Part I

Setting the Stage

American Liberalism and Populism

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

2
Is There Still a Liberal Public Sphere in the US? Was There Ever One?

Jan-Werner Müller

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

The early twenty-first century has seen a widespread moral panic about the fate of what was long seen as a central feature both of liberalism as a distinct ideology and of the modern liberal script more broadly (Jungherr and Schroeder 2021): a public sphere in which individuals (and groups) exchange reasoned opinions on the basis of accurate information, with a view to forming a shared political will, and to addressing collective challenges rationally—all the while remaining open to a variety of internal contestations of who gets to speak, what claims gain traction in debate, etc.[1] Whether one should regard "truth-seeking" as central to the public sphere is also an issue for internal contestation: Public opinion, one might well hold, is not a matter of true or false; as Hannah Arendt famously pointed out, the truth in politics tends to be despotic, for it would allow for no legitimate disagreement or even just plurality. What one should aim for, Arendt held, is a plurality of opinions constrained by facts (Arendt 1977). One might add that the process of opinion formation is furthered immeasurably by the institutions generally charged with establishing facts, but also with circulating and refining opinions: what used to be known as the press, but what, in the age of electronic media, we might perhaps simply call professional news media organizations.

While understandings of the precise contours of the public sphere differ, there is wide-spread consensus today about one thing: public spheres are in crisis (Rosenfeld 2018). Liberal (again, in the widest ideational sense of that term, as explained in the introduction to this volume) political cultures appear today threatened by "truth decay" (D'Ancona 2017; Kavanagh and Rich 2018) and what in the US has even been declared a "national reality crisis" (Roose 2021). That is to say: a dramatic increase in misinformation and outright disinformation, spread by political actors committed to antiliberalism, as well as those who are just out to make a quick buck. Here we are dealing with an external contestation (and one that has also been aided by external actors such as the Russian and Chinese regimes), and sometimes even a deep contestation, as citizens have started to resent "the media" (which usually means "the liberal media") and, as on January 6, 2021, appeared prepared to use violence against

[1] This chapter draws extensively on Müller 2021, Müller 2022 and Müller 2019. I am grateful to Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse for comments on drafts of the chapter.

Jan-Werner Müller, *Is There Still a Liberal Public Sphere in the US? Was There Ever One?*. In: *Polarization and Deep Contestations*. Edited by: Tanja A. Börzel, Thomas Risse, Stephanie B. Anderson, and Jean A. Garrison, Oxford University Press. © Jan-Werner Müller (2024). DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198916444.003.0002

journalists. This diagnosis of a comprehensive undermining of the epistemic conditions of liberal democracy has arguably concerned liberal observers more than any other negative global trend in recent years (with the possible exception of the pernicious effects of globalization on the "left behind"). In short, we are dealing not just with an internal contestation of the liberal script; rather, we are facing a fundamental challenge to it—which is not to say that the tensions within the script, as well as the choices of self-declared liberals, for that matter, might not be partly responsible for why this threat has become so grave.

The United States is often seen as exhibit A for these large trends: The disintegration of anything resembling reasoned debate in the public sphere (and "truth" more broadly) brought a manifestly unqualified president to power in 2016; and, as president, that figure then further hastened "truth decay" (and continues the process during the post-presidency). This is not the place to repeat the well-known statistics about Trump's lying; suffice it to say that even among the most hardened realist observers, there was a justified sense of not only a quantitative, but a qualitative change (politicians had always been taking liberties with the truth—but not like this!). At the same time, it was clear all along that Trump was a symptom, not a cause; structural changes had enabled the rise of the aspiring strongman from Queens, a man who both benefited from and further exacerbated pernicious polarization (see also Garner, this volume).

With Trump no longer in office, the structural problems have of course not simply disappeared: just think of the precipitous decline of local journalism (a development that affects many liberal democracies, but that has been particularly pronounced in the US) and the apparent monopoly power of platforms—challenges which the Biden administration has identified clearly enough but de facto proven unable to tackle so far. Hence the worries among observers of many political stripes remain: a highly fragmented public caught in a doomsday dynamic of ever increasing polarization remains deeply vulnerable to tactics inspired by Stephen Bannon's memorable injunction to "flood the zone with shit," as well as other practices which have helped autocrats come to power in many parts of the world (Guriev and Treisman 2022). Lurking behind these US-specific concerns is a deeper anxiety about the fate of the liberal script: Might what was initially touted as a "liberation technology"—social media and platforms enabling peer-to-peer communication—actually contribute to the systematic undermining—and clearly external contestation—of core elements of the script?[2]

This chapter first asks whether the US has ever been as "liberal" (in the sense used in the framework of this volume) as idealizations of previous instantiations of the public sphere would suggest. It has become a cottage industry to demonstrate that Jürgen Habermas's original account of the public sphere was already an empirically implausible take on debate cultures in the eighteen century; I, too, shall cast some doubt on images of information-gathering and unconstrained rational

