POPULISM AND MEDIA POLICY FAILURE

The 'parade of the aghast'

One of the explanations for the rise in prominence of populist challenges to centrist political forces has focused on the former's effective use of the media: their ability to transmit 'sentiment' over 'fact', to use 'authentic' language, to make full use of social media and to exploit the mainstream media's appetite for sensationalist stories. 'All neo-populist movements', argues Gianpetro Mazzoleni (2003: 6), 'rely heavily on some kind of indirect (and direct) complicity with the mass media, and all are led by politicians who, with few exceptions, are shrewd and capable "newsmakers" themselves.' In Europe and North America, this has worked to the advantage of iconoclastic or right politicians like Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and the former UKIP leader Nigel Farage who have all received extensive airtime in which they have combined nativist rhetoric with outbursts against the political establishment (no matter how privileged they themselves may be). A dangerous cocktail of tabloid values, falling levels of trust in the media and unaccountable tech power (facilitating the spread of hyper-partisan and sometimes 'fake' news) is widely seen to be intimately linked to the rise in recent years both of a xenophobic populism and polarised media and political environments (Barnett, 2017; Benkler et al, 2017, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2017).

Yet the political earthquakes of Trump and Brexit were greeted with astonishment and confusion by some of the most prestigious names in mainstream journalism who had, to use a popular expression, misread the tea-leaves. Trump's victory, for example, 'was the night that

wasn't supposed to happen, that had almost no chance of happening' opined the public editor of the *New York Times* (Spayd, 2016) while her bosses, publisher Arthur O. Sulzberger Jr and editor Dean Baquet (2017), admitted that '[a]fter such an erratic and unpredictable election there are inevitable questions: Did Donald Trump's sheer unconventionality lead us and other news outlets to underestimate his support among American voters?' Reporters at Politico were blunt: 'we were more than wrong. We were laughably oblivious. The entre Washington political-media complex missed the mark. Not by inches or feet, but by miles…There will be plenty of time to dissect it all. The joke is on us' (Palmer and Sherman, 2016). The joke wasn't just confined to the US: for Jon Snow, the veteran presenter of *Channel Four News*, the British media 'failed, not only over the [Brexit] Referendum, but perhaps over reporting Europe at all down the 40 years of the UK's membership. Amid the fresh mown lies (or fake news) of the campaign itself, we didn't have a chance' (Snow 2017).

Elite journalism, however, largely recused itself from any direct responsibility for events such as Trump and Brexit and instead embarked on what some journalists described as a period of self-reflection: 'to 'think hard about the half of America the paper too seldom covers' according to the *NYT*'s Spayd (2016) and, for Sulzberger and Baquet (2016), to 'rededicate ourselves to the fundamental mission of Times journalism…to hold power to account, impartially and unflinchingly'. Modest changes have been made: mastheads have been amended (for example, the *Washington Post*'s 'Democracy Dies in Darkness') and mission statements revised, such as the *Guardian* editor's promise relentlessly to 'challenge the economic assumptions of the last three decades, which have extended market values such as competition and self-interest far beyond their natural sphere and seized the public realm' (Viner, 2017). Additionally, robust 'anti-populist' editorial stances have been widely adopted as demonstrated

by the *NYT*'s decision to publicly denounce Trump as a 'liar' and the tidal wave of anti-Trump coverage across liberal broadcast and print news outlets in response to his presidency (Patterson, 2017). While this strategy has been good for business – there has been a spike in subscriptions following the election of Trump and Brexit to outlets like the *Post*, the *NYT*, *Vanity Fair* and the *Guardian* together with rising viewing figures for CNN and MSNBC (Doctor, 2017) – it is less clear how effective this will be in holding reactionary populism to account. For example, the US journalist Thomas Frank has described 'Trump denunciation' as 'a parade of the aghast' in which 'all the skills of the journalist [have been] reduced to a performance of perturbation and disgust' (Frank 2017), a situation that does little either to undermine Trump himself or to discover the roots of the problems that may have engineered his election success.

