in-depth news-gathering, investigative reporting, independent analysis and critical journalism (Hess et al., 2014; Dwyer et al., 2011; Richards, 2014). Scrutiny of local politics and accountability for local decision making are jeopardised when under-resourced newsrooms must recycle and recirculate content and desk-based journalists replicate pre-packaged information sourced directly from local officials (Firmstone, 2016; Djerf-Pierre & Pierre, 2016; Hess & Waller, 2008). Bowd (2014) highlights that the dependence of local government on email communication in particular is reducing opportunities for non-metropolitan journalists to interact directly with political actors, prompting a shift away from first-hand and face-to-face forms of reporting. Uneven signs of adaptation to these circumstances are available.

Community media help to counteract declines in local commercial news outlets and benefit civic life and social capital (Bowd, 2012; Richards, 2014). New business models are emphasising “hyperlocal” news, reporting on matters relevant to smaller communities in order to cover information overlooked by larger news organisations (Ewart, 2014; Barnett & Townend, 2015). For example, in the past two years an independent company in the regional city of Wagga Wagga (population approximately 60,000) in NSW has been streaming free content about the town (see waggawagga.tv). The platform includes local political news reports, information for local businesses and live local sports broadcasts. It averages 700 to 1000 viewers for regular shows and up to 20,000 for football matches (Barbour, 2016). Worth noting, however, is that this type of hyperlocal media depends upon sufficient broadband connectivity to support production and consumption, meaning areas with inferior speed are less likely to accommodate such developments.

Digital media complicate the already contested meanings of public engagement enacted by news media, local governments and citizens (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015). The developments described in previous sections highlight a mismatch between one-way flows of government information to constituents and the realisation of multi-directional political participation and dialogue. The role of local news media in this period of change is, therefore, crucial. Transformations to local democracy and political power are unlikely to be substantial in areas with limited media scrutiny of political actions and where digital civic participation is poorly understood and/or deemed illegitimate.

Local democracy in the digital environment

Chadwick (2013) argues that expectations of “effective” and “worthwhile” political action are now shaped by norms of networking, flexibility, spontaneity and organisation, with these norms realigning interactions between governments, citizens and the news media. However, the disruptive logics of digital media can only be observed and understood through the ways in which they interweave with older media technologies and practices. The result is that political communication currently exists in a complex and unsettled state shaped by power that is relational, fragmented, plural and dispersed (Chadwick, 2013). The value of print news and broadcast media – so-called legacy media – in sustaining democratic processes remains, but political actions also rely on a capacity to successfully integrate multiple media forms into communication practices. Papacharissi (2015) dubs these mediated hybrid environments “electronic elsewheres”: spaces where the voices of diverse publics are negotiated, shared and supported.

However, as our discussion indicates, the effects of digital technologies on, and the norms and practices associated with, political participation are by no means universal. Rather, these effects

and their accompanying responses are dependent upon contextually specific circumstances. The relationships between connectivity, political institutions and news media in local settings need to be scrutinised properly in order to account for the ways in which variable media ecologies impact democratic engagement. Local government reluctance to embrace digital participation, the decreasing capacity of many local newsrooms to provide in-depth political reporting and uneven levels of connectivity all shape the power and impact (or lack thereof) of local political activities.

The existence of multiple local media outlets is a safeguard for the diversity of opinions necessary to ensure the public interest is served. However, some local governments operate in a “media shadow” where there is limited or no news covering their jurisdiction (Djerf-Pierre & Pierre, 2016). As the earlier example of Wellington Shire demonstrates, when local news coverage is produced out of metropolitan centres by news organisations, purportedly local news fails to draw sufficiently on local knowledge or offer timely information for smaller communities. Djerf-Pierre and Pierre (2016) contend that authorities without local news media outlets are more likely to use digital technologies as an alternate route to communicate with citizens. This suggestion has some merit as local governments have had to “fill in” news gaps to provide information for outlying communities (Christian & Asher, 2015), although such coverage is neither independent nor investigative in orientation.

Political actions in metropolitan areas are more likely to attract scrutiny through state and national news media attention (Djerf-Pierre & Pierre, 2016). A recent example is the coverage of Geelong City Council in Victoria, where a dysfunctional workplace culture (including bullying and conflicts of interest) and a lack of attention to public concerns resulted in the council being deemed unfit to govern (Lucas, Dow & Booker, 2016). Sadly, Geelong is not an isolated case. In Victoria alone, the State Government has dismissed six councils since the late 1990s and several others have been subject to Ombudsman investigations into corruption and misconduct (Lucas et al., 2016).

Outside the metropolises, absent or limited local news provides a disincentive for authorities to use digital media for civic engagement. If councils are not subject to media scrutiny and demands for accountability, then local political power is more readily maintained by authorities that restrict digital interactions to control information and conceal political decision making. When digital media are used in these ways, political power remains embedded in the hierarchical system of Australian local government. If areas of “media shadow” overlap with inferior connectivity, then citizens are unlikely to possess the capacity for digital mobilisation, and “electronic elsewhere” remain elsewhere. In these instances, opportunities for civic participation to co-produce political outcomes are entirely reliant upon government willingness to engage constituents. This confluence of factors helps to explain the political participation deficits evident in many local government areas, the failure of digital media to displace more traditional communication channels, and why many citizens believe their participation is unlikely to impact local politics (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015; Barnett & Townend, 2015).

Conclusion

Considerable threats to civic engagement and local democracy exist if communities lack the infrastructures and opportunities for political participation, and are deprived of in-depth news coverage of local political issues. Informed by our critical examination of existing research, we argue that these problems do not threaten state and national levels of governance and political participation in the same fashion or to the same degree as at the local level. These differences exist partly because local digital democratic engagement is shaped fundamentally by *wider* technological, political, social and economic contexts, and the variable intersections that exist across and between them.

The situation outlined here presents significant and ongoing challenges for civic engagement in local settings. There has been little sustained local government interest in accepting or implementing digital civic participation as a means to contribute to local democracy. The few opportunities for political dialogue that are available offer the facade of connective action, and provide limited capacity for input from issue publics to effect consistent change in local decision making. Further concerns arise in areas where declines in local newsrooms and resources inhibit political reporting and scrutiny of government actions, and where issue publics are less likely to deploy digital technologies because of poor connectivity. In these areas in particular, there is little impetus for governments to develop interactive digital practices (or to consider and respond to civic input) given that restricting such spaces is arguably an advantage in the maintenance of political power. Such restriction creates the risk of a ruinous triumvirate – ill-informed citizenries, illegitimate local decision making and minimally accountable local governments. Following this line of argument, local political power is not so much fragmented and dispersed in line with network logics (Chadwick, 2013), but concentrated and institutionalised within local government.

The role of digital media in local democracy illustrates a divergence from the processes envisioned in many large-scale theories of connective action. This is not to claim that no changes are taking place. Rather, it is that arguments proposing increased external scrutiny of political actions and decision making through digital technologies need to properly account for local contexts and offer greater insights into the changing dynamics of localised political engagement and democracy. Comprehensive empirical fieldwork into Australia’s diverse local settings is urgently required to assess the democratic value of contextually specific media ecologies. A failure to investigate these contexts in Australia, and develop strategies to address their conditions, risks the entrenchment of marginalised communities and a democratic “participation gap” between metropolitan, regional and rural areas.

Note

1. The term media ecology refers to “how technologies and techniques of communication control the form, quantity, speed, distribution, and direction of information” (Postman, 1979, p. 186).

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