

Media Regime Disruption and the Conditions of Public Reflexivity

BEN O'LOUGHLIN¹

Royal Holloway, University of London, UK

This article examines public debates about disruption to the media regime of Western democracies precipitated by the Trump and Brexit elections. Delli Carpini and Williams introduce the media regime concept to explain how media and politics in a given era hold together structurally and are superseded. This article highlights what conditions for public reflexivity emerge during such a disruption and transition, while renewal of media and political institutions continues in parallel to disruption. I explore the conjuncture of formats, contexts, and content in 2016–2019 elite public debates. I find that these broadly map onto the macro-, meso-, and micro-level changes Delli Carpini and Williams identify. I use this to demonstrate the form and content of reflexivity claims generated as elite actors attempt to give meaning to these changes. Despite uncertainty in these debates, there is normative value to the attention generated on fundamental questions about the nature of connectivity and the nature of the social. This disruption presents opportunities for scholars to build new research trajectories and inform public debate as we transition to a new media regime.

Keywords: democracy, media regime, disinformation, reflexivity, social media

From the 1940s until the 1990s, Western national political and media regimes were largely overlapping. National press and broadcasters informed national publics about affairs affecting them collectively and individually. Using that information, citizens could participate in national democratic politics to direct the nation's public policies. Delli Carpini and Williams (2020) argue that in the late 20th and early 21st centuries a fundamental disruption is occurring as some countries experience a transition from a nationally oriented media regime to another one still emerging (see also Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). In Western democracies, this disruption reached a critical juncture in 2016. The election of Donald Trump as U.S. president and the Brexit vote for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union suggested that, systematically, journalism could not hold lying politicians to account (Curato, Hammond, & Min, 2019), citizens were voting based on misinformation, and information operations by Russia showed Western democracies could be "hacked." Public intellectuals asked whether news media and democracy were broken (Habermas, 2016; Runciman, 2018; Wade & Mishra, 2018). A stable, structural conjuncture of culture,

Ben O'Loughlin: Ben.O'Loughlin@rhul.ac.uk

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institutions, and media organizations is necessary for citizens to make decisions together based on a shared set of facts. This article is concerned with the premise that this conjuncture, held together by a media regime, has broken down.

In fact, Western democracies seem to be in transition between media regimes. This is in part an overgeneralization, however. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts' (2018) study of political communication during and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election shows a bifurcation between a radicalized right wing that supported Trump, against a traditional but renewing center and center-left of parties and news media, with a center-right largely losing any presence. The center and center-left hybridize as they incorporate, and interact with, digital media. The radicalized right marked around 30% of actors, and the stable, renewing traditional media and politics measured around 70%. Benkler and associates thus argue that a majority of U.S. politics is not disrupted or feeling an epistemic crisis. The bifurcation is between disruption and renewal, but we shall find that disruption is a focus in the elite debates I analyze.

In this article, I take the structural changes that Delli Carpini and Williams (2020) document and focus on the formats, contexts, and content presented within debates that will inform public reflexivity generated by this sense of disruption in Western democracies. Reflexivity has been theorized by Giddens (among others) as the practice of an individual monitoring others and how social systems work. They reflect on how they fit, to ensure they live effectively, a process of continual calibration and mutual adaptation: "The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character" (Giddens, 1990, p. 38).

Disruption radicalizes reflexivity because practices appear to be breaking down. This threatens to make relationships and behaviors unpredictable. Reflexivity is expressed through public debate. Attention has become focused on a set of overlapping problems of symbolic and material consequence. These include the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the rise of microtargeting, the difficulty of regulating social media companies, and anxiety that filter bubbles are real and create conflicting epistemologies: that political antagonisms become entrenched because groups of citizens hold to different forms of belief and procedures of verification about empirical phenomena. The aim of this article is to examine the *formats* through which these concerns emerge, the *contexts* within which the disruption is presented, and the *content* of information about concrete issues within these debates.

Based on that examination, I argue that this moment of disruption is of great potential value. Certainly, many aspects of the disruption have brought what seem dysfunctional and normatively poisonous practices to the surface of public life (Chadwick, Vaccari, & O'Loughlin, 2018). Benkler and colleagues (2018) argue that, in the United States, disruption is driven by a hard-right partisan group of leaders and media. That political driver runs parallel to an economic motive for social media firms to amplify dramatic news that drives user engagement. Yet, alongside these political and economic drivers, this article shows that this possibility of disruption creates prospects for public debate about the nature of connectivity and about the nature of the social itself. We must acknowledge, still, that the capacity of these debates to trigger collective reflection, deliberation, and mobilization for legislative change is constrained by the fact that they unfold within the very conditions of a media regime in disruption.

