Journalism's sharp end: fatal materiality and the algorithms of profit and political extremism

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Abstract

This conceptual paper focusses on two fronts forming a broad assault on journalism, extending from more autocratic settings to include liberal democracies, and leading to what is now widely perceived as a crisis in news. We analyze these two attacks by presenting a framework integrating their sources and causes. We argue that the first attack emanates from commercialized media, occurring at economic and normative level, and has created, at least in part, the conditions that have enabled the more recent attack, which is more directly political, associated with the re-emergence of forces that are loosely categorized as populist. What is new in the second front is the geography and the constitutional nature of the societies in which this antagonism has grown. It extends now to long-established representative democracies that have come to be governed, or where new influence is wielded, by emergent right movements and parties who seek to cast the press as the enemy within. Abuse and even mortal danger increasingly have become part of the occupational reality of news-making. We conclude that this development is inscribed in the current material conditions under which journalists work, as well as in the materiality of the media through which they do so.

Keywords: Journalists; Journalism; News Work; Newspapers; Repression; Publishers; Commercialism

Introduction

Journalism in the early 21st century is embattled to an extent unprecedented in the post-war era. It struggles in a crisis or complex of crises seen as stripping it of its legitimacy, in ways extending beyond the often technology-centered analyses of its problems. In this commentary, we illustrate how and why journalists have come under assault on two closely connected fronts, firstly economic and then political. This has occurred as new forces, enabled in positioning the press as part of an elite, self-serving establishment, openly reject the critical functions of the fourth estate. Waisbord (2019) observes that "the current economic vulnerability of journalism reveals the historical tensions of the commercial press in democracy that were somewhat masked when news was a huge business success" (p.211). Our aim here is to contribute further to the understanding of why journalists have become so exposed. The fresh antagonisms represent a challenge to journalism at a level more essential than technologically driven obsolescence, a theme that informs many deterministic, linear analyses. We argue that the long-term first attack at material economic and normative levels, emanating from the corporate media system in liberal democracies, has put in place the de-legitimating conditions that have fostered the second, at political level, associated with the rise of disillusionment with societal institutions more widely. At a time characterized in the west by the rise of the polarizing politics of Donald Trump, Brexit, and right-wing groups in Europe, and elsewhere by the re-assertion of autocratic power, doing journalism has become perilous to a degree not seen in many decades. *Time* magazine named as its 2018 person of the year a group of journalists, among them the murdered Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi, who have faced intimidation, violence, torture, imprisonment and death. Worldwide, journalists airing awkward truths have become exposed social subjects liable to be persecuted

by political and criminal powers. The threat is no longer confined to the by-now familiar patterns of coercion associated with dictatorships or immature democracies, such as ex-Soviet states. It extends to liberal democracies until recently characterized by their avowed tolerance and promotion of a strong press, at least within agreed parameters, or, viewed more critically, constructed limitations. Our aim here is to draw the link between this emerging new environment of de-legitimization and the animus towards journalism that has been essential to the marketization of news in earlier decades.

Positing a narrative of the suppression of the press, with its associations of guarding democracy and holding the powerful to account, risks dichotomously adopting an uncritical stance toward journalism. Such a view, in keeping with familiar norms and myths, is not our starting point. The current wave of pressures on journalism takes place against a background of substantial and legitimate critical analyses. Mass media, including news media, has long been cast as a dominant source of power in capitalist societies (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1996; Habermas, 1989), playing, in Gramscian terms (1975), a key hegemonic role. More specific to news are convincing critiques from political economy (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Curran and Seaton, 2003), recently further elaborated by Freedman (2014). Moreover, established perspectives on journalism place it in this strategic role through mechanisms of agenda setting or gatekeeping, within constraining news values (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001; McCombs, 2005). These understandings of news, while conventionally assumed in media studies generally, often are not explicitly recognized in considerations of journalism's current problems.

We argue that the news system, with all its compromises, now has been broken to the extent that journalism as a public good is in danger of a watershed marginalization in considerations of power in late modern democratic societies. Journalists increasingly are finding that the central prerogatives of their professional roles have been taken from them, and the editorial tools with which they have exercised control over information are blunted.

Our thesis is that market forces, sociotechnical changes and, later, new political pressures, mediated if not entirely driven by digitalization, via the Internet and social media, are interwoven in the same historical process of this critical undermining.

