

"The best introduction to the nature of Trump-era journalism and how the 'post-truth' media world is inimical to a democratic society."

—**ROBERT W. McCHESNEY**

author of *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*

UNITED STATES OF DISTRACTION



**MEDIA MANIPULATION
IN POST-TRUTH AMERICA**

(AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT)

NOLAN HIGDON + MICKEY HUFF

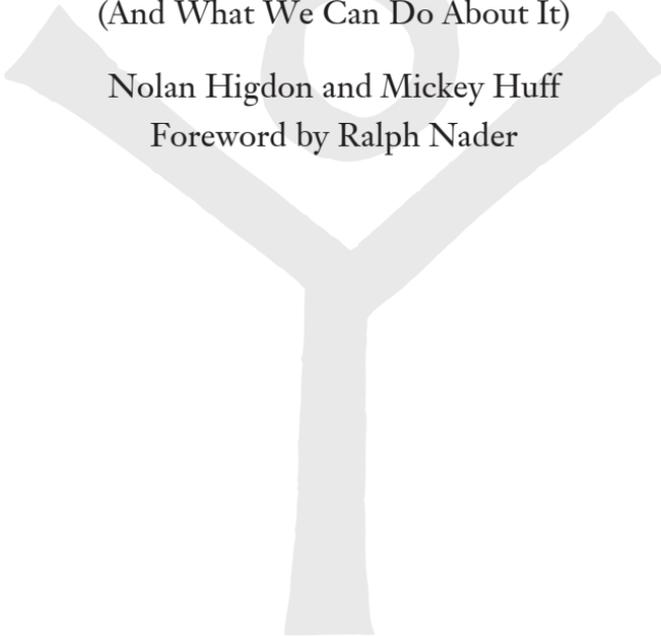
FOREWORD BY **RALPH NADER**

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United States of Distraction

Media Manipulation in Post-Truth America
(And What We Can Do About It)

Nolan Higdon and Mickey Huff
Foreword by Ralph Nader



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“Our government is a bird with two right wings. . . .
They’re devoted to the perpetuation and spread
of corporate capitalism.”

—*Lawrence Ferlinghetti*



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FOREWORD

By Ralph Nader

Ever since the few began to control the many, disinformation, fabrications, and distractions have been used to shape consent, impose submission, and maintain domination. Whether by the invoked authority of God, the divine right of kings, the dictatorial embodiment of a fatherland, the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” or the tyranny of commercially managed marketplaces, the casualty of such control has always been the ability of ordinary people to give voice to their own realities, needs, demands, and grievances. Given the inherent pragmatism of the human mind, the oppressed have often found it safer to believe rather than think, to obey rather than dissent. Today, such a path is reinforced by a plutocratic political economy that allows corporations to dominate mass media, education, and the production of knowledge and memory.

Human history, however, has not been without its visionaries, seers, and prescient intellectuals, poets, artists, thinkers, and philosopher rebels. Every major religion admonishes its adherents not to allow the merchant class—with its singular focus on aggregating profits at the expense of truth, compassion, and self-restraint—to amass too much power. Such instructions have emanated not from

revelation, but from ethics learned via the daily experience of living in community with others committed to the common good.

Unfortunately, it has been the transactional incentives of commerce, not the cooperative bonds of community that dominate the most significant aspects of life in the United States today. The dystopian scenarios portrayed in George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* look like understatements compared to today's plutocratic deployment of communications technologies, many of them developed by taxpayer-funded government programs and grants.

The ultimate success of top-down censorship is self-censorship by the people. The same holds true for mass surveillance. From radio and television, to the internet and smartphones, and all the video platforms and apps in between, commercially controlled media have used seduction and addiction to lure “users” to increasingly stare into screens and “share” personal data and location, thus becoming complicit with authoritarianism and mass surveillance. In the process, the population has become fact-deprived and over-entertained, with lowered expectation levels and reduced attention spans. These technology-driven changes have distracted people from their rights and powers as citizens. As authors Nolan Higdson and Mickey Huff write: “Long before Trump’s candidacy, ratings drove programming and news. In the process, celebrity, entertainment, scandal, crime, disaster, and spectacle clearly dominated over the substantive reporting . . . and public interest advocacy capable of questioning and countering abuses of corporate power and government authority.” Trump, they note, came right out of this omnipresent “corporate commercialism.”

