

BEYOND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN FREEFALL – WHERE ARE WE NOW?

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A decade and a half after “Political Communication in Freefall” (Blumler & Coleman), this article asks where the crisis of civic-democratic political communication now stands. It argues that the problem is no longer an unanchored system in freefall but a more organised and consequential shift in the normative foundations of public discourse: political illiberalism has gained legitimacy, while core liberal-democratic norms of publicity—equal respect for voices, reason-giving, truth-testing, and openness to plural narratives—have weakened. Framed as a Weberian legitimisation conflict, the article examines how antagonistic value-sets contend over what counts as acceptable public controversy, who must justify claims, and which voices can be excluded without scandal. The British case (2016–2026) is used as a critical illustration: Brexit-era turbulence, rapid turnover of governments, declining turnout, and the rise of Reform UK reveal a democracy characterised by volatility without durable public orientation. The article then analyses the media’s role in this reconfiguration, arguing that elements of mainstream journalism—under structural-economic pressure and intensifying competition—have sometimes contributed to political chaos and illiberal normalisation, including through game framing, a narrow repertoire of expertise, and a degraded conception of impartiality under bad-faith conditions. Finally, the paper identifies four dimensions through which the new order is legitimated (ironic pragmatism, narrow expertise, hyper-fragmentation, and impunity for bad-faith actors) and concludes by calling for “democratic clarity”: a renewed set of normative commitments capable of resisting illiberal drift and rebuilding communicative conditions for democratic agency.

KEYWORDS political communication; illiberalism; legitimisation conflict; public sphere; journalistic impartiality; media fragmentation; disinformation; UK

A decade and a half ago the late Jay Blumler and I published an article entitled ‘Political Communication in Freefall: The British Case – and Others?’ in which we addressed what we considered to be a systemic crisis facing the civic-democratic model of political communication. We argued that this model was under assault from a Machiavellian approach to political strategy which reduced democratic contestation to the instrumental pursuit of power, heedless of normative obligations. We looked back in that article to what had once been regarded as something of a natural order of political communication: a structural pyramid consisting of defined roles, well described by Esser and Pfetsch (2013:30) as comprising ‘a horizontal dimension which depicts the interaction between media and political audience to produce messages for a mass audience’ and ‘a vertical dimension which refers

to the message flow that is produced at the interface between media and politics, on the one hand, and the public, on the other'. Our concern back in 2010 was that this structure was becoming destabilized, its democratic efficacy undermined by contingent and systemic pressures that were eroding convention without offering anything resembling a fresh institutional and normative approach to the circulation of information and the exchange of ideas that give meaning to the political process. There were still political elites. There were still citizens. But each seemed to be withdrawing from the other, speaking only to themselves and blaming one another for their reprehensible indifference. As the political scientist, Peter Mair (2006:76) astutely observed in his book *Ruling the Void: the hollowing of western democracy*, 'just as citizens retreat to their own private and particularized spheres of interest, so too the political and party leaders retreat into their own version of this private and particular sphere, which is constituted by the closed world of the governing institutions'.

In order to address this democratic pathology we focused upon what we referred to as 'recent, dramatic developments in British politics', which we suggested 'may well be characteristic of liberal-democratic political communication systems globally'. Our aim was not only to examine the specific, contextual features of those developments, but to explore systemic sources of this democratic malaise. Our impression then was that political communication, though still possessing legitimacy, was in freefall, unanchored from its well-established roots and directionless in its trajectory of travel. That is not the case now. The argument set out in this article is that political communication's direction is all too clear: political illiberalism is in the ascendancy, by which I mean an approach to public discourse which routinely excludes certain voices and arguments; marks out whole areas of public controversy as being off limits and beyond dialogue; affords credence to arguments and perspectives without requiring those who promote them to justify them in public or engage with challenging counter-arguments; dismisses the plurality of narratives through which complex cultures arrive at their identity; and, while claiming to champion individual freedom, allows such autonomy to be constrained by unjust systemic causes, refusing to take any responsibility for their enduring existence. In contrast, basic liberal norms such as unfettered communication between people whose voices are regarded by default as being worthy of equal respect; the assumption that all arguments relating to the social interest should be tested in the light of publicity where claims, reasons and beliefs are required to be justified in relation to conflicting opinions; and openness to diverse perspectives and social narratives, are on the wane. This shift in the foundations of public discourse, which itself reflects a more comprehensive illiberalism at the level of cynical state operations, leaves democratic norms of communication in an existential struggle for legitimacy, and in many contexts, effectively delegitimised. The term legitimisation is being applied here in the Weberian sense of the binding quality of norms as a result of being approved and upheld by social actors (Weber, 1954:124). The aim of this article is to explore how political communication is currently embroiled in a legitimisation conflict (Zürn, 2018), at the core of which are two antagonistic sets of values, only one of which is normatively compatible with democracy.

