

New Global Learning



News, Noise, and Neutrality

Noise, News and Neutrality

Worksheet - Radosław Czekan - Fundacja Polska Debatuje

Part I- Critical and analytical thinking skills- exercises

Exercise 1:

Motion: This House prefers a world without state-funded news organizations (e.g. SABC, BBC, AlJazeera, Deutsche Welle, etc.)

List at least 5 different stakeholders and rank them from the most important to the least important one.

Questions:

1. Why do you place one over the other?
2. Do the Proposition and Opposition teams rank stakeholders in the same way? Why do they differ?
3. How would you define subgroups within the most important stakeholder? How does motion impacts them differently?

Exercise 2

Motion: This House would introduce fairness doctrines in the major news organizations

Divide groups of 2-3 students and draw their sides (the Proposition and the Opposition). List several arguments for either bench. Organize them into categories*:

1. Arguments about the problem or assumptions

2. Arguments about the values, rights, and duties Arguments about the

consequences

Questions:

1. Which arguments are more important strategically for a given side?
 2. How would you attack the best arguments on either side?
- You can use Thinking Models and Strategy as a point of reference for argument categories.

Part II- Motions for further practice

This House would appoint board management of the state-funded media through the general election.

Context: State-funded board management is usually appointed by political bodies. For example, The BBC CEO is appointed by the King-in-Council, on the advice of the Secretary of State, The Deutsche Welle Director General is appointed by the Broadcasting Council which consists of different representatives nominated by e.g. parliament, government, church, trade unions, universities.

This House would compel news media to give coverage to all demonstrations proportionate to the size of that demonstration.

Context: Demonstrations are covered differently by different news outlets at their discretion in terms of air time, framing, commentary, and even size of the demonstration. The coverage significantly influences the public perception of the protest's importance and social mobilization. Though most of the news media invoke in their policies objectivity and fair coverage, there is no effective enforcement of it at this moment.

This House would prosecute the production, distribution, and sharing of fake news

Context: Several countries introduced prosecution of fake news distribution. For example, Greece prosecutes citizens who spread false information during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar regulations were passed in Malaysia, South Africa and the current regulation is used for investigation in Turkey.

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Case studies

Motion

This House prefers a world without state-funded news organizations (e.g. SABC, BBC, AlJazeera, Deutsche Welle, etc.)

Context

News organizations are usually owned by either state, private owners, or groups of interests. Examples of state-funded media are among many: BBC in UK, Deutsche Welle in Germany, TVP in Poland, SABC in South Africa, AlJazeera in Qatar, CBC in Canada.

What is the problem or decision to be made?

State-funded media are widely accessible, free, and a common source of information for citizens. However, there is a strong incentive for the government to influence such media by setting up agendas, instilling soft or hard propaganda, and manipulating the market with unfair advantage. As the official owner or the major financing institution state can (though not need to) choose and revoke the Board of Directors, Chief Editors, particular journalists or influence the program. Therefore state-funded media can bring massive benefits to democracy or be the first nail in the democracy's coffin.

What are the burdens?

The Proposition needs to prove that a world without state-funded news organizations would be better. The Proposition needs to present and characterize what the world would look like without state-funded media. Who would take their place? How consumption of media would change?

The Opposition needs to prove that the status quo with state-funded media would be comparatively better.

What are the competing proposals?

	Without state-funded media (PROP)	With state-funded media (OPP)
Who?	State government	Mostly private owners (private firms, individuals, shareholders)
What?	The world changes like with a magic wand and state-funded news organizations disappear.	Status quo.
When?	Starts tomorrow. A future-oriented debate	
What would it look like in practice?	State doesn't fund media but can own its own communication channels (like websites, social media accounts, press conferences, and official announcements). The state would be probably highly covered by different private media with different perspectives.	State funds some media and has various levels of control over them. The more democratic state, the more likely independent state media.
Exclude extremes	We don't defend every single private owner (like Murdoch Family and Fox News).	We don't defend state media in non-democracies like North Korea or Russia.
Working examples or analogies	USA media market is dominated by private entities with no major state news organizations.	BBC and Al-Jazeera are great examples of high-quality state-funded journalism.

Possible arguments

Proposition

1. State-funded media are inherently biased and dangerous for freedom of speech.

Even the best regulation is not possible to deliver fair and objective coverage, which makes it illegitimate public spending. The government has a strong incentive to influence coverage and even if it doesn't do it, it can have a chilling effect on journalists. In private media, the major evaluator and determinant of the job is the ultimate viewer (also so-called the citizen). In publicly-funded media, politicians can decide about reducing or restructuring the budget.

