

FAKE DEMOCRACY, BAD NEWS

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Media and democracy, like Cagney and Lacey or Starsky and Hutch, are inseparable. You just can't have one without the other. The free exchange of ideas, information, and symbols that nourish citizens and replenish the system as a whole have long been seen as a central foundation of democratic societies. Indeed a complex normative paraphernalia has emerged to describe the key responsibilities placed on media in the emergence and sustenance of democracy: as an independent watchdog and monitor of unchecked power, a tribune of the people, a defender of minorities, a fourth estate, and a public sphere. Free media are said to provide the oxygen, the lubrication or indeed the sinews of a fully functioning and robust democracy.¹

Yet in those liberal democracies of the west where this vocabulary is most deeply entrenched, we are seeing quite the opposite: a media that all too often preys on the vulnerable and bows down before the powerful; a media whose noble crusade for truth and justice has been replaced by a carnival of gossip and spectacle; a media that demonstrates a commitment to consumer, rather than popular, sovereignty; a media that is no longer an outlier but a constitutive part of class rule; a media that has adopted the mantras of the free market rather than the difficult practices involved in ensuring free expression, political participation and democratic renewal. The result has been a growing loss of authority and legitimacy. In Europe, the only media sector that is trusted by a majority of the population is radio, while the trust of ordinary Americans in the media has fallen from 53 per cent of citizens in 1997 to only 32 per cent in 2016.² In 2017, the Edelman Trust Barometer reported that the media was distrusted in 82 per cent of the 28 countries they surveyed, and it had dropped to an all-time low in 17 of those countries. Traditional media showed the steepest decline.³

This collapse in trust is far from unique, and is related to the same backlash against entrenched interests that has also eaten into the credibility of neoliberal political parties and politicians. While politicians and the media

often fight it out for the last place in the trust stakes, business and NGOs are also tarred by the same brush. Given that the mainstream media are seen to be ever more closely entangled with elite power, so are they also implicated in the same mire of corruption and scandal.

This is part of a wider narrative about the degeneration of the liberal ‘centre’ and its failure both to stand up to, and to distinguish itself from, the market forces that have eviscerated, evacuated, hollowed out, reined in, commodified, trivialized and generally contaminated those spaces with which democracy has been traditionally associated. Of course, it is neoliberal forces, rather than liberal democracy more generally, that are most frequently associated with this degeneration. For millions of people, it is the icy calculation of neoliberal logic and the narrow instrumentalism of allegedly self-correcting markets that has ridden roughshod over permanent jobs, organic communities, egalitarian structures, and democratic aspirations. The emphasis on economic efficiency has depoliticized much government decision-making, transforming social, political, and moral dilemmas into technical and managerial problems, leaving little room for public participation.

With the veneer of liberal watchdog now stretched perilously thin across the mainstream media, it should come as no surprise that neoliberal rationality has been so successful in occupying the terrain of the liberal centre. Rather than the 2008 global financial crisis spurring the questioning of the logic of global capitalism, we saw its logic extend. Austerity policies became a normalized solution to the crisis wherein, as Blyth says:

... those at the bottom are expected to pay disproportionately for a problem created by those at the top, and when those at the top actively eschew any responsibility for that problem by blaming the state for their mistakes, not only will squeezing the bottom not produce enough revenue to fix things, it will produce an even more polarized and politicized society in which the conditions for a sustainable politics of dealing with more debt and less growth are undermined. Populism, nationalism and calls for the return of ‘God and gold’ in equal doses are what unequal austerity generates ...⁴

Unemployment, high levels of personal debt, extreme poverty, and inequality feature heavily in this particular post-crash moment. As governments seek to manage their deficits, the protective mechanisms of welfare that remain shrouded by the spectre of democracy too often end up excluding, rather than supporting, those in need. In England between June 2010 and March 2016, welfare reforms enacted deductions of £26 billion in UK social security and tax credits spending with ‘deficit reduction’ being

the primary goal of government.⁵ Local authorities in England are currently dealing with a scheduled 40 per cent cut in core funding from the central government. In response, councils and other public agencies seek to further outsource and share services as a means of reducing costs, detaching these services from democratic processes and depoliticizing decisions about public welfare and the public good.