My examination of debates is based on materials reviewed while commissioned to write a report for the Flemish Royal Academy to advise policymakers in Brussels. This review was not a scientific project: It did not involve a systematic content analysis of all media, political, or commercial statements about media regime disruption in that period. Instead, it involved immersion through interviews with academics, journalists, and policymakers who in turn recommended information and cases they felt central to this phenomenon. This is conjunctural analysis. Hall (2017) proposes that conjunctural analysis is useful for explaining why a phenomenon was given particular meaning at a certain time; it requires attention to the rhythms and codes of debate and how stories become interlinked. It is a form of interpretive analysis helped by the researcher being there and witnessing how connections are made in public as events unfold. This article does not offer a fully comprehensive evaluation of all dimensions of the intersecting crises that lie at the heart of this broader disruption. Nor can it produce analysis of how these debates have shaped actual reflexivity among citizens; this is a field for study. Necessarily partial and incomplete, this analysis emerges from the very historical conjuncture that is being analyzed and is still unfolding.

Media Regime Disruption

Delli Carpini and Williams (2020) argue that at any time we find that the triad of media organizations, publics, and policy elites exists in an informal and implicit set of relationships. Within those relationships, tacit assumptions exist about what counts as “news” versus “entertainment,” about the role of professional journalists in holding political elites to account; gradually these relations and assumptions coalesce into what from the outside looks like a coherent *media regime*. They define a media regime as “an historically specific, relatively stable set of institutions, norms, processes and actors that shape the expectations and practices of information producers and information consumers” (Delli Carpini, & Williams, 2020, p. 408). A media regime will be regulated formally by the state and reinforced informally by the practices of a constellation of other actors including civil society organizations, citizens, private companies, unions, and research institutions. Media regimes do not just mediate flows of information in a society. They also mediate how new communications technologies are adopted. Equally, while wider economic, geopolitical, and cultural processes influence media regimes, media regimes influence how those processes function. As such, we can infer they play a vital role in enabling major intra- and cross-societal functions to operate.

In periods of media regime stability, Delli Carpini and Williams (2020) argue that controversy breaks out when actors break the given rules. The origin and nature of rules and roles are not subject to public contestation. However, when technological, cultural, political, or economic changes disrupt the media regime, rules come under question. Actors make normative and empirical claims about what could and should be the proper role of journalism, what counts as “news,” the nature of public deliberation, and other core aspects of the emergent, next media regime. For instance, from the 1940s until the 1990s, Delli Carpini and Williams suggest that Western democracies largely experienced a media regime constituted by sharp distinctions between news and entertainment, mass-mediated versus interpersonal communication, information producers (often journalists) and information consumers (often citizens), and facts versus opinion or beliefs. These distinctions were not present to such a degree in media regimes prior to the 1940s (Tworek & Hamilton, 2018) and have eroded in the early 21st-century emerging media regime. That blurring is reinforced by qualities unique to the media regime now emerging. Delli Carpini and Williams argue that one quality is that media are now “multiaxial”: The information gatekeeping and framing roles previously

performed by journalists are now diffused both within and across countries, and thus the capacity to shape agendas is also diffused (see also Entman & Usher, 2018; Livingston & Nassetta, 2018). Another quality is "hyperreality," whereby representations and performances of reality become more important than independent empirical facts. Again, as a new or renewed media regime emerges, these new qualities are subject to normative and empirical deliberation as well as being integral qualities of the landscape in which those deliberations unfold.

The media regime concept brings two advantages. First, it offers far more scope to situate an event or process as conjunctural—as an intersection of macroeconomic, geopolitical, and cultural trends; meso-level actions by specific institutions and organizations; and micro-level individual behaviors. Locating what a disruption is an instance of makes the public deliberation of it possible. If it is a disruption of a media regime, then it becomes comparable to other disruptions of media regimes. This conceptual specificity is necessary because, until we agree what the type of problem is that we are deliberating, then we debate at cross-purposes (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Dewey, 1927).

