

Content Guidance

■ Section A Globalisation and the digital social world

What is the relationship between globalisation and digital forms of communication?

Defining globalisation

In simple terms, globalisation is seen as the process by which the world is becoming more interconnected. However, the term is used in different ways by different people and there are various problems with many of the definitions which are given.

One problem is that globalisation is used to describe at least three distinct processes:

- **Economic globalisation.** This involves the interconnectedness of the world's economies, through global trade.
- **Political globalisation.** Political ideas such as democracy, equality and human rights, most prevalent in Western countries, are now more influential around the world, sometimes leading to protests and even military interventions. Additionally, the political leadership in different countries is increasingly interconnected, with more powerful countries often intervening in or 'propping up' weaker or smaller regimes.
- **Cultural globalisation.** With globalised communication comes the spread and sharing of national cultures, potentially leading to more similarities between cultures across the world, known as cultural homogenisation.

Each of these processes is also complicated by power imbalances, which means that globalisation is not a neutral process that happens in the same way everywhere, but is a process that is led by some countries (particularly Western ones) and happens to other countries.

In 1964, Marshall McLuhan predicted the emergence of what he called the '**global village**'. He likened communications and media in the 1960s to a giant central nervous system which ultimately would connect everybody in the world. He argued that this would eventually compress the world's thousands of cultures into one 'super-culture', predicting cultural homogenisation — the idea that cultural diversity would eventually be replaced by cultural sameness.

McLuhan's idea of the global village can be clearly seen in modern definitions of globalisation. Albrow (1990), for example, defines globalisation as all those processes by which the disparate people of the world have been incorporated into a single society, while Waters (2001) observes that it is a social process in which the constraints of geography on economic, political, social and cultural arrangements have declined.

Exam tip

You need to be aware of the various definitions of globalisation and to consider some of the problems in defining the concept.

Knowledge check 1

Give a current example of each of the three aspects of globalisation.

Global village The world viewed as one interconnected community, whose population all experience similar things.

Martell (2010) observes that at a micro-level, globalisation for individuals means that both geographical distance and time zones are no longer important. Harvey (1990) calls this 'space-time compression'. The instantaneous interaction afforded by digital technology, such as e-mails or instant messaging, has erased distance and substituted virtual space for physical space. It does not matter where people are in the world; this global digital-interconnectedness means that people can occupy the same online space at the same time.

At a macro or societal level, globalisation means that goods, money, people, popular culture, drugs, crime, terror, news, images and ideas are now crossing national borders on an extraordinary scale and at an incredible speed. Societies that were once distant, independent and different from one another are today increasingly globally intertwined and interdependent whether they want to be or not. Moreover, the macro and micro are also interwoven in that the local lives of ordinary people everywhere in the world are increasingly shaped by events, decisions and actions that take place thousands of miles from where they live and work.

Globalisation is not a new process. For example, the voyages of discovery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the resulting growth in global trade and empire building are all examples of globalisation in practice. However, the process has speeded up considerably in recent years, due mainly to technological advances.

Notably, advances in digital forms of communication and computer technology have transformed the world's concept of time, distance and space. Important examples include e-mail, smartphones, satellite technology, digital television, texting and the internet (with its diversity of websites, social media networks and blogs). Information in all its varied forms — news, political ideas, financial transactions and cultural products — can now be transmitted instantaneously to most global destinations from any part of the world that has a digital connection.

For example, most banks, stock exchanges and trading markets have utilised digital technology to set up a 24-hour global financial market, while transnational businesses have used digital technology such as e-mails, conference calls and the internet to effectively manage an international division of labour in which production and marketing are often dispersed across continents.

Digital communications have helped to globalise war, conflict and terrorism. For instance, smartphones in Africa are seen as necessities in coordinating civil wars, while terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, and individual terrorists such as white supremacists in New Zealand and the USA, have successfully used the internet and social networking sites to globally publicise their cause.

Another driver of globalisation has been capitalism, in that the ownership and control of the world's digital forms of communication have become increasingly concentrated in the hands of fewer transnational corporations. This has resulted in cultural products — such as films, television, music, designer fashion, news, social networking sites, food, drink, brands and sport — being developed and manufactured for global rather than local consumption. Steven (2004) observes that, despite huge differences in location and upbringing, much of the world's population now listens to the same

Exam tip

The micro-macro distinction is a useful evaluative tool. Don't just focus on the impact of globalisation on societies — think also about its impact on individuals. For example, compare the impact of globalisation on your own life with its impact on someone living in a developing country.

music and watches the same films and television via the same digital communication networks and social media.

Developments in digital forms of communication in a global society

Digital revolution

Some argue that the social world can be divided into three revolutionary periods:

- 1 The agricultural revolution — the development of farming to cultivate crops.
- 2 The industrial revolution — the development of science and technology to build machinery in order to manufacture goods from raw materials in factories.
- 3 The computer or information age, culminating in the development of the internet and the World Wide Web.

The World Wide Web is a global multimedia library of information and services in cyberspace which is made possible by a global system of interconnected super-computers (the internet). The development of high-capacity broadband wireless networks means that more people than ever can connect at high speed to this information superhighway and communicate in forms very different from those found in the pre-digital age (such as chatting with a friend in their physical presence, talking on the telephone or writing a letter). For example, Skype means that users can see and chat to people on the other side of the world.

The early twenty-first century saw a further revolution in communication as society entered a digital age — sometimes described as the **digital revolution**. Digitalisation refers to a dramatic change in the way information is stored and transmitted. All information, regardless of format (for example, images, text and sound), is now converted into binary code. This has led to an explosion of new types of digital communication devices, including cheap laptop computers, tablets, smartphones and digital television.

Digitalisation has led to three types of **media convergence**: technological, economic and cultural.

Technological convergence refers to the merging of different types of information — text, photographs, video, film, voices, music and social networking — into a single delivery system, through devices such as smartphones and tablets. Digitalisation allows information to be delivered across a range of media platforms which were once separate and unconnected technologies. For example, on your tablet or smartphone you can read a newspaper, download and listen to music, watch videos or films, and create your own video or photo content, as well as searching the internet and engaging with others through social media.

Economic convergence refers to the fact that media, computer, television and telecommunications companies that once operated in separate spheres of development and production are increasingly diversifying their business models, or engaging in alliances with one another, to produce multimedia delivery systems. This is because digitalisation has rendered the borders between these forms of communication irrelevant. For instance, Amazon is not just an online retailer — it also produces its own tablets, runs a streaming service and produces original media content.

Cultural convergence refers to the fact that most members of society increasingly interact with one another using the same type of digital communication. Old ways

Knowledge check 2

Explain how developments in digital communications have impacted on the process of globalisation.

Digital revolution A

term used to describe the transformation that digital technology has made to society, particularly in the ways in which we communicate and how information can be shared.

Media convergence

The coming together of different forms of media, for instance on a single device or in the delivery systems of a few large providers.

of communicating such as writing letters are being replaced by digital social media networks such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter. This also means that individual cultures become less distinct, since we are all sharing similar communication experiences and viewing similar content. This is linked to the process of cultural homogenisation, which is considered further below.

A major feature of the digital age has been the appearance and rapid spread of social media platforms. Social media refers to a participatory culture or network of websites and applications which enable a community of users to interact and collaborate, for example, by creating and sharing content, engaging in social networking or spreading news. There are different types of social media.

