

# **Ideological Bias in the Media: “Blue Feed Red Feed<sup>1</sup> = How Democracies Die<sup>2</sup>”**

Sophie Laurence

AP US Gov Research Paper

Winter Trimester, February 2020

---

<sup>1</sup> Jon Keegan. “Blue Feed, Red Feed.” The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, May 17, 2016.  
<http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/>.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. London: Penguin, 2019.

## ***Introduction***

“Ideological bias in the media” is a multidisciplinary topic that falls under media studies, communications, journalism, linguistics, history, sociology, economics, political science, and psychology. The evolution of mass media, from print press, to television, and the internet, has accelerated the speed of influence by which mass media changes culture, society, and beliefs. Scholars try to keep up with tectonic shifts and changes in society which are the direct result of media influence. Despite the wide-ranging interest in the topic, data-driven targeted research in this area is conducted mostly by social scientists.

Compared to the variety of research involving media bias and politics, the body of purely theoretical work by scholars of media theory is not robust. The methodology is statistical: Beginning with gathering evidence and facts, scholars construct a theoretical model to explain current trends and, using that model, produce insights informed by critical theory.

The problem of media bias is both accelerating and deepening. An important factor in these developments is the weaponization of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which is increasingly essential to—well, almost everything.<sup>3</sup> Bias is human, and humans do the coding, thus AI is coded with implicit bias.<sup>4</sup> As Stephen Hawking warned shortly before his death, AI bias poses an enormous danger to society. The news media digispace (journalism, social media, and various platforms) is completely dependent upon information provided by algorithms. Those who understand and harness their incredible power can change the world (e.g., Cambridge Analytica/Russian interference on 2016 elections).

---

<sup>3</sup> “The Impact of Artificial Intelligence.” Future of Tech. <https://www.futureoftech.org/artificial-intelligence/2-impact-of-ai/>.

<sup>4</sup> “Implicit Bias.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/implicit-bias/> (First published Thu Feb 26, 2015; substantive revision Wed Jul 31, 2019)

Media bias has had a central role accelerating the splintering of politics and society into ideological tribes and factions. In *The Federalist Papers*, Hamilton *et al.*<sup>5</sup> warned of the weakening of democracy by factions. In the present, we are living in the absence—even willful rejection—of those cautions.

As the November 2020 presidential election approaches, partisan news outlets have eradicated any hope of objective news sources. “Post-truth” and “alternative facts” have redefined the lines by which media bias draws ideological borders. As the work of Herman & Chomsky, Kuypers, and Graber predict, when good-faith political dialogues take place neither in neighborhood communities nor in Congress, there is no democracy.

### ***A Short History of Media and Bias in Politics***

Between 1787 and 1788, U.S. Founding Fathers Alexander Hamilton (first Secretary of the Treasury), John Jay (first U.S. Chief Justice), and James Madison (fourth U.S. President) authored a series of 85 articles and essays that would become known as *The Federalist Papers* (published under the pseudonym, “Publius”), which were intended to convince voters to ratify the U.S. Constitution.

Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, widening socio-economic class divisions resulted in an existential crisis about the future of the Union.<sup>6</sup> Political disagreements between Federalists (Hamilton *et al.*) and Antifederalists (Jefferson *et al.*)<sup>7</sup> gave voice to representative constituent

---

<sup>5</sup> [The Federalist Papers](#) were written by [Alexander Hamilton](#), [James Madison](#) and [John Jay](#) under the pseudonym “Publius.”

<sup>6</sup> Foreshadowing “The economy, stupid.” – James Carville

<sup>7</sup> Anti-Federalists were primarily concerned with a strong central government weakening the authority of states, and a strengthened presidency leading back to a monarchy. Anti-Federalists were responsible for the incorporation of the Bill of Rights into the Constitution. Notable Anti-Federalists: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Federalism>

views. Americans were confronted with a choice between government ideologies that would define the relationship of the states to central government, and led to the establishment of political structures that remain with us today, including a system of governmental checks and balances, the *Republic* of the United States, and the modern two-party system (Democrat and Republican).