The second advantage of the media regime concept is that it offers an analytical framework for considering temporality. Public debate on disruption tends to assume a temporality of a "crisis" or a "new normal," but these can become mixed and unclear. The notion of crisis implies a problem that could be solved (Zelizer, 2015). If something is broken, it can be fixed, or else a new arrangement must be built instead. In journalism since late 2007, the migration of advertising to social media platforms and gatekeeping to a wider variety of sites and users led to claims of crisis. That enabled a narrative demanding the restoration of "standards" maintained previously through hierarchies of authority and credibility (Buozis, Rooney, & Creech, 2018), as if such hierarchies were unproblematic and should be the model for journalism's future. Furthermore, the notion of crisis creates a "blind spot" in knowledge about any institution over time (Roitman, 2014, p. 11), preventing acknowledgment of continual uncertainty and allowing a false premise that things were simpler and less troublesome before disruption emerged. The other temporality, the notion of a new normal, implies a linear temporality within which society enters a new stage after a step change caused by some technological, cultural, commercial, or political innovation or disruption. It is not that democracy can be fixed, but that we would be *after* democracy. Neither temporal conception is especially useful, especially considering that in the bifurcation identified by Benkler and associates (2018) we find a renewed, continuous, traditional center and center-left and supportive media. Rather than assume either a crisis or a new normal, the concept of media regime enables us to identify precisely what institutions, norms, processes, actors, and expectations are changing and what remain relatively continuous or unaltered.

This analysis seeks to go further. In line with Hall's (2017) notion of conjunctural analysis as a practice of interpretation, I also seek to identify the experiences of temporality presented in open, public reflections on the current media regime disruption. Adopting Williams' concept "structure of feeling" (Orrom & Williams, 1954), Mitchell (2018) argues that by late 2018 a convergence of temporalities occurred in Western democracies based around a sense of rupture and an anxiety that aspects of the disruption might be enduring and permanent. Together, these concerns created a feeling of perpetual alertness and roiling anxiety of all sides, he argues. Thus, this section has demonstrated that alongside the structural changes identifiable through Delli Carpini and Williams' (2020) concept of media regime, there are also temporal and affective dimensions to public deliberation that contribute to feelings of urgency or stasis, novelty or

paralysis. These matter because they bear on expectations about what action is required (Wagner-Pacifici, 2000). Reflexivity is not simply the rational calibration of known information.

The Format of Debates

Information about media regime disruption has emerged through investigative journalism, whistleblower interviews, government hearings, committees and reports, and scholarly research. Commentators in public life use these formats of information to build narratives of blame, retribution, and possible resolutions. These narratives indicate structures of feeling. They present situations of unease and desired endings.

Much public information about media regime disruption has emerged through investigative journalism combined with whistleblower interviews. On March 16, 2018, Facebook suspended the account of Cambridge Analytica, a data company—funded by the billionaire Robert Mercer—with political clients. Facebook’s decision came just before *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* were about to publish reports in which the whistleblower Christopher Wylie would claim that Cambridge Analytica had used data that an academic had taken improperly from Facebook (Madrigal, 2018). Via a set of companies, Cambridge Analytica promised clients it could build and harness users’ psychological profiles. By posting personality test surveys on Facebook that went viral, the firm obtained data it processed through an OCEAN (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism) model (Bartlett, 2018). These scores were triangulated against users’ likes and other demographics to generate a profile. Cambridge Analytica could promise political parties that it could microtarget individuals with particular psychological profiles with tailored advertisements. This indicated microtargeting on a mass scale, enough to trigger immediate speculation that voters could be influenced and election results swayed. There was also nothing to stop any actor using Facebook to try to influence elections in any democracy.

Whistleblower interviews have been an important subgenre supporting investigative journalism. They provide detailed information and texture or color that give a sense of backstage authenticity and drama to narratives of the disruption. One Facebook employee told *Wired* readers about the “witches’ brew” of personal data that Facebook uses to build out from a user’s friend network to find—and build—an audience of the similarly minded (Martinez, 2018, para. 20). Similarly, Miller (2018) interviewed an anonymous researcher at “one of the tech giants” who was responsible for ensuring that a certain algorithm maximized certain outputs such as engagement (para. 3). The researcher could not explain how any change in inputs (e.g., user search behavior) would proceed through the algorithm to generate certain outputs. As long as outputs kept growing, he kept his job. Showing that even staff did not fully understand the platforms’ systems, such accounts indicated the difficulty any regulator would face. Yet, this also raises questions about whether social media actually disrupt democracy or simply mark an extension of conventional campaigning.

Fisher (2018) reported on 1,400 pages *The New York Times* had obtained of Facebook’s own rules for moderators to apply around the world. In liaising with Facebook whistleblowers Fisher became aware that Facebook outsourced much moderation to unskilled workers, often recruited from call centers. Workers relied on Google Translate to interpret content and felt under severe pressure to process content quickly. Such reporting made public how Facebook worked. Given that free speech is conceptualized and practiced

differently in different countries, Fisher reported Rosa Birch, from Facebook's own internal crisis team, arguing that their moderation would never be definitive. This highlighted the problem as bigger than Facebook and Cambridge Analytica. The problem was governance of private spaces in the public interest, when platforms are transnational and national regulations vary.