Similarly, little attention has been paid to the *structural* conditions that underlie what Victor Pickard calls the 'misinformation society' and the 'commercial imperatives [that] drove news organizations to popularize a dangerous politics' (Pickard, 2018: 195). In particular, there has been scant critical examination of the policy actions (and inactions) that have facilitated environments in which the coverage of populist leaders and narratives is not simply profitable but the logical outcome of media markets in liberal democracies that are wedded to ratings and controversy. Minor editorial changes and software updates are hardly likely to compensate for the systemic degeneration of communication systems in which power has been increasingly consolidated by oligopolistic digital intermediaries and media giants, in which liberal news media have failed sufficiently to address the roots of polarisation, in which public media have increasingly been identified not as monitors but as embodiments of elite power and, finally, in which highly partisan right wing media have been emboldened and rewarded.

In this combustible context, this article reflects on the implication for media systems of liberal conceptions of right-wing populism that see it as a threat to 'reason' and social order as well as to consensual and 'objective' journalism. From this 'anti-populist' perspective, 'mediated populism' can be seen as an example of 'policy failure' yet the underlying reasons for this failure, and especially the idea that we might want to consider fresh policy options that would foster more diverse and democratic media environments, are all too often ignored. The article does not claim that this failure has *led* to the rise of right-wing populism nor does it claim that there is a media policy 'solution' to the populist surge. Instead it argues that existing liberal approaches to media policy have contributed to highly unequal and distorted communication systems that have been exploited by forces on the far right and that need to be corrected as part of a broader challenge to right-wing populism. These failings in media systems have previously been explained by concepts such as 'policy failure' (Pickard, 2014), 'regulatory failure' (Horwitz, 1989) and 'media policy silences' (Freedman, 2014) but they are just as relevant to contemporary spaces in which 'misinformation' thrives and xenophobia and white nationalism are able to find their voice.

The article focuses largely on examples from the US and the UK not because they epitomise some sort of undifferentiated 'global populism' (see Chakravartty and Roy, 2017 for a fascinating account of 'mediatised populisms' across the Inter-Asian region; see also Artz, 2017, for an equally interesting collection of essays on populist media policies across Latin America) but because, since the 1980s, they have provided some of the earliest and most visible examples of an emerging market-oriented communications policy paradigm characterised, according to Van Cuilenburg and McQuail (2003: 197), by a susceptibility to '[p]ragmatism and populism'. Of course there is an enormous difference between the hypercommercial US media, the mixed

ecology of the UK and far more regulated Scandinavian media systems but none of them are insulated from the market pressures and technological affordances that are re-writing contemporary political communications landscapes. The article first poses a particular way of framing populism, considers the strengths and weaknesses of theories of 'mediated populism' and then identifies four areas of 'policy failure' that have nurtured highly skewed media environments in which far right perspectives have been widely amplified. The article concludes with a call to devise a new policy paradigm based around *redistribution* that aims that to reconstruct media systems in order both to resist both state and market capture and to undermine the appeal of populist forces on the far right.

Populism as policy failure

Without wishing to add to the 'terminological mess' that, according to Cas Mudde (2017: 12) marks the scholarship on populism, this article seeks less to define right-wing populism than to understand it from the perspective of some of its harshest critics from the political centre: as an existential threat to liberal democracy. True, there do appear to be some common tropes that circumscribe populism as a specific type of political phenomenon: its 'anti-pluralism'(Mueller, 2016), its appeal to a 'pure people' in opposition to a 'corrupt elite' (Mudde, 2007: 23), its 'anti-status quo dimension' (Panizza, 2005: 3), its distinct and vernacular 'political style' (Moffitt, 2016) and finally, as I have already noted, its dependence on 'media action' (Mazzoleni, 2008: 50). What I am most interested in, however, is the extent to which contemporary populism is condemned as a form of 'illiberal democracy' – as class- and identity-based movements that seek

to mobilize 'resistance to moderate, centrist or established political elites from both sides of the political spectrum' (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2017: 46).

Far right populism, understood in these terms, is not just as a challenge to representative forms of democracy but – especially given its recent electoral successes – as evidence of a more profound breakdown of the 'centre ground'. In this sense, it can be conceptualised as a type of 'market failure' arising out of the inability of liberal politics to cater effectively to all tastes and demographics by over-representing those people whose interests it deems to be most 'lucrative' (for example, middle-class voters who are seen as low-risk) and marginalising those who are more 'expensive' to seek out (those who are seen to be 'high risk' such as the poor and the marginalised). This is similar to the sorts of market failure generated in a range of industries (including the media) which then require particular kinds of corrective policy actions, not least to address the 'information asymmetries' (Stiglitz, 1982: 8) and unwelcome externalities (of which right-wing populism is clearly one) that distort the production and allocation of goods. Liberal democracy appears to be suffering from the same set of problems: it has super-served elites and under-served minorities and the poor (Piketty, 2014) while fostering a polarised and asymmetrical public sphere (Benkler et al, 2017); its adherents across Western Europe and North America have implemented austerity programmes that both intensify inequality and roll back the traditional welfarist 'market failure' policies that might help to ameliorate the pain (if not, of course, to address its underlying causes) (Blyth, 2013). Populists, meanwhile, have been very quick to take advantage of this market failure by reaching out to those individuals and groups whose interests do not lie within this narrowly defined liberal market consensus and by attempting to represent their cultural and economic anxieties. Neoliberalism may not the sole

