Communicating Politics Online

Disruption and Democracy

Chapman Rackaway

Second Edition

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palgrave
macmillan

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To Andrea. I was lucky enough to marry my dream girl, and I love you more every day. My life is better, stronger, more joyous, with you in it. You are the Leslie to my Ben.

I love you, and I like you.

Preface

The first edition of this book was published in 2014. Only eight years have passed since the first edition's publication, but of course, much has changed in that short period of time. In 2014, as I was writing the first edition, many of the substantive changes I note in this edition were just underway. Barely noticeable, they would quickly snowball into a massive change. It is safe to say that the equivalent of decades of change has come in less than a decade. News desertification, "fake news," and deliberate disinformation campaigns were not in the public eye, but they were developing.

It is cliché to talk about the fast rate of change in the world, particularly in the realm of technology. Things move fast, yet the pace of change has always seemed to be fast, and getting faster. But this shift was different, more concentrated. In 2014, more to the point, no person or group had attempted a violent coup to overthrow Congress. In 2022, we now operate in that media landscape.

I hope in this completely new second edition I have captured the speedy disruptive pattern of change that political communication has undergone this past not-quite-decade. Doubtless in another eight years, the game may have changed completely once again. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Radford, USA   Chapman Rackaway

Acknowledgements

I am glad I read my e-mails carefully, otherwise I may have deleted Madison Allums' email inquiring if I would be interested in writing a second edition of the Communicating Politics Online book. Considering the massive technological, societal, and political changes over the last eight years, the timing was perfect. I'm eternally grateful to Madison for her interest in a new edition, it's been a joy to write and she a joy to work with.

The publication of books is a team effort, of course, and so in addition to Madison, the team of Arun Kumar Anbalagan, Rebecca Roberts, and Henry Rodgers have made a smooth process and been a great support in moving this work from concept to press.

Since 2014 I have made two institutional moves, leaving Fort Hays State University for a five-year stint at West Georgia before arriving here at Radford University. In addition to all my friends, mentors, and colleagues from FHSU I now get to thank Brad Yates, N. Jane McCandless, Ryan Bronkema, Paul Rutledge, and Gavin Lee from UWG, as well as my great new RU colleagues. My Dean, Matt Smith, is supremely supportive and indulges my more magical administrative thinking. My colleagues in Political Science, Allyson Yankle, Paige Tan, Daniel Reed, and Tay Keong Tan, have inspired me to be a better teacher, researcher, and colleague. I am profoundly grateful that fate brought me and my family to the New River Valley.

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The Disrupting of Mobile Communication

THE PAUL PELOSI ATTACK

On October 28, 2022, the Speaker of the House of Representatives' husband, Paul Pelosi, was viciously attacked by a hammer-wielding intruder in their family home. The 82-year-old businessman had the poor fortune to be at home alone while his wife, Nancy, was in Washington D.C. performing her duties as Speaker of the House. While Pelosi was sleeping, the attacker broke into the house, waking the Speaker's spouse. The assailant, David DePape, shouted "where is Nancy?" repeatedly while attacking her husband. Paul Pelosi suffered a skull fracture and numerous other injuries from the attack, and fortunately appears to be in position to make a full recovery. But much more concerning was DePape's motives and how he radicalized to the point where he was willing to kidnap and torture the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Just as significant as the attack itself was the aftermath. Instead of universal condemnation for a heinous act of violence, opponents of Pelosi almost immediately began a campaign to deflect from the fact that a supporter of former President Donald Trump had become so radicalized he planned and executed a scheme that involved kidnapping and torturing the Speaker of the House. The campaign was conducted through social media. Trump's son Donald Trump Jr. tweeted a picture of a pair of underwear (Pelosi was in boxer shorts during the attack) and a hammer, calling it his Paul Pelosi Halloween costume. More troubling was a cadre

of conservative media figures and online influencers who immediately rushed to provide a counter-narrative to the attack. The false claims and conspiracy theories including suggestions Pelosi had staged the attack (as actor Jussie Smolett had done a few years before), that DePape was actually an Antifa member playing the role of "crisis actor," and that DePape and Pelosi were lovers in an argument.

Almost immediately the conspiratorial thinking and lies spread quickly across the internet. A content analysis of tweets in the three days after the attack showed 19,000 posts which mentioned both words "Pelosi" and "gay," prompting more than 700,000 likes from users of the site. (Tolan et al. 2022) Even former President Trump himself, in an interview with a conservative journalist, suggested that the story was fake as he falsely suggested that DePape did not break into the Pelosi's home but was trying to escape an attack from Paul Pelosi himself.

The Paul Pelosi story is emblematic of the current-day state of media in America. Legacy news agencies, new players, social media, and mobile technology have simultaneously caused a tectonic shift in our politics. Misinformation and falsehoods can spread as fast as, if not faster than, the truth. Opening a social media account is so easy that anyone can create fake profiles to share lies which become quasi-truths once they spread far and long enough. Those fake accounts target people in the public eye, like Darrell "Bubba" Wallace Junior.

The NASCAR Cup competitor from Mobile Alabama is the only black driver in the sport's premier series. Driving for legendary athlete Michael Jordan's 23XI team, Wallace is a two-time winner in the sport and one of its most recognizable figures. In 2020, at the beginning of race weekend, Wallace's team arrived at their assigned garage at the Talladega Superspeedway, opened the garage door, and found a rope tied into what looked to be a noose hanging from the bottom of the door. The team members immediately notified NASCAR, who interpreted the discovery of the rope to be a racist symbol directed toward Wallace. By the time Wallace arrived at the track, NASCAR had already contacted the FBI who then conducted a full investigation.

The result of the investigation showed that the rope was tied to be a handle to close the door more easily, and since garage space was assigned randomly there was no way the misunderstanding could have been intentionally targeted toward Wallace. Social media users were quick to call the mistake a hoax, just like Jussie Smollett's fake report of a racially motivated attack the prior year. The fact that Wallace was not involved until

after the FBI arrived was and remains unimportant to those who choose to believe that the situation was a mistake. Two years later after Wallace won a race in September 2022, the hashtag #BubbaSmollett persisted on Twitter.

Whether the venue is motorsports or politics, the Pelosi and Wallace stories exemplify a media environment in which falsehoods can spread and reify in dangerous ways. The same social media use that radicalized David DePape was instrumental in planning and organizing the attempted coup at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. The state of American democracy is in a seemingly fragile condition, perhaps as tenuous as any time in the nation's history. Does our media usage contribute to that state of democratic disruption? In this volume I seek to explore the connection between current-day digital mobile media and the state of American democracy.

Technology Is Disruptive

Much can change in fifteen years. As technology advances, the pace of change accelerates in parallel. While technological changes in the last decade and a half have affected nearly every aspect of the typical American's life, few aspects have changed as significantly as those related to mass media. A move away from traditional print and broadcast media toward a mostly online and mobile world has accelerated drastically. While some of that acceleration can be attributed to the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic that forced nearly every American to embrace a digital life, the technological and social institutions that allowed for the online shift were already in place. Indeed, the COVID-19 lockdowns and quarantines could have been much worse in the absence of communication technology. Schooling, video calls, telehealth appointments, and important work could not have been done without high-speed internet, webcams, mobile phones and tablets, and cellular data.

More than likely, the way you do many things has changed drastically since 2014. Perhaps in ways that you do not realize, but that change has come. Consider taking a long-distance trip in 2006. You drove to the airport, took public transport or hailed a taxi, printed a boarding pass to get through security and onto the plane, hailed another taxi or rented a car at an airport counter upon arrival, and took that last leg of the trip to a hotel room. Today, you probably conduct most of those transactions via your smartphone: you paid for your public transport access with a mobile app or a card on a digital wallet or requested a rideshare through Uber or

Lyft. You displayed your boarding pass for the aircraft via your smartphone or smartwatch, requested another rideshare or had your rental brought to you through Turo through your phone on arrival and took it to a VRBO or AirBnB rental property, again using your phone to access keys to your lodging. While the actual elements did not change—multiple forms of transportation got you to a destination where you had a place to stay—the method by which you arranged each element of the trip looked significantly different than fifteen years ago.

Much has been made of the concept of disruption, particularly in the business world. Success stories of the new economy are highlighted by disruptive entities such as Uber, AirBnB, and Turo. Each of those entities disrupted the existing economies in their fields involving taxi service, lodging, and auto rental. Disruption has become a common theme in the business world as the world has become more mobile. In each of the cases above, those new players needed mobile technology to make their disruptive innovations work. Established entities such as Avis and Enterprise rental car companies, Hyatt and Holiday Inn hotels, and local taxi companies all were forced to change their business models and practices under the challenge from the new disruptive entrants into their industries. Leveraging that mobile technology, disruptors have brought some positive developments such as lower costs for consumers, but also more desultory effects such as increasing the cost of the overall housing market (Crommelin et al. 2018) and a loss of jobs in the existing industry not compensated for with new employment from the disruptor (Frey and Osborne 2013).

Those mobile technological advances have also made it possible for disruption to occur in the area of political communication. The last decade has shown the most significant change in communication practices since Gutenberg invented the printing press. No technological advances in between—neither mass production of printed materials nor the advent of broadcast audio and visual media, have so fundamentally changed the environment in which political actors communicate. Without the slightest bit of exaggeration, everything related to how political information is consumed and produced has changed since the first edition of this book.

Consider the political communication analogy counterpart to the trip above. Today, we access most of our political news through our phones. Multiple sites and apps use the full technology available on mobile devices to deliver text, audio, and video content to end users. Journalists have left their notepads and audio tape recorders for recording and notetaking

apps on their smartphones. Videographers can produce HD quality video on those devices as well and publish them directly. Citizens can produce their own content as well, bypassing the traditional reporter gatekeeping role and sharing real-time content such as the individual who filmed Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin and three fellow officers tragically taking George Floyd's life in 2020 on their phone. Without that video, Floyd's unnecessary death might never have been held to account.

For better or for worse, political communication occurs almost completely online today. With the move into a virtual environment comes the disruption of existing media entities and also the new opportunities to explore that are the hallmarks of innovative change. Old media outlets like the local community newspaper died, replaced by new disruptive entries. Politically engaged citizens, media outlets, journalists, and political actors around the world are adapting to the disruptive changes in mobile media that hallmark the drastically altered environment of the 2020s. The end users of media must change their intake and evaluation methods, actors change their rhetoric and strategies, and the lines between the roles of creator and consumer have blurred significantly (Cozzolino et al. 2018).

Four Disruptive Themes

Disruption is such a powerful force that we can understand online political communication better by parsing out the different areas that have been affected by the decade of disruption. Accordingly, I have chosen to organize this edition of Communicating Politics Online into four elements that have experienced disruption.

Part I of this edition focuses on the disruption that has occurred in journalism over the last decade and more. Chapter 2 will focus on the technological changes that have effected news gathering and reporting. Not only has mobile technology become ubiquitous, but a few parallel and complementary changes have disrupted the process of news gathering and reporting: the advance of paywalled access to news sites, crowdfunded journalism such as ProPublica, the emergence of mobile video, and the day-to-day work of a journalist have all changed. Chapter 3 turns to the vital area of information literacy. Mis- and disinformation have exploded in the last decade, and with it citizens' critical capacity has changed. However, this same time period has seen a drastic erosion of critical thinking toward the news on the part of the voting public. While social media bears much of the blame for spreading these untruths, the online

environment has opened to bad faith actors such as Cambridge Analytica's attempts at manipulating voters in 2016.

Part II moves to focus on the changing consumption environment for political content. So-called "fake news" and the rise of extreme distrust of traditional media and journalists is the focus for Chapter 4. The growing lack of faith in reporting accuracy and quality traces back to the rise of ideological broadcast media in the 1990s, certainly, but the 2010s and 2020s have amplified that state of distrust with a widely dispersed media environment that allows microtargeted reinforcement of viewpoints. Furthermore, in Chapter 4 I explore the strategic use of "fake news" as a rhetorical tactic. Chapter 5 shifts the focus to places where little news content exists: the news desert. The last decade has seen a drastic decline in the availability of local news, which has in turn not only removed a vital accountability measure against local governments, but it has also made the focus on national politics much greater. The effects of news deserts, including a decreased sense of community, are explored along with the efforts by some to compensate for the reduced local news capacity with microsites.

Political campaigns have been greatly impacted by the changing technology of the last decade, and they will be the focus of Part III. Chapter 6 examines the new media campaign: how strategies, site usage, data and analytics, and social media have altered the landscape of election campaigns and forced new strategies and tactics onto those campaigns and electioneering actors. When campaigns change, so do the kinds of issues they discuss and candidates they elect into office. Changes in online political communication have contributed to greater political polarization in government and the electorate, which will be the topic in Chapter 7.

Part IV turns to the effects that these changes have had generally speaking. As mobile technology use and polarizing rhetoric combine, they metastasize partisan polarization into negative partisanship, Chapter 8's focus. Our regular, if not constant, use of social media means we are always connected to political messages even when we want to distance ourselves from them. Increased "tribal" mentalities with fear of out-group members as well as the emergence of filter bubbles/echo chambers complete the negative partisanship chapter. In Chapter 9, I turn to the effects on the voting public. While the minimal effects thesis continues to hold in many studies of political communication, the direct connection between user and content creator in mobile technology suggests that there are independent forces which may have greater impacts than

previous media exposure have displayed. The decline in social capital that accompanies increasing physical isolation has in turn led to declining trust in government and elected officials, as well as increased support for authoritarianism and decreased faith in democracy.

Conclusion

Some bemoan the disruption that mobile digital technology has caused in political communication, and those criticisms are valid. However, as in most cases the genie cannot be put back into the bottle: the change is here, continues, and will continue into the future. Legacy industries that did not respond to disruption failed, and we can expect more failures into the future. If change cannot be reversed, it must be adjusted to and that is one of the overarching themes of this work. How have news gatherers, the news industry, campaigners, and the general public responded to the disruption of digital mobile technology over the last fifteen years? The disruption begins with journalism and the process of collecting news.

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Mobile Digital Technology Disrupts the News Media Industry

CHAPTER 2

Disrupting Journalism

Technological Advances in Journalism

In many ways, mobile technology over the last decade has inspired a corollary to Moore's Law. More an aphorism than an actual scientific law, Gordon Moore noted in the 1960s that the number of transistors (and thus computational power) that could be built into a computer chip doubled approximately every two years. This arithmetic growth seemingly without a ceiling suggested limitless capacity to add more powerful tools into computer-based technology. Moore's Law held current until recently, but even if chip density is taking slightly longer than two years to double in 2022, the pace of increasing chip density has not slowed drastically.

Smartphones have followed a path akin to Moore's Law development since the 2010s. In September of 2012, Apple introduced the iPhone 5 to the marketplace. A significant advance from the fourth generation it replaced, Apple introduced its higher-powered A6 chip exclusive to the fifth-generation device. The new chip increased processing speeds to 1.3 GHz through a new dual-core CPU and triple-core graphics unit. The phone's memory increased with two different types of RAM bringing its overall speed to roughly 1.5 GB. Optimized for the fastest cellular networks of the time, the phone's 3G antenna reached a maximum download speed of 7.2 mbps. Finally, the iPhone 5 included an image signal processor for its 8-megapixel camera. Technically, the iPhone 5 was state

of the art—in 2012. In 2022, the iPhone 5 was so antiquated and obsolete that Apple had stopped providing software updates and support for the device five years ago.

By 2021, Apple had advanced its smartphone technology by leaps and bounds with the introduction of the iPhone 13. The standard A15 chip increased to a six-core processor and four core graphics unit, nearly sextupling graphic resolution display and speed over the iPhone 5. An additional neural engine made app multitasking possible and functionally increased memory to nearly 3 GB. The camera, now a 12-megapixel unit with wide and ultrawide cameras built in, could take 63-megapixel panoramic shots and record in 4K high-definition resolution. The iPhone may not have doubled in performance every two years, but the difference between the fifth generation and thirteenth generation iPhones was drastic. Apple is merely an example here, as Samsung and Google both made significant strides forward in both their Galaxy and Pixel offerings that paralleled that of the iPhone. Even if the pace of technological development is not as rapid as Moore's Law suggests, the speed with which more functionality grows into each iteration of phone development is very fast.

The technical specifications are not merely grist for the early adopter's mill. Particularly in smartphone technology, the enhanced capacity has translated into a greater ability to consolidate tasks into a single device. In 2012, for instance, a reporter would have not only had their phone handy during an interview, but they likely had a still camera, possibly a separate video camera, an audio recording device, a notepad, and a laptop to write up any stories, edit and submit their stories provided they could find an internet connection. By 2022, reporters could simply take their phone with them and have all of the functions previously managed by seven devices. A multimedia reporter could film an event, conduct interviews on video or record audio with a built-in app, use a notes app for contextual information, write up a story, and submit to their publisher all with one single device. Not only does that mean reporters can post information more quickly than they could even ten years ago, but the reduced time in packaging stories for publication should theoretically let reporters focus more time on the actual reporting of finding and verifying sources, editing, and new story discovery.

Just as smartphone technology has changed, so has the job of a journalist and the dynamics of reporting the news. The ubiquity of smartphones in the American environment has greatly contributed to this

change. By 2021, 85% of Americans reported owning a smartphone. All age groups younger than 65 and older report smartphone ownership at over 83%, and even among those 65 and older more than three in five owned smartphones. No significant differences in racial groups exist, either: black respondents said they owned a smartphone 83% of the time, compared to 85% for both white and Hispanic respondents. Smartphone ownership also shows no urban–rural divide, with 89% of urban respondents owning a smartphone, 84% of suburbanites, and 80% among rural respondents. Economic status is, along with being 65 or older, the most significant difference in smartphone ownership. Incomes over $75,000 annually own smartphones 96% of the time, declining to 85% for incomes between $50,000 and $750,000, then 83% down to incomes above $30,000, and among the lowest income bracket still 76% of respondents own smartphones. No longer a younger person's accessory, or unevenly distributed based on race or wealth, smartphones have become a constant part of American life. For those in rural areas, some of the draw of smartphones is the lack of access to reliable high-speed home internet. More than a third of rural respondents said they had a smartphone because otherwise they could not have access to the internet at home (Staff 2022).

Internet access is no longer a luxury, a truth emphasized by the 2020 lockdown necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rural children had greater learning gaps and loss than their urban and suburban counterparts, businesses closed at a more rapid rate with less online distribution, and people were increasingly isolated (Janse et al. 2021). Whether in education, economic development, or simple quality of life, broadband access is one of the most significant concerns facing rural communities today.

Today, every news media outlet has a website and perhaps a dedicated mobile app. Even the sub-industries of journalism have converged under the pressure of changing technology—television stations not only post video of their news content but offer text from reporters that would be edited out for broadcast, and newspapers have added video as complements to their text stories on their websites and apps. The app ecosystem is not new to American media, but its ubiquity is. By 2010, only the major news outlets (national scope newspapers like the New York Times and Washington Post, or national broadcast networks) had their own apps. Now, local network affiliates have their own apps and communities as small as 20,000 that still have newspapers feature apps.

Another app has become a powerful force in current-day political communication: Twitter. The microblogging app, launched in 2006, has become one of the most important media entities in the world. With nearly 400 million users, Twitter is an online ecosystem worthy of the moniker. While not as ubiquitous as Facebook, Twitter's inherent advantages in required post brevity have made it a common informational choice for many citizens. Twitter also has changed much of the news industry through its presence.

Journalists have been attracted to Twitter since its launch, partly because of the similarity Twitter threads have to conversations. Journalists as storytellers must be cognizant of conversations, and many journalists claim that the core story they tell is one of conversation. The required maximum character limit (no individual tweet can be more than 280 characters in total) invites quick posts and replies. Reporters have the freedom to use Twitter to share elements of their research which may have been edited out of longer pieces, communicate directly with readers for instant feedback, and collect contextual information that enhances their reporting. As one journalism scholar noted, "It is the sacred duty of journalists to listen to the public they serve. It is then their duty to bring journalistic value — reporting, facts, explanation, context, education, connections, understanding, empathy, action, options— to the public conversation. Journalism is that conversation. Democracy is that conversation." Twitter's conversational nature, at least to Jarvis, makes it a natural vehicle to take journalism beyond the static written or broadcast story, creating stories that are more alive and richer (Jarvis 2019).