American democracy was founded on political divisions that existed prior to the nation *per se*. In *The Federalist Papers* (henceforth “TFP”) no. 1, the founding fathers argued that if the current government (Articles of Confederation) was both inefficient and insufficient, then it should be replaced with a better one, in the form of a new, upgraded Constitution. In 1787, this was the issue on the table. Hamilton, Madison, and Jay (“Publius”) set out to convince voters of their Federalist views, particularly voters in deadlocked swing states. Notably, in TFP’s “Introduction,” they openly discuss *bias as human nature*, including *implicit bias* in the form of “honest errors of minds led astray by preconceived jealousies and fears.”<sup>8</sup> They are open and direct in making the point that polarization is emotionally driven, whereby “a torrent of angry and malignant passions will be let loose.”<sup>9</sup> *The Federalist Papers* no. 9 and no. 10 discuss “The Utility of the Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Faction and Insurrection.*

---

<sup>8</sup> Hamilton et al., *The Federalist Papers* (1787-88). Introduction.

<sup>9</sup> Hamilton et al., Introduction.

<sup>10</sup> Hamilton et al., no.10.

Why can't we just get along? In groups of people, it is human nature to factionalize, to self-sort into "tribes."<sup>11</sup> The phenomenon is described in Psychology 101:

Group Polarization refers to a group's tendency to talk itself into extreme positions.

Imagine a group of protesters, all agreeing and deciding to picket. You can see how this could get out of hand because opposing views (Group Think) are not considered and the push to move forward for the cause is fueled internally (Group Polarization).<sup>12</sup>

TFP no. 10 plunges directly into the mess that is minority and majority interests; self-interests versus public interest; the rights of a few versus the will of the many; and, ultimately, how and by whom power is wielded.

TFP no. 9 and no. 10 tell a cautionary tale of the evils of powerful self-interests and oppression in the hands of factionalists. This evil is described as a "disease" for a government which, up to this point, neither of two known remedies is an acceptable solution:

There are again two methods of removing the causes of factions: the one, by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> "Birds of a feather flock together" – Proverb

<sup>12</sup> "Psychology 101: Chapter 8: Section 4: The Role of Groups." All Psych: Psych Central's Virtual Psychology Classroom. 2018. <https://allpsych.com/psychology101/groups/>

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton et al. *The Federalist Papers*, no. 10.

Of the prescribed solutions, the first possible method is fascism, “by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence”<sup>14</sup> describes the absence of civil liberties. The second possible solution is this: A large republic has greater diversity. A larger group is more likely to have factions and sub-factions encompassing a wider variety of interests, making it less likely for a one group or a few groups to consolidate strength. Neither too much power in the hands of a few, nor mob rule (pure democracy). So that “the influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States.”<sup>15</sup>

### ***Media Technologies, Propaganda and Power***

The authors of *The Federalist Papers* understood and leveraged the power of the press. Entitled “General Introduction For the Independent Journal,” the first TFP essay in its public debut includes the name of its publisher, the *Independent Journal*. On its own, the word *Independent* means “not influenced or controlled by others in matters of opinion,” while *Journal* invokes the free press. Freedom of independent thought and voice was clearly emphasized, although media

---

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton et al., no. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Hamilton et al., no. 10.

bias is and was always prevalent<sup>16</sup>, and propaganda was already in existence in 1787 as a political and social weapon.

Beginning with the invention of the Gutenberg Press (~1440) which introduced the first mass *printed* texts, those who controlled what was being printed and distributed quickly learned that press equals power. Coincidentally in Europe, in 1787—the same year as TFP—the three social “Estates” (the clergy, the nobility, and the peasantry) had to make room for the *fourth estate*, the press, which was declared “far more important than they all.”<sup>17</sup> Groundbreaking innovations in mass media technology followed rapidly: The radio (1890s) was the first mass *audio* communication. The commercial television (1941) was the first mass *visual* communication. The internet followed in 1989-1990 with *digital* communication. Each consecutive advancement in media technology increased the communication bandwidth and sphere of influence. With the launching of the World Wide Web, its power became worldwide.

In *Key Themes in Media Theory*, Dan Laughey<sup>18</sup> defines media as “technologies that communicate messages to audiences in different parts of a region, country, or even the world.”

