

# The Power of Information

by Maggie Farley

The power of information. It's enough to start a war, elect a president, bring down a wall, or bring down an entire regime. It's powerful enough to make governments censor papers and target journalists, and it's compelling enough to make journalists put their lives on the line to get it.

From the first printing press to Facebook, we've gone from Johannes Gutenberg to Mark Zuckerberg. Every new technology has accelerated how we receive news and disrupted the authority of those who controlled information.

In the middle ages, it took a monk a month to copy a Bible by hand. After Gutenberg invented the press in 1436, widespread printing allowed the emergence of popular opinion that challenged the king's writ. And with the spread of information came the powerful revelation that people could make their own decisions about their lives and even govern themselves. But if a nation is to be directed by its citizens, they must be educated and informed. That's what made the founding fathers of the United States decide to protect the freedom of speech and the press in the First Amendment to the Constitution in 1791. Thomas Jefferson said that he would rather have a free press and no government, than a government and no free press.

The free press may be a cornerstone of democracy, but there are times when the free press has seemed like a free-for-all. In the fledgling United States, dozens of partisan newspapers carried brazen attacks against political opponents that today's bloggers would recognize. And courts then had to settle – as they still do today – what the limits of the freedom of expression should be.

Through the decades, we have seen how advances in technologies have transformed the concepts of community, and the creation of news. The country's earliest newspapers were funded by political sponsors and helped forge the creation of political parties. But as the cost of printing became cheaper, and the telegraph made it possible to transmit news instantly across the country, demand grew for more independent sources of news. At the turn of the century, competing newspapers found that sensationalism sells.

A newspaper war between William Randolph Hearst's New York Journal and Joseph Pulitzer's New York World led to sensationalist headlines and made-up reports about Spain's actions in Cuba that created public pressure for a U.S. intervention in 1898. A cartoon featuring a provocative yellow-clad boy in the World led to the term "[yellow journalism](#)" that is still used to refer to biased or sensationalistic coverage.

In the 1920s, radio created a national community that could hear events for themselves. In the 1950s,

television transfixed the national audience with visual images, and bound people who were hearing the same set of news stories. Today, however, with the internet, Facebook and Twitter, news travels faster, but communities are more splintered, with niche new sources that tend to affirm their political beliefs rather than exposing alternate points of view. Information is more accessible than ever, but more scattered and less predictably reliable.

The changes in the way we get the news also alters the hierarchy of information. It turns a broadcast from one source to many into an upload from many to many more. It changes a lecture into a conversation. What effect does that have on democracy? Does it make it easier for people to organize and act, or harder to create common ground?

In their book, “The Elements of Journalism,” veteran newsmen Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel say, “The purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self governing.”

You may not think about your role in the information infrastructure when you pass on a tidbit you got on Facebook or Twitter. After all, in an age when anyone can publish, who exactly is a journalist? What qualifies as journalism?

How do you get your information today? How do you know what’s news and what is entertainment, opinion or propaganda? How can you tell which information sources are reliable and credible? How can you elect a president, challenge a policy, or make an investment if you can’t?

In this unit, we are going to look at how the role of journalism is changing with the advent of new technologies and media, and explore whether people are still able to get the necessary information to make sound choices. By the time you finish, you will be able to articulate why information is so powerful, to create and disseminate credible information, understand the rights and the limits to free expression, and how to verify information before passing it on. These are all skills that journalists and citizens should have, especially as the distinction blurs between the two, so they know how to discern and disseminate information that can be relied on.