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Historical Roots of US Press Freedoms and Failures

Few freedoms in the United States are as cherished as freedom of the press. Sanctified by the First Amendment, press freedoms are inviolable in the eyes of most Americans. “Power of the press” narratives loom large in the social imaginary, from the muckrakers of yore to the Pentagon papers of the Nixon era. In recent years, popular films such as *Spotlight* and *The Post* have further romanticized the image of the dogged reporter digging for the truth, holding power to account. Our current political moment has ushered in a new-found appreciation for journalism among many Americans—though certainly not all. Yet despite the rhetorical power and emotional pull of these convictions, most Americans do not spend much time thinking about the policies, laws, and institutions that maintain their freedom of the press. Nor do they ask the critical question: freedom of the press for *whom*?

The US press system is strikingly different from that in other democracies in one key respect: It is extremely commercialized. Far more reliant on advertising revenue than most news industries around the world, US journalism is subjected to unmitigated commercial pressures. This unfettered commercialism has made US journalism exceptional in subtle yet significant ways.¹ Since the 1800s, the US press has simultaneously functioned as a business enterprise and a public good. As a commodity, it has been pegged to the capitalist market, generating tremendous profits for a relatively small number of owners and investors. As a public service, it has, at its best, strengthened democracy. Public service journalism typically aspires to inform, enlighten, keep a check on the powerful, and provide a forum for diverse views and voices. However, profit motives drive commercial media to entertain, sell advertising, satisfy shareholders, and make as much money as possible. These two sides of US journalism within a commercial system—the one, a vital public service; the other, a commodity

bought and sold on the market to make profit—have been in conflict since the 1800s.

Ever since the press commercialized, reformers have sought to protect journalism's public service mission from profit imperatives that threaten democratic objectives. Many of the ideals and codes of professional journalism in the United States developed in direct response to these pressures. The goal was to buffer newsgathering from the anti-democratic and corrosive effects of commercialism, or, at a minimum, to create a veneer of objectivity and social responsibility. Yet in many ways these journalistic ideals are an outgrowth of, rather than protection from, commercial influence. This inherent contradiction has prompted radical criticism, reform efforts, and experimental alternatives from the beginning. For as long as media have been commercialized, social critics and media reformers have risen to challenge it.

This chapter looks at how these long-standing tensions between journalism's profit-seeking and public-service objectives help explain the contemporary journalism crisis. The collapse of journalism's business model was not simply caused by new digital technologies; rather, this crisis is the culmination of long-term, systemic problems present since commercial journalism's birth. Put differently, commercial journalism has *always* been in crisis. The origins of this crisis trace back to the normative and historical foundations of US journalism, which themselves are bound up with the rise of classical liberalism.

Democratic Principles of the Press

Many of the democratic principles we associate with the press trace back to the emergence of classical liberalism. This ideological formation, which celebrates equality, tolerance, and diversity of views,² emerged in seventeenth-century Britain and France as a response to state tyranny and infringements on individual freedoms.³ Classical liberals sought to resist censorship, expand freedom of choice, and protect civil liberties under the rule of law.⁴ John Milton's foundational text, the *Areopagitica*, inspired the classical liberal notion that the best idea naturally rises to the fore when diverse views and voices are given their full airing.⁵ Another seminal work, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, celebrated such individual liberties as freedom of expression and advanced a utilitarian notion that the greatest amount of freedom for individuals, barring harm to others, serves the greater good.⁶ He

wrote that “unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinions, is not desirable, and diversity not an evil, but a good.”⁷ In other words, all voices and views deserve a fair hearing—not just for the sake of free speech and expression, but also to ensure that people have access to diverse information. Liberal thinkers drew from formulations such as these to uphold an ideal of the press that encouraged diversity of ideas and vibrant debate.

These texts prefigured the “marketplace of ideas” motif, which did not crystalize until much later. US Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes argued in a famous dissenting opinion in 1919 that the “ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas—that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market.”⁸ Subsequently, the “competition of the market” became the “marketplace of ideas,” a phrase that connotes an open domain for free-flowing information and expression. Few metaphors have held such power in describing a democratic ideal.⁹ Invoking the “market” made the phrase even more poignant—and also problematic. As the historian Sam Lebovic notes, there were “deep ironies” in the fact that this concept ascended at the very moment that the market was corrupting media institutions to become more concentrated, consumer-based, and commercialized—and less hospitable to a teeming marketplace of diverse voices and views.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the “Milton-Holmes” approach to press freedom laid the foundations for what became known as the “libertarian theory of the press,” with the “marketplace of ideas” serving as its apt slogan.¹¹ Indeed, in key respects, liberal and libertarian press theories are interchangeable, as each focuses on individual freedoms and a general deference to the market.