cause of contemporary populisms but it has certainly intensified the economic and cultural

tensions on which far right populists have been quick to prey.

This 'dismissal' of populism by liberal elites is, according to Ernesto Laclau, 'part of the

discursive construction of a certain normality, of an ascetic political universe from which its

dangerous logics had to be excluded' (2005: 19). For Laclau, this involves not simply the elite's

fear of rowdy crowds and dissenting publics but also its denigration of populism's simplistic,

binarized operating system as 'irrational and undefinable' (2005: 16). In this context, liberal

democracy's failure to address the underlying grievances caused by neoliberal policies that have

increased inequality and diminished the public sphere (Brown, 2015) has provided fertile ground

for the right-wing populism that is the focus of this article. Populism's opacity and the

'emptiness' of its political symbols (Laclau, 2005: 12) means that it is ripe for exploitation by

competing political forces with very different attitudes towards sovereignty, democracy and

indeed the very construction of the 'people'. However I am less interested here in how different

kinds of populists have battled for influence so much as whether existing pluralist media policy

paradigms have contributed to conditions in which, in particular, illiberal political forces have

been able to thrive. If populism is indeed, at least in part, a response to the failure of the liberal

political market to cater for all citizens, then to what extent has this failure been facilitated by

contemporary media policy environments and with what consequences?

The rise of 'mediated populism'

I have already referred to a growing literature that argues that a central precondition for the

ability of populist movements to challenge the hegemony of centrist parties struggling with

issues of legitimacy and trust is their ability to communicate the anger and emotion that will resonate with disaffected publics. Far right populist parties have been especially successful in winning coverage of their appeals to what Alvares and Dahlgren (2016: 49) describe as core populist tropes: 'an idealised sense of historical nation and (often ethnic) community – "the people", as well as a critical stance towards "the elites".' Ruth Wodak argues that right-wing populist parties are actually dependent on 'performance strategies in modern media democracies' (Wodak 2013: 27) and insists that their growth is dependent on visibility generated by the media. According to Gianpetro Mazzoleni, media organisations are complicit with populist movements in what he describes as 'mediated populism', defined as 'the outcome of the close connection between media-originated dynamics and the rise of populist sentiments' (2015: 376). It is thus increasingly difficult to imagine 'unmediated' forms of populism in any part of the world with 'mediated populism' apparent not simply in Europe and North America but in India (Chakravartty and Roy, 2015), Indonesia (Mouffe, 2019) and across Latin America (Waisbord, 2012).

Tabloid media, especially sensitive to market imperatives and often adept at using vernacular language, are often seen as key vehicles for the circulation and normalisation of populist ideas. Mazzoleni (2008: 59-62) maps out a 'media-market life-cycle' of populist movements in which tabloid media amplify anti-elite sentiment in an initial 'ground-paying phase before bowing to the allure of populist leaders in a later 'insurgent' phase – precisely what we saw with the endless attention given to Trump, Farage, Le Pen and Modi during their respective election campaigns. This is followed by a more tense relationship when populist parties become more established and thus less of a sensational news story and, finally, a period of decline when the initial excitement generated by populist iconoclasm has long disappeared.

Elite media, described by Mazzoleni as 'the mouthpieces of the ruling classes' (2008: 51), have a rather more complicated relationship to populist movements but they are equally central to the legitimation of right-wing populist ideas. According to Mazzoleni, elite media ignore populists at first and then respond to their insurgency 'by adopting tones of outrage and ridicule' (2008: 61) – precisely the 'aghastness' referred to earlier by Thomas Frank. Yet the established news media are by no means immune to the commercial and ideological sheen of right-wing populism and 'can display an unprecedented deference to populist parties that have gained power' (2008: 61). Of course this is not always the case – witness their opposition to Trump in the US – but the establishment's 'sacerdotal' attitude to power often leads to illiberal political forces receiving 'compliant media treatment' (2008: 61) from liberal media outlets who pave the way for the normalisation of populist agendas on, for example, topics such as immigration and crime (Holt et al, 2008).

