

**Broadcasting Democracy: Reclaiming Media Integrity in Polarized Times**

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In democratic regimes, transparency is critical for maintaining the legitimacy of the state as citizens need to know what the government is doing and believe the regime should be in power. The principle fashion that governments achieve transparency is through an unbiased and independent media, which is able to release content without the need of approval from the state. However, around the world in democratic regimes, the freedom, independence, and pluralism of the press is being undermined by increased political polarization, disinformation campaigns, and the need to generate revenue. Currently, in most countries the need to make money motivates the media to publish content that citizens want to hear, not what they need to hear.

What citizens want to hear, however, typically involves the promotion of a political ideal, while condemning an opposing ideal. Therefore, the need to make money pressures media companies to make politically polarized content, which has negative consequences for the political culture of a state. Along with this, it is easy for media companies to make money by releasing content that is either misleading, or false; the sensationalism brought by a false, but emotionally charged article typically generates more clicks than a true, but dull article. These two problems lead to a confused public that is susceptible to falsities in the media, and undermines transparency in government.

Polarized and biased media is a fundamental characteristic of a democratic regime that is susceptible to backsliding, or an already authoritarian regime. Therefore, measures must be taken to solve these issues in order to prevent this possibility. One such measure involves government investment in the media, removing the need to appeal to a wide audience in order to survive. Along with this, to combat political polarization the algorithms of social media platforms like Instagram and X should be adjusted, as they currently handpick videos based on the political ideals of the viewer to promote a dependency. Finally, an independent fact-checking organization

should be created to push back against disinformation campaigns in the media. Amid rising political polarization and widespread disinformation, democracies can safeguard media freedom, independence, and pluralism by investing in journalism to prioritize accuracy over profit, reforming social media algorithms to reduce polarization, and establishing an independent fact-checking body to uphold truth in media.

The pressure to make money causes media conglomerates to make many decisions that worsen political culture due to their lack of profitability. In her article, *How Corporate Media Profits from Fear*, Natylie Baldwin, a Russian writer and CalTech graduate finds “Corporate media tends to prioritize sensationalism and scary stories... inundating consumers with scary stories under the guise of giving them what they want actually results in a distorted view of the world.” By prioritizing content focused on viewer appeal, rather than actual unfiltered news, the press makes more money. To solve this problem, the media should be shifted off of depending on clicks from the viewer for income, rather, financial support should come from the government. Other thriving democracies already do this, in countries like the UK (BBC), Canada (CBC), and Germany, (ARD) about 90\$ per person per year is spent on funding the media. The results of this investment are clear, with these being some of the most reliable and trustworthy sources in the world; (BBC; UK Government), (Rundfunkbeitrag.de), (Canadian Heritage; CBC/Radio-Canada).

Critics will argue that not all democracies have 90\$ per person per year to spend on funding an independent media, as it is not their top concern. This is a valid claim, as developing democracies like Nigeria could much better spend that money on other priorities like education or healthcare. However, this essay is not arguing that developing democracies should invest their money into this field, rather only countries that have the ability to reallocate capital from another

spending category into the press should do so. One such category that funds could be drawn from is defense. Countries such as the US spend proportionally much more on defense than on others such as education and public health, so reallocating some of that money into the media would be beneficial for their democracy. Some will argue that if the media is government funded, it will feel pressured to paint the government in a positive light to maintain a good relationship with the funding organization. However, the press companies will remain separate from the government, and will be encouraged by the government to keep the state accountable by releasing news without bias. Therefore this concern should not be an issue if their relationship is sufficiently independent: the government should invest to maintain democracy, not to get positive news from the press. Democracies around the world should follow in the footsteps of the UK, Germany, and Canada—prioritizing the health of the press—due to its key part in preventing backsliding.