Classical liberalism’s contradictions come into focus when we scrutinize news media’s underlying—and often-unexamined—normative ideals. For example, the “marketplace of ideas” model suggests that the commercial media system is a meritocracy in which the best idea wins public approval, with the implication that capitalist competition best serves democratic communication. Emphasizing fairness and equality of opportunity, this metaphor assumes a relatively level playing field that naturally encourages egalitarianism. However, liberal constructions, including the very notion of “public spheres,” often suffer from blind spots when it comes to structural inequities. This is especially true regarding inequalities that emerge from the actual capitalist market, which liberalism often treats as a neutral arbiter. Liberalism’s inability to effectively address structural exclusions—such as

racism, classism, and sexism—renders it less compatible with more radical conceptions of redistributive justice.¹²

Liberalism also privileges individuals' private property rights over the collective needs of society. In media policy, this prioritization has historically led to a laissez-faire arrangement that treats media as private commodities whose value is dictated by the market. Such an approach does not privilege diverse voices, representations, and perspectives. Nor does it guarantee media access for all communities and social groups. While liberalism/libertarianism is quick to recognize government censorship as a serious problem for a free press, it tends to ignore recurring omissions and constraints caused by "market censorship."¹³

Liberalism's abiding faith in the market as the best vehicle for a democratic media system has spurred radical criticism in the United States since the 1800s. Liberal/libertarian theories of the press, in other words, primarily focus on protecting the press from government intervention rather than ensuring that people have access to the press. The imperfect dichotomy of positive (freedom to) and negative (freedom from) liberties brings into focus how traditional liberals typically worry about protecting individual freedom from government tyranny, but often have less to say about enhancing positive liberties. The latter might include broadening media ownership, expanding the breadth of views and voices represented in news media, and opening up access to communication systems and infrastructures to include more members of society, especially those groups who are most often marginalized. These tensions between liberal ideals for what the press should do in a democratic society and the structural constraints imposed by the market have existed since the early republic.

Normative Foundations of the US Press

In foundational narratives of the US press, few individuals figure as prominently as Thomas Jefferson. His well-known aphorisms about the vital necessity of newspapers for a self-governing society comprise a "greatest hits" playlist for why democracy depends on a well-informed populace. In one of his most famous statements about the press, Jefferson reasoned:

The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether

we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. *But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.* (Emphasis added.)¹⁴

The last part of this quote, which emphasizes the need for access to—and not simply the existence of—the press, is often conveniently forgotten. However, Jefferson emphasized the importance of an institutionally supported and accessible press because he saw the maintenance of a free and open media system as an essential prerequisite for democratic society.¹⁵

Other founders of the US republic generally shared Jefferson's view that self-governance was predicated on society having access to reliable information, which in turn was predicated on a vibrant news media system. For example, James Madison famously said that "A popular Government, without popular information, or *the means of acquiring it*, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or perhaps both" (emphasis added).¹⁶ Both Jefferson and Madison emphasized the necessary condition of ensuring *access* to information. Understood in this way, the press provides an essential infrastructure for democratic society.

These sentiments are even enshrined in the US Constitution, which provides special consideration and inalienable protections to news institutions, the only industry to receive such treatment. The First Amendment to the Constitution states, "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." Legal theorists and historians have long debated the intended meaning of the "or of the press" clause, which seems to distinguish it from "freedom of speech."¹⁷ The leading First Amendment scholar, Steven Shiffrin, notes that while the Supreme Court has denied that the press clause confers special privileges on the press, existing jurisprudence and case law suggests otherwise. Shiffrin points out that "the *New York Times* is not a fertilizer factory" and should not be treated as if it were an ordinary business. Moreover, some historical analyses suggest that, by the time the First Amendment was adopted, the founders saw the press as an autonomous institution whose need for special protections exceeded individual speech freedoms.¹⁸