While Mazzoleni's analysis certainly appears to fit the pattern of coverage of far right parties in a whole range of European countries, there are perhaps two key problems associated with this understanding of 'mediated populism.'

The first concerns the elevation of 'media logic' above other factors in explaining both the construction and normalisation of far right movements. Although Mazzoleni insists that he is not making any 'causal links between the media and the spread of populism' (2008: 50), he nevertheless argues that media are inseparable from populism as it emerges in any specific context, generating 'media parties' and giving 'status' to what were previously dissident discourses. The danger is that by fetishising the role of the media, we run the risk of underestimating the significance of the broader political factors that play a key role in cementing

the appeal of right-wing populist parties: alienation from elite institutions, cultural and economic insecurities and nativist opposition to immigration.

A second problem with traditional accounts of 'mediated populism' is their failure to consider media environments as products of policy action (and inaction). While some scholars certainly do talk about the structural factors of media systems that pertain to the opportunities for populists to be widely publicised (Berry and Sobieraj, 2013; Kramer, 2014; Pickard, 2018), much of the literature on mediated populism remains aloof from policy debates and, therefore, from the possibility of policy change. Mazzoleni, for example, argues (2008: 62) that populism 'has its origins in the typical patterns and practices of commercial media outlets', but he fails even to acknowledge that these 'patterns and practices' are by no means natural but the product of specific media policy environments and decisions. Given the salience of social media platforms in providing populists with additional means with which to communicate with supporters above and beyond traditional media, it is ever more vital to reflect on the policies that have shaped the broader communications landscape and potentially contributed to the normalisation of far right ideas. Media ecologies chararcterised by high degrees of polaristion, falling levels of trust, weakened public service remits and oligopolistic structures all have recent histories that are at least partly explained by the choices made by specific policy actors. To what extent is 'mediated populism' the product not just of 'complicit' communication channels but, more specifically, of policy regimes that have generated communicative climates that the far right have been able to exploit?

Media policy failures

Our communications systems are not in any sense 'natural' but created in the shape of the vested interests that dominate at any one time; communications policy is a highly political, value-laden, interest-driven field of decision-making. Since the 1980s, this has generally followed 'the logic of the marketplace' (Van Cuilenburg and McQuail, 2003: 200) whereby decision makers have been in thrall to rhetorics concerning innovation, efficiency and consumer sovereignty. Under the guide of neoliberalism (Freedman, 2008) or 'corporate libertarianism' (Pickard, 2014), communications markets have been restructured better to enhance corporate accumulation and to inscribe a commercial logic ever deeper into the cultural field.

Yet this policy restructuring is executed not simply through visible and identifiable legislative or regulatory acts but often through flawed decision-making processes that remove certain issues – notably those concerning concentrations of media power – from the policy agenda. Thus we have 'media policy silences' (Freedman, 2014) and 'media policy failures' (Pickard 2014: 216) characterized by 'inaction' and 'invisibility' and often caused by the ideological affinity between and mutual interests of policymakers, regulators and industry voices. This underlies the 'regulatory failure' that Robert Horwitz (1989: 29) describes as taking place when 'a captured agency *systematically* favors the private interests of regulated parties and *systematically* ignores the public interest.' I argue that a series of media policy failures and silences in relation to four areas in particular have taken place in Europe and North America in the last three decades that have further distorted our communications landscapes and undermined their ability to act as counterweights to the rise in recent years of parties and movements on the right.

Failure to tackle concentrated ownership

Traditional ownership controls in media markets that seek to prevent any single company from gaining undue dominance or any single voice from gaining undue prominence have long been a key part of a democratic toolkit. According to Ed Baker (2009), concentrated media ownership 'creates the possibility of an individual decision-maker exercising enormous unchecked, undemocratic, potentially demagogic power…Even if this power is seldom exercised, no democracy should risk the danger.' This fear of 'demagogues' is at the heart of liberal opposition to all forms of populism – borne out by the warnings posed by the reign of former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi whose control of media outlets was essential to his populist success. Yet, as a result of pressure from lobbyists arguing that ownership rules are both a brake on innovation and an impediment to profitability at a time when traditional business models are under pressure, ownership rules in countries like the US, UK, Australia and New Zealand have been systematically relaxed since the 1980s. We have seen consolidation in terrestrial and satellite television markets, in the national and local press, in wholesale and retail radio and online such that the top 10 content companies in a study of 30 countries from across the globe account for an average 67% of national market share while the top four digital platforms account for a whopping 88% of their national media markets (Noam, 2016: 9).