However, Twitter also invites a significant critique. A writer for the New York Times bluntly noted the opinion that the microblogging app is "ruining American journalism… and short-circuiting our better instincts in favor of mob- and bot-driven groupthink" (Manjoo 2019). The hiccup speed of the online world's news cycle, to which Twitter contributes significantly, runs contrary to the ideas of deliberation and fact-checking which defined twentieth-century journalism. In Manjoo's evaluation the quick-reaction nature of Twitter reduces the quality of the democratic conversation, but it may also elicit viewpoints that traditional journalism misses. Newsrooms have their own biases and folkways, which often exclude voices at the margins. A powerful rejoinder to Manjoo's column notes,

> If you are an African-American who is shopping or barbecuing or eating lunch or going into your own home when a white person calls the police on you, you do not have a newsroom of journalists who look like you who will tell your story. The outlet you have is a hashtag on Twitter. These stories are now, finally, making it into mainstream media only because #livingwhileblack exists as a tool for those forever unrepresented and unserved by mass media. (Ingram 2019)

Furthermore, by bringing the public into the conversational frame all the way through the entire news gathering and reporting cycle, the public has a new insight into the processes by which the news is packaged and presented to them. The benefits and costs of Twitter's emergence seem nearly equal in their force, suggesting that regardless of how good or bad it is, it is an embedded part of media culture now.

PAYWALLS

American media have always been private entities, with relatively few outlets receiving government support (NPR and PBS being the main exceptions) and relying on the combination of subscriber fees and advertising to continue their existence. Finding both was never a systemic problem for news media until the ubiquity of internet technology. Alternative news sources began almost as soon as the internet became widely available to the public, and they were some of the only sources one could find online. The Drudge Report led the way, followed by a host of other startups. Traditional news media, in particular newspapers, initially resisted the pull of the online world, sensing a threat to their business model. Of the legacy media only the *Wall Street Journal* embraced the online world, notably limiting access to those who bought an online subscription to the business newspaper, called a paywall.

In the parlance of innovation diffusion, the *Journal* was an early adopter. The paper saw the online world not as a threat, but as a new market. The *Journal*'s business focus may have contributed to its different view of the nature of online news seekers. Few other actors in the legacy media followed the *Journal*'s model, though. For the most part, legacy news entities either kept their content offline entirely or provided their web content as a draw to their existing money-making enterprises. Neither approach would be successful.

As the internet became omnipresent, it disrupted the world of advertising and sponsorships. Sophisticated web tools tracing clicks, views, and analytics gave online advertisers a significant advantage through their available metrics which could not be produced by broadcast and print media advertisers. The glut of new outlets seeking advertising also drove up competition and drastically reduced the prices that broadcast and print outlets could charge. Combining the decline in ad revenue with a significant loss of subscribers for outlets posting their content for free online, the legacy media in America were struggling to maintain enough revenue to remain in operations. News media were seeing a mirror image of the same struggles faced by the music industry in the late 1990s under the disruptive entrance of Napster.

The decline in advertising revenue was important, especially for those entities posting their content for free. Between 2000 and 2015, print newspaper advertising revenue fell from about $60 billion to $20 billion, a drop of two-thirds (Thompson 2016). Subscriptions could have compensated for the loss, but they were also in free-fall. Between 1990 and 2016, total U.S. daily newspaper circulation declined from sixty million to just over thirty million, a reduction by half (Barthel 2017). The public, acting rationally, rejected paid news for free alternatives. All free rides, though, come at a cost.

The advertising dilemma became a full-blown crisis during the economic downturn of 2008, commonly known as the Great Recession. Within two years, all but two American metropolitan areas would be served by only a single newspaper after more than a century of competing news sources, notable consolidations included the absorption of The Rocky Mountain News by The Denver Post and similar mergers in Philadelphia and Seattle. Only Los Angeles and New York continue to have multiple daily newspapers operating in competition. Furthermore, over the next decade roughly two newspapers a year would cease operations, leaving an ever-larger footprint of the United States without access to traditional news coverage (Abernathy 2020).

Like any business, legacy news media were faced with a difficult choice: to adapt, or to die. To overcome this existential crisis, newspapers needed stable revenue streams. Despite the seemingly direct pathway toward adaptation, many entities, especially small-town newspapers, were unable or unwilling to adapt. National-level and high-profile local media began to follow the *Wall Street Journal*'s lead, albeit a decade and a half later, and installed paywalls on their sites. Paywalls are not so much innovations

as what Arrese terms "retro-innovation," an existing practice perceived as new because it is presented in a different way. We can think of paywalls as an online replication of the traditional print subscription, though, instead of a true innovation *ex nihilo* (Arrese 2016). At first the public resisted against paywalls, having become accustomed to not needing to pay for their news for a while.

Public resistance to news paywalls may be receding. In May of 2022, the New York Times reported its paid digital subscriber numbers crossed 9.1 million, a record number. Purchasing and integrating the online sports news site The Athletic boosted numbers, but not so significantly as to be an outlier from prior steady growth (Robertson 2022). The rival Washington Post notes one-third of the Times' subscriber base, with just over three million paid subscriptions. The Post's struggles are noteworthy because of a unique market position occupied by the paper. In 2013, billionaire Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos bought the Post. Initially, the Washington Post was folded into Amazon Prime subscriptions, but within a year that plan sunsetted with the hopes that existing Prime customers would continue to add the subscription on to their accounts. However, the Post retained few of those customers and has failed to expand its subscriber base as the Times has (Mullin and Robertson 2022).

At the local level, paywalls are increasingly common, especially in markets where the local newspaper is owned by a large chain. The Gannett chain, owning more than 100 different news sites, introduced a metered system in 2017, where readers were allowed three, five, or seven free articles per month before being required to subscribe to continue to see subsequent content. Two years later, a hybrid model emerged where breaking news and wire service content was available without a paid subscription but high-demand specialized content such as local dining reviews and sports as well as investigative pieces were put behind paywalls. After Gannett merged with another giant chain, GateHouse Media, the paywall became known as a "two-five meter." In the new system, readers get two free articles, then they must register without paying to view up to three more, and must pay-subscribe to read beyond (Farrow 2021). The model does appear to be working, if slowly, because from 2017 to 2021, Gannett/GateHouse subscribers increased from 341,000 to 1.6 million (Watson 2022).

Paywalls have not rescued news, especially at the local level, but they have enabled media outlets to stabilize from a decade and a half of loss. While many workarounds exist to allow users behind paywalls without

subscribing, the number of subscribers to the combination of various outlets suggests that, much like the experience of the music industry in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a sizable enough component of the population will pay for content if given no free options. To more substantively address free-riding, additional approaches have emerged.

Another paywalled option has emerged in the online world—the subscriber-only specialty news site. An example is the Sunflower State Journal, an online-only news site dedicated to Kansas politics. Former Associated Press and Kansas City Star reporter Brad Cooper started the Sunflower State Journal in 2017 after seeing most of the media outlets in the state reduce or eliminate their reporters' bases in the state capitol of Topeka. Cooper believed there was a market for state-specific political news, and he leveraged his expertise in the statehouse to create his own news outlet. Subscribers who pay $160 a year get detailed analysis of state budgets, proposed legislation, policy, and campaigns. While data on the number of subscribers is not available, longevity is a marker of success and Cooper's site has been online and active for five years, suggesting a sustainable business model.

Across the nation similar entities have launched, particularly under the States Newsroom project. In nearly thirty states, a dedicated state-specific entity gathers news such as the Virginia Mercury and the Daily Montanan. Instead of a paywall system, States Newsroom operates as a not-for-profit entity and provides free news content, particularly for areas considered to be news deserts. States Newsroom's efforts are mirrored at the federal level by another non-profit, ProPublica, which has been in operation since 2007. Focused on deep investigative journalism, ProPublica covers less day-to-day governmental operations and instead produces longer-form pieces from a team of over one hundred journalists. Using grants and volunteering journalists, these new sites are at least partially filling the growing news gaps across the country.

Whether bootstrapped and crowdfunded outlets or not-for-profit entities, the character of news gathering and dissemination has changed greatly over the last decade. As more traditional media outlets fold or consolidate, newer online-only or hybrid news outlets are sure to emerge. What remains to be seen is whether or not the new players will remain economically viable over the long term.

Video Content

Another significant shift in journalism has been the need to integrate video into every outlet. Prior to the Web 2.0 world, print journalism would include text and still photography. Legacy newspapers put that content into their online stories as well. Reporters and photographers would cover stories but they did not include video in their content, only text and still photographs. Broadcast outlets were only slightly more adaptable to new conditions. Radio and television stations would transcribe audio into text and add it to embedded video for consumers who preferred to read over watching video, but no sites used text, audio, and video together in creative ways. Each medium replicated its existing content for online posting. Eventually the legacy industries would embrace technology that added depth to their content and improved the value proposition to existing and potential subscribers.

Social media would end up showing the way, but even that pivot would take time. Early social web entities made it easy to post pictures to one's MySpace account or Facebook wall, but not video. Video had yet to be fully embedded into mobile phone technology, which would prove to be pivotal in the advancement of hybridized media. Anyone who wished to shoot video needed to have either commercial video equipment of the kind television outlets would have access to, or high-quality home camcorders. Even with the ability to shoot video, downloading it to computers, have the right software to digitize and encode the video for web playback, uploading the video, and building it into a website was a time-consuming process, so much so that it created a significant barrier to entry for video from non-television sources. Newspaper sites were mostly print and pictures, radio sites were mostly audio with some text, and television sites were video primarily with transcribed text. Each online deployment of a media outlet looked similar to its pre-internet origin.

Perhaps the most important milestone in the development of hybridized media came when video recording capabilities were introduced in the Apple iPhone 3GS model in 2009. The first two editions of the smartphone included still photographs only, but the video recording capabilities of the iPhone 3GS would make the video much easier to shoot, edit, and embed. The phone's video capacity meant that anyone with a phone could shoot video, apps that could edit video on the same device, and new online tools like social media made it much easier to share.

With the portability and adaptability of phone-captured video available to them, some sites started integrating more video into their content. Even more than legacy media outlets, though, individual citizens began filming and sharing more video content. The early era of MySpace and Friendster had given way to Facebook and Twitter, and quickly they pivoted to allow uploaded video as well as pictures and text. Individuals began moving more completely toward video as well. As a user-created video became more common, so did new social tools built mostly around it.

In 2011, the social app Snapchat launched, capitalizing on the growing use of smartphones and video recording capacity being standard in Apple's iPhone line as well as Google Android's primary smartphones, Motorola's Moto and Samsung's Galaxy. With video capacity on both sides of the phones' interfaces, users could not only shoot video of their surroundings but of themselves. Quickly, video became common. By 2015, Snapchat users were sending out 2 billion videos each day (Matney 2015). The shift may seem inconsequential, but consumers were changing in preferences, moving from commonly typing messages and taking pictures of others to self-shot pictures and video. Snapchat's growth would presage another significant video-first app, TikTok, which uses video exclusively as posting content. TikTok's editing tools meant that users do not need to upload raw video, but can edit, cut, add effects, splice in other material, and a number of other more sophisticated techniques that made users savvier about video and thus a more discerning audience.

The New World of Journalism

The emergence of video-centric social media tools was important, because it changed audiences' tastes in their other media choices. Text-centric sites continued their sharp decline. As consumers' tastes changed in their social media world, so did their news media preferences. Newspaper sites became more aggressive about integrating video into text stories, meaning reporters were now expected not only to follow stories and interview subjects, but shoot still photographs and video to be embedded into their stories.

Thus the new world of journalism is more hybridized. All news media must have the ability to include some mix of text, photography, and videography. Technology has made it much easier to do so, since every

one of those tasks can be accomplished on a smartphone, but it has expanded the required skill set for a reporter, requiring them to be tech-savvy in addition to the extant expectations upon journalists. Consumers expect more from journalists in the 2020s than they ever did before. A 2022 report from the International News Media Association identified six new demands of media outlets in a social world: (1) Consumer attention as a finite resource, where the public must immediately see something of interest to draw their attention; (2) mobile usage is driving connectedness, so reporters must be accessible to the public just as elected officials are; (3) rising consumer expectations, where users are savvier and more demanding for content; (4) connected marketing emerging as a response, using reviews and the wisdom of crowds to promote content; (5) new consumer behavior patterns, understanding how much text consumers will read before tuning out; and (6) the new need for personalization and the elimination of friction points. News media cannot simply tell the story in a neutral and complete way, there must be a consideration of the consumer experience for media outlets to persist. Consumers will shift their attention very quickly, leaving little brand loyalty for media to leverage. Most news will be consumed today on a mobile device, so all content must be formatted mobile-first for ease of access. Consumers, especially those paying subscription fees, expect more content generally and more content directly relevant to them. Media outlets must find new ways to engage consumers, with social media sharing and integrated marketing tools a high priority.

Journalism has changed drastically in the last decade and a half, largely driven by the technological changes which have disrupted the industry. As a result, many journalists express grave concern about the future of their industry, with 72% of respondents describing the news industry with a word that suggests a negative outlook for the future of the profession (Gottfried et al. 2022). The impact of those changes is not simply seen in a new landscape of news producers, there will be impact on consumers as well.

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Information Literacy in a Mobile World

"Democracy Dies in Darkness"

The actions of democracies rely on media for a variety of roles, most notably that of a watchdog over what government does. Exemplifying that spirit, the Washington Post adopted the motto "Democracy Dies in Darkness" in 2017. Mass news media provide much more democratic service, of course, than merely the watchdog role. In an era where, ever more parents shirk their role as familial political socialization agents, media serve as a much larger influence (Graham et al. 2020). Media can also serve as a nationality-defining characteristic, particularly in mono-cultural societies. Media usage provides common frames of reference, contributing to senses of community and belonging.

In a fundamental way, democratic citizens cannot uphold their civic duty without some form of independent media. The U.S. Constitution's authors note, in Federalist #39, that no element of the Constitution or the government it created was sustainable without the continued monitoring and consent of the public. Implied within this statement of simple republicanism is the responsibility of a citizen to monitor the work of their government and evaluate it. To simplify the concept of democratic accountability, republican governments put the people as the ultimate authority over government. Periodically, the public grant agency to individuals to represent their interests in the work of government. Elections in this manner can be thought of as performance reviews of the quality

of that agency. Has the elected official acted in the public's best interest? Does the elected official keep an active pipeline of constituent feedback looped into their decision-making? For both of those things to happen, citizens need an independent view of what government does to allow their critique of the previous term's work and the viability of the incumbent for another term. Any direct communication from elected officials will try to put their work in the best light possible, making it less valuable for assessing government performance. The independent nature of a separate media news source is vital.

The mindset that the Constitution's writers believed was necessary for democracy to sustain itself may have been over-optimistic for the public's commitment to informed democratic deliberation in 2022, but the public must be able to independently consume some minimal quantity of news (or more) to make reasonably informed decisions at the ballot box (Kellner and Share 2007). The public's understanding of the informational content they consume, or media literacy, is thus one of the necessary building blocks of a sustainable democracy. The same critique the public are supposed to apply to their government should also be applied to assessing the quality of the news they use to be informed about it.

Media literacy can be seen as a foundational skill of republican democracy. Without it, citizens do not develop the higher-level skills which enable them to review the agency they provide to elected officials. Understanding how the mobile and social realms have impacted media literacy are particularly important because many markers of media literacy suggested low levels prior to the shift to a more online world. American citizens began a multi-decade withdrawal from active democratic engagement in the 1960s, marked by a period of declining civic participation, lower social capital, decaying civic trust, and plummeting voter turnout (Putnam 2000). The decay of social capital is its own reinforcing problem. Lower social capital means less trust, but trust is an important prerequisite for social capital to be rebuilt. Tracing alongside those trends was news media consumption, which exacerbated problems by creating a more reactive and less-informed public. Unlike media usage, social capital was not particularly strong prior to the advent of the mobile age (Mihailidis and Thevenin 2013).

Ubiquitous personalized and mobile media can provide one of two theoretical informational pathways: (1) greater convenience and availability of information can revitalize mediated news consumption and

revive civic engagement, or (2) increased availability of non-news content can further allow a disengaged public to shirk their role as democracy's ultimate accountability mechanism. Note here that the mere quantity of media consumed is inadequate for democratic engagement, there must be a quality of news consumed accompanied by critical reflection by the consumer. Again, this ideal type of informed and engaged citizen may never have achieved full reality, but the possibility of the public deviating ever further away from that ideal is deeply troubling for democracy.

The public must have useful policy and performance information available to them and willingly synthesize it into evaluations of government's effectiveness for democracy to work. We know that a quantity of media options unrivaled in history is available to the public, but what of its quality and the perception of that quality by the public? Is the American public better, worse, or similarly informed to the pre-mobile era today?

CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT THE NEWS

Citizen political knowledge, of sufficient quality to hold government accountable for its actions, has multiple levels. At the most basic level, people must understand the essential functions of constitutional government and how policy decisions are made. Before citizens can evaluate their government, they must have the fundamental knowledge of how a functional government works to understand what capacity and limitations it has. Ideologues who blame Congress for a showdown against the President may think that the legislative branch has more power over its own docket than it does, or believe the president can unilaterally force Congress to do something it does not want to do, hurt the overall democratic process by introducing irrational thinking and unrealistic expectations. Political socialization and schooling largely help develop this knowledge, though media has a role as well. Where the citizenry uses media, they do the most through advancing that knowledge into higher-level critical thinking. Media provide real-world insight that informs and sometimes confounds the textbook knowledge of process held by the citizenry. To synthesize all of that information into a cohesive worldview requires the critical intake of mediated information.

Citizens not only know about government through the media, they must know about the media they consume. Put another way, quality knowledge about politics makes for a citizen's "healthy diet" of information. The consumer must be aware of what is at the end of their fork.

In a mobile and instant world, understanding the media we consume in addition to its content is more important than ever. As entertainment options are so abundant and overwhelming, the consumer has the opportunity to load up their informational diet with lots of deserts but little in the way of lean protein and vegetables.

Throughout the twentieth century, citizens had a constrained set of choices when it came to news. Newspapers, mostly a single local daily print, was a mainstay, joined later by three to five radio stations and three or four television stations. Every individual in a given area would be very likely to consume similar information. Outside sources such as opinion magazines and newsletters existed, yes, but the typical citizen consumed all of their political media from a constrained set of sources. Each of those sources was a large institution with many norms, perhaps none more so than that of objectivity (Goldberg 2001). News media were supposed to be neutral arbiters of events, and even though accusations of ideological bias followed the twentieth-century media the citizen still understood that there were quality controls in place and that even if they disagreed with some of the media's interpretations of events, they had little concern over its veracity.

Perhaps no better exemplar of the media's role during that era was a 1968 CBS News special broadcast entitled "Report from Vietnam." Cronkite, the powerful and trusted anchor of CBS' nightly news broadcast, took a team directly into the battlefields of Hue, Khe Sanh, and Saigon. Shortly after the Tet Offensive, Cronkite's one-hour broadcast was a thoughtful assessment of the strategic barriers that faced the U.S.' attempts to oust the Viet Cong from power. Signing off, Cronkite stepped out of the neutral reporter's role and noted that the only way he saw forward was for the United States to withdraw its troops and end the conflict.

For many, Cronkite's willingness to opine in such clear and forceful terms had a dramatic impact. Then-President Lyndon Johnson is said to have told an advisor after watching the program, "Well, if I've lost Cronkite, I've lost America," and in days announced he would not seek a second term (Voices and Visions 2017). The base truths that people commonly accepted as protected and supported by the press provided a vernacular for people to share and debate the issues. Consumers did not have to be particularly critical of their news sources because of the combination of norms and limited choice. In turn, on those rare occasions when

reporters editorialized, they did so with an extension of care and trust by the public.

The first disruption of this culture would come with the advent of cable television in the 1980s and 1990s. CNN was the first challenger to the established media marketplace, but it would be far from the only one. CNN itself was a great disrupter, challenging existing network news broadcasts and accelerating the news cycle to a near-constant 24-hour clock. By the 1990s, an even more significant change occurred when cable news outlets with ideological slants began to broadcast. FOX News and MSNBC were covert about their rightward and leftward perspectives, at least initially, but quickly both shed their veils and became very clearly biased and part of their own party's electioneering efforts.

Ideologically aligned, as opposed to neutral or objective, news was both a significant shift and not new. The objective press, in retrospect, was an artifact of the twentieth century's rejection of the high partisanship of the nineteenth century which saw each community having multiple news-papers, each with their own veryclear partisanship. Without the trust of the objectivity norm, the news consumer now had to view their media intake with a more critical lens.