He explained:

---

<sup>16</sup> Dan Laughey, *Key Themes in Media Theory*, (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2007), 19. Through “*impact analysis*” which “compares the role of opinion leaders to the role of media in influencing individuals’ decision-making processes. We must all know one or two opinion leaders among friends and family members with whom we intermingle. They are those people who have an opinion on everything; who lead conversations as if talking came naturally; who might be otherwise called the ‘movers and shakers’ among their party... ‘opinion leaders seemed to be distributed in all occupational groups, and on every social and economic level’ (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955: 32). So opinion leaders are found in all walks of life and, moreover, they tend to expose themselves to media messages more so than less opinionated individuals. An opinion leader not only transfers media messages to others; he or she selects and adapts these messages in line with their own agenda. As such, opinion leaders are located between media institutions and the rest of society.”

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Carlyle, in his book *On Heroes and Hero Worship*, attributed the origin of the term “Fourth Estate” to [Edmund Burke](#), who used it in a parliamentary debate in 1787 on the opening up of press reporting of the [House of Commons of Great Britain](#).<sup>[2]</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth\\_Estate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_Estate)

<sup>18</sup> Dan Laughey, Senior Lecturer, School of Cultural Studies & Humanities, University of Leeds.

These media are the most obvious and familiar to us, but they are more accurately described as mass media. The term ‘mass,’ in this sense, refers to the massive reception of media such as television, film, and so on.<sup>19</sup>

Laughey connects the term “media” to capitalism.<sup>20</sup> He argues that communication was the yellow brick road for businesses seeking to profit from commercial advertising, which quickly transformed mere journalistic production into a vehicle for a highly lucrative business sector. Politically, due to factionalization, American media is not only partisan: it is propaganda.

This situation is not new, but it is more dire. *The Federalist Papers* were published in the *Independent Journal* with the intent to persuade Americans to support a constitutional government and reject their existing Articles of Confederation. Freedom of independent thought and voice? Yes, but for the explicit purpose of convincing others to agree with their ideology. Laughey devotes a chapter of his book to biases in communication, including political biases. His primary theoretical source is the political economist, Harold Innis,<sup>21</sup> who published widely on topics including media and communication theory. He argues that bias is inherent not to the *journalist*, but to the *technology*. In his view, it is the *medium* of communication that is intrinsically biased:

Innis extends his theory of media bias to the issue of how knowledge and information are disseminated in societies. He uses historical examples to show that the medium through which knowledge and information is circulated has more impact on societies than the

---

<sup>19</sup> Laughey, 2007, 13.

<sup>20</sup> With heavy reliance on the work of Raymond Williams, particularly *Culture and Society: 1780 – 1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

<sup>21</sup> Harold Innis, Professor of political economy, University of Toronto.

character or content of that knowledge or information. As such, media technologies determine human affairs to the extent that new technologies can create new ways of living: “the advantages of a new medium will become such as to lead to the emergence of a new civilization (Innis 1951: 34).”<sup>22</sup>

Marshall McLuhan, a philosopher and Innis’s student, developed “medium theory” even further. In a chapter titled, “The Medium is the Message,” he argues that “any advanced modern society is shaped by the various media technologies that are available to it. Moreover, media become extensions of ourselves; extensions of our human senses. What matters, then, is not the content of these media technologies but the technologies themselves.”<sup>23</sup>

*The Medium is the Message.*

If this is the case, then why do we believe “the news”? In *Partisan Journalism*, Jim Kuypers<sup>24</sup> revisits the 1800s, a period in history not long after *The Federalist Papers* and the establishment of the first political party (the Federalists led by Hamilton), in order to explore what the “news” actually is. He writes in his chapter, “The Rise of a Partisan Press: News Was Not Always ‘News’”:

---

<sup>22</sup> Laughey, 2007, 43.

<sup>23</sup> Laughey, 2007, 34. Paraphrasing a key theme from Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill), 1964.

<sup>24</sup> Jim A. Kuypers, Professor, Department of Communication, Virginia Tech

If people expect truth in news, truth becomes the standard by which news is measured... Yet truth can become a casualty when editors and publishers possess motivations other than supplying a for-profit product for a reading public – The key to understanding American newspapers in the Jacksonian<sup>25</sup> era is recognizing that they were not necessarily profit-driven organizations but instead political creatures whose central purpose was to elect a party's candidates.<sup>26</sup>

Here, Kuypers points out that by the early 1800s, it was a given that the “news” was published by for-profit businesses. It is only just being understood now, that 200 years ago, the “news” in parallel, was therefore already and simultaneously political tools of social exploitation. And we, society, have been manipulated into believing that there is truth, or at least, objectivity, in the “news.” For two centuries since, Americans have carried forward this naiveté.