2. Private media represent public interest much better.

State-funded media needs to cater to the dominant politicians or political parties because their existence relies on it like in Qatar or Poland, so they are easier to influence by the government.

Private media due to market incentives are forced to cater to the majority of the citizens and often to those disadvantaged (to widen the audience base), so even with private ownership, journalists are much more influenced by viewers than owners. For example, numerous controversial laws voted in Poland were kept silent by state media (no information leads to no protests), while were signaled by the private station TVN owned by private owners from the US (information led to street protests and withdrawal of laws).

3. State-funded media harms competition at the market.

Theoretically unlimited budget and abilities to extend it make operation for private local, national and regional news outlets much more difficult and unstable, which stifles competition and deters independent investors or stakeholders to create new news organizations. Some state-funded media dominates also regional and global public discourse (like BBC, Al-Jazeera, Axel Springer-Politico) with little ability to enter the market for other organizations.

Opposition:

1. Privately-owned media are even more biased and dangerous.

Private companies or individuals shape the narrative according to their interests and profits. For example, international media conglomerates like Axel Springer (German capital) is able to shape public discussion for their own business interests in different

European countries (like Poland).

Jeff Bezos (owner of the Wall Street Journal) is able to stifle journalists' investigation and criticism of his enterprises and diminish published arguments on wealth redistribution (e.g. tax or income caps). The influence of the WSJ is not only in the US but also in other parts of the world, where it is commonly quoted.

2. State-funded media are better controlled by the democratic process.

All political parties and citizens have a clear interest to disallow manipulation and censorship. That is why legislation and regulation ensure the independence of media like at BBC.

3. State-funded media covers and represents society's interests.

For example, private media has little incentive to cover global climate change (due to low article performance and so the profits). State media don't need to worry about viewership and can shape public awareness rather than only respond to it. On the other hand, state-funded media are usually expected to cover issues important to the widest group possible in a given country regardless of their status or opinions.

4. State-funded media serve as a necessary balance against polarizing private media

Market incentives for private media encourage polarizing messages and coverage. The lack of alternatives in the form of not-for-profit state-funded news would create even stronger division within society.

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Case studies

Motion

This House would ban political advertising on social media

Context

Advanced targeting of political campaigns on social media made electoral persuasion highly effective, cost-efficient, and difficult to spot. The targeting uses enormous data on particular users (gathered for other purposes like games or friendly interactions) and tailors the political message to them multiple times at the proper moment with proper emotions.

What is the problem or decision to be made?

The question is whether political advertising does not give an unacceptable political advantage, whether it is ethical, and whether it improves democracy.

What are the burdens?

The Proposition needs to prove political advertising brings so much harm that it justifies a ban (not a regulation or education or any other action)

The Opposition needs to prove that the ban is excessive and could lead to even worse consequences. Additionally, the Opposition may argue that political advertising on social media brings some benefits, that outweigh the harm.

What are the competing proposals?

	Ban on political advertising on social media (PROP)	With political advertising on social media (OPP)
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Who?	The state bans platforms, politicians, middlemen, political stakeholders, and any people from executing political advertising,	Everyone can run political advertising on social media.
What?	A ban on political advertising, so any advertisement with a political context or a (even indirect) purpose to influence voters. Advertisements include video spots, visuals, or any information provided by politicians in an organized and intentional way to influence electoral decisions. This does not include the organic online activities of citizens and supporters, independent journalists or organizations lobbying for their causes.	
When?	In the near future. A future-oriented debate	
What would it look like in practice?	Political advertising would be a criminal offense judged in an instant trial in court.	Political advertising in social media is allowed in all forms of activities: posts, ads, videos, comments, stories, reels, etc.
Exclude extremes	We don't support penalizing political discussions by citizens or stifling any political debate on social media.	We don't support spreading falsehood or hate speech for political gain.
Working examples or analogies	Defamation in the electoral campaign is usually held by a judge within 48hrs to limit its impact on voting.	Political advertising on social media does not differ from well-researched political campaigns on billboards.