The growth of ideological media on cable presaged an even wider-open world of online news. The objectivity norm was still only practiced by legacy media like newspapers and broadcast network news, which in turn led to those who embraced partisan media to claim the legacy press were biased against them. Trust in media, not only particular outlets but the entire institution, was in serious decline by 2010. That societal media trust is important, because individual senses of political self-efficacy are signifi-cantly correlated with greater knowledge of events and confidence in the utility of the information they take in (Ashley 2020). Lack of confidence in news disengages voters.

Once again, a paradox emerges: there is more information available than ever, yet people are doing ever less with it. Instead of providing a revival opportunity for media consumption skills, the mobile world has given the typical citizen a means to further disconnect themselves from the kind of important evaluative information they need to manage a republican democracy. By 2021, the United States ranked 15th of 44 countries on the Open Society Institute's Media Literacy Index. Data from the index show that the United States ranks third in technology-based civic engagement but only ranks twelfth in trust in others (Carr 2021).

The online world has provided an environment that incubates three significant traits working against media literacy: selective exposure, confirmation bias, and motivated reasoning. Each pathology of consumption has worsened over the course of the last twelve years, accelerated by the use of communication technology.

Selective exposure is the most commonly noted issue with media literacy in a mobile age, simply because the massive nature of choice is such that individuals can easily curate their own media mix to only consume content which reinforces their existing biases and understandings. Liberals can avoid Fox News, indeed any conservative-aligned media. The same absence of barriers to entry that allow niche news like Axios also provide opportunities for sites that seek to leverage existing partisanship and weaponize it.

Furthermore, selective exposure also manifests in the ability to self-select out of deep content. Research has shown that a move to more digital media has been followed by a decline in long-form reading skills, meaning in-depth pieces such as political thought or investigative journalism are likely to be avoided by the typical media consumer, a phenomenon known as "TL:DR" or "too long, didn't read " (Baron and Mangen 2021). Citizens get more reportage on personalities and conflict, less on policy. Furthermore, some may not only eschew longer-form reading but commit to complete avoidance of political news altogether. It is possible to either wrap one's self in an ideological cocoon or completely reject political knowledge and engagement in this age of ubiquitous media availability.

Trust is harmed by selective exposure in subtle but destructive ways. When we are surrounded by information that meshes with what we already believe, it provides comfort but also makes differing viewpoints appear to be alien and, by default, wrong. If one is never confronted with alternative interpretations of events, it becomes easier to define other viewpoints as incorrect, even dangerous. In turn trust in anyone or anything that does not conform perfectly to our viewpoints erodes and can disappear entirely.

The brain seeks to eliminate the messy and unpleasant things that do not conform to our existing pathways of thought (Goleman 1985). That can in turn lead to greater support for censorship of opposing views and intolerance, a sign of declining social capital. The use of social media has been claimed to be a contributing factor to declining social capital. Lower trust, greater disengagement, decreased feelings of political efficacy, and

less faith in government as a legitimately elected body are all markers that have been posited as accelerating under a social media world. Putnam's landmark work on the subject suggests that the only way to build and maintain social capital is with in-person interaction, and that social media are merely an extension of the disconnecting power that television exerted in disconnecting people from each other (Putnam 2000). However, other research suggests that online social capital does exist, but it is distinctly different from in-person social capital. One study suggests online social capital is not as robust as in-person social capital, but that particularly strong online bonds can produce trust and engagement effects similar to that of in-person social capital (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2017).

Related to selective exposure is confirmation bias. The brain naturally is attracted to anecdotes and data that reinforce one's already-held convictions. We are less likely to second-guess or critique information we see with which we agree. And since we can curate our social lives to only provide content which satisfies our confirmation bias, we further distance ourselves from a constructive dialog with those whom we disagree.

The intersection of confirmation bias and selective exposure is not limited to news choice. We self-select our lives into patterns that fit our previously held beliefs, whether that be our choice of home (Levendusky 2009) or the online communities into which we sort ourselves (Ling 2020). Confirmation bias appears in a lack of "source monitoring," which means that when we see a piece of content online such as a news story shared by a friend who we know shares our same predispositions, we are less likely to consider the veracity of the claims or assumptions in that content (Frost et al. 2015).

The spiral effect of confirmation bias and selective exposure effectively creates an "informational cocoon" around the individual which prevents any information that may be challenging from coming in. Naturally, small-group dynamics can then come into play, especially groupthink. After prolonged exclusive exposure to a small, self-selected group in agreement, viewpoints become more extreme and can be breeding grounds for many social ills, notably racism (Abdallah et al. 2018). One could extrapolate from Abdallah and colleague's claim that the timing of the rise of the American "alt-right" white nationalist movement is not coincidentally related to the expanded availability and use of social media for news and information. Small group dynamics suppress dissent, impose norms of agreement, and can spiral out of control toward action.

Motivated reasoning also has seen an intense increase in the mobile world. While often conflated with confirmation bias, motivated reasoning manifests in different ways when looking at online political communication. Confirmation bias is a clear predilection to consume information that reinforces our existing beliefs and ignores information that does not fit that model. Motivated reasoning, by contrast, is the tendency to readily accept new information that comports to our ideology and critically deconstruct anything which does not. Malicious actors can exploit motivated reasoning through intentional and strategic misinformation and disinformation campaigns (Vegetti and Mancosu 2020).

Political parties and other electioneering actors have long used motivated reasoning tactics to energize their base and mobilize supporters to vote (Rune and De Vreese 2010). Motivated reasoning can increase the volume and intensity of online echo chamber, especially through the regular re-sharing of news and commentary content through one's social media outlets. Twitter in particular has developed into a very effective vehicle for spreading mis- and disinformation by taking advantage of motivated reasoning (Wischnewski et al. 2021).

The impact of motivated reasoning's exploitation by online actors can have ramifications well beyond the political. The anti-vaccination movement, for most of the last thirty years a quiet fringe group, gained traction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Trust is so powerful that individuals will believe their less-informed friends who share content which aligns with their motivated reasoning than actual research and scientific findings (Patrick et al. 2015).

The misinformation and disinformation shared because of motivated reasoning has a larger-scale effect as well, resulting in what Sunstein calls "reputational cascades."

> *In the case of a reputational cascade, people do not subject themselves to social influences because they think that others are more knowledgeable. Their motivation is simply to earn social approval and avoid disapproval. … If many people are alarmed about some risk, you might not voice your doubts about whether the alarm is merited, simply in order not to seem obtuse, cruel, or indifferent. … Sometimes people take to speaking and acting as if they share, or at least do not reject, what they view as the dominant belief. As in the informational context, the outcome may be the cleansing of public discourse of unusual perceptions, arguments, and actions. … Lawmakers, even more*

than ordinary citizens, are vulnerable to reputational pressures; that is part of their job. (Sunstein 2017)

As noted earlier, these phenomena preceded the arrival of social media and mobile technology, so significant here is the change in the trend which occurred as social media became more ubiquitous. In other words, how much change is due just to social media and how much was already in motion and would have happened regardless of the disruption?

Social Media's Contribution

Social media has compounded the effects of the online shift by introducing a number of significant changes to how the public wants to consume news. As a global phenomenon, social media can change humankind in ways heretofore unimaginable. Regardless of language, location, ethnic background, education, social folkways and norms, or social status, social media has had a significant set of effects on people, many of them in ways that are not readily understood. Social media can provide the opportunity to connect people, building community unbound by geography. Niche interests can find homes, and the socially isolated can discover support. With those benefits come a number of problems as well.

In the offline world, neural systems build around concepts of social cognition: skills that are required to appropriately interact with others in personal, vocational, and educational settings. Examples of social cognition skills include affective recognition, interpretation of abstract concepts, and the ability to remember and recognize visual stimuli (Goldstein et al. 2019). The mobile world provides the opportunity to gauge differences in online and offline social behaviors, as well as discover behaviors that are unique to the mobile world (Meshi et al. 2015).

Two important differences in online and offline behavior have already emerged as significant: shorter media consumption time media in the online world, as well as a more superficial understanding of the issues. Two other important developments are unique to the mobile world: viral spread and political anger.

The speed with which information can be shared online is dizzyingly fast, and sometimes pieces of content will spread so quickly that they become ingrained in our public consciousness. When a piece of content becomes very popular very quickly, being liked and shared across a variety

of media platforms, it is said to go viral. Viral spread of political content can be profoundly damaging. During his campaign for U.S. Senate from Pennsylvania in 2022, television doctor Mehmet Oz posted a campaign video hoping to show high food prices and blaming them on President Joe Biden to bolster his chances of winning. Oz, who made a small fortune peddling supposed medicinal cure-alls to his audience, picked up items in the grocery store to make a vegetable and dip tray. In a moment of clear disconnect with his more working-class target audience, Oz termed the items "crudité," showing his social class and creating a cue that he was not as connected to his target audience as he had intended. Oz's opponent, John Fetterman, publicized the video and then saw his supporters like, retweet, post, and otherwise share the video in every way they could. The video received more than 10 million views, and helped contribute to Oz's eventual defeat (Kelly 2022).

Kovac describes social reading shifts through publishing statistics from different reading modes. The mobile shift has had two predominant effects: from textual to visual media, and from long-form to short-form texts. While the general public tend to immerse themselves more completely in offline reading, the user tends to skim mobile content. Furthermore, the public's ability to comprehend suffers when complex texts are read from screens. In other words, long-form deep reading traditionally associated with the printed book has been marginalized by the technological shift into more inattentive and incomplete reading modes. For news content producers, these are two important market trends to which they must respond. Journalists are now expected to provide shorter articles, embed more video, and format their stories for reading on small screens. The size of mobile device screens, especially phones, limits the amount of text one can see at a time to a much smaller sample than one would on a computer monitor or even a small tablet. Readers find it easier to lose continuity over long stories when reading on their phones, forcing reporters into shorter content and less context. Particularly strongly hurt will be long-form journalism like investigative reporting. If the public will not read an article because of its length, then an entire field of content will shrink and potentially disappear (Kovac 2018).

Furthermore, since the typical reader is spending less time and mental effort on the content they consume, the public's understanding of issues becomes much more superficial. Social media is a strong inducement engine for participation, there is little evidence of the imparting of political knowledge through the use of social media (Dimitrova et al. 2014). A

growing body of literature finds that the effects of social media on political knowledge, in terms of both depth and accuracy, are generally negative and are not compensated for with other forms of learning (Lee and Xenos 2019). Perhaps most significantly, by allowing the news consumer to passively accept content pushed to them, social media disengages the consumer from an intentional search for information—also called the "news-finds-me" phenomenon—which in turn suppresses levels of political knowledge (Lee 2021; Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl 2019). While some studies show a positive relationship between social media use and density of political knowledge, they generally involve high-interest opinion elites with strong media use backgrounds who shift their interest from print and broadcast to online sources (Beam et al. 2016). Mass publics are much less strategic in their media consumption.

The capacity to share content created by others easily across social media platforms has its impact on the news as well. Not only must news reporters shorten their pieces and draw eyes in with clickbait teaser headlines, they must also tailor their work toward widespread sharing. Content is often considered highly successful when it is shared very widely by thousands of people or more—going viral. Media organizations had long held tightly to the ability to control the diffusion of their news content, but the social world makes any attempt to corral or limit the scope of shared content nearly impossible. Indeed, not only must media outlets abandon the idea of scope limitation, they must plan for it intentionally (Wadbring and Ödmark 2016).

Social media's viral impetus leads to market incentives that may be manipulated to undermine the public good. Social media news readers tend to share positive news, but consumers of content that has gone viral focus on social significance and novelty in the viral news stories to which they pay attention (Al-Rawi 2019). Early studies of viral spread showed a clear trend of emotional power over informational quality. One examination, using health-related articles shared from the New York Times, showed news articles that the reader considered having high informational utility and positive sentiment invited more frequent shares. Sharers also selected articles more frequently when they presented controversial, emotionally evocative, and familiar content. The more contributory to social and political divisions, the more views it receives. Even the method of sharing diverged: informational utility and novelty had stronger positive associations with sharing by email, but emotional impact and existing familiarity with the content played larger roles in inspiring shares on

social media platforms (Kim 2015). Health-related information became increasingly salient in 2020, when the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic provided the opportunity for more content to go viral than ever as people shifted into an online world.

The pandemic, its associated shutdown, and the response to the development of COVID-19 vaccines underscores the issues that can accompany viral dissemination. The exclusion of the word news from the previous sentence is intentional, because much of the virally shared content was either misinformation (incorrect) or disinformation (intentionally wrong and misleading). One study investigated the influence of fear of COVID-19 on social and cognitive factors including believing in fake news, susceptibility to disinformation, and problem-solving in two of the polities most severely hit by COVID-19: Italy and the United States. An individual's fear of COVID-19 was related to seeking information about the virus and avoiding infection in both countries, as well as a willingness to share news headlines in the United States. However, fear positively correlated with susceptibility to disinformation. Authors of the study suggest the pandemic might have contributed to situation where people were pushed toward "pseudo-profound existential beliefs," a circumstance where an inverse relationship existed between veracity of information and intense belief in its truth. Most notably, a individual's ability to conduct creative problem-solving was positively associated with correctly differentiating fake from real news, but polarization was associated strongest with believing in fake news in both countries (Carola et al. 2021). Existing political beliefs were cued by elite statements about the pandemic response and steered public reaction.

Content which the initial consumer enjoys is more likely to be shared and thus go viral, but a strong trend in the literature shows that social media and viral spread of news actually contribute to political anger. Studies have shown that when an individual from a self-identified "out group" shares content, that content inspires more anger and is more likely to be shared (Guadagno et al. 2013; Rathje et al. 2021; Chuai and Zhao 2022).

Social media has also blurred the lines between partisan electioneering content and news delivery (Hasell and Weeks 2016), desensitizes consumers to propaganda (Mattingly and Yao 2022), and hypercomplicates information search to make users in general more susceptible to misinformation and disinformation (Tucker et al. 2018). In turn, social

media use encourages people to retrench into their in-group and further withdraw from those with differing views.

The Cambridge Analytica Scandal

Social media as a gateway to mis- and disinformation susceptibility is particularly important when such inaccurate and motivated content can be weaponized to interfere with elections. In 2016, a scandal threatened the future and viability of the most popular social networking platform in the world, Facebook.

One of the values of social media, especially for marketers, is the wealth of personal user data that the sites can collect. Likes, clickthroughs on ads, content analysis of scraped text content, and a host of other information is all collected on user and stored in Facebook's database. While ostensibly used to improve Facebook's content-provision algorithm, it also gives Facebook some of the deepest consumer data available. Facebook's success was, at least in part, due to its popularity as an advertising platform. Games such as Farmville became common on the platform, in no small part due to the amount of harvested data on players. Others followed suit, creating in-platform apps to collect user data. One of those apps, entitled "This is Your Digital Life," culled thousands of personal data observations from users. While less than three hundred thousand people actually used the app, This is Your Digital Life was able to collect data on 87 million users of the site. As part of the sign-up process, This is Your Digital Life asked the user a series of personality-related questions to develop psychological profiles of those users. Not only did This is Your Digital Life cull the users' responses, the app exploited a Facebook policy loophole that also empowered it to collect the data of anyone who was friends with the user. The friends-of-users were never given informed consent or the opportunity to opt out of their data being used (Lapowsky 2019).

The author of the This is Your Digital Life app, Aleksandr Kogan, was employed by the British consulting firm Cambridge Analytica. Cambridge Analytica collected the data on all 87 million user profiles This is Your Digital Life had accessed. Such a wealth of data could be advantageous to a campaign seeking to identify content to push to niche-specific populations. FEC records show that the first U.S. presidential candidate to hire Cambridge Analytica was the campaign of Texas Senator Ted Cruz, who

paid the firm nearly six million dollars in the early stages of his primary campaign for the Republican presidential nomination for 2016.

Employing user data to build profiles and micro target to those populations was nothing new or scandalous, but Cambridge Analytica's surreptitious collection of data from users who had not opted into it would become a scandal. After Cruz's campaign ended and Donald Trump won the Republican Presidential nomination, his campaign also hired Cambridge Analytica to build psychographic user profiles from their activity on Facebook. The largest division of targeted groups was between Trump base supporters and persuadable "swing" voters. Depending on the user's profile, they would either receive a message serving the more ideologically extreme base or a comparative message which negatively profiled his general election opponent, Hillary Clinton, for the swing voters.

Cambridge Analytica was a subsidiary of the SCL Group, an international business consortium. SCL's executives had contact with fellow executives at Russian giant Lukoil, and the Russian firm reached out to SCL to use the Cambridge Analytica data for targeting American voters. Not only did the campaigns use illegally obtained information to target voters, but news reports in 2018 indicated that the Russian assets used Cambridge Analytica's data to push deliberate disinformation to American voters in promotion of Trump, their preferred candidate. Moscow created false narratives about U.S. complicity in disrupting global food supply and distribution, started them on Facebook, and spread to right-wing enclaves like Reddit.

While impossible to determine if the mis- and disinformation campaigns altered the eventual outcome of the 2016 election, the non-consensual collection of data and foreign interference in the election was enough to inflame into a scandal. Trump advisors had close ties to Cambridge Analytica going back to 2014, the organization hired non-Americans to work on election-specific issues in violation of campaign finance law, and the specter of foreign electoral manipulation hung over the Trump Administration. Facebook experienced a massive public backlash, including notable celebrities making public points about deleting their profiles, and for the first time the general public saw concerns about media literacy in the social media world for the threat they were (Confessore 2018).

Since the exposure of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, a public conversation has emerged about the responsibility that social media platforms have. Some view social media as simply one more capitalistic enterprise, which should only be subjected to market forces (Afriat et al. 2021). Others view the social media realm as an online world extension of the traditional public square, with the same responsibilities for reliable information and unplanned encounters with challenging worldviews and information as a town hall would have had prior to the 1900s (Sunstein 2017).

The Cambridge Analytica scandal did not end the discussion of social media outlet responsibility, either. Facebook responded with stronger data security measures, closing data collection loopholes, and enhanced opt-out opportunities for users. But as the 2020 election concluded, President Donald Trump used his outlet of choice, Twitter, to broadcast false theories of electoral fraud against him which resulted in a chimerical victory for Joseph Biden. After the election fraud lies fomented into action with the attempted coup in Washington on January 6, 2021, Twitter went so far as to ban Trump from its site.

The online, social, and mobile world of communication today is like little else before it. In nearly every method of news assembly and dissemination, mobile technology has disrupted existing work patterns and folkways that survived for more than a century beforehand. But what of the news consumer in this new mobile world? We turn to that question in Part II of the book.

Conclusion

For much of American history, news media choices were limited and constrained. The typical voter worried little about the integrity of the news they consumed. Digital mobile technology has comprehensively disrupted that environment, creating new pathways of media literacy in which the citizen must be fluent. At a time when searching for news is easier and quicker than ever, citizens need to devote more time and effort to ensuring the news they consume contributes to their ability to make effective political choices.

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Digital Mobile Media Disrupts Consumption of News

"Fake News" in a Mobile World

The Fake News Agenda

While "fake news" has become a common refrain in the age of Trump, its origins go all the way back to the 1960s conceptually and substantively to the 1990s. It is impossible to disaggregate "fake news" from the return of ideologically and partisan-driven news.

Throughout the twentieth-century objectivity was the prime directive of the American newsroom. Reporters saw themselves as neutral arbiters, delivering the facts to the public in as unbiased a frame as they could provide. True objectivity is, of course, an impossible-to-achieve ideal, but for the most part the public felt they could trust their news reporters to put the truth above their own personal views and not marry the two. Over time, though, the journalistic profession began to display tendencies to prefer liberal candidates and policies personally, which in turn influenced the tone and framing of their coverage (Allison 1986).

As journalism became generally more liberal as an industry, conservatives took notice and began a process whereby trust in news reporters would plummet. The drumbeat of liberal media accusations reached its peak in the 1980s during the Reagan Administration. The significant departure that Reaganism represented from even established conservative ideology brought great scrutiny by reporters. Even as the economy

flourished in the mid-1980s, Reagan was the subject of constant questions which reporters accounted for with liberal bias accusations (Graham 2004). Into this environment, a new medium and player would enter that would turn the drumbeat into a frenzy.

Since the 1960s, most terrestrial radio stations had moved to the FM band. AM, with its larger broadcast footprint but lower quality sound, had fallen out of favor with music listeners. Some broadcasters saw an opportunity to bring a new content category onto the airwaves. As commutes lengthened and more small businesspeople would travel long distances in their cars, the AM band had an appeal because the signal would carry uninterrupted over larger areas. But music was less-than-ideal for content, so talk shows became more common on the AM band during the 1980s. Also, in 1987 the FCC sunsetted the Fairness Doctrine, so broadcasters no longer had to balance one set of ideological voices with another. By 1988, there was room within that ecosystem for a national star to emerge. Enter the Rush Limbaugh program.