The impact of the crisis has been especially marked for the poor and minority communities as well as for young people whose experiences (in the UK at least) are also inflected by the ‘war on terror’, student fees, housing inflation, and urban riots.⁶ Not surprisingly, we have seen people’s overall confidence in established systems of governance start to crumble:

Only a third of the public think the system by which Britain is governed works well (33%) with those living furthest from Westminster most likely to be dissatisfied. Just 35% believe that when people like themselves get involved in politics they can change the way the country is run. Only 13% feel they have some influence over decision-making nationally although 41% would like to be involved in decision-making. More people (46%) would like to be involved in local decisions but just 25% currently feel they have some influence at the local level.⁷

These are the conditions in which a series of political ‘earthquakes’ have taken place: the decision taken by UK voters in 2016 to leave the European Union, the election of Donald Trump in the United States, the collapse of the main parties in the French presidential elections of 2017, and the resurgence of the anti-austerity politics of Jeremy Corbyn. These events have brought to the fore the economic dislocation that has taken place since the 1980s, revealing deep class, as well as generational and ethnic, divisions. Marginalized voices have kicked back against a post-war party system that has failed them and a professional political elite that has largely ignored them. These were also the circumstances in which the media’s democratic credentials were to be sorely tested.

THE DEMOCRATIC MEDIA SWINDLE

The central issue for us is not that we are suddenly surrounded by what is described as ‘fake news’ but that we have been living with fake democracy. This takes the form of a democratic facade that promises much but delivers little, leaving its citizens confronted by what Raymond Williams described as ‘the coexistence of political representation and participation with an economic system which admits no such rights, procedures or claims’.⁸

Colin Crouch has described the closure of alternatives under neoliberalism as a situation of ‘post-democracy’ in which ‘politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of pre-democratic times’.⁹ For Crouch, it is a paradox of contemporary democracy that despite the surfeit of apparently democratic-sounding developments – the collapse of deference, increases in transparency and literacy, and more opportunities formally to engage in democracy – we nevertheless have to be persuaded to vote and to exercise ‘civic responsibility’. The media themselves are partly to blame: their attachments to power and their use of sensationalism and soundbites ‘degrade the quality of political discussion and reduce the competence of citizens’.¹⁰ This sham sovereignty is not incidental to, but intertwined with, the liberal capitalism of which our mainstream media industries are very much a part.¹¹ The real problem isn’t the Macedonian cottage industry churning out pro-Trump messages, but the fact that in equating liberal democracy (and a liberal media) with meaningful control of our collective lives, we have been *swindled*.

Actually existing democracy (rather than its utopian ideal) – both in its rhetoric and its political routines – has very successfully used discourses of equality and autonomy to commodify individualism and constrain freedom. It has promised popular rule and self-governance through market exchanges and constitutional guarantees, but instead we have a shrink-wrapped democracy that celebrates only the most pallid forms of participation and engagement with all political nutrients removed. Citizens have been recast as consumers and collective decisions transformed into questions of individual need and choice. And in doing so, it has given us nothing more than the illusion of democratic communications: a media where editors and top politicians dine at the same tables, are educated at the same institutions, and share many of the same corporate values and ideological agendas; a media that is disaggregated in theory but centralized in practice; a media where the tools may be open source but where the most powerful networks remain closed. This is a media marked by commerce, complicity, and caution rather than critique, creativity, and a journalism of conscience.

Media institutions are massively implicated in fake democracy as both subject and object of a socio-economic restructuring that favours the upward transfer and concentration of property and wealth.¹² Mainstream media outlets have failed to use their symbolic power to challenge this shift to offer alternative visions and truly representative narratives, serving up instead an anaemic diet of stories that are frequently shallow, decontextualised, misleading, or downright biased – for example the economics journalism that assumes the ‘expertise’ of financial commentators and the legitimacy of austerity policies,¹³

the reporting of ‘terror’ that marginalizes geopolitical tensions and inequalities,¹⁴ the negative coverage of progressive movements and leaders,¹⁵ and the popular representations of welfare claimants as ‘revolting subjects’¹⁶ that seek to mobilize a sense of disgust towards the ‘unproductive’ and ‘undeserving poor’ in the contemporary world.

In posing these questions about the relationship between media and democracy, we are drawing on Marx’s famous invocation of liberal democracy as an enormous swindle in which superficially democratic forms of constitutional government were employed to undermine the possibility of a fully functioning democracy based on equality and popular control. Speaking of the United States as ‘the archetype of democratic humbug’,¹⁷ Marx, according to Hal Draper, insisted that it ‘had to develop to its highest point the art of keeping the expression of popular opinion within channels satisfactory to its class interests’.¹⁸

Mainstream media have long played this essential role – framing debate and identifying controversies but always seeking ‘to strictly limit the spectrum on acceptable opinion’¹⁹ whether this relates to issues concerning the economy, immigration, or foreign intervention. We are now facing a new democratic swindle in which elite media institutions – from the BBC and the *New York Times* to Google and Facebook – are using the crisis posed by the growth of anti-establishment politics to argue that only they are capable of sustaining a consensual, rational, and credible information ecology that can expose ‘fake news’ and protect ‘established truths’. The problem is that they intend to achieve this by relying on the same personnel, the same evangelical belief in algorithms (even if the algorithms themselves may be forced to change), and the same agendas that failed dismally in their democratic responsibilities and that are intimately connected to the neoliberal order that has so alienated millions of people.