Media theory is a relatively recent, interdisciplinary field. Innis, a political economist, developed medium theory in the 1950s. McLuhan, a philosopher, continued Innis' work and foraged new ground of his own in the 1960s. Edward Herman,<sup>27</sup> an economist, and Noam Chomsky,<sup>28</sup> a linguist, published the groundbreaking book, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988) and developed their “propaganda model” a mere 32 years ago. Whereas Innis and McLuhan focused on understanding the medium and technology of media communications, Herman and Chomsky named the elephant in the room by combining the

---

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Jackson, President of the United States, 1829 -1837.

<sup>26</sup> Jim A. Kuypers, *Partisan Journalism: A history of media bias in the United States* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 15.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Herman, Professor Emeritus of finance at the Wharton School of Business of the University of Pennsylvania

<sup>28</sup> Noam Chomsky, Institute Professor Emeritus, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); Laureate Professor, University of Arizona

words “political” and “economy” with “mass” and “media,” and thereby drawing a straight line from deliberate and strategic political and corporate machinations to the manipulation of the public through propaganda. By way of the book’s title, they draw attention to the symbiotic relationship of politics and business, which utilize the widest possible technological reach of the media as a tool of communications control. They who control communications, control the flow of ideas and, eventually, belief and truth.

Whereas Kuypers looks at the history of the “news” and partisan journalism, Herman and Chomsky get around to answering the question, “why do we believe the news?” From the Introduction and Preface through Chapter One (aptly titled A Propaganda Model), they explain how easily we are manipulated into believing that “the news” is factual and truthful:

Leaders of the media claim that their news choices rest on unbiased professional and objective criteria... If, however, the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear, and think about, and to “manage” public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns, the standard view of how the system works is at serious odds with reality.<sup>29</sup>

These pre-2000s theorists, Hamilton *et al.*, Laughey, Innis, McLuhan, Herman and Chomsky, are uncannily predictive of our current polarized state. Hamilton predicted that if *faction and insurrection* were not suppressed, they would lead to the demise of democracy. Innis and McLuhan predicted that the *technology of mass media* continues to inexorably expand its reach,

---

<sup>29</sup> Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), lviii.

and correspondingly, its power over people who don't care about nor see the technology, and care only for its content. Herman and Chomsky predicted that media manipulation by political and business leaders would reach the point where *reality could be fabricated* and easily mass fed to the public. And now, technology has a global and intimate reach to each and every person on the planet, through tech that tracks us in our homes and in cars, monitors our heartbeat, and analyzes our DNA. As the presence of technology infiltrates deeper into every aspect of our existence, so, too, does the reach of biased media.

***If A.I. will change the world, who will change A.I.?*<sup>30</sup>**

What no pre-2000s media theorist predicted, however, was viral *social media* and "echo chambers"<sup>31</sup> created by "news" feeds where users are exposed to only like-minded content. When a computer algorithm is deciding which "news" your Facebook feed receives, users become increasingly, and sometimes, entirely, isolated from other points of view.

Algorithms do not write themselves; humans do the coding, and for "deep learning" algorithms, humans do the teaching. Human bias is encoded into computers, whether we are aware of it or not. In 2016, Microsoft launched a "chatbot" named Tay to learn about conversation from humans on Twitter, and incorporate what it learned into its own Twitter communications. The result:

---

<sup>30</sup> The motto for AI4ALL, a web platform for AI open learning to increase diversity among coders of AI programming.

<sup>31</sup> Jack Karsten and Darrell M. West, "Inside the Social Media Echo Chamber." Brookings, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2016/12/09/inside-the-social-media-echo-chamber/> (February 2, 2020)

Twitter taught Microsoft's AI chatbot to be a racist asshole in less than a day. It took less than 24 hours for Twitter to corrupt an innocent AI chatbot...as an experiment in "conversational understanding." The more you chat with Tay, said Microsoft, the smarter it gets, learning to engage people through "casual and playful conversation."