Ideological Media Emerges

Limbaugh would be the first visible example of a growing snowball of ideologically driven media. Openly and unabashedly conservative, Limbaugh used some of the shock-jock techniques pioneered by Howard Stern and applied them to politics. Over three hours each weekday, Limbaugh would debate liberals and term hanging up on them as a "caller abortion." Daily Limbaugh also railed against what he perceived as a conspiratorial-level of liberal bias in the mainstream press. Television network nightly news broadcasts and the New York Times were favorite targets for Limbaugh's monologues. Limbaugh's audience grew, numbering more than 30 million weekly listeners in the early 1990s (Chmielewski 2021).

The Rush Limbaugh show was proof-of-concept that conservatives were so off-put by the bias they saw in traditional media that a media outlet geared particularly toward the right could be successful. Limbaugh even added a half-hour weeknight television show to his growing media empire, which in many ways was the catalyst for the most significant watershed moment in modern media development: the launch of the Fox News cable channel.

The brainchild of Republican media operative Roger Ailes, as early as the Nixon Administration he foresaw the opportunity to create a television network that could provide a slant to the news that would have empowered the 36th president. As Nixon was constantly dogged by scandal until his resignation in 1974, Ailes saw the best way to defend the administration was with a dedicated conservative television network. At the time, cable television was in its infancy, and so the initial investment in starting up a new network was too great an obstacle to overcome.

Around the same time that Limbaugh rose, Australian media magnate Rupert Murdoch bought the struggling Twentieth Century Fox company. Murdoch and Ailes were allies, and the combination of Murdoch's resources with Ailes' pro-conservative network concept married to form the basis of Fox News. Launched in 1994, Fox's cable news outlet was the second all-news entity on cable, entering into direct competition with Turner/TimeWarner's Cable News Network (CNN), who they targeted as being the epicenter of liberal bias within the news media.

Fox News immediately skyrocketed to being one of the most watched cable networks, far eclipsing CNN and amassing a cable audience second only to sports giant ESPN. The success of Fox News led to copycats and mirror images emerging. NBC partnered with Microsoft to launch MSNBC, an avowedly liberally slanted news network hoping to consolidate audiences on the left the way Fox News had done on the right (Jurkowitz et al. 2013).

In Fox News conservatives had a dedicated place to provide their perspective on news, in essence creating the first modern echo chamber. In the pre-mobile days, Fox News cemented itself as the hub for American conservatives. Ambitious candidates for office angled to get exposure coverage, Republican presidential nominees and administrations could count on favorable coverage, and during election season the base was mobilized through outrage at reported Democratic excesses.

Fox News became the de facto voice of conservatism in America. Limbaugh continued to dominate the radio waves, and spawned his own copycats such as Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham. Limbaugh and Fox stayed within their own lanes, complementing and complimenting each other. The old-guard opinion news magazines such as *Commentary* and *National Review* sent correspondents to Fox News in attempts to remain

relevant. For American conservatives, their new town hall was a combination of The O'Reilly Factor and El Rushbo (Limbaugh's nickname for himself).

Had the Fox News/Limbaugh effect been merely to provide a "safe space" for conservative dialog, the effect of ideologizing news media would be contained and perhaps healthy for democratic engagement. But Fox's foundation was built on a growing popular distrust of the national establishment media. Once Fox saw they could consolidate a loyal viewership by stoking those fears of liberal bias, they began presenting themselves to their viewers as a "watchdog" toward liberal bias and even masquerading as a non-ideological network. Fox News' "We Report, You Decide" slogan reinforced trust in their viewers and encouraged their distrust in what they called the "mainstream media."

Combining the critique of all other outlets and the imprimatur of an ostensibly non-partisan viewpoint built a trust of almost slavish proportions for Fox News. Over time regular Fox News viewers came to see any news report originating from another source as inherently suspect. Only Fox News could be trusted for this growing cadre of voters, creating a parallel media ecosystem that saw no cross-communication or dialog. CNN viewers did not watch Fox News, saw their analysis as suspect, and in turn distrusted anyone who espoused their viewpoints. Fox News' viewers did the same. In this way, the distrust of media that undergirds the "fake news" mindset was established through Fox News (Bartlett 2015).

From 1994 through the election of Donald Trump in 2016, Fox News and the Republican Party were inseparable (Falk 2019). Throughout Donald Trump's presidential campaign, Fox News remained the GOP nominee's medium of choice. Toward their goal of supporting Republican office-seekers and administrations, Fox News provided a forum for Trump just as they had Mitt Romney, John McCain (though grudgingly), George W. Bush, and Bob Dole before him. While in office Bush reciprocated, giving privileged access to Fox's reporters denied all other media outlets (Farnsworth 2018). After Trump's election, however, the media environment shifted once again.

Trump and the Media

Not only was Trump elected in 2016, but the shift to a mobile media environment was fully underway. Where Fox News had been the prime (if not sole) outlet to extol conservative ideology and bolster Republican

administrations, the online world provided many more loci where conservatives could go for information that fit their worldview. The combination of alternative pathways for conservative political leaders and Trump's unique communication style would bring him into conflict with Fox News.

When confronted by other media outlets with damning or critical questions, Trump would rely on Fox News to backstop him, and using the distrust toward other media the cable outlet had helped build, he could comfortably explain away any negative information as being part of the larger liberal bias against him, hence the term "fake news". Trump interrupted a campaign speech in 2015 to point out reporters, and addressed them by saying "I'd like to welcome the fake news media" (Coll 2017).

Throughout the Trump administration Fox News played its role as unofficial state media, but there were more moments of discord between the president and the cable outlet than had been seen previously. During a debate in 2015, Trump attacked then-Fox anchor Megyn Kelly. During the August 6, 2015 presidential debate that Kelly moderated, she noted Trump had called women he did not like "fat pigs, dogs, slobs, and disgusting animals." Trump took to Twitter, noting how his supporters were hounding Kelly on social media and said that during the debate there was "blood coming out of her eyes" (Chavez et al. 2016). The confrontation would lead to Kelly's firing by Fox. Still, Trump could always count on the ability to bring Fox News into his media strategy when he needed them. Trump clung desperately to his relationship with Fox News after the 2020 election counting was complete, as a place to spread his conspiratorial theories of widespread voter fraud (Hoewe et al. 2021).

Trump would take the "fake news" phenomenon and bring it front-and-center in his communication strategy. Using the rhetorical turn of "fake news" provided not only a deflection of critical mainstream news, but it provided an identity label for his supporters. In leveraging the faith in Fox News (and by extension, him) that many core conservatives held, Trump could rally supporters around him as a persecuted martyr. The "fake news" mantra meant that Trump's followers could discount the substance of whatever the competing news outlets reported. The louder the criticism got, the more Trump was a target of a larger attack on conservatism to his followers, and the more they clung to their safe ideological space, Fox News. The "fake news" strategy also gave Trump cover for his own peddling of mis- and disinformation. In effect, Trump allowed

himself to spread substantively fake news by accusing mainstream outlets of doing exactly that (Ross and Rivers 2018).

Fox News was the primary televised venue for Trump, but not the exclusive one. Trump used the microblogging site Twitter extensively, sometimes in parallel with his broadcast strategy and sometimes independent of it. Also, during this time, more copycats emerged and positioned themselves to be further to the right of Fox News. One American News began broadcasting their 24-hour cable news channel in 2013. Newsmax, a conservative weekly magazine-turned-web presence, launched the following year. Both channels were fringe, initially only provided through AT&T's cable U-verse service and the satellite providers DirecTV and Dish Network, both of which were also owned by AT&T (Shiffman 2021).

After the January 6, 2021 coup attempt, the tone of Fox News shifted. The network may have seen the prospect of diminishing returns from their relationship with the tarnished president, or some within the network boardrooms may have worried about the possibility of their playing an unwitting role in fomenting the insurrection. Regardless, Fox News' tone toward Donald Trump changed. As befits a conservative network like Fox News, with the imminent inauguration of a Democratic president their editorial content shifted from supporting Trump to attacking Joe Biden.

Had Twitter not de-platformed Trump for his election conspiracy falsehoods, he may have simply abandoned Fox News and shifted to an all-online strategy. With Twitter no longer in play, Trump and his allies shifted their presences to Newsmax and One America. Fox may have developed a new view of Trump, one of his presence on the network as more of a liability than an asset. Fox News, the Wall Street Journal, and other elements of Murdoch's media empire began airing and publishing editorials critical of Trump as more revelations emerged from the U.S. House' January 6th investigation (Mastrangelo 2022).

"Fake News" as a Strategy

One of the specific tactics used by Fox News was a hybridized approach of anti-intellectualism and anti-elitism. The anti-intellectualism can largely be ascribed to the resurgence of evangelical Protestantism in America that hallmarks the Reagan-era model of conservatism. Reagan was the first Republican in modern times to openly embrace religious conservatism,

and his lead was carried on by all Republican nominees through Mitt Romney in 2012 (Wilcox 2018).

Perhaps the standard-bearer for religious conservatism, the movement's true believer, was George W. Bush. Avowedly religious, Bush encouraged faith in churches over faith in science, notably in his stance against the use of stem cells for health research as it violated the tenets of his church. As religiosity surged, so it would push back against its most significant epistemological rival, modern-day intellectualism. Conservatism had previously embraced both religion and intellectualism, exemplified by the William F. Buckley tradition carried on by thinkers such as George Will. But within the conservative rank-and-file, intellectualism equated to science, which meant forcing children to learn about the theory of evolution among other controversial viewpoints to the highly religious (Martin 2005).

During the George W. Bush Administration, intellectuals were commonly equated with urban liberal elites. Bush's religious brand of quasi-populism made many of his supporters openly suspect intellectual thought leaders as inherently impious (Shogan 2007). The growing reliance on religious leaders as political opinion leaders created greater distrust among scientists and science generally (Motta 2017).

Fox News did not produce this new strain of anti-intellectualism on its own. As mobile technology spread, it allowed similar filter bubbles to be constructed around one's own confidence in "having done the research myself." Online communities could pop up to support parents who wrongly believed their children developed autism because of vaccines, similar-minded populists could connect on Facebook groups, and the underlying algorithms used by the social networking platforms made it all the easier for the like-minded to connect and reinforce their own beliefs (Claussen et al. 2011).

As the cultural conservatism exemplified by Bush spread, so did the thread of anti-intellectualism that would presage Donald Trump's more caustic populism. Not all conservatives shared Bush's embrace of anti-intellectualism, though. Harvard professor and outspoken "Never Trump" conservative Tom Nichols highlighted the unintended problems of unrestrained religious anti-intellectualism in *The Death of Expertise*. While Nichols points to a number of different forces at play in promoting the rise of modern anti-intellectualism, the antithetical tautological positions of science and religion contributed significantly, and the

scientific/expertise distrust occurred asymmetrically on the right (Nichols 2017).

Nichols' avowed anti-Trumpism can be seen as an extension of his thesis in *Death of Expertise*. Everyday citizens commonly rely on opinion elites, however they may personally define them, to form their viewpoints and attitudes toward issues of the day. Trump's use of the "fake news" mantra was designed to tell citizens they should put their trust in him, and not in the scientific or intellectual elites that he saw as part of the larger conspiracy to suppress his agenda. Trump not only advanced the fake news strategy, to implement it effectively he would have to develop a mechanism by which he could undermine trust in others so that it would be solely invested in him. As a corollary, if one trusted experts and intellectuals who disagreed with Trump, that person may start to question more of Trump's statements and goals, which could lead to the eventual unraveling of his entire rhetorical strategy.

Distrust built on the foundation of "fake news" exacerbates other problems as well. In 1999, David Dunning and Justin Kruger's "Unskilled and unaware of it: how difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments" posited an inverse relationship between confidence in one's knowledge and the substantive depth of that knowledge. Put another way, Dunning and Kruger suggest that the less one knows, the surer they are they have significant knowledge of the area in which they opine (Dunning and Kruger 1999). The Dunning-Kruger effect, named after the authors of the study, exemplifies the longer-term effects of the "fake news" strategy. "Fake news" as a tactic creates a strong confidence and trust in a certain type of individual, in this case one who eschews scientific and intellectual expertise. The echo chamber of Fox News, and now online ideological media as well, reinforces the individual's confidence that their lack of knowledge is in fact encyclopedic. "Fake news" exemplars of Dunning-Kruger are so sure in their beliefs thanks to constant reinforcement that they see opposing viewpoints as uninformed, perhaps even dangerously so. The distrust is reinforced, creating a spiral of confident misinformation.

Trust is a significant trait, and usually if one comes to distrust an institution they previously put faith in, they will likely shift that trust elsewhere. The distrust of media, experts, and intellectuals promoted by Fox News and evangelical conservatives did not create a cynical nation of individuals who had no trust. The trust that the public had placed in opinion and societal elites was displaced. Trump was the most noteworthy

exponent of where that displaced trust went, but he was not the exclusive recipient of the shifting locus of trust. Trump's allies of the moment would be recipients of that new anti-expert trust, and candidates who fell in line with Trump's goals would as well.

In a more general sense, if we remove Trump from the political arena there would still be a displacement of trust, but those in Trump's role: candidates and partisan elected officials with whom one identifies, become the recipients of that trust. The anti-expertise mindset engendered by Trump, social media, and the larger news environment meant that people primarily trusted candidates and their slanted, self-serving interpretations of events more than they would more objective or skeptical views.

The mobile enhancement of "fake news" echo chambers takes the typical Lockean model of electoral accountability and turns it on its head. In Locke's view, governments are prone to devolve into entities that fail to or openly violate the natural rights of the citizenry. That citizenry has the right, should they identify those failings, to remove the government from power by whatever means necessary (Locke 1967). In republican democracies, elections are the accountability mechanism used to remove those non-functional governments. But if the only information source a citizen gets and trusts is from the self-interested elected official, there is no critical eye that can determine when the public rhetoric does not reflect reality. Should a voter only believe their elected officials, then by extension every dissenting voice is not trustworthy. Thus, the traditional media role as a watchdog is eradicated. The final result is a government free from the shackles of accountability.

Finally, the "fake news" strategy in and of itself accelerates and metastasizes the echo chamber/filter bubble phenomenon that has been growing since the advent of ideological media. Social media are a rich field for filter bubbles and echo chambers to emerge, both within and external to politics. As information is shared from person to person, each subsequent messenger's interpretation, telling, and style can alter the initial information and distort it. Commonly called the "telephone game," this communication pathology is strongly promoted with social media's ability to selectively pass content from one person to another while adding one's own interpretation.

Furthermore, some destructive societal behaviors that can bleed into politics are also encouraged in a social world. Rumormongering, cyberbullying, harassment, and other forms of interpersonal reputational violence are rampant on social media, exposing opportunities for some of the worst behaviors in humankind to be encouraged (Choi et al. 2020). Fake news circulates online, gets shared within filter bubbles, and becomes a factoid, or an untruth commonly perceived to be fact.

Notably, as the incentives for reporters have changed, they have created a perverse incentive which inverts the twentieth-century objectivity norm. Not only must reporters use clickbait tactics to attract readers, but they are now in the position of having to push the ideological boundaries in their content. Echo chambers may keep adherents' ideological preferences from moderating, but the new news media ecosystem may actually exacerbate ideological extremity in news consumers. Emerging research suggests that ideologically charged media consumption makes opposing views seem more disproportionally extreme (Padgett et al. 2019) and not only reinforces extreme viewpoints, but may contribute to making them even more ideologically extreme (Hiaeshutter-Rice and Weeks 2021).

Technology always disrupts existing industries, so the changes that journalism and news consumption have undergone are not surprising or particularly novel. However, their effect on the larger ability of a citizenry to become informed supervisors of their polity is novel and problematic. As news consumers have become less able to consume news that helps them make choices about the job performance of elected officials and more a marker of tribal partisan loyalty, democracy has suffered a decline in public faith in democracy and democratic institutions. The intermediary institution of media not only performs a linkage role poorer than political parties do, that role has become weaker over time. That lack of faith in media may explain why it is much easier to see media entities fail in the mobile world.

Conclusion

Using "fake news" as a strategy is one of short-term gain for long-term struggle. The more candidates use the fake news strategy to attack critical media outlets, the more general disbelief of any news is possible as an after-effect. Donald Trump may have been able to use the term to build a loyal follower base, but in doing so he threatens the long-term ability of citizens in a democracy to conduct their accountability role effectively.

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News Deserts

IS LOCAL NEWS DYING?

Newspapers, particularly local ones, are part of the backbone of American republican democracy. The War for Independence could have never been planned and conducted without pamphleteers and newspapers sounding alarms of British tyranny. Newspapers inflamed the passions of the independence-minded colonists, helped support the war effort through the worst days of the conflict, and then served as a debate forum over the Constitution. Freedom of the press was built into the First Amendment as a top priority specifically because the Constitution's writers knew the centrality of a free and active press.

The First Amendment assumed that the greatest threat to newspapers would be a government loath to accept critique. However, newspapers have experienced an existential threat, and government has no hand in this peril. Instead of a repressive governmental regime or despotic leader censoring critics, newspapers' most significant threat since the advent of television has been the Internet and mobile technology.

Throughout the nineteenth century, nothing challenged or eclipsed the dominance of newspapers. Local newspapers were numerous, with even small communities having multiple papers. Those imprints were largely partisan, so in some ways very similar to the partisan media land-scape today. The parties heavily funded, or owned outright, many of those papers which aligned them very well with the linkage function of their

sponsoring party. Parties used the newspapers to inform and mobilize, certainly with their own ideological and electoral ends. Newspaper circulation was high, and the expanded franchise meant more people had an incentive to pick up their party's newspaper and read.

Internet technology was not the first disruptive force to lay a challenge down to the power and primacy of newspapers. As the partisan era was eclipsed in the wake of the Progressive Reforms, neutral independent newspapers often consolidated the partisan papers into one after their sponsoring parties could no longer afford the expense of doing so. Television was the first competitor to newspapers as an industry. As broadcast media spread, initially through radio but mostly during the time of broadcast television expansion from the 1950s to 1990s, newspaper circulation began to decline. Radio to a small extent, but much more so television, created the first viable alternative to papers. However, widespread consolidations and closures did not occur—newspapers were still vital and nearly ubiquitous in any community with at least 5000 people (Abernathy 2020).

The newspaper industry changed permanently, though, under assault during the internet era. Television changed the format of news delivery, making it more convenient and removing the transaction cost of subscribing or buying individual editions of a newspaper. The free-rider enablement of television would presage the inability to paywall online news at first. Some newspapers entered the online space, usually posting their full printed content on websites and providing no incentive for the consumer to purchase copies or subscribe. Newspaper subscriptions and circulation experienced unprecedented declines. As technology became more sophisticated, newspapers were able to introduce subscriber-only access codes or paywall digital subscriptions. But damage was already done.

After the rise of merit-driven bureaucratic employment reduced party sponsorship of papers, they had print advertising and classifieds to rely on for compensatory revenue streams, but print advertising was quickly overcome by the lower price and greater customer data streams available from online news. Print newspapers could no longer charge the advertising rates they had. And sites like Craigslist made the print newspaper classified ad obsolete. Much more than television, internet, and mobile technology threatened every core business model that newspapers had used for a century or more. Online sites that provide news

without a paywall and are supported by advertising (such as The Huffington Post, Yahoo News, and other aggregators) have made things even more challenging for communities struggling as their local news content disappears.

By the 2010s, that threat had become a cascade. Large urban areas with multiple newspapers saw them consolidate, to where only three major metropolitan areas have competing newspapers as of 2022. In areas where only a single newspaper had served the community, there were no former competitors with which to merge, and those newspapers began to fail. Slowly at first, and then with speed, communities began to lose their daily newspapers. The damage is most notable in rural areas, where there is little radio or television coverage to compensate for the closure of a local newspaper.

As of 2022, in the 3143 counties of the United States, nearly half are down to having only one newspaper. Those papers, which used to be dailies, are now much more common as weekly prints. 225 counties have no newspaper coverage at all. A locality or county with weekly news coverage or less is termed a "news desert." And news deserts are becoming much more common. Some remote areas like central Alaska make sense, but even more populous states struggle with local news coverage. Colorado has seven counties with no newspaper coverage at all, for example, and Texas has twenty-two counties without regular dedicated news content available (Newspapers By County: United States 2020).

The bad news is not just a reflection of struggling local businesses, but of one of the bulwarks of democratic engagement. Without regular news to inform the public of their public officials' work, democratic accountability suffers and thus does democracy itself.

