

INDEPENDENT MEDIA VS. AUTHORITARIANISM

On the fragility of democracy and the power of stories

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Independent media are a defining element of functioning and pluralistic democracies and are particularly effective in allowing publics to hold governments to account. It is unsurprising then that the media are one of the first things attacked when leaders seek to gain or retain power at the expense of democracy. Media capture is an early chapter in a clumsy, albeit effective, playbook wielded by authoritarians, populists, national libertarians and corporations. While the actors may vary, the goal is the same: keep and accrue power without care for citizens' rights.

We have seen this in Orbán's Hungary, Modi's India, Erdoğan's Turkey, Putin's Russia. The playbook they follow is alarmingly similar: from pro-government forces buying out independent media sources, governments regulating and controlling advertising to squeeze independent media dry, to lawsuits against (and imprisonment of) journalists. **The playbook of media capture has been used far and wide, and we are at a moment in time when we need to understand it and acknowledge that our media landscapes are all too vulnerable to capture. Where does this leave us? Where can we go from here? We may need to build an entirely new media and information ecosystem for the unique challenges of the 21st century.**

DESTROYING PLURALISTIC MEDIA

Stories have always been in our public commons as much as the water in our rivers and the soil under our feet. They shape our worldviews, offering frameworks through which we can comprehend our responsibilities and the consequences of our actions. Understanding how citizens access, relate to, and believe stories is paramount to understanding how they participate in a functioning democracy.

With textbook and complete media capture, there is only one story. This can be seen with Putin banning words such as 'war' in reference to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, coupled with the escalating suppression of journalistic freedoms. These actions have compelled many journalists to shut down their newsrooms and go into exile faced with the grim alternatives of becoming instruments of propaganda or risking imprisonment. Once the state has created an all-inclusive worldview, citizens have no choice – there is only one story. In situations where maintaining a facade of democracy remains crucial, such as in Orbán's Hungary, we observe a similarly constricted public square. Jillian Stirk, Head of Mission for the ODIHR, who oversaw the independent observation of the 2022 Hungarian elections, remarked that "the consolidation of media as well as the prevalence of biased and unbalanced news coverage limited voters' ability to make an informed choice." Likewise, in India, the government's branding of journalists like Ravish Kumar as 'Anti-Nationalists' and the persecution of author Arundhati Roy on anti-terror charges pose significant threats to the plurality of public discourse.



MIS-/DISINFORMATION IS A TOOL, NOT THE PICTURE

Media capture means undermining the citizen's ability to choose whom to trust. Immense amounts of mis-/disinformation create a quagmire of stories in which citizens struggle to distinguish the loudest messengers from factual sources. Steven Bannon, a nationalist, political strategist and former Trump advisor, spoke to this tactic when he said, "The Democrats don't matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit." It comes as no surprise that Americans are increasingly detaching from politics, as the research non-profit More in Common reports. Aside from that, when the media landscape is completely polluted, it is the media institutions themselves that end up losing the public's trust. This breaks the trust chain which is further preyed upon by those with a power or profit agenda—populists, the far-right, evangelists, and even wellness influencers who build audiences on social media, YouTube and podcasts providing 'the real news you won't hear anywhere else.' Corporate media capture follows a similar playbook. UN Secretary General António Guterres recently labelled the fossil fuel industry as the "godfathers of climate chaos" when calling for a tobacco-like global ban on fossil fuel ads in the media. Recently, The Verge reported "Google, Facebook, and Instagram rake in tens of millions of dollars each year from fossil fuel advertising", and The New York Times and Reuters topped a ranking of media companies enabling fossil fuel ad campaigns. This is critical, as studies by Michelle Amazeen and Bartosz Wojdyski found that more than 9 out of 10 US adult citizens are unable to tell the difference between an advertorial and real news.

ANTI-INSTITUTIONALISATION IS ON THE RISE

Simultaneously, media platforms and distribution systems are increasingly distancing themselves from public-interest media, operating under the misguided belief that audiences only want entertainment. **For many legacy-media institutions with precarious financial situations, political risk aversion becomes a survival strategy. Many taxpayer-funded public broadcasters are increasingly chasing ratings to maintain relevance, often resorting to self-censorship to avoid political budget cuts. Even those media institutions adopting sustainable business models become subservient to metrics such as clicks, likes and ratings to attract advertising revenue, or they limit public access to information by placing content behind paywalls.**

With the media not just vulnerable but, in many countries, partially or completely captured, the future of democracy is up for grabs. If democracy is to survive, public-interest media and information need to be protected and rebuilt to ensure they can withstand political and corporate pressure. Understanding the media-capture playbook is half the battle. The other half is solutions. The good news for democracy is that there are plenty of solutions that have already been tried and tested by independent media makers.