Deadly degradation of media is everywhere. Fueled by Madison Avenue's promotional perfidy, the junk food industry, bypassing parental authority, has lied its way directly into the stomachs of tens of millions of children, creating an obesity epidemic with its attendant diseases. "Alternative facts," anyone?

Forty-five years ago, venerated *CBS News* anchor Walter Cronkite called the three minutes or so devoted to a serious news story merely "a headline service." If anything, the situation has worsened since Cronkite's time. Gone are the "Fairness Doctrine," the "right of reply," and any pretense that the Federal Communications Commission is regulating the broadcasters according to the 1934 Communications Act standard of the "public interest, convenience, and necessity."

The takeover of hundreds of newspapers, local television stations, and radio stations by corporate profiteers is still worsening. These corporations loot vulnerable media operations by cutting out reporters, investigative journalism, whistleblowers, educational content, and local coverage. Magazines are shrinking, going out of business, or just migrating to online-only versions. Social media cannot generate such content in addition to other shortcomings.

Young people today are becoming increasingly *aliterate*. They spend more time staring at screens, but ultimately read less long-form content unless forced to do so for classwork. Fewer people are showing up for town meetings, marches, demonstrations, and rallies, in spite of the ease and immediacy of communication enabled by the internet.

The so-called "Information Age" has become the "Disinformation Era," with the corporate media's exclusion of the civic community being one of its most devastat-

ing triumphs. In the 1960s and 1970s, we could not have succeeded in advancing standards for public health and safety, labor, and environmental integrity without the help of mass media reporting on public campaigns and Congressional hearings, or without large audiences tuning in to programs such as the *Phil Donabue Show*, which dedicated airtime to discussing our investigations, reports, and exposés. Now it is not just corporate media, but the Congress itself that is increasingly shutting out citizen groups, accomplished civic leaders, and other valued witnesses whose needs, voices, and demands deserve to be heard and represented. Congress is open for business, but closed to the people—C-SPAN notwithstanding.

Readers of this timely book will note with admiration that its detailed analysis and moral outrage at corporate domination are grounded in irrefutable evidence. The essential question raised by the ongoing “assault on democracy” must still be addressed: How can we *implement* all the constructive proposals for developing information systems that serve the civic values of the people instead of the crass, profit-driven priorities of short-sighted corporations?

Congress can and should acknowledge, address, and implement many of the proposals in this book. There are only 535 elected officials for millions of Americans to instruct. Send them the plans described by Higdon and Huff and demand not just a reply, but that they hold their own town meetings around changing media and education. A petition of 500 citizens, with names, addresses, and occupation clearly marked, can bring a senator or representative to your community. Face to face!

Add to the agenda our proposal to have Congress create a national “audience network”—by returning a few hours of public airwaves to communities, otherwise known

as “we the people,” for noncommercial programming, on licensed stations every day. Support for developing such a network of radio and TV programming can and should be funded by charging the commercial stations rent for their use of our public airwaves, which, historically, Congress has gifted to commercial corporations free of charge. Congressman Ed Markey held a hearing on the idea of an Audience Network in 1991, but without citizens organized to support the initiative, it went nowhere.

There can be no democracy without democratic media. Look at your *TV Guide* and see how sports, low-grade entertainment, and endless advertising dominate hundreds of outlets. Are there, among the 600+ cable channels, any devoted to workers, consumers, students, taxpayers, or any of the thousands of nonprofit social justice organizations fighting for a better America? Of course not. We have allowed our property and our franchises to be completely seized by the corporatists, with scarcely a whimper. The big foundations do not like funding watchdog groups. But perhaps some enlightened, very wealthy people can be persuaded to do so.

Critical media literacy needs citizen motivation and citizen context. It must relate, at the beginning, to the communities where people live, work, and raise their families. That means that concern over toxic air, dirty water, contaminated food, dangerous disrepair of public services, underfunded schools, inadequate clinics, drug epidemics, and public transportation will generate receptivity to the facts. Fake news, swerves, and propaganda didn't work in Flint, Michigan, when the parents discovered their children were ingesting perilous levels of lead in the drinking water. They were outraged and called loudly for the truth . . . and got it, by organizing and making demands.