One type is digital social networks, which encourage registered users to create public profiles and to create a list of users who can be invited to share connections. Users upload photos and videos, send messages and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues via computers, tablets and smartphones. The most popular social networking site in the world is Facebook, with an estimated 2.4 billion active users worldwide. We Are Social's 2019 data suggest that in the UK, 71% of people aged 13 and over can be reached through Facebook. However, Facebook usage among younger people has fallen in recent years, in favour of sites such as Snapchat and Instagram, though the latter is owned by Facebook.

Other types of social media include:

- microblogging sites such as Twitter, which has 326 million active users per month worldwide
- sites run by individual diarists and commentators, known as bloggers, who write about a diversity of subjects, from baking to politics
- content from video bloggers or 'vloggers' who upload videos of themselves onto YouTube, discussing, for example, commercial products relating to beauty or fashion (often sponsored by advertisers)
- open content sites such as Wikipedia, where users are encouraged to collaborate on an online web-encyclopaedia

Before the computer-digital age, people who wished to share their interests, ideas or opinions with people in other parts of the country or world were constrained by geographical distance and time zones, and had to use forms of communication that were either slow (letters) or expensive (telephones). However, the computer-digital age has produced **virtual communities** in which globally dispersed people with common interests are no longer constrained by geographical distance or time zones. The access provided by the internet to a diversity of websites, newsgroups, discussion boards and social networking platforms, as well as e-mail and video applications such as Skype, has enabled instantaneous interaction and sharing at any time and from any place. This 'space-time compression' has completely changed the relationship individuals can have with other people, since their physical location has become less relevant.

Van Dijck (2013) argues that both identity and community are increasingly shaped by virtual communities. For example, teenagers can no longer imagine organising their social lives without social media; news organisations have become increasingly dependent on Twitter for breaking news stories; would-be pop superstars ignore YouTube at their peril; and A-level students cannot imagine an academic world

Knowledge check 3

Give another example of each of the three types of media convergence.

Virtual communities

Communities that exist on the internet.

without Google and Wikipedia. Carter (2005) argues that members of virtual communities see the relationships that they establish online as equally important to those that they establish in offline physical communities.

Networked global society

The concept of a networked global society is mainly associated with the neo-Marxist sociologist Manuel Castells (1996, 2004), who discusses social networks and their growing importance. Social networks relate to the connections people have with each other, and have always existed, in the form of family and kinship groups, friendship groups and business contacts. However, in an age where information is more important than physical products, Castells argues that social networks are the main centres of power. Nowadays, social networks are formed, joined and expanded online, so are global. Facebook is essentially an example of a global social network and LinkedIn is an example of a social network that expands people's business contacts. Therefore, the internet has allowed social networks to increase and expand.

Castells argues that in the twenty-first century, people are more likely to be organised into horizontal digital communication networks using new forms of social media, rather than the traditional vertical organisations of the past. Moreover, these networks connect people and allow them to interact instantaneously, wherever they are in the world. Digital technologies have therefore transformed all relationships, whether they are personal, political, religious, cultural or economic. For example, politics used to involve joining vertical organisations, such as political parties or pressure groups, and/or reading the products of such organisations, such as political manifestos. Media organisations, which were also vertical organisations, attempted to influence voters too. Consequently, political news or scandal travelled relatively slowly, and came from the top downwards — 'from the few to the many', as Castells describes it.

Castells argues that new digital media, such as Twitter, Facebook, blogs and websites, have transformed the relationship that the electorate has with politicians and the way that politicians now behave, because political news and gossip is instantaneously available via these new media networks and can ruin political careers in minutes. Moreover, these networks are global, so people's political interests now often extend beyond domestic politics to how Britain engages with the rest of the world.

People can also share stories and experiences with each other, so 'news' is also horizontally produced, via **citizen journalism**, instead of being imposed on the masses by the elite. For example, people can video events at the scene of a crime or a protest and share the videos via social media, giving those in power less control over the portrayal of events. Therefore information now flows 'from the many to the many' via digital social networks.

However, Castells acknowledges that there is still inequality — not everyone can access online networks, and some have little to offer or may struggle to make connections, and so may be excluded.

Applying sociological theories to digital forms of communication

Marxism

Marxist ideas about digital and social media are generally critical, although Castells (as seen above) and some other neo-Marxists are more positive.

Knowledge check 4

Give one reason for and one reason against the idea that digital social networks can make people more equal.

Citizen journalism The collection, dissemination and analysis of news and information by the general public, especially by means of the internet.

Fuchs (2015), for example, takes a conflict view of the role of digital communication in reproducing and legitimating inequality in capitalist society. He observes that Karl Marx argued that:

**the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas....
The class which has the means of material production at its disposal,
has control at the same time over the means of mental production,
so...the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are
subject to it.**

Marxist theories of the media and their newer digitalised forms of communication therefore argue that all forms of communication are ideological in that they function on behalf of the capitalist ruling class to reproduce and justify class inequality. Marxists believe that the role of digital social media (along with other ideological agencies, such as traditional media, education and religion) is to bring about a state of 'false consciousness' so that citizens do not criticise or challenge the unequal and unjust organisation of capitalist society.

Marxists tend to argue that the popularity of social media networks, such as Facebook, functions to reinforce false consciousness because digital social networks mainly focus on non-critical issues such as identity, entertainment and consumption, and consequently are rarely important vehicles of protest and social change, instead acting as a distraction. Those who own or control these new forms of communication and social networks aim to shape and manipulate how people think about the world they live in so that they only get a narrow range of 'approved' views and knowledge, with the result that 'alternative' and critical points of view are rarely heard or are dismissed altogether as extremist.

Chomsky (2011), for example, argues that platforms such as Twitter, while appearing to give a voice to ordinary people, create superficial forms of communication which act as a distraction from the real control of knowledge. He argues that such communication is shallow, and acts to draw people away from serious communication.

In another Marxist-related view, Seabrook (2004) sees the globalisation linked to digital communication as a type of **cultural imperialism** because it is dominated by Western cultural industries which use digital forms of communication to impose their cultural values on the rest of the world. He argues that integration into a single global economy and culture is a 'declaration of cultural war' upon other cultures. It implies that traditional cultures have little or no value. Seabrook argues that this cultural imperialism attempts to replace diversity with homogenisation and this often results in social and religious disruption as local cultures attempt to resist. Some observers have suggested that the recent growth in Islamist fundamentalism may be a reaction to these processes, as a form of cultural defence.

Dal Yong Jin (2013) extends the idea of imperialism in his discussion of 'platform imperialism'. Digital platforms include social network sites such as Facebook, search engines such as Google, the hardware we use to access the internet, in the form of smartphones, and so on. The ownership and development of these platforms are dominated by Western, mostly US-based, companies, and Jin argues that the increased influence of these platforms is a new form of cultural imperialism. He

Exam tip

The three theories discussed here are specifically identified in the specification, so you must be able to apply and evaluate their views on developments in digital communications. However, other theories such as functionalism and interactionism could still be used as sociological knowledge, and also to evaluate the other theories.

Cultural imperialism

The ability of richer nations and some global corporations to impose their cultural products on the rest of the world. It is often argued that cultural imperialism leads to cultural homogenisation.

suggests that the USA previously controlled non-Western countries with its military power, capital, and cultural products, but that it now seems to dominate the world through digital platforms.

This theme of ownership is developed by other Marxist writers, who argue that digital forms of communication are merely a continuation of older forms of media and consequently are subject to the same economic and social influences. Jenkins (2017) argues that most new forms of digital media have developed as a result of investment by the big media corporations and consequently ownership of digital communications is concentrated in the hands of a few major transnational corporations.

