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Media capture, academia capture? Rising authoritarianism and public knowledge capture

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Media capture, academia capture? Rising authoritarianism and public knowledge capture

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Recent political and media trends challenge various disciplinary axioms and popular scholarly intuitions. For instance, is media good or bad for democracy? Is democracy—ideally based on the popular will—necessarily popular? And what might the news look like when politicians and audiences become increasingly illiberal, authoritarian, and, in some cases, simply racist?

Several books, written by media scholars and practitioners, have tackled different aspects of this reality in recent years. As is often the case, the US received greater scholarly attention (e.g., Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018; Carlson et al., 2022), both due to the incomparable impact each shift in the US carries over other countries' media systems—as Trump's cuts to the USAID funds demonstrate—as well as the US-centric political economy of certain academic institutions, funding structures, and publishing industries.

The three books reviewed here, while focusing on different political and cultural contexts, share a similar concern: the rise of what Stetka and Mihelj (2024) term “the illiberal public sphere,” what Wright, Scott, and Bunce (2024) call “media capture,” and what Martinos refers to as the “liberalization of hate.” From different angles and using different methodologies, all three books link the varied forms of media capture not merely to censorship and silencing, but also to social unrest, extremism, and hatred.

In *Capturing News, Capturing Democracy: Trump and the Voice of America*, Kate Wright, Martin Scott, and Mel Bunce (2024) dive into the war of Trump's first administration against the international, public-funded media outlet in the US. In (short) retrospect, this piece of research could not have been more prophetic: Trump's second administration has targeted Voice of America ever more blatantly, appointing Trump's loyalist and election denier Kary Lake to lead the news organization, then replacing its newsroom with One America News (OAN)—a conspiratorial, far-right media outlet famous for spreading lies and MAGA propaganda. Most VOA staff were laid off as part of a broad, orchestrated effort to undermine media freedom in the US (Horne et al., 2025). The flood of VOA news in recent years certainly makes the relevance of the book's chosen case study stand out; however, its timeliness is only one of this book's many strengths, as it brings together journalistic and scholarly methods to explore democratic backsliding.

Methodologically, the book utilizes two strong suits of journalistic investigation, repurposing them into academic inquiry: deep access and FOIA.¹ In their book, Wright and her colleagues combine these two methods. First, the depth of access demonstrated in this book, covering all levels of personnel inside the VOA, is relatively rare in academic research (and considering recent developments, might not have been possible today). When it comes to media capture, this level of access is critical for gaining a glimpse into newsrooms under populist attack. Second, the researchers' fruitful use of another traditionally journalistic technique—the Freedom of Information Act request—is a reminder of how useful such information requests can be for scholarly investigations. Beyond insider interviews, the researchers examined around 12,000 pages of documents obtained through freedom of information requests, alongside public records and court hearings. As the authors note, this channel to data has been “much underused” (p. 9) in scholarly work. Their book is a strong endorsement for the call to embrace it more often.

While this meticulous research is laser-focused on VOA's specific case, demonstrating eye-popping access to elite sources, it also exposes a massive structural lacuna in the foundations of US democracy. The legislation put in place to protect international public media when challenged is exposed in this book as sloppy, partial, and insufficient, doing “nothing to mitigate the risks of resource capture, discursive capture, or related forms of digital surveillance” (p. 237). As a result, “the purpose of VOA would still be vulnerable to interpretation by partisan actors unless legislators work together to clarify and update the accumulated body of law relating to the network” (p. 238). As the book makes clear, this kind of ambiguous legislation, unclear charters, blurred definitions, and vague “gentlemen's agreement”-style protections are easily turned into vulnerabilities. The toll for media freedom might be significant.

