

Mike Ananny, **Networked Press Freedom: Creating Infrastructures for a Public Right to Hear**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018, 312 pp., \$35.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

Niall P. Stephens

Framingham State University, USA

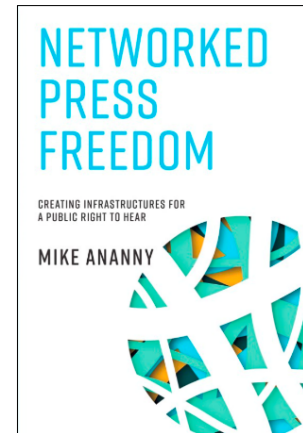
Our thinking about the world is entangled with the world itself, an old problem for liberal theory and social science alike—a circularity that complicates any effort to parse the descriptive from the normative and practical. As Mike Ananny says in his introduction to **Networked Press Freedom**, “press freedom . . . is what people think press freedom should mean and how people have arranged people and power to achieve that vision” (p. 3).

For Ananny, the press earns its freedom by sustaining democratic publics, and such publics embody a positive as well as a negative conception of liberty. Freedom is achieved through the networks we inhabit, no less than against or despite them. Press freedom is won through “dependencies” as much as through “separations.” To be free, the press must constitute itself in relationships with advertisers, government officials, audiences, and increasingly, software engineers. For Ananny, as for Poletta (2002), freedom is an endless meeting.

Modern conditions would seem to make some version of this perspective inescapable—a point that goes back to John Dewey’s and Walter Lippmann’s discussions of the public in the 1920s. Nevertheless, as if to underline the pragmatist point that the public is not external to its own problems (Marres, 2012), a negative conception of liberty has taken hold of the public imagination over the past several decades, particularly in the United States, the subject and context of Ananny’s study. This is a matter not only of neoliberal ideology but also of America’s exceptionally permissive free speech jurisprudence, spearheaded after World War I by Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Joseph Pulitzer described press freedom in the following terms: “circulation means advertising, and advertising means money, and money means independence” (cited in Starr, 2004, p. 257). Evidently Pulitzer was preoccupied with independence from political influence, not the market for advertisements. Though dependent on advertising for handsome profits, the 20th century press in the United States maintained a clear separation between reporting and advertising—“church and state”—and Pulitzer’s business model functioned to support a democratic public sphere. Its success seemed to confirm the harmony, even the identity, of capitalism and democracy. Pulitzer’s business model collapsed a decade ago, and the line between journalism and public relations has since become increasingly blurred. In this context, Ananny recognizes that money entails dependence no less than independence, but he gives the tensions between consumerism and citizenship little scrutiny.

Whatever the core of such tensions may be, it is clear that digital technology is shifting their tectonics. Before it was a synecdoche for journalism at large, *the press* referred to a technological system



that was perhaps uniquely suited to aligning capitalism with democracy. Ananny's interest in technology's role—his preference for a "sociotechnical" rather than a politico-economic lens—is understandable. A view of publics and press freedom arising together from infrastructures of people and machines has the potential, in any case, to account for political economy together with technology.

Ananny recounts how, as *the press* came to refer to broadcasting as well as print media, the routines and ideologies of institutionalized objectivity originating in the print context easily adapted to broadcast news. At the same time, broadcast technologies seemed to demand expanded regulatory mechanisms. Ananny underlines that the fairness doctrine (a rule mandating equal time for different political positions, imposed on American broadcasters in 1949) was "a technology specific policy" (p. 37). Nothing like it applied to newspapers, because they were understood to serve the public's interest more or less automatically. Before it was abolished in 1987, the doctrine was deemed constitutional by the Supreme Court (*Red Lion Broadcasting v. FCC*, 1969). For Ananny, this represents an explicit affirmation of a *public right to hear*.

This public right, a principle of positive liberty, expresses the general postbroadcast concern with the shifting attention of fragmented audiences, the convergence of cultural production with cultural consumption, and, most important for Ananny, digital automation. It underscores that the individual freedom to speak does not by itself guarantee that all relevant voices and facts will be heard throughout the collective. Such a guarantee was plausible when newspaper and broadcast journalists almost single-handedly convened the public sphere. So long as these gatekeepers upheld the trust vested in them, it was possible to think of freedom of the press as "whatever journalists think they need to be free from in order to realize their vision of the public" (p. 110). The fact that they are no longer capable of upholding this trust is, Ananny's discussion suggests, due to technological change.