In pursuing this purpose, I shall turn once again to dramatic developments in British politics, this time over a ten-year period between 2016 and 2026. This empirical focus is adopted with sensitivity to the fact that the British case is quintessentially western and should not be treated in isolation from other histories and democratic models that have experienced different, if in some ways related, forms of normative erosion. However, the British case is particularly striking in providing a critical illustration of the effects of illiberal pressures over a relatively short period of time in what has been widely regarded as a stable liberal-democratic state characterised by a legacy of public institutions bound by the rule

of law, a strong public service broadcasting tradition and a normatively regulated media framework. Having considered that case, I shall return to the sources of pressure upon the political communication system discussed in the 2010 article and show how they have become exacerbated, and then point to some new, more radical sources of systemic disintegration which suggest that liberal democratic values are losing their hold. Finally, our 2010 article asked whether there were ways out of the rut. Blumler and I offered a sanguine institutional proposal which, upon reflection, was rooted in the liberal optimism that still obtained back then. However, as Knüpfer et al (2024) have rightly pointed out, there is a pressing need now for a new kind of 'democratic clarity' in responding to the illiberal surge, and it is with that in mind that this article concludes by setting out some basic normative commitments around which efforts to reinvigorate a democratic political communication system might coalesce.

The British Case – from Stability to Chaos

At the time when our 'freefall' article was published Britain was nearing the end of its longest stretch of Labour government (1997-2010) in its electoral history. The world was still suffering the after-shock of the 2008 financial crash and social insecurity was widespread. But Britain still had a predominantly stable two-party system (no party but Conservative or Labour had been in peace-time government since 1915) and, despite a growing partisan dealignment since the 1970s, British voters were used to alternation between the two main parties. The United Kingdom was still a member of the European Union and continued to regard the United States as its special ally. Gordon Brown's Labour government was behind in the polls and it was widely expected that the Conservative leader, David Cameron, would become the next Prime Minister, but the election results confounded the polls and Cameron was forced to form the country's first ever peace-time coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. That coalition lasted until 2015 when Cameron's Conservatives won their own electoral majority. However, Cameron was under immense pressure from the right-wing of his party and most of the British popular press to call a referendum on the question of leaving the European Union. The result of that 2016 referendum was a shock to the system. Cameron, having expected the electorate to stick with the status quo, lost the vote and duly resigned. Theresa May became Prime Minister and British government descended into a post-Brexit spiral of chaos.

An indicator of this chaos was that the length that governments managed to remain in office reduced, as it became increasingly impossible to sustain the confidence of MPs or the support of the electorate for the full five-years periods of government granted by the British constitution. This was quite exceptional for British politics. Between 1945 and 2017 most governments lasted in office for more than four years. The average length of UK governments between 2017 and 2024 was less than two years. Theresa May's government operated as a minority administration, incapable of passing the key legislation to secure an exit treaty from the European Union. Boris Johnson's Conservative government was elected with a big majority in 2019, but was paralysed by scandal in its final years because of Partygate (the regular holding of parties in and around Ten Downing Street during the pandemic while citizens were legally compelled to social distance). Johnson was forced to resign in disgrace in 2022, in which year there were no less than three different Conservative Prime Ministers, one of whom (Liz Truss) introduced policies that seriously spooked the global bond markets and resulted in a significant economic crisis. Within these post-Brexit governments party factionalism made it impossible to present anything resembling a united front and the febrile atmosphere within Parliament resulted in a public sense that elected representatives

had lost control. This unprecedented political turbulence, fuelled by the newspapers and their support for rival factions and would-be leaders, destroyed public confidence in the idea that elections resulted in stable governance.