[2] For the view that social media was never going to favor progressive, let alone grassroots, causes, see Schradie 2019.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

opinion formation that paint too rosy (if not outright golden) pictures of previous eras (Schudson 1992). I will also highlight, however, that the US really was exceptional in two regards: First, compared to many European countries, it had impressively extensive and dense communications networks by the end of the eighteenth century (and this trend, as well as a general flourishing of the newspaper industry, continued into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). At the same time, those public spheres (arguably, there never existed anything like a unified national public sphere) were hardly free from what recent analysts of liberalism's decay call "false speak" and "double speak:" Those spheres were wild (to pick up one of Habermas's favorite terms), chaotic sites of gloves-off political contestation, and, overall, prone to generating falsehoods with real political effects: Thomas Jefferson, the great champion of a free press in a democracy, also paid a journalist to spread falsehoods about Washington and Hamilton (Gajda 2022).

Second, the US proved exceptional in generating an awareness of problems produced by a highly commercialized "free market place in ideas." In general, as analysts of media systems put it, the "North Atlantic liberal model"—"liberal" meaning market-oriented in contrast to corporatist approaches elsewhere—privileges the quest for private profit (and, in the US, local, as opposed to national markets) (Hallin and Mancini 2004). But, during the Progressive era, there was also major pushback against journalism as unrestrained commercialism. The supposed "golden age of truth" in the mid-twentieth century (while not nearly as golden as some make it out to be) was based not just on the dominance of the three painstakingly moderate TV networks eagerly providing fairness and balance, but also on the entrenchment of norms for professional news organizations, truth-seeking ones in particular. These norms were not enforced by the state, but by self-governing professional associations, or even, for that matter, just individual news media organizations.

My core claim in this chapter, drawing on recent work by a number of American social scientists, is that the fall from grace was not caused by technological innovations—which is to say: not the internet or social media more specifically—but by regulatory and commercially driven decisions. These decisions were made by actors who sometimes, though not always, understood themselves as antiliberal in the partisan American sense; they did not see themselves as engaged in an external contestation of the liberal script, but they effectively enabled one, as the new media infrastructure of talk radio and cable made space for forces that attack liberal democracy itself. To be sure, right-wing authoritarian populism today is not just a creation of "the media," but its rise cannot be understood without an account of the structural transformation of the US public sphere, and its increasingly glaring vulnerabilities.

Right-wing authoritarian populist success has in turn rendered journalistic practices, the press as a collective agent, and professional news media organizations more fragile—a vicious circle, which I try to elucidate more analytically at the end of the chapter. The systemic nature of the problems makes it likely that challenges to US liberal democracy will persist and quite possibly become worse. At the same time—and this is crucial to underline—we must remember that these problems were not somehow produced by long-lasting features of American political culture: had some

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

decisions about media regulation by state actors, and some content decisions by media elites, gone another way, it would be by no means obvious that the US public sphere would be in quite the dire situation it is in today. Having said that, the somewhat more heartening upshot is that structural transformations of the public driven by technology evidently have important effects—but it would be wrong to assume that the fragmentation and "truth decay" in the US foreshadow the future everywhere. Elsewhere, the internet and social media come on top of a different media infrastructure.

A Very Brief History of the American Public Sphere

Obviously, there are very distinct national (and even local) trajectories of the relationship between democracy and professional news organizations as well as particular journalistic practices. These differences are best explained by differing "constitutive choices," as the sociologist Paul Starr has put it: choices, that is, whether to help or hinder the distribution of information, how and how much to regulate, etc. These decisions become entrenched; they open up some pathways of development, while sometimes permanently closing off others (Starr 2004). In addition, there are important transformations in the self-understanding of journalists, who, as a profession, have arguably never had as much certainty about their purposes (and constraints) as other professions such as doctors and lawyers.[3]

As Starr has shown, it was not technology as such, but "architectural" political choices, informed by particular values, which made for the evolution of the American media system. The development of a relatively decentralized newspaper industry was massively helped by the federal government's early decision in effect to subsidize it through low postal rates. In the 1790s, as much as 70 percent of the mail were newspapers; the number rose to 95 percent in the 1830s (Pickard 2020, 16).

There was political thought behind these constitutive (and in a sense even constitutional) choices: Jefferson emphasized the need to give the people "full information of their affairs through the channel of the public papers, and to contrive that those papers should penetrate the whole mass of the people. The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the first object should be to keep that right" (quoted in Lebovic 2016, 10). No wonder that the press is the only profession that enjoys

[3] Following a suggestion by the media critic Jay Rosen, I distinguish between journalism, the press, and media. Journalism is a practice that prescribes particular roles and norms which are fairly well known: seeking out facts to the best of one's abilities, explaining larger political developments, and, already more controversially, holding the powerful to account. Plenty of journalists have nothing to do with democratic politics directly: they cover exotic travel destinations or try as hard as they can to get the facts about celebrities' infidelities right. The press, by contrast, is a *collective* tasked specifically with a role in a democracy: to seek and provide the information needed by citizens to judge politicians and, more specifically, hold governments accountable (the press isn't just print publications for my purposes here, but includes radio and electronic media oriented to covering political matters). That is the reason why there is an official, accredited press corps in democratic states (which is not to deny that unofficial, unaccredited reporters can also play an important role). See Rosen 2021.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

constitutional protection in the United States, and that, time and again, authoritative voices have emphasized the foundational value of a free public sphere for the American political experiment. Brandeis provides just one well-known example:

> Those who won our independence believed that the final end of the state was to make men free to develop their faculties, and that in government the deliberative forces should prevail over the arbitrary. . . . They believed that the freedom to think as you will and speak as you think are means indispensable to the discovery and spread of political truth. . . . Believing in the power of reason as applied through public discussion, they eschewed silence coerced by law—the argument of force in its worst form (Whitney v. California, 274 U.S. 357 [1927])

This did of course not mean that free information flows were realized in practice or that ideals of publicity would remain uncontested. Projections of libertarian notions of free speech—often seen as "typically American" today—onto the founding period obscure the long-term persistence of blasphemy laws, widespread intolerance of supposedly un-American beliefs (such as Catholicism until at least the 1950s or so), and draconian restrictions on political speech (just think of the 1798 Sedition Act, which effectively criminalized criticisms of the sitting president). Social norms also mattered, of course: European observers have long been struck by the curious combination of an American commitment to freedom in the abstract and conformity of opinions, or at least a narrowness of the politics that can be publicly avowed in the US—an impression also articulated in the introduction to this volume.

Jeffersonian ideals of public opinion formation and government accountability also did not translate into American papers necessarily providing accurate information (as mentioned already, Jefferson himself transgressed the ideal): The press was highly partisan, and often directly owned by political parties or other associations (for instance, the *Arizona Republic* used to be the *Arizona Republican*). According to some estimates, up to 80 percent of newspapers were linked to parties in mid-nineteenth-century America (Ryfe 2017, 50). This led Tocqueville to observe that decentralization of political power, large numbers of associations, and a proliferation of newspapers all went together, forming central elements of the "democracy in America" which so impressed the French aristocrat.

This is also important to note for a more normative discussion: where they did not outright lie, papers and parties *both* fulfilled a double function for democracy of generating information *and* casting that information in a particular perspective to generate partisan judgments (and, of course, votes). As Tocqueville put it, "a newspaper cannot survive unless it reproduces a doctrine or sentiment shared by a great many people" (Tocqueville 2004 [1835/1840], 602). Both papers and political parties served as what has been called "epistemic trustees:" They should provide accurate information, but they also help make sense of that information in light of partisan commitments (White and Ypi 2016). In its inaugural editorial from 1851, the *New York Times* claimed that its "influence shall always be upon the side of Morality, of Industry, of Education and Religion" (it also rejected "passion" in journalism, with

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

the claim that "there are few things in this world which it is worthwhile to get angry about; and they are just the things that anger will not improve") (*New York Times*, September 18, 1851).

Eventually, American newspapers cut loose from political parties, relying on private profit, rather than state subsidies (which, of course, had only ever been indirect) or party financing.[4] The "penny press" was long derided by cultural pessimists, but it enabled independence and, in the eyes of its admirers, a broad process of democratization, as traditional notions of journalistic decorum—what could be written about and reported on—broke down (Post 2018). Jurist Robert Post has enthused: "the responsiveness of newspapers to consumer demand was ultimately a political question. The broader the public to which newspapers responded, the more democratic was the public sphere which they created" (Post 2018, 1036–1037). Not everyone saw sensationalism as democratizing, though; here is Brandeis again, who, in his seminal opinion on the "right to left alone" co-authored with Samuel Warren II, claimed:

> The press is overstepping in every direction the obvious bounds of propriety and of decency. Gossip is no longer the resource of the idle and of the vicious, but has become a trade, which is pursued with industry as well as effrontery. To satisfy a prurient taste the details of sexual relations are spread broadcast in the columns of the daily papers. To occupy the indolent, column upon column is filled with idle gossip, which can only be procured by intrusion upon the domestic circle (Warren II and Brandeis 1890)

The outrageous practices of some journalists—not just sensationalism and violations of privacy, but stealing content, making stuff up, etc.—eventually provoked a push for professionalism. Progressives sought to codify special roles for journalists to generate "objective" reporting; and they demanded particular training in journalism schools, which started to be set up by the beginning of the twentieth century.

Professionalism, on a very simplistic reading, is just elitism: The well-trained get to exercise power without any broader popular authorization. But, at least in theory, professional standards are also a way of shielding institutions from economic and political power; plus, they can be democratizing, if they enable more people to make a living with writing on the basis of clear normative expectations (as opposed to only the independently wealthy being able to engage in more sophisticated forms of journalism) (Foer 2017).