Within digitalization, the first challenge has come as news has been reframed as technologically enabled dialogue and negotiation (Rosen, 2012), with consumers now also producers, or prosumers (Bruns, 2008). The second effect stems from the rise of social media, which further have diminished the political mediation role of journalists. Politicians and propagandists now can reach masses of followers directly and immediately, leading to the chaos of systematic disinformation (Moore, 2018; Pomerantsev 2019). Thirdly, in addition to growing disintermediation, journalists, like intellectuals, scientists, experts and technocratic administrators, have begun to find themselves categorized in the messaging of right-wing movements as belonging within a coalition of self-serving elites conspiring against the common good. The fresh animosity springs from, among other sources, the widespread incorporation of parts of this information elite in neoliberal structures of power, and their abandonment of support for weaker social subjects further down the socio-economic scale. No longer an ally against the powerful (a key claim of journalism in particular), the information professional of any stripe has come to be mistrusted and derided. In the words of Trump, echoed by his followers, the press are now enemies of the people. In the realm of science, expertise is perceived as able to resolve neither the grand problems of hunger, pollution and climate change, nor the immediate, material problems of ordinary people. Scientists' authority is brought into question, as some are seen as working in

the interests of businesses funding their research. This flattening vision has driven the devaluation of expertise more generally (Szabados, 2019). The new anti-establishment challenge to science is characterized by climate change confusion and denial. Conspiracy theories abound around disparate subjects such as chemtrails and flat earth theories, to which latterly have been added campaigns against 5G technologies allegedly linked to Covid-19. In the background to this scenario is the resentment of middle income groups who, through the financialization and deregulation that led to the last market crash and subsequent recession, have seen the so-called strong powers, in the form of markets, banks, and international monetary institutions, impoverish them through the imposition of austerity and radical labor reforms (Hardt and Negri, 2000). They find themselves joining less privileged cohorts who previously had been the primary targets of such policies.

Enabled by and now compounding the corporate challenge to journalism's public role, these developments – the advent of the Internet, the rise of social media and the animosity towards journalists – have contributed substantially to neutralizing the media system's control over information. Thus, the space has been opened for organized manipulation of democratic processes, to rather older, conservative ends, in the form of info-swarms and voter targeting (Berghel, 2018). Where previously the media system operated to furnish professional mediation, its now vulnerable condition means that new entities can achieve political manipulation of targeted audiences through a variety of methods, from social bots to fake news. What was in place heretofore could be considered a balancing, however imperfect, of news media influence and fulfillment of press functions (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1956). Now, communication power has shifted to often-opaque forces, typically on the right, who serve specific agendas in elections or referendums. The associated tide of disinformation connects to the decline in trust in democratic institutions more widely (Bennett and Livingston, 2018). This analytical framework, which takes a wider view of the source of the new wave of antagonism facing journalists, calls for a qualification of critical theory and cultural hegemony theory, as power and hegemony have become more complex. Now the picture includes new social subjects – prosumers – new forms of mediation, disintermediation and remediation of power, and new potential for direct manipulation of voters. The Internet, and especially social media, have been deployed to undermine the control of information that the traditional system had provided to the economic-political establishment, with cascading implications. The role of mediation that news played both directly in politics and more widely in achieving and sustaining cultural hegemony has been weakened. A new form of direct and – at least on the surface – spontaneous politics have contributed to the growing superfluity of news work.

This paper is structured as follows: in the following section, we focus on the sustained attack that media ownership, or capital, has mounted against journalism, undermining its institutions and practitioners to the point that they have become more compliant, but also consequently vulnerable to aggressions of a more proximately threatening nature on the part of political actors. Then we analyze how movements variously described as populist or anti-elitist, target journalists, primarily using Italy as an example. This country serves well as a case study because it was one of the first in Europe in which authoritarian populism developed in recent decades, with political strategies subsequently applied elsewhere (Bobba and Legnante, 2016). Finally, we draw some conclusions, indicating also what future scholarship approaches might be useful in further developing this analysis.

Media groups attack journalism

In this section, we will illustrate how media organizations' profit-seeking strategies since the latter decades of the 20th century have constituted a long war on journalists at economic level, creating the conditions to position them as superfluous labor. We begin by analyzing the first phase of these strategies. In their functional roles as agencies of hegemony and consensus building, one might have anticipated an enduring commitment by media interests to the support of mass audience news entities. This would apply, if not purely in pursuit of normative ends then, more instrumentally, as a strategic component in the operation of market-based liberal democracies (Christians et al, 2009). But, well in advance of the challenges of digital networked media, this position already had begun to erode. The first cracks in the late modern era's press emerged in the US in the 1920s, accelerating with conglomeration and the loss of newspaper-dedicated companies in the period after the Second World War (Herrick 2012). In the 1980s and 1990s, preceding general Internet adoption, the process intensified to further re-center profit at the heart of the newspaper enterprise. A culture emerged within newsrooms where editors aimed for double-digit operating profit targets, with relentless cutting of budgets. Where once editors of family-owned entities enjoyed significant autonomy, with owners careful at least to exercise power in the background, their agency now was bounded by new imperatives. Having achieved healthy profit outcomes in one period, managers would seek further cuts and target higher 'shareholder value' in the next. Thus came a shift in which news producers learned to privilege market discipline (Underwood, 1993; Overholser, 1998).