BAD NEWS

Convergent shifts in cultural production, journalism, political communication, marketing, and data mining have contributed to the emergence of a mediated regime facilitated by deregulated, commodified, affective and ever faster forms of what Jodi Dean calls ‘communicative capitalism’.²⁰ Political discourse is commandeered by the stuff of entertainment, while the news all too often traffics in trivialities and repackaged public relations material²¹ and occupies an increasingly fragile and narrow centre ground. This determination, traceable across the last forty years, to subjugate *all* areas of mediated activity to market logic and competition through ever-more commercialization, privatization, and restructuring has prepared the way for

what Will Davies has referred to as ‘post-truth politics’ based on an over-supply of ‘facts’ and an under-provision of meaningful analysis.²² We now have a mainstream journalism that fails to perform what is assumed to be the central role of media in a liberal democracy: to interrogate the power relations that shape our world. This is partly because of the quick-fix, rapid-fire, clickbait-focused strategies that don’t allow for critical reflections, but also because media organizations themselves are increasingly implicated in power relations that they have little reason to illuminate or challenge. Add to this the refusal by the entire mainstream UK press to comply with a system of independent self-regulation recommended by Lord Justice Leveson after an 18 month inquiry into the ethics and standards of the press that was agreed by all parties in Parliament, supported by the vast majority of the population, and designed to hold the press to account for misrepresentation, distortion, and illegal behaviour,²³ and we have a confluence of processes that have hollowed out those remaining democratic spaces in our most popular news media outlets.

Of course, while democracy is about far more than an accountable press or a truly social media, the sheer scale of the largest media organizations compounds the problems of ‘fake democracy’. Despite Rupert Murdoch’s claim that ‘no one controls the media or will ever again’,²⁴ markets in both ‘new’ and ‘old’ media sectors are heavily concentrated and skewed towards wealth creation, effectively suffocating any notion of the public interest. Media landscapes – from the analogue world of the print title to the global digital monopolies of Google and Facebook – are increasingly monopolistic in nature, resistant to traditional forms of regulation, and out of reach of democratically organized political will-formation. The UK, for example, has a supposedly competitive national newspaper market but just five companies – largely presided over by tax exiles and media moguls – control 90 per cent of daily circulation (albeit one that is shrinking), and help to set the agenda for the rest of the news media. For all the rhetoric about a ‘paradigm shift’ from traditional to social media that works to the advantage of both the populist left and right, it is not the case that that legacy media have lost the ability to influence conversation and conduct. Research on the agenda-setting influence of right-wing newspapers on broadcast coverage of the 2015 general election,²⁵ together with the domination of those same voices of coverage of the referendum on membership of the European Union,²⁶ points to the continuing ability of established voices to distort conversations about contemporary politics and to delegitimize progressive arguments.

The situation is actually worse when it comes to the increasingly profitable digital world. While there may be thousands of digital start-ups, Apple

and Spotify alone account for 63 per cent of the global streaming market and Facebook is fast becoming the dominant digital platform for news. Meanwhile Google has some 90 per cent of global desktop searches, and Google and Facebook together account for around two-thirds of all digital advertising in the US. According to the *Financial Times*, 85 cents of every dollar spent on digital advertising in America went to those two companies in the first quarter of 2016, evidence of ‘a concentration of market power in two companies that not only own the playing field but are able to set the rules of the game as well’.²⁷

What we are witnessing now is not the total eclipse of the ‘old’ by the ‘new’, but instead a rather strange and unpredictable dance between two sectors that are heavily interconnected. Both sets of players – digital intermediaries and more traditional content providers – are battling to command and monetize public attention. The bewildering market power wielded by the likes of Google and Facebook has not come at the expense of the influence of mainstream press and broadcasters. Google, Facebook and Twitter are, if anything, *reinforcing* the agenda-setting power of the mainstream news brands by facilitating their increased circulation. For some time now, Google has been ranking news providers in relation to what it considers to be the most reliable indicators of news quality. But it turns out that algorithms are not much better at assessing news values and ensuring a diverse flow of sources than human beings. According to Schlosberg, while this means that they may be less prone to editorial intervention of the sort that we are used to, it also means ‘they rely on quantitative measures of quality, which produces their own bias in favour of large-scale and mainstream providers’.²⁸ Schlosberg goes on to note that:

... the most contentious metric is one that purports to measure what Google calls ‘importance’ by comparing the volume of a site’s output on any given topic to the total output on that topic across the web. In a single measure, this promotes both concentration at the level of provider (by favouring organisations with volume and scale), as well as concentration at the level of output (by favouring organisations that produce more on topics that are widely covered elsewhere). In other words, it is a measure that single-handedly reinforces both an aggregate news ‘agenda’, as well as the agenda-setting power of a relatively small number of publishers.²⁹

The gatekeeping power of Google and Facebook works, therefore, *in tandem* with that of mainstream news providers, mutually reinforcing each other around what they consider to be real, legitimate, and authoritative

news. Only in much of the popular press, in the UK at least, this press is riddled with distortions, misrepresentations, and illegitimate news. When even Wikipedia decides that the UK tabloid newspaper the *Daily Mail* is not a trusted source of information you know something is amiss.³⁰ But Google's algorithms amplify these so-called reliable sources of news, so is it any surprise that it becomes difficult to tell them apart from the likes of the *official* fake news industry?

This symbiosis certainly helped to pave the way for the election of Donald Trump. After all, it wasn't so much his provocative and offensive tweets that enabled him to capture the headlines and helped him ascend to the highest political office in the land, but the way in which mainstream news networks were, from the outset, fascinated by his personality and aware of his commercial potential. 'The more offensive, provocative, outlandish the comment – the bigger the lie – the more newsworthy it became. Twitter gave him a platform, but mainstream news provided the microphone, and it is amplification – the ability to be heard – that is the major currency of agenda power.'³¹

So just as elite media were horrified by his politics, they were gripped by his star potential and well aware of the potential financial benefits. According to Victor Pickard:

Even as Trump attacked the press – mocking and feuding with journalists, threatening to change libel laws, holding campaign events where reporters were corralled and roughed up – he still served major media outlets well. That's because the news organizations covering Trump, particularly television stations, reaped incredible amounts of money from their election coverage. Cable news organizations' expected haul this election season? A record-breaking \$2.5 billion.³²

Pickard quotes research that shows that Trump received 327 minutes of nightly broadcast network news coverage, compared with Hillary Clinton's 121 minutes and Bernie Sanders' 20 minutes and benefited to the tune of \$2 billion from free media coverage during his primary campaign. Given that profit-seeking is, as Pickard puts it, 'in commercial media's DNA', it was no surprise to hear the CEO of broadcast media giant CBS declare that '[Trump's candidacy] may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS ... The money's rolling in and this is fun ... this is going to be a very good year for us ... bring it on, Donald. Keep going.'³³

This commitment to accumulation and monopolization, whatever the immediate political costs, seems like a pretty obvious and far from unexpected

consequence of a neoliberalized for-profit media market. But what of public service media organizations like the BBC that aren't accountable to shareholders, aren't dependent solely on advertisers, and whose underlying logic is not reducible to the need to chase high ratings and to secure customer data? To what extent are they immune from the calling cards of the ambassadors of neoliberalism and able to exploit their limited autonomy for genuinely democratic purposes?

The answer is that public media are just as embedded as private media in a neoliberal discipline that is present in all the restructurings and cultural shifts that have affected the BBC: the emergence of an internal market, the deployment of new public management techniques, the emphasis on value for money, the introduction of public value tests and service licences and, above all, the determination to tie public service media to the needs of their commercial rivals. In all these ways, the BBC has long been structured by and subject to market discipline and, in this sense, the BBC is just as tethered to neoliberalism as BP or Google or Apple.

Leys and Player, writing about the BBC's coverage of the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK in the wake of the 2012 Health and Social Care Act that outsourced a significant portion of health services to the private sector, reveal how the BBC, by defining its commitment to political impartiality in terms of standing mid-way between the views of the major political parties, placed itself near the middle of a neoliberal consensus.³⁴ This is further inscribed in a regulatory framework that provides for '*due impartiality*', a conception of impartiality that takes account of the mood of the times and bends to the prevailing logic. Thus, views that run counter to a market sensibility and that would have been part of a mainstream *critical* standpoint 20 years ago gradually come to be seen as eccentric, marginal, and unrealistic. We are left, therefore, with a frighteningly singular and apparently depoliticized version of a neoliberal culture that is increasingly normalized, inflexible, and apparently inevitable. According to this narrative, the NHS is a huge, inefficient beast that requires the market discipline of a privatized industry to function effectively – as opposed to being an incredibly popular universal service that requires additional funding to meet the challenges of an aging population.