Another key takeaway from the Voice of America experience, beyond the striking shortcomings of existing regulations to protect public media freedom, is the “messiness” of media capture (pp. 81–88). Media capture, as documented by VOA, was not the outcome of a clear monolithic master plan or consistent intention by one actor. Rather, it was at least partially the outcome of unintended consequences, various actors' involvement, efforts

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to appease and resist, mixed ambitions and power struggles (in line with Des Freedman's (2014) conception of media power). One of the obstacles to detecting—and resisting—media capture is precisely the inconsistencies, contradictions, and erratic changes it entails. Acknowledging and unpacking its “messy” nature is, hence, critical. Beyond the methodological, empirical, and theoretical contributions, and despite the bleak topic, the book—written by academics who are also former journalists—makes for a great, if frustrating, read.

On a meta-level, this book tells us something about conducting research in real-time, as the sands keep shifting around the manuscript. At the time *Capturing News, Capturing Democracy* was first published, in July 2024, Joe Biden was still the US president, and Donald Trump was generally considered “old news.” As I write this review, two years into Trump's second administration, it is difficult to exaggerate the impact of his efforts to tame the news media. From lawsuits against the BBC, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and CNN to encouraging the takeover of major news outlets by friendly billionaires—this story is very much alive and kicking. By the time you are reading this, further unprecedented twists and turns have probably taken place.

This type of timely research introduces unique difficulties and advantages, particularly when encapsulated in a book format. On the one hand, the research is likely to remain a “hot topic,” evoking interest and attention in and outside academia. On the other hand, it is particularly challenging to ensure that the book does not feel outdated by the time it is published, given the hectic pace of events. Timely academic work demands not only that we chase our own tail fast enough, but also that we draw the kind of big conclusions that lengthen its shelf-life so that our research does not become redundant with the next radical change in Trump's thinking or actions. The book meets this acrobatic challenge masterfully; it reads as relevant now, with the VOA struggle expanding to CNN and CBS, as it did when it first came out. As scholars like Silvio Waisbord and Matt Carlson stress the importance of relevance in journalism (Carlson et al., 2022; Waisbord, 2025), Wright and her colleagues give us a lesson in what relevance in academia might mean.

In a way, *Free to Hate: How Media Liberalization Enabled Right-Wing Populism in Post-1989 Bulgaria* (Marinos, 2023) offers the opposite perspective on the very same topic. Instead of the US, it focuses on one of the least-studied media spheres in Europe—Bulgaria. Rather than exploring the recent, ongoing, pressing present of media and populism, it dives into the history of entangled far-right media and politics in the country. Finally, while Wright and her colleagues highlight the risks to international public media, Martin Marinos sheds light on the role that commercial media played in the rise of the Bulgarian populist right. The protagonist of this well-researched, detailed history is not a media organization under populist attack but an entire news industry complicit in driving the rise of hateful political forces. Not what a populist administration can do to the media, but how the media can bring about a populist administration.

If the main culprit enabling Trump's media capture in the VOA book is the flawed legal protections for public media, in Marinos' volume the arch-enabler of the far right in Bulgaria—and particularly the nationalist party Ataka—is, in short, neoliberalism. For Marinos, neoliberal economic policies that were

applied in Bulgaria—from commercialization and deregulation to privatization and media concentration—were the ones paving the way for the rise of the far right from the 1990s onwards. These seemingly opposite approaches—Wright et al. focusing on the legal framework and public media, with Marinos emphasizing the political economy and commercial media—are, in fact, complementary: two sides of the same unfortunate coin. After reading the history of post-1989 Bulgaria, one might conclude that neoliberal economic policies are the source of all evil and that, therefore, public funding might be the answer. After reading the meticulous account of VOA's capture, however, the conclusion might be that any contact with governments makes media too vulnerable to populist authoritarianism. Both conclusions are, of course, partially true. In a world where Donald Trump and Elon Musk join forces to control the media through both executive power and “free speech” anti-regulation rhetoric, reading these two books side by side is particularly powerful. Reality can have more than one villain; media capture in the 2020s thrives on various—sometimes contradictory—enablers.