Let me be very clear: concentrated media markets do not create populist movements out of thin air and deregulation does not lead inevitably to demagoguery. Yet the desire of neoliberal policymakers to cement commercial values in, and to minimise regulatory controls on, accumulations of media power is hardly without consequence. First, this simply enhances the visibility, in particular, of far right politicians who can be relied upon to generate the provocative speech and nativist appeals that play well with ratings. As Victor Pickard has argued in relation

to Trump, 'the news media's excessive commercialism – largely driven by profit imperatives and, thus the need to sell advertising – manifested in facile coverage that privileged entertainment over information' (Pickard, 2018: 196). Second, size matters, especially in media landscapes where there is a fierce battle for attention and therefore strong incentives for political leaders to accommodate to media power. The agenda-setting roles of Fox News in the US or of the tabloid *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* in whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment in the run-up to the Brexit vote were partly made possible by their status as very influential players in their respective news media markets. As long as liberal politicians and policymakers continue to exercise only a rhetorical commitment to plurality, then the incentives for large news organisations to amplify the controversial – and often racist – content that far right populists are only too pleased to provide will continue to exist.

Failure to regulate tech companies

The failure by policymakers to tackle monopolistic behavior is particularly clear in the digital sphere where a handful of giant intermediaries dominate their respective markets and where Facebook and Google alone account for such an overwhelming proportion of advertising revenue that, according to the *Financial Times*, they 'not only own the playing field but are able to set the rules of the game as well' (Garrahan, 2016). Powered by ever-expanding piles of cash and the logic of network effects which rewards first-movers, these intermediaries are not simply expanding into associated fields but usurping some of the editorial and creative gatekeeping roles previously fulfilled by traditional content companies (Hesmondhalgh, 2017).

This market power, combined with the specific ways in which algorithms function, has created giant monopolistic machines for the circulation of misinformation and propaganda that liberal commentators have argued has distorted recent ballots in the US and the UK (Cadwalladr, 2017). Whether or not it can be proved that 'fake news' has changed the result of elections – and recent research suggests that its influence may well have been exaggerated (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2016) – it is certainly the case that Google and Facebook have created both incentives and systems for low-cost, highly-targeted transmission of clickbait posing as news. For Tim Berners-Lee, the founder of the web, the 'system is failing…We have these dark ads that target and manipulate me and then vanish because I can't bookmark them. This is not democracy – this is putting who gets selected into the hands of the most manipulative companies out there' (quoted in Solon, 2017).

The problem is that this is a situation generated not simply by the computational power of complex algorithms but by the reluctance of regulators, up to this point, to address intermediary dominance. True, the European Commission did impose a €2.4 billion fine on Google in 2017 for abusing its dominance by unduly prioritising its own price comparison service but this is likely to be a mere inconvenience to its parent Alphabet as opposed to a structural challenge to its operating model. Many regulators still refuse to acknowledge Facebook and Google as *bona fide* media companies and instead continue to rely on the same liberal policy frameworks that were developed in the 1990s that protected intermediaries from responsibility for the content they carry. US regulators like the Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission do have antitrust remits that would enable them to challenge intermediary power but, wedded to a neoliberal vision of market fundamentalism, prefer to remain silent. Indeed, according to Barry Lynn and Matt Stoller (2017), 'the FTC itself partially created the "fake news" problem by

failing to use its existing authority to block previous acquisitions by these platforms such as Facebook's purchase of WhatsApp and Instagram.' Shackled by a worldview whose default position is that regulation is an impediment to innovation, the British and US governments, in particular, have long been content to rely on industry self-regulation that is insufficiently strong to pre-empt the hateful forms of speech that continue to circulate and that underpin the growth of far right parties. Regulation may now ensue following the Facebook/Cambridge Analytica data scandal but it remains an open question whether it will be tough enough to change corporate behaviour and transform business models unless genuinely radical action, such as breaking up or nationalising the largest platforms (Srnicek, 2017), is considered.