Recent policy developments in relation to the BBC exemplify this inability to act independently or to step outside market logic. First, the UK state continues not only to coordinate the overall framework within which the BBC sits but micro-manages its broader orientation, instructing it not to privilege popular formats or provide too much online content lest it tread on the toes of commercial providers, not to pay its talent too much money,

and forcing it to outsource more and more content from the independent sector in order to ensure the latter's growth. In turn, the BBC has responded with a news agenda that is demonstrably closer to the Conservative hymn-book than those of other broadcasters: unwilling to challenge the consensus on austerity, morbidly fascinated by what it sees as the cheeky nationalism of the former UKIP leader Nigel Farage, and overtly hostile to the left-wing challenge posed by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Its affiliation with establishment figures and parties remains remarkably consistent: the outgoing chair of the BBC Trust, Rona Fairhead, was a non-executive chairman of HSBC holdings for many years and chairman and CEO of the *Financial Times*; the chair of the new BBC unitary board, Sir David Clementi, is a former chairman of Prudential and got the job after the government invited him to design a new governance framework. Senior figures in the newsroom, like chief political correspondent Laura Kuenssberg, and the head of news, James Harding, are both robust in their defence of small 'c' conservatism, while James Purnell, a key New Labour figure, was promoted to head of radio without having any experience of actually making radio programmes. Meanwhile, the government has forced the BBC to absorb the enormous cost of providing free licences for the over-75s, thus implicating the corporation in the Conservatives' broader welfare agenda and further cementing the links between state and broadcaster. As with its commercial rivals, a neoliberal logic has been forcibly implanted into the water coolers of the BBC and its management has, in turn, internalized this in its operational manoeuvres.

THE CENTRE FIGHTS BACK

Given the collapse in confidence in many of the institutions of liberal democracy and the fissures exploited by populists on both the right and the left, there is a political (and media) vacuum that is waiting to be filled. In this situation, the outbreak of 'fake news' — choreographed by the Russian security establishment and allegedly responsible for the election of Donald Trump — has presented more established media outlets with the opportunity to reassert their democratic role in winning back trust and re-establishing the importance of 'truth'. The *New York Times*, for example, spent millions of dollars on a television commercial during Superbowl 2017 entitled 'The Truth is Hard' while its commentators argue that independent, fact-based journalism 'has never been more important. Truth has not yet perished, but to deny that it is under siege would be to invite disaster.'³⁵ This may be true but it overlooks two facts.

First, 'fake news' is not an exception to but the logical result of a market

economy that privileges short-term rewards and commercial impact. The rise of programmatic advertising and the domination of advertising by Google and Facebook are hardly peripheral developments, but part of a structural readjustment of the media. In this situation, ‘fake news’, according to researchers at Columbia University, ‘is a distraction from the larger issue: that the structure and economics of social platforms incentivize the spread of low-quality content over high-quality material. Journalism with a civic value – journalism that investigates power, or reaches underserved and local communities – is discriminated against by a system that favors scale and shareability.’³⁶

Second, ‘fake news’ is itself a disputed category that refers to hugely different practices, from falsehoods deliberately concocted to undermine democratic processes (such as elections and referenda), through traditional journalism with its long history of misrepresentations, exaggerations, and distortions (including ‘yellow journalism’ and sensationalist claims such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq being able to launch weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes), through to what Tambini describes as ‘[n]ews that challenges orthodox authority’ and that departs from an elite shared consensus.³⁷ Each of these instances of ‘fake news’ requires quite different policy and professional responses but, at the moment, it is only the first kind – of deliberate lies designed to disrupt ‘democracy’ – that seems to absorb the attention of the mainstream media.

In this situation, claims made about the dangers of ‘fake news’ are hardly innocent but part of a coordinated attempt by the centre ground – the people who used to be known as the establishment until Trump nullified the meaning of the phrase by placing himself outside of it – to construct a narrative that contrasts ‘professional journalism’ (based on ethical responsibility and objectivity) with ‘fake news’ (anything that departs from established protocols). This is likely to involve the resurrection of the same newsroom agendas and the same authorities of ‘truth-telling’ and expertise that failed to make sense of the world for so many people and that, at least in part, paved the way for the rapid rise of the ‘fake news’ mainstream media so deplore. ‘The net result of the defense of democracy against populism’, writes Thea Riofrancos, ‘is, inevitably, a defense of political centrism. Democracy is reduced to the separation of powers and the search for bipartisan consensus.’³⁸ The fact that the *Daily Telegraph*, a mid-market UK newspaper, recently appointed Andy Coulson, a former editor of the *News of the World* who was jailed following the phone-hacking scandal, to promote the paper as truthful and authoritative, is the final irony in the scramble to protect their commercial product and declare what is ‘fake news’ and what is not.

