

Fake democracy, bad news¹

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Abstract: Media and democracy, like Cagney and Lacey or Starsky and Hutch, are inseparable. You just cannot have one without the other. The free exchange of ideas, information, and symbols that nourish citizens and replenish the system as a whole has 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. The free media is said to provide the oxygen, the lubrication or indeed the sinews of a fully functioning and robust democracy.

Keywords: free media; democracy, communication; fake democracy.

Resumo: A mídia e a democracia, assim como Cagney e Lacey ou Starsky e Hutch, são inseparáveis. Não se pode ter um sem ter o outro. A livre troca de ideias, informações e símbolos que alimentam os cidadãos e reconstitui o sistema como um todo tem sido há muito vista como uma das bases de sociedades democráticas. De fato, uma parafernália normativa complexa emergiu para descrever as principais responsabilidades dadas à mídia no surgimento e manutenção da democracia: como um vigilante de poderes desconhecidos, uma tribuna para a população, um defensor das minorias, um quarto poder e uma esfera pública. Diz-se que a mídia livre fornece o oxigênio, a lubrificação ou, mesmo, que é os tendões de uma democracia funcional e robusta.

Palavras-chave: mídia livre; democracia; comunicação; democracia fake.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Media and democracy, like Cagney and Lacey or Starsky and Hutch, are inseparable. You just cannot have one without the other. The free exchange of ideas, information, and symbols that nourish citizens and replenish the system as a whole have been long seen as a central foundation of democratic societies. Indeed, complex norms have emerged to describe the key responsibilities placed on media in the emergence and maintenance of democracy: as an independent watchdog of uncontrolled 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 the base for a fully functioning and robust democracy². However, in liberal democracies of the west, where this vocabulary is most deeply entrenched, we are seeing quite the opposite: a type of media that all too often relies on the vulnerable and bows down before the powerful; a type of media whose noble crusade for truth and justice has been replaced by a carnival of gossip and spectacle; a type of media that demonstrates a commitment to the consumer, rather than the people and sovereignty; a type of media that is no longer an outsider, but a constitutive part of the society of classes; a type of media that has adopted the free market mantras 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 it is still considered trustworthy by most part of the population is the radio, while the trust of ordinary Americans in the media has fallen from 53% of citizens, in 1997, to only 32%, in 2016^{3,4}. In 2017, the Edelman Trust Barometer reported that 82% of the population of 28 surveyed countries did not trust the media, presenting an all-time low in 17 of these countries. Traditional media showed the steepest decline⁵.

This collapse in trust is far from unique and is related to the same backlash against entrenched interests that affected the credibility of neoliberal political parties and politicians. Besides politicians and the media, companies and NGOs also fight for people's trust stakes. Given that the mainstream media have been entangled with the elite's power, their work is also associated with the corruption and scandals of this social class.

This is part of a wider narrative about the degeneration of the liberal 'centre' and its inability to stand up and to distinguish itself from the market forces that have erased, commercialized and contaminated those spaces with which democracy has been traditionally associated. And neoliberal forces, rather than liberal democracy more generally, are the 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 have run roughshod over permanent jobs, organic communities, egalitarian structures, and democratic aspirations. The emphasis on economic efficiency has depoliticized the government decision-making, transforming social, political, and moral dilemmas into technical and managerial problems, leaving little room for public participation. With liberals now occupying the mainstream

2. For a comprehensive summary of classic liberal conceptions of the free press, please see: CURRAN, James. **Media and Power**. London: Routledge, 2002. p. 217-247.

3. European figures are from: EUROPEAN BROADCASTING UNION. **Trust in Media 2016**. Geneva: EBU, 2016.

4. US figures are from: SWIFT, Art. **Americans' trust in mass media sinks to new low**. Washington, DC: Gallup, 2016. Available at: <<http://news.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>>. Accessed on: 10 Apr. 2018.