Well before the election that took place in 2024 it was clear that the electorate had lost faith in the Conservatives, not only because of their reputation for in-fighting and scandal, but because of their long-term commitment to economic austerity as a response to the 2008 financial crash. The Labour Party won the 2024 election in what some journalists referred to as a landslide victory. In fact, the party only increased its share of the national vote by 2% from its 2019 performance, but because of the anomalies of the first-past-the-post electoral system it won 200 new seats, giving the Labour government a majority of 174 over all other parties. The election was disastrous for the Conservative Party which received its worst election result ever, with their share of the national vote share plummeting by 20 points to 24%, resulting in an unprecedented loss of 251 seats. In terms of national vote share, Reform was in third place at 14%, winning five seats. (The Liberal Democrats were 2 points behind them at 12% and the Greens took 7% of the national vote). Basic analysis of the 2024 general election result pointed to a political democracy that was in deep trouble. Firstly, this was an election in which just one in two eligible voters cast a vote, which was a record low since the introduction of universal suffrage. At 60%, turnout was the second lowest in any UK election since 1885. Secondly, only two out of ten eligible electors voted Labour. As landslides go, this looked more like a stroll in the democratic quicksand. Thirdly, although only five Reform party MPs were elected, with a share of the national vote that was only 1.7% higher than UKIP's in 2015, Reform candidates came second in 98 constituencies, 89 of which were won by Labour. This left the winning party extremely vulnerable to pressure from Reform in the next election. Indeed, the first two years of Keir Starmer's Labour government have been dominated by two major problems. The first is that Labour had not so much won the election as benefited from the Conservatives' collapse. This was very different from 1945 when voters looked to Labour as architects of a New Jerusalem. No sooner had the irritable electorate of 2024 elected a Labour government than they were looking at possible replacements for it. Reform UK's brand of populist nationalism proved attractive to many voters, but perhaps most of those who have opted for it when polled do so because it seeks to distance itself from traditional elite politics. The second problem facing Labour was that it had fought its 2024 election campaign on a promise to keep government spending within strict fiscal rules, which left it incapable of delivering the kind of social-democratic policies that many voters expected from a party of the left. Labour's first year in office was marred by a failure to offer any kind of vision of a less economically harsh future; a degree of policy zig-zagging, as so-called fiscal responsibility came into tension with backbench MP desires to seem radically different from their Conservative predecessors; and a growing sense that the party's class allegiances were not with those who sell their labour in order to live – an image dramatically illuminated by the scandal surrounding the party grandee, Peter Mandelson's close friendship with the convicted paedophile billionaire, Jeffrey Epstein.

How did the British media behave as this descent into political chaos unfolded? They were deeply implicated. Partly as a result of structural-economic pressures that have seriously constrained journalists' ability to carve out critical space; partly because of a relaxation of professional norms in the face of an unprecedentedly competitive market for news; and in some cases because journalists have found themselves tied to strategically ideological media organisations that require them to look the other way in the face of illiberal injustice, some (but by no means all) journalists have found themselves performing a central role in the legitimisation of what would not so long ago have been simply unthinkable.

The first observation to be made about the mainstream media (broadcasters and the press) concerns their almost total immersion in a narrow repertoire of repetitive storylines through which chaotic politics was framed. Every speech by a political leader seemed to be described as the most dangerous moment in their career – a live, mediated test of whether the nation is governable under their care. Every rumour of political in-fighting was presented as if it were historically momentous. Every hint of policy failure or programmatic inconsistency was framed as cumulative evidence of systemic political incompetence and/or mendacity. There was something of an unseemly excitement around political trouble that led well-informed and reflective broadcast commentators like Chris Mason (BBC) and Robert Peston (ITV) to sound like breathless witnesses from the feudal court, titillating their audiences with dark hints of simmering intrigue. Political journalists need to decide whether they are on the rollercoaster, screaming out at every unexpected turn and becoming dizzy with the excitement of it all, or scrutinising from the near sidelines, offering a sense of grounded perspective and normative clarity in moments of political turmoil. With the media so caught up in the buzz of frenetic politics, it became extremely difficult for governments to disseminate positive stories of policy effectiveness. As the veteran journalist, Polly Toynbee (*Guardian*, 22.12.25) notes, in its first year in office the Starmer government scored several impressive policy successes worth sharing with the public, but doing so when ‘only grim stories attract public attention’ seemed to be almost naively futile. Of course, it is the job of journalists to hold governments to account, but that is different from becoming ticket-sellers for their psychodramas. There is a parallel here with the US media which seems to devote enormous energy to reporting on the latest Trumpian outrage without firstly, moving beyond a recursive role of reactive outrage in the face of transgression and secondly, putting penetrating questions to the powerful about their positions on issues that really matter to everyday people.

While there is much that the British media can still be praised for in terms of deep analytical reporting, it is precisely in the midst of political chaos that this quality is most often conspicuously absent. There is a role for the media in such moments to confront governments and their opponents with their specifically democratic (as opposed to narrowly strategic) responsibilities. Impartiality, in the most basic sense of a striving for evidential objectivity and the fair representation of competing viewpoints and interests, remains a valuable aspiration in the midst of legitimisation conflict, this norm has too often been reduced to a naïve endeavour to strike a balance between evidential veracity and cynical manipulation. During the Brexit referendum a number of obviously untrue statements were made, ranging from the claim that millions of Turks would soon be joining the European Union and coming to work in Britain to the absurd promise that £350 million per week currently paid to the European Union would be spent on a post-Brexit National Health Service. Journalists did occasionally confront the deceivers about these claims, and in the case of Boris Johnson a look of boyish guilt at being caught in the act was recorded for posterity, but the bigger question is whether these lies should ever have been given serious space in public discourse. As when Donald Trump in the United States accused immigrants of eating people’s dogs, the question is not about whether there is scope for liberal refutation, but whether reasonable political debate can sustain the contamination of such well-resourced nonsense. The argument here is not that the media should more vigorously take sides, but that it should do a much better educative job in guarding the public domain from manifest disinformation.