The assertion of extractive corporate priorities at the expense of journalism followed a similar trajectory in the UK, with the same patterns of takeover, merger and the movement away from firms defined as newspaper publishers to media power concentrated in conglomerates. The Murdoch-led abandonment of Fleet Street for the industrial site at Wapping in outer London, with its accompanying adoption of digital print technologies and the breaking of union power embedded in hot metal production, was emblematic of the wider reorientation in the later 20th century (Cole and Harcup, 2010). Growing advertising revenues lent a healthy sheen to newspapers' economic indices, but this prosperity did not extend to the unquantified normative activities of journalism. As expressed by Robert Picard, 'Considered in revenue terms, the primary business of newspaper publishing in the twentieth century was advertising not news' (2017: 147). While the strength of claims for a pure church-state separation of editorial and commercial concerns has long been cast in doubt, the growing constraints of business orientation and the sustained commodification of news and news audiences are convincingly documented (Meyer, 2009; Cooper, 2011; Fenton, 2011).

The second phase of the corporate transformation, extending from the first, is centered on digitalization and its applications in reshaping the power relations of news work. Seen by many as in itself the primary force disrupting journalism, digitalization, we argue, more accurately performs a mediating role in the deeper economic and cultural transformations witnessed by the industry and profession. In the age of the net and social media, and with them the celebration of disintermediation and of the independent creation of content by produsers (Bruns 2008), as we posited in the introduction, the conditions have been set for an accelerated destabilization of journalism (Schnell, 2018). These have featured the rapid and extreme intensification, via digital platformization, of the data and advertising-led logic of news. Contrary to the often optimistic accounts of journalism opening up, it has become clear that the substantial gains have been made by powerful technology actors now placed centrally within, and controlling much of, the information sphere

(Bell et al, 2017). Further, news organizations can no longer be seen as professionally inured from the well-documented vagaries of social media. On the contrary, as elucidated in damning terms by Harrison (2019), they too must play the audience engagement game, with all that entails in terms of clickbait, appealing to emotion, and limiting diversity, at the expense of the civic role of journalism.

A key part of the market assault has been the campaign further to casualize news labor, within the more general emergence of a new knowledge worker precariat, or cognitariat (Miller, 2017). Newsrooms have faced enormous changes generated by the competition brought by new actors, typically using free or cheap, non-organized labor. Such labor now, to varying degrees, inhabits all sites of production and diffusion – news websites, net-native news entities, blogs, citizens' journalism and specialist outlets – in what is widely named the new news 'ecosystem'. The latter term, as Nadler (2019) observes, implies an evolving natural order, even if it is the construct of policy and business decisions. The rise of this system has brought new pressures, along with a wave of innovation that has included the introduction of automation and multimedia production that not only enable but also require journalists to produce news adapted to different formats (Westlund, 2020). News work increasingly is reduced to content production, quantified in streams of bits and atoms, crossing medium, spatial and temporal boundaries (O'Sullivan et al., 2017). Accounts of frictionless convergence of outputs elide the material actualities of the working conditions, cultures, practices and routines of newsgathering and production. Unsurprisingly, the meeting of digital technologies and professional cultures and environments has been far from tension-free, marked by ambivalence or resistance (Fortunati et al., 2009; Luengo, 2016; Deuze and Witschge, 2018). Recognizing this, journalism studies recently has begun to adopt more labor-centered approaches (Siegelbaum and Thomas, 2016; Cohen, 2018). Within journalism, news workers, including those in marquee "digital native" brands, have begun to mount a reassertion of labor interests and, with them, professional values.[1]

Thus, digitalization has functioned to a large degree as an extension of the long-operating market assault on the role of journalists. Its associated disruptions, strongly mediated by profit calculations, have been stark in their effects. The materialities of the new platforms and of their journalism have received less attention than concerns around consumption habits and commercial revenues (Molyneux, 2018), even if a more critical edge has begun to emerge in commentary on the role of social media actors in the news system (Dwyer and Martin, 2017; Nechushtai, 2018). The de-materialization of news as content relates not only to the physical size of presentation on screens, and to associated modes of reading, but also to the diversity and depth of that journalism, constrained as it is within 'real estate', driven by selective push notifications and app design (Ananny and Crawford, 2015). Further, out of view of the consumer, the imposition of newsroom metrics, with imperatives for social media shareability and virality (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013), forces editorial compromise with cohorts of advertising brokers and digital mavens, within and outside publishing organizations (Nguyen, 2013; Bunce, 2019). While it is too sweeping to complain that all news organizations now play the games of sensationalism and clickbait, it is clear that, for many, traffic rules. The primacy of audience numbers is evident not only within journalism, but extends to much of the discourse

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[1] Nolan, H. (2017). A Billionaire Destroyed His Newsrooms Out of Spite. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/03/opinion/dnainfo-gothamist-ricketts-union.html. Also Vernon, P. (2017). The media today: A unionization wave across the industry. Retrieved April 17, 2019, from https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/union-los-angeles-times-vox.php

around the health and future of news and the public sphere. The discussion of the digital strategies even of quality outlets such as *The New York Times, The Guardian, Il Corriere della Sera* or *Le Monde* focuses reductively, to a considerably greater degree than in the print era, on maximizing measures of audiences and advertising revenue streams. It is worth recalling here that historically, in the context of print newspapers, the massive readership disparity in favor of tabloid sensationalism, entertainment and titillation had been balanced by lower-circulation newspapers' public role, and was not so readily accepted as a singular measure of success.