5. EDELMAN. **2017 Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Report**. Chicago: Edelman, 2017. Available at: <<https://www.edelman.com/research/2017-trust-barometer-global-results>>. Accessed on: 10 Apr. 2018.

media, it should not come as surprise that neoliberal rationality has been so successful in the liberal centre. Despite seeing the 2008 global financial crisis spurring the questioning of the logic of global capitalism, we noted that its logic extended. 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.⁶

Unemployment, high levels of personal debt, extreme poverty, and inequality heavily feature this particular post-crash moment. As governments seek to manage their deficits, usually democratic welfare protective mechanisms 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 government’s primary goal⁷. Local authorities in England are currently dealing with a scheduled 40% cut in core funding by the central government. In response, councils and other public agencies seek to further outsource and share services as a way of reducing costs, detaching these services from democratic processes, and depoliticizing decisions on public welfare and public good.

The impact of the crisis has been especially marked by the poor and minor communities as well as by young people, whose experiences (in the UK at least) are also affected by the ‘war on terror’, student fees, housing inflation, and urban riots⁸. 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.⁹

These are the conditions in which a series of political ‘earthquakes’ have taken place: the UK voters’ decision of leaving the European Union in 2016, 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

6. BLYTH, Mark. **Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. p. 15.

7. UNITED KINGDOM. Department for Work and Pensions. **Simplifying the Welfare System and Making Sure Work Pays**. London: DWP, 2013. Available at: <www.gov.uk/government/policies/simplifying-the-welfare-system-and-making-sure-work-pays>. Accessed on: 10 Apr. 2018.

8. HILLS, John et al. **Falling behind, getting ahead: the changing structure of inequality in the UK, 2007-2013**. London: Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion; LSE, 2015.

9. HANSARD SOCIETY. **Audit of Political Engagement 13: the 2016 report**. London: Hansard Society, 2016. p. 7.

anti-austerity politics of Jeremy Corbyn have brought to the fore the economic dislocation that has taken place since the 1980s, revealing deep class, generational, and ethnic divisions. Marginalized voices became 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 needed to be sorely tested.

2. THE DEMOCRATIC MEDIA SWINDLE

The main issue for us is not the feeling of being 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 despite promising a lot, does not deliver enough, which makes its citizens face what Raymond Williams described as 'the coexistence of political representation and participation with an economic system which admits no such rights, procedures or claims'¹⁰.

Colin Crouch has described the closure of neoliberal alternatives as a situation of 'post-democracy' in which 'politics and governments are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in a characteristic manner of pre-democratic time'¹¹. For Crouch, it is a paradox of contemporary democracy: despite the surfeit of apparently democratic sounding developments, the deference collapse increases transparency and literacy and formal opportunities of engagement in democracy – nevertheless, we have to be persuaded to vote and to exercise 'civic responsibility'. The media are partly to blame: their association with power and their use of sensationalism and soundbites 'degrade the quality of political discussion and reduce the competence of citizens'¹². This false sovereignty is not incidental too, but associated with the liberal capitalism from which our mainstream media industries are very much apart¹³. The real problem is not the Macedonian cottage industry churning out pro-Trump messages, but the fact that we have been *swindled* in an equating liberal democracy (and a liberal media) with meaningful control of our collective lives.

Actual democracy, rather than its utopian ideal in its rhetorical and political routines, has used very successful speeches that defend equality and autonomy to commodify individualism and constrain freedom, promising to conduct popular decisions and self-governance through market exchanges and constitutional guarantees, but instead we have a shrink-wrapped democracy that only celebrates the most pallid forms of participation and engagement. Citizens have been turned into consumers and collective decisions into questions of individual need and choice, which has given us nothing more than the illusion of democratic communications: a type of media whose editors dine at the same table as top politicians, are educated at the same institutions, and share many of the same corporate values and ideological agendas; a type of media that is disaggregated in theory, but centralized in practice; a type of media whose tools can be freely accessed, but whose most powerful networks remain closed.

10. WILLIAMS, Raymond. Democracy and Parliament. *Marxism Today*, London, v. 26, n. 6, p. 14-21, June 1982, p. 19.

11. CROUCH, Colin. *Post-Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity, 2004. p. 6.

12. *Ibidem*, p. 47.

13. See FENTON, Natalie. *Digital, political, radical*. London: Polity, 2016. chapter 3.

This is a type of media marked by commerce, complicity, and caution rather than critical thinking, creativity, and a conscious journalism.