In our 2010 article we identified five egregious roots of the political malaise as it was then. Each of these not only still applies, but has become heightened in the interim. Firstly, we pointed to how it had ‘become a default position of much political journalism that politicians

are out for themselves, that political mechanisms are cumbersome and ineffectual, and that if one wants to exert real influence, this is best done through the media than within existing constitutional structures. This position has become more institutionalised over the past decade and a half, with journalists increasingly seeing themselves as being in the business of exposure rather than explanation. Within the terms of the exposure frame they become partial authors of the agitated narratives that they appear to be describing. Locked into a cycle of meta-analysis, where they are constantly commenting on aspects of their own collective story, the political media assumes a role that is more like a detective on the scene of a crime than an educator offering dispassionate critique and clarity, taking account of the difficulties of satisfying the full range of public demands. After all these years, much of this may well be happening unconsciously, with young journalists being socialised to believe that their future prospects lie in exposing turpitude rather than explaining complexity.

Secondly, we pointed to 'an ever-increasing emphasis upon politics as a game', resulting 'in an incessant narrative of who is in and who is out, accounts of political credibility based upon often-flimsy poll data, parties devising policies with more than one eye on the media as their principal judges ...'. Recipients of mainstream news would be forgiven for concluding that politics consists of players from both political and media elites exciting themselves by enacting strategic manoeuvres in order to cast themselves as winners and their opponents as losers, leaving citizens feeling like the played. Of course, the game metaphor cannot be entirely excluded from a field in which the difference between winning and being in government and losing and being destined to somewhat impotent opposition is a reality of the constitutionally designed winner-takes-all arrangement. But the incessant focus upon the volatility of 'in' and 'out' popularity fails to capture a much richer aspect of democracy which involves the substance and salience of intellectual contestation. To put it simply, with rare exceptions (Coleman, 2026) the media pays far too little attention to the battle of ideas that precedes decisions being made and is over-focused upon the drama of the final count. Media attention is over-focused upon pollsters and their quantitative accounts of what the non-deliberating public would think if asked. That is a way to run betting odds, not a democracy.

Thirdly, there was what we referred to as a 'double-competitive whammy among and between politicians and journalists' whereby politicians are constantly engaged in selling themselves to a small group of journalists, while ever-more competitive media operators are driven to rely upon politicians to fill news holes. This reciprocal entanglement, whereby people who too often went to the same schools and universities and live in the same neighbourhoods engage in a process designed to generate mutual reward, has now reached the point in which role distinctions between politicians and political commentators are becoming dangerously blurred. For example, the license given to GB News, which is jointly owned by a British hedge fund owner and a Dubai-based investment company, and exists to present right-wing news and commentary to a UK audience, is exceptional within British broadcasting in explicitly supporting one political party (Reform UK) and having as its presenters and panel commentators an overwhelming number of salaried staff who are themselves far-right-wing politicians. There are regulatory questions to be considered in relation to this matter, and the UK media regulator, Ofcom, has had several run-ins with GB News, although many feel that the former has yet to really show its teeth. As importantly, there is the question of whether such echo-chamber broadcasting (which is already embedded in much of the online mediaspace) is compatible with an ethos of separating the actors on the stage from the critics who are evaluating their performances. Watching a news show presented nightly by Nigel Farage (media presenter) in which he observes how spot-on the policies of Nigel Farage (party leader) is symptomatic of a double-whammy at the heart of the public sphere.

Fourthly, we referred to a 'burgeoning undergrowth of political news and opinion sources' online. Social media remains a potential space of pluralistic expression in which

political connections can be made, often inadvertently, and official gatekeepers eluded. In many parts of the world it is the safest space available for autonomous activity and a needle in the side of autocracies. That said, two factors undermine the vulnerable democratic potential of social media in countries like the UK and USA. The first is the tyranny of corporately-designed algorithms which reinforce polarised silos and vulgarise the tone of public discussion by rewarding aggressive self-presentation. The second is the emergence of cyber warfare whereby states and other malign actors set out to exploit, weaken and derail liberal-democratic values and practices. In 2010 Twitter was a difficult space in which to engage in intelligent debate. Now, under its new name X, it is for many a dangerous place; one from which serious democrats might be best withdrawing. Alas, not only is this 'burgeoning undergrowth' failing to provide the sort of escape from mainstream media pathologies, it is now feeding them. When the holder of the most powerful office in the world makes most of his policy declarations in the middle of the night in viciously phrased and grammatically ignorant terms on his own social media platform, in the full expectation that it will be the next day's mainstream media headlines, the flow of political information fitting for a democracy is dangerously off track.