Unfortunately, the conversations didn't stay playful for long. Pretty soon after Tay launched, people started tweeting the bot with all sorts of misogynistic, racist, and Donald Trumpist remarks. And Tay—being essentially a robot parrot with an internet connection—started repeating these sentiments back to users, proving correct that old programming adage: flaming garbage pile in, flaming garbage pile out.<sup>32</sup>

Recently, in spite of pressure from an increasingly aware public of the dangers of false and inciting postings, Facebook and Twitter refused to remove an altered video posting (one of many) of Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives.<sup>33</sup> The video is altered to falsely show, again and again, Pelosi ripping up President Donald Trump's 2020 State of the Union Speech while he is saluting a member of the military, not at the completion of his speech as is what actually happened. This edited video, posted by President Trump on his Twitter feed, has passed 18 million views, fanning the "flaming garbage pile" into an incendiary inferno.

On the heels of the 2016 presidential election, *The Wall Street Journal* created "Red Feed, Blue Feed"<sup>34</sup> to illustrate how polarized the United States had become in 2017. Based on

---

<sup>32</sup> James Vincent, "Twitter taught Microsoft's AI chatbot to be a racist asshole in less than a day," <https://www.theverge.com/2016/3/24/11297050/tay-microsoft-chatbot-racist>, (February 11, 2020).

<sup>33</sup> Jessica Guynn, "Trump celebrates, Pelosi fumes as Facebook and Twitter refuse to take down altered video," <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2020/02/07/trump-video-nancy-pelosi-tearing-sotu-speech-remain-facebook/4694454002/>, (February 17, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> "Blue Feed, Red Feed: See Liberal Facebook and Conservative Facebook, Side by Side," *The Wall Street Journal*, <http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/#/immigration>, (February 9, 2020).

self-identified political leanings as either “very conservative” or “very liberal,” two dramatically different views of the world are starkly juxtaposed as side-by-side visual memes. For example, compare sample news feeds for the keyword “Immigration”:

(red feed) Trump is not backing down. He's taking action against immigrants mooching off public benefits. (posted by *The Political Insider*)

(blue feed) A return to Iraq would be a death sentence — This man has lived in the U.S since he was 3 years old. (posted by *Now This Politics*)

According to Merriam-Webster, “news” is a “report of recent events.” The Wall Street Journal shows that Facebook “news” feeds are not actually news: These posts are *opinions*. Trust in the *traditional* news, developed over the years by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists and news outlets with highly trained and qualified researchers and writers, fact checkers and editorial oversight, has been hijacked to give *opinion* credibility, strength—and the veneer of “truth” which has been traditionally and naively believed since the founding of this country to be inherent in journalism. There is no greater danger to democracy, and civilization itself, than “post-truth” and “alternative facts.”<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> “Alternative Facts,” Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternative\\_facts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternative_facts), (February 15, 2020). "Alternative facts" is a phrase used by U.S. Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway during a Meet the Press interview on January 22, 2017, in which she defended White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's false statement about the attendance numbers of Donald Trump's inauguration as President of the United States.

In his recent 2018 book, *Post-Truth*, philosopher Lee McIntyre<sup>36</sup> traces the steps in recent history from science denial, to *alternative facts*, to the fracturing of society into *information silos*, another way of describing what the Wall Street Journal described in the “Blue Feed, Red Feed” experiment as the Facebook *echo chamber*. Like the theorists before him, McIntyre attributes cognitive biases, inherent to human psychology, as a universal vulnerability that when used as a tool of mass manipulation, can be easily leveraged to convince people of believing that their conclusions are reasonable and rational even when they are not.<sup>37</sup> When the decline and compromise of *traditional* media is combined with the increasingly viral influence of social media, it is perhaps no surprise that *opinion* has replaced the news as the new normalized source of “information.” The next step, “fake news” and widespread acceptance of pure falsification as “news,” brings about the ideal conditions for post-truth. With divided consensus on what is fact or fiction in the “news” leveraged as a political tool, there is little to no will to turn this around.

“The latest fake video of Speaker Pelosi is deliberately designed to mislead and lie to the American people, and every day that these platforms refuse to take it down is another reminder that they care more about their shareholders’ interests than the public’s interests.”<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Lee McIntyre, Research Fellow, Center for Philosophy and History of Science, Boston University; Instructor in Ethics, Harvard Extension School

<sup>37</sup> Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018). Winner of the CHOICE Outstanding Academic Titles for 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Jessica Guynn, “Trump celebrates, Pelosi fumes as Facebook and Twitter refuse to take down altered video,” <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2020/02/07/trump-video-nancy-pelosi-tearing-sotu-speech-remain-facebook/4694454002/>, (7 February 2020).

