

Is the digital media a panacea for the ills of mass media concentration?

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Mass media play an important role in democracies, educating the public, providing a forum for discourse, and shaping public policy. Control of mass media by a few elites, however, is inimical to democracy as it limits the variety of messages disseminated, who can participate in discourse, and what is discussed. Yet, even in democratic countries, mass media is controlled by a few.

In the United States, for example, [90 per cent of traditional news media outlets](#) (newspapers, radio, and television stations) are owned by only six firms, which are controlled by 232 media executives. [Similar patterns](#) prevail across European media. Initially a news source for traditional media in locations where alternate sources were unavailable, digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook seem to be eroding traditional media's hegemonic lock on public discourse. But *is digital media truly a panacea for the ills of mass media concentration?* [Our study](#) of the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) provides paradoxical answers to this question.

SOPA and associated legislative proposals in the US (e.g., PIPA) and Europe (e.g., ACTA) aimed to curb dissemination of pirated content on the Internet, but also provided media powerhouses the ability to censor speech by claiming copyright violations. The Electronic Frontier Foundation, a digital rights organisation, [noted](#) that "SOPA would not just go after copyright infringers; it leaves no one on the Internet untouched". The proposed legislation polarised organisations and legislators; [most traditional media](#) organisations supported it and most digital media organisations opposed it; [legislators](#) who received campaign financing from traditional media organisations generally supported it and legislators who received financing from digital media organisations generally opposed it.

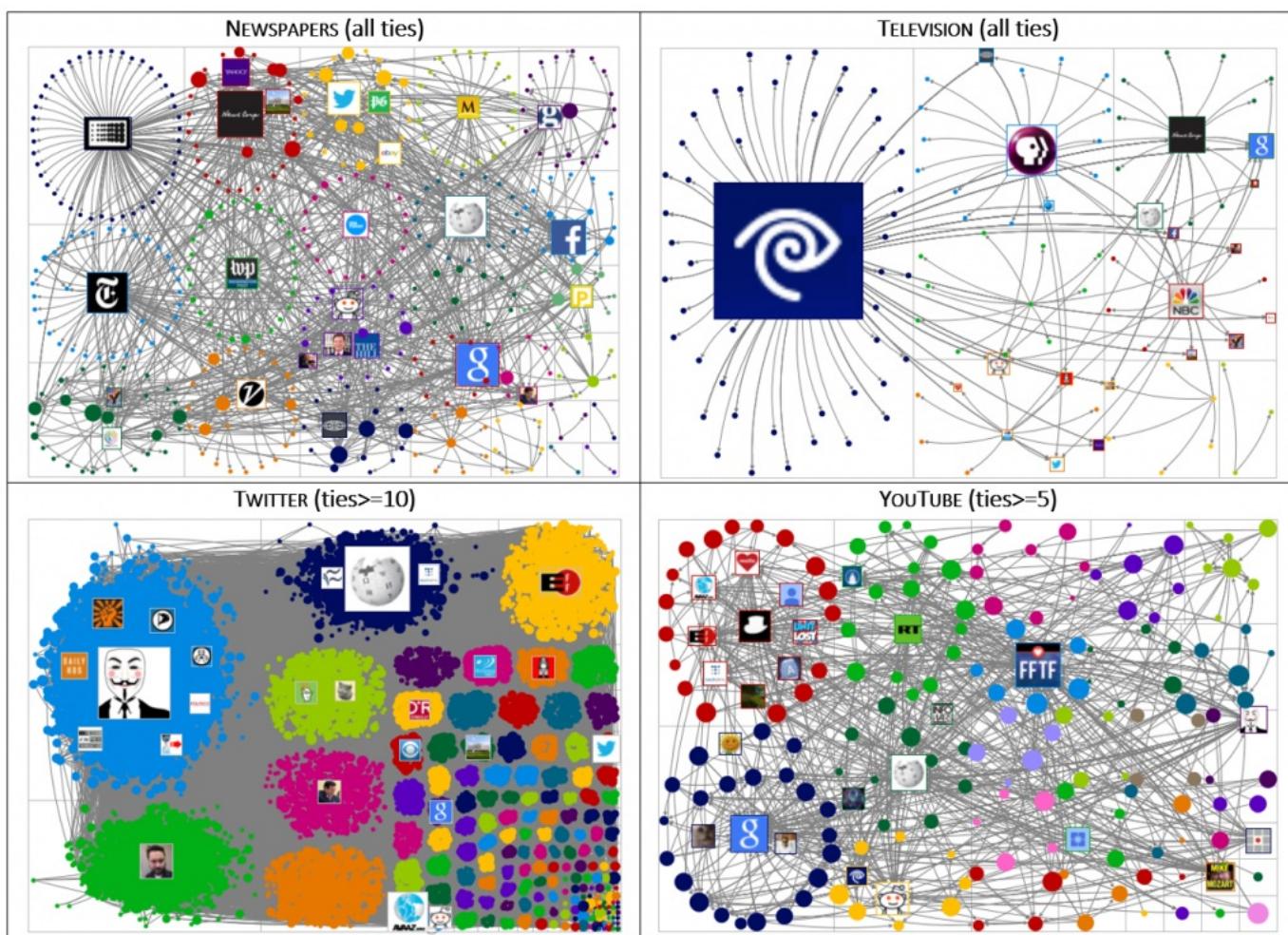
Between introduction of the proposal on October 26th, 2011 and Stephen Colbert's coverage of it on December 1st, 2011, traditional media largely ignored the legislation, despite a flurry of protests from digital rights advocacy groups and prominent Internet organisations. Internet organisations such as the Wikimedia Foundation, tumblr, and Reddit used digital media to disseminate information on the problems SOPA would create and mobilised the Internet

community, creating a [watershed moment](#) in digital rights as legislators realised that digital media were less susceptible to control.