Failure to safeguard an effective fourth estate

First Amendment absolutism and libertarian conceptions of speech continue to undergird arguments against regulation of corporate interests in many liberal democracies. Yet this has not prevented attacks by respective states on investigative journalism, one of the hallmarks of a functioning 'fourth estate' and one of the great traditional liberal defences against demagogues and tyrants. In the US, before 2008, a grand total of three cases had been brought against whistleblowers and leakers under the terms of the Espionage Act for helping journalists to report on classified government programmes. The Obama administration, however, used the Act to launch nine cases, leading the *New York Times* to comment that that if 'Donald J. Trump decides as president to throw a whistle-blower in jail for trying to talk to a reporter, or gets the F.B.I. to spy on a journalist, he will have one man to thank for bequeathing him such expansive power: Barack Obama' (Risen, 2016). Similarly, the UK government passed the Investigatory Powers

Act in 2016 that provides for unprecedented surveillance and hacking by the security services but fails to guarantee sufficient protection for journalists' sources. 'We do have to worry about a UK Donald Trump', commented one British lawmaker, Lord Strasburger. 'If we do end up with one, and that is not impossible, we have created the tools for repression' (quoted in MacAskill, 2016). Politicians like Donald Trump have, therefore, inherited anti-democratic tools that can be used against legitimate journalistic inquiry in the context of the rise of surveillance states and anti-terror regimes.

Yet these authoritarian instincts - ones that can be easily exploited by populist actors – coincide with a reluctance to create effective systems of fully independent press self-regulation. So, for example, in the UK, the government has still not enforced the full recommendations of the Leveson Inquiry that were designed to hold the press to account for the kinds of misrepresentation and distortion that was so evident, particularly in relation to coverage of immigration, in the run-up to the Brexit vote, in the popular press. Tabloid excesses are then intensified by the less shrill but nevertheless deep-rooted 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995) of elite journalism that continues to 'flag' the importance of national identity and thus gives further ground to those on the right who wish to demonise 'outsiders'. In this situation, the failure to ensure that there is low-cost access to justice for those individuals and groups who have been unfairly targeted by right-wing media together with what Victor Pickard (2018: 197) calls the 'slow-but-sure structural collapse of professional journalism' both incentivises journalists to pursue stories that target and scapegoat minorities and interrupts their ability to report on complex socio-economic issues that the far right are quick to sensationalise and simplify.

This is magnified by what Sarah Smarsh calls the 'economic trench between reporter and reported' (Smarsh, 2016) – the fact that the highest levels of journalism are increasingly filled by

those who can afford to go to journalism school and who are thus most likely to be drawn from elite networks who are less familiar with the economic and cultural anxieties of the groups targeted by right-wing populists. 'That the term "populism" has become a pejorative among prominent liberal commentators should give us great pause' argues Smarsh. 'A journalism that embodies the plutocracy it's supposed to critique has failed its watchdog duty and lost the respect of people who call bullshit when they see it' (Smarsh, 2016). One response to this might be to introduce new levies on digital intermediaries to fund new entrants to the profession, particularly representing marginalised groups, in order to correct this imbalance but this is seen by austerity-minded governments as tax-raising initiatives that have no part to play in a dynamic market economy.

Failure to nurture independent public service media

One of the great fears of mainstream journalism is that partisan media environments fuel political polarisation (and vice-versa) and destabilise democracy by shifting the political centre of gravity away from a 'moderate' consensus to 'extremes'. Media outlets in deregulated and highly commercial media systems gravitate towards wherever ratings and profits are to be found while media in authoritarian states are often 'captured' by business interests working closely with governments (Schiffrin, 2017). In this context, one potential solution is regularly proposed: an independent public service news media that is strong enough to defy the pressure of both government and market and to serve citizens without fear or favour. According to this narrative, public service media allegedly offer the best prospect of impartial, high-quality journalism that is insulated from the partisanship that feeds 'extremism'. The European Broadcasting Union

(2016), for example, argues that countries with strong public service media traditions are likely to have greater press freedom, higher voter turnout, less corruption and lower levels of right-wing extremism.