Similarly, Bagdikian, in 'The new media monopoly' (2004), argues that the internet is just another mode of communication which is prey to the interests of large corporations, who squeeze out smaller providers, destroying the possibility of independence in either content or service providers. An examination of the internet suggests that it is dominated by a small number of media corporations — for example, Microsoft developed most of the software required for accessing the net, while Google is the most popular search engine, and through its dominance has expanded into many other aspects of digital technology. Apple and Samsung dominate the smartphone market and Amazon is a giant in the online retailing sector, while Netflix has transformed the way we view television content.

Most of the internet's commercially viable content is therefore controlled and/or commissioned by a handful of media conglomerates, sometimes referred to as FAANG: Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google. Interestingly, in China, different companies dominate, due to the block on Western companies (sometimes referred to as 'the Great Firewall of China'). A different acronym is used to refer to China's major companies: BAT (Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent).

McChesney (2000) highlights the similarity of digital content and social networking. Facebook, Google and Twitter operate in hundreds of countries across the world. He claims such companies are like imperial powers colonising the minds of millions of people across the world so they behave and think in the same way. McChesney argues that this 'cult of homogeneity', which speaks to everyone in general and no one in particular, crowds out local cultural products. He claims that it has also reduced people's opportunity to speak out, silencing or 'muting' less powerful groups so that they are less likely to challenge inequality or injustice.

However, others, including some neo-Marxists, have taken issue with these traditional Marxist ideas regarding digital communications. It is clear that Castells sees the potentially positive impact that digital networks can have in empowering people, when he argues that now information can flow from the many to the many, rather than from the few to the many.

Jurgenson (2011) holds similar ideas. He challenges Chomsky's view regarding the superficiality of digital communication platforms such as Twitter, arguing that this is similar to claims that rap is not proper music, or graffiti is not art — it is elitist. Jurgenson points out that digital forms of communication tend to be used more by disempowered groups, such as minority ethnic groups and young people, so a critical Marxist like Chomsky should be applauding this medium of communication since it gives people a voice.

Knowledge check 5

Give three ways in which Marxists argue that developments in digital communications have maintained and increased the power of the ruling class.

Therefore, far from 'manufacturing consent', as Chomsky accused traditional forms of media of doing, newer forms of media are capable of 'manufacturing dissent' and traditional left-wing writers like Chomsky need to be aware that their way of communicating is not superior, it is just different. It is clear that neo-Marxist writers are much more positive about the potential for developments in digital communication to disrupt the power of the ruling elites, rather than to maintain it.

Other challenges to the traditional Marxist view include the issue that it assumes a unified conspiracy on behalf of the providers of digital forms of communication. In fact, the owners of digital forms of communication are not united because their companies are involved in competition with one another for a bigger share of the market and therefore profit. Marxists also tend to overemphasise social class at the expense of other inequalities that may also result in muted voices, such as ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

Feminism

Feminist theory has traditionally focused on how societies tend to be organised in patriarchal ways, that is, in favour of men. Males dominate positions of power in most societies and consequently women generally occupy subordinate positions.

Many feminists are critical of both old media and digital forms of communication, which they see as patriarchal agencies that mainly engage in the 'symbolic annihilation of women' (Tuchman 1978) — that is, they tend to show women in a narrow and limited range of social roles and to suggest that their achievements are less important than their looks and bodies. A good example of this with regard to digital communication is the popularity of pornography websites on the internet. Feminists also point out that control of the content of new digital forms of communication is in the hands of transnational corporations mainly owned by men.

'Muted group theory', developed by the anthropologists Ardener and Ardener (1975), explains the silencing or 'muting' of certain less powerful groups in society, and has been especially applied by feminists such as Kramarae (1981) to women. Feminists argue that women have often been unable to voice their concerns about patriarchy because a male-dominated media suppressed or muted them.

Kramarae sees language as patriarchal, and argues more recently (2015) that online communication, which is mainly done through written language, is constructed and controlled by men despite the fact that women use it as much as men do. She argues that the companies that control the digital technology underpinning cyber communication, the way the internet is organised, much of its software and even the metaphors used to describe the internet (such as the 'information superhighway') are masculine and this has the effect of 'muting' the voice of women.

However, some feminists are positive about the power of digital forms of communication to change women's position in society for the better, even while recognising the power of patriarchy. Haraway (1985, 1991) is critical of male dominance of the online as well as the offline world, but does recognise the potential offered by the anonymity of the online world, utilising the concept of 'cyborgs' to show that we can transcend our physical identities online, and potentially challenge patriarchal constructs of gender.

Exam tip

It is useful to show an awareness that within the critical theories of both Marxism and feminism, there are both positive and negative views relating to the impact of digital communications, suggesting that these developments are having a complex effect on inequalities and oppressed groups.

Cyborg A part-human and part-machine entity, which some argue we become during our time in the online world.

The online virtual community 'Second Life', studied by Boellstorff (2008), in which users create a utopian world, is a particularly good example of how people might transcend their gender identity. Users construct an avatar — an image that represents them — from a selection of generic choices, including muscular male bodies, voluptuous female forms and asexual humanoid alternatives. Boellstorff's research suggests that users do not feel limited by their real gender identities when choosing an avatar identity. For example, some women reported that they had deliberately chosen to adopt male bodies in order to experience a masculine identity, while other women preferred the cyborg identity because then interaction with others excluded sexual politics.

Cochrane (2013) identifies a 'fourth wave' of feminism which she argues is powered by digital technology and is encouraging women to build an empowering, popular and reactive feminist movement online. Green and Singleton (2009) argue that digital technology, and particularly the internet, is a feminine technology that has the potential to destabilise patriarchy because its use allows women to explore, subvert and create new identities and to resist sexist representations wherever they might occur. They emphasise the central use of the smartphone and particularly texting in the creation and maintenance of feminine identities, friendship networks and communities across local and global spaces.

A good example of this online empowerment and community is Laura Bates's 'Everyday Sexism' project, which has over 280,000 followers on Twitter. This is a consciousness-raising initiative which encourages women to send in their everyday experiences of sexual harassment, workplace discrimination and body shaming.

Cochrane observes that women are using digital forms of communication to protest about pornography, violence against women, the sexualisation of childhood and so on. She argues that digital technology has resulted in contemporary young women adopting an 'intersectional' form of feminism in which they are aware of how multiple oppressions — involving class, poverty, race, age, sexuality and so on — intersect with gender to create many different experiences of oppression and misogyny.

This is supported by Chittal (2015), who argues that 'hashtag feminism' is a new phenomenon which is engaging women of all ages to respond to examples of sexism and misogyny in real time, by engaging in online campaigns. Recent examples of this include the #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns, and positive movements such as #ThisGirlCan.

However, evidence suggests that women who use digital forms of communication may still be subjected to sexism, abuse and threats. Jane (2017) discusses the '**gendered cyberhate**' which has become more and more prevalent in the twenty-first century. In Amnesty International research across eight countries in 2017, 23% of women polled said they had experienced online abuse or harassment and one third had changed the way they express themselves online in response.

Many females, some in the public eye, have experienced threats and sexist abuse via social media, including MPs, celebrities and campaigners. Research into Twitter by the research organisation Demos found 200,000 aggressive tweets using the terms 'slut' or 'whore' in a 3-week period in 2016. Amnesty International carried out further research into this kind of abuse on Twitter in 2018, condemning Twitter and the

Gendered cyberhate

Violent and abusive language and threats against females online, targeted at their gender and sexuality, often involving threats to mutilate their bodies or rape them in violent ways.

misogyny it breeds as 'toxic'. Its research highlighted the highly offensive and abusive tweets received by several females, including Everyday Sexism's Laura Bates, Diane Abbott MP, the game developer Zoë Quinn and the writer and activist Miski Noor. The research also monitored over 6,500 female volunteers worldwide, calculating that 1.1 million abusive tweets were sent to them, which equates to one every 30 seconds.