Our analysis largely runs counter to the stance taken by much, though increasingly not all, of the literature around digital technology and news. First, we posit that, rather than unproblematically advancing journalism's normative aims, seemingly technologically-driven changes often have produced negative outcomes: in the thinning of the journalist population, in journalists' relative disempowerment within news organizations, in the social and political devaluation of their profession, and in their further alignment with commercial goals. The dematerialization corresponding with the shift in consumption from the physical construct of the newspaper in particular has played a significant role in this weakening, not only in terms of labor and professional relations, but in more recent years extending lethally to the domain of human rights. Second, we posit that responsibility for the reversal in the quality of public debate is attributable not solely to media owners.

While there has been sporadic resistance from journalists in defence of their values and livelihoods[2], it is clear that for the most part journalists have been weak in the face of economic power that has over time driven the deterioration in the quality of news and public information. Among the consequences are the continued decline in trust in newspapers (Fink, 2019; Sonwalkar, 2019) and the now commonplace charges of fake news. Such concerns cannot be dismissed. They reflect the softening of standards as evidenced, for example, in some of the practices associated with 'advertorial' and the rise of native advertising that compromises journalism's vaunted independence (Ferrer Connel, 2016; Glasser et al, 2019). Associated with these phenomena is the rise of 'entrepreneurial' journalism, shifting emphasis toward commercial initiative on the part of individual news producers (Vos and Singer, 2016), even as, in parallel, a new breed of market-driven media producer, the influencer, has come to prominence. We do not need a catalogue of shoddy practice to appreciate the ethical decline. For illustration, one could observe that a new low emerged in the use of news for blackmail, serving political ends, in the case of Amazon's founder.[3] As we argue in the next section, the long-standing challenges to journalists, at economic, normative and professional levels, deeply connect with the new political campaigns against them.

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[2] For example, the International Federation of Journalists reports strikes over working conditions and redundancies in France (https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/collective-bargaining/article/france-lequipe-and-france-tv-journalists-strike-over-working-conditions-and-redundancies.html); Global Media Journal reports on a journalists' strike against *The Huffington Post* (https://www.globalmediajournal.com/open-access/journalists-strike-online-visibility-field-and-the-huffington-post.php?aid=35324); in the UK and Ireland, the National Union of Journalists organized a newspaper journalists on strike in August 2020 "to take action in response to redundancy plans, new working practices and being underpaid" (https://www.nuj.org.uk/contact-us.html).

[3] Bezos, J. (2019). No thank you, Mr. Pecker. Retrieved from https://medium.com/@jeffreypbezos/no-thank-you-mr-pecker-146e3922310f

Journalists as political targets

A contiguous assault on the public sphere is under way at a time when journalists have come to be viewed as frictionlessly commodifiable. Their labor is delivered into a hyper-mediated clickstream, increasingly populated by deskbound, PR-dependent information processors engaged in 'churnalism' (Jackson and Molony, 2016). At the opposite pole to banal routine is the endeavor of journalists in conflict zones or of those who risk opposing repression in undemocratic regimes or powerful forces in democratic ones. The war correspondent is a familiarly established trope, even as the movement away from industrial war brings new complexities (Tumber and Webster, 2006). But, according to Hughes and Vorobyeva (2019), the most dangerous environment, rather than international conflict, is that "of national-level hybrid regimes with subnational authoritarian enclaves" (p.15). In particular instances, such as those of Daphne Caruana Galizia, murdered in Malta, or Victoria Marinova, assassinated in Bulgaria – these two occurring within the EU – and Khashoggi, murdered by Saudi Arabia in Istanbul, journalists themselves become the story (Palmer, 2018). The high-profile targeting of journalists by criminals, as witnessed in the assassination of Greek investigative reporter Giorgos Karaivaz[4], underlines the growing vulnerability of the press, with the erosion of the inhibition on violence against practitioners. Globally, however, most victims remain in relative obscurity, unrecognized other than as part of an awareness of the stream of body or prisoner counts and reports of torture.