The answer to the question, “Who will change A.I.?”, is this: Far too few people are aware of the problem, and scarce are the people who do know about the problem who actually care. Even rarer are the people who are trying, or who are capable of trying, to enact change.

***This is how democracy dies.***<sup>39</sup>

Doris Graber<sup>40</sup> and Johanna Dunaway,<sup>41</sup> political scientists, begin their book, *Mass Media and American Politics*, with a chapter entitled “Media Power and Government Control.” The book includes an important chapter on “Incivility, Negativity, and Bias in the Media.” Graber and Dunaway aptly describe Twitter-era news: “Attack” journalism. “Gotcha” journalism. “Pack” journalism. “Junkyard” journalism. “Game-frame” coverage. “Fake/false/hoax” news. It is clear how low “news” communications has sunk. We are entering a new age of “Yellow” Journalism, defined in *Encyclopedia Britannica* as the “use of lurid features and sensationalized news in newspaper publishing to attract readers and increase circulation.”<sup>42</sup> With ever-decreasing public belief in truth and objectivity of the news, fewer journalists are willing to uphold codes and canons of ethics and standards defined by journalistic integrity.

---

<sup>39</sup> Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, (NY: Crown Publishing Group, 2018)

<sup>40</sup> “Doris Graber,” Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doris\\_Graber](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doris_Graber) (11 December 2018). Graber was founding editor of the journal *Political Communication*.<sup>[4]</sup> She won the academic [Goldsmith Book Prize](#) in 2003, for *Learning From Television in the Internet Age*, published in 2001.<sup>[5]</sup> She retired from teaching at University of Illinois at Chicago in 2012.<sup>[3]</sup> The Political Communication Section of the [American Political Science Association](#) has awarded the Doris Graber (Book) Award since 2000, in her honor.<sup>[6][7]</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Johanna Dunaway, Associate Professor, Department of Communication, Texas A&M University

<sup>42</sup> “Yellow Journalism,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/yellow-journalism>. The use of lurid features and sensationalized news in newspaper publishing to attract readers and increase circulation.

In the arena of election coverage, scholars have noted that the news now spends more time on what *journalists* are saying about races and candidates, while offering much less coverage of what the *candidates* are actually saying.<sup>43</sup>

By stating the obvious, Graber and Dunaway explain why negativity in the news is on the rise: “put simply, it sells. Audiences are attracted to negativity for psychological reasons widely demonstrated in the field of cognitive psychology.”<sup>44</sup> This is the definition of one of three categories of media bias as defined by Graber and Dunaway: *affective* bias, which makes the case that humans are biased toward “paying attention to negative information.”<sup>45</sup> The second category, *informational* bias, is structural and systemic:

News that is personalized, dramatized, fragmented, and told within the framework of order versus chaos fulfills news production objectives and is easily digestible and appealing to audiences...supports the financial goals of news organizations.<sup>46</sup>

The third category, *partisan* or *ideological* bias, leads “directly to political polarization and dissatisfaction with and distrust of the media.”<sup>47</sup>

*Political polarization and distrust of the media.*

---

<sup>43</sup> Doris Graber and Johanna Dunaway, *Mass media and American politics 9th ed.* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2014), 346.

<sup>44</sup> Graber and Dunaway, 347

<sup>45</sup> Graber and Dunaway, 362

<sup>46</sup> Graber and Dunaway, 362

<sup>47</sup> Graber and Dunaway, 363

Nancy Gibbs, Lombard Director of the Shorenstein Center for Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, and, until September 2017, editor in chief of *TIME* magazine, recently wrote the following in an online commentary:

If we can't share the insights they [scholars] gain, if policymakers can't leverage their expertise, and if citizens can't trust the possibility of progress, this extraordinary house we've been building together for more than 240 years will slowly become uninhabitable. Trust and truth aren't the only things that matter in a democracy, but no democracy can survive without them.<sup>48</sup>