In reality, far from retaining independence from all vested interests and delivering a critical and robust public interest journalism, public service media are often far too implicated in and attached to existing elite networks of power to be able to offer an effective challenge to them (Freedman, 2018). Indeed, public service media are likely to be intertwined – through funding arrangements, elite capture and unaccountable modes of governance – with the specific configurations of political power in their 'home' states in the same ways as are commercial media. The BBC, for example, may be publicly committed to impartial reporting but by marginalising voices that are not part of the established liberal consensus and by normalising those closest to official sources (Mills, 2016), it invites criticism from both left and right.

Indeed, in Europe, public service media appears to be a particularly ineffective bulwark against extremism given the sizeable votes in recent years for far right politicians in countries like Austria, Germany, France and the Netherlands, all of which have high levels of consumption of public service content. These channels find it difficult either to transcend the tensions and polarisation that mark their wider political environments or to establish themselves as fully independent of power elites. In part, this is because public service media across the globe have been hollowed out – their funding has been cut, their staffing reduced and their services suffused with a market logic – in ways that make it increasingly difficult for them to provide an authoritative centrist challenge to political polarisation; in part it is also because their remit is constituted by the very same elites that are so hostile to far right populism. This is not to denigrate the need for meaningfully independent public media services that can act as a

counterweight to vested interests but simply to note that existing institutions have all too often been identified with precisely the same power elites that right-wing populists claim they are seeking to challenge.

Conclusion: towards a new policy paradigm

Media policy failures did not cause the rise of Trump, the Alternative for Germany, the People's Party in Austria or indeed Brexit. Those have other structural causes related to legacies of racism, experiences of insecurity and disenchantment with a political system that rewards people so unequally. What is remarkable, however, is the extent to which those most contemptuous of right-wing populism's anti-elite narratives are so reluctant to acknowledge their own complicity in facilitating the discursive and material conditions they now seek to oppose. This is as true for media elites as it is true for other areas of political life. Liberal media policies have been unable to lay the basis for independent, critical and representative media systems that would articulate and respond to the very diverse sets of concerns that citizens have in their respective environments. Policy silences paved the way for the emergence of powerful and yet unaccountable digital intermediaries through whose channels travels the 'fake news' widely believed by mainstream politicians and commentators to have corrupted democratic politics. Policy silences smoothed the path for the implantation of commercial values throughout our communications systems, unshackling conceptions of the public interest from corporate responsibility so that poisonous coverage of refugees and other minorities is entirely legitimate and constitutionally protected while far right populist figures litter news bulletins because a business logic demands it.

These policy silences are intensified by a regulatory failure to challenge the intimacy of governments and media executives – a familiarity which further contaminates democratic societies and simply hands ammunition to far right populists who are then able to attack mainstream media as representatives of elite power. Liberal media policy with its commitment to market forces, its privileging of corporate speech rights, its complicity with the establishment and its technocratic obsession for innovation ahead of the public interest, is therefore severely implicated in the growth of those reactionary movements that it is now affronted by. It has achieved this not by advocating or protecting populist actors but by repeatedly failing to produce conditions in which a representative and pluralistic public media could be sustained.

If centrist politicians and mainstream media really wished to remove the conditions in which anti-democratic forces are able to grow, they would acknowledge that is time for radically new communications policies – not solutions to right-wing populism *per se* so much as responses to degenerated media environments that have been captured by corporate and state elites. We need a new policy paradigm to supersede the market-oriented approach outlined by Van Cuilenburrg and McQuail (2003), one that is based not simply around notions of freedom, access and accountability as they suggested, but on the *redistribution* that is necessary to confront the abuse of media power by states and corporations.

This is a paradigm designed to cater to the needs above all of disaffected citizens and depends on reversing the policy failures that I have outlined in this article. Instead of allowing further concentrations of media power, a redistributive media policy will seek to break up existing oligopolies and tackle the corrupting influence that comes with market domination; instead of bowing down to the giant digital intermediaries whose algorithms increasingly structure patterns of everyday life, a redistributive model will seek to find ways to use these

algorithms better to serve the public interest, in part by forcing private companies to share their

proprietary models; a redistributive model will siphon cash from the giant stockpiles held by the

largest intermediaries to support new, non-profit grass-roots journalism start-ups with a mandate

to serve diverse audiences; and, finally, a redistributive model would seek to construct vibrant

public media systems that are independent of vested interests and meaningfully able to hold

power to account, to cater to all audiences, irrespective of partisan affiliation and social

background, and to cut the ground from underneath the poison of the far right.

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