> *After a decade of shrinking circulation, disappearing advertising revenues, and declining profits, the number of local newspapers in the U.S. has dropped from 8,972 in 2004 to 7,112 in 2018. Of these, only 1,283 are dailies; the rest are weeklies or biweeklies.2 Of the surviving papers in 2018, some 75% have a circulation of 10,000 or fewer. Between 2004 and 2018 alone, at least 1,800 newspapers shut down or merged, and more than 100 shifted from daily to weekly publication.* (Miller 2018)

Television and radio are poorly prepared to compensate for the lack of local news content. Since the preponderance of news deserts are in rural areas, urban and small-metropolitan ADIs for network affiliates mean

that smaller communities get little to no news attention relative to the anchor cities for their affiliate stations. Furthermore, chain media ownership homogenizes the news content available on those network affiliates, suppressing the opportunity for local public affairs-focused content to emerge and minimizing the diversity of viewpoints offered in the area in question. Finally, the news content on television relevant to a voter: city or county commission meetings, policy decisions, state legislation, and so on, get little coverage. Stories regarding crime, accidents, and human interest receive four to five times the coverage of public affairs on local television (Miller 2018).

The pace of news desertification is increasing, and the problem is no longer confined primarily to rural areas. Metropolitan areas with large populations like Denver and Seattle, which did have multiple local papers until the 2010s, have cut back their local content drastically and rely primarily on newswire coverage in lieu of hometown reporting. The prolonged economic downturn from 2008's housing crisis shock and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic response have made resources harder to come by, and these local institutions are often victims of the economy (Burns 2022).

The shift to digital and mobile technology did not bring about the rise of news deserts alone. Mismanagement of newspapers, particularly by large chains that have laid off reporters and reduced the value of local media, has contributed as well. Today ten firms own approximately 1500 newspapers across the country, most of them geographically concentrated in a single region. Two of the largest firms, Gannett and Tribune/Media News Group, own 677 newspapers alone. Over the course of two years, however, the number dropped from 820. Gannett in particular shed its newspaper holdings, shuttering or consolidating 126 newspapers (Winders 2022).

News availability and consumption changes are not limited to newspaper media alone. Local television outlets are under threat as well, as audiences and revenues decline. Over a five-year span from 2016 to 2020, local news consumption in every major time frame (morning, evening, and late night) decreased significantly. By 2020, less than four million people nationwide indicated they watched televised news of any kind. Many, if not most, of those news viewers were exactly the same in each of the time slots, so the fraction of Americans consuming local broadcast news is also eroding. Advertising revenue for local television also dropped, from highs near $24 billion annually to less than $18 million by 2021.

The only area of significant increase has been in the revenue from political advertising, jumping from $500 million in 2012 to over $2 billion in 2020 (Local TV News Fact Sheet 2021).

As local news content erodes, not only does local government accountability get short-shrift, but the absence of local content compared with the abundant and constant national content available on the 24-hour and network nightly news broadcasts shifts the political focus to be trained almost exclusively on the federal level of government. To be as abundantly clear as possible, the significant focus on national-level politics is not a bad thing in and of itself. Democratic accountability demands attention to government at any level. But in federalist governments, the citizenry must pay that attention to both the national and regional governments. The dominance of national politics creates an unhealthy imbalance. First, national political attention dominance makes the public see less value in their local government. Secondly, that lower value leads to less interest, and thus less engagement. Third, that lower engagement shifts peoples' policy demands to be almost exclusively federal in nature, rendering state governments ineffectual (Gardner 2013).

The Effects of News Desertification

Beyond encouraging a default expectation for federal solutions to all policy problems, there are three significantly related effects of growing news desertification. The three primary effects emerge from the growing body of research on news deserts in America: less focus on national issues, less transparency in local government, and a decreased sense of community.

The first effect is the most instantly apparent. Since citizens rely on media content to set the public agenda and drive their evaluations of government, when a level of government is not covered by the media the public cannot pay attention to it. Despite the democratic ideal of an engaged and participatory citizenry, the public does not attend city or county commission meetings in droves. For nearly two centuries the public who were interested in the work of their local government would rely on the newspaper. Even for the highly engaged, it would be nearly impossible for them to attend every single government meeting at every scheduled date and time. Local news media outlets provided a shorthand summary of those meetings and decisions for the members of the public to help them make decisions about the propriety of the policy

their government produces. No information source, of course, is perfectly informative and unbiased. In fact, even before the days of local news decline evidence emerged that local news coverage did a poor job of covering local budgeting activities (Swoboda 1995).

Any coverage, even substandard coverage, is superior to a complete absence of coverage. Any elected official thinking of engaging in ethically questionable activities might see the potential for negative news coverage to be enough of a deterrent, for example. And the public, knowing a media entity was watching, felt as though they could better trust their government to be faithful to its perceptions of the public's wishes (Gordon 2000). In terms of decision-making transparency, having effective local news media is paramount. Communities, even those with highly evolved senses of desired transparency, do a generally poor job of providing that transparency through their own communication mechanisms like websites (Armstrong 2011). If a willing government does not do a particularly good job of being transparent, by corollary any government wishing to make its decision-making and actions opaquer would have a much easier time of it. Social media also tends to do a suboptimal job of encouraging and facilitating local government transparency (Mahajan-Cusack 2016). By far the most effective vehicle of government transparency is a local news media entity regularly serving in its watchdog role (Veal et al. 2015).

Beyond the specifics of decision-making and policy, the desertification of local news has also reduced Americans' sense of community. Newspapers provide more than simply a current events digest. A newspaper is as much a symbol of a community as its schools are. Even when the public may disagree with a piece of news or commentary, that evaluation leads to public discussion on a common topic which will often in turn produce some form of governmental action. For the public to have a dialog on its politics, there must be a common frame of discussion and understanding of the issues involved. Newspapers provided that sense of community for millions of Americans. Their absence subtracts one more common frame of reference for members of those communities. Beyond political news, communities who invest much of their identity in their school sports found a vital resource in local newspapers, reporting on area high school sports scores and enhancing an area's sense of being a cohesive community (Perrett 2019).

The effect of news desertification is not felt equally among all Americans, either. While urban and suburban news entities may survive even if

stripped down and/or consolidated, those areas maintain their service by dedicated news outlets. Rural America, however, is bearing the brunt of news desertification and the effects are troubling. Since news outlets set the agenda for roughly 85% of all public decision-making, if rural areas lose that resource then local democracy will suffer. Rural residents will become more susceptible to mis- and disinformation, spiral out of trust with governments and others, and the resulting decline in social capital can lead to out-migration and the death of communities (Brounstein 2017).

The threat of news deserts in rural areas is real. Roughly half of Americans surveyed say that the local news they get covers areas in which they do not live. Neither are the anti-democratic results merely theoretical. In North Carolina's 9th Congressional district in 2019, itself largely a news desert, unethical campaign consultants illegally harvested and filed absentee ballots to boost one candidate. The scandal took more than a year to uncover, and then even more time for a trial to be held to determine the actual winner of the race. In turn, the 9th District was unrepresented in Congress while the controversy was being adjudicated. Had local media been in place, the malfeasance may have been caught well before the election and prevented the gap in representation from occurring (Simpson 2017).

The Role of Digital Media

The Web 2.0 promise of social media is that by breaking down the barriers to entry, should local print and/or broadcast entities fail to do the job adequately new competition in the digital arena can emerge to fill that gap. In reality, the shift to digital has not provided adequate compensation for the loss of legacy media (Abernathy 2020).

The public say they want digital media that replicates the forum and watchdog functions that local newspapers served. A 2018 study showed the percentage of Americans consuming news online was nearly equal to that portion of the population consuming television news: thirty-seven percent accessing digital news compared with forty-one percent who identified as television news consumers. However, consumption habits have not followed ostensible demand. The same study showed that a relatively small segment of the population consumed dedicated online news content from less-traditional sources: online forums or discussion groups comprised twelve percent of the sample, while local school or church

online groups and community listservs made up eight percent of the total audience (For Local News, Americans Embrace Digital but Still Want Strong Community Connection 2019).

A 2022 study showed little increase in consumption patterns in the three years since. Between 2020 and 2022, the percentage of news consumers using dedicated news websites or mobile apps somewhat or quite often dropped from 69 to 63% and social media dropped from 63 to 60%, while podcast listenership increased only one percent, from 22 to 23%. Despite a stated desire to have more interaction with local digital news media, the citizenry is either not finding or not using the resources they need (Forman-Katz and Matsa 2022).

Availability does not appear to be the issue. Across the country, in urban, suburban, and rural areas, bootstrapping local news websites are emerging. In western Kansas, local cable and internet service provider Eagle Communication created the Hays Post news site to compete with the chain-owned local newspaper as the Gatehouse company whittled away the Hays Daily News' staff and local coverage. The non-profit Texas Tribune is a crowdsourced investigative journalism site that has expanded its footprint and become a viable entity since its founding with venture capital seed money in 2009. States Newsroom, which operates state-level journalism sites in thirty states, provides ad-free reportage through grant funding. And hyperlocal independent sites like southwest Virginia's Cardinal News operate largely through editorial drive and volunteer reportage.

Most of the local and state-level news entities that have emerged in the digital and mobile world are niche in nature, covering political campaigns and state legislative session debates over bills and amendments. Since the sites are not comprehensive, they do not attract the regular and dedicated audiences that we expect to mirror the traditional consumption of newspapers. Significant trends have emerged in online news site success that suggest a path into the future for a robust local online news provision. Many of those new sources have alliances to local public broadcasting radio stations, which may be a new local news backbone. More than 700 public broadcasting stations across the country produce original content, nearly half of all public stations (Abernathy 2020).

Of high-traffic news websites, the vast majority use email newsletter subscriptions to drive traffic to their pages. More than 90% of the highest traffic news sites online use daily or periodic email blast newsletters to

push headlines out and draw clickthroughs. Syndication through aggregators like Flipboard and Apple News are also effective, with more than eighty percent of the most successful online news sites using them. One may expect that having a comments section would also drive traffic upward. Online news sites have appeal to many because of their ability to build community through interaction, often in the form of a comment section. However, less than half of the most successful news sites use comments, suggesting that readers do not build a community and sustain it through their sharing of thoughts in those sections. And while a very small segment of the population seeks news from podcasts, of the successful news sites three-quarters of them use podcasting as a traffic driver (Digital News Fact Sheet 2021).

Most of the digital-only news media use is concentrated in younger users, which itself is not a novel finding. Younger citizens are more technologically savvy and likely to have access to bandwidth and devices needed for those sites. If young people are entering into the news media marketplace through the digital pathway, the role of social media in fighting news deserts must be addressed as well. Older voters, more reliant on analog media, will find it progressively harder to stay informed as access to information moves more into the online space.

Determining patterns of social media use for news is difficult, because social media sites can be used for so many purposes other than news. Separating out watching clips of candidate debates from cat videos can be challenging, but survey responses do suggest that site ubiquity does correlate with news consumption on a site. Far and away the social media platform with the widest audience is Facebook, with billions of users. More than seventy percent of Americans report having a Facebook account, and 31% of all Americans claim to use Facebook to get their news. The percentage of news seekers is not proportional across all platforms, making the overall footprint of the platform the determining factor of news consumption a poor proxy measure. Only one-quarter of Americans are on Twitter, but fourteen percent of all respondents' report using Twitter for news. While less than half of Facebook's users include news content in their regular use, more than half of Twitter users are engaged with news content. Instagram users are twice the number of Twitter account holders, with a roughly equal percentage of the population using it for news. Instagram thus has the largest population of non-news-seekers on its platform save YouTube, as only 25% of the 82%

whole use that site visit it for news content. Newer social media ecosystems such as Snapchat and TikTok have growing user bases, but less than ten percent of all respondents' report using either site for news (Social Media and News Fact Sheet 2022). TikTok appears to bear continued attention, because a study just one month later showed that among Americans under 30 years of age, a quarter of them get news content from the microvideo site (Matsa 2022). While users of other sites appear to be moving away from using them for news content, TikTok is one of the only growing news sources among social media users.

News desertification is a growing problem and one with few clear remedies. Paywalled independent news sites tend to fail, which imposes a high-risk business model on any for-profit media entity potentially entering into the space. The types of news that most citizens seek is unavailable through mainstream sources, so the market is very niche-oriented, which further makes amassing a large audience difficult. Reporters for the sites must use eye-catching and controversial clickbait headlines to draw readers in, because the news consumer has become very passive with the ability to have news pushed to them through apps, email newsletters, and alerts on their mobile devices.

The disproportionate effect of news desertification on rural areas is of special import. As news access decreases, so does trust and governability while susceptibility to mis- and disinformation increases. A growing rural–urban political divide is much deeper than gun policy and inclusion of religious-friendly practices in schools. The growing trend of distrust with no bulwark of local media to challenge, enlighten, and strengthen one's views will only serve to accelerate feelings of lower social capital and negative partisanship (Mathews 2022).

Advocacy groups seeking to bolster local news, coordinated through the Local News Initiative at Northwestern University, have proposed two national-level reforms, three at the state level, and are engaged in an anti-trust lawsuit which are designed to help bolster local news. The proposed federal legislation includes tax credits for hiring journalists and exempting some local media outlets from anti-trust prohibitions on collective bargaining with digital ad companies. At the state level, the group proposes a mirror tax credit for advertising with hyperlocal sites, public-funded journalism grants, and empaneling state task forces to study and make policy recommendations. Finally, the group suggests states join in the West Virginia class action anti-trust lawsuit against Meta

and Alphabet, the parent companies of Facebook and Google, claiming that the two companies illegally colluded to divert ad revenue away from local sources (Burns 2022).

CONCLUSION

While not a comprehensive solution to the numerous challenges facing the news industry, significant changes will need to be taken under for local journalism to once again be the robust bulwark of democracy expected in a constitutional republic. News desertification is one of the greatest challenges of the digital mobile environment. All democratic citizens need news. In Chapter 4 we saw how the quality of news coverage has declined over the last fifteen years. News desertification tells us that the quantity of news is also declining. Journalists and consumers are two of the three vital stakeholders in the news media environment. We now turn to the third constituency, campaigners and elected officials.

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Digital Mobile Technology Disruption of Electioneering

A New World of Campaigning

Campaigning Is a Growth Industry

As with reporting and consuming the news, mobile technology has significantly disrupted the political campaign industry. Political campaigning is most certainly an industry, even if its work is diverse and diffuse. The electioneering industry is constantly growing. The most common marker of the size of the campaign industry, though not a perfect measure, is the overall cost of elections. While the general public may express consternation over the sheer amount of campaign money raised and spent, the total cost of a given election is a fraction of the throughput from most industries. In 2020, for example, the aggregate cost of federal elections topped $14 billion dollars, nearly double the money spent in the 2016 contest. Election spending soared across the board, as well, with both presidential and congressional races (Evers-Hillstrom 2021).

Mobile digital media has done much more than cause costs to double. In increasing the costs of campaigning, fundraising, messaging, indeed all strategic approaches to campaigning, the game has changed. While campaigns still conduct the traditional campaign activities of door-to-door mobilization, direct mail, and television advertising, the digital mobile world has opened up new avenues though which to campaign.

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The First Social Campaign

The first per se social media campaign was the 2008 presidential bid of Barack Obama. While Howard Dean may have encouraged supporters to organize using meetup.org during his Democratic Presidential primary bid in 2004, the first truly intentional and integrated online political campaign belonged to the 44th President. Some important developments were necessary to provide the building blocks for the Obama digital strategy. The Obama team hired much of Dean's online team early on to build a robust digital presence. YouTube emerged in 2006, which would provide a stable video delivery platform. Facebook's footprint was rapidly expanding as well. The general public was adapting to a digital and mobile world, which created the right environment for the Obama campaign to operate.

The Obama campaign was indeed the first to use social media systematically and strategically. But with the developments in new sites between 2004 and 2008 including YouTube, Twitter, and others, it is probable that any president elected in 2008 would have the title of "first social media president" grafted on to them. Why the Obama campaign was so readily called an innovator in social media relates to an element not commonly attributed to news reports of that campaign.

Conventional wisdom considered the breakthrough innovation of the Obama campaign the use of social media. At the time, "content is king" was a mantra that encouraged social media content producers to flood the platforms on which they operated. Were content alone enough, Obama may still have won in 2008 because of the massive online movement that formed around him. But the wealth of content provided the Obama campaign with a significant advantage that others had not anticipated. And one other development would lay the groundwork for the breakthrough of the Obama campaign: databasing.

Throughout the late twentieth century, campaigns aggressively pursued data on voters however they could. For the most part, the only reliable data on voter preferences came at the precinct level. Canvassing strategies were built around swing voting neighborhoods to maximize effort toward blocks of voters who were considered persuadable. Individual-voter-level data was available in some localities, but not universally and the reliability of that data was not especially strong. As a result, most voter targeting was done at the precinct level as the lowest unit of analysis. Campaigners also tended to look at the general

electorate as broken into three main and roughly equal blocs: the candidate's partisan base, the candidate's opposing-party base, and a group of persuadable voters. Campaigns thus saw their job as keeping the base mobilized and persuading the swing voters to choose their candidate as the default path to victory (Burton et al. 2015).

Things began to change in the 1990s, as databasing was becoming more sophisticated. Campaigns began collecting individual level voter data. A movement began to make campaign databases more granular so that voters could be targeted personally, giving campaigns the opportunity to push specific messages to particular voters. By 2004, the individual-level database use had become fairly sophisticated. The Bush re-election campaign had developed a nationwide individual-voter database with information culled not only from local voting records but purchasable information such as subscriber lists from magazines. When John Kerry proposed new environmental legislation that would set higher taxes and create stricter fuel-efficiency standards for two-stroke internal combustion engines (engines commonly found in lawnmowers, personal watercraft, snowmobiles, and some gasoline-powered lawn equipment) the Bush campaign had a response strategy.

Using a subscriber database purchased from *Snowmobile Enthusiast* magazine, the Bush campaign was able to identify all subscribers in swing states, most notably Michigan. Bush's campaign sent out a direct-mail piece claiming that Kerry's new environmental regulations would force snowmobile owners to give up their machines that only went out to a highly interested audience in a strategically valued state (Gilgoff 2006). Database sophistication was reaching a high point going into the 2008 election.

The Obama online campaign in 2008 was thus the combination of two important pieces: social media and data analytics. Social media received much of the attention for the innovative ways in which it was used. Not only could supporters create their own social profile on the MyBarack-Obama.com campaign website, the campaign regularly pushed content to users which they could share on their own social media accounts like Facebook. The campaign also coordinated messages with bloggers and began the first large-scale use of SMS or text messaging in American campaigns (Harfoush 2009).

The social and online messaging was only part of the overall strategy used by the Obama campaign. With a large extant voter database, the social content allowed Obama's team to add to existing individual-level

data and enrich their understanding of what issues, aspects of Obama's personality, comparisons with competitors, news occurrences, and other triggers motivated those voters best. The Obama campaign voter database would have hundreds of observations on individual voters in many instances, bringing together voting history, likes and preferences, size of social circle, socioeconomic status, education, and personal history data.

With such a rich dataset, the Obama campaign was not only able to microtarget as the Bush campaign had done four years previously, but it used aggregated analysis to determine where the highest concentrations of mobilizable voters could be found. The Obama team then used that data to drive where they located their local outreach offices (Issenberg, How Obama's Team Used Big Data to Rally Voters 2012).

Shifting Campaign Strategy

Furthermore, the data uncovered a finding that would upend decades of campaign strategy. With individual-level voting data, the campaign was able to see that the old tripartite model of the electorate was incorrect. The two partisan bases were evident in the data, but they discovered that the supposedly persuadable swing voters actually were non-voters. Campaigns were devoting a significant amount of time and energy trying to persuade people to choose their candidate who were never likely to vote. The analytics revolution in American politics had begun, and it was an important part of the Obama success strategy (Issenberg 2012).

For decades, campaigners had used the tripartite model of the electorate as an extension of median voter theory (Downs 1957). The "persuadable middle" was a large bloc of voters clustered toward the center of the left–right ideological spectrum. As initially posited by Downs, the largest portion of votes was close to the median, which assumed that the target audience of campaign communication would be moderates. Since partisan bases were smaller and more ideologically extreme, their preferences were predetermined. Neither partisan base was large enough to win a typical election, which meant attempting to persuade those centrist voters to choose one partisan candidate over the other. Little to no cross-partisan persuasion was possible, so with independents no longer a valued source of votes the only way to increase one's turnout was to better mobilize the base.