## ***Conclusion***

For the past 233 years, theorists have warned against the dangers of *factions* and *media technology*. Scholars have cautioned that news was not always “news” and that the *medium itself is the message*. In the mid 1900s, Chomsky and Herman described the quadrumvirate of political economy and mass media leading to the normalization and commonality of propaganda. More recent scholars, Graber and Dunaway in 2015, have sounded the alarm and predicted *political polarization and distrust of the media* leading to political and social instability and erosion. The trajectory is bluntly forewarned by Levitsky and Ziblatt in 2018: “The weakening of

---

<sup>48</sup> Nancy Gibbs, “Truth and Trust: How can we decrease disinformation in public discourse?”, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty-research/policy-topics/democracy-governance/nancy-gibbs-truth-and-trust>, (Winter 2020).

our democratic norms is rooted in extreme partisan polarization—And if one thing is clear from studying breakdowns throughout history, it's that extreme polarization can kill democracies.”<sup>49</sup>

Have we passed the tipping point for the end of American democracy? Can the trajectory be reversed?

In TFP no. 10, Madison et al. warned the country about the disease of factions, and prescribed *diversity* as the antidote. In 2018, Levitsky and Ziblatt ascribe the United States' ever-increasing diversity as fueling the fire of intense social and political divisions, vitriol, and distrust. In 1787, the *press* was used to strengthen democracy by persuading undecided voters in key swing states of constitutional benefits. Conversely, in 2020, the press has devolved into a form of entertainment, whether liberal (Colbert) or conservative (Fox). The February 2020 Presidential candidate debate, held in Las Vegas, resembled the game show Jeopardy, with a gaudy contest atmosphere rather than a serious primary discussion on contemporary political and societal issues.

What about the *economy*? In 1787, the U.S. was in an obvious class struggle and economic unrest, with those who were “well read, well bred, and well fed” on the side of the Confederate Articles (aristocracy, in power), and most everyone else (the 99%), restless for change. Would business and commercial interests trump (no pun intended) a traditionally agrarian and artisanal society? Would individual interests be lost to powers of the state? Would the selfish and feckless in power fleece the everyday hard working American?

The reality is that money and power go hand in hand. This was the case in 1787, and it is no different today. While a few Congressional representatives have risen from the working class

---

<sup>49</sup> Levitsky and Ziblatt, 124

to the ivory tower, the vast majority of our governmental leadership, including President Trump, is wealthy, privileged and, arguably, putting personal financial gain over the well-being of the country. Described as such in 1787: “Every shilling with which they overburden the inferior number, is a shilling saved to their own pockets.”<sup>50</sup> By calling out economic inequality, correlating it to inefficiencies and insufficiencies of the current government, and offering salient, comprehensible and innovative solutions, the Federalists *succeeded* in getting votes and the Constitution, the foundation of our democracy, was ratified in 1788.

Flash forward to 2020: President Trump’s approval rating is overall lower today than when he took office, although it varies depending on the partisan lean of the polling organizations. And yet, in light of seemingly constant and unprecedented scandals and improprieties, ranging from adult film actor Stormy Daniels’ defamation lawsuit, to impeachment over abuse of power and obstruction of Congress, the president’s approval rating remains stable. Correspondingly, the economy has also remained remarkably strong. “In politics, economic growth, for better or worse, covers over a multitude of sins.”<sup>51</sup> At the same time, social and economic inequality continues to grow. The American middle class is shrinking. Income growth has been rapidly increasing for the top 5% while declining for everyone else.<sup>52</sup> In previous election years, any U.S. president seeking reelection under such negative economic conditions was ousted. In 2020, due to the extraordinary influence of the internet on belief and perception, this is less predictable.

---

<sup>50</sup> Hamilton et al., *The Federalist Papers*, no. 10.

<sup>51</sup> John Hart, “It’s Still the Economy, Stupid.” *Forbes Magazine*. (27 December 2017).  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnhart/2017/12/27/its-still-the-economy-stupid/#134c7c5d2c9a>

<sup>52</sup> Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik and Rakesh Kochhar, “Trends in Income and Wealth Inequality.” Pew Research Center. (9 January 2020).  
<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/>.