Fifthly, we referred in 2010 to how a less deferential public was becoming culturally fractured and volatile in its media consumption. That fragmentation is much greater now than it was then, as the extensive literature on polarisation shows (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2023; Rodilosso, 2024). For some, this trend has extended into forms of identity politics whereby all news is filtered through a cultural prism. But for many others, the kind of news attentiveness and civic participation that once went with a broad sense of democratic duty has not given rise to selective activism, but to forms of nihilism and fatalism that emerge from stealthy egression from the public sphere. Rather than committing to specific judgments, these are the people who tell pollsters in focus groups that they find themselves in a permanent state of suspicion. The British media makes much of the fact that Keir Starmer is the most unpopular British Prime Minister in the history of modern polling, but the three most unpopular Prime Ministers before him were his three predecessors. At the time of writing, Donald Trump has some of the highest disapproval ratings in modern presidential history, but the next highest were those of his predecessor, Joe Biden. People have got used to detesting elected leaders. That might be a sign of a critical electorate, disinclined to offer Chinese or North Korean approval ratings to their leaders, but when hostility becomes a default habit the consequence is that democracies become ungovernable.

The systemic roots of 'political freefall' in 2010 are all still here a decade and a half later, now more embedded and taken for granted. Were the analysis to stop there, the scope for remedial action might still be cast in an ameliorative tone. However, we are not simply witnessing the exacerbation of pre-existing trends. As we shall show in the next section, democracy, both as a value system and a repertoire of practices, is now engaged in an existential struggle and the political communication system, rather than being organised to support democratic survival, is in many respects a collusive resource of intransigent illiberalism.

Democracy Challenged

In her 2025 State of the Union Address, the President of the European Union, Ursula von der Leyen began with the direst of warnings:

Europe is in a fight ... A fight for our values and our democracies. A fight for our liberty and our ability to determine our destiny for ourselves. Make no mistake – this is a fight for our future. (European Commission, 2025)

She went on to reflect that 'I thought long and hard about whether to start this State of the Union address with such a stark appraisal', but concluded that as the very basis of democracy was under attack, it was important to be explicit about this new reality. Von der Leyen's listeners would have been in little doubt as to the tumultuous trends to which she was referring: a return to the nineteenth century world order whereby a small group of big powers operating in accordance with their own unpredictable and avaricious interests feel able to regard the rest of the world as exploitable dependencies; the passing of the twentieth-century experiment in rules-based order rooted in international law and globally accountable institutions; the demise of authoritative public knowledge, as wild and apocryphal 'facts' and narratives circulate within an epistemic domain in which charlatans, rogue state actors and conspiracy promoters are able to enjoy equal status with peer-reviewed research and scrupulously verified journalism; the fragmentation of civic publics into identity-based tribes, often driven by ethno-nationalist notions of 'us' and 'them'; and a growing disdain amongst certain politicians for fundamental norms of electoral legitimacy, media plurality, minority rights and judicial independence. These are not features of a dystopian future that might arise if insufficient attention is paid to the nurturance of liberal-democratic values. This is the nadir that we have reached.

Although von der Leyen might not highlight these as features of the existential threat to democracy, it should be acknowledged that the current moment is also characterised by the reconfiguration of global markets in which finance capital is now the dominant actor, dividing the world into debtor and creditor nations and giving enormous policy leverage to bond markets which operate beyond the realm of sovereign accountability; the prevalence of a post-welfare rationality by which all citizens, regardless of disadvantage, are expected to make their own way in life as units of initiative, bearing full responsibility for the consequences of their actions no matter how severe the constraints of unjust structures limit their agency; the deregulation of media industry standards, thereby opening up space for owners who have no interest in authoritative knowledge, the civic interest or pluralistic discourses to pursue whatever agendas they wish; and a troubling harshness in the tone and language of political discourse which leaves a substantial section of the demos losing confidence in the prospect of collective determination arising from the robust exchange of ideas and plans.

Back in 2010 there were prescient commentators who warned that the recent financial crash would be catastrophic in its consequences, compelling the least advantaged members of society to pay the long-term costs of capitalist recklessness, but it is only relatively recently that the world has found itself so manifestly caught between the sustainability of democratic norms and practices and the illiberal logic of the new world disorder. How did we reach this point in such a short time? Changes of such magnitude, even when they occur by stealth, backsliding and moral erosion rather than coups or cataclysms, have to attain legitimisation. As Lance Bennett and Marianne Kneuer (2003:5) point out in their highly insightful account of the rise of illiberal public spheres, 'styles of communication are indicators of the quality of democratic public life and ... communication systems can alternately erode or legitimize other political institutions'. How was it that the political communication system fell in so abjectly with the post-democratic drift?