How did digital media mobilise? In our research, we addressed this question by examining the social *structure* forged by participants on digital versus traditional mass media and the *content* of messages disseminated. We studied SOPA coverage across two traditional news media – newspapers and television – and two digital media platforms – Twitter and YouTube.

Structurally, we observed three things (Figure 1). **First**, there were vastly more participants on digital than on traditional media. While those with a viewpoint on the SOPA legislation needed to be invited by traditional media to share that viewpoint, anyone could share their views on digital media. **Second**, there was inertia in participation in traditional media discourse – either as authors or sources: those participating early tended to continue participating. This was not the case on digital media though, as participants came and went from the discourse space over time. **Third**, while many digital media participants were isolated, there was greater inertia in who was influential on the traditional lean medium (newspapers) than on the digital lean medium (Twitter).

Figure 1: Social networks constructed by referencing or citing others across media



Notes: Node size depicts actors' relative influence; groupings, depicted by node colors and position on grid, represent distinct communities.
Only prominent actors in social media networks are depicted because of the density of networks.

Content-wise, we noted two things. **First**, while there was greater diversity in the ways participants framed the SOPA issue on digital than traditional media, participants on digital media were more apt to omit frames inimical to their interests than were participants on traditional media (Figure 2). Specifically, participants on digital media focused almost exclusively on anti-SOPA frames and were derisive of those sharing a pro-SOPA perspective.

Second, while the average traditional media story actually employed a wider range of frame “signatures” – message elements that enhanced the resonance of the frame (Figure 3) – than did the average digital media story, because of the vast number of messages on digital media, anti-SOPA frames diffused quickly across digital media via evocative digital signatures or memes such as visuals (Figure 4) and [songs](#).

Figure 2: Frames shared across media

Frames	NEWSPAPER	TELEVISION	TWITTER	YOUTUBE
Diagnostic Frames				
+ Anti-piracy/-counterfeiting	●●●	●●●	●	●●
+ Drastic action is required	●			
+ Illegal conduct is not free speech ... It's stealing		●		
+ Illegal Web sites abroad stealing American IP		●		
+ Piracy is rampant	●		●	●
- Censorship/ First Amendment violation	●●	●	●●●●	●●●●●
- Imitation is not the same as copyright infringement			●	●
- Internet blacklist bill	●	●	●	●●
- Legislators are incompetent	●●	●●	●●●●	●●●●●
- Legislators are over-reacting	●●	●●	●●●●●	●●●●●
- Legislators are pandering to entertainment industry	●	●	●●	●●
- Obsolete entertainment industry business model			●	●●
- SOPA supporters created the problem			●	●●
- SOPA opposition disseminating misinformation	●	●	●	
- SOPA supporters disseminating misinformation			●●	●
- USA is being a bully	●			●●
○ Technology enables both good and bad	●		●	
Prognostic Frames				
+ Good for entertainment industry/jobs	●	●	●	
+ Improve quality of media content online	●			
+ Prevent increasing cost of products for Americans		●		
+ Protect public health	●			
- Bad for business/ innovation/ economy	●●●●	●●	●●	●●●●●
- Bad for art/fun/ gaming/ pornography		●●	●●	●●
- Bad for international relations			●●	●●
- Break the Internet	●	●	●	●●
- Diminish Internet freedom	●	●	●●	●●
- Enact/enable repressive regimes/silence free speech	●	●	●●	●●
- Increase litigation/government overhead for enforcement	●	●	●	●
- Legislators would be guilty of piracy		●	●	●
- Loss of popular online resources	●●	●	●●●●●	●●●●
- Make third-party intermediaries enforcers of copyright	●	●	●	●
- Shut down sites	●	●	●●	●●
- Threaten cybersecurity	●	●	●	●
- Threaten supporting companies' privacy (Anonymous)	●		●	●
Motivational Frames				
+ Don't let the law die out	●			
+ Examine SOPA supporters' motives	●			
+ Maintain parity between online and offline theft policing	●	●	●	
+ Protect Americans	●	●	●	
- Boycott supporters	●		●●●●	●
- Call legislators	●		●●●	●●
- Demand freedom	●		●●	●●
- Don't break the Internet	●	●	●	●
- Don't let the Internet vanish			●	●
- Re-post and share information			●	●
- SOPA strike			●●●●●	●
- Stop the law that will censor the Internet	●		●	●●
- Unite against SOPA	●		●●	●