Some critics have also argued that claims about the fourth wave of digital feminism might be exaggerated in terms of its influence on women. Moreover, Green and Singleton suggest that the online communities that are most popular with women users — Mumsnet and Facebook — might merely reinforce the patriarchal notion that women should perform the emotional work of maintaining family relationships.

Postmodernism

Many postmodernists see digital forms of communication as beneficial, arguing that global digital networks are primarily responsible for diffusing different cultural styles around the world and creating new global hybrid styles in fashion, food, music, consumption and lifestyle. It is argued that in the postmodern world this cultural diversity will become the global norm. Postmodernists therefore see globalisation as a positive phenomenon because it has created a new class of global consumers, in both the developed and the developing world, with a greater range of choices from which they can construct a **hybridised global identity**.

Postmodern societies are 'media-saturated' societies, according to Strinati (1995). New forms of digital communication therefore merely reflect the postmodern condition. Postmodern societies are also underpinned by globalisation — media transnationals have used digital communications technology such as the internet and satellite television to remove the distinction between the global and the local and to increase consumer choice in the range of knowledge and entertainment available.

Another key postmodernist idea is the collapse of metanarratives that can explain society in a macro and predictable way. The diversity of digital forms of communication has undermined explanations that claimed absolute truths (for example, world-views provided by mainstream religions, science and political movements). It has resulted in the fragmentation of knowledge and encouraged people to see that there are multiple interpretations or truths, all of which have some relative value.

People are no longer content to inherit fixed identities such as social class or gender identities. Instead social media networks and virtual communities offer people a plurality of identities to choose from, subverting traditional forms of identity. Hart (2011) argues that individuals are using social media to continually write and rewrite their biographies, thus constructing and reconstructing their social world.

However, there are some postmodernists who are less positive or optimistic about the impact of developments in digital communication. George Ritzer has written widely about these impacts, but is best known for his concept of **McDonaldisation** (1993), which refers to the spread of production processes associated with the fast-food chain McDonald's. These processes are efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. Ritzer explains these in relation to the business model successfully used by McDonald's, but argues that such processes are being increasingly applied to all

Knowledge check 6

For what reasons might females who post opinions and materials online be more likely to receive abuse than their male counterparts, according to feminists?

Hybridised global identity

Personal identity which combines diverse inputs from the local (e.g. traditional beliefs and local customs) and the global (e.g. a global social networking site like Facebook).

McDonaldisation

The process whereby businesses and society adopt the business model of the fast-food chain McDonald's, pursuing 'rationality' to achieve ultimate efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

aspects of postmodern life, including education, religion and shopping. This model is promoted in terms of rationality, but Ritzer is critical and argues that it actually leads to many irrational outcomes, such as the deskilling of workers, the turning of consumers into workers (e.g. with self-service restaurants) and the loss of quality of the final product.

Ritzer's ideas can be applied to developments in digital communications. For example, the loss of in-depth one-to-one communication could be seen as a form of efficiency — we find it easier to post, text or tweet than to have a face-to-face conversation. Other examples of this are communicating via memes and emojis, or through images on Snapchat and Instagram. Being able to follow, like, share and retweet things online is an example of calculability, since the number of followers or 'likes' can be seen as a way of judging and quantifying content. Cookies and targeted advertising can be seen as examples of control and predictability, and online shopping is a good example to illustrate all aspects of the McDonaldisation processes.

Ritzer (2012) has also applied the work of his fellow postmodernist Jean Baudrillard to developments in digital communication, arguing that many of Baudrillard's ideas and concepts were ahead of their time when he was writing in the pre-internet time of the 1980s about the developing postmodern world. Ritzer states that 'in many ways, postmodern social theory can be said to have anticipated today's (and even more tomorrow's) realities and to have provided us with a toolkit full of concepts to analyze that world'.

Baudrillard argued that we live in 'the age of simulation'. Simulations are copies, an idea which is particularly relevant in the internet age. Copies are both unlimited and perfect (e.g. through file-sharing), but Baudrillard suggested that simulations are not only copies, but also fakes. It is now impossible to tell the real from the fake, and this can apply to internet posts, news stories and even online identities. Baudrillard suggested that we have 'lost the negatives' (the originals from which the copies are made), implying that authenticity is also being lost.

This links to one of Baudrillard's most famous concepts: **hyperreality**. Ritzer explains it as follows: 'The *hyperreal* is more real than real; more beautiful than beautiful; truer than true.' Baudrillard was suggesting that the media world gives us a hyperreal version of reality, in which everything is more vivid, more interesting and more extreme. We end up caring more about this media hyperreality than about the real world, and the distinction between the two is becoming ever more blurred.

Ritzer has also extended some of these ideas in his work with Jurgenson (2010) on 'prosumers', suggesting that we now live in a 'prosumer society'. The word 'prosumer' is a blend of 'producer' and 'consumer', and refers to the fact that, through digital communications, individuals are no longer simply consumers, but also producers — we create media content as well as consuming it. This is not necessarily a bad or a good thing, but it implies that there has been a change away from the simplistic divide (traditionally discussed by Marxists) between the ruling class who own and produce media content and the masses who consume it. However, Ritzer and Jurgenson take a critical position, arguing that in 'prosumer capitalism', control and exploitation are still present, but take on different forms, often with unwaged labour and products circulated for free.

Knowledge check 7

Explain, with examples, what is meant by the four processes of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control (look these up if you need to).

Hyperreality An inability to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality, so that the media simulation becomes more real to people than the physical world they inhabit.

Knowledge check 8

In what ways are you a 'prosumer' via digital forms of communication?

Some postmodern ideas about digital communication can be criticised because they fail to recognise inequalities in access to technology. Consequently, they do not offer any explanation for why some groups experience a digital divide and 'muted voice' despite the diversity of choice available in digital forms of communication. Postmodernists probably exaggerate the impact of the 'digital information explosion' on ordinary people's capacity to bring about change in their social identities and lives. However, as with Marxism and feminism, it is clear that within postmodernism, there are many different views on the impact of the development of digital communications, which include both potentially positive and negative outcomes.

Summary

- There is no universal agreement on how to define globalisation, since the term is used in different ways, and globalisation is an ongoing process that varies in its speed and its impact.
- It is accepted that rapid advances in digital technology in the past 20 years have compressed distance (or space) and time. Instantaneous communication with any part of the world has made the world seem a smaller place.
- Marxists generally see global processes such as digital social networks as ideological — as geared to reproducing and legitimating capitalism. However, some neo-Marxists see great potential for political change in the emergence of a networked global society, since the masses may be more empowered than previously.
- Some feminists see the internet and digital communication in positive terms as a weapon against patriarchy. However, it is also a way to maintain and perpetuate patriarchy and misogyny, and women are often targets of online abuse.
- Some postmodernists see the globalisation of digital communications as positive, arguing that it will produce more cultural diversity as hybrid cultures emerge, and will offer us endless choices. However, others are concerned by the loss of authenticity and the shallow nature of digital communications.

What is the impact of digital forms of communication in a global context?