This interpretation again underscores the need for institutional support of the press, as well as the importance of public access to it. Key figures of the early American Republic, including Benjamin Franklin, suggested that individuals should have a positive right to express themselves in the press,

that viewpoint diversity and equality in the press were important, and that newspapers were communal goods, not simply private property.¹⁹ This position represents what the historian Robert Martin refers to as the “open press doctrine,” which extended well beyond simply preventing state interference in news media to consider the press’s obligations to society, such as providing diverse sources of information.²⁰ When the founders drafted the First Amendment, Martin observes, such normative ideals were as much “in the air” as were libertarian concerns about governmental overreach.²¹

The belief that Americans must have access to reliable and diverse information—and that the government had an affirmative duty to help provide it—justified the US government’s investment in the country’s first major communications network: the postal system. In its early days, this system served primarily as a news-delivery infrastructure—private letters were secondary. As much as 70 percent of mail delivered in the 1790s, and 95 percent in the 1830s, consisted of newspapers.²² In the first major US media policy debate, the founders of the US government argued decisively that the postal system should not have to pay for itself—a rejection of what the historian Richard John terms a “fiscal rationale.”²³ Rather, these visionaries privileged the postal system’s *educational* purpose over economic considerations, and thus determined to heavily subsidize it.²⁴ Given the postal system’s vital function in society as a core communication infrastructure, these early political leaders regarded the notion that it should be self-supporting as nonsensical.²⁵

These debates, so timely for today’s discussion about the proper relationship between media and government, show that the founders were not in thrall to market fundamentalism. Because the postal system served a higher civic purpose as a news and information infrastructure upon which a self-governing populace depended, policymakers determined that the state would directly subsidize the dissemination of newspapers with low postal rates. Remarkably, the debate on postal policy ranged between those (such as George Washington) who believed postal fees should be entirely waived for all news material and those (such as James Madison) who thought the system should just be heavily subsidized. The latter position ultimately prevailed and was inscribed into law with the Post Office Act of 1792.²⁶ This government-funded infrastructure—including a vast network of postal roads—would quickly expand to become the largest employer in the United States.²⁷ As one popular history of the post office described it, the newly created “postal commons” served as the “central nervous system to circulate news throughout

the new body politic.”²⁸ This system depended on massive government subsidies worth billions of dollars today.

Despite its long history of investing in communication systems, many assume that the US government has no legitimate role in subsidizing such infrastructure. In part, this belief stems from the misconception that state tyranny is the primary impediment to actualizing democratic ideals rather than the private tyranny of concentrated corporate power. In the classical liberal conception of the press, we need only worry about government infringing on our First Amendment rights. But as the press became highly commercialized, broader and subtler structural impediments to the free press emerged. These constraints continue to haunt US news media today. A longer historical view helps bring into focus such structural contradictions—as well as the radical criticism that arose to confront them.

The Commercialization of the US Press

The 1800s witnessed a gradual structural transformation of the press as the “partisan press” model began to fade. In its place emerged commercialized papers largely dependent on advertising revenue. The press historian Gerald Baldasty notes that the profound shift in the underlying logic of news production to a profit motive not only altered newspaper content but also changed how newspaper publishers and editors saw their own role in society and their relationship to readers. Whereas previously they saw their readers as essentially voters, by the end of the nineteenth century, they saw them primarily as consumers. This vision of the “commercialized reader” became central to news production.²⁹

This shift to an advertising revenue model ultimately shrank the ideological range of opinion published in newspapers. The media historian John Nerone describes the “depoliticizing effect of commercialism” in both the US and British press systems as they became more reliant on advertising.³⁰ Even though the newly commercialized newspapers depended on a larger readership, advertisers had no desire to promote working-class political and economic interests. Instead, as Nerone observes, it “became common for mass-circulation media to simultaneously attract working-class audiences and promote reactionary politics,” via trivial, sensational, and even untrue reporting.³¹ These strategies of attracting audience attention for advertisers worked to promote a particular view of society and mobilized audiences

according to specific affects and allegiances that often worked against progressive narratives of working class solidarity, the ravages of capitalism, and wealth redistribution. The media scholars James Curran and Jane Seaton have noted a similar ideological shift after the British press commercialized. Driven by the profit motive and concomitant need to expand and reach larger audiences, the market achieved what no government could by ensuring the demise of radical newspapers who could not afford the rising costs of production.³² Tracing similar ideological policing, C. Edwin Baker argued that advertisers provided a “subsidy” for journalism while simultaneously acting as the “most consistent and the most pernicious ‘censors’ of media content.”³³

These structural changes unfolded differently and unevenly across newspapers, but general patterns emerged. While party patronage and partisanship did not disappear all at once, a creeping commercial logic changed the nature of news in profound ways, replacing party loyalty with economic imperatives. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, profit-seeking publishers and investors sought to expand their readership to entice advertisers. These efforts led to what we might call “clickbait” today: an emphasis on the sensational, the dramatic, and the garish. Newspapers increasingly filled their column inches with various kinds of “lowbrow” entertainment, such as crime stories and pictures of scantily clad women, and reporting that tended toward exaggerated and even fabricated accounts—a style that would become known as “yellow journalism.”