Atrophy of the Public Sphere

At the core of any society is communicative space in which groups and individuals can express themselves, competing interpretations of reality circulate, political moods can be worked through, interest-holders seek to assemble support, and political claims can

be measured against public experience within various fora of debate. Habermas (1991) famously wrote of the emergence of such spaces in the fledgling liberal societies of eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe as a public sphere and, although what he presented as an empirical snapshot turns out to have been something of an idealised account that failed to register a range of exclusions and misrecognitions, this archetype remains important as a normative aspiration. The public sphere comprises more than media organisations and social networks. It is a cultural space within which political mediation takes place at every level of society, across and beyond 'the media'. The openness of the public sphere is perhaps one of the most celebrated claims made by liberal democracies, marking a striking contrast with societies in which opportunities for public expression, mobilisation and resistance are ruthlessly or stealthily closed down.

As globalisation and neoliberal ideology have permeated states that were once characterised by liberal-democratic norms, governments have lost interest in protection of the public sphere. Their reasoning for doing so is that power is increasingly exercised at the global level by unaccountable transnational bodies, meaning that what goes on within national public spheres is of diminishing relevance or efficacy; that as neoliberal ideology is less interested in voice than investment, what occurs in spaces of critical talk and deliberation comes to be regarded as mere noise; and that the survival of public space is seen as constituting a failure of market omnipresence and a case for commercial colonisation. It follows that once robust public institutions like national broadcasting, universities, library services or adult education have been left to thrive or fail under market conditions. According to neoliberal rationality, if consumers do not want to buy such services, then they are unprofitable and therefore unsustainable. Social architectures that had been cumulatively developed over the course of the last century with a view to providing for social needs that will never be registered as sources of profit have tended to be privatised, deregulated and hollowed out. The lofty norms that characterised the liberal-democratic political communication system, as outlined by twentieth-century media scholars like Jay Blumler, James Curran, Jean Seaton, Paddy Scannell and Nicholas Garnham, were highly dependent upon the willingness of enlightened states to resource public knowledge collation and dissemination with a view to generating positive externalities. That is to say, even when the production of news, public information and fora for debate were not profitable, they served a public interest that could not be supplied if left to market rationality. Neoliberal states still recognise the value of certain externalities, particularly in relation to policing and defence, but the notion of publicly resourcing the public sphere goes against the new spirit of the age. Even when public-service media institutions have been allowed to survive, as in the case of the British BBC, they have tended to have their funding squeezed, their editorial judgments threatened by hostile factions within the license-fee-setting state and bullied into a self-imposed timidity resulting from an impractical trade-off between editorial independence and political accountability to the government of the day. Snapping at the heels of public-service media are a range of political communication channels and platforms that invest little or nothing into public-interest areas such as investigative journalism or fact-checking. These new political communicators have a commercial rationale to remain focused upon a narrow range of in-demand/clickbait content; are under no regulatory obligation to provide their audiences with pathways into the public sphere; and are often owned by the very strategic actors whose fortunes depend upon the success of the neoliberal globalising project.

While the prevalent direction of travel is towards illiberal disregard for public goods and democratic agency, there is nothing inevitable about actors within the political communication system blindly following this trajectory. The policies and behaviour of media institutions are not deterministically shaped, but, as 'inhabited institutions' (Hallett and

Vantresca, 2006), they are subject to decisions made by editors, journalists, political commentators, programmers and moderators, as well as owners, investors and appointed board members. These actors have choices regarding their part in the legitimisation of the new neoliberal settlement and its neglect of the public sphere. The legitimisation of an illiberal political communication order is a consequence of political commitments enacted by people with the power to enact them. In turning to four dimensions of that legitimation, it is critically important to acknowledge that we are dealing with political choices that remain open to contestation. Each of the following illustrative dimensions involve matters of political choice rather than ineluctable systemic elements. Once again, the focus of what follows is upon the British case on the assumption that it shares many characteristics with other weakened liberal democracies.

A Tone of Ironic Pragmatism

Reporting and commentary on the relentless political chaos, economic turbulence and cultural anxiety of the past decade has been predominantly covered by British broadcasters and newspapers in a tone of resigned exasperation, somehow locked into a recursive loop of foretold disenchantment. Failed plans and policies, under-achieving governments, morally exposed politicians, international insecurity and publics turning in on one another – all of these are recorded with a sigh of long sufferance. One is referring here to a tone rather than content, but it is often the case in moments of historical uncertainty and anxiety that tonality tells its own poignant story. Writing about the BBC's construction of the Nazi enemy during the Second World War, Siân Nicholas (2011:170) observes that

... to focus solely on the vocabulary of discussion would be to oversimplify the web of cultural negotiations required in transmitting and interpreting broadcast propaganda. Of at least as much importance is the 'tone' of propaganda: the voice behind the words (authoritative/familiar/satirical/sarcastic etc.), and the context in which it appears (a news broadcast/a 'serious' or 'light' talk/a comedy reference etc.).