Campaigns steadfastly clung to the median voter theorem as a strategic guide. Primary elections exacerbated the challenge of appealing to moderates as well. High-interest funders tend to have more extreme ideological preferences, and since money is a necessary element of campaign competitiveness candidates would go out to the extremes to raise money, especially in the vital early stages of a campaign (Kujala 2020). Reinforcing the incentive to campaign toward the extremes, primary electorates are smaller and more ideologically polarized, thus the candidates they vote for would reflect their divergent ideological preferences (Brady et al. 2007). Primaries pushed candidates toward the outer tails of the median voter distribution, which in turn created a problem for the remainder of the campaign. Once candidates had established themselves as extreme to satisfy the base of their party, they were required to make a hard pivot to appeal to the larger pool of centrist voters that would be the target audience of their general election strategy. At the same time, the further the candidates strayed from the more ideologically extreme strategy of the primary, the more likely they were to lose the party's base that got them to the general election in the first place. The very natures of the primary and general election electorates were contradictory (Piereson and Smith 1975).

Often, candidates' campaigns were judged by their ability to successfully make the transition between primary and general electorates. When President Obama sought re-election in 2012, his general election opponent became an exemplar of the legacy campaign strategy which was in the process of being turned on its head. Mitt Romney was, at his core, a center-right Republican who had embraced more extreme rightward rhetoric during the primary to cater to that electorate. As a well-established moderate, Romney was forced to take stands far more conservative than his previous record in office suggested. Romney was accepted by Republican voters as their nominee, but not with enthusiasm. When the Romney campaign had to change their strategy and rhetoric to go back to the center, where his strengths actually lay, Obama's campaign was able to point to Romney's rightward turn during the primary as a sign that he was disingenuous about his policy positions. The more conservative voters saw Romney as insincerely concerned with their cause and the moderates saw him as a flip-flopping opportunist. In effect, candidates like Romney are in a no-win situation: the primary-general pivot drives wedges in between the candidate and their base as well as the candidate and the supposedly moderate general election voter body (Galston 2012).

Analytics quickly became a requirement for any campaign that wanted to succeed. While Romney's campaign lagged, Obama's campaign was able to refine their database from 2008, add more data, and develop more sophisticated analyses. As the analytics became more refined, new findings would emerge that challenged the assumptions of median voter theory and the tripartite electorate. Voting patterns on individual-level data showed a very clear trend. The stronger one's partisan attachment, the more likely one was to vote. Someone who votes in a primary is a near-certainty to vote in a general election, and the inverse is also true. Rather than being a semi-reliable persuadable voting bloc, those with the weakest—or no—partisan attachments were the least likely to vote. Having a more precise unit of analysis showed campaigns that efforts made to persuade the middle provided much smaller returns on investment than did keeping the base happy and motivated (Bonier 2018).

As a result, campaign strategy has shifted drastically over the last decade. With an ever-larger population of campaigns using analytics and finding the same minimal return on centrist persuasion, ever more energy has gone to keeping the partisan base as engaged as possible. Campaigns thus have abandoned their centrist general election plans and embraced a strategy that, as we will explore more in Chapter 7, exacerbates one of the larger political ills facing American politics today: partisan polarization (Panagopoulos 2016).

The use of data analytics in any capacity is highly controversial. Large technology corporations like Google and Apple have databases with tens or hundreds of thousands of observations per user, and concerns about personal privacy have emerged as mobile technology allows a much larger body of data to be collected on individuals. With campaigns having access to comparable datasets, even if much smaller in scope, the same concerns about privacy exist in the larger democratic context (Mavriki and Karyda 2019).

With campaigns' main goal now being mobilization, the digital mobile world has allowed some new tools to enter into the milieu. Campaign volunteers can use apps to make individual voter calls, push mass texts out, even conduct door-to-door canvassing. The sophistication of individual-level databasing and these apps mean that more information on voter characteristics is available to campaigners than ever.

Campaigning In A Social World

While content may not be king, as assumed in the late 2000s, content is still vitally important to understand in the context of campaigns. Another revolution in campaign communication has followed the emergence of social media, a parallel "online political universe" to the real-life political realm, with vastly different players and strategies. In some ways the content of online political campaign rhetoric looks little different than it did in 2008. Users still find content and post it to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or whatever platform of choice they primarily use. Four trends specific to social media in campaigns are noteworthy: differential of usage between campaign organizations, trolling accounts, slacktivism, and crowdfunding.

Campaigns tend to display a decreasing lack of sophistication and professionalism as one descends from the most-sophisticated presidential campaigns to the least sophisticated and professional, local elections. In between a wide-ranging continuum exists where great differences between campaigns emerge, even those at the same level of office sought. Even among highly sophisticated campaigns, their social media use can differ greatly. At the presidential level, for example, all campaigns have now evolved their social media staff to use posts for frame building and gauging levels of audience engagement (Sahly et al. 2019). Campaign organizations have also developed analytical tools to use social media postings as a substitute for traditional opinion polls which have become much less reliable than in the past (McGregor 2020).

For campaigns at the U.S. Congress level and lower, though, the hundreds of millions of dollars devoted to campaign messaging at that height of sophistication are not available. More conventional use of social media for campaigning is evident among races for Congress, for example (Gulati and Williams 2015). At the state legislative level, however, social media use was sporadic and more an artifact of overall campaign professionalism. Ambitious office-seekers with experience and eyes on higher office tended to have more aggressive social media content campaigns, but non-professional campaigners tend to have either minimal or no social media presence (Rackaway 2007). For local candidates, the use of social media may seem ubiquitous, where most campaigns have some form of online presence at least in the form of a Facebook page. But generally, very few local campaigns produce a significant amount of content, instead relying on supporters sharing content. Since social media content requires

a significant devotion of time and energy, local campaigns often rely on family members or friends to manage their social media presences, rather than having professionally developed content (Skogerbø and Krumsvik 2015).

In a gray area between official campaign social media use and the murky underground of chaos peddlers we find a new player in campaign politics; the online trolling account. Trolling is in many ways an online world manifestation of a problem that has plagued humanity from its beginnings: bullying. Online trolls spread negativity, hate, uncertainty, false urgency, and unrest in society the same way bullies have since the beginning of time. Social media provide a new venue for people to not only share, but attack. And just as campaigns have become more sophisticated using mobile technology, so has the practice of trolling.

Trolling is the online posting of content that can be inflammatory, insincere, defaming, intentionally hurtful, or cause trouble in some other definable way. The online world has had trolls from the very beginning, manifesting early on in message boards and forums where some users would not only take contrary opinions to other users, but be personally derogatory in their posts. Trolls can appear in any online community, they are not exclusive to politics. Any special interest or category can see trolling emerge, whether it be in the worlds of college football, science fiction, reality television fandom, and of course politics. Trolling has been called the "cancer of the internet" because of its discouraging and disruptive nature (Stein 2016). When trolling emerges in politics, though, the negative consequences can compound. As intentionally false information is often shared by trolls, concern has emerged over whether the truth is so easily hidden or corrupted that we have entered a venue where no fact is safe from misinterpretation, called "post-truth politics" (Hannan 2018).

The online world provides an avenue for the development of trolls because of the ease with which one can make fake accounts to create "bots" which automatically distribute and spread the scope of content being shared. Even more importantly, those fake accounts can hide the identity of the individual behind the troll, which insulates them from the accountability mechanism present in the physical world.

Trolls emerge just as bullies did, seemingly out of nowhere. But trolls can be activated through individual moods as well as exposure to previous trolling behaviors. Prolonged exposure to others engaging in what the individual sees as troll-like behavior increases the likelihood of an ordinary

person shifting their behavior to be more troll-like and disrupting existing political conversations (Cheng et al. 2017).

Trolls are not always spontaneously appearing disruptive bullies. Trolling can be a strategy. One study of a "troll farm" organized on the Reddit site identified three different categories of troll, from the most engaged to the least, and that by framing the issues discussed organizers can sustain both interest of and engagement from trolls. The authors found organizers gamified the process to allot points and other recognition to the most actively engaged trolls within their community. Reddit was noted as a particularly ripe area for trolling to emerge because unlike Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, Reddit is better designed for spurring on collective action, and that those seeking to combat trolling could use the same tactics against trolling that the Reddit troll farm organizers used (Flores-Saviaga et al. 2018).

The online world presents a testbed for the limits of collective action in a virtual world. In the physical world, organizing for and taking collective action require personal investments of time and effort and accepting the possibility of repercussions which equate to a form of opportunity cost. Activism in the online world, though, requires a much smaller personal cost. The digital mobile world makes it much easier to engage in what feels like substantive participation to the participant, but it is low-risk and low-cost; the result of the minimal effort of a few mouse clicks and keyboard strokes. Over the last decade a debate has ranged to determine if online political activity is indeed substantive or worthy of the derivative nickname "slacktivism" (Christensen 2011).

Online activism is unique from in-person activism. Once one overcomes collective action barriers in the physical world, they are more likely to engage in multiple forms of participation. In-person activism has an additive or multiplicative effect on engagement. Studies of online activism, however, tend toward balancing and compartmentalizing activities: participating in one form of online activism tends to result in lower forms of engagement in other activities. For example, individuals who sign online petitions are less likely to follow that engagement up with charitable donations toward the same cause, and vice-versa (Lee and Hsieh 2013).

The comparisons of in-person activism and online slacktivism mirror the debate over the scope of social capital. While Putnam (2000) believes that mediated communication is in and of itself a suppressor of social capital, more recent research suggests that social capital can and does exist

in the online world, but that the strength of that social capital is not as robust as its in-person analog (Spottswood and Wohn 2020).

A common form of activism is donating money to political campaigns, and the online shift has disrupted the campaign finance regime as well. Prior to the 2010s, during the entirety of the FECA campaign finance regime beginning in 1974, significant focus among campaigns went to trying to maximize the amounts given by individual donors. Incentive plans like exclusive access to the candidate would accompany calls to bundle hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations. And while the *Citizens United* and *SpeechNOW* decisions of 2010 and 2011 did disrupt that regime, it is campaign crowdfunding that has had the most significant effect on electioneering in the last decade.

Crowdfunding relies on small donations given by individuals, often on a set periodic schedule. For instance, a committed Republican may not have given a donation to the party or its candidates when the GOP routinely tried to extract $1000 or larger contributions with its fundraising appeals. When the parties and campaigns did their own fundraising internally, seeking out small-dollar donors would not provide a worthwhile return on investment. As e-commerce became commonplace, new avenues for campaign fundraising emerged. For the Republican in question, a candidate can now tweet a message that resonates with that partisan and direct them to WinRed, a Republican-aligned crowdfunding site. Through WinRed, the supporter can give as little as five dollars, but can also set up automatic donations weekly or monthly (Dey et al. 2022).

The online shift has disrupted the campaign finance industry by removing the disincentive campaigns had against seeking donations of less than $200 at a time. Online aggregators like WinRed and ACTBlue, the biggest crowdfunding sites affiliated with the two major parties, are significant components of the campaign finance regime. In 2016, Donald Trump's campaign raised nearly seventy percent of its funds from donors of less than $200. In a curious development, crowdfunding can in many ways perpetuate itself. Not only can campaigns solicit donations with crowdfunding appeals, but because those appeals tend to be ideologically extreme they can also be used for counter-messaging from opposing campaigns (Pildes 2019). Fundraising appeals tend to be based on outrage, using rhetoric such as "the other candidate is raising money from special interests, we need your donation to fight back!" Using crowdfunding for one's own candidates, in other words, tends to help

the other party's candidates' fundraising efforts too (Dey, Political crowd-funding does more than raise money—it can also rile up opponents 2022).

Donald Trump Changes the Game

If Obama's 2008 effort was the first sophisticated online campaign, then the 2016 Trump campaign was equally transformative. Donald Trump was a truly unique candidate, nominee, and president. From his announcement in 2015 through his departure from the White House in 2021, Donald Trump behaved like no previous president, thought like no previous president, and was the most unpredictable in his decisions and actions of any modern president. The only president as disruptive as Trump in U.S. history was likely Andrew Jackson. Jackson's influence is still felt in many ways today, just as Trump will likely leave an impact for a century or more due to how divergent he was from any other president in recent memory.

As Obama's campaign needed analytics to develop its path to victory, Donald Trump would likely never have won a presidential nomination, let alone the general election, without social media. Republican candidates had strained relations with the legacy news media since Nixon, but none of them had a stable alternative method of reaching voters so they were forced into an uneasy truce with a hostile press corps. Trump's relationship with the news media was much different, and outwardly so.

Throughout his pre-presidential career, Trump's celebrity had been built around his personality. Caustic, haughty, and arrogant, Trump's persona made for a very watchable villain in his television show *The Apprentice*. Part of that program was built on antagonism: Trump either pitting two contestants against each other or him berating one himself. In his media relations, Trump took that same antagonistic relationship and made it outwardly hostile. Combative and derisive, Trump would have none of the uneasy peace navigated by his Republican predecessors (Rackaway, The Unorthodox Campaign of Donald Trump 2021).

Unlike the prior GOP presidents, Trump did not need to worry as much about his relationships with reporters, because thanks to digital mobile media he had a way to bypass the mainstream press and communicate directly with his base of supporters. As much as his television persona boosted him, Donald Trump could have never succeeded in his political career without Twitter.

On Twitter Trump had a vehicle to send his message, without contrary interpretation, to the partisan base. Trump could even use Twitter as a bulwark, a place from which he could attack the media with his claims of "fake news" and a concerted agenda against him (Ross and Rivers 2018). The exposure Twitter provided Trump during his 2016 presidential campaign was equivalent to more than $100 million in advertising, which suggests the enormity of the advantage that strategic use of Twitter provided the real estate mogul turned candidate (Francia 2018).

Twitter would not only support Trump's ascendance, it would accelerate his downfall. Trump attacked the media, his opponents, even his allies, on Twitter throughout his presidency. As the 2020 presidential campaign closed and Trump's defeat was confirmed, he could use Twitter to continue peddling conspiracy theories about voter fraud costing him the election. Trump's strident Twitter content riled up his supporters, encouraged them to share and perpetuate the myth of a stolen election, and perhaps even contributed to the radicalization of his supporters into the attempted coup on January 6, 2021.

Conclusion

In form and content, political campaigning has changed as it adapted into an online world. New tools, venues, tactics, and players have emerged. The new rhetoric of campaigning is more extreme, as campaigns address their messages toward their mobilizable partisans. The extreme rhetoric exemplifies a new political environment fed by the rise of digital mobile media: partisan polarization.

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CHAPTER 7

Polarizing Media, Polarizing Politics

The Consequences of Strategic Base Mobilization

As noted in Chapter 6, the combination of social media content and related analytics caused a significant shift in the strategic thinking of candidates and their campaigns. Abandoning the old tripartite median voter model for one that focused on campaign messages meant to keep base supporters highly engaged and mobilizable has had some significant impacts on the conduct of campaigns.

A prime example is Marjorie Taylor Greene. The Georgia congress-woman ran a mercurial first campaign in 2020, shifting strategically from district to district before the primary filing deadline and engaging in a scorched-earth campaign from the primary all the way through her general election victory. Greene's primary performance was predictable, embracing Donald Trump unabashed and enthusiastically. On a platform of COVID denial and gun rights, Greene planted her flag as far to the right as she could, and the result was a primary victory over her eight more center-right opponents.

Prior to the 2010s, professional campaign strategists on Greene's team would have planned her pivot to the center. No matter how far from the center or how improbable the pivot would appear, pre-2010 campaigns would have embraced an eventual and inevitable move toward the center to appeal to more moderate voters. For candidates like Greene, who are

among the furthest out to the ideological extremes, the analytics revolution and social media have freed them from the perceived need to pivot. Instead, Greene maintained as far-right a rhetoric as any candidate for Congress in the 2020 cycle.

Greene did not need to pivot, partly due to strategy and partly due to her district's status as safely Republican. But Greene never worried about alienating center-right Republicans, and even called them Republicans In Name Only (RINOs), a common pejorative for more moderate members of the GOP. Greene's campaign strategists did not concern themselves with reaching out to moderate Republicans in fear they may have swung over to vote for Democratic nominee Kevin van Ausdal. The abundance of information provided by analytics gave them confidence that all Republicans would stay home, that social media content enabled them to maintain Republican mobilization, assisted by the new media outlets like One America News and InfoWars, all for the purposes of solidifying partisan preferences.

Implicit in the strategic shift toward base mobilization is the abandonment of the rhetorical strategy commonly used in the median voter era: persuasion. Candidates would need to pivot toward the center according to the conventional wisdom of pre-2012 campaign strategists, and to do that they would need to persuade the mercurial center. Persuasion was widely accepted as the necessary path to securing the median voter, and thus victory. Some elements of persuasion were fixed, such as candidate charisma (Dewan et al. 2014). The most important element of persuasion was in convincing the voter that they held common ideological views with the candidate. (Bartels 2006)

Removing the onus of persuading the center meant that post-primary candidates could keep their policy positions unadulterated by the need to pivot on policy and ideology. Subtly, the base mobilization strategy also changed the landscape of campaigns. For those of a more centrist mindset, even if they did not vote they were subjects of opinion polls and their evaluations of campaigns mattered in the overall sense of a democracy. Non-voting moderates began to see any campaign communication that spoke to them disappearing since they were no longer considered viable mobilization targets (Hill 2017). As such, even if the rhetoric from primary-winning Republicans went no further right and Democrats went no further left, campaigns appeared to have shifted further to the right and left because neither side made the traditional and expected move to

the median. In appearances at least, the political rhetoric shifted away from the center (Galvin 2020).

Over time in the absence of any centripetal force, or incentive to move toward the center, the question must arise whether it will be replaced by centrifugal force. Instead of staying statically in place ideologically speaking, would the lack of centrist incentive lead to rhetoric becoming progressively more conservative and liberal on each side of the ideological spectrum? Put another way, currently extreme rhetoric should only get worse as time goes on and all incentives push candidates to be as far to the left and right as they can. No longer forced to think in terms of how to pivot should a candidate win the primary, they can focus their attention on whatever they need to do to win the primary. Strategically minded candidates and their campaign staffers will wonder exactly how far, if at all, is too far. Should we expect that over time political communication will only become more and more extreme? If Donald Trump and Marjorie Taylor Greene are not anomalous and instead emblematic of our politics, then there is ample evidence to suggest we will see candidates pushing further out toward the ideological tails of the distribution (Raynauld and Turcotte 2018).

Harsher Campaign Rhetoric

The tone of campaign rhetoric has become ever more caustic in this new era of digital mobile political communication. Campaign rhetoric has always been acerbic, but what we have seen over the last decade and a half is a significant shift toward harsher, more personal, more negative, and more polarized, rhetoric in all forms of campaign communication. This chapter does not argue that earlier campaign rhetoric was high-minded discussion of political philosophy or detailed and technical dissection of the potential impacts of policy. Indeed, the first truly contested American presidential election saw campaign communication accuse Alexander Hamilton of being the child of a prostitute, John Adams of being a weak person who was bullied by his wife, and Thomas Jefferson deemed an anarchist. Even from that inauspicious standard, the tone seen in current-day campaigning is striking in its negativity and outward hostility (Ferling 2004).

Campaigning has always been a place of coarse negativity, of course. The voting public has rarely if ever responded to the nobler-minded policy-focused discussion that many idealize politics to be about. Instead,

voters respond strongest to emotional appeals, and among them nega-
tive emotions are the most powerful motivators: especially fear and anger.
During the broadcast politics era plentiful examples of campaign rhetoric
appealing to fear and anger are evident. The famed "Peace, Little Girl"
ad from 1964 leveraged fears of nuclear war with the USSR against Barry
Goldwater, as the Reagan "Bear In the Woods" ad would do twenty years
later and the George W. Bush campaign would do another twenty years
later with "Wolves". Ads playing on anger are common as well, with the
Nixon campaign's chaotic "Convention" ad against Hubert Humphrey
and the infamous "Willie Horton" ad the National Security PAC ran
on behalf of George H. W. Bush in 1988. Playing on fear and anger is
nothing new. But in a political realm that incentivizes extremity, it should
not be surprising that the rhetoric has become even more severe in the
last decade and a half.

The nature of news presented online differs significantly from that in
print, underscoring McLuhan's assertions that the method of message
delivery is as important as the core message and can alter it accordingly
(McLuhan 1994). In an experiment with readers of the New York Times,
Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) find that as individual news consumers
shifted between online and print delivery of the Times, their issue priority
agendas changed and were more driven by consumption media than
content (Althaus and Tewksbury 2002). Online content preferences were
more ideologically extreme, contributing to polarization's advance.