Thus, a disquieting feature that marks an objective boundary in the news dematerialization process described above is the number of journalists killed or imprisoned each year in conflicts, terrorist attacks, and criminal attacks, in what the Committee to Protect Journalists describes as a 'new normal' (Beiser, 2018). RSF's World Press Freedom Index highlights a continued decline in the number of countries in which journalists can work safely, and a climate of fear and routine threats, citing in particular 'strong leader' regimes such as Narendra Modi's India or Jair Bolsonar's Brazil.[5] In the US, hostility fired by the rhetoric of Trump and media associates such as Steve Bannon, formerly of the far-right digital outlet Breitbart, found expression in the gun attack on the Capital Gazette newspaper in Maryland, with five deaths, along with the 148 arrests or attacks on media covering George Floyd protests in the US, analyzed by *the Guardian* and *Bellingcat.*[6] The EU and Balkans, still the safest region, nevertheless registered the one of the biggest losses in the index, moving closer to the score of ex-Soviet bloc countries that have entered the Union, or countries on its periphery, such as Turkey. RSF's 2020 report recorded a 0.9% improvement in the index, but emphasized that the indicator had declined by 12% since its introduction in 2013. In particular, the report highlighted concerns about the US and, within the EU, Hungary, and drew attention to the economic and technological crises facing journalism, with threats further amplified by repressive measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.[7]

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[4] European Federation of Journalists. (2021). Greece: Crime journalist killed outside his home. Retrieved from https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2021/04/09/greece-crime-journalist-killed-outside-his-home/
[5] Reporters Without Borders. (2019). World Press Freedom Index. Retrieved from https://rsf.org/en/2020-world-press-freedom-index-entering-decisive-decade-journalism-exacerbated-coronavirus
[6] Safi, M et al (2020). 'I'm getting shot': attacks on journalists surge in US protests. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/jun/05/im-getting-shot-attacks-on-journalists-surge-in-us-protests
[7] Reporters Without Borders. (2020). World Press Freedom Index. Retrieved from https://rsf.org/en/2020-world-press-freedom-index-entering-decisive-decade-journalism-exacerbated-coronavirus

Harassment from neo-fascists has grown, even with a slight improvement to 41 in the index, in Italy, where the then interior minister Matteo Salvini previously had suggested the removal of police protection for journalist Roberto Saviano[8], and in France, Hungary and Poland. The UK, already one of the lowest-ranked western European countries, fell further to 35, with the killing of journalist Lyra McKee during riots in Northern Ireland and continued paramilitary threats. RSF draws particular attention to the contradiction in the UK's profile as a champion of media freedom globally. Concern also is expressed that in Japan, the world's third largest economy, the press works under the constraint of a law protecting designated 'secrets' that threatens up to 10 years imprisonment (2020).

A dangerous development in the relationship between governments, public representatives, publics and the news media is powerful figures' vilification of reporters as 'enemies of the people' or as traitors, as has occurred in both the UK and the US (Kellner, 2019).[9] This campaign serves to create an enabling atmosphere for wider abuse, extending to more severe actions (Council of Europe, 2019). In the UK, the National Union of Journalists has called on authorities to counter the tide of assaults on and intimidation of reporters, with social media, including doxing, used to target individual journalists.[10] Reporters covering protest rallies face open hostility. They are no longer accepted as objective observers but are seen instead as servants of the elite, there to create distorted narratives, to the point where reporters covering gilets jaunes protests in France have needed bodyguards.[11]

Added to attacks by military or by political or criminal forces, a more generalized trend has emerged of programmatic de-recognition of journalists' bona fides in their democratic role. The new, principally right-wing political entities favor social platforms because this environment is less democratically normed and can be used to circumvent the press's mediation role. At the same time, social media superficially present as more open in terms of content production and consumption, linking digital democratization to free speech. The chimera of novelty and disruption facilitates the appeal of the new breed of politician seeking to overturn the conventions of representative politics, making room for the rhetoric of extremism, polarization and raw abuse of opponents and critics.

The post-truth escalation in rhetorical, non-lethal antagonism towards journalism in leading democracies is not disconnected from more acute attacks occurring elsewhere. The accusation against media as disseminators of fake news has become a stock element in the playbook of the right, not least Donald Trump, whose notorious confrontations with reporters at news briefings, or barrackings at mass rallies, had become routine, even as the powerful now offered 'alternative facts'. The US administration's hostile posture towards the press was encapsulated in a *New York Times* interview in which Bannon, at that point Trump's media strategist, said: 'The media should be embarrassed and humiliated and keep its mouth shut and just

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[8] Ligresti, V. (2019) Salvini che minaccia di togliere la scorta aSaviano è 'intimidazione attribuibile allo Stato'. Lo ha detto il Consiglio d'Europa, dopo l'ultima diretta Facebook del Ministro dell'Interno. Retrieved from https://www.vice.com/it/article/8xzdmb/salvini-scorta-a-saviano-intimidazione-attribuibile-allo-stato
[9] Peters, J. (2017). Trump and trickle-down press persecution. Retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/local_news/trump-and-trickle-down-press-persecution.php
[10] NUJ. (2019). Press become target of the far-right. Retrieved from https://www.nuj.org.uk/documents/nuj-informed-issue-27-april-2019/
[11] Goillandeau, M., & Eyre, M. (2018). Journalists harassed and assaulted at Yellow Vest protests across France. Retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/analysis/yellow-vests-france-assault-journalists.php

listen for a while'.[12] Similar media relations emerged in the UK's Brexit paroxysms, while senior EU figures also have resorted to the gambit of alleging 'fake news'.[13]