Imagine how differently things might have gone if the local community college or high schools taught physics, biology, and chemistry courses as science-for-the-people, and regularly had their students test for heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, and arsenic. Such practices are entirely possible to achieve, but we need to organize them. Doing so could improve public health and safety standards and catch deadly contamination much earlier. Education can and should show students how to get the facts about conditions in their own community. Learning by doing is more memorable than mere instruction.

Finally, nonstop propaganda delivered over the mass media year after year, without equivalent media rebuttals, makes it very difficult to free minds so immersed in disinformation and manipulative fictions—such as the “magic of the marketplace,” to use Reagan’s fantasy phrase. Our information system needs to be transformed, as Huff and Higdon advocate, to center on the commons, the public interest, and the institutions of democracy currently in place to serve and protect them.

Giving people motivating opportunities to think for themselves on matters of public importance and peril is far superior to pleading, necessary as that is, with networks, the cable industry, and the woeful PBS and NPR. *The United States of Distraction* affords readers plenty of material to begin working together to protect facts, truths, and civic fulfillments from being dislodged or destroyed by the adversaries of a functioning democracy. The time to get started is now. It is easier than we think!

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PROLOGUE

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

“If you do not change direction, you may end up where you are heading.”

—Lao Tzu

“Sorry. It’s a terrible thing to say. But bring it on, Donald. Keep going. . . . It may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS,” exclaimed Les Moonves while he was executive chairman and CEO of CBS, during a Morgan Stanley Technology, Media and Telecom Conference in the summer of 2016. He further noted, “I’ve never seen anything like this, and this [is] going to be a very good year for us.”¹

Moonves was referring to the boosted ratings and revenues his network reaped from its coverage of Donald Trump’s sensationalist 2016 presidential campaign. CBS and other networks were punch-drunk with profits gained by the way the electoral contest had devolved into a circus. At one point, Trump’s campaign captured nearly 300 percent more media coverage than Hillary Clinton’s campaign, and twenty-three times more coverage than Bernie

Sanders's campaign.² Team Trump basked in the equivalent of \$2 billion in free media exposure, and the broadcast corporations made money hand over fist.³ "Man, who would have expected the ride we're all having right now?" asked Moonves, "The money's rolling in, and this is fun."⁴

Whether it's about cosmetics, condoms, or candidates, publicity is the oxygen that fuels successful marketing campaigns.⁵ Media corporations have cashed in by covering Trump. Their repetition and amplification of his messages have contributed not only to his family winning the White House, but also to his ongoing campaign for political dominance. How has a former beauty pageant owner and television celebrity with no public-interest experience outmaneuvered critics and rivals who have far more political acumen, understanding, and knowledge? How has the American public allowed itself to be distracted from urgent issues like climate change, economic equality, racial justice, women's issues, LGBTQI rights, fair trade, environmental sustainability, and health care for all?

To begin answering these kinds of questions, we must first understand the role played by systems of government, media, and education to produce knowledge and information for purposes of the public interest, and how those systems have come under the corrupting influence of commercialism and corporate power. For over four decades, these bulwarks of democratic principles and practice have been bruised, battered, defunded, dismantled, diminished, infiltrated, and manipulated by corporate interests. Perpetrated by relentless financial forces exerted from a free-market economy, the glorification of wealth and pursuit of private profit have gradually been elevated over defense of the commons, maintenance of public-interest institutions, nonprofit community and culture, and

the processes of social justice and democracy that simply cannot advance without them.

What has remained? A media-refracted society that has become so alienated and distracted that it has allowed Trump's team to take command of the White House, the U.S. military, a nuclear arsenal, and the federal institutions responsible for running the country. For years to come, many will ask, how did they do it? The better question, we argue, is how did we let them do it? Unless and until the corporate economic system served by the Trump regime succeeds in fully deconstructing the administrative state of our democratic republic, our surviving public-interest institutions, no matter how traumatized, should be able to provide sufficient space, protection, and opportunity to advance the independence and agency to sustain and advance non-commercial civilian sovereignty. In the meantime, such institutions remain under serious assault.