The impact of digital forms of communication on individuals

Identity

Many sociologists, and postmodernists in particular, suggest that individuals now construct their own identities and that the media have a big impact on how they do this. Social network platforms such as Facebook have become the most important infrastructure through which people organise their lives and interact with others in the twenty-first century. Such platforms have become the major means by which individuals package, promote and present 'the self' for public consumption. Thus, new forms of digital communication have given people greater choice in selecting and constructing the identity that they want to present to the wider world.

Van Dijck (2013) argues that people have a vested interest in what Castells calls 'mass self-communication' because they subscribe to the view that disclosing information

Exam tip

Material on identities covered in Component 1 can be linked in this section, as long as it is applied to developments in digital communication.

about their identity is closely associated with popularity. Identity is therefore a social product constructed by members of social networks for consumption by others in return for admiration and social approval. According to Turkle (2011), internet-based social networks free people of the burdens of their physical identities and allow them to present 'better' versions of themselves.

An interesting dimension of digital media is the fact that millions of people like to construct new identities for themselves in online virtual communities. Boellstorff (2008) conducted research into Second Life, the most popular of these worlds, and found that the experience of virtual worlds can reshape ideas about identity. For example, users of Second Life may experiment with identity by adopting avatars of the opposite sex to their real-life selves or by adopting gender-neutral cyborg identities. Similarly, Carter's 2005 research on another virtual community, 'Cybercity', observes that users see their online identities as just as important as their offline identities, and that friendships made online often migrated into the real world.

Social class and identity

Social class identity, in common with other sources of identity, used to be ascribed at birth, based on the family you were born into, and then based on the occupation you followed. This was the basis on which people would judge you and you would then judge yourself. Postmodernists have argued that identity has become detached from social class background — that we now construct identities based on consumption, and digital technologies can be seen as feeding this trend. Thus the internet could be seen as contributing to the death of class-based identities in some ways, since people can construct their own identities in any way they choose, and issues such as occupation or family background become irrelevant in the age of the superstar vlogger.

However, Matthews's 2014 research shows an opposite trend, in that social media sites such as Facebook can recreate a sense of community and belonging, by reconnecting younger people within a community to its history, which is often bound up in the social class identity of its past. Matthews researched a community organisation that created, through a Facebook site, an online archive of a deprived neighbourhood in Edinburgh. Photographs were uploaded to the site and visitors posted memories, which created an online conversation about issues of community, social class and identity, with discussions of marginalisation and exclusion. Matthews argues that the stories of communities such as this are very different from those of middle-class neighbourhoods, thus demonstrating the power of the internet and social media to achieve access to and understanding of people's experience of class and its impact on identity.

Gender and identity

The ideas of feminists discussed earlier can be related to female identity in relation to digital communications — both the positive ideas about empowerment, and the negative ones about gendered cyberhate.

In terms of male identity, Giese (2018) argues that the internet, and especially gaming, has reinforced the worst aspects of masculinity, in relation to aggression, competitiveness and violence. Durham (2001) observed that early interaction with the

Knowledge check 9

For what reasons may an individual wish to construct an alternative identity in a virtual community?

Exam tip

You can also apply some of the material from Marxists considered above to ideas of class identity, as well as ideas on class identity from Component 1, such as those of Bourdieu (e.g. cultural and social capital), as long as you apply them to the digital social world.

internet for young males tended to link to issues of heterosexuality as an expression of masculine identity, with a focus on female celebrities and pornography.

Reaching a similar conclusion, Schmitz and Kazyak (2016) looked at the rise in men's rights activist groups and their online presence, conducting content analysis of several such websites to explore the various strategies used to provide support for men in their pursuit of social legitimacy and power. One major category of sites tended to promote explicit aggression towards and devaluation of women, suggesting that this was the main way in which males could assert their masculine identities. This suggests that male and female identities are very much interrelated, with masculinity often being asserted through a male's attitudes towards females.

However, there have been positive online campaigns to promote a more positive male identity which is not rooted in violence or misogyny. Examples include the HeForShe campaign, which encourages men to stand in solidarity with women in the fight for gender equality, and the recent campaign supported by Gillette which challenges toxic masculinity.

Age and identity: youth

Gardner and Davis (2013) observe that young people are the most frequent users of social media. Their research indicates that young people take a great deal of care in how they present themselves online for public consumption. They identify certain trends in this **presentation of self**:

- Many young people construct a socially desirable and polished self online. This 'glammed-up' online identity generally exaggerates the more socially attractive aspects of the person's personality while downplaying less 'cool' traits.
- Some young people adopt a range of identities in order to present themselves in different ways on different sites, responding to audiences who may have different expectations. For example, a person may construct a Facebook identity that fits in with family members' expectations, a Twitter identity that is 'edgy' in its comments on events, an avatar identity in Second Life that has characteristics which the user lacks in real life and a Snapchat identity that shows how much fun the user is having and how outrageous they can be.
- Once the 'self' has been constructed on a social network platform, there is evidence that young people then engage in **identity performance**, in that much time is spent checking phones in order to manage others' online impressions of them by 'liking' what others upload as well as updating their own profile and status.

Some observers have suggested that young people's obsession with their digital or virtual identity has created a number of modern-day problems. For example, Gardner and Davis argue that this constant self-projection and self-tracking online reduces the time teenagers have for real-life interaction with others. They observe that the maintenance of virtual identity means that teenagers are more **narcissistic** compared with previous generations.

Twenge (2015) argues that fear of negative reaction to their identity performance is producing rising levels of moodiness, anxiety, sadness and isolation among teenagers. In her 2018 book *iGen*, Twenge argues that the iGeneration, as the first generation to spend their entire adolescence in the age of the smartphone, spend less physical

Presentation of self

A concept from interactionism that refers to the conscious public persona that we project to the world.

Identity performance

The ways we attempt to manage and control other people's impressions of us, for example via the posts we make on social networking sites.

Narcissism Excessive love or admiration of ourselves. This is related to being self-obsessed or self-centred.

time with their friends, perhaps contributing to their levels of anxiety, depression and loneliness. These ideas can be related to 'FOMO' (fear of missing out) and the constant pressure to compare yourself to others, and to show that your life is just as interesting and exciting as theirs, even though you know on one level that the versions of identity that others present are also heavily edited.

Brignall and Van Valey's 2005 research on 'current cyber-youth' (also referred to as 'digital natives' or the iGeneration) found that, due to the constant use of the internet in education, communication and entertainment, there has been a decrease in face-to-face interaction among youth which may have 'significant consequences for their development of social skills and their presentation of self'. They emphasise the negative consequences of extensive internet use, which include social isolation and a lack of community.

Age and identity: older people

There are signs that the greater take-up of digital communication by older people may have benefits for their self-esteem and identity. Researchers on the Ages 2.0 project (2014), who carried out a study of elderly people's use of social media in Britain and Italy, found that training vulnerable older people to use social media can not only improve their cognitive capacity, but also increase their sense of self-competence. The majority of their sample reported feeling less isolated because of the connections they could make with relatives, friends and people with shared interests by using digital forms of communication. Some individuals reported feeling younger and more alive, and started taking more interest in their appearance.

The Pew Research Center has also supported these positive impacts, finding in 2012 that older people who regularly go online use the internet as a tool to bridge the geographic gap between them and their loved ones far away and as a way to reconnect with friends from a far-off time. The researchers also argue that social media can provide opportunities to share experiences and skills across generational divides. They point out that there are 'few other spaces — online or offline — where tweens, teens, sandwich generation members, grandparents, friends and neighbors regularly intersect and communicate across the same network'. Such connections can enhance an older person's identity by giving them a sense of purpose and self-worth.