US reformers were driven by the ambition, as the liberal Walter Lippmann, one of the protagonists of professionalization, put it, of bringing "publishing business under greater social control"—that is to say, exerting legal power over private interests in the name of a conception of the common good (Lippmann 2008, 45). Lippmann had witnessed how government propaganda in support of World War I had flooded the American public sphere; but he did not conclude that state control or shameless

[4] In a somewhat similar vein, constitutive choices for privatizing the telegraph (in the 1840s), the telephone, and broadcasting meant that American media operated much more independently of the state, unlike, for instance, public service broadcasters that came to be established in many European countries.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

commercialism, which left the "manufacturing of consent" to unregulated private actors, were the only options. Professionalism promised autonomy (from the state and commercial interests dictating a paper's line) without losing accountability—one could fail to observe professional standards and come to be judged accordingly by professional peers. Journalists, Lippmann demanded, should stop acting as "preachers, revivalists, prophets, and agitators"; instead, they ought to report the news and explain the world to the best of their abilities (Lippmann 2008, 4).

After World War II, various commissions of wise elders—above all the group chaired by Chicago President Robert Maynard Hutchins—recommended that newspapers follow a model of "social responsibility" in how they handle information and opinion (Bates 2020). Like the push for "objectivity" during the Progressive era, this amounted to a call for self-regulation. As a result, major American media outlets concentrated almost entirely on information, in contrast to interpretation, let alone advocacy. It is often forgotten that the *New York Times* did not have a designated op-ed page until 1970, and that "op-ed" means "opposite the editorial page" (the "op" is not "opinion"—the *Times* initially encouraged opinions that countered its own official stance). Newspapers "reported" mainly on what various government figures had said and done; there was not much by way of explaining what it meant, let alone anything like judging whether it amounted to anything positive (Pressman 2018). As a journalist covering the witch hunts of Joe McCarthy confessed, "my own impression was that Joe was a demagogue. But what could I do? I had to report—and quote—McCarthy . . . The press is supposedly neutral. You write what the man says" (quoted in Lebovic 2016, 161).

Many US journalists eventually changed course; mere information was complemented by copious amounts of interpretation; in addition to "who," "where," "when," there was now "why." Asking that question—and packaging interpretation together with ads for luxury consumer goods and high-end jobs—turned out to be highly lucrative (Pressman 2018). What's more, from today's vantage point, the second half of the twentieth century appears to have been the golden age for the notion of the press as a Fourth Power supporting or even furthering liberal democracy: fearless investigative reporting that exposed misdeeds like Watergate formed part of it, but so did high-minded editorializing, or, in the preferred language of today: *gatekeeping*, which kept demagogues and assorted antiliberal radicals out.

Of course, this is not how it looked in the eyes of critics, from very different parts of the political spectrum: for many conservatives, "interpretation" was merely a form of partisanship: already in the 1950s, such critics faulted the press for supposedly pushing a "liberal"—in the partisan US sense—agenda (Walter Cronkite, the embodiment of trusted establishment media, once replied to such charges: "As far as the leftist thing is concerned, that I think is something that comes from the nature of a journalist's work") (Hemmer 2017).

By contrast, from the perspective of progressives, the era would be seen as a period when new claims for representation of minorities or the long oppressed were very hard to make public, as older white male gatekeepers decided what was newsworthy and how it should be interpreted, and when, overall, media pluralism, in comparison

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

with today, was very limited; to maximize audiences, broadcasters invariably decided to offer what an NBC executive called the "Least Objectionable Program" (quoted in Poniewozik 2019, 25). In the end, journalism that depended on profits from advertising, in the eyes of radical dissenters, fulfilled a distinctly ideological function: As Sinclair famously claimed, "journalism is one of the devices whereby industrial autocracy keeps its control over political democracy."

From Partisan Antiliberalism to Erasing the Liberal Script?

Conservative critics had long taken issue with one of the central elements of the postwar public sphere dominated by TV: the Fairness Doctrine, dating from 1949. According to the Doctrine, those given the privilege of broadcasting on what was, after all, a technically limited spectrum had to give space to both sides of an issue of public interest; they also had to allow for responses from citizens who claimed their views or conduct had been portrayed falsely. The Doctrine was abolished in 1987 by a Reaganite deregulator who famously called TV "just another appliance . . . a toaster with pictures." What had been treated as a public utility of sorts was now recast as purely private property fully at the disposal of the property owners.

It was the end of the Fairness Doctrine, combined with the rise of cable and AM talk radio that best explains the emergence of what American social scientists have identified as a distinct right-wing media eco-sphere, where "news" serves primarily as a form of political self-validation—and where disinformation (or even just misinformation) goes largely uncorrected. The reason is this: The audience of a kind of right-wing polit-entertainment complex has hardly any contact even with center-right sources of news and opinion (and, one hastens to add, the common claim that the situation is symmetrical is empirically false: There are conspiracy theories on the left, too, but its consumers are much more likely to have them eventually corrected through contact with publications such as the *New York Times*). The result is that misinformation and especially disinformation—divorced from any checks on veracity—can travel fast and far, amounting to what Lippmann had already termed a "contagion of unreason" (Lippmann 2008, 33).