By the late 1800s, such commercial excesses had become more pronounced as publishers sought ever-larger readerships that appealed to advertisers. Although publishers hoped to generate handsome sums of money, competition was fierce. One historian of this period has noted that media markets were “oversaturated; revenues were down; pay [for journalists] was poor; and publishers were locked in circulation battles, working to one-up one another for more subscribers—even if it meant engaging in some unsavory practices.” Under these conditions, reporters internalized publisher’s commercial logic and adhered to one rule: “do whatever it takes to get the story—even if it meant making things up.”³⁴

These trends were especially pronounced in some of the country’s most successful newspapers. For example, in their 1898 coverage of the *USS Maine*, a US Navy battleship that exploded off the coast of Havana, Cuba, killing more than 250 Americans, both Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst *New York Journal* immediately attributed the act to the Spanish and ginned up support for military action with

“Remember the *Maine*” sloganeering. Although their role in instigating the Spanish American War is often overblown, newspaper coverage was typically reactionary and lurid.³⁵

This style of reportage, however, would begin to backfire. The rise of yellow journalism incited public reaction against the news media’s commercial excesses. Initially, the greatest outcry came from the elite professional press, but growing disgust toward sensationalist papers soon spread among the broader public, especially as journalists began to target their own industry for malfeasance. Some public libraries and civic associations even threatened boycotts against the worst culprits, including the aforementioned *New York World* and *New York Journal*.³⁶ Against this rising tide of press criticism, the newspaper industry began to adopt professional norms to help inoculate the press against more structural interventions, especially government regulation. But this process of professionalization would come only after decades of pressure from the public and from news workers themselves.

Early Radical Criticism of a Commercialized Press

The first wave of twentieth-century media criticism reacted against the many commercial excesses of advertising-driven newspapers.³⁷ This criticism came from a number of sources, especially the radical press, which was experiencing its high-water mark of popularity. In 1910, the socialist weekly *Appeal to Reason* enjoyed an astounding readership of 750,000. Combined with other smaller outlets, the overall readership of radical newspapers at that time was approximately two million people.³⁸ These outlets ruthlessly critiqued the commercial press for its profit-driven venality and for serving as a capitalist mouthpiece.

These conflicts at times escaped the printed page. Objectivity in the early 1900s was still far from a standard journalistic norm, and many commercial newspapers openly espoused strong ideological positions.³⁹ In the early 1900s, the *Los Angeles Times* unremittingly editorialized against labor unions, the push for an eight-hour workday, and the closed shop.⁴⁰ “This city is unique in having driven to bay the snarling pack of union labor wolves that have infested many other cities of the land and have snapped their red-seeking jaws over the fallen form of industrial freedom,” asserted one editorial.⁴¹ The *Los Angeles Times* publisher, Harrison Gray Otis (referred to as “General Otis” due to his military background) saw himself leading an all-out

class war against labor unions. He stockpiled weapons at his printing plant and forced his employees—whom he referred to as his “phalanx”—to drill with rifles. Otis drove around town in a touring car equipped with a brass cannon mounted to the front and an ammunition box hinged to the back. Class antagonism reached a head in 1910 when the anarchist McNamara brothers bombed the *Los Angeles Times* building, an event that gripped national attention for years.⁴²

Liberal reformers, meanwhile, challenged the concentrated wealth and political corruption associated with commercial newspaper publishing. These crusading “muckrakers,” including Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, and Upton Sinclair, famously exposed various forms of predation, fraud, and unsafe practices in industry after industry—including their own.⁴³ Their investigative reporting led to necessary regulatory reforms in food, drug, meat-packing, and other sectors, and even helped break up some of the Gilded Age’s all-powerful monopolies, such as Standard Oil. These reporters typically published long exposés in outlets such as *McClure’s Magazine* and *Collier’s Weekly*.⁴⁴