Before Trump began marketing himself as a politician, he had already achieved a certain level of superficial tabloid celebrity through glitz and scandal. Trump was able to develop and amplify this celebrity through his employment as the lead character in the television show *The Apprentice*. It was through this platform—and the numerous ways he promoted himself publicly during this time—that Trump used commercial media as a vehicle for marketing his racial bias, suit-and-tie sexism, strong-man posturing, and self-mythology as a successful businessperson. Trump leveraged this celebrity during his candidacy, making a telegenic spectacle of himself and his provocations, brand, and image. The audience-amassing power of this spectacle gave commercial media the free entertainment they needed to reap larger advertising revenues while giving Trump expanded platforms to market himself.

At the same time, Trump strategically partnered with Steve Bannon to attract and harness white anxiety through far-right online platforms such as *Breitbart News*, constant mass rallies, easy-to-understand nationalist slogans of political aggrandizement and social intolerance, and aggressive rhetoric and posturing that appeared to celebrate violence. A host of factors, particularly decades of corporate domination over U.S. economic, political, and social institutions, had sufficiently cultured the population, rendering the values of commercialism increasingly more influential than those of the public interest and the common good. This has resulted in a gradual assault on the resources and solidarities required for what Noam Chomsky has called intellectual self-defense. The steady decline of education and independent media in the face of corporate power has created public vulnerabilities that have led us to the crisis we find ourselves in today.

From a public-interest perspective, commercial domination of media, journalism, and education represents not just an assault on democracy, but a relentless effort to replace the sovereignty of citizenship with the corporate dictates and manufactured consent of consumerism. Schools are clearly not adequately educating young people in media literacy, critical thinking, or the central importance of the public interest and the common good. While the potential for a free press still exists, the momentum created by Ronald Reagan's commercial deconstruction of the "public interest, convenience, and necessity" regulation of the airwaves, the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine, and the abolition of low-power community radio licenses, set the stage for the corporate domination of media seen in the United States today.

Long before Trump's candidacy, ratings drove pro-

gramming and news. In the process, celebrity, entertainment, scandal, crime, disaster, and spectacle clearly dominated over the substantive reporting, in-depth investigation, and public-interest advocacy capable of questioning and countering abuses of corporate power and government authority. In short, the corporate commercialism that invested in and profited from Trump's tele-celebrity, enabled and fueled his candidacy, and currently feeds the provocative impulses of his presidency. That this is occurring openly is a testimony to the degree of our collective distraction, vulnerability, and complicity with forms of authoritarianism that have been written about at length by Hannah Arendt and anticipated in the contemporary period by a wide range of outspoken thinkers including Noam Chomsky, Angela Y. Davis, and Henry A. Giroux.

The volume of media coverage that favored Trump during his initial presidential run, as well as the overall failure of the press to cover issues of substance, has not gone unnoticed. A 2016 poll found that 75 percent of Americans agreed that Trump was covered too often.⁶ In the days that followed the 2016 presidential election, news outlets were criticized for their unequal and trivial reporting, and were even blamed for contributing to the election's outcome.⁷ Many major outlets tacitly admitted their failure to report on issues of substance and promised to recommit themselves to investigative journalism. The *New York Times* penned a sheepish letter to readers, the *Washington Post* adopted the tagline "Democracy Dies in Darkness," and CNN aired short clips using a bunch of bananas allegedly hiding an apple as a symbol of their dedication to fact-driven reporting over political narratives, stating, "There's only one way to know what's been covered up. You start digging."⁸

These gestures seemed to offer sober day-after promises from a profession that has historically served as an essential pillar of democracy. So essential that political theorist Edmund Burke proclaimed the press “more important than they all.” Despite their promises to the public, any changes in corporate journalism after Trump’s victory were either unnoticeable or ineffective in holding Trump accountable in any meaningful way. However, to simply blame journalists and media would be to miss the larger context in which Trump’s organization gained control of the White House and United States military command.