Media institutions are massively implicated in fake democracy as both subjects and objects of a socio-economic restructuring that favour the upward transfer and concentration of property and wealth¹⁴. Mainstream media have failed to use their symbolic power to offer alternative visions and truly representative narratives, presenting stories that are frequently shallow, without proper context, misleading or biased, such as economical journalism, which assumes the ‘expertise’ of financial commentators and the legitimacy of austerity policies^{15,16,17}; ‘error’ reports that marginalize geopolitical tensions and inequalities¹⁸; negative coverage of progressive movements and leaders¹⁹, and the popular representations of welfare claimants as ‘revolting subjects’²⁰ that want to mobilize a sense of disgust towards the ‘unproductive’ and ‘undeserving poor’ in the contemporary world.

When referring to these questions about the relationship between media and democracy, we recall Marx’s famous invocation of liberal democracy as an enormous swindle where 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’²¹, 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’²².

Mainstream media have long played its essential role by portraying debates and identifying controversies, but always seeking ‘to strictly limit the spectrum on acceptable opinion’^{23,24} when it comes to issues concerning economy, immigration, or foreign intervention. We are now facing a new democratic swindle in which elite media institutions – from BBC and the *New York Times* to Google and Facebook – are using the crisis caused by the growth of anti-establishment politics to state 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 want 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 dismally failed in their democratic responsibilities and are intimately connected to the neoliberal order that has alienated millions of people.

3. 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’²⁵. Entertainment

14. For a full discussion of these debates, please see: CALABRESE, Andrew; FENTON, Natalie (eds.). Media communication and the limits of liberalism. *European Journal of Communication*, Thousand Oaks, v. 30, n. 5, 2015.

15. BERRY, Mike. No alternative to austerity: how BBC broadcast news reported the deficit debate. *Media, Culture & Society*, Thousand Oaks, v. 38, n. 6, p. 844-63, 2016.

16. See also MERCILLE, Julian. *The Political economy and media coverage of the European economic crisis*. London: Routledge, 2015.

17. See also SCHIFFERES, Steve; ROBERTS, Richard (eds.). *The media and financial crises: comparative and historical perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2014.

18. FREEDMAN, Des. The terror news cycle. *LRB Blog*, London, 24 May 2017. Available at: <www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2017/05/24/des-freedman/the-terror-news-cycle/>. Accessed on: 10 Apr. 2018.

19. MILLS, Tom. Is the BBC biased against Jeremy Corbyn? Look at the evidence. *New Statesman*, London, 1 Aug. 2016. Available at: <<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2016/08/bbc-biased-against-jeremy-corbyn-look-evidence>>. Accessed on: 10 Apr. 2018.

21. MARX, Karl. Letter to Engels, 7 September 1864. In: _____. *Marx and Engels collected works: Letters 1860-1864*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010. v. 41. p. 562.

20. TYLER, Imogen. *Revolting subjects: social abjection and resistance in neoliberal Britain*. London: Zed Books, 2013.

22. DRAPER, Hal. Marx on democratic forms of government. In: MILIBAND, Ralph; SAVILLE, John (eds.). *The Socialist Register 1974*. London: Merlin Press, 1973. p. 118.

23. CHOMSKY, Noam. **The common good**. London: Pluto Press, 2003. p. 43.

24. The notion of 'legitimate controversy' was also discussed by Daniel Hallin in his critical account of the media's role in Vietnam. See HALLIN, Daniel. **The uncensored war: the media and Vietnam**. London: University of California Press, 1989.

25. DEAN, Jodi. Communicative Capitalism: circulation and the foreclosure of politics. **Cultural Politics**, Durham, v.1, n.1, p. 51-74, 2005.

26. Read Nick Davies' work for a powerful critique of UK journalism. See DAVIES, Nick. **Flat Earth news**. London: Chatto & Windus, 2008; and DAVIES, Nick. **Hack Attack: how the truth caught up with Rupert Murdoch**. London: Chatto & Windus, 2014.

27. DAVIES, William. The Age of Post-Truth Politics. **New York Times**, New York, 24 Aug. 2016. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/opinion/campaign-stops/the-age-of-post-truth-politics.html>>. Accessed on: 10 Apr. 2018.