Indeed, the centrist response is related to a backlash against voices – admittedly, many of them deeply unpleasant – that epitomizes the breakdown of a neoliberal consensus that has been taken for granted for many years. The revival of political participation that we are now seeing – epitomized by the movements that have emerged around Bernie Sanders in the US and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK – has come with a rejection of the post-war party system and the appetite for those at the bottom to call foul on those at the top. It brings with it different possibilities: both the rise of a populist right as well as the potential for a reimagining of the notion of democracy. Vested interests, however, will always respond to any attack on their own position and privilege by condemning the ignorance of the ‘masses’ and celebrating the benevolence and rationality of their own motives. Marx identified this nearly 150 years ago when reflecting on bourgeois attacks on the Paris Commune:

... no sooner do the working men [and women] anywhere take the subject into their own hand with a will, than up rises at once all the apologetic phraseology of the mouthpieces of present society ... as if capitalist society was still in its purest state of virgin innocence, with its antagonism still undeveloped, with its delusions still unexploded, with its prostitute realities not yet laid bare.³⁹

Without wanting directly to compare a nineteenth century socialist experiment with a twenty-first century populist revolt, the point is that powerful media interests – as with any dominant group whose backs are against the wall – are conducting a propaganda campaign designed to suggest that only they can be trusted with safeguarding freedom of expression and a commitment to truth, and that only they can be guaranteed to preserve democratic rights. Yet while we desperately need a journalism that is both fearless and rigorous, we have no reason to believe that the existing professional model is capable of delivering it.

MEDIA POWER IS NOT ABSOLUTE!

One of the puzzles concerning the media’s promulgation of fake democracy is that, while its supporters in the commentariat may imagine that its institutions are robust and its foundational ideas deep-rooted, millions of people think otherwise. This is especially the case when neoliberal administrations make promises that they are unable to keep and then lack the ideological mechanisms to convince electorates that someone else is to blame. As we have already noted, we have seen a backlash against establishment politics in recent elections and referenda – a backlash that has also been aimed at

media elites who have themselves been identified as ‘part of the problem’ and whose power, therefore, has been increasingly brought into question.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the UK general election of 2017, where Corbyn confounded the vast majority of a media class that had sought to undermine him since his very first day as leader of the Labour Party by sensationally depriving Theresa May of a Conservative majority in Parliament. Despite regular headlines about ‘annihilation’ and ‘meltdown’, Labour earned its biggest share of the vote since Tony Blair in 2001 and its biggest increase in vote share since 1945. This was an election in which the hostility promoted by the vast majority of the media towards a progressive leader was intense but ultimately ineffectual; a campaign in which the tabloids in particular turned up the heat against the Labour leader but also in which many (although not all) ordinary voters refused to acquiesce to these voices. Yet predictions that the right-wing press have had their day or that, as the *Observer’s* media correspondent put it, media bias is no longer an issue are just as misconceived as *Sun* editor Tony Gallagher’s claim that the Brexit vote demonstrated the continuing power of the press only twelve months previously.⁴⁰ We need, instead, a far more complex understanding of media power as a phenomenon that distorts democratic processes – and that is, therefore, a central feature of our fake democracy – but that has its own limitations when applied to stubborn publics; a phenomenon that is pervasive but also contingent, fragile, and unstable.⁴¹

The 2017 election bears this out. Whole swathes of press reporting were hugely biased towards the Conservatives. Despite what was widely acknowledged to have been a disastrous campaign, the Tories attracted coverage that was neutral overall while Labour, running a largely successful and popular campaign, suffered the most negative coverage of all the parties. In terms of endorsements, the Tories received support from 80 per cent of the Sunday press and 57 per cent of the daily press, with Labour receiving 20 per cent and 11 per cent respectively.⁴² Titles regularly highlighted Corbyn’s alleged links to terrorists and attacked his position on nuclear disarmament, while on the day before polling the *Daily Mail* – with its millions of online and offline readers – devoted 13 pages to attacks on Labour.

It could be argued that these attacks were balanced both by the far more pluralistic agenda of social media as well as by broadcast coverage that was required to respect ‘due impartiality’ and thus obliged to feature Jeremy Corbyn as much as Prime Minister Theresa May. This certainly benefited Labour, as once Corbyn was given the opportunity to speak, his message was able to resonate with millions of people because of the public’s appetite for the party’s manifesto policies around redistribution, investment

in public services, and anti-austerity. Yet broadcasters also regularly aired memes around Corbyn's 'unelectability', his 'tax-and-spend policies', and his reluctance to condemn people to a horrific death by pressing the nuclear button. The BBC, for example, continued to circulate a report on Corbyn's views on 'shoot to kill' that had previously been censured by the BBC's own regulator because of its misleading editing, which then attracted millions of views during the campaign. It would be foolish to think that this constant repetition of Corbyn as either dangerous or deficient had absolutely *no* impact on what the electorate was discussing.