To be sure, this diagnosis should not legitimate the rearticulation of old prejudices about "the masses." The story is more complicated, though not necessarily more heartening for democratic theorists: The contagion of unreason might have affected some very badly, but a much larger number of citizens, when given plenty of new options through cable TV, actually decided to tune out of politics altogether. The "low-choice" era of three large TV networks had forced everyone to pick up some news in simple language and with interesting images (for there was nothing else on at a particular moment); the post-broadcast environment allows many to opt for continuous entertainment, while political junkies can enjoy their outrage 24/7 (Prior 2007).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

The crucial point is this: the emergence of the self-enclosed right-wing eco-sphere *predates* the internet (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). Regulatory decisions which only to a limited degree were prompted by new technologies such as FM radio and cable enabled a form of polarization which, it just so happens, turned out to be very big business, especially for self-declared "advocacy journalists" and what might more broadly be termed polarization entrepreneurs on the right (Rosenwald 2019). This is not to minimize the fundamental changes brought by the internet and social media in particular; it is just to remind us that no technology applies itself and, furthermore, that every innovation takes place in an already existing public sphere with a particular shape. The internet revolution happened in the US at a time when there were already major (economic and political) incentives for partisanship which pushed the limits of professional journalistic norms (or outright transgressed them). Conflict—not just talking but *shouting* heads opposing each other on cable TV—and outrage could easily be created (and monetized). Outrage production is of course much cheaper than actual reporting. And all this happened *before* the age of platform algorithms designed for "outrage optimization" and running on "outrage porn" (Nguyen and Williams 2020).[5]

Political antiliberalism (with "liberalism" understood here again in the partisan US sense) became partly defined as "anti-professionalism:" "sticking it to the establishment," "pushing back against the agenda of out-of-touch liberal elites," etc. formed core parts of the brand of highly influential "media personalities" and "advocacy journalists" whose capacity for outrage was high, while care for objectivity remained generally low. Professionalism was now explicitly disavowed; as the right-wing talk show host Glenn Beck once declared: "I'm not a journalist. I'm just a dad. I'm a guy who loves his country" (quoted in Peck 2019, 115).

Professional journalism had already become more fragile through what, on this occasion, can broadly be called neoliberalism. What I mean specifically is the suspicion that professionals—be it academics, doctors, or, indeed, journalists—run a kind of closed shop through requiring specialized education and training. Once inside their self-created system, they can relax; unlike those engaged in business, who are mercilessly exposed to the punishments meted out by objective market mechanisms, they can get away with a lax attitude toward their own productivity. Margaret Thatcher evidently assumed that most professors, other than in the hard sciences, were just wasting taxpayers' money by sitting around drinking tea and spouting leftist nonsense. The simulation of markets inside universities and the National Health Service—through a relentless "audit culture" and "tyranny of metrics" which would have given central planners in the Soviet Union the pleasure of instant recognition—was to make professionals compete, work properly, and, above all, become accountable to society at large, i.e. taxpayers (Muller 2018). The latter were assumed to think that the whole game of professionalism was probably always

[5] Moral outrage porn, Nguyen and Williams argue, provides immediate gratification, without any costs or consequences—just like the original version of pornography and derivatives such as "real estate porn" and "food porn."

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

rigged, and that "liberal elites" simply reproduce themselves in a world where in fact there are no real standards.

When Donald Trump revealed his cabinet appointments, some observers pointed with glee to what they thought was an obvious contradiction: How could a supposed "populist" surround himself with corporate bosses and Wall Street figures—all epitomizing the elite, after all? What such critics failed to appreciate was precisely that many cabinet members were *not* professionals: Their success (and "hard work") could be measured objectively, in dollars; they were obviously competent and capable of implementing the real people's will, as uniquely discerned by the populist leader—unlike professionals who would always end up distorting it, while lecturing everyone on how they simply knew better because, after all, they had more education. Right-wing authoritarian populists are not simply "anti-elite"; they target a particular elite—including professional journalists who are accused of being unfair und unbalanced. Here as well, it is important to realize that such negative portrayals of professionalism precede the internet; these are political strategies pursued by those with a broadly speaking antiliberal agenda, not inevitable outcomes somehow generated by technology.

True, it would be problematic to downplay the structural changes brought by the emergence of platform and surveillance capitalism: The business model of professional news media organizations has of course been undermined by Google and Facebook siphoning off enormous amounts of advertising revenue (Zuboff 2019 and Seemann 2021). As a result, newsrooms have become smaller (this is most obvious at local level where the "crisis of journalism" really has resulted in a large number newspaper casualties); less obviously, they have also become subject to a relentless logic of immediate success (what's being clicked on? What might go viral?) dictated by Chartbeat. And there is the problem of a fundamental opacity: With papers and TV stations, one had some sense of where they stood politically and why we are getting what we are getting; with supposed "trends" on social media, we are not sure what we are getting and where supposed shifts in opinion are really originating. Social scientists can only guess what some of the effects of proprietary algorithms might be (Persily and Tucker 2020); citizens themselves can easily be misled by bots; and while the perils of echo chambers and filter bubbles may have been exaggerated somewhat (Guess et al., 2016), the fact remains that online subcultures can reinforce more or less closed publics—from which, to pick up a seminal argument by the social theorist Gabriel Tarde, offline crowds, including extremely violent ones, can eventually emerge (Tarde 2007 [1901]).