An atmosphere in which assaults on reporters can meet with a US President's tweeted approval has helped to legitimize repressive actions elsewhere. The new line of attack against the 'lamestream' or 'failing' media is mirrored online by European parties such as Italy's Five Star movement, which in its first phase particularly targeted *L'Espresso* group, a principal press forum for perspectives from the left. Journalists expressing criticism of the government were invited to resign, as in the case of *RAI* reporter Cristina Parodi. The then administration threatened to cut funding for news diversity, with the aim of 'starving the beast' represented by traditional media. The Five Star party embodies the link to digitalization: it is organized not as a conventional political party, or as a movement, but as a private firm, fixing power ironically not in the diffused membership but highly concentrating it at the center. This "business firm party" model, with its origins in southern Europe in the 1970s, was copied in Britain by the Brexit Party, led and owned by Nigel Farage, himself a representative of wealthy interests (Gerbaudo, 2018).[14]

Anti-elite political forces, principally from the right but in in some cases also from the left, that are marshalling globally have been labelled generically as populist, not least by centrists close to the current neoliberal establishments in societies marked by inequality and austerity (Milanovic, 2016). The international Team Populism project, commissioned by *the Guardian*, tracking the rise of the phenomenon in leaders' speeches, shows a doubling since the early 2000s of characteristics it deems populist (Hawkins, et al, 2019). This categorization, open to interpretation and critique (Brookes, 2018), elides differentiation between right and left populism (Mouffe, 2018), and provides limited insight into the structural roots of the new movements, which could be roughly expressed as a response to, along with economic conditions, a deficit of democracy (Aslanidis, 2015; Wilkinson, 2016). Another problem of analysis is added by journalism itself: while often acting as a bulwark against simplistic political solutions, the press, or elements of it, also has promoted them (Wettstein et al, 2018). For these reasons, although here we use the term 'populist' to denote new sources of hostility to journalists as representatives of elites, it is clear that such sentiment arises for the most part within the new extreme right, self-styled as the alt-right or, in more conventional language, neo-fascists. Such groups, when achieving power, have shown little tolerance for democratic institutions, above all traditional media and the press, because they represent an obstacle to the demagogy that they develop online.

Here, to ground our discussion, we describe the Italian case, in which the 5 Star Movement targeted the press. Its leader, Beppe Grillo, called journalists "walking dead", "lackeys" and "counterfeiters", and prohibited activists from talking to them.[15] Animated attacks on *La Stampa* during an election campaign by 5 Star leading lights Alessandro Di Battista and Luigi Di Maio, who became deputy prime minister, escalated to include publication on the party's blog of proscribing lists of hostile reporters, the exclusion from political

[12] Grynbaum, M. M. (2017). Trump Strategist Stephen Bannon Says Media Should 'Keep Its Mouth Shut.' Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/26/business/media/stephen-bannon-trump-news-media.html

[13] Marks, S., & Livingstone, E. (2019). Brussels to Africa: Don't cry over our spilt milk. Retrieved from https://www.politico.eu/article/hogans-milk-wars/

[14] Gerbaudo, P. (2019). Where democracy goes to die: how Nigel Farage copied Italy's digital populists. Retrieved from https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/brexit/2019/05/where-democracy-goes-die-how-nigel-farage-copied-italy-s-digital-populists

[15] Cangini, A. (2018). 5 stelle vs stampa: il giornalismo ha una funzione pubblica che dovrebbe essere sostenuta. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.it/andrea-cangini/grillini-vs-stampa-il-giornalismo-ha-una-funzione-pubblica-che-dovrebbe-essere-sostenuta_a_23476186/

events of journalists considered enemies, a demand to limit press space in Rome's parliamentary building, the presumption of the right to nominate reporters who could interview the prime minister[16], and attempts to dictate the choice of opponents in talk shows.[17]

A comprehensive portfolio of measures to control news media was effected, up to and including physical aggression. With 5 Star then in power, in coalition with the League, this antagonism continued, even as, like their predecessor whom they had criticized for the practice, the party controlled appointments of directors and editors of the state broadcaster, RAI. Hostility towards the press also was expressed through disinformation. Undersecretary Vito Crimi, whose brief included publishing, complained that newspapers receive direct public funding[18] where, in reality, some newspapers receive modest, indirect, subventions promoting diversity. Five Star, born on the Internet and conducting its communication and organization through digital channels, took aim particularly at traditional journalism. Like many populist movements, and mirroring citizen journalism's rhetoric, it worked on the presumption that, like politics, journalism does not need a profession or professionalism. As with such political forces elsewhere, Five Star is anti-intellectual in tone (McLean, 1996, p.392), while at the basis of its ideology the slogan 'Uno vale uno' (one counts as one) expresses the promise of lean democracy. In keeping with this vision, social media functions effectively as a platform for the promotion of extremism, rewarded by the hidden, traffic-seeking algorithms of digital intermediaries (Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

The repertoire of such movements is that of online bullying, with a crude discourse centered on personalized or trivial abuse and ridicule. While democratic forces traditionally have sought, at least in part, to translate material and contingent issues through evidence-based communication, populists instead adopt the register of the 'common people'. They position themselves as having a connection with ordinary folk in punching up against corrupt establishments, often in spite of their own privileged positions, while their democratic opponents' use of dialogical argument seems distancing. In some cases, the target is the state, seen as controlled by vested interests or too powerful in itself (Laclau, 1978). Often it is the EU, banks or the markets. Such politics, experienced as novel in Europe, have a longer record in developing countries – Peronism in Argentina is the classic example – but more recently it is manifest in post-Soviet central and eastern Europe, with nationalism an important thread (Scott and Marshall 2005).