Possible arguments

Proposition

1. Political advertising on social media promotes the richest, not the best candidates

Political advertising on social media requires significant capital (e.g. to buy users' data or troll farms), know-how, and access to data, which is inaccessible to most candidates. Even if many candidates have access to such resources, the winner is always the richer one due to the enormous advantage in the accuracy and quality of ads, higher reach, stronger online engagement, and retention. Such a disadvantage distorts voting to the extent the proper representation is lost.

2. Platform algorithms are neither transparent nor accountable, but influence electoral results.

The way algorithms select and display content for users is not clear and is being constantly changed. State or courts are not able to see how the selection was decided, and which users were targeted with what messages, which makes manipulation, deception, and disinformation easier, more attractive, and more effective. The Brexit campaign is claimed to be significantly influenced by social media manipulation. There is no surprise that in Q1 2023 most polls presented the majority of UK citizens would vote for EU membership.

3. Harm on the election is irreversible.

Fake news, hateful campaigns or scaremongering brings political gain even if it will be later reported and taken down. The effect is achieved. Even in the court, the scope of harm would be difficult to prove, so the punishment would be usually underestimated.

4. Social media advertising algorithms encourage polarization and radicalization.

The ad performs better if it creates a strong emotional response for the most people possible. Therefore igniting heated conflict, spreading radical claims, and exaggeration are used commonly in advertising. Such algorithms bring benefits to platforms, so it is unlikely to be modified in the near future.

Opposition:

1. Political speech is the most fundamental expression of freedom of speech

Presenting political ideas to citizens is the most basic human right in a democracy. Moreover, all presented on social media would be said anyway in real campaigning

or TV program. Therefore banning political communication because it is effective is counterproductive for democracy.

2. Political advertising on social media is one of the cheapest campaigning expenses and allows niche or starting politicians to gain supporters.

Compared to traditional ways of promoting candidates (open meetings, printed ads, and spots on TV) social media offers free or significantly cheaper opportunities to build a supporter base. Moreover, social media advertising allows to target undecided voters, but also opponents' supporters, which diminishes polarization and increases representation.

3. The social media are a double-edged sword. Opponents can also use such advertising to advance their cause. There is no inequality.

We should encourage politicians to be more innovative in ways to understand citizens and offer them valuable policies. That is why any way to remove social media political advertising deters the most ambitious and valuable candidates from politics.

4. Social media advertising allows for real, unique dialogue with voters, due to comments, likes, and sharing options.

Traditional advertising (banners, TV spots, newspaper ads) has not allowed for instant interactions, which created a false perception of agreements and similarity, while society and highly diverse and needs more conversations.

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Case studies

Motion

This House would introduce fairness doctrines in the major news organizations

Context

In the status quo news organizations decide on their own what time, what guests, and to what extent to cover events, debates, or any controversial issues. Some media outlets use internal rules and regulations for objectivity, neutrality, or fair coverage. However, most media cover issues, and events and invite guests based on their agenda, biases, interests, and preferences.

What is the problem or decision to be made?

Major news organizations are capable of massive political, social, and cultural influence. Therefore society's interest is to regulate media in a way that it enhances democracy and freedom. Unfortunately, mere access to the platform like major broadcasters even for a few minutes is nearly impossible for some citizens, organizations, and voices. The question is how to balance private and public interests as well as how to improve public discourse.

What are the burdens?

The Proposition needs to prove that state intervention in media to ensure fair coverage is the best way (better than feasible alternatives) to solve current problems. Moreover, the Proposition needs to provide arguments for why private freedom limitation is justified.

The Opposition needs to prove that the status quo or feasible alternatives are better options to solve given problems or that the state has no right to such intervention.

What are the competing proposals?

	With fairness doctrines (PROP)	Without state-led fairness doctrines(OPP)
Who?	State government intervenes	Mostly private owners (private firms, individuals, shareholders) decide independently
What?	<p>Obligation intended to ensure fair representation of diverse voices and balanced coverage of controversial issues in broadcasting programs.</p> <p>Only in major news organizations like: CNN (US), BBC (UK), TVN (Poland), Deutsche Welle (Germany).</p>	Freedom to decide independently how to invite guests, which issues to cover, how much time spent on issues and guests etc.
When?	In near future. A future-oriented debate	
What would it look like in practice?	<p>On issues like abortion, all media would need to invite pro-life, pro-choice activists, and some other options.</p> <p>Demonstrations are covered proportionally to the turnout regardless of the events or interests.</p>	<p>On issues like abortion, editors exclude religious representatives, because the media believes in a secular state or does not invite anti-science influencers.</p> <p>Demonstrations are covered proportionally to their importance and social interest, not just the number of participants.</p>
Exclude extremes	We don't want everyone to be involved, because it would paralyze coverage. We limit ourselves to max. 5 guests from the most represented groups and limit demonstration coverage to current coverage habits.	<p>We condemn media that don't invite women or ignore significant social groups.</p> <p>However we believe the change should be from the bottom up.</p>