Like Hamilton et al., Levitsky and Ziblatt caution that the United States is *not* exceptional nor immune to diseases overpowering democracy:

Comparing our current predicament to democratic crises in other parts of the world and at other moments of history, it becomes clear that America is not so different from other nations. Our constitutional system, while older and more robust than any in history, is vulnerable to the same pathologies that have killed democracy elsewhere. Ultimately, then, American democracy depends on us--the citizens of the United States. No single political leader can end a democracy; no single leader can rescue one, either. Democracy is a shared enterprise. Its fate depends on all of us.<sup>53</sup>

Ultimately, we cannot rest our hopes on the economy to restore health to democracy. *Truth* has to be restored as the societal norm. Deep-seated conscious and unconscious *divisions need to be overcome*. *Trust* in our institutions, including the government, must be recovered, to avert the complete breakdown of democracy, which is already significantly underway. It will require the work of every citizen to repair the rifts, undo the untruths, and to align ourselves willingly together on the shared path of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

---

<sup>53</sup> Levitsky and Ziblatt, 142

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adkins Covert, T., & Wasburn, P. (2009). *Media bias? : A comparative study of Time, Newsweek, the National review, and The progressive coverage of domestic social issues, 1975-2000*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Dimaggio, A. (2017). *The politics of persuasion : Economic policy and media bias in the modern era*. Albany, New York: SUNY Press.

Graber, D., & Dunaway, J. (2014). *Mass media and American politics* (9th ed.). Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

Hamilton, A., Jay, J. & Madison, J. (1788) *The Federalist: A Collection of Essays, Written in Favour of the New Constitution, as Agreed upon by the Federal Convention, September 17, 1787*. New York: J. & A. McLean.

Herman, E., & Chomsky, N. (2002). *Manufacturing consent : The political economy of the mass media*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Innis, H.A. (1982) *The Bias of Communication*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Kuypers, J. (2014). *Partisan journalism: A history of media bias in the United States*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Laughey, D. (2007). *Key themes in media theory*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Levitsky, Steven, & Daniel Ziblatt (2019). *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown Publishing Group.

McIntyre, Lee (2018). *Post-Truth*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York: McGraw-Hill.

## WEBSITES

“Alternative Facts,” Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternative\\_facts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternative_facts), (15 February 2020).

“Blue Feed, Red Feed: See Liberal Facebook and Conservative Facebook, Side by Side,” The Wall Street Journal, <http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/#/immigration>, (9 February 2020).

Gibbs, Nancy. “Truth and Trust: How can we decrease disinformation in public discourse?”, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty-research/policy-topics/democracy-governance/nancy-gibbs-truth-and-trust>, (Winter 2020).

Guynn, Jessica. “Trump celebrates, Pelosi fumes as Facebook and Twitter refuse to take down altered video,” <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2020/02/07/trump-video-nancy-pelosi-tearing-sotu-speech-remain-facebook/4694454002/>, (17 February 2020).

Hart, John. “It’s Still the Economy, Stupid.” Forbes Magazine. (27 December 2017). <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnhart/2017/12/27/its-still-the-economy-stupid/#134c7c5d2c9a>

Horowitz, Juliana Menasce, Igielnik, Ruth and Kochhar, Rakesh. "Trends in Income and Wealth Inequality." Pew Research Center. (9 January 2020).

<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/>.

"Implicit Bias." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/implicit-bias/> (First published 26 Feb 2015; substantive revision 31 July 2019)

Karsten, Jack and West, Darrell M. "Inside the Social Media Echo Chamber." Brookings,

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2016/12/09/inside-the-social-media-echo-chamber/> (2 February 2020)

Keegan, Jon. "Blue Feed, Red Feed." The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company.

<http://graphics.wsj.com/blue-feed-red-feed/>. (17 May 2016)

"Psychology 101: Chapter 8: Section 4: The Role of Groups." All Psych: Psych Central's Virtual Psychology Classroom. <https://allpsych.com/psychology101/groups/> (2018)

"The Impact of Artificial Intelligence." Future of Tech.

<https://www.futureoftech.org/artificial-intelligence/2-impact-of-ai/>. (accessed 11 February 2020)

Vincent, James. "Twitter taught Microsoft's AI chatbot to be a racist asshole in less than a day,"

<https://www.theverge.com/2016/3/24/11297050/tay-microsoft-chatbot-racist>, (accessed 11 February 2020).

"Yellow Journalism," Encyclopedia Britannica.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/yellow-journalism>. (accessed 11 February 2020).