The tone of the chief political correspondents of the two most popular mainstream TV channels (BBC and ITV), as well as most of the leading political commentators in the press, is marked by an ironic pragmatism – 'Here they go again'; 'It is what it is'; 'What else can you expect?' – that fails to provide any kind of historical theorisation of the recursive events and patterns confronting contemporary society. By not referring to or attempting to explain the global turn to neoliberalism, news is presented as an endless sequence of episodic dramas, linked if at all by the general incompetence of politicians and the inevitable failure of hubristic attempts to make plans for the future. The cumulative effect of this is to devalorise constructive political endeavours and set the scene for the neoliberal mantra that only market contingencies can be trusted, while it is the task of smart governments to adjust to the whims of investors.

Tonality is a political choice. As Hart et al (2013:221) point out, tone is omni-functional: 'It conditions or qualifies what is being said and thus permits a kind of double-messaging'. The ironic-pragmatic tone adopted by British journalists in the face of political and economic crisis seems to be describing an inevitable course of events, but its effect is to signal the necessity of fatalistic endurance. This has been particularly evident in post-Brexit media commentary on the troubled state of the British economy. There has been a coyness about acknowledging the damages to British trade, financial status and support for infrastructural regeneration, with Brexit mainly spoken of as defining an inexorable reality rather

than being a consequence of a long-term political project intended to establish the unattainable goal of national economic sovereignty. Faced with a choice between reflecting the overwhelming evidence of Brexit's negative effects and treating Brexit with fatalistic resignation, most journalists have opted for the latter (Houde and Stockwell, 2025).

Reference to a Narrow Range of Expertise

In a democracy the media have a fundamental obligation to offer citizens a range of perspectives and choices to consider in relation to issues that might ultimately determine how they live with one other. This calls for more than the maintenance of 'balance' between competing viewpoints. The media's role is to clarify the nature of problems and to provide platforms for a wide range of voices reflecting broad social experience to be heard. However, the evidence from empirical studies suggests that media coverage of the neoliberal economy relies upon a very limited range of sources. Mike Berry (2019:77) has clearly demonstrated in his detailed empirical study of which voices were heard on British broadcast media in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 crash, 'the largest source category was again people from the finance sector such as bankers, stockbrokers or analysts'. Berry (2019:168) goes on to point out how:

In discussing the consequences of the deficit there was a remarkable consensus that stretched across the right- and leftwing press and the BBC. This was that the deficit threatened future debt refinancing, interest rates, sterling and the country's credit rating. Economists or other analysts who questioned this consensus were not featured in television coverage and barely appeared in newspaper accounts. One possible reason for the consensus was the high level of routine access given to City sources whose views were treated as authoritative accounts by many journalists.

This narrowing of knowledge sources, whereby most 'expert' interviews are with an ideologically homogeneous range of industry and City insiders and trusted think- tanks such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), while trade unionists, community organisations or critical academic economists are ignored, reflects a move in the direction of technocratic analysis, according to which social problems are primarily functional pathologies to be fixed by qualified experts rather than occasions for normative choice and contestation. This accords with the neoliberal premise that market rationality, rather like the law of gravity, is inviolable and that the task of politicians is to keep up with the demands of economic inevitability.

A Hyper-Fragmentated Public Sphere

As citizens are faced with more choices than ever before about how to receive news, the very idea of a 'general public', as both addressee of information and participants in a national conversation, has become difficult to sustain. For nearly half a century television audiences, which once had a choice of only two or three news providers, are now faced with an abundance of channels, not only offering them radically different takes on the news, but allowing them if they choose to completely ignore news content. Television's role within the public sphere is diminished by these easy opt-outs and democracy suffers from the absence of socially cross-cutting exchanges of experience, knowledge, and comment.

Beyond the mainstream media, from which most under-30-year-olds no longer receive their news, information is theoretically available from multiple, diverse sources,

but in reality most online news is filtered through a few corporately-controlled platforms which gather information from across the web, process it for algorithmic delivery and track its reception. While digital news distributors do not produce news as such, ‘their judgments and policies do affect the nature and range of news content that we have access to Foster (Foster, 2012:6). In stark contrast to the universalist assumptions of the public sphere and public-service media, digital platforms are designed to filter information to individualised demand, thereby protecting users from the civic burden of having to acknowledge thoughts or experiences that are beyond their ideological comfort zone. Echo chambers and filter bubbles are the antithesis of the public sphere. They are also perfect incubators for the neoliberal condition in which public connection gives way to atomised entrepreneurialism and practices of collective action give way to ever-narrowing forms of identity-based competition. As news and public discourse become ever more targeted and siloed, other forms of media entertainment, such as reality formats, focus increasingly upon the lone ego’s struggle to survive against other vying egos.