Working examples or analogies	Fairness Doctrine from the US, but applied more effectively. Another example: the impartiality rule at BBC.	Most notable news organizations like The Economist, CNN, and South China Post demonstrate the diversity of opinions without state obligation.
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Possible arguments

Proposition

1. Existing market incentives increase polarization.

Due to the limited time and occasions, citizens consume media, there is a strong incentive for broadcasters to cater to viewers' biases and prejudices to the highest extent because it increases emotional response, engagement, and retention in all media channels. Polarizing media invite one-sided guests, imitate experts, ignore competing events and opinions as well as exaggerate the importance and undergoing of some events. Only state intervention can break this cycle.

2. Private interests of media organizations distort reality and democratic choices. The rule of greater good shall be applied for regulation.

Most major broadcasters are privately owned, profit-incentivized organizations with economic and political interests. Therefore selection of stories, coverage, and guests even if it looks fair and objective can significantly exclude important influence groups or events from the public discourse and further from democratic representation. Moreover, media owners might have the incentive to exclude people, events, and stories that in any way could harm their interests. For example media operating in the EU, but owned by the USA are not likely to platform any critical guests toward the US government.

3. Freedom of speech is intended to increase the diversity of voices. If it were used to limit the diversity of voices, it would be inconsistent.

Some editors argue that media channels are allowed to invite whomever they want and cover whatever and however, they want due to freedom of speech. Such

reasoning would lead to absurd conclusions, that media that actively shut down some important voices is a freedom of speech promoter. That is why such an attitude is illegitimate and inconsistent.

4. Fairness doctrines increase the quality of public discourse and further the quality of democratic representation in elections.

More diversity and equality in discussion means more chances to correct, exchange and hear other points of view, which allows viewers to be more critical and open. E.g. Media would be allowed to platform conspiracy theories on global warming without a climate activist or scientist in the newsroom.

Opposition:

1. An average person has the easiest access to different opinions in the entire history.

The ability to access, read, and connect with diverse views or groups of interests or even the coverage of events is the easiest and most accessible in history due to free and common social media platforms and free streaming options. Therefore the intervention claims to solve the unexisting problems are excessive and illegitimate.

2. Private and often conflicting interests of different organizations are a guarantee of freedom and diversity.

Media compete for viewers and therefore have a clear interest in catering to various citizens, and groups and involve events that are not covered by other media organizations. Fairness doctrines would enforce some diversity but would decrease overall access to media platforms for many other stakeholders, who would not fit under the state regulatory guidelines.

E.g. fairness doctrines would provide an excuse to not invite a citizen-led electoral committee in France while there are already 3 major parties hosted in a program.

3. Fairness doctrines encourage destructive conflict and polarization.

To increase the chances to be covered a person, group or event needs to be as far from the other side as possible. Therefore even if the groups would be moderate and agree on most issues, they would need to differ, polarize, and disagree to increase their air time. This is destructive for public discourse. For example, some

conservative politicians might be encouraged to be more radical on immigration (e.g. dehumanizing migrants) to increase their ability to be invited.

4. Fairness doctrines are hard to control and therefore could easily slip into censorship with a freezing effect on media.

There is no clear classification of who is an expert or valuable speaker on any topic and what side they represent. Neither there is a classification of how many and what sides exist to the particular problem. Therefore any execution of the fairness doctrine would seem too challenging and risky to fail in excessive censorship

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Case studies

Motion

This House prefers that speech and user content on social media be regulated by the government as opposed to set independently by the platforms

Context

Social media platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) use internal regulations and procedures for content moderation. The declarations and execution might vary, but it puts a lot of responsibility, autonomy, and power in the hands of the privately-owned platforms, which are not democratically accountable.

What is the problem or decision to be made?

The increasing number of fake news, hate speech, and other harmful content is alarming. The question is no longer whether should it be moderated, but how should it be done.

What are the burdens?

The Proposition needs to prove that government regulation would be more effective in targeting harmful content on social media than independent moderation by platforms.