28. CATHCART, Brian. Where press regulation is concerned, we're already being fed 'post-truth' journalism. **The Conversation**, Boston, 3 Jan. 2017. Available at: <<http://theconversation.com/where-press-regulation-is-concerned-were-already-being-fed-post-truth-journalism-70812>>. Accessed on: 10 Apr. 2018.

29. Quoted in FREEDMAN, Des. **The contradictions of media power**. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. p. 89.

30. CUSHION, Stephen et al. Newspapers, impartiality and television news. **Journalism Studies**, Abingdon, v. 19, n. 2, p. 162-181, 2016.

31. CENTRE FOR RESEARCH IN COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE. **82% circulation advantage in favour of Brexit as**

controls political discourse, while the news all too often undergo trivialities, repackaged public relations materials²⁶ and occupies an increasingly fragile and narrow centre ground. This has been observed in the last forty years, subjugating *all* areas of mediated activity to market logic and competition through increasing commercialization, privatization, and restructuring, which Will Davies has referred to as 'post-truth politics' based on an excess of 'facts' and an under-provision of meaningful analysis²⁷. We now have a mainstream journalism that fails to perform what is assumed to be the central role of the media in a liberal democracy: to interrogate the power relations that shape our world. This is partly due to quick-fix strategies that do not allow for critical reflections, but also because media organizations themselves are increasingly implicated in power relations with 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 a 18 month inquiry on the ethics and standards of the press agreed by all parties in Parliament, supported by most of the population, and designed to make the press account for misrepresentation, distortion, and illegal behaviour²⁸ (we have the relation of the processes that have hollowed out those remaining democratic spaces in our most popular news media outlets).

Of course, while democracy is far more than an accountable press or a truly social media, the sheer scale of the largest media organizations aggravates the problems of 'fake democracy'. Despite Rupert Murdoch's claim that 'no one controls the media or will ever again'²⁹, markets in both 'new' and 'old' media sectors are heavily focused on wealth creation, effectively suffocating any notion of the public interests. Media landscapes – from the analogue world of the print 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 politics. 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% of daily circulation (despite the reduction in the circulation of one of them), and help to set the agenda for the rest of the media news. According to the rhetoric on the 'change of paradigm' from the traditional media to the social media that works to the advantage of both populist left and right, it is not true that traditional media have lost the ability to influence conversations and conducts. Research proved the influence of right-wing newspapers in the coverage of the 2015 general election³⁰ and of the membership referendum of the European Union³¹, pointing out to the continuing ability of distortion of conversations on contemporary politics and the delegitimization of 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% of the global streaming market and Facebook is quickly becoming the dominant news digital platform. Meanwhile Google has some 90% 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’³².

What we are witnessing now is not the total eclipse of the ‘old’ by the ‘new’, but a strange and unpredictable dance between two sectors that are heavily interconnected. Both sets of players – digital intermediaries and more traditional content providers – want to control and monetize public attention. The market power achieved 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’³³. 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.³⁴

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. For 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 amiss³⁵. But Google’s algorithms amplify these so-called reliable sources of news, so is it a surprise that it becomes difficult to tell them apart from the *official* fake news industry?

This symbiosis certainly helped pave the way for the election of Donald Trump. After all, it was not 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 USA, but the way in which mainstream news networks

The Sun declares. Loughborough: Loughborough University, 2016. Available at: <<https://blog.lboro.ac.uk/crcc/eu-referendum/sun-no-longer-hedging-bets-brexit/>>. Accessed on: 10 Apr. 2018.

32. GARRAHAN, Matthew. Advertising: Facebook and Google build a duopoly. **Financial Times**, London, 23 June 2016. Available at: <<https://www.ft.com/content/6c6b74a4-3920-11e6-9a05-82a9b15a8ee7>>. Accessed on: 10 Apr. 2018.

33. SCHLOSBERG, Justin. The media-technology-military industrial complex. **openDemocracy**, London, 27 Jan. 2017. Available at: <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/wfd/justin-schlosberg/media-technology-military-industrial-complex>>. Accessed on: 11 Apr. 2018.

34. *Ibidem*.