Early twentieth-century intellectuals also contributed to reformist projects and poignant media criticism. The celebrated philosopher John Dewey’s classic essay, “Our Unfree Press,” criticized commercialism’s deleterious effects on the entire press system, including “upon the judgment of what news is, upon the selection and elimination of matter that is published, upon the treatment of news in both editorial and news columns.”⁴⁵ This corrupted system, Dewey argued, rendered impossible “genuine intellectual freedom and social responsibility.” Yet publishers’ insistence that “government is the chief enemy to be dreaded” allowed them to normalize and even romanticize their profit motives as the “glory . . . of rugged individualism in a laissez-faire system.” They rationalized that “private profit” was “the best way of rendering social and public service.” While this view mistakenly conflated a commercialized media system with core American press freedoms, Dewey noted that a different logic might support a “cooperative” system “controlled in the interest of all.” However, publishers’ extreme reactions even to minor suggested reforms indicated their steadfast commitment to preserving the commercial system, regardless of the damage it might cause to democratic society.⁴⁶

Dewey’s frequent interlocutor, the famous journalist Walter Lippmann, offered some similar press criticisms, albeit likely motivated by the desire to prevent more interventionist government regulation.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, he clearly believed that the commercial press was unable to produce the

quantity or quality of information that readers required to make sense of their complex social world. “Increasingly,” he wrote, people “are baffled because the facts are not available; and they are wondering whether government by consent can survive in a time when *the manufacture of consent is an unregulated private enterprise*” (emphasis added). He concluded that the “present crisis of western democracy is a crisis in journalism.”⁴⁸ Lippmann attributed this early crisis in journalism to the news media’s increasingly commercial nature and believed that professional norms for accuracy were necessary but insufficient to address the scale of the problem. Reforming the press would, in Lippmann’s view, require constant public pressure.

Upton Sinclair’s 1919 muckraking book *The Brass Check* shared some of these concerns while leveling a more radical critique.⁴⁹ Named after the token that brothel customers purchased for sexual services, Sinclair’s book argued that the commercial press debased everyone involved. Citing numerous examples of political bias—especially against socialist causes—Sinclair saw commercial journalism’s structural flaws in terms of class conflict, with capitalist values pervading all aspects of news production throughout the entire press system. “In every newspaper-office in America,” he wrote, exists “the same struggle between the business-office and the news-department.”⁵⁰ According to Sinclair, a capitalist press was simply incompatible with democratic principles. He believed the entire institution should be de-commercialized and democratized, with ownership residing at the local community level.

Other radical critics worried about the rise of one-newspaper towns.⁵¹ Oswald Garrison Villard, the publisher of the *Nation* and future author of the book *The Disappearing Daily*, wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly*: “If no good American can read of cities having only one newspaper without concern, it does not add any comfort to know that it would take millions to found a new paper . . . in our largest cities.”⁵² While it seemed that press freedoms increasingly were reserved only for those wealthy enough to own a newspaper, many other critics focused on advertising’s pernicious effects on the press. Hamilton Holt, managing editor of the *Independent* and long-time advocate for press reform, argued that, thanks to advertising, “journalism is no longer a profession, but a commercial enterprise.”⁵³ Similarly, Will Irwin, an author and muckraking journalist, condemned “The direct control of the advertiser,” arguing that “commercial publishers of million dollar newspapers must recognize this influence whether they like it or not.”⁵⁴ Writing in the

1930s, James Rorty called advertising's ideological power—and the title of his well-known book—“Our Master's Voice.”⁵⁵

This radical media criticism continued through the Great Depression and President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.⁵⁶ Harold Ickes, Roosevelt's first secretary of the interior, continued the structural critique that journalism's problems stemmed from the commercial press's profit imperatives and class allegiances. In his book *America's House of Lords*, he argued that the publishers who “belong to the moneyed class and whose primary objective is to make profits” could never provide the journalism that democratic society needs.⁵⁷

Few media critics from this period loom as large as George Seldes, a predecessor to the legendary muckraking journalist I.F. Stone. Seldes wrote two books highly critical of the newspaper business, *Freedom of the Press* and *Lords of the Press*.⁵⁸ He also launched the weekly *In Fact* in 1940, which was subtitled with the tag line: “An Antidote to Falsehoods in the Daily Press.” The four-page muckraking newsletter, devoted to press criticism and investigative reporting, exposed the growing influence of corporate power in US society, including its ownership of much of the US news media system. Both publicly and in private letters, Seldes acknowledged that he launched *In Fact* to provide a truthful alternative to the “commercial press.” In a letter to his readers announcing that he would be suspending the journal, he noted: “We were the only publication in the country devoted to printing the important news the commercial press suppressed, distorted, faked or buried. We were the only publication in the country exposing reaction—which is the step before fascism.”⁵⁹ Although his newsletter's circulation peaked at one hundred and seventy-six thousand subscribers in 1947, Seldes's outspoken opposition to corporate power left him exposed to attacks by anti-Communists in the late 1940s. When subscriptions plummeted, he was forced to close his paper in 1950.⁶⁰