As early as 2008 studies showed that political discourse was becoming
more polarized online, as noted by comparison of newspaper wire copy
used by news agencies with the content on their web pages. Despite being
run by the same companies, and often with the same editorial teams,
clear differences emerged between the content seen in print and that seen
online. The early ideological web presences like DailyKos showed an even
more significant partisan filtering (Baum and Groeling 2008).

Online news content differs greatly from legacy newspapers in tone,
clarity, and content, even when the reporting is text-only (Ghersetti
2014). Journalists tend to follow established norms when they link or
embed online content into their stories, but they tend to use exagger-
ated statements from them to increase audience engagement (Cui and
Liu 2018). A polarized public provides ever more extreme statements in
interviews, furthering the centrifugal force of polarization.

Social media can leverage the growing distrust of legacy media as
well to enhance its own reputational power. The substance of content

shared online by candidates, elected officials, and journalists will be more moderate than individuals, and readers with low trust of traditional media are more likely to see their perceptions influenced by non-journalist and non-candidate/elected official tweets than they are professionals in either field (Ross and Dumitrescu 2019). The same preference for coarser content applies to the comments sections of online news sites as well (Kim 2015).

When content is unpleasant or caustic, it may still be beneficial if the online world provides an avenue for substantive knowledge acquisition, especially among populations that would not normally be oriented toward news consumption like the young or newly registered voters. There is promise in the interactive nature of online content. Hyperlinking text creates a built-in opportunity to fact-check stories and to delve deeper into root causes and content. The presence of hyperlinks, theoretically, should inspire greater faith in the veracity of online news content and help expand knowledge by giving people the opportunity to research beyond the story itself. For those who are already knowledgeable and engaged, hyperlinks help expand the breadth and depth of knowledge, but for younger users the relationship between hyperlinks presence and knowledge is the inverse (Eveland et al. 2004). Users may see a hyperlink as authoritative support and believe the associated content without doing the expanded reading offered by the linked content. Furthermore, a Dunning-Krueger effect is evident because online news users, even those with minimal frequency, believe themselves to be more informed than others as well as than they actually are (Leonhard et al. 2020).

Some studies have shown that there is a more positive side to online news content. For sites seeking online audience engagement, the successful pathway seems to be pushing a harshly negative and caustic frame around all content. But in a study of online audience engagement involving sharing news, commenting, and using content as a base for more user-created material, the more serious hard-news content without ideological manipulation or clickbait-style extremity prompted more sharing. However, the study only focused on legacy media online presences, so it is impossible to say whether or not this would apply to the new generation of online-only sites that do not adhere to the objectivity norm of reporting the studied sites do (Krebs and Lischka 2019).

The substance of online news content changes as well, moving away from the specifics of policy to personal behavior and scandal, exacerbating the incentives toward scandal reportage that highlight the post-Watergate

reporting world (Sabato 1991). Evidence from editorial decisions on stories to highlight and promote show an ever-greater interest in the personal over policy. Stories involving scandal and personal behavior issues are much more likely to be promoted by editors to prominent positions (Sen and Yildirim 2015). The focus on personal behavior may extend from the ability to curate echo chambers as well, since partisan isolation in news exposure is multiple times as intense online as it is in print or broadcast (Peterson et al. 2021).

Social media makes the focus on scandal ever stronger, even beyond that of news coverage. The very nature of social media, without built-in editorial assistance and the propensity to push reinforcing information, creates a space in the digital world where malfeasance and indiscretion can be exposed, but also manipulated, exaggerated, and even fabricated (Chen 2019).

Governmental Polarization

Polarization is an issue at the center of a great deal of scholarly and public examination. Throughout the twentieth century, the government was not polarized, and may have been the most centrist period in the nation's history. A number of important elements contributed to the moderation of American politics in the 1900s. Weakening of the political party organizations through the Progressive Reforms was one of the most significant, since the meaning of a party label meant less and voters saw ever less substantive difference between the two parties. Across the country, conservatives were divided between mainstream Republicans and southern Democrats, which meant any successful legislation had to have cross-partisan support. The major parties saw significant internal rifts over budget deficits, war powers, and civil rights. In Congress, the weakened Speaker's office gave rise to a committee-dominated era that could not enforce party discipline in votes on legislation and amendments. An expanded franchise that slowly opened to women, black Americans, and 18–21-year olds, brought new representative voices forward. A cooperative public spirit, spurred on by two world wars and an economic depression encouraged an ethos of "country above party."

The center would not hold, however. The 1972 McGovern-Fraser Reforms would functionally make primaries binding for presidential nomination contests, pushing those campaigns further to the extremes. Shifts in political geography would realign the South, sending conservative

Democrats into the Republican Party while center-right northeasterners would shift left, abandon the GOP and move to the Democratic Party. With the parties more homogenous, there was less need to cross the aisle. Ideological media helped push the two sides further apart by allowing partisans to disconnect from a shared frame of reference (Sides and Hopkins 2015).

While media, particularly the digital mobile media upon which this work focuses, are not the sole driver of polarization they do make a significant contribution. There are structural forces at work beyond media, and they allow us to categorize the agents of polarization into the media, the parties, and the institutions.

Starting with the parties, since party organizations are central to the concept of polarization, the 1970s marked a substantive change in how the parties campaigned. Prior to the 1970s, federal party organizations were barely detectable. None of the national political party committees had permanent headquarters. The Congressional and Senatorial campaign committees from each party were run out of the office of that committee's chairperson in the Capitol. And the national presidential committees had no permanent headquarters which led to the national parties basically rebuilding themselves every four years in preparation for their main purpose, conducting the national nominating convention for their Presidential candidate. Parties raised little money, did even less in the form of substantive campaign support, and had little clout outside of the convention hall's walls.

The era of polarization beginning in the 1970s coincides with an era of national partisan institutionalization unseen since Andrew Jackson empaneled the very first national party committee to plan the 1832 nominating convention to bypass the Congressional caucus' nominating power. Democrats saw the need for a permanent headquarters after the break-in to the Democrats' national headquarters in an office suite in the Watergate hotel in 1972 laid bare the national committee's lack of security. Republicans took advantage of early databasing technology to fundraise using direct mail to partisans, greatly enhancing the GOP's resource base. Both parties built national headquarters near Capitol Hill that housed all three national electoral committees for each party as well as affinity groups aligned with the parties. As the party organizations became stronger, they provided the first incentives for candidates to align with the party's platform for the first time in a century (Herrnson 1986).

As party organizations became stronger and partisans saw close ties to the party organization as electorally beneficial, the centripetal force of those ties made the party organizations much stronger in the electoral arena (Jacobson 2000). The national committees began to undertake more direct post-convention electioneering on behalf of their nominees. In Congress, particularly for challenger candidates in the House, being targeted for support by one's own party Congressional Committee was a significant achievement that strongly enhanced the competitiveness of races and created more loyalty to the party once targeted candidates won the election (Roberts et al. 2016). In turn, the party's leadership in Congress could then leverage the party's support in the pursuit of party unity votes.

Turning to institutions, we can see that Congress in particular has changed significantly over the last five decades. Democrats and Republicans in Congress are further apart, ideologically, than they have been at almost any time in the nation's history. Democrats have moved slightly left, Republicans have shifted more significantly to the right. The reason for Republicans' stronger tendency can be attributed to the southern realignment of the 1990s, as the largest cadre of voters were conservative Democrats who left that party for the GOP (Poole and Rosenthal 2001). Defections from unity voting with one's own party also subsequently plummeted after a regular cross-partisan trend in vote defections throughout the Twentieth Century (Nokken and Poole 2004). Much like with the public, as party caucuses become more ideologically homogenous, the more they consider the out-group to not only be wrong, but the enemy. That us-versus-them mentality has prompted the rise of party unity voting and reduced cross-party voting drastically (Kirkland 2014).

Congress' own rules, and some factors outside of Congress' internal control, enhanced polarization. Newly strengthened party caucuses since the southern realignment of the 1990s gave party bodies within Congress renewed power to coalesce their membership, including calendar authority like the Hastert Rule, which forbade scheduling of any vote without support from the party's majority (Fechner 2014). Some have suggested that gerrymandering by state legislatures has exacerbated polarization, though evidence suggests that gerrymandering has minimal to no contribution to the issue of political polarization (McCarty et al. 2009).

The media are the third contributor to the issue of polarization. Media's contribution to polarization is twofold: showing the polarization to the public, and contributing to more polarization. Without news about the issue, the public would pay no attention to political polarization. Polarization's mere presence on the public agenda is an artifact of the media attention it receives, and the presence of that coverage tends to stoke fears of polarization in the public while glorifying and supporting the governmental activity that polarization manifests (Kubin and von Sikorski 2021).

Polarization does not manifest itself in simple things like distrust and party-line voting. As an element of current-day politics, polarization has developed into a dysfunction. The growth and intensity of polarization in Congress, and our perceptions of it, have made even the simplest and most necessary tasks of the national legislature difficult to carry out. No better example of the impact of polarization exists than the budget process. Congress faces an annual deadline of October 1 each year to pass a budget that funds the government for the upcoming fiscal year. For 24 years and counting, Congress has failed to meet that deadline every single year. To keep the federal government in operation, Congress must pass continuing resolutions (CRs) to maintain funding past the October 1 deadline. The length of the resolutions can range from weeks to a single day, and Congress has had to pass more than fifty concurrent resolutions as stopgaps as a result. On three occasions, Congress has not even been able to come to a deal on CRs with the president and the government has shut down for a period of time (Wezerk 2018).

Congress' inability to budget and even make the CRs work is a sign of a larger issue, where both Congress and the public are unwilling to compromise to make things work. A political "win," even with great cost, is more valuable to members than making government work even if the result is a significant price tag (Krause 2018). Social media then reinforce the sense of polarization through more personal attacks on cross-partisan actors and content (Bernhardt et al. 2008).

Conclusion

The combination of attention which glorifies polarization and the social cues from interactive media that demonize opponents has made even the government's most basic Constitutional tasks difficult if not regularly impossible. As media have taken increasingly partisan and combative

stances, the room to compromise is greatly restricted. The content of media reports often frames controversies as only being resolved if the ideological position of that media outlet "wins," but unilateral success on all matters of public policy is inherently undemocratic. Polarization seems to be a self-reinforcing spiral. A polarized public takes in messages of outrage over compromise as a sacrifice of principles, elected officials and candidates play to that outrage, pushing them further apart and making government's work ever harder to accomplish. The blame for not getting the work done is then universally blamed on the opposing side, which encourages their retrenchment more than coming to the negotiating table to act in good faith. Spirals, as the polarization spiral described here, rarely get better. As they have seemed to get worse over time, they have metastasized into something that may threaten democracy in America, negative partisanship.

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Digital Mobile Media Disrupting Democracy

Negative Partisanship

Rewiring the Human Brain

One easy way to differentiate between generations is to look at what people do when they are waiting in line alone, say at the driver's license office. Older individuals may have something to do, but they will often sit quietly with their own thoughts. Generation X members are likely to do the same, but will often have books or something with which to stay busy like knitting. For anyone younger than 40 (and many people now over 40 years of age), though, they are likely to grab their mobile device the moment they become idle. That practice of looking at one's phone during downtime, no matter how brief, is much more important than just a change in how people process boredom. Our growing tendency to look to our phones is changing the human brain's "wiring" in important ways.

Smartphones are a constant companion now for approximately three out of every four people. The company our phones provide make them our most intimately connected contact. Some studies have suggested that on average, people touch their phones more than 2600 times a day, equating to having contact with our phones nearly every two seconds. The constant connection to our phones and reliance on them is substantively changing the cognitive processes and capacity of Americans (Naftulin 2016).

In a 2018 National Institutes of Health study, a significant generational difference exists in the capacity for deep thought, attention spans,

creative conception, and even basic informational recall between those raised before the advent of the smartphone in 2007 and those after. Younger individuals, whose brains were historically better at recall, maintaining attention, substantive thought, and creativity based on earlier studies, evinced significant reductions in those skills. An inverse relationship exists between smartphone use and all the measures of brain capacity (Wacks and Weinstein 2021).

The substance of why the generational differences emerge is important because they are primarily a byproduct of our increased use of social media around boredom. When people are inactive, they can choose any number of activities but most of them (and certainly those not involving smartphones) tend to be mentally engaging: reading, writing, sewing, conversation, or similar. Even if they do not engage us with other people, they engage the individual in some form of thoughtful and creative activity. The brain produces dopamine, the pleasure chemical, at these activities at a stable rate. Each time we become bored and look at our phones, a small dopamine rush follows. Getting that dopamine rush is easy, and addictive. Over time, the ease of getting the dopamine dose from interacting with our phones becomes our default way of dealing with downtime. The problem emerges that seeking gratification passively through our phones requires little to no creativity or initiative. The longer one looks to one's phone for the gratification of novel content, the less one is able to produce novel thoughts and products of one's own self (Peeples 2018).

As we are never away from our mobile devices, we have the constant ability to keep ourselves thoughtlessly entertained. The online world becomes the default location for us to follow our interests (or boredom), which differs greatly from the in-person world and creates a different type of social interaction (Carr and Hayes 2015). The online ecosystems into which we journey also have their own unique folkways and etiquette. A Facebook user brings a different mentality than a Pinterest user does, and behavior that is acceptable in one venue may be antithetical to the ethos of another. The type of content one shares is different between platforms as well. A user on Twitter tends to put more personal content into their tweets than they do their professional LinkedIn page, for example (Ramirez 2022).

Regardless of the content we put into different social platforms, their daily use is now ubiquitous and nearly universal. As our in-person relationships dwindle and our online ones take precedence, we reflect more

of the online world cultures in which we spend our time. Our behaviors also tend to conform to the norms within which each platform operates, meaning friendships can develop much as they do in-person. Since social media is an emotional ecosystem, our sense of emotional sensitivity is much higher in the digital mobile world.

For younger individuals, the emotional impact of social media use is much stronger. Teens are more sensitive to trolling and bullying behavior (Nesi et al. 2022). The psychological desire to receive more affirmation on social media alters behaviors, often toward negative attention-seeking (Lee et al. 2020). Those desires can in turn lead to high degrees of stress and incidents of depression (Fabris et al. 2020). Each social media platform's technology, interface, and features combine to create a culture, with its own folkways, taboos, incentives, and hierarchy. Those sites can create social constructs very similar to those of tribes (McIntyre 2014).

The Tribal Mentality of the Digital Mobile World

The filter bubbles and echo chambers that the digital mobile world has developed combine with two other significant factors to create an online behavioral pattern we will call "online tribalism." Earlier in this work, we explored the echo chambers and filter bubbles that users can curate around themselves in the online space, and some of the dangers to democratic participation that they can bring (Pariser 2011).

Tribal mindsets are ones where the individual regards themselves primarily as part of a sub-group rather than of a larger society. We may not consider ourselves to be Kentuckians or Arizonans, but we do think of ourselves as smaller tribal communities. Whether one's loyalty is to a local high school football team, a musical performer, an actor's work, or a profession, we commonly break ourselves into tribes as a way of creating common bonds between ourselves and others. Since those interests tend to be specifically related to particular things about which the individual is passionate, one's bonds to the tribe can be very strong.

Online self-sorting can easily translate into tribal mindsets. Facebook has groups for a massive variety of specific interests where community can build. Golfers in a geographic area can organize foursomes out of individual golfers, homebirthing advocates can connect with doulas, and immigrants can find a community of familiar faces in a new home. Twitter allows users to create lists that connect political journalists or DIY auto

mechanics. On Pinterest, individuals can build quasi-tribal communities around outfit accessorizing or community organizing best practices. Each sub-group within each platform is its own tribe, varying in size and intensity, but tribal nonetheless.

The tribal concept is important because it departs from established media scholarship dating back to Marshall McLuhan. In the 1960s, when television was becoming a dominant media and the idea of a social network was unheard of, McLuhan posited that satellite and broadcast technology would create a world more aware of the many differences between people across geographies. As we learned more and interacted with each other, those intergroup differences would begin to fade, replacing old tribal mindsets with a new "global village" (McLuhan and Powers 1989). However, the digital mobile world has allowed for a reversion toward more tribal mentalities. The niche sites and groups may use the global connective technology that had such connective and cross-divisional promise, but rather than bringing people together to lessen differences, the niche connectivity of the digital mobile world has allowed us to curate very specific tribes around ourselves and move in the opposite direction of McLuhan's global village.

One online platform that engenders significant tribal mentality is the user community of Reddit. Users of the site, called Redditors, organize around forums, or subreddits, focused on specific issues from sports to politics to lifestyle and culture. In Reddit, many find a strong group identity that tribally connects them with their fellow Redditors (Robards 2018). As the tribal bonds become stronger, they can overwhelm other identities, even those of nationalism. Throughout his candidacy and presidency, starting with the 2015 announcement of candidacy and maintaining a significant presence through his departure from the White House in 2021, a subreddit about Donald Trump entitled r/TheDonald became a community for die-hard Trump supporters to connect. Over time, as conspiratorial theories and groupthink began to permeate the subreddit, r/TheDonald became ever more a place where Trump supporters with an authoritarian preference would go. Many of the Redditors on the subreddit indicated before the 2020 election was held that they would not accept the results if Trump did not win. Over the course of five years r/TheDonald encouraged radicalization of community members, and as the content on the forum became more strident and desperate, some of the planning for the January 6, 2021 coup attempt was done on that subreddit (Hiaeshutter-Rice and Hawkins 2022).

Subreddits like r/TheDonald develop their own tribal identities and loyalties. In the case of the January 6th insurrection, Redditors placed their loyalty to Donald Trump above that of democracy and the tradition of peaceful power transition from one president to the next. Tribal attitudes can inculcate anti-democratic, extreme, and bigoted attitudes just as they can connect and uplift.

Our in-person realities can presage our virtual ones, as well. Just as people have found commonality in online communities and seek homogeneity in their virtual environments, so we have also clustered geographically. Predating the 2010s shift to digital mobile media, Americans were becoming progressively more concentrated in areas of similar socioeconomic status, interest, and even partisan affiliation (Levendusky 2009). Affective polarization literature suggests seeing polarization as diverging issue positions rooted in sorting: an alignment of differences which is "effectively dividing the electorate into two increasingly homogeneous megaparties." Digital mobile media can be an accelerator, taking many aspects of sorted polarization together and helping bind them together in a larger whole. The multiple aspects interact together to create strong in-group dynamics that lead to exclusion, distrust, and negativity toward any individuals or collectives outside of the in-group (Törnberg 2022).

Polarization is important in this context because it involves an increasingly sharper division between in- and out-groups. For polarization to impact politics, there must be both in-group loving support and out-group skepticism. The out-group must be seen as a negative entity, a threat or hated enemy, for polarization to accelerate. A neutrally viewed out-group would not reinforce positions that push the two groups further apart. In one game-theoretic model, enabling group members to express in-group love independently of out-group hate significantly reduced inter-group conflict. Group members strongly preferred to cooperate within their group rather than to compete against the out-group, even in the condition in which conflict preceded the intervention (Halevy et al. 2012). Something needs to trigger the out-group skepticism that makes polarization worse.

The key to turning polarization into conflict lies in the nature of partisanship. As a quasi-tribal identity, citizens cling strongly to their partisan loyalty. While people will mostly opt to help their in-group, when one's partisan identity is challenged the individual is most likely to turn

negative against the out-group. Symbolic moral threats, such as accusations of malfeasance, have the strongest triggers of out-group negativity. The target of the negativity is salient. When the target was a distant, elite member of their party, individuals were more likely to denigrate the opposing party compared to rallying around their own. When the threat became more real and personal, such as a local fellow partisan, the reaction was even stronger against the out-party. Thus a Prisoners' Dilemma of political rhetoric emerges. For both parties, if neither attacks then neither party activates the more aggressive side of their partisanship. When one party initiates an attack and the other does not respond, which rarely occurs, then the attacking party wins. Each party has an incentive to attack the other, which in turn activates the sharpest and most negative out-party reactions (Amira et al. 2021).

Negative Partisanship

Partisan polarization is not, *ipso facto*, a bad thing. Polarization is a common condition in democracies around the world and does not wholly correlate with the democratic ills evident in the United States. That is because American partisan polarization has metastasized into a more caustic and threatening condition: negative partisanship.

For fifty years, political scientists looked at partisanship from a perspective of ideological orientation and loyalty. Liberals made a choice to align with Democrats because that party was closer to their ideal policy points, just as conservatives chose to align with Republicans. Within each of those examples is a positive choice: the individual identifies with a party because of their belief in the value of that party.