35. JACKSON, Jasper. Wikipedia bans Daily Mail as ‘unreliable’ source. **The Guardian**, London, 8 Feb. 2017. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/feb/08/wikipedia-bans-daily-mail-as-unreliable-source-for-website>>. Accessed on: 11 Apr. 2018.

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’³⁶.

Thus, 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.³⁷

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, as Pickard puts it, is ‘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’³⁸.

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 about the public service media organizations, such as BBC, that are not accountable to shareholders, do not depend 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 the neoliberal discipline present in all the restructurings and cultural shifts that have affected 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, BBC has long been structured by and subject to market discipline and, in this sense, is just as tethered to neoliberalism as BP or Google or Apple.

36. FREEDMAN, Des; SCHLOSBERG, Justin. Murdoch’s access to British Prime Minister shows media power still in hands of the few. *The Conversation*, Boston, 7 Feb. 2017. Available at: <<https://theconversation.com/murdochs-access-to-british-prime-minister-shows-media-power-still-in-hands-of-the-few-72547>>. Accessed on: 11 Apr. 2018.

37. PICKARD, Victor. Yellow journalism, orange President. *Jacobin*, Brooklyn, NY, 25 Nov. 2016. Available at: <<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/11/media-advertising-news-radio-trump-tv/>>. Accessed on: 11 Apr. 2018.

38. *Ibidem*.

Leys and Player, writing about 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 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 consensus³⁹. This is further inscribed in a regulatory framework that provides for 'due impartiality', a conception that takes into account the mood of the times and bends to the prevailing logic. Thus, views that run counter to 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 increasingly normalized, inflexible, and apparently inevitable. According to this narrative, 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 concerning BBC exemplify this inability to act independently or to step outside the market logic. First, the UK state continues not only to coordinate the overall framework within which 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 to ensure its growth. In turn, BBC has responded with a news agenda 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 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, such as 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 on actually making radio programmes. Meanwhile, the government has forced 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 BBC and its management has, in turn, internalized this in its operational manoeuvres.

39. LEYS, Colin; PLAYER, Stewart. *The plot against the NHS*. London: Merlin Press, 2011. 179 p.

4. 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 waiting to be filled. In this situation, the outbreak of ‘fake news’ – choreographed by the Russian security establishment 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’⁴⁰. This may be true, but it overlooks two facts.

First, ‘fake news’ is not an exception, but rather 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’⁴¹.

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 consensus⁴². 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 ‘fake news’ mainstream media so deplorable. ‘The net result of the defense of

40. COHEN, Roger. Am I imagining this? *New York Times*, New York, 10 Feb. 2017. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/10/opinion/preserving-the-sanctity-of-all-facts.html>>. Accessed on: 11 Apr. 2018.

41. BELL, Emily; OWEN, Taylor. *The platform press: How Silicon Valley engineered journalism*. New York: Tow Center for Digital Journalism, 2017. p. 10.

42. TAMBINI, Damian. *Fake news: public policy responses*. Media Policy Brief 20. London: Media Policy Project; LSE, 2016. p. 5.

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’⁴³. 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 epitomize the breakdown of a neoliberal consensus taken for granted for many years. The revival of political participation 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 an 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.⁴⁴

Without wanting to directly 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.

5. 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

43. RIOFRANCOS, Thea. Democracy without the people. *n+1*, New York, n. 28, 6 Feb. 2017. Available at: <<https://nplusonemag.com/issue-28/politics/democracy-without-the-people-2/>>. Accessed on: 11 Apr. 2018.

44. MARX, Karl. The Civil War in France. In: MARX, Karl; ENGELS, Frederick. *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, selected works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983. v.2. p.223.

45. See PRESTON, Peter. This election proves that media bias no longer matters. *The Observer*, London, 11 June 2017. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/jun/11/media-bias-no-longer-matters-general-election-2017>>. Accessed on: 11 Apr. 2018.

46. See MARTINSON, Jane. Did the Mail and Sun help swing the UK towards Brexit? *The Guardian*, London, 24 June 2016. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jun/24/mail-sun-uk-brexit-newspapers>>. Accessed on: 11 Apr. 2018.

47. FREEDMAN, op. cit., 2014.

48. See DEACON, David et al. **National News media coverage of the 2017 general election**. Loughborough: Loughborough University, 2017. Available at: <blog.lboro.ac.uk/crcc/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2017/06/media-coverage-of-the-2017-general-election-campaign-report-4.pdf>. Accessed on: 11 Apr. 2018.