At the same time, it is also clear that some 40 per cent of the electorate rejected the preferences of media moguls and the cynicism of liberal commentators. When after years of declining wages, disastrous foreign interventions, and cuts in public services, voters were offered the opportunity to strike back against neoliberal policies and support a distinctively progressive, anti-austerity programme, some 13 million people took up this offer to the utter astonishment of the media elite. We can conclude from this that even the most sustained levels of media bias have their limits when faced with an angry and disenfranchised population. Despite voices on the soft left encouraging Corbyn to professionalize his media operation, to be more 'presidential', and to adopt a more conciliatory tone, it was precisely Corbyn's direct engagement with voters through rallies and social media connections, together with his refreshing passion for social justice and his accountability to democratic decision-making, that saw Labour climb so dramatically in the polls.

So while the media play a central role in the legitimation and sustenance of fake democracy, we should be careful not to exaggerate the power of elites in the face of publics who are by no means simply subjects to be brainwashed or herds to be bewildered.⁴³ Media influence is not predictable or mechanical but connected to the ideas that people hold at any one moment – a consciousness that is not fixed or immutable but profoundly contradictory and volatile. The general election result showed that campaigns, just like media, can change minds if they connect to the actual experiences of publics who, in the UK, were seeking alternatives to a status quo that had let them down. In this case, mainstream media – as epitomized by a memorable *Daily Telegraph* headline less than six weeks before the election: 'Theresa May most popular leader since the late 1970s as Jeremy Corbyn hits all time low' (26 April 2017) – neglected to notice the deep-rooted changes that were going on around them and were outmanoeuvred by a Labour campaign that struck a chord with an electorate increasingly hungry for change.

This also reminds us that to understand power you must first appreciate

what powerlessness feels like. Brexit spoke to those who felt cast aside by globalization and forgotten by ruling elites all too willing to stand by and watch communities decimated and social infrastructures weakened. The tag line of the Leave campaign offered the promise of a different future: ‘Let’s Take Back Control’. It spoke to a disaffection that neoliberal democracy doesn’t work for the majority of its members. That the Conservative Party – and their supporters in the press – thought they could win a general election simply by repeating ‘Brexit means Brexit’ reveals they never fully understood what people had hoped Brexit could give them: the dignity of making their own history. When people feel that they are dispensable and don’t need to be listened to, then democracy has failed. The Conservative Party wasn’t just *not listening* but it blatantly refused to engage in virtually any debate at all.

Corbyn’s Labour campaign, on the other hand, vilified by most of the mainstream press and apparently with nothing left to lose, took to the streets and mobilized thousands of grassroots supporters, often through social media, to knock on doors and discuss the first party political manifesto since the financial crash to attempt to break through the neoliberal force-field, acknowledging that to do this would require a redistribution of wealth via more progressive levels of income tax. They exposed the contradiction between how we are told the world works – that the only way out of an economic crisis is through austerity measures – and our experiences of it – that the more austerity we have, the less economic growth and the higher levels of anxiety we experience. It was a campaign that spoke to people.

Brexit forewarned us of a crisis of the relations of political representation and political parties – what Gramsci referred to as a crisis of authority. But Gramsci also pointed to the ‘trenches and fortifications’ of civil society as sites where power could be challenged and negotiated.⁴⁴ The lessons for us today are stark: first, media power is not an immovable force; second, activist politics is not a luxury if we are to meaningfully contest mainstream agendas.

LESSONS FOR A DEMOCRATIC MEDIA

In targeting intensified market logic as a major barrier to an independent media, we should be wary of suggesting that neoliberal states inherited fully functioning democratic media systems and set out systematically to roll back their dialogical and ‘truthful’ qualities. Neoliberalism may have weakened the relationship between mainstream media and democracy but this degeneration has a far longer history. Indeed, we need to ask whether media institutions were ever genuinely accountable to publics apart from those moments when publics themselves hijacked media technologies in the

pursuit of democratic aims, from the Chartist press of the nineteenth century to social media platforms during the Arab Spring.⁴⁵

For example, the lack of diversity and accountability of the press has been recognized for many years and, at least in the UK, there is a long history of failed attempts to reform the press that started with the first Royal Commission on the Press in 1947 and continued through to the Leveson Inquiry that followed the phone hacking crisis of July 2011. At each stage, recommendations made were largely rejected by a press that consistently promised to behave and then consistently failed to do so. Governments, always keen to maintain good relations with the press, have time and again bowed down to industry pressure.