Together, these two books foreground the return of the repressed. Scholars have long acknowledged the tensions baked into media freedom—both in its relationship with the state and in its relationship with the market (e.g., Baker, 2001; Hall et al., 1978; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Schiffrin, 2019). Nevertheless, the myth of the media as a “marketplace of ideas” remains popular, together with its assumption that a plurality of media ownership will somehow lead to quality, mitigating the risks of both state and market control. In this sense, the two books recenter our attention on core questions related to media ownership—this time, in relation to a new threat. While neoliberal economies shape media industries prone to populist manipulation, public media tend to play into populist hands in their own, distinct manner. The media's constitutive role in the rise of populist authoritarianism does not prevent populist leaders and parties from targeting journalists and newsrooms once in power. Populist media capture, in other words, is a many-way street; the only constant loser appears to be democracy.

Empirically, the Bulgarian experience contextualizes the Trump-focused literature, challenging American exceptionalism in media studies. It is a great reminder that Donald Trump is far from being the first celebrity clown turned racist political leader, with the substantial support of commercial TV. In fact, Ataka was first launched as a Bulgarian cable TV program back in 2003, before becoming an official political party a couple years later. Moreover, Marinos's book provides important evidence that media professionals who work for far-right media were drawn to it due to financial incentives and work conditions, rather than ideological commitment (p. 231). This is a fantastic example of empirical evidence supporting what commentators and political figures have speculated for a while—that “Trumpism” or “Ataka-ism” may be driven by sheer opportunism rather than authentic ideological convictions. Such findings should shape both our understanding of democratic backsliding and the future efforts to counter it.

Moreover, these seemingly contradictory books both help recenter our attention on the role of legacy media and journalistic institutions in the public conversation. As Marinos rightfully notes, the booming literature on populism and media tends to be ahistorical and focused on new digital technologies (p. 229).

Nevertheless, the impact and power of legacy media do not disappear online. More importantly, the institutional role of legacy media in democracy cannot be replaced by social media platforms or genAI chatbots. Recentering research on what should have been ‘the fourth estate’—as both victims and enablers of populist authoritarianism—is necessary.

Both books speak to the great collapses of grand historical narratives. In Bulgaria, the bitter disillusionment with the romanticized ideal of Western ‘liberalization’ that will free the press is deeply felt throughout the book. In Marinov’s powerful words, “Instead of a vibrant public sphere prompted by independent media that ‘speaks truth to power,’ the only freedom that media in the region seemed to have gained after 1989 is the freedom to hate Roma, Muslims, refugees, and other marginalized groups” (p. 12). Whether this is truly the *only* freedom Bulgarian media gained since the 1990s is arguable; what is clear is that underlining Marinov’s critique is a post-Cold War disenchantment with the West and its broken promises about economic prosperity and press freedom. In the US, the breakdown of the dream of America as the global ‘good guy’ leading the free world, spreading the values of an open society globally, is tangible. After all, VOA was established in 1942, amid World War II, targeting viewers in countries with no independent journalism (Wright et al., 2004, pp. 28–29). By capturing VOA, Trump’s administration erodes this international news organization founding goal. Not only has the US turned against its tradition of supporting press freedom globally, but it has now declared war on press freedom in the US, too.

It is perhaps not surprising that the disenchantment with liberalism and the promise of liberalization that concludes Marinov’s volume is also the starting point of Stetka and Mihelj’s (2024) book, which opens with the sentence: “There is little doubt that the era of triumphant liberalism is over” (p. 1). In *The Illiberal Public Sphere: Media in Polarized Societies*, the authors build on the cases of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Serbia to conceptualize recent changes to our information environment. Stetka and Mihelj define an illiberal public sphere as “a communicative space comprising both traditional and new media that promote and amplify illiberal actors, views, and attitudes” (p. 31). It is an original and convincing conception, which has already gained traction. Indeed, it is likely to become foundational to the growing field of studies on ‘bottom-up’ forms of authoritarian populism: “anti-liberal media” (George, 2023), “hate journalism” (Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2021), “anti-media media” (Panievsky, 2026), and “the problem of classification” (Bauer et al., 2022). But what does ‘illiberalism’ mean? As the authors acknowledge, “illiberalism remains poorly defined, and explicit attempts at its conceptualization are rare” (p. 25). This might be the result of the confusion and lack of clarity around what liberalism means—for its enthusiast advocates as well as staunch critics.