An educated and informed population, one capable of critical thinking regarding political and historical matters, would likely have responded differently to Team Trump’s aggression and marketing. Democracy is predicated on an engaged citizenry not only making informed decisions in the voting booth, but continually maintaining public sovereignty by keeping private and state powers in check. When the press and our schools function properly, the citizenry can effectively participate in the democratic process. Without an effective public education system and an independent and diverse press, the prerequisite conditions for a functional democracy do not exist. Educators provide people with tools to be equitable participants in an open and accountable political culture. Media publish and broadcast journalists’ reports on matters that inform citizens’ understanding of key events, policies, and politicians. However, for nearly half a century these institutions have been under assault by private interests and a political system skewed to serve them.

Trump’s acquisition of television celebrity and political supremacy was made possible by decades of corporate domination of U.S. financial, media, and education sys-

tems. In a sense, Trump was made by and for such domination. Since Reagan's neoconservative rollback of public-interest regulations and policies, U.S. economic and political culture has been shaped by deregulation of big business, privatization of public institutions, trickle-up wealth transfer (through tax reductions for the rich and corporate welfare), militarization, divestment from social benefits and safety nets for the needy, blind faith in the primacy of the market, and merit-based systems of measurement. Such pro-corporate policies represent the uncontested common interests served by America's increasingly narrow two-wing electoral spectrum. While Democrats and Republicans openly clash over issues of social justice, women's rights, gun control, diversity, health care, and immigration, certain matters remain quietly uncontested: issues of free markets, globalized trade, militarization, surveillance, corporate power, tax cuts, and bailouts. Simply put, it is a system that serves the rich. Citizen advocate Ralph Nader has described it as a democracy of minimums and a plutocracy of maximums. "In a plutocracy," says Nader, "commercialism dominates far beyond the realm of economics and business; everything is for sale, and money is power. But in an authentic democracy, there must be commercial-free zones where the power of human rights, citizenship, community, equality, and justice are free from the corrupting influence of money."⁹ Since Reagan, those zones have been under constant attack.

For nearly the past half century, private interests have systematically targeted, usurped, and commercialized such zones. As business relentlessly invests in political and economic dominance over public interests, "the market" is elevated over social and environmental well-being. In the process, "trickle-down" explanations are used to indoctri-

nate average Americans with the view that they too are invested, and that they too will profit. Election after election, American voters are told countless times that what's good for the market is good for society, but all they see is a widening gap between haves and have-nots, along with a host of other forms of preventable social injustice.

Over nearly five decades, commercial influence over the production and distribution of information and knowledge has adversely impacted the public-interest value of media and education. Political literacy and civic agency as ethical manifestations of the common good have been deliberately degraded. Donald Trump's arc from television celebrity to commander in chief of the U.S. military, with a direct propaganda feed to 55.5 million voluntary followers, was made possible through this degradation—and a media system openly willing to profit from it, even though it “may not be good for America.”

In addition to his plutocratic agenda, Trump's power represents gendered, homophobic, transphobic, and racialized forms of political domination that increasingly project characteristics of authoritarianism and autocracy. Among these characteristics are chronic lying and propagation of disinformation, demonization of criticism and dissent, censorship of language and knowledge, repetition of slogans, hyper-nationalism, valorization of aggression, belittlement, victim blaming, and general intolerance.

The normalization of official lying and disinformation alone should be a matter of alarm for everyone concerned about the integrity of our political system. Acknowledgment of the matter is open and widespread. In December 2017, for example, the *New York Times* published a piece by David Leonhardt and Stuart A. Thompson in which they attempted to catalogue “nearly every outright lie” Trump

had told publicly from moment he took the oath of office to the time of writing the article. “There is simply no precedent for an American president to spend so much time telling untruths,” wrote Leonhardt and Thompson. “Every president has shaded the truth or told occasional whoppers. No other president—of either party—has behaved as Trump is behaving. He is trying to create an atmosphere in which reality is irrelevant.”¹⁰ That atmosphere is clearly malignant to U.S. democracy and the government accountability required to serve and maintain it.

In addition to chronic lying, another Orwellian aspect of Trump’s authoritarianism has been the censoring of certain words and phrases in government departments and agencies, particularly in the Department of Health and Human Services. Officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for example, were given a list of seven words and phrases that could not be used in budget documents. These were “entitlement,” “diversity,” “vulnerable,” “evidence-based,” “science-based,” “fetus,” and “transgender.” Officials were instructed to use the term “Obamacare,” and never refer to the Affordable Care Act or ACA, a transparent effort to politically stigmatize the program and those Americans who benefit from it.