Social media platforms encourage political polarization, as it is more profitable for companies like X, Facebook, and Instagram to show viewers content they agree with as opposed to content in support of other ideals. For this reason the algorithms for each platform purposefully place content in front of each viewer that he or she agrees with to generate more clicks. In his 2025 Camden Conference talk, *What Have We Learned about Social Media and Political Polarization*, Joshua Tucker finds that these social media algorithms are increasing ‘affective polarization’, which is the tendency for members of individual parties to dislike each other (Tucker, 2025). Affective polarization is a huge step back towards achieving a positive political culture, and its spread must be controlled to prevent potential democratic backsliding. To solve this problem, algorithms must be adjusted to show political content to viewers regardless of their views, to effectively show spectators more sides of an issue, thus reducing radicalism. The Carnegie Endowment report is in agreement with this claim, “People who are

affectively polarized may dislike one another and be unaware that their policy beliefs overlap. Multiple studies found that when partisans were made aware that they shared policy beliefs across parties, their affective polarization declined.” (Kleinfeld, 2023) Affective polarization can therefore be decreased by adjusting social media algorithms to present viewers with content in an unbiased manner, as this would inform them of policy beliefs that overlap. This is not to say that social media algorithms should be eliminated, as the viewer specific content is what shapes the social media experience. Rather, only the algorithms around political content should be removed, as they are what contribute to increased affective political polarization.

In addition to creating a gulf between people, media platforms can be weaponized to spread disinformation. Disinformation plagues media platforms around the world for two main reasons: pressures by the government as well as the profitability that comes with disinformation. An example of government pressure on the media is occurring “...in Venezuela, [where] a report found over 400 instances of misinformation, often where the Maduro Regime censors its opposition.” More specifically, “... between July 2024 and February 2025 at least 421 instances of misinformation were reported; in the bimester July-August 108 instances were recorded; in the last four-month period of the year there were 248 records; and in the first two-month period of 2025, 65 instances were recorded. Of the 421 false instances, 28% were detected on Facebook, 26% on X, 25% on WhatsApp, and on other platforms (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Threads) 21% were recorded” (Soto, 2024). Disinformation as seen in Venezuela occurs around the world, and creates a confused public who does not know what to believe. This also goes towards increasing affective polarization, as disinformation pushes people apart, rather than bringing them together.

To solve this issue, an independent fact-checking organization should be created to stop the spread of disinformation/misinformation in the media. This should be done in different ways for social media and for the press. For social media, it should be mandated that each platform create a fact checking system inside of their company to prevent this issue. This is seen in Instagram, where a combination of third party checkers and AI is used to find and remove disinformation (“Instagram Help Center”). For the press, a government funded organization should be created to verify that the content released is truthful. France is an example of a modern democratic country where this strategy does exist. On the French Government website, a portal exists where a government organization labels news as “Désintox” or “Vrai ou Faux” (True or False), which verifies the reliability of press content. This has been effective in France, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many false rumors about vaccinations and quarantine were exposed. Some will argue that these strategies go against the economic liberalization policies that are central to democracies around the world. However, some government intervention must be taken to prevent potential democratic backsliding, making the governmental influence appropriate. Democracies should implement policies similar to France, and require social media platforms to follow in the footsteps of Instagram to maintain truth in media.

The media is under threat throughout the world. In the US, two news sources formerly funded by the government, PBS and NPR, have been targeted for elimination by the current US administration. In China the great firewall silences the views of millions of people who might not be in support of the government (Hauss, 2023). In Russia and Iran, the media is controlled by the government, and used to present disinformation to the public (Hauss, 2023). These examples highlight a global trend: when media independence is compromised, democratic integrity erodes.

To protect democracy, bold and immediate action must be taken. Governments should tackle this issue by investing in the media—not to create news in favor of their regime but to free the press from the need to make a profit by releasing unreliable content. If journalists are able to report freely without fearing for their funding, the public would see unbiased and balanced coverage of current events. Removing social media algorithms around politics is equally important to solve this issue. By showing viewers content from across the spectrum, political polarization will decrease, leading to a more positive political culture. Finally, independent fact checking organizations—both within social media platforms and in actual news sources—will prevent disinformation from confusing the public. These are the first steps that must be taken to solve this issue, to ensure the stability of democracy around the world.

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