Vicious Circles and Other Consequences

Right-wing authoritarian populists pose dangers to press freedom and democracy more broadly everywhere, but they present particular challenges in a country with a two-party system, an inherited liberal ethos of journalism, and a highly commercialized public sphere—in short: a country like the United States. First, the fact that

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

at least parts of the Republican Party no longer clearly support the most basic elements of democracy (such as: *those who get fewer votes lose an election*) has also put standard journalistic practices in question. While both parties remained committed to liberal democracy, traditional professional norms of objectivity and neutrality could be perfectly justified; but, as Jay Rosen and others have pointed out, under conditions of highly asymmetrical polarization, a "both-sides"-approach, suggesting a mere symmetry of different policy positions, actually turns into a distortion (Rosen 2016). Journalists have been afraid to be seen as partisan. Charges of partisanship can easily make them modify their stances, but since, in the eyes of their critics, there is never enough objectivity, they are effectively being pushed along the political spectrum by their critics. To put it another way: Traditional professional journalism has plenty of techniques to deal with internal contestations; it can be completely helpless when the contestation is de facto from the outside by actors who simply no longer accept the basic rules of the public sphere, and democracy more broadly (and, in particular, weaponize journalist norms against journalists).

The other extreme also exists, of course: Journalists have presented themselves as part of "the resistance," thereby falling into the very trap Trump and Bannon had set for them when they called the media "the opposition" (if not outright "enemy of the people"). If journalists declare themselves the opposition, then whatever they say and write can be discredited in advance as partisan as well. No wonder that former *Washington Post* editor Martin Baron famously claimed that "we should not be an activist for anything except fact and truth" (even if his opinion pages, not to speak of the paper's new motto "Democracy Dies in Darkness" often told a different story) (Pitzke and Nelles 2021). With the increased access of journalists to the public outside channels subject to editing (Twitter in particular), the divergence of a news outlet's official line and individual stances by journalists could now easily also become visible in ways unimaginable before social media. It is worth remembering that only 21 percent of Americans are on Twitter—but probably close to 100 percent of American journalists (a fact which Trump also relentlessly made to work in his favor) (Schudson 2018, 41).

Second, there are novel forms of attacking the press.[6] What I mean is the press as a particular *collective agent*—one that is characterized by internal pluralism, but one that also sees itself as an institution tasked with holding politicians accountable. The Trump administration for a while refused to hold *any* press briefings; Trump himself made a point of trying to divide and conquer the press corps by picking on individual reporters. When other journalists failed to show solidarity, his tactic of weakening the press as a collective agent would broadly succeed. While some cohesion has arguably returned, basic problems with journalistic practices—namely, the limits of objectivity and neutrality in the face of threats to democracy itself—continue to have an effect on the press as a whole.

Third, there is the underlying issue of the economic weakening of professional news organizations. While some may have benefited from a "Trump bump," the

[6] To be sure, one can debate the novelty of Trumpism in this regard: Nixon would seem an obvious precedent.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

long-term trends still point in the direction of shrinking newsrooms and, less obviously, commentary that only speaks to the converted, as media organizations cultivate specialized (and more or less partisan) constituencies, rather than aim at broader audiences. As Osita Nwanevu has astutely observed, the crisis of journalism can become a crisis for democracy—that Walter Lippmann already knew—but the crisis of democracy can also turn into a particular crisis for journalism: both political reporting and commentary simply reinforce what citizens are already thinking and feeling; moreover, a political system not designed for asymmetrical polarization will likely not be responsive even to a fairly attentive and well-informed public in the way democracy textbook wisdom would suggest. As Nwanevu puts it:

> It's true that the health of a democracy depends upon the state of its journalism. But the relationship also works the other way: the state of journalism depends upon the health of democracy, and not just in the sense that journalists depend on press freedom. Democracy gives journalism purpose; the journalist brings information and arguments to the public, and the informed public acts, or makes its preferences known to those in a position to act. But if our sclerotic political institutions are less responsive to broad public opinion than to the imperatives of major corporations and the wealthy—and if, as the political-science and social-psychology literature tells us, public opinion isn't reliably responsive to argument and new information to begin with—what are the would-be shapers of public opinion to do? (Nwanevu 2021)

Moreover, news organizations and even those not directly in the news business (such as AT&T) feel the need to hedge by supporting not just conservative, but outright right-wing authoritarian populist actors in order to shield themselves from charges of partisanship (Schiffman 2021).