49. See MAYHEW, Freddie. General election 2017 press endorsements: Tories backed by 80 per cent of UK national Sunday newspaper market. *Press Gazette*, London, 5 June 2017. Available at: <<http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/general-election-2017-press-endorsements-tories-backed-by-80-percent-of-uk-national-sunday-newspaper-market/>>. Accessed on: 11 Apr. 2018.

50. See PONSFORD, Dominic. Daily Mail and Sun launch front-page attacks on Corbyn as Fleet Street lines up behind Theresa May. *Press Gazette*, London, 7 June 2017. Available at: <<http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/daily-mail-and-sun-launch-front-page-attacks-on-corbyn-as-fleet-street-lines-up-behind-theresa-may/>>. Accessed on: 11 Apr. 2018.

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

Nowhere is this clearer than in the UK general election of 2017, in which 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 votes 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 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^{45,46}. 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 unstable⁴⁷.

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, Tories attracted coverage that was overall neutral, while Labour, running a largely successful and popular campaign, suffered the most negative coverage of all parties. In terms of endorsements, Tories received support from 80% of the Sunday press and 57% of the daily press, with Labour received 20% and 11%, respectively^{48,49,50}. 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 the broadcast coverage 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 due to 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. BBC, for example, continued to circulate a report on Corbyn's views on 'shoot to kill', previously censured by BBC's own regulator, due to 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% 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 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 bewildered⁵¹. 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 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 does not 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

51. LIPPMANN, Walter. *The phantom public*. London: Transaction, 2011. p. 145.

hoped Brexit could give them: the dignity of making their own history. When people feel that they are dispensable and do not need to be listened to, then democracy has failed. The Conservative Party was not 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 negotiated⁵². 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.

6. 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^{53,54,55}.

For example, the lack of press diversity and accountability has been recognized for many years and, at least in the UK, there is a long history of failed attempts to reform it, which started with the first Royal Commission on the Press in 1947 and continued with 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.

52. GRAMSCI, Antonio. **Selections from the Prison Notebooks**. New York: International Publishers, 1971. p. 243.

53. See for example FENTON, op. cit., p. 24-51.

54. See for example HARRISON, Stanley. **Poor men's guardians: surveys of the democratic and working-class press**. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974.

55. See for example HERRERA, Linda. **Revolution in the age of social media: the Egyptian Insurrection and the internet**. London: Verso, 2014.

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 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 issues⁵⁶. A reading that ties the degeneration of an institution like 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 BBC's moments of questioning and creativity, is marked by a history of deference to the state, a lack of geographical and cultural diversity only starting to be acknowledged and perhaps addressed, and a paternalistic political agenda intertwined with a legacy of imperial, corporatist, and 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'⁵⁷ when the rulers of Western Europe were at least forced 'to admit the voices of ordinary people into affairs of state'⁵⁸.

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'⁵⁹. 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 shrivelled democracy on offer in the modern age. However, 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'⁶⁰.

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 based on popular sovereignty and 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

56. MILLS, Tom. *The BBC: myth of a public service*. London: Verso, 2016.

57. CROUCH, op. cit., p. 4.

58. *Ibidem*, p. 82.

59. STREECK, Wolfgang. The crises of Democratic Capitalism. *New Left Review*, London, n. 71, p. 5-29, 2011, p. 10. Available at: <<https://newleftreview.org/11/71/wolfgang-streeck-the-crises-of-democratic-capitalism>>. Accessed on: 11 Apr. 2018.

60. WILLIAMS, Raymond. *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*. London: Fontana, 1983, p. 96.

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 we shall face in the coming years.

Therefore, the radical left today must not return the media to an imaginary pre-neoliberal bliss that may 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 racism and war, for example. Secondly, we need to figure out how best to build a radical political project in which truth-telling and communicative capacities 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’⁶¹. 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*’⁶². 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, 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.

61. WILLIAMS, Raymond. *Communications*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968. p. 121.

62. FANON, Frantz. *A dying colonialism*. New York: Grove Press, 1994. p. 93.

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