Here again, choices are involved. Filter bubbles are outcomes of algorithmic design and could be broken up by effective regulatory interventions. And yet most mediated public discourse focuses upon the threats and risks of the internet to public civility, without attending to the policy options open to states, which would of course entail taking on the globally powerful tech companies.

Impunity for Bad-faith Actors

While the reconfiguration of communication technologies and media structures play their part in the diminution of democratic agency, it would be a mistake to think of these historical developments as generating deterministic effects. As Simone Chambers and Jeffrey Kopstein (2022:225) have insightfully argued, by ascribing blame to malevolent platforms, there is a danger of arriving at ‘an unwarranted techno-dystopian defeatism’ in which moral agency is imputed to impersonal structures. Rather, they state, ‘the dangers to democracy posed by information technology have more to do with political bad actors intentionally targeting democracy than with either the technology itself or the economic forces driving the developments and expansion of that technology’. Much of the disruption to democracy over the past decade has been purposely driven by bad-faith actors seeking to take advantage of the freedom of the public sphere to spread disinformation, undermine trust in democratic institutions, manipulate vulnerable groups and weaken people’s confidence in their capacity to tell the difference between reality and fiction. Steve Bannon’s infamous strategy of ‘flooding the zone with shit’ – i.e. creating a plethora of crazy stories designed to disorientate and bamboozle audiences – could serve as a five-word mantra not only for the Trump Presidency, but for this entire era in which bad-faith actors ranging from political ideologues preferring to manipulate public opinion by stealth rather than open persuasion, anonymous lobbyists employed by corporate interests with a view to distorting public reason and rogue states working in the information sphere to disrupt and demoralise democratic values have created what Bennett and Livingston (2012) describe as a ‘disinformation order’. In their provocative analysis of what they call ‘informational autocrats’, Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman (2019:123) argue that:

The totalitarian tyrants of the past employed mass violence, ideological indoctrination, and closed borders to monopolize power. Most authoritarian rulers also used brutal repression to spread fear. However, in recent decades, a growing number of

nondemocratic leaders have chosen a different approach. Their goal - concentrating power - remains the same. But their strategy is new. Rather than intimidating the public, they manipulate information—buying the elite's silence, censoring private media, and broadcasting propaganda—in order to boost their popularity and eliminate threats.

The impunity granted to those choosing to communicate to the public in bad faith, often by using 'liberalism's own positions against itself, such as demanding a right to free speech and tolerance to promote illiberal ideas, even as they would deprive others of these privileges' (Knüpfer et al, 2024:1012) has left democratic societies epistemically vulnerable to those who would intentionally undermine them.

The Politics of Legitimation Conflict

If political communication was once in freefall, it now seems to have hit the ground with a crash. The illiberal zeitgeist is palpable. But it is not as if everything is going well for the neoliberal order. The apparent strength of its legitimacy is reiteratively destabilised by its dire record of recurrent institutional crises, plummeting public trust, erratic economic performance, propensity towards unwinnable warfare and apocalyptic ecological prognosis. Motives for popular unsettlement, alienation and resentment born of lived experience are abundant in present-day society. Such feelings can provide a breeding ground for authoritarian populists who are adept at exploiting the vacuum in public discourse once occupied by liberal-democratic norms and practices. Playing upon the public's desire for change and loss of confidence in its own agency, populists offer to deliver the former while leaving the latter intact.

An alternative to the populist non-alternative is proposed by Nancy Fraser (2015:189):

Absent a reinvention of public power, there is no hope of successfully addressing the ecological, economic, or social dimensions of crisis. The crisis of democracy demands our attention, then, both for its own sake and for the sake of our other problems.

Reinventing public power calls for a coalition around a set of basic normative commitments to a reinforced confidence in the exercise of democratic agency untrammelled by market priorities; a recovery of communicative spaces conceived as public goods; and a refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of social power, including mediated symbolic power, unless it is exercised in full accountability to citizens. These principles are far from constituting a programmatic strategy, but may serve as a moral vocabulary with which the legitimacy of post-democratic illiberalism can be effectively challenged. The core assertion of the new illiberal settlement is that the scope for democratic agency is minimal and decisions should therefore be left to the hidden hand of the market. In short, its legitimacy depends upon the potency of the invisible. However, the study of political communication, if it has a normative core, is to resist the invisibility of power.

As it emerged in the last century, the scholarly field of political communication took as its object the endeavours by political actors to coordinate power authoritatively. The new imperative is not merely to witness how others accomplish political legitimation, but to summon our intellectual resources with a view to challenging the legitimacy of norms and practices which, if merely left to empirical description, would attenuate and ultimately eliminate the vitality of democracy.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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