The Opposition needs to prove that independent moderation by platforms is more effective than governmental intervention.

What are the competing proposals?

	Government-led regulation (PROP)	Independent platforms moderation (OPP)
Who?	The state compels social media platforms to apply state regulation.	Social media platforms (privately owned) set and execute content moderation rules independently.
What?	Content moderation rules and execution on i.a.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fake news • hate speech • disturbing content • age-inappropriate content • other sensitive content. 	
When?	Now and in near future. A future-oriented debate	
What would it look like in practice?	<p>All regulation is created in a democratic process, is transparent and its execution is enforced by law.</p> <p>Poor application by platforms would lead to sanctions such as fines, blocking, and other measures.</p>	<p>Facebook and Twitter have different policies. Any user can report content at any time, but the issue is handled by internal algorithms or officers and might be subjective.</p> <p>However, the measures might be much more up-to-date, flexible, and tailored to the platform.</p>
Exclude extremes	We don't support the Thought Police and we do not intend to effectively ban social media.	We don't support radical freedom of speech and no moderation or poor moderation by platforms. However, we believe the rules and enforcement should be handled by the owners.
Working examples or analogies	States already penalize hate crimes, defamation, or fraud regardless of where it happens. Other similar policies include AI regulation or misinformation counteraction in EU.	Twitter demonstrated before the government acted important initiatives e.g.: fake news flagging in the COVID-19 pandemic or account authentication.

Possible arguments

Proposition

1. Platforms policies are always subject to conflicting interests of the owner

Platforms belongs to the owner, whose interest are often clashing with the users or the public good. The acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk and the reopening of Donald Trump's account (who previously with using fake news inspired the attack on the Capitol) are notable examples of the profit-incentive dependence on the platform. Even the best policy could be changed overnight without any notice or accountability.

2. Platforms are not transparent in their operations

Social media platforms do not share (or even are not able to share) the process of content moderation e.g. in the case of account reporting, because of the complex algorithms that handle most of the operations. The algorithms are not publicly available and not regulated and therefore no one can question the decisions effectively. Government intervention would enforce platforms to at least achieve desirable goals and be judged based on the consequences of the moderation.

3. State regulation reflects local laws, context, and morality

Social media companies are usually based in the US or other single countries, which does not represent local laws, context, and morality of e.g. Brazilians, Spaniards or Egyptians. Therefore the moderation needs to be guided by local laws rather than imposed by a US-centered, narrow, and privileged perspective. Even if platforms would be eager to comply with hundreds of local regulations, it seems highly difficult to implement and nearly impossible to reliably manage on a daily basis.

4. Government-led laws are usually consulted with stakeholders (companies, citizens, NGOs) and are more stable, which creates more confidence in operations and more compliance from day one.

Platforms are not obliged or incentivized to conduct open consultations, which causes social backlash, disobedience and overall lack of trust in society.

Opposition:

1. Government is not competent to make the regulation effective.

Officials, stakeholders, or even external experts do not have access to confidential information on algorithms, their future operations, and the consequences of the intended rules. Politicians rarely understand modern technology and therefore are not able to create effective laws or make platforms accountable.

2. Government regulation would make content moderation slower and less flexible.

The nature of social media is incredibly dynamic, which requires high flexibility, adaptation, and reaction in a matter of hours or days. The legislative or executive process is too slow and would only increase the reach of harmful content. For example, climate change disinformation campaigns are fast, massive, ambiguous, and related to breaking news, so the regulation is often unable to prevent or respond unless it is based on preventive algorithms and advanced information on users, which is not accessible to the government.

3. Government intervention is always politically motivated

Social media platforms have clear incentives to cater to the most users possible, including those sensitive, and disadvantaged, but also disappointed with a flood of fake news on their wall. Politicians focus on political goals and prioritize the agenda and interests of the voting base. Therefore government intervention is likely to create discriminatory and unfair content moderation e.g. anti-immigration government would diffuse the definition of hate speech to make it ineffective. Private entities might not be perfect, but at least are more accountable to users than politicians.

4. Platforms' ability to effectively moderate content becomes a competitive advantage.

More and more users demand effective moderation from platforms e.g. flagging fake news, removing destructive accounts, preventive measures, or automated fact-checking on climate change content. Therefore more platforms (like Twitter, and Instagram) improve their moderation efforts from the bottom up and state regulation would only destroy it.