Social inequalities

Some sociologists are concerned about a **digital divide**. Inequalities are apparent in terms of who has access to digital forms of communication, including computers, broadband and internet connections, and smartphones. This can be seen particularly in terms of social class, gender and age.

The digital class divide

Helsper (2016) argues that digital communications are dominated by middle-class usage because this class can afford to invest in the most recent digital technology. In contrast, it is argued that the revolution in digital communications has created a **digital underclass** because poor people lack the resources to join in with this new media usage. Helsper claims that this digital underclass is characterised by unemployment, lower education levels and low digital skills.

Evidence suggests that although the digital class divide has narrowed in recent years, it still exists. For example, surveys demonstrate that the poorest group has increased its

Knowledge check 10

Explain one positive and one negative impact which high levels of social media use may have on a young person's identity.

Digital divide

Inequalities in access to and use of digital technologies.

Digital underclass

Those who cannot afford to use digital forms of communication and/or do not have the skills to do so.

use of the internet at a much slower rate than other social groups, and that those who do have internet access rate their skills as poorer than other, more educated groups. The 2019 OFCOM survey shows that, despite much more similar internet use across the social classes than in previous years, 23% of the DE socioeconomic group (lower-skilled working-class workers) do not use the internet. The corresponding figure for the AB socioeconomic group (middle-class professionals) is just 6%. Nearly three-quarters of the AB group have a social media profile, compared to just 56% of the DE group.

Ragnedda (2018) supports this finding, pointing out that there are 4.3 million people in the UK with no basic digital skills and 11.3 million people with only limited digital awareness. When many institutions are now digital by default, this lack of skills and access can further increase social exclusion. Ragnedda argues that there need to be more programmes promoting digital inclusion, which will benefit economies, yielding positive effects on employability, social inclusion and wellbeing.

The gendered digital divide

Li and Kirkup (2007) found significant differences between men and women in the UK in their use of digital communication. Men were more likely than women to use e-mail or chatrooms, and men played more computer games on consoles such as the Xbox than women.

OFCEM's 2018 survey supports this, though the gendered divide seems to be shrinking year on year. OFCEM found that, while men and women are equally likely to go online using any device, men are more likely to use a computer or a games console whereas women are more likely to use a tablet or smartphone. In fact, the growth seen since 2016 in the use of a smartphone to go online is largely due to its increased use among women. The 2018 survey also found that women said they would most miss checking social media if they had no access to their smartphone, whereas men said they would most miss checking e-mail, suggesting a difference between the genders in the way the internet is used.

Mphidi (2004) argues that women have more limited access to and use of the internet than men because IT is still perceived to be a technical and 'male' arena which many women avoid. Web designers and IT experts tend to be men — only around 17% of people working in technology-related industries are female — and girls are driven away from these areas early in school.

Age and social class intersect with gender in relation to the digital divide. The World Wide Web Foundation's 2016 evidence shows that in poorer countries, the gendered digital divide is greater. The foundation's 'women's rights online' research surveyed urban poor communities in ten low- and middle-income countries and found that women were nearly 50% less likely to access the internet than men in the same communities. In 2019 the UN reported that the digital gender gap is actually growing in less developed countries. The proportion of women using the internet globally is 10% lower than for men.

The same research shows that the digital gender gap increases as age increases, though this is more significant in low- and middle-income countries. The gender gap in internet use is slightly higher among the 25–74 age group than for the younger age group across all countries, but for the age group 75 and above, the gender gap becomes significantly larger, with an average gap of 46% across all countries.

Knowledge check 11

Suggest reasons why the digital gender gap may intersect with age and social class.

The generational digital divide

The fast-moving nature of the digital world means that younger users come of age in a vastly different media environment compared to those born just a few years before. This makes it difficult to ascertain whether there is a generational divide in the use of digital communications. When digital technology first took off in the 1990s, it was probably true that the older generation (that is, the 50+ age group) was left behind by a so-called 'net generation'. However, in the twenty-first century we now see micro-generation gaps, with each group of children uniquely influenced by the latest digital tools available in their formative stages of development.

Prensky (2001) refers to young people as '**digital natives**' because for them the internet is a 'natural' environment into which they are fully integrated. Fluency in digital culture is second nature to them and they feel a strong sense of community when online. Most of them are confident users of multiple devices on which they multitask. Conversely, those who grew up before the advent of digital technology have had to learn what these digital natives take for granted — they can be seen as 'digital immigrants'.

Research suggests that those in the net generation, who are now in their mid-thirties and early forties, still spend time talking on their smartphones, still watch television and use e-mail frequently. However, the iGeneration of the early to mid 2000s spends considerably more time texting than talking on the phone, tends to communicate more over instant-messenger networks and is more likely to be involved in active and regular engagement with the internet (for example, uploading, blogging and networking).

However, 2019 statistics compiled by the ONS suggest that the generational divides between young and middle-aged or elderly users may now be in decline, as older age groups (digital immigrants) increasingly engage in online activities such as social networking via smartphones and tablets. Recent internet use in the 65–74 age group increased from 52% in 2011 to 83% in 2019. Of adults aged 75 and older, 20% were recent internet users in 2011, but this has risen to 47% in 2019.

Research from the Pew Research Center (2019) on internet use in the USA tends to support this, suggesting that the baby boomer generation (those aged 55–73) have been steadily increasing their use of digital technology, with 68% now owning a smartphone, compared with just 25% in 2011. However, they are still less likely than younger people to agree that the internet has had a positive impact on society.

The Pew researchers also looked at what they term the 'silent generation': those aged 74–91. Just 40% of this group report owning a smartphone, and only 28% say that they use social media. Previous Pew surveys have found that the oldest adults face particular barriers when it comes to embracing new forms of digital communication, which include their lack of knowledge and confidence, but also physical challenges relating to the use of smartphones and tablets.

Relationships

Digital social media in all their forms can be seen to facilitate human interaction and relationships by constructing a participatory culture. Gardner and Davis (2013) also observe that internet-enabled digital devices have enabled relationships because they transcend geographical and temporal barriers. They allow for immediacy of communication with others. Young people, in particular, have taken advantage of digital technology to engage in frequent on-the-run communication with friends.

Digital natives People who have used digital communications since their early childhood and consequently are skilled in the use of digital devices and software.

Exam tip

These examples of inequalities in terms of social class, gender and age can also be used in Component 2, Section B.

Gardner and Davis suggest that young people now 'hang out' on social media as they once did in physical places like cafes or shopping malls.

Several advantages of online relationships have been identified by Van Dijck as well as Gardner and Davis. First, accumulating connections or online relationships is empowering and enriching because it produces **social capital**. This means that it has collective value for all concerned because connections and the opportunities which result from them are shared and reciprocated. Examples include the following:

- Membership of an online community may provide opportunities for people with similar interests to find and interact with one another. This type of capital is known as 'bonding social capital' and produces shared information flows that may create opportunities for jobs or mutual aid. For instance, belonging to a Facebook community of A-level sociology students may bring benefits in terms of shared information about how to pass the exam.
- Membership of a particular online community may lead to relationships being established with others who are very different. This is known as 'bridging social capital'. For example, feminists may wish to bond with other feminists but may realise, through social networking sites such as Twitter, that seemingly different political causes focusing on aspects of inequality actually have a great deal in common with their own cause. This may lead to political alliances which increase the potential for social change.