Even the State Department was ordered to stop using the term “sex education” and to substitute “sexual risk avoidance.” This ban is part of the Trump administration’s campaign on Capitol Hill to stress premarital abstinence as the primary form of national health advocacy on the matter. Censorship at the Department of State could ultimately translate into less funding for maternal health and abortions, according to the vice president and director of global health and HIV policy at the Kaiser Family Foundation.¹¹

The Health and Human Services (HHS) press briefing

to announce these changes was given anonymously, with the acknowledgment that specific agencies were not being named because language changes were on “close hold.”¹² Particularly offensive was the ban on the word “transgender,” in view of the high percentage of HIV infections among transgender women, the highest of any gender group. Censorship at the HHS agencies is reprehensible overall, because their programs must be science-based or evidence-based as part of a larger search for truth. As former surgeon general Dr. Vivek Murphy noted, “When science is censored, the truth is censored.”¹³

Since Trump took control of the White House, the phrase “climate change” has also been disappearing from government websites. The Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Energy, Department of Health and Human Services, and Department of Transportation have all had websites or press releases purged of references to humanity’s role in rising average temperatures.¹⁴

In addition to censoring administrative language, Trump has repeatedly tried to censor the press. In May 2018, the Environmental Protection Agency attempted to bar reporters from attending a meeting on water contamination. The meeting included more than 200 representatives of regulatory and industry groups. The Associated Press reported that one of its journalists “was grabbed by the shoulders and shoved out of an Environmental Protection Agency building by a security guard.”^{15,16}

In tones that remind many of World War II-era dictators, Trump has gone beyond censorship and openly raged about media that question and challenge him, aggressively attacking those journalists and free press outlets as “fake news” and “enemies of the people.” Trump has threatened to revoke broadcast licenses from media out-

lets that question or criticize his behavior.¹⁷ Such conduct has raised considerable alarm. “I told the president directly that I thought that his language was not just divisive but increasingly dangerous,” said the publisher of the *New York Times*, A.G. Sulzberger, following a White House meeting with President Trump. “I told him that although the phrase *fake news* is untrue and harmful, I am far more concerned about his labeling journalists the *enemy of the people*,” Mr. Sulzberger said. “I warned that this inflammatory language is contributing to a rise in threats against journalists and will lead to violence.” This is particularly true overseas, Mr. Sulzberger said, where governments are using Mr. Trump’s words as a pretext to crack down on journalists. He said he warned the president that his attacks were “putting lives at risk” and “undermining the democratic ideals of our nation.”¹⁸ Trump’s glorification of an assault on a reporter in Montana at the same time that he tried to minimize the Saudi government’s assassination of *Washington Post* reporter Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi embassy in Turkey, further underscores the seriousness of Sulzberger’s concerns.¹⁹

While Trump’s attacks on truth and the press have drawn more public attention to the matter, this has been a bipartisan problem. In April 2019, many Democrats were smiling from ear to vindictive ear as Julian Assange, co-founder and publisher of Wikileaks, was arrested and dragged out of the Ecuadoran embassy in London, where he had been granted refuge since 2012 in his effort to avoid extradition to the United States. In May of 2019, he was sentenced to fifty weeks in a UK jail for violating bail conditions, namely, by seeking refuge to evade the extradition. Many Democrats blamed Assange for their 2016 electoral defeat, after he published leaked emails ex-

posing the party leadership colluding to fix the Democratic Party primary. Interestingly, just a decade earlier, many of these same Democrats were cheering Assange for publishing leaks by whistleblower Chelsea Manning that revealed damning evidence of U.S. war crimes in Iraq during George W. Bush's presidency. These were illustrated most notoriously by the "Collateral Murder" video, which is why the United States now wants to extradite Assange on conspiracy charges. This about-face suggests Democrats' commitment to party over principles. More important, the hyper-partisan war on truth tellers is incompatible with free press principles, no matter who is doing it.