By 2018, many public authorities convened committees seeking to understand causes of these disruptions, assign blame, and identify how these dilemmas could be overcome. In a report for the Flemish Royal Academy of Sciences in which they considered Russian external interference, Billiet, Opgenhaffen, Pattyn, and Van Aelst (2018) argue that elections and referenda as well as routine identity politics "are profoundly disrupted by activities *made possible by* [emphasis added] the media platform" (p. 63). A European Commission committee reported that without data transparency from social media platforms, no evidence base for countering disinformation is possible (High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, 2018). A UK Parliament committee on disinformation concluded that Facebook had been entirely "disingenuous" when asked about such matters (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2019, p. 93). Emerging scholarly research bolstered these committee reviews. Where scholars could access social media data, their analytics could produce network maps that offered publicly available visualizations of potential filter bubbles or insurgent political movements (Albright, 2016; Starbird, 2017).

Across all of these formats, narrative structures emerged: the geographical setting of the story (national democratic systems as well as networks of transnational influence), the pivotal characters (individual and corporate), the dilemmas to solve (privacy, transparency), the tools that characters could use to solve the dilemmas (policies, technologies), and projected endings (fix or transform democracy). For instance, Zuckerberg's Senate testimony in 2018 was a hook around which to build a larger plot, which in turn triggered broader normative contestation. On social media, critical scholars followed the Zuckerberg testimony because it seemed to symbolize a problem with how the issue of disruption was being made public. This group argued that holding individuals' account evaded the more difficult task of transforming the very logics of the digital or platform economy that enable disingenuous individuals to prosper (e.g., Andrejevic, 2018). In a *New York Times* article, media professor Tufekci (2018) argues the Zuckerberg hearing was a distracting spectacle that left the real story unaddressed: the "structural problems" whereby democracy has to somehow operate in a public space driven by the commercial logics of platform capitalism. This was not a simple problem that, with a smart flourish, Zuckerberg could fix.

The "blame social media platforms" narrative was undermined further as it became clear that the problem of nontransparent microtargeting was identified by researchers years earlier (Madrigal, 2018). The 2012 Obama campaign used similar data-gathering and profiling techniques, including an app that could reach 98% of U.S. Facebook users by acquiring users' friends' data (Sifry, 2018). However, few Facebook users understood that selling their data was integral to Facebook's business model. Journalists had never made it a public issue or understood how Facebook's model worked (Sifry, 2018). Electoral regulators had not investigated how digital marketing techniques were being used in politics. Tufekci (2012) had warned that data were being "weaponized" in politics in November 2012. In London in June 2012, I warned polling companies and the public authority officials that data analytics firms working with political parties were openly admitting that they viewed politics as a "wild west" for exploitation (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2012).

In summary, information became public in Western democracies in various formats that narrated disruption to the “institutions, norms, processes and actors that shape the expectations and practices of information producers and information consumers,” as Delli Carpini and Williams (2020, p. 408) define a media regime. From backstage whistleblower accounts to public hearings with social media bosses, this patchwork of formats was the raw material from which actors formed several narratives, giving meaning to the causes, consequences, and necessary responses to the disruption. This array is valuable because it represents the disruption through a plurality of possible timescales (did the problem of microtargeting begin in 2016 or 2012 or earlier?) and through a mix of stories: personal accounts, data visualizations, and dramatic televised hearings. This allows citizens to stitch together their own narratives that bring together systemic features, such as regulatory structures and platform logics; meso-level expectations about how journalistic practices and election campaigns should work; and individual-level matters related to privacy, news choice, information sharing, and vote preference. We return later to the broader questions that this array of information and narratives generates in the public realm.

The Contextualization of the Disruption

In this section, we find that the disruption is presented within various contexts: as a matter of electoral interference, as part of a new Cold War, as a moment within a wider transition to a world in which all social and political processes occur within social media spaces and is guided by their logics, as part of a global plutocrat insurgency, and through fears of continued technology-driven disruptions within an uncertain and dangerous future. More contexts have appeared but less frequently in the conjuncture of public, policy, and media debates analyzed in this research. This includes populism, nationalism, and economic inequality in some countries (see Reid-Henry, 2019).

For some, the crisis was that elections could be swayed by illicit methods. On November 12, 2016, Zuckerberg posted that his platform had not won Trump the election. In response, former Facebook employee Antonio Garcia Martinez said, “Until literally a few days before, this entire ad sales team at Facebook was literally telling every politician with a budget that Facebook can actually hand them the election” (as cited in Kulwin, 2018a, para. 2). This was a divisive point. Campaign managers noted that the narrative omitted that Senator Ted Cruz had used Cambridge Analytica services in previous campaigns with little success (e.g., Wallace, 2018). Furthermore, as we explore later, it would be difficult to establish that microtargeting even influenced any specific voters.