Finally, it is worth going back to Tocqueville's insights into the decentralized nature of a US democracy relying on parties and largely local newspapers. Today's problems start close to home, with the dramatic decline, and often outright death, of local journalism. The latter, as Jay Rosen has pointed out, "is where a relationship with trusted news providers typically begins" (Rosen 2018). Local journalism has particularly suffered from the restructuring of the economy in the past two decades. Advertising used to sustain serious journalism; as Clay Shirky famously put it, "Wal-Mart might not have any interest in the Baghdad bureau, but de facto they subsidized its staff" (Shirky 2009). As advertising was hoovered up by Google and Facebook, local papers in particular saw their newsroom staff cut dramatically. One in five local newspapers has disappeared in the US since 2004; 5 million Americans have no local newspaper at all, 60 million have only one (Hendrickson 2019).

The growth of such "news deserts" has had profound political effects (Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido 2009). Corruption increases, as no journalist reports on town council meetings, especially public procurement decisions. Political interest declines: The shuttering of local papers has been associated with lower turnout in elections, fewer candidates running for office, and more incumbents winning. Citizens also

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

have less effective representation at the national level: As local and regional papers cannot afford a correspondent in the capital, it becomes more difficult to understand what a Congressman or Congresswoman is doing exactly in D.C.—and hence it is harder to hold them accountable.

Less obviously, the shrinking of proper local news reinforces pernicious trends of polarization (Garner, this volume). In their neighborhoods, citizens can often agree on diagnosing concrete problems and respectfully discuss practical solutions—all without getting into extended culture wars.[7] But as local news—and hence local debates—disappear, national news fills the void. And national debates often contain much more partisan posturing and the recoding of conflicts as questions of cultural identity.

Conclusion

In sum, then, there really is a problem for the public sphere (or public spheres) in the US. But it has nothing to do with irrational masses being unleashed, as advocates of traditional gatekeeping might suggest; rather, it is a matter of different structural vulnerabilities reinforcing each other: The professional ethos of journalists was premised on a particular form of politics; as the latter is being transformed by a radically antiliberal (in the widest sense) Republican Party, so far uncontroversial practices of objectivity and neutrality might actually contribute to the undermining of democracy. In the same vein, novel attacks on the press as an institution will put further fear into individual journalists, making them seek refuge in neutrality, rather than seeking the truth of the matter (I adopt this phrase and thought from Jay Rosen as well). And that in turn will make professional news organizations be deeply concerned about attacks on them and hence also seek refuge, or, in line with a quasi-liberal principle of making money from clashing opinions, also contribute to polarization in various ways.

I conclude, then, that a liberal script might be under pressure in many parts of the world—but that the US is especially vulnerable because of a combination of the following factors: structural changes in the media landscape unrelated to the internet; a long-standing campaign against professionalism; a fateful vulnerability created by particular professional norms of objectivity and neutrality among journalists (which can be hacked by partisan actors); and a fateful interaction of the increasing fragility of the media and political systems.

References

Arendt, Hannah. 1977. "Truth and Politics." In *Between Past and Future*, edited by Hannah Arendt, pp. 227–264. New York: Penguin.

[7] To be sure, this perspective risks romanticizing front porch democracy; after all, disputes among neighbors can be particularly bitter. In any case, many local problems require more than local solutions.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

Bates, Stephen. 2020. *An Aristocracy of Critics: Luce, Hutchins, Niebuhr, and the Committee That Redefined Freedom of the Press*. New Haven: Yale University Press

Benkler, Yochai, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. 2018. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

D'Ancona, Matthew. 2017. *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*. London: Ebury.

Foer, Franklin. 2017. *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech*. New York: Penguin.

Gajda, Amy. 2022. *Seek and Hide: The Tangled History of Privacy in America*. New York: Viking.

Guess, Andrew, Benjamin Lyons, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler. 2016. "Avoiding the Echo Chamber about Echo Chambers: Why Selective Exposure to Political News Is Less Prevalent than You Think." *Knight Foundation* 2 (1): 1–25.

Guriev, Serguei, and Daniel Treisman. 2022. *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hallin, Daniel C., and Paolo Mancini. 2004. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hemmer, Nicole. 2017. "From 'Faith in Facts' to 'Fair and Balanced': Conservative Media, Liberal Bias, and the Origins of Balance." In *Media Nation: The Political History of News in Modern America*, edited by Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, pp. 126–143. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Hendrickson, Clara. 2019. "Local Journalism in Crisis: Why America must revive its local newsroom." *Brookings Report*, November 12. https://www.brookings.edu/research/local-journalism-in-crisis-why-america-must-revive-its-local-newsrooms/ (accessed September 20, 2023).

Jungherr, Andreas, and Ralph Schroeder. 2021. "Disinformation and the Structural Transformations of the Public Arena: Addressing the Actual Challenges to Democracy." *Social Media + Society* 7: 1–13.

Kavanagh, Jennifer, and Michael D. Rich. 2018. *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*. Santa Monica: RAND.