That noted, Trump's ongoing war on truth, language, openness, and the free press is incompatible to an unprecedented degree with the mission of American government to operate openly and accountably as a democracy. Attacking journalists as "enemies of the American people . . . gives aid and comfort to present-day officials and lawmakers who want to avoid being held publicly accountable for their acts,"²⁰ says Arnold Isaacs, a former editor of the *Baltimore Sun*. Such attacks, coming from an office of such enormous responsibility and power, serve to normalize aggression and intolerance toward those who question and criticize authority; they serve to corrupt the ethical foundation necessary for a republic.

How did we get to this point? Trump did not commercialize society, but his team strategically used commercial mechanisms to manipulate the public and take power. Trump homed in on public vulnerabilities created by decades of pro-corporate influence and policy. Trump, a fourteen-season television game-show character, leveraged his rise on the centrality of America's pervasive entertainment culture, increasingly hyper-partisan narratives, frag-

mented media landscape, and ineffective education system. He has deftly manipulated the press, exploited potential voters, and lied with nearly complete impunity. It is worth noting that Trump tapped into other cultural vulnerabilities that had existed well before America's corporate age, such as its long history of white supremacy, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, and nationalism. However, this book addresses the public vulnerabilities caused by the impact of corporate interests on U.S. educational and mass media systems, and how and why such interests enabled Trump's self-serving messaging to be so effective.

Trump can be seen as the temporary face of an increasingly invasive corporate algorithm, one that views civil liberties, the public interest, the commons, and the democracy-centered institutions mandated to serve them as enemy forces to be administratively "deconstructed." The algorithm unifies by distraction and extraction—distracting the population from the common good and the civic agency required to defend it, while extracting data, resources, and power from the public sector and transferring them to the private sector—a euphemism for the rich. In the process, the United States increasingly drifts toward becoming an authoritarian society in which government represents and protects the interests of the wealthy few. As corporations succeed in replacing the notion of a "citizen" with that of a "consumer," their power concentrates, producing characters like Donald Trump.

As damaging as Trump is to the advance and dignity of women, people of color, Native Americans, the disabled, the LGBTQI community, peace, and social justice, his moment will pass. The algorithm will remain. The structural conditions that created and profit from Trump—the people and corporate entities that continue to invest in him

and his re-election—are the forces that will continue to produce new and more virulent forms of authoritarian and fascist threats to the public interest, the common good, and all the institutions and ethical principles associated with them. There is no hiding the fact that Trump is not good for America, but he *is* good for those who profit from the elimination of corporate accountability and restraint.

It would be a mistake to expect Trump's regime to duplicate past authoritarian states, but there are similarities. We are witnessing a kind of corporate plutocracy in which control is primarily achieved not through the cudgel, but through media, spectacle, surveillance, data control, disinformation, propaganda, and consumerism. Gandhi presciently argued that people in the West merely “imagine they have a voice in their own government”; instead, they were “being exploited by the ruling class or caste under the sacred name of democracy.”²¹ Moreover, a regime in which “the weakest go to the wall” and a “few capitalist owners” thrive, “cannot be sustained except by violence, veiled if not open.” This is why, Gandhi predicted, even “the states that are today nominally democratic” are likely to become “frankly totalitarian.”²²

The purpose of this book is to focus on media's role in getting us where we are today, the normalization of media tactics used by those seeking to acquire power through manipulation and deception, and strategies that could be used by the public for intellectual and civic self-defense. Our goal is to counter forms of pro-corporate domination by promoting civic agency, sovereignty, diversity, and dignity through education.

This book operates from an assumption that we cannot fix the problems of today without understanding how we got here. As a result, we take a deep look at the roots of

America's drift into authoritarianism through an analysis of political economy and the changes to journalism, media, and education over the last half century.

We believe education and social solidarity offer the best forms of resistance against threats to the sovereignty of the people, the sustainability of the environment, and the non-commercial democracy required to hold corporations and elected officials subordinate to the common good. However, in order to implement the necessary changes, we must implement new forms of political literacy—identifying power and organizing it in collective forms—in order to break the commercial algorithms of distraction, disinformation, surveillance, and polarization that we have allowed to infiltrate and immobilize civil society. Such a step, should we achieve it, will represent a fundamental shift in consciousness and exercise of public sovereignty, one that democracy and citizenship are capable of delivering through education, organizing, and spontaneous forms of civic rebellion.

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