Gardner and Davis also suggest that digital communication is used as a 'virtual tap on the shoulder', establishing and maintaining links between friends who are physically separated. Cummings (2002) found that e-mail, instant messaging and social networking sites helped students to stay in frequent contact with friends and family when separated by geography. Miller (2011) observes that, thanks to Facebook, people can maintain friendships over distance with less expenditure of time or money. He argues that social media extend existing relationships which may be weak because of distance or because they have lapsed over time, and develop them into more meaningful relationships.

Sites like Facebook may also be a social lifeline, particularly for isolated, shy or disabled individuals, enabling them to stay connected to other people. Bargh and McKenna (2004) found that online social networks can help those with low self-esteem to relate to others, because they lower barriers to interaction (as it is not face-to-face) and this may make it easier for some people to disclose their feelings to others. Social media enable minority groups that have been denied a voice in the traditional media — such as people with disabilities and some minority ethnic groups — to create supportive communities that can highlight their everyday experience and coordinate activism.

On the other hand, there is some evidence that developments in digital communication, and social media in particular, are having a negative impact on relationships, particularly for young people. Common Sense Media carried out a survey in 2018 as a follow-up to similar research in 2012, to identify any changes in how teenagers approach their friendships and online interactions. They found that the proportion of young people who say their favourite way to communicate is 'in person' had dropped from nearly half in 2012 (when it was their top choice) to less than a third in 2018, with texting now taking over as their top choice to communicate with their friends. In 2018, 54% of teenagers also agreed that using social media 'often distracts me when I should be paying attention to the people I'm with', up from 44%

Social capital A

concept often associated with the neo-Marxist Bourdieu, referring to the benefits and advantages which come from the amount and type of social contacts a person has.

Exam tip

Use the example of the coronavirus lockdown to show how digital communications can support the maintenance of relationships when face-to-face contact is impossible.

in 2012; and 42% agreed that time using social media 'has taken away from time I could be spending with friends in person', up from 34% six years earlier.

Similarly, research conducted by Cancer Research UK in 2018 showed that, although social media can be helpful in building up contacts, young adults with high social media usage can feel more socially isolated than those who use it less, struggling to talk to people they do not know, for example. In a report for the Education Policy Institute in 2017, Frith suggested that children and young people's heavy internet use can have damaging consequences. More than one third of British 15-year-olds were classed as 'extreme internet users', spending at least 6 hours per day online. A similar proportion of children have experienced cyberbullying or had some other type of negative experience when using social media. Frith concludes, 'The evidence points towards a correlation between extreme use of social media and harmful effects on young people's wellbeing.'

The quality of online relationships has also been questioned. Turkle (2011) observes that people boast about how many people they have 'friended' on Facebook, but research on the nature of friendship in the USA shows that Americans say they have few real friends. She discusses how we are now 'alone together', meaning that even though we may be physically with our peers, we are all glued to our devices, so are not communicating face to face. Turkle feels that online relationships are not as rich and meaningful as face-to-face ones and that we have developed a tendency to keep people at arm's length.

Similarly, Miller (2011) observes that critics of Facebook suggest that 'friending' represents an inflation of superficial and weak relationships that diminishes the value of true friendship. It is argued that the quality of Facebook relationships can feel inauthentic because they lack the intimacy, vulnerability and physical closeness that characterise real relationships.

Digital technology is potentially disruptive for family relationships because it may reduce family time and closeness. Turkle has argued that the proto-communities of social network sites and online fantasy gaming such as Second Life are increasingly replacing real communities composed of family, extended kin and neighbours. As a result, the '**post-familial**' family, in which family members spend more time interacting with their gadgets than with each other, is becoming the norm.

Livingstone (2009), in a similar analysis, argues that children today communicate more with the virtual outside world than with adult members of their own family. Parents often have to text or message their children to gain their attention at meal times. Palmer's ideas on 'toxic childhood' (2007) could be applied here. Though not referring directly to the impact of digital communications, she argues that parents increasingly use media to distract and entertain their children, as a replacement for more meaningful face-to-face interaction. This could be damaging to child development but also for relationships.

Digital communications may also have an impact on the formation and maintenance of romantic relationships. Utz and Beukeboom (2011) argue that social networking sites increase the amount of information that couples receive about their partner, for example through their profile and photos. However, this also makes it easy to monitor and spy on partners, which can create jealousy and uncertainty in a relationship. In their research on jealousy and social media, Muise et al. (2009) found that the more time a person spent on Facebook, the more jealousy they experienced.

Post-familial family A
family that interacts and communicates via social media and other digital devices rather than face to face.

Kitson (2019) suggests that, while social media and technology have allowed romantic relationships to be established and sustained from a physical distance, they may, on the other hand, have 'ruined dating', in the sense that the courtship process can now occur almost entirely over the internet. With the increased availability of options, this could create a search for perfection, which may decrease the incentive to make a commitment.

The impact of digital forms of communication on culture

Conflict and change

Castells (2008) argues that in the digital age many people have moved away from expressing their political and social concerns through hierarchical and bureaucratic organisations such as governments, political parties, pressure groups, trade unions and religions. The easy availability of digital forms of communication now means that people can organise themselves into non-hierarchical and non-bureaucratic digital networks of like-minded individuals who can mutually share information on the web and organise collective action.

Castells argues that this **civil society** approach is now an alternative source of political power that is challenging the power of both the state and the market. For example, successful petitioning of those in power has been carried out through Facebook, Twitter and sites such as Change.org.

Digital activism, sometimes referred to as 'clicktivism', is a new and growing form of protest, utilising developments in digital communications as a way to promote change. Examples include online petitions (or e-petitions), use of the Twitter hashtag to raise awareness, and use of social media to organise protest marches.

Jurgenson (2012), in his article 'When atoms meet bits', argues that digital communication enhances, or 'augments', the power of the physical protest movement, rather than replacing it — hence the 'atoms' of people meeting the 'bits' of digital communication. Jurgenson discusses the power of 'augmented revolution', particularly in relation to the uprisings in many Arab nations in 2011, known as the Arab Spring. He argues:

Linking the power of the digital — creating and disseminating networked information — with the power of the physical — occupying geographic space with flesh-and-blood bodies — is an important part of why we have this current flammable atmosphere of augmented revolution.

Others, such as Castells, agree with Jurgenson about the Arab Spring, discussing the role that Facebook played in spreading information about the injustices and the protests. However, critics argue that the role of social media in the Arab Spring has been grossly exaggerated. Curran (2012) contends that the Arab Spring was actually caused by deep-seated economic, political and religious factors, concluding that social media played a role in the build-up of dissent and the coordination of protests but they did not cause the uprisings — they merely facilitated them (along with other forms of traditional media).

Some further argue that digital activism can actually be ineffective and undermine movements for change. Lee (2016) refers to a concern which has been expressed by some activists that 'a hashtag is not a movement', suggesting that it can promote laziness or apathy, especially among young people and students who have traditionally

Knowledge check 12

Summarise two positive and two negative impacts that social media may have on relationships.

Civil society The community of ordinary citizens who are linked by common interests and collective actions.

Knowledge check 13

What does Jurgenson mean by 'augmented revolution'?

been active in protest movements. For example, clicking a button to sign an e-petition may make the person feel they have done their bit.

However, despite this scepticism, there are numerous examples of online campaigns that have ignited global movements for change, including Black Lives Matter, MeToo and the more recent Extinction Rebellion campaign.