Also typical of the discourse is the tone struck by Sonia Avolio, of Fratelli D'Italia (an extreme right party), a councilor in Cascina (Pisa), who used a video message to mount a crudely personal attack focused on the husband of journalist Cristina Parodi.[19] This style of politics has faced its own reaction, with flash mob demonstrations mounted by the 'Sardine' movement opposing the threatening rhetoric of the Italian right and of various shades of nationalism.

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[16] Grasso, A. (2021) Casalino star del circo mediatico e un passato da dimenticare. Il Corriere della Sera, 18 February, p.47.

[17] Ordine dei Giornalisti del Lazio. (2014). Camera, Odg Lazio contro l'iniziativa del M5S: "Attacco alla libertà di stampa" | Ordine dei Giornalisti del Lazio. Retrieved from https://odg.roma.it/camera-odg-lazio-contro-liniziativa-del-m5s-attacco-alla-liberta-di-stampa

[18] ANSA. (2018). M5s all'attacco della stampa dopo l'assoluzione della Raggi. "Sciacalli." Retrieved from https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2018/11/11/assoluzione-raggi-m5s-contro-la-stampa_c6d5cae8-3c5e-46d6-ace5-178387adb074.html

[19] Ceccareli, P. (2018). Cascina, si dimette l'assessora che ha offeso Cristina Parodi. Retrieved from https://corrierefiorentino.corriere.it/firenze/notizie/politica/18_ottobre_15/pisa-si-dimette-l-assessora-che-ha-offeso-cristina-parodi-1596b850-d07c-11e8-8d02-856c82c5bc77.shtml

However cynically managed and at times extreme it has become, the new criticism of traditional media shares some of the conventional, including scholarly, perspectives on news industry failings. But this diagnosis is deployed as a tenet of the new movements, aimed at undermining classical media generally. The confluence of the existential crisis in journalism, with the consequent collapse in its status, and the aggressive rhetoric of the newly powerful right, primarily in digital media, have made the world a physically more dangerous place for journalists. The rise of direct attacks on them sharply reinstates the materiality of their work. Confronted with the ontological reality, beyond the routines of hollowed newsrooms, of the deaths of journalists, the consumption-led abstraction of news through digitalization and convergence clearly falls short. Even if the heroic correspondent is used to legitimize news businesses as well as the profession's normative narratives (Underwood, 2011), the killings of reporters exposes the relative inattention to the changing conditions of their work. While it is shocking to learn that war reporter Marie Colvin was actively targeted, rather than being a 'collateral' victim of loose artillery (Doucet, 2019), her case is one among many. Attacks on journalists have become commonplace, and a press badge may be as much a target as a shield. The diminution of professional capital thus can be seen to have repercussions in the ways in which journalists are treated. As we have seen, while so far such patterns primarily had been confined to countries with shallow democratic legacies, and to war zones, sometimes with the connivance of avowedly democratic powers (Paterson, 2014), now the rise of extremist forces puts journalists in jeopardy more widely.

The smoothly converged content that we now scroll through in our automatically filled newsfeeds is originated by people who are less valued and increasingly in danger, even closer to home. Journalists around the world have always been exposed in this way: now, however, the risks are evident in the cultures and societies that historically engendered liberal democracy and its associated role for a free press. Obviously, national and international authorities should work to counter the trend in which attacks on reporters become a regular tool in political and military strategies. The Council of Europe as taken action in this regard, through its platform to promote the safety and protection of journalists.[20] Beyond such measures, however, our argument is that, stemming from this new era of open hostility to the press, fresh attention should be paid to its functioning and to its defense on a wider basis.

Conclusion: A meaningful future for journalism in the face of hostility

The discussion above demonstrates that the economic and political attacks against journalists in older and in developing democracies are intrinsically connected with the loss, latterly associated with digitalization, of the mission of the so-called legacy media system. The nexus between journalism's accelerated commercial imperative and the erosion in the quality of public debate attending the rise of social media is not incidental. Rather, it is essential to changes in the nature of news, bringing about the denigration, beyond conventional critiques, of journalism and journalists. The continuum between professional decline, open political hostility and physical attacks is clear. Furthermore, viewing these assaults as intrinsically connected forces us to

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[20] Council of Europe (2021). Attacks on physical safety and integrity of journalists. Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists. Retrieved from https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/attacks-on-physical-safety-and-integrity-of-journalists

recognize that the perilous decline in the fortunes of journalism is far from an ideology-free process (Faucher 2018).