Ultimately, Stetka and Mihelj chose to define illiberalism as “an ideological universe that (a) underpins a set of practices and institutional arrangements that are both opposed to, and dependent on, liberalism; (b) pursues a vision of society that is governed by ethno-nationalist ideas and traditional cultural hierarchies; and (c) leads to a gradual decoupling of democracy from constitutional liberalism, potentially opening doors to authoritarianism” (p. 29). The distinction between illiberalism

and ethno-nationalism might require further conceptual work. On the other end of Eastern Europe, Marinov would probably offer strong objections. In his book’s very last sentences, he concludes that “These antidemocratic forces are not ‘illiberal’ because they challenge liberalism. Instead, they are the outcome of an ill liberalism, or liberalism that is fraught with crises, failures, and contradictions. Understanding this point is necessary for imagining new worlds, including media worlds, in which financial profits are not the main driving force of social change” (p. 236).

Clearly, the ghost looming over these three recent contributions to the research on populist authoritarianism and media is the crisis of liberalism. But what liberalism means for each of these authors varies. For Marinov, liberalism and neoliberalism are essentially the same, and one cannot be discussed without the other. For Stetka and Mihelj, liberalism is a distinct—and positive—worldview, to be contrasted with illiberalism. For Wright and her colleagues, liberalism has been manipulated by US administrations to gain global soft power in the past and weaponized against media freedom in the present. The fact that scholars disagree over what the term means is an ironic reflection of the crisis of liberalism, not only in journalism or society at large—but within academia, too.

Journalists and researchers are currently facing similar threats, originating from similar sources, that are similarly difficult to ignore. Populist politicians, parties, and movements seek to challenge both reporters and scholars, questioning their epistemic authority, public standing, reputation, and legitimacy. This trend renders the reading of the recent wave of books on anti-media populism almost personal. Considering the global news coming out of campuses in the US and beyond, one cannot help but wonder: Who will be writing the next set of books, exploring how Trump tried to shut down American universities and intimidate critical thinkers? Will journalists’ strategies be useful to combat Orban’s war on universities? What can media capture tell us about knowledge production under attack when academia is increasingly scrutinized by the same populist authoritarianism? Will we be wise enough to learn the lessons of journalism under attack? Will we be courageous and genuine enough to follow the advice we were giving reporters when targeted by authoritarians? What should we all take from these empirical findings—not just for the future of news, but also for the future of knowledge production more broadly? How should we rethink our work as researchers in increasingly hostile environments?

After reading these three enlightening books, it seems that two features bind journalists and researchers when facing populist authoritarianism: (a) both journalists and academics have authority over public knowledge, which makes them targets of populist authoritarianism; and (b) both journalists and academics are bound by a traditional ethos of objectivity, or impartiality, which challenges their ability to shield themselves, or frankly, fight back.

These are critical times for journalism, just as for democracy, or what is left of it. What is still missing from the vast range of new books on media capture, including the three reviewed here, is a humble gaze at journalistic cultures that have been facing populist authoritarianism long before it hit the US or Europe. Lessons and conclusions rarely migrate from the Global South to the Global North. Yet the reviewed books offer a valuable and critical asset: a sober, detailed look at the collapse of the liberal promises on media freedom: first, the US failure to promote the

ideal of media freedom worldwide via VOA; second, the failure to bring freedom and prosperity to Bulgaria through media privatization and commercialization; and finally, the disappointment with a European public sphere that looks quite different from how Habermas envisioned it. At the end of the day, the current wave of populist authoritarianism threatens media freedom and academic freedom in similar ways. It is yet to be seen whether scholars apply the findings and conclusions furnished by fellow academics in order to better cope with this rising threat.

Note

1. FOIAs, or FOIs, are data requests based on the Freedom of Information Act in the US and the UK. While FOIAs have become a common instrument in the journalistic toolkit, scholars have not used them nearly as often.

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