→ An interesting read on what young people expect from their news is provided by the NEXT GEN NEWS Report, "Understanding the Audiences of 2030", from Northwestern University's Knight Lab and the Financial Times Strategy.

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INDEPENDENCE AS RESILIENCE

Indeed, it is the independent media makers (the documentarians, the journalists, the storytellers) that work outside of the corporate system and refuse to succumb to political pressures who still hold the public's trust when the institutions are struggling. Citizens are hungry for the independent, beautiful, stirring, diverse works created by and for communities. Based on a research conducted by the JournalismLab at Hogeschool Utrecht, the European Journalism Centre (EJC) highlights that Generation Z, widely regarded as the critical voting bloc to prevent far-right takeovers in Europe, wants to engage with alternative media that broaden their horizons and address issues they care about. Studies consistently reveal that Gen Z desires media that is authentic, features diverse voices, is locally focused, and offers meaningful content. They are increasingly weary of content produced by large institutions. This demand for genuine, varied, and impactful narratives is precisely what independent media delivers.

Independent media creators have mastered the art of delivering information to the public by any means necessary. Their strength lies in their grassroots adaptability and focus on community and justice. They maintain trust with both contributors and audiences, embodying over 12 years of best practices in the field of impact producing. Public interest media goes beyond reaching audiences; it bridges trust gaps, strengthens communities, facilitates difficult conversations, and, in some cases, drives systemic policy changes and community dynamics. This exemplifies participatory democracy in action.

Previously institutionalised storytellers, journalists, and opposition leaders who have been persecuted or silenced often turn to independent media as their last means of communication. Examples include exiled reporters using Telegram in Belarus, feature documentaries like "While We Watched", and Rain TV broadcasting on YouTube, showcasing the enduring power of independent, open-access media.



BUILDING A FUTURE WE CAN TRUST

With the magnitude of reality being questioned, we cannot leave public interest media to the vagaries of the marketplace or political funding mechanisms. We must remember that free independent public media access is a cornerstone of democracy, a human right. A new media infrastructure fit for the 21st century must reflect this.

Doc Society is diving headfirst into the possibilities—after launching the Democracy Story Unit in 2023, we held two labs in London (November 2023) and Rio (March 2024), where we convened a diverse group of academics, analysts, community organisers, film-makers, journalists, economists, lawyers, faith leaders, comedians and civil-society organisations to imagine and dream of what this future could look like. One key takeaway from this collective work was the need to build a flotilla, across sectors, to have creative conversations now about imagining and designing a new public-interest media platform fit for the challenges of the 21st century, one that is autocrat- and market-proof, and has a new relationship with the citizens. The future is yet to be written.

→ **Doc Society supports storytelling by artists, journalists, and filmmakers, who maintain full creative and editorial control, free from government, corporate, or algorithmic control. As a global non-profit with a team of 29 based in Europe, East Africa, the Americas, and Australia, they have been providing resources for creatives and championing a network of supportive partners since 2005. In addition to grantmaking and supporting the creative process, Doc Society helps artists and journalists develop impact strategies and connect with communities and allies beyond the media industry and across civil society.**

→ **The Democracy Story Unit from Doc Society is a cultural strategy initiative for transformative storytelling, supporting filmmakers and journalists who critique and interrogate the imperfect, and in some cases failing or harmful, institutions that comprise democracies and societies. The aim is to advance more just and inclusive societies and create better futures for all.**



“Most people are not misinformed, but uninformed.”

Quote by Hannah Metzler

According to Hannah Metzler, cognitive psychologist at the Complexity Science Hub and the Medical University of Vienna, most people do not believe too much misinformation, but trust science and the media too little. Many people's interest in the media, politics and science is declining. According to a study published in May 2024, news consumption (including on social media) fell by 25 per cent in 46 countries between 2015 and 2022.



→ **Only in German: Hannah Metzler, Mythos Fehlinformation—Warum soziale Medien weniger gefährlich sind, als wir denken. Spektrum der Wissenschaft, 22.08.2024**

→ **Altay, S., Fletcher, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2024). News participation is declining: Evidence from 46 countries between 2015 and 2022. New Media & Society, 0(0).**