+Pro-SOPA frames | - Anti-SOPA frames | O Neutral frames

More dots indicate greater emphasis

Figure 3: Types of signature elements or memes used

NEWSPAPER	TELEVISION	TWITTER	YOUTUBE
Metaphors			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ SOPA is like ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ China's Great Firewall ▫ suing Ford just because a Mustang was used in a bank robbery ▫ ...to slay the dragon, we need more than a fly swatter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ SOPA is like ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ suing Ford just because a Mustang was used in a bank robbery ▫ obliterating a neighborhood that just had a burglary ▫ Can't find the pirate so you go after the guy that paved the road 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ SOPA is like ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ China's Great Firewall ▫ totalitarian regime like Nazi Germany ▫ landmines in stores to discourage shoplifting ▫ burning a Walmart 'coz they sell knock-offs ▫ releasing tigers to deal with urban foxes ▫ ...fewer foxes ... but have to deal with tigers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ SOPA is like ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ China's Great Firewall ▫ dealing with escaped lion by blasting some kittens with a flamethrower and kitten BBQ=bad!! ▫ burning down your house because you have an ant problem
Exemplars			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Red Mass Group blogger: very existence could be wiped out if SOPA passes ▪ Ben Huh, CEO of Cheezburger: threatened to move 1,000 domains off GoDaddy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Aqua: able to download "I'm a Barbie Girl" from YouTube ▪ Senator Blunt: guilty of theft ... for using Flickr picture on Twitter page ▪ Chinese bloggers: unable to protest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Justin Bieber, pop singer: could be sent to jail because of the videos that made him famous (#FreeBieber) ▪ Ben Huh, CEO of Cheezburger: threatened to move 1,000 domains off GoDaddy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ben Huh, CEO, Cheezburger: SOPA will curb first amendment rights and prohibit the growth of American jobs ▪ YouTube user, The Internet is the only way poor people like him can have fun and SOPA would take it away
Catchphrases			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Don't Break the Internet ▪ Stealing the American Dream 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Don't break the Internet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ #DontBreakTheInternet ▪ #BoycottGoDaddy ▪ #NoSOPA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Don't break the Internet ▪ SOPA? How about NOPA! ▪ SOPA strike ▪ Stop SOPA
Depictions			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Foreign rogue Web sites ▪ Washington legislating Internet akin to gorilla playing Stradivarius ▪ Web users: corporate pawns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Foreign criminals ▪ Wikipedia: Spreading misinformation about bill 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Confused, middle-aged politicians making rules for the Internet ▪ Google: Piracy leader who streams movies free, sells advertisements around them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rep. Mel Watt: I'm not a nerd ▪ Technically incompetent legislators in charge of the Internet is like toddler at the controls of a 747
Visual Images			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Pirate Bay screenshot ▪ Screenshots of protest websites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Pirate Bay screenshot ▪ Screenshots of protest websites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Censored profile pictures ▪ Redacted text ▪ Links to animated GIFs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Screenshots of protest websites ▪ Animated GIFs ▪ Stop signs
Sarcasm/Irony			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ With SOPA you get more prison time for singing Michael Jackson songs than killing him ▪ Bills do surgery on the Internet and haven't talked to a doctor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Makes you long for a world where people respected works of others... [Imagine all the people] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ With SOPA you get more prison time for singing Michael Jackson songs than killing him ▪ We want to thank co-sponsors of #SOPA. We were beginning to think we were the only ones who hated freedom. #TSA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ With SOPA you get more prison time for singing Michael Jackson songs than killing him ▪ SOPA=Stupidity Only Politicians Acquire
Music			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Day the LOLcats Died 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Imagine all the People 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Day the LOLcats Died ▪ Don't let 'em Censor the Internet ▪ Firewall 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Day the LOLcats Died ▪ Don't let 'em Censor the Internet ▪ Firewall ▪ SOPA Cabana

Figure 4: Some SOPA Protest Visuals



In sum, digital media facilitated public discourse by:

1. Promoting widespread awareness about SOPA: Were it not for digital media coverage, the public likely would have had little knowledge about SOPA, since traditional media were not motivated to critique the legislative proposal;
2. Permitting a wider segment of the public to engage in the discourse about the legislation and to be heard;
3. Propagating more evocative, attention-grabbing messages.

Yet, digital media also encumbered public discourse by constraining the frames sanctioned on digital media, actively discouraging articulation of competing frames. As we embrace the benefits of unfettered digital media, we also need

to guard against the public's potentially irresponsible use of the media. The recent dissemination of false news, culminating in the [PizzaGate fiasco](#), underscores the threat of an irresponsible public. Nevertheless, digital media offer a democratising counterpart to state- or oligopoly-driven traditional mass media, as long as its governance remains neutral and its participation varied.

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Notes:

- This blog is based on the authors' paper [Are Social Media Emancipatory or Hegemonic? Societal Effects of Mass Media Digitization in the Case of the SOPA Discourse](#), *MIS Quarterly Special Issue: ICT and Societal Challenges*, Vol. 40 No. X, 2016
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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