Over the last decade and a half, scholars have begun to rethink the idea that voters make positive choices based on their policy preferences. Instead, this new conception involves a negative choice—aligning against one party and therefore identifying with the other. Ties to the "preferred" party are not particularly powerful, but feelings against the disliked party are very strong (Abramowitz and Webster 2018).

The tendency toward negative partisanship has been evident over the same time span as the increase in polarization, so it is easy to conflate the two. Some of the same causes are common in both negative partisanship and partisan polarization: geographic sorting, a growing racial divide between the parties, and the increasing presence of an ideologically

reinforcing media landscape (Abramowitz and McCoy, Racial resentment, negative partisanship, and polarization in Trump's America 2019).

Negative partisanship manifests itself in a number of ways that are critical for this crossroads of democracy. Individual and collective negative partisanship are linked to lower satisfaction with democracy, and sentiments toward the other party alter the experience of electoral outcomes. Negative partisans savor wins and mourn losses more strongly than others. Negative partisans also value the defeat of the opposing party much more strongly than satisfaction for in-partisans (Ridge 2020).

The term negative partisanship may even be a misnomer, with some arguing that party preferences are secondary and that negative partisanship is actually a marker of group identity. In this way, the partisanship is merely a title attached to a group affiliation, and the individual enmity is less about partisanship and more about an appositional group's differences from one's own in-group (Bankert 2020).

A cultural divide between ideological media contributes to negative partisanship. Conservative-leaning media, which largely emerged as a reaction to perceived liberal bias in the mainstream objective press, tends to be stronger in their rhetoric and inspiration of negative partisanship. Since the conservative media ecosystem does not share the same newsroom norms as their most centrist and leftist counterparts, is not as bound to the journalistic tradition of objectivity and thus tends to operate much more as an arm of the partisan electioneering network and be more unabashedly ideological (Faris et al. 2017). Donald Trump's entry into the 2016 Presidential campaign caused a shift in media tone that also contributed to negative partisanship, where mainstream news coverage of his inflammatory rhetoric angered conservatives and enhanced their distrust of Democrats and mainstream media sources (Hoffman et al. 2017).

Ideological media is a well-established contributor to negative partisanship, but social media's role is also notable. Just as ideological media provide echo chambers to further distance one's self from opposing views and parties, self-selected social media friends and follows should amplify the echoes and create filter bubbles that further demonize out-party identifiers. While social media use is not the primary source of negative partisan attitudes, it does exacerbate divisions and enhance both polarization and negative partisanship (Lee et al. 2018).

The public perceives social media as contributing to the problems we see in current-day politics. A Pew Center study showed that 64% of respondents considered social media to be one of the most important factors in a negative turn the country has taken. When asked what the most important factor is they see as contributing to the nation's problems, 28% cited mis- and disinformation, 16% pointed to online trolling, 14% noted less confidence in the veracity of news, 11% said polarization and echo chambers, and another 4% noted the ubiquity of clickbait and sensationalism. News and social media consumption combined accounted for 73% of what respondents believed was the most significant contributor to the nation's negative direction (Auxier 2020).

The intersection of online and social media, partisan polarization among elected officials, primary election incentives to push rhetoric to the extremes, and partisan sorting have created a self-reinforcing phenomenon that appears to be exacerbating the divisions between Americans. The eventual results are of concern to democratic theorists and the general public alike, because the very fabric of democratic engagement appears to be ripping before our very eyes. As Yu and colleagues put it,

> The exacerbating effects of extremity on negative partisanship implies that if the ideological division between the two parties widens, which is what we have witnessed in the past years, elite negative partisanship will be enhanced and may outstrip positive partisanship in opinion expressions, potentially inciting violence and enhancing undemocratic attitudes among the public. (Yu et al. 2021)

Conclusion

Democracies are built upon a few foundational principles, one most importantly being the adage that ours is a nation "of laws, and not men." No individual is above the law, and no person is more important than the peaceful use and eventual transition of political power. A political system outlives its participants, and no person has a birthright to wield its power. The confluence of ideological media, social networking platforms, partisan sorting, and the nationalizing of elections may have created a circumstance which threatens the long-term prospects for democracy's continuation in America. What does all of this disruptive change mean for the voter?

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The Media and the American Voter

The Homogeneity Impetus

One of the common themes in digital mobile technology is personalization. The plentiful scope of platform choice lets each individual user pick the site or sites that best suits their interests. News options are so plentiful as to be difficult to comprehensively review, so each person can pick a news site that aligns with their views, no matter how niche (or even dangerous). Algorithms develop a form of personalization based on user data. Each one of us can live within our own very carefully curated news and communication ecosystem.

Individuality is also one of the two poles of a continuum that describes American society. Radical individuality is at one end, exemplified by the frontier spirit of westward settlers packing Conestoga wagons to begin new lives in unfamiliar territory. On the other end is full communitarianism, with individuality and personal preferences subsumed to a greater good. The United States has long attempted to keep a balance between individuality and communitarianism, but now the two concepts are at odds with each other in a paradoxical fashion.

The digital mobile world allows for a fully unique individual experience. Algorithms and abundant choice contribute to the ability to create those individual environments. People with highly similar interests may still find great differences in how algorithmic media delivery produces two very different user experiences. But the social part of social media

also means that we find like-minded people and build communities with them. Those communities in turn see their views constantly reinforced and members become convinced that only their preferences are valid. In doing so, small communities of highly individualized preferences become the enemy of the larger community. Demand grows that other groups and quasi-communities accede to their preferences instead of finding commonality and room to compromise in order to maintain the stable and functioning government which has successfully modeled democracy in the world for over 200 years.

As communities become smaller and concentrated around shared viewpoints, the groups become more homogenous and demanding. Groupthink suggests that when people in a shared community connect they begin to think the same way, either through self-censorship of those with different opinions or reinforcement of shared beliefs. If one's own group sees the world in a proscribed way, out-group distrust suggests that they will reject any thoughts counter to the group's preferences and will see those out-group preferences as dangerous. Social media use strongly correlates with political network homogeneity, providing an amplifier for those strongly held beliefs (Neo 2021).

Group homogeneity and the aggregation of preferences thus come to odds with each other. Elected members of the House of Representatives have constituencies that roughly average 800,000 per district. As the population grows while the number of House seats stays fixed at 435, representatives have an ever-larger group from which they need to discern preferences and select one option for votes. When countless small groups all demand their interests be catered to, universally and without exception, gridlock is not a surprising result.

Identity Politics in the Digital Mobile Environment

The term "identity politics" is controversial but it is salient to this discussion of digital mobile media because identity is inherent in the small-group community structures that social media have exaggerated. Individuals, even the most ruggedly self-possessed, will find themselves identifying with a particular group. Gender, race, or special interest all provide venues by which people can connect their own values. Identity politics, as it has been termed in recent campaigns, is a proxy for using gender or race to encourage voters to choose those candidates based more

on their skin color or sex than policy preferences. But identity politics can be viewed in a much broader context as well.

Women and racial minorities are not the only people who invest in their group identities. Look at vinyl window appliques on cars as you drive. There you will see people commonly and voluntarily telegraphing their group identities through tokens they choose to emblazon on their cars. Every day while driving I see cars self-describing group identity through vinyls touting #momlife, or one's work as a firefighter, or the church one attends. Sticking identifying totems on one's car is nothing new, but for a long time most bumper stickers were political promotions for candidates or witticisms. The presence of vinyl window stickers suggests a more personally identifying group connection that goes deeper than one's politics.

Each group identification item, whether it be window vinyl, t-shirts, or frames for social media avatars, is a sign of an identity that also contributes to one's political orientation. A "Back the Blue" sticker is inherently political, even if it is superficially a plea to support law enforcement officers. The driver identifies with a particular group and has a set of policy expectations that accompany that identity. Candidates and elected officials know that they can leverage those group identities no matter how large or small their scope. We have entered an era of "personalized politics" where expressive individual actions and identities dominate collective action frames, particularly in protest. This change is marked by the rise of large-scale, rapidly forming political participation aimed at a variety of targets, that are political and non-political, ranging from the typical parties and candidates engaged in politics to ostensibly nonpolitical entities such as consumer brands and large corporations (Bennett 2012).

The subdivision into so many small categories reinforces the idea of American politics in the 2020s in a tribal society. Individuals have their preferences and seek others who also self-identify with those same preferences. The communities that build around those shared beliefs and experiences are fiercely loyal to their in-group and automatically skeptical of any out-group members. Distrust and conflict emerge from the intergroup enmity and lead to an expanded scope of conflict where identity and loyalty supersede ideology and policy preference (Fukuyama 2018).

Interconnectedness within one's own tribal identity combined with the capacity of social media to mobilize for collective action also has disrupted existing political folkways. Just as the Arab Spring brought optimism

about the use of social media from it being credited for being the organizing structure around the democratization protests around the Middle East, social media can also undergird planning for violence, such as the Charlottesville Virginia "Unite the Right" and the January 6, 2021 coup attempt. Social media adds a new complication to collective action organizing, where the sharing of personal information on social networks can mirror organizations with significant resources. In other words, a flash mob organized on Instagram can be as large as a protest organized, planned, and executed by established interest groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Social and digital mobile media will continue to confound existing models of collective action for generations to come as society adapts to the normality of social media use for political organization (Bennett and Segerberg, The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics 2013).

DECLINING TRUST

Tribalism does not just make compromise on legislation harder, but legislating at all is much more difficult. High levels of personalized demand mean that the government will have a difficult time satisfying any constituent group for any period of time. The increased polarization and gridlock in Congress exacerbate those feelings of distrust in government by seemingly proving the assumption that government is dysfunctional correct.

The ICPSR's American National Election Study (ANES) asks a series of questions on government trust and combines those scores into an index which traces American's trust of their government on a scale of 0–100. As seen in Fig. 9.1, in 1992, the ANES' trust in government index score was at thirty percent, itself a low number. Over the next twelve years, the trust index scores trended upward, reaching a high of 37 in the aftermath of 9/11. Over the next sixteen years, the trust index would plummet, dipping below twenty percent in 2016 and remaining there for 2020. While social media and ideological news cannot be said to be the primary drivers of this decline in trust, research noted in previous chapters make it clear that they are strong contributors to this growing division between the public and their elected leadership.

Distrust in one's government is not alone worrisome, especially in a democratic system where one has the means to remove an untrustworthy government and replace it with one in which the public can greater invest
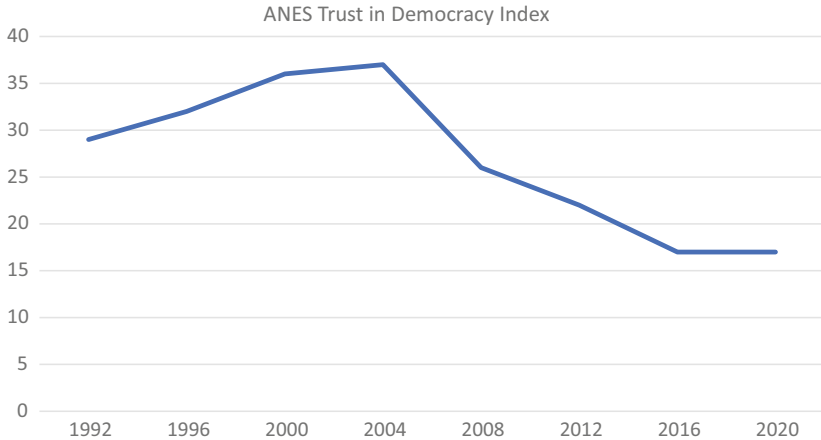
Fig. 9.1 Trust in government 1992–2020 (*Source* https://electionstudies.org/
resources/anes-guide/top-tables/?id=116)

their faith. But if the public do not believe they have the power to effect political change against a government they do not trust, the result is often alienation and rejection of democratic principles.

Figure 9.2 shows that Americans today display the troubling combination of low trust in democracy and low sense that they can effect change through the ballot box. The ANES also constructs an index of political efficacy, comprised of questions prompting respondents to indicate their perceived influence on their elected officials and those politicians' responsiveness to the public. While efficacy is stronger overall than trust, it is not much stronger and is in a similarly sharp decline. Between 1992 and 2020, efficacy followed a similar trajectory to trust by spiking upward after 9/11 and then beginning a precipitous decline.

The lack of trust and efficacy in government tracks along with another declining metric of trust: in others. The Pew Charitable Trust poll of American trust also correlates with the declining governmental trust and efficacy results evident from the ANES data. Seventy-nine percent of respondents to the poll said they believed Americans have too little (either somewhat or far too little) confidence in each other and that the rate of trust has been in decline. More than forty percent of respondents point to social and ideological media as well as political polarization as the primary
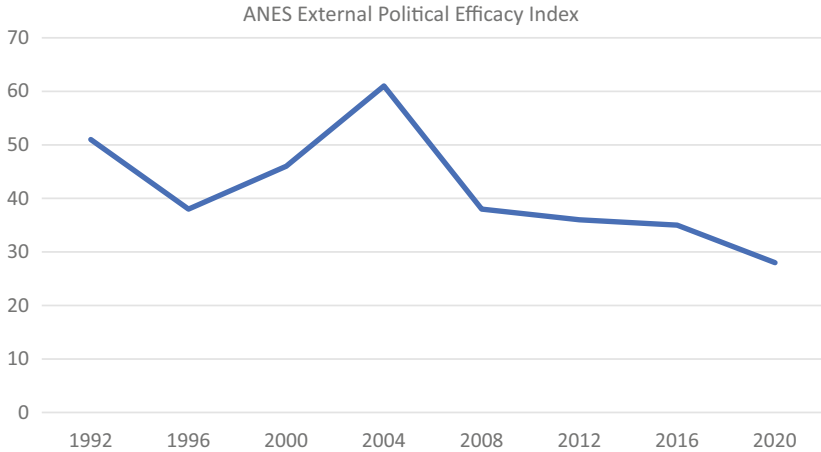
Fig. 9.2 Political efficacy 1992–2020. https://electionstudies.org/resources/anes-guide/top-tables/?id=117

source of the decline. The relationship between societal and governmental trust is expected, as are the elements that lead one to have more faith in others. Individuals with high overall trust invest that trust in scientists, law enforcement officers, schools, religious leaders, and least of all elected officials. Of high-trust individuals, though, the only group that less than half of respondents have strong trust in is elected officials (The State of Personal Trust 2019).

Combining low general trust with low political efficacy is the formula for circumstances like January 6, 2021. Though they were radicalized by Donald Trump's insistence on continuing with a false narrative about voter fraud costing him an election, we can see the pathway from small-group identity to violence. The coup participants believed that Trump was a uniquely qualified candidate to purge the entrenched organized interests from the government for which his supporters blamed what they saw as a country in decline. Those interests, who had comprehensively infiltrated the government, would stop at nothing to remove Trump from the White House. State elections officials, even those who were partisans of Trump, could not be trusted because they were part of the efforts to defeat the President. An allied and complicit media network of mis- and disinformation carriers enhanced the belief as well as the identity politics

involved and gave supporters talking points to dismiss true explanations of the 2020 election's results. An untrustworthy government, coupled with an inability to effect change through the ballot box, exemplified their perceived lack of both trust and efficacy for their government. In turn, they saw violence as the only way to effect change. We must be clear here that the pretense of voter fraud was indeed false, but the pathway to violence was a direct result of that combination of reduced trust and efficacy.

Conclusions

This volume began with a story of violence just as this final chapter is concluding. Violence is now steady and seemingly growing here in the United States. Domestic terror groups from white supremacist organizations, the January 6th insurrectionists, and extreme leftist organizations like Antifa all point to an increasing sense that violence is an acceptable alternative means of political expression.

Political violence is a part of the American founding of representative democracy. This new wave of political violence emerges from the Lockean perspective that governments which fail to protect the citizenry's natural rights must be removed, even if at the end of a bayonet, and replaced by ones that better align with the public's needs. But the violence of revolution was supposed to be replaced by the quieter and more peaceful revolutions which would take place periodically at the ballot box. When people begin to believe that the ballot box is not the force for reform and change that it is promised to be, violence can be expected to follow.

Over the last decade, political scientists have begun to interrogate the robustness of American democracy in the future. What was once unthinkable has now become a point of legitimate discussion. The bulwark and model of representative democracy around the world appears to be losing its passion for popular and accountable political rule. Ideological and social media are contributors to that decay, as the authors say, because they provide an avenue for candidates and elected officials to sidestep their responsibility and accountability. By enhancing tribal group identities over policy discussions, the public has allowed their political leaders to abdicate their responsibility for the state of the nation, and avoiding accountability is the first step on the road to authoritarianism.

Ideological media and their replacement of political parties as the main citizen linkage to government are again responsible for some of these

problems. Strong political party organizations provide the linkage role for the public, as a filter against appeals that may be too extreme. Parties had, until the confluence of forces noted in this work, served as that moderating gatekeeper. With parties in a secondary role, their filtering function disappears and thus the opportunity to share and spread extremist appeals emerges. Primaries accelerate that move to the extremes. Social media then provides a pathway for those appeals to spread more widely than they ever had before.

When governments sidestep accountability, they do the most damage to democratic institutions. Throughout the last fifty years, democracies have not failed due to external efforts like war, but instead their internal democratic institutions have been subverted by their own leaders. Venezuela under Hugo Chavez, Vladimir Putin's Russia, and similar stories emerge from Hungary, Turkey, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines to name but a few (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019).

The Question of Inevitability

One may reasonably wonder from the above discussion if democracy is indeed doomed to die in America, where ideological and social media developments of the last fifteen years have been accomplices to the murder. However, the future is not as bleak as that overly simplistic generalization would have one believe. Often in the concluding sections of works like this, the author or authors will posit a series of policy-based reforms that they believe could improve the circumstance studied. I will not do that here, because the solution will not emerge from the government but from the electorate itself.

The American media space is a capitalistic market, not a venue of public policy. Reforms may be appropriate when the government itself is not working properly, but the government has not changed over the last fifteen years other than becoming more polarized to match an ever-further dispersed electorate. So, the answer will be within the marketplace of media, meaning that all change and reform must start with individual members of the body politic.

Curing ills in societal behavior is similar to curing medical ills in that the optimal solutions nearly always come from correctly identifying and intervening against root causes. What are the root causes, then, of this shift in the electorate? Most of them center around the choices of media source that individuals make. By prioritizing reinforcing and polarizing

ideological media, the voters make themselves more extreme and divided. A return to the era of the Fairness Doctrine may force people into the unplanned and unwanted interactions with divergent political views, but it is as likely to drive more political content out of the media than in, particularly since the Fairness Doctrine could only apply to broadcast television and not internet sites.

Instead, the public must become more educated about their media diet and take proactive steps to make that informational diet healthier. The only true way to improvement is individuals realizing the eventual consequences of their unhealthy media choices and decide to improve the quality of their informational diet. Filter bubbles do not burst on their own, echo chambers do not collapse unless forced. Only when voters make an affirmative decision to alter their own behaviors does substantive change occur.

In the Federalist 39, James Madison explores the representative aspects of the newly proposed Constitutional government at length, but repeatedly refers to the source of power in government being the will of the people. Governments are expressions of political culture, and the American spirit at the founding was one of citizen leadership and civic engagement. The representation of populations, the ratification process, and the nature of federal powers are all manifestations of a representational contract derived through mutual consent and maintenance. The maintenance element is vital here, because the public in Madison's view must be actively engaged in and ultimately responsible for the actions of their government. Elected officials are only agents, proxies in the Capitol for individual expressions of the public will (Hamilton et al. 2008).

Implicit in this argument is that citizens be responsible and thoughtful in their evaluations of government. We know that this ideal was unattainable, but saying such is a cop out. Even if the public does not satisfy the Madisonian ideal, it does not mean that we can embrace the current-day lack of engagement and thoughtfulness as appropriate. Indeed, were Madison to see the state of American democracy in the 2020s he would likely believe that we have already descended into demagoguery. Any founder would be hard-pressed to look at today's informational commitment among the population and find it consistent with the republic they designed in 1787.

If the public will not embrace a change on their own, and political reforms will not address core ills, what can be done? One powerful tool in the effort to rebuild civic knowledge is the use of social media itself.

Using social media to boost media literacy efforts through enhanced fact-checking and dialog, along with public service messages aimed at increasing civility and mutual respect, may be effective in bringing forth more responsible use of informational media.

A more thoughtful and engaged public would then reverse the cascade of ills documented here, and begin to slowly rebuild the understanding, trust, and reciprocal appreciation that democratic compromise requires. Only through a sincere public commitment will that change occur.

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