The narrative of social media platform culpability was enhanced when the disruption was put in a geopolitical context. It was widely reported that microtargeting facilitated by U.S. social media companies let Russia sow dissent within the United States at election times and by stoking divisive protest/counterprotest dynamics. Political communication scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2018) argues that Russia’s use of microtargeting fit the definition of propaganda offered by political communication scholars in the 1940s. The media regime of the 1940s–1990s with high press/broadcaster gatekeeping functions had limited foreign interference in U.S. media output. The digital media ecology, Jamieson argues, featured monopolization (by platforms), supplementation (by nonjournalist voices), and canalization (filter bubbles). This allowed Russia to disseminate information in ways that negated U.S. news organizations. Moreover, rather than challenge that information, those news organizations amplified Russia-backed stories.

Think tank reports confirmed that Russia was conducting such operations in many democracies (Ünver, 2019). This placed the context of electoral interference into a wider "new Cold War" narrative.

In the 2016–2019 period, there was a sense that the West was being surprised and outmaneuvered by Russia. This was evident both in scholarship (Jamieson, 2018) and wider policy responses such as NATO creating new STRATCOM centers in Baltic states. In the United States, PBS News interviewed Bret Schafer who directed the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy, monitoring thousands of Russian Twitter accounts. Yet, the report noted a practical disadvantage: The U.S. counternarrative agency, the Global Engagement Center, had only one Russian-speaking senior officer (Epatko, 2018). *The Sunday Times* published a story reporting that Russian Twitter bots tried to boost UK public opinion in favor of opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn during the 2017 UK general election. The story was based on unpublished research by scholars at Swansea University. Other scholars swiftly debunked the study and the story (Chadwick, 2018). Nevertheless, such a story seemed credible and compelling to the editors at *The Sunday Times*. This reinforced the new Cold War narrative in which Russia became a significant threat and player, an outcome the Putin leadership wanted (Belton, 2020). Here, media regime transition was enmeshed in geopolitical struggle.

A third context of disruption proposes that social media platforms had entirely reconfigured how societies work. Platforms had such power that they could act with impunity in ways that could determine vast political outcomes, bypassing and negating state power. The allegation that Facebook enabled genocidal violence against Rohingya people in Myanmar led to publicity that Facebook could simply switch off Internet access in countries; that it could do so without warning and with impunity (Singh, 2018). It is not that legal and political institutions are the framework firms operate in, but vice versa. Kate Losse, former speechwriter for Mark Zuckerberg, suggested that Facebook is the air around everything, including politics: "Politics is smaller than it" (Kulwin, 2018b, para. 30).

Alongside these journalistic and whistleblowing statements, critical scholars tried to theorize this publicly. Pasquale (2018) argues that technology firms acquire aspects of sovereignty that were previously the preserve of nation-states: "As digital firms move to displace more government roles over time, from room-letting to transportation to commerce, citizens will be increasingly subject to corporate, rather than democratic, control" (Pasquale, 2018, n.p.). Social relations were becoming regulated by firms' policies: "privatized governance," not public law (Weatherby, 2018, para. 1).

Zuckerberg's words reflected this. He conceptualized the social through the concepts of connectivity and community—often a world community. For example, he said,

With a community of more than 2 billion people all around the world, in every county, where there are wildly different social and cultural norms, it's just not clear to me that us sitting in an office here in California are best placed to always determine what the policies should be for people all around the world. And I've been working on and thinking through: How can you set up a more democratic or community-oriented process that reflects the values of people around the world? (Zuckerberg, as cited in Klein, 2018, para. 12)

Zuckerberg connected questions of values to the organization of his platform. He outlined his preferred imaginary of a sovereign structure: "If you ask millennials what they most identify the most with, it's not their nationality or even their ethnicity. The plurality identifies as a citizen of the world" (as cited in Klein, 2018, para. 74). By this logic, this collectivity of user-citizens should exist in a Facebook global public sphere—the ever-expanding community already 2 billion strong. There would be

some sort of structure, almost like a Supreme Court, that is made up of independent folks who don't work for Facebook, who ultimately make the final judgement call on what should be acceptable speech in a community that reflects the social norms and values of people all around the world. (Zuckerberg, as cited in Klein, 2018, para. 21)

Regardless of their truth content, these public statements became material for public deliberation about the preferred media regime to be built out of the current disruption.