It is first at socioeconomic level, and not at the level of practitioners alone, individually or even collectively, that the deep-seated problems of journalism must be addressed. The corrosive effects of late capitalism more widely, with its promotion of market forces and its alienation of previously included populations in western democracies, have clear and profound consequences for journalism.[21] A Marxian reading of the historical developments suggests that, in the absence of class consciousness, politically incoherent resentments will surface. Such alienation now is expressed in populist anti-elite sentiment rejecting the standing of professionals generally, including journalists, identified with the establishment (Clarke and Newman, 2017; Eyal, 2019). While it would be interesting to understand if power today still needs legitimation or is taken for granted, news media no longer can guarantee the same social functions that they provided in the past. So the media, even if still capable of generating profit for shareholders, albeit on a more modest scale, have shown that they have reached their structural limit, with a void of meaning in their purpose.

This is a challenge not just to journalists and publishers, but to all. Certainly, a precondition to countering the twin assault on journalism is a reformulation of the priorities of news production, as Waisbord (2019) puts it "to refine normative visions about professional ethics in real-world conditions" (p. 213). Journalists need to be included, with due valorization of their civic role, in deeper, journalism-first – not merely digital-first – media strategies. Given that their legitimacy has come into play in wider political discourse, newspaper organizations can buttress their position in the new information sphere through structured measures to democratize and widen their agendas, including affording more meaningful roles to their publics.

Solutions lie not simply in technologies for enhancing journalism, however relevant these are as tools, but in a reassessment and reclaiming of journalism's role. Journalists need a revived solidarity and vision in re-adopting core values of working objectivity, independence and transparency, in pursuing and defending the worth of specialist knowledge and skills – linguistic and professional – and education, and in protecting the originality, reliability and authenticity of their work. Elaboration of such a professional renaissance, recognizing the part that journalists themselves must play, is beyond the limits of the current discussion. However, the re-affirmation of journalism's goals is a necessary but insufficient response. A strategy based on valorizing and restoring journalistic agency, however appealing its rhetorical tone, alone cannot address larger structural challenge.

This discussion does not naively propose a return to an imagined golden age, or to 'make journalism great again.' The valid critiques of news media in mature democracies are well-rehearsed, and, standing against the pieties of the industry and profession, are a standard point of reference in journalism studies. The concern of this paper is, rather, the attacks on journalism that unchecked market logic and technological disruption have wrought, now compounded by a political onslaught. The wilting of journalism's public mission brings with it dangerous and even lethal consequences. Just as neoliberalism successfully has captured the stage in democracy, so too has it specifically captured the press. The caricaturing of news practitioners as untrustworthy agents representing the elite against the common good moves journalists to a position of

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[21] Donovan, K. P. (2020). Colonizing the Future. Retrieved from https://bostonreview.net/class-inequality-global-justice/kevin-p-donovan-colonizing-future

acute exposure. It is fair to say, using Raymond Williams' concept of an overarching atmosphere, that we have witnessed a significantly altered structure of feeling (Fuchs, 2017), in wider society but in particular in public discourse, to the detriment of journalism.

It is tempting for journalists to react to the new challenges by adopting a self-destructive stance, as expressed in the extensive coverage of the crisis in news, often ascribed in shallower analyses to a failure to keep up with new technologies and audience habits. The question in evaluating what indeed are changing times for journalism is how to reposition it in what has become an economically, technologically and politically hostile environment (Hafez, 2019; Pickard, 2019). Such a rethinking should, as acknowledged above, encompass professional values, competencies and skills, content, and institutional structures. But, more critically, in the face of the restructuring of economic and political power over recent decades, it must include recognition of the necessary place of a critical press at the most basic level in civil society.

We have discussed above how journalism is weak in the face of intensified market forces and, now, aggressively hostile political forces. For that reason, it is clear that, where public economic underpinning of press quality and plurality is not already in place, a new commitment is required for democratic polities to underwrite journalism with enough resourcing to free it from the grip of profit corporates and from commercial demands more generally. Such a vision slowly has begun to gain traction in policy discourse, as seen most notably in the impactful analysis of the UK's Cairncross review, which argues for public funding for the quality and local press (2019) or in the emergence, hitherto largely taboo, of calls for state supports in Ireland.[22] Within journalism studies, the imperative to support and protect journalism and its normative values – the always-contested whys and wherefores of news – should reclaim a central position. Arguably, the need for such a turn is greatest in digital journalism studies, where the real substance of journalism so often serves as a taken-for-granted and generalized backdrop to the debates dedicated to the inevitabilities of technological disruption and market adaptation.

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[22] Submission by The Irish Times Group to the Future of the Media Commission. Dublin. Retrieved from https://www.irishtimes.com/business/media-and-marketing/the-irish-times-group-calls-for-state-financial-support-for-journalism-1.4475290

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