

Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

One Day's News Shows Effects of New Media ^[1]

As an indication of how online media are becoming ever more dominant in our world, consider two newspaper front pages (the ink-on-paper versions) on Wednesday, April 24.

Of the six stories on the *New York Times* front page, three are related to new media: one about the alleged Boston bombers' online personae; one about Al Qaeda's online instructions for bomb-making that may have been used for the Boston attacks; and a story about dissent in Vietnam that is testing the communist party there. Add to these the front-page *Wall Street Journal* story about a Twitter hoax concerning a bombing at the White House that caused the U.S. stock markets to lose about \$200 billion in value within just a few minutes. (When the hoax was exposed, the markets quickly climbed back up.)

In terms of long-term significance, the Vietnam story stands out. With the Vietnamese economy slumping and public unhappiness growing, the nation's communist leadership is attracting sharp criticism for its absolutist rule. The *Times* story says: "Perhaps most important, the party is struggling to reckon with a society that is better informed and more critical because of news and opinion that spread through the Internet, circumventing the state-controlled news media."

The availability of information contributes to a sense of empowerment among the public. The gatekeeper role that governments once played in controlling the flow of news has become largely a thing of the past. There are simply too many Internet-based sources of information for a government to stomp on unless the nation wants to retreat into political isolation. The voices of dissent in Vietnam echo those that were so loud during the Arab Spring of 2011, when social media – amplified by satellite television—helped bring cohesion to the uprisings.

Vietnam will not be the final place in which information-fueled unrest occurs. The balance of power between governments and publics has been permanently altered by the increasing accessibility of new media. Governments are being faced with a fundamental choice: respond or repress.

The other *Times* story worth particular attention is headlined, "Boston Suspects Seen as Zealots, and Self-Taught." The notion that terrorism can be self-taught is frightening but entirely accurate. Several years ago, Al Qaeda and its brethren realized that bringing people to training camps, even in the wilds of Pakistan or Yemen, was dangerous and inefficient. And so, instruction in many of the vicious skills of terrorism can now be found on the Internet. Bomb-making recipes, weapons training, and tactical coaching are available online, and as soon as one dangerous Facebook page or website is pulled down, another pops up. Intelligence agencies monitor such sites and try to follow their visitors, but the almost infinite breadth of the Internet limits the effectiveness of such efforts.

The third *Times* story, “Unraveling Brothers’ Online Lives, Link by Link,” underscores the difficulties of online detective work. Even the disturbing content, such as video of Chechen militants, does not lead to the conclusion that its viewer will conduct a savage act of terrorism. In retrospect, a danger signal might be perceived, but that is far too little, far too late.

As for the *Wall Street Journal* article about the Twitter hoax and the stock markets, the public should keep in mind the vulnerability that accompanies speed in dissemination of information. News organizations themselves are sometimes guilty of sacrificing accuracy in the interest of being first with a story, and Wall Street traders – human or computerized – are susceptible to being merely reactive to “information” regardless of whether it is correct.

All this in just one morning. It is a useful – and cautionary – reminder about how dominant new media have become in our lives.