The fourth context for understanding the unfolding media regime disruption made public was that it was inseparable from a global plutocrat insurgency (see Gilman, 2014). Here, particular billionaires and autocratic leaders mobilized culturally conservative networks by working with the grain of sensation- and affective-led logics of the social media attention economy. Journalists investigating Cambridge Analytica situated its operations within what Cadwalladr (2017) calls a "shadowy global operation" against liberal democracy (para. 1). It was argued that this insurgency emerged within liberal democracies as well, as an array of think tanks, media organizations, foundations, lobbyists, and grassroots organizations gained "high levels of framing coherence and audience reach" (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 129) via mainstream media. Institutions integral to the disrupted media regime assisted the insurgency through the paradoxical mechanism whereby news outlets attacked as "fake news," like *The New York Times*, gained huge new subscription levels by reporting on the daily attacks on liberal institutions.

A final, fifth context presented these problems as harbingers of greater structural changes that bring further dangers to media, democracy, and citizenship. Fears were expressed that a media ecology of deep fakes, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things will mean that technology would have far richer user profiles, rendering voters more malleable. Some reporting publicized huge claims. Justin Hendrix, director of NYC Media Lab, and David Carroll, a media professor filing a claim against Cambridge Analytica, wrote that even if Cambridge Analytica could not demonstrate any "measurable effect on the 2016 U.S. election, these technologies are advancing quickly. . . . The next generation of such firms will almost certainly deliver on the promise" (Hendrix & Carroll, 2018, para. 3). The potential for automated systems led scholars to claim an "end of causality" (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013, p. 18). With human reflexivity and responsibility removed, this raised the question of how accountability and democracy would function in such a future media regime. Yet, it did not demonstrate the empirical arrival of disruption.

In this section, we see that through various formats the possible disruption is placed in several contexts. As a final focus within Delli Carpini and Williams' (2020) framework, what substantive information content were citizens offered about the exact mechanisms of disruption and possibilities for legislative action? We see, next, that this factual information was marked by uncertainty.

Substantive Information Content About Disruption

Within the overarching formats and contexts identified in the previous two sections, understandings of the concrete issues within the media regime disruption problem were highly uncertain. This is understandable as new technologies were being used and events were unfolding in disruptive ways within and across nations.

Did microtargeting affect voters? Myriad scholars offered rapid public statements summarizing empirical research refuting claims of effects. In terms of public reflexivity, however, Barker (2018) suggests that microtargeting was possible in cultural conditions in which, since the 1990s, nudge theory and neuroscience had generated popular understanding of how persuasion works, understandings not supported by evidence. Flam (2018) argues that Cambridge Analytica's psychological profiling was not accurate. In *Wired*, Lapowsky (2018) argues that exposure did not equate to persuasion. Lack of access to Facebook data also made it impossible for researchers to trace effects of individual ads or the longitudinal effect of exposure to repeated ads.

There was nevertheless a feeling in public debate that microtargeting must have had some effects. One media entrepreneur argues, "Businesses wouldn't have billions in social media ad spend if it weren't effective"; she suggests the data told Trump whom to target, even if she does not point to effects on specific audiences (Dukic, 2018, n.p.). She argues that Trump ads targeted the "reptilian" aspect of the brain that is engaged when a person (or lizard) feels threatened, stoking fear, leading his supporters to be "brainwashed" and "genuinely afraid" (Dukic, 2018, n.p.). Cadwalladr (2017) argues that Cambridge Analytica was used to "dupe" citizens. Political scientist Matthew Hindman (2018) argues that, even if the psychometrics were "just hocus-pocus," the Facebook data campaign teams bought access to were still a step change in scale and analytical scope. Think tank director Jamie Bartlett (2018) writes that, although it is not known whether microtargeting influenced U.S. voters, the data did allow for the construction of target groups and persuaded the Trump campaign to target Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan, swing states that Trump won.

Did social media drive citizens into filter bubbles? Public deliberation was again hindered by confused concepts. Whether a filter bubble is defined by the news sources that people share, by substantive content of arguments expressed, by party political affiliation, or by general sociocultural identity will deliver very different measures of how many people are located within filter bubbles (see Bechmann & Nielbo, 2018). Studies have reported that users are exposed to an ideologically diverse range of content online (Nechushtai & Lewis, 2018) and that users regularly, actively click on stories containing content they disagree with (Song, Cho, & Benefield, 2020). This demonstrates that explanation of a disrupted or renewed media regime must have methodology and concepts that can capture interactions at multiple levels and with multiple ontological specifications of what "is" the key marker of political difference, because identity, affiliation, and behavior can be conceptualized in many ways.