Ananny's networked press is an actor network, which is to say a complex infrastructure comprising nonhuman as well as human actors. The press has been dependent on computation and associated professional expertise since the quantification of the public began with random sample surveys in the 1930s. Algorithmic automation intensifies this dependence spectacularly. Every aspect of journalism is transformed as machines become increasingly adept at collecting, organizing, and disseminating information in forms that are (and are not) human readable. In a recursive twist, journalism itself is subjected to robotic reading, sorting, and prioritization. Editorial and authorial discretion is displaced by the dictates of data analytics. The public right to hear is overridden by the imperative to maximize engagement. The heroic mythology of the individual journalist upholding democracy with truth telling loses its power.

However inaccurate this mythology may have been as a descriptive account, it means that journalists have a long habit of taking their responsibility as curators of the public sphere seriously. Digital automation (like ecological destruction) reinvigorates a key point of actor network theory, that normative regimes have always been inseparable from material infrastructure. For Ananny, promoting a public right to hear is not just a matter of telling the right stories but of shaping infrastructure. Contemporary journalists need to be not just politically savvy but technically savvy.

Recognizing that different normative visions of the public entail different conceptions of press freedom, Ananny refrains from endorsing any one conception. Treating press freedom as a heuristic or generative question about what kind of public is desirable, he offers a menu of diverging conceptions of the public—from Habermas's rationalism to Mouffe's agonism—but makes no commitment of his own.

This agnosticism might be read as performatively stressing that norms arise from distributed networks rather than from individuals. For the reader, though, it is unsatisfying, and it brings out weaknesses that may be inherent in infrastructural or network thinking in general. It is easy to theorize that entities such as the press are constituted in webs of dynamic relationships, but it can be hard to apply such conceptions effectively to concrete cases. This is apparent in the empirical core of Ananny's book, a qualitative analysis of almost 3,000 trade press stories, selected over a six-year period, which illuminates the all-encompassing range and depth of the challenges posed for journalism by an environment transformed by digital technology. This discussion (chapter 5 of the book) is probably the part of *Networked Press Freedom* that will be of most interest to other scholars. Unsurprisingly, however, it figures the "networked press" as the nexus of an already-constituted field of professional journalism and new digital technologies.

The book's conclusion contains flashes of post-Pulitzer skepticism about the harmony between unregulated private enterprises and democratic outcomes:

As companies like Facebook and Google increasingly capture and monopolize revenue and attention, they consolidate the power to make publics within inscrutable and unaccountable sociotechnical systems, seeing public outcries as public relations problems to be ameliorated or endured. Such companies are not simply threats to journalistic freedom, but to the very idea of autonomous self-governing publics. (p. 186)

Ananny goes on to suggest that the press "redefine and reassert its moral authority" and not "cede the high ground of democratic debate to technology companies that cannot or will not prioritize publics" (p. 187). His theoretical difficulties are in full view here. At the epicenter of the struggle over a public right to hear, the tech giants are—one way or another—part of the networked press, or certainly entities on which the networked press is heavily dependent. In drawing such a sharp separation in his conclusion, Ananny risks putting the press back in the heroic position he began by disavowing.

At a time when publics around the world are riven by disinformation and misunderstanding, Ananny's public right to hear is clearly a relevant notion. He could be criticized for suggesting that democratic politics are simply a matter of establishing adequate infrastructure given a particular set of technological conditions. That said, his focus on technology is not misplaced. Like Douglas Hofstadter (2007), the modern public is a "strange loop." From Lippmann's *Phantom Public* to V. O. Key likening public opinion to the Holy Ghost, its spectral nature has long been commented upon. Ananny is right to see that democracy is at stake in the machinery of the ghost.

References

Hofstadter, D. (2007). *I am a strange loop*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Marres, N. (2012). *Material participation: Technology, the environment, and everyday publics*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Red Lion Broadcasting v. FCC, 395 U.S. 367 (1969).

Poletta, F. (2002). *Freedom is an endless meeting*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Starr, P. (2004). *The creation of the media: Political origins of modern communications*. New York, NY: Basic Books.