Opposition to the mainstream media's amplification of neoliberal 'common-sense' ought not to be based, therefore, on the idea that there once existed – perhaps before Reagan and Thatcher – a meaningfully independent and representative democratic media determined to maintain a check on official power. Tom Mills' excellent history of the BBC demonstrates how even an organization with a reputation for independence has compromised with the state from its very inception: from its involvement in the general strike through its relationship with the security services and its coverage of foreign interventions and its' framing of economic issues.⁴⁶ A reading that ties the degeneration of an institution like the BBC – and the media more generally – as exclusively linked to the rise of neoliberalism misses out on a far more complicated picture: one in which, for all the BBC's moments of questioning and creativity, is marked by a history of deference to the state, a lack of geographical and cultural diversity that it is only starting to acknowledge and perhaps address, and a paternalistic political agenda that is intertwined with a legacy of imperial, corporatist, and then neoliberal affiliations. This is a broadcaster that has, throughout its history, served the state more effectively than it has served the public.

These clientelist and paternalistic relationships are resonant of traditional forms of social democracy – precisely the 'democracy' invoked by Crouch as that which existed before 'post-democracy'. This was a political settlement that reached its highpoint after the Second World War and that Crouch describes as 'the democratic moment of most of the western world' when the rulers of Western Europe at least were forced 'to admit the voices of ordinary people into affairs of state'.⁴⁷

Is this the best we can hope for? The limited representation of working people into a state dominated by other forces? Streeck argues that this period was hardly a highpoint of popular participation but was instead characterized by *compromise*, by a contract between capital and labour that entailed accepting

‘capitalist markets and property rights in exchange for political democracy’.⁴⁸ That involved some huge steps forward in terms of collective provision and the mobilization of working-class pressure to demand basic rights in the sphere of housing, health, and employment – a long way from the rather shriveled democracy on offer in the modern age. But it is still nothing like the expansive definition of democracy proposed by Raymond Williams: that democracy must refer to ‘popular power’ and an arrangement in which ‘the interests of the majority of the people [are] paramount and in which these interests [are] practically exercised and controlled by the majority.’⁴⁹

We ought, therefore, to be sceptical of any simplistic understanding of ‘post-democracy’ that somehow suggests that we have now superseded an actually existing democracy that was based on popular sovereignty and the equitable control and distribution of all resources, including those of the media. Instead what has happened is that banks, financial agencies, and global conglomerates now compete with states in the management of economies, thus making real democracy ever more distant. In these circumstances, a democratic media will not descend from the heavens nor will it emerge from the compromised models of the past. It has to be fought for and invented out of the struggles that we face in the coming years.

The task for the radical left today, therefore, is not to return the media to an imaginary pre-neoliberal bliss that may well turn out to be even less democratic than the forms of media we have now. Instead we need, first, to challenge some of the most obvious abuses of media power – to oppose further media concentration and to resist the stereotypes and distortions that seek to normalize, for example, racism and war. Second, we need to figure out how best to build a radical political project in which truth-telling and communicative capacity emerge from the bottom up and not through paternalistic diktat or pure market exchange.

This will require not a clever media strategy but the imagination to conceive of a democratic communications system genuinely in the hands of its users as opposed to controlled by billionaires and bureaucrats. ‘The principle’, as Williams wrote some 50 years ago, ‘should be that the active contributors have control of their own means of expression.’⁵⁰ The interactive and decentralized affordances of digital media ought to make this easier to achieve – but only if they are freed from the same structures of controlling state and profit-maximizing market that have distorted and undermined previous communication ‘revolutions’.

It will also require a commitment to the building of radical political movements given that all major campaigns for social change have had their own channels of communication. The Chartists had the *Northern Star*,

the Suffragettes had their own self-titled newspaper, the Bolsheviks had *Pravda*, Gandhi founded *Harijan* to help build his anti-colonial struggle, while Solidarity in Poland had *Robotnik*. Algerians had the unofficial *Voice of Fighting Algeria* during their anti-colonial struggle in the 1950s, a radio station so transgressive that, according to Frantz Fanon, '[h]aving a radio seriously meant *going to war*.'⁵¹ These were all tools of struggle, instruments with which activists communicated with each other, and publicized their activities to others. They were the organizing frameworks of emergent mass movements designed not simply to provide 'alternative' narratives to those of their enemies but to strengthen their own activities and challenge the 'common sense' of elite opinion. These are vigorous examples of democratic media that are utterly distinct from a contemporary 'liberal media' rooted either in a meek and defensive public service or an aggressive market entrepreneurialism, and they are ones that will surely emerge again in the shadow of new struggles for social justice.

NOTES

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