Concrete solutions were proposed at the macro-system, meso-organizational, and individual micro levels, enabling reflexivity fitting Delli Carpini and Williams' (2020) media regime conceptualization. At a macro level, Tufekci (2018) argues that social media had to be regulated as a public good and legislation

had to ensure data transparency at the individual level, which would generate solutions at the social level. If users could see which advertisers were targeting them, how their data were being analyzed and by whom, and if legislation ensured that aggregated data were not used in discriminatory ways, then this would produce a more open and data-literate culture (see also High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, 2018).

At a meso-organizational level, fact-checking operations were created in many countries. Some felt that this ignored how citizens choose news and information based on group identity and a desire for confirmation of “deeper emotional truths” (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 135). Debates also considered the role of journalism. In March 2018, *The Washington Post* executive editor Martin Baron said, “The president has said he is at war with the press. I can say this: We are not at war. We are at work” (n.p.). Media scholar Jay Rosen countered that the Trump administration was conducting a war against the U.S. press. Rosen’s diagnosis supports the plutocrat insurgency context identified above. He questioned professional journalists seeking to maintain a particular self-identity. Rosen described, “You’re supposed to stay cool. . . . The right pose to strike is unrattled, laconic. Serene and detached when under attack” (Rosen, 2018a, n.p.). He argues that they should instead realize that they “have to go to war against a political style in which power gets to write its own story” (Rosen, 2018b, n.p.). This exemplifies how disruption to the norms, expectations, and practices of the media regime raises fundamental questions about journalism’s proper role and the context it finds itself in. It again reproduces a bifurcation between renewing established norms versus fear of a wholly new, disruptive threat to journalism.

At the individual level, would media literacy help? Like fact-checking, commentators consider media literacy an opportunity to show action is being taken, but predict limited effects. Individuals could hardly offer informed consent on how their data would be harvested and used as they engaged with news (Carmi, 2018). Microsoft researcher danah boyd (2018) argues instead for “a networked response for a networked landscape” (para. 64).

On all of these important mechanisms, citizens were offered little certainty. However, I contend in the following discussion that these public debates still produce valuable perspectives on fundamental questions about what kind of media regime we want.

Discussion: Conditions of Public Reflexivity About Connectivity and the Social

Debate about media regime disruption has generated awareness about how platforms reconfigure social relations and how difficult it is to see how platforms transform society. This has triggered public information that allows citizens and elites to see connectivity and the relations of power and influence they sustain. It has long been argued that it is difficult to “see” a market or a state; so too for platforms, which makes it difficult to respond to them. Weatherby (2018) argues that all efforts at regulating technology platforms or altering our own behavior or literacy are secondary to grasping that the issue is a new sociotechnical situation. Global society is now made up of a new ontology. States and markets remain, but platforms constitute a new, third category of social relations or third institutional form. The defining quality of platforms is their integrative function. Weatherby writes,

Platforms are a computational interface between society and capital. They host the performance of that interaction. And, in this way, they are also a kind of outsourced and even crowdsourced mind, in which signs and concepts are in direct, exploitable communication with production and valuation. (n.p.)

All behavior is data that can be used to connect user and product, through always-on automated, algorithm-driven processes. One former Facebook employee interviewed in early 2018 explained how this integrative function is conceptualized by Facebook to avoid responsibility for impacting how social relations work:

They've always claimed, "Look, we're just intermediaries. The algorithm optimizes for a metric, whether it's engagement, clicks, or whatever. We're not responsible for what you see. At the end of the day, it's you, the users, through your actions, that ultimately define what you see. It's not really us." (Martinez, as cited in Kulwin, 2018a, para. 36)

However, these ways of "optimizing" engagement mean that a platform is more than an intermediary. It also shapes or constitutes behavior. Public reflexivity has generated information that makes visible—and perhaps legible to some—this totality. This allows consideration of how to redesign at all levels, as a regime—boyd's (2018) idea of a networked response for a networked landscape.

Making connectivity visible allows reconsideration of the nature of the social and what kind of social is normatively desirable and possible. Tufekci (2018) argues that "companies can and will persuade people to part with their data in ways that may seem to make sense at the individual level but that work at the aggregate level to create public harms" (para. 13). The emergence of discriminatory algorithms and their public debate allows citizens to grasp individual-meso-macro relations.