Ideas about the ability of digital communication networks to construct an alternative civil society that can bring about real social change are undermined by the global divide in access to and participation in digital networks. In 2019 the UN found that while most people (87%) are online in developed countries, the figure for the least developed countries is only 19%, with Africa having the lowest internet usage rates.

Furthermore, critics argue that states and digital corporations continue to exercise much greater power than digitalised civil society groups. There is a growing tendency in the digital corporate world for power to be concentrated in fewer and fewer more powerful hands. Martell (2010) argues that digital technology therefore gives a false impression of more power being given to a greater number of people.

Keen (2007) is also critical of the idea that the internet and digital technology have the power to change the world politically. He argues that the internet is too chaotically organised to be effective in bringing about change. Moreover, he argues that social networking sites such as Facebook and blogging do not contribute to the democratic process in any way because they are merely vehicles for shameless self-promotion.

Joyce, in her 2011 article 'The proof is in the pendulum', argues that those in power do not allow protestors to gain ground using digital media for long. The pendulum of power over digital media swings back and forth between protestors and government. Digital activism may take off and lead to protests on a particular issue, but then governments catch up and retake control.

An example of those in power using the internet to retaliate against protests can be seen in the 2019 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. China used social media platforms to spread misinformation about the activists, who were described as 'cockroaches' and accused of being members of ISIS. In addition, the censorship rates of Chinese social media increased over the time of the protests, to include keywords such as 'police' and 'justice'.

The impact of globalisation and digital media on cultures

Hall (1996) argued that the accelerated pace of globalisation brought about by global media and other technological advances would have three possible consequences for local cultural identities:

- cultural homogenisation: distinct national identities being eroded
- cultural resistance (defence): national and other 'local' identities being strengthened by the resistance to globalisation
- cultural hybridity: national identities changing as they take on some aspects of other cultures (this is similar to the idea of glocalisation)

Cultural homogenisation

The idea of a 'global village' discussed earlier relates to the idea of **cultural homogenisation** — the notion that one global culture is replacing cultural distinctiveness.

Exam tip

In this section, specific contemporary examples can attract as much credit as a named study, so keep an eye out for good examples to apply.

Cultural

homogenisation The process by which all cultures are becoming the same.

Some argue that homogenisation is really a form of Americanisation, or at least Westernisation, since these cultures are the ones which dominate in a globalised world. A homogenised global culture is likely to be a capitalist, consumer culture, which is patriarchal and English-speaking, and promotes values such as democracy and individualism.

Supporting arguments for the existence of cultural homogenisation include Ritzer's ideas on McDonaldisation, considered above: the features of efficiency, predictability and so on are applied globally. Similarly, the idea of cultural imperialism is a version of cultural homogenisation.

Cultural defence (resistance)

In the face of globalisation, and the threat that cultural homogenisation caused by digital communications may pose to their way of life, some societies and cultures have sought to defend their traditions and uniqueness. There are a number of examples of **cultural defence** or resistance:

- Some countries, such as France, have introduced quotas on the distribution of cultural products such as films that originate from outside those countries.
- Some countries, for example China, have taken control of digital media through the censorship or blocking of certain content. For example, China has blocked all references to the word 'democracy' on its most popular search engine and denies its citizens access to websites such as Wikipedia, Facebook and Google. All internet use is closely monitored by the authorities. This censorship and surveillance is referred to as 'the Great Firewall of China'.
- There is evidence that social networking sites such as Facebook are being used by migrant populations to facilitate connections with their homeland. These connections help them to preserve and defend aspects of their culture, especially language, customs, traditions and religious rites. McKay (2012) found that Filipinos living and working in London used social networking sites to insulate themselves from the individualism of Western culture. Social networking with relatives and friends in the Philippines meant they could digitally return to the culturally familiar types of relationships that they had physically left behind, which were characterised by obligations to the extended family and religious traditions.
- Cultural survival.org documents the diverse range of ways in which indigenous tribes and isolated communities are starting to use digital technology to gain a voice that can help defend their cultures from exploitation by corporate interests and other threats.
- Extremist groups such as the Islamic State group (also known as ISIS) also utilise social media to defend and disseminate their ideology. Singer and Brooking (2015) discuss how ISIS use social media as a 'weapon' to shock Westerners, posting choreographed execution videos and using 'hashtag hijacking' (hacking into trending hashtags on Twitter and redirecting users to their own extremist material). They also use social media as a tool to recruit new members.

Glocalisation

Cultural hybridity is the third response to globalisation suggested by Hall. This is the idea that cultures take on aspects of other cultures but merge them with their own, rather than all becoming homogeneous. This is closely related to the idea of **glocalisation**, which involves combining the global and the local.

Cultural defence

Involves societies attempting to protect their local cultures from the growing trend of cultural homogenisation which has been linked to digital forms of communication, and to resist the impact of globalisation.

Knowledge check 14

In what ways are cultural homogenisation and cultural defence linked?

Glocalisation The process by which local cultural products and practices are combined or fused with global ones to produce unique cultural forms or hybrids. It can also refer to how local cultures adapt and use global social networks in ways that reflect their own priorities.

Martell (2010) observes that glocalisation in terms of cultural products involves two elements. First, Western media and cultural producers often adapt their products to that they appeal to local markets and audiences. For example, MTV adapts its programming according to the cultural likes and dislikes of particular countries such as Japan, India, Mexico, Spain and France, and mixes Western music with that produced locally.

Second, local cultures select and appropriate elements of westernised global culture that appeal to them, and then modify and adapt these to local cultural needs. In other words, they localise the global to produce a hybridised popular culture. A good example of this is the Indian film industry — 'Bollywood' combines contemporary Western ideas about entertainment with traditional Hindu myth, history and culture.

Another good example of glocalisation is Facebook. Although Facebook is a global media platform, there is no uniform version of what it is and how it is used — it is only the aggregate of its regional usage. Miller et al.'s 2016 research shows that Facebook use in Trinidad reflects aspects of Trinidadian culture. Locals refer to it as 'Fasbook' or 'Macobook'. These terms deliberately mirror the cultural inclinations of Trinidadian society: being 'fas' is trying to get to know another person rather too quickly and being 'maco' is being nosy and wanting to pry into other people's business. So activity on 'Fasbook' in Trinidad is mainly geared to getting to know somebody of the opposite sex, but once people become friends with one another, they constantly meddle in one another's lives. 'Fasbook', then, is a good example of glocalisation because it shows that a global social network will be modified to reflect local culture.

Knowledge check 15

How do the ways we use social media in the UK reflect the values of UK culture?

Summary

- People use social networking sites and virtual worlds to package, promote and present their identities for public consumption. This may have both positive and negative impacts on identities, especially in terms of social class, gender and age.
- Not everybody enjoys equal access to digital forms of communication. Research indicates that a digital divide exists with regard to access to the internet. There exists a digital underclass which is denied a digital voice, showing how social class inequalities may be reinforced by digital communication, but there is also a gendered and a generational digital divide.
- There is a debate about whether social networking sites are good for relationships. Some sociologists argue that they facilitate human interaction, relationships and social capital by constructing a participatory culture. Others have expressed concern that these sites have created a culture of alienation and loneliness which has diminished the quality of human relationships.
- Digital media have also impacted on societies and cultures. They can act as a resource that helps bring about social change, for example via online activism. They can also create and increase conflict within and between cultures.
- There is a debate about whether digital technology and globalisation are creating cultural homogenisation, causing all cultures to become the same, and whether this is in turn leading to cultural defence. Others argue that cultures are taking on some aspects of global culture but adapting them and retaining their distinctiveness, as part of a process of glocalisation.