Lebovic, Natan. 2016. *Free Speech and Unfree News: The Paradox of Press Freedom in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lippmann, Walter. 2008. *Liberty and the News*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Müller, Jan-Werner. 2019. "Democracy and the Public Sphere." In *Thinking Democracy Now*, edited by Nadia Urbinati, pp. 23–39. Milan: Feltrinelli.

Müller, Jan-Werner. 2021. *Democracy Rules*. London: Penguin.

Müller, Jan-Werner. 2022. "Still the 'Fourth Power'? Rethinking the Press in Liberal Democracies." *SCRIPTS Working Paper* 18. Berlin: Cluster of Excellence 2055 "Contestations of the Liberal Script" (SCRIPTS).

Muller, Jerry Z. 2018. *The Tyranny of Metrics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Nguyen, C. Thi, and Bekka Williams. 2020. "Moral Outrage Porn." *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 18: 147–172.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

Nwanevu, Osita. 2021. "What Is Political Writing For?" *Columbia Journalism Review*. https://www.cjr.org/special_report/political_writing_future_internet.php. (accessed September 20, 2023).

Peck, Reece. 2019. *Fox Populism: Branding Conservatism as Working Class*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Persily, Nathaniel, and Joshua A. Tucker. 2020. *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Pitzke, Marc, and Roland Nelles. 2021. "We Had to be Much More Forthright about Trump: Interview with Washington Post Editor Martin Baron." *Der Spiegel*, February 9. https://www.spiegel.de/international/business/interview-with-washington-post-editor-martin-baron-we-had-to-be-much-more-forthright-about-trump-a-2d5b7c59-7024-4138-91bc-0cc3b54d3794 (accessed September 20, 2023).

Pickard, Victor. 2020. *Democracy without Journalism?* New York: Oxford University Press.

Poniewozik, James. 2019. *Audience of One: Trump, Television, and the Fracturing of America*. New York: Penguin.

Post, Robert. 2018. "Data Privacy and Dignitary Privacy: Google Spain, the Right to be Forgotten, and the Construction of the Public Sphere." *Duke Law Journal* 67: 981–1072.

Pressman, Matthew. 2018. *On Press: The Liberal Values That Shaped the News*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Prior, Markus. 2007. *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Roose, Kevin. 2021. "How the Biden Administration Can Help Solve Our National Reality Crisis." *New York Times*, February 2.

Rosen, Jay. 2016. "Asymmetry between the major parties fries the circuits of the mainstream press." *Pressthink.org*, September 25. https://pressthink.org/2016/09/asymmetry-between-the-major-parties-fries-the-circuits-of-the-mainstream-press/ (accessed September 20, 2023).

Rosen, Jay. 2018. "A current list of my top problems." https://pressthink.org/2018/09/a-current-list-of-my-top-problems-in-pressthink/#p5 (accessed September 20, 2023).

Rosen, Jay. 2021. https://twitter.com/jayrosen_nyu/status/1363669915555749890 (accessed May 25, 2021).

Rosenwald, Brian. 2019. *Talk Radio's America: How an Industry Took over a Political Party That Took over the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rosenfeld, Sophia. 2018. *Democracy and Truth: A Short History*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Ryfe, David M. 2017. *Journalism and the Public*. Cambridge: Polity.

Schiffman, John. 2021. "How AT&T helped built far-right One America News." *Reuters*, October 16. https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-oneamerica-att/ (accessed September 20, 2022).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024

Schradie, Jen. 2019. *The Revolution That Wasn't: How Digital Activism Favors Conservatives*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Schudson, Michael. 1992. "Was There Ever a Public Sphere? If So, When? Reflections on the American Case." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig Calhoun, pp. 142–163. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Schudson, Michael. 2018. "My Very Own Alternative Facts about Journalism." In *Trump and the Media* Cambridge, edited by Pablo J. Boczowski and Zizi Papacharissi, pp. 41–47. MA: MIT Press.

Schulhofer-Wohl, Sam, and Miguel Garrido. 2009. "Do Newspapers Matter? Short-Run and Long-Run Evidence from the Closure of The Cincinnati Post." *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper* 14817. March.

Seemann, Michael. 2021. *Die Macht der Plattformen*. Berlin: Chr. Links.

Shirky, Clay. 2009. "Stop Press—and then What?" *The Guardian*, April 13. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2009/apr/13/internet-newspapers-clay-shirky (accessed April 18, 2024).

Starr, Paul. 2004. *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communication*. New York: Basic Books.

Tarde, Gabriel. 2007 (1901). *L'Opinion et la Foule*. Paris: Sandre.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. 2004(1835/1840). *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer. New York: Library of America.

Warren II, Samuel, and Louis Brandeis. 1890. "The Right to Privacy." *Harvard Law Review* 4 (5): 172–183.

White, Jonathan, and Lea Ypi. 2016. *The Meaning of Partisanship*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. New York: Public Affairs.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/book/58012/chapter/480372482 by Princeton University user on 25 November 2024