Theorists of technology have explicitly criticized platforms' public conceptions of the social. Philosopher Ian Bogost (2018) highlights Zuckerberg's language of "community," arguing that "'community' is such an amazing euphemism for 'database'" (n.p.). Technology theorist Benjamin Bratton (2018) argues that Facebook's community is designed around individuals interacting as individuals, possessing individual privacy rights. This has generated calls for group privacy rights: "AI and algorithmic methods create ad hoc collectives for purposes such as predictive policing, medicine, psychological experiments and urban planning, but in most cases where people are addressed collectively, no protection will apply until it can be demonstrated that an individual is impacted" (Taylor, 2017, para. 3). How to assert group rights? These are ontological questions, akin to how conceptions of "the public" formed around embryonic public opinion research in the 1940s, at the beginning of the last Western media regime, such that to speak of "the public" as a measurable entity became an implicit quality of that regime. Public agreement now on an ontology of the social will be difficult. Waisbord (2018) asks whether we must accept a society featuring multiple concepts and ontologies of the social.

This leads to normative questions about how much polarization about the nature of connectivity and the social is desirable. In 1950, the American Political Science Association called for greater polarization: Parties offered no clear, coherent differences. This was felt to stymie voter choice and pluralism (Tucker et al., 2018). We have seen the range of types of filter bubble existing today, based on news source, ideology, and social

identity, each enabling different forms and degrees of polarization. Is there a happy medium for a new media regime that would sustain agonistic democracy, and how could that be achieved given that platform capitalism and populist politicians are incentivized to exacerbate difference, sensation, and outrage?

There is a further complication. As Western democracy is deemed to be in crisis, then the very media regime within that crisis will be debated, and a decisions debate and legitimated is itself bifurcated between experiencing manifold, intersecting crises while much is simply renewed. Just as the moment arises for public deliberation to consider new norms and legislation for the next media regime, so the prospects for such deliberation are to an extent undermined (in ways that vary by country). For Delli Carpini and Williams (2020), these crises are "limiting the discursive resources available for identifying alternative mechanisms to re-establish the public interest obligations of the media," (p. 411) for instance. Nevertheless, this article has demonstrated that those discursive resources are there, but the variety of formats, contexts and available information that has any certainty means that citizens must be comfortable negotiating plural levels and ontologies. It entails work for forms of public reflexivity to emerge that address that plurality.

Conclusion

Information about contemporary media regime disruption has emerged through investigative journalism, whistleblower interviews, government hearings, committees and reports, and scholarly research. Commentators use these formats as resources to forge narratives, expressing and contributing to structures of feeling. Disruption is presented within various contexts: electoral interference, a new Cold War, as part of a world within a social media ecology, and as one step toward even more dangerous technologies. However, these narratives' and contextualizations' credibility rests on establishing certain facts about present events around which an informed debate can unfold. This analysis has found reflexivity about substantive issues at macro, meso, and micro levels of media regime disruption, including possibilities of systemic regulation of platforms, new organizational practices of journalism and fact-checking, and individual-level literacy and rights. However, these were informed by partial and uncertain understandings of the actual mechanisms thought to constitute and symbolize the disruption, for instance, the apparently significant effects of microtargeting and the existence of democratically dysfunctional filter bubbles.

This renders uncertainty. A disruption that can be fixed demands transparency about how social media work and how institutions and practices are being disrupted. A renewal of the existing media regime requires new forms of regulation and accountability and normative acceptance of new phenomena such as microtargeting. Because it is unclear how connectivity and the social function empirically in this media regime, this problem enables structures of feeling characterized by an anxiety about rupture, in Mitchell's (2018) terms. Further study could identify whether this structure of feeling is why debate about the current media regime analyzed in this article has been more focused on disruption than renewal.

These empirical uncertainties are unavoidable given that some disruption is unfolding. More important, the proliferation of competing narratives, contexts, and uncertainties has triggered broader consideration of fundamental questions that can guide deliberation about the emergence of a new or renewed media regime. Questions have been raised, publicly, about what kinds of technologically enabled connectivity is normatively desirable and what we understand as the social. This is an opportunity. We have

been here before: "The 1940s and 1950s . . . was the genesis of many of the theories, methods, and empirical research that, to varying degrees, still shape our scholarly, normative, and applied understandings of the relationship between media, politics and democracy" (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2020, p. 420).

Each media regime transition provides new relationships and practices that demand explanation, interpretation, and normative evaluation. Benkler and colleagues (2018) write, "We are only at the very beginning of the ability to create the capacity to engage in . . . broad, cross-platform research" (p. 384). Delli Carpini and Williams (2020) note that Lazarsfeld and colleagues at Columbia University could forge a research paradigm at the birth of the broadcast era. Such opportunities are present now. That research should feed into processes of public reflexivity about the media regime and how democracy, journalism, and citizenship can and should function.

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