Several years later, I.F. Stone, who credited Seldes as the “father of the alternative press,” picked up where he left off with his own news weekly. In describing his and Seldes's tradition of adversarial journalism, Stone was adamant that it was “very much in the best American tradition” because “journalism is not a business . . . just a way of making money . . . it's a major part of a free society . . . [just as] Jefferson intended it to be.”⁶¹ Stone passionately believed that the press should never be reduced to a mere commodity or solely a for-profit enterprise.

For both Seldes and Stone, the rise of media monopolies posed one of the greatest threats to freedom of the press in the United States. Since the early 1900s, newspaper chains had exploited economies of scale and cut costs by centralizing editorial authority, consolidating various administrative functions, and relying on syndicated content. Edward Scripps, who already by 1914 owned twenty-three papers with their own news service, mastered this business formula through vertical integration, low-cost production, and market segmentation.⁶² By the middle of the twentieth century, media monopolies had eliminated competition in many cities, leading to fewer total newspapers and less local reporting. This, in turn, left fewer voices and viewpoints in circulation, all while amplifying powerful economic and political interests.⁶³ Even worse, as the press transformed into a big business, commercial pressures magnified into what one critic called a “brutal monopoly” that served the interests of the “fascist fringe,” including the media mogul William Randolph Hearst.⁶⁴ In this context, activists and reformers of all stripes proposed structural alternatives.

Alternative Models to the Commercial Press

During the first half of the twentieth century, public disdain toward the commercial press created fertile ground for experiments with alternative models.⁶⁵ In addition to alternative weeklies pioneered by the likes of Seldes and Stone, other reformers experimented with advertising-free dailies. Two ad-less, subscriber-supported newspapers merit particular note, one each in the Progressive and New Deal eras. Chicago’s the *Day Book*, founded by the publisher Scripps in 1911, focused on working class issues and was launched as a direct response to the over-commercialization of newspapers and a perceived lack of independence. New York’s *PM*, founded by the journalist Ralph Ingersoll in 1940, was closely aligned with President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal project and was a steadfast champion of the labor movement.⁶⁶

Despite promising beginnings, these pioneering newspapers ultimately folded for want of adequate funding. In the case of the *Day Book*, which lasted six years, a sudden increase in the cost of paper accelerated the collapse of what was potentially a sustainable model. The *PM*, which closed after eight years of publication, suffered from some mismanagement, but also experienced similar red-baiting and political shifts that undermined radical

journalists such as Seldes. Although they ultimately failed, both publications maintained enthusiastic audiences until their end.

Municipal-owned newspapers offered another alternative in the Progressive Era. The *Los Angeles Municipal News* launched in April 1912 following a December 1911 majority vote on a city ordinance to establish the paper.⁶⁷ Early on, George Dunlop, the newspaper's original architect and one of its three commissioners/publishers, posed the rhetorical question: "can commercial journalism make good, or must we look for the public newspaper?"⁶⁸ He believed public newspapers offered the best hope for democracy, and he helped set up the model in direct opposition to the commercial press. The municipal newspaper experiment reflected the growing conviction that a commercial model of the press could never rise above profit pressures and status quo allegiances to serve democratic imperatives.

Widely seen as a local protest against the excesses of sensationalism and yellow journalism, the *Los Angeles Municipal News* enjoyed much community support and initially seemed successful.⁶⁹ The paper's distribution of sixty thousand copies was financed by the city and governed by a municipal newspaper commission, the latter comprised of three citizen volunteers appointed by the mayor to four-year terms. The newspaper guaranteed an equal amount of weekly column space to any political party that received a certain percentage of the vote, including the Democratic, Republican, Socialist, and Socialist Labor parties. Newspaper carriers delivered the eight-to-twelve-page paper free of charge to residences, or people could subscribe to it via mail for one penny.⁷⁰ The inaugural editorial of this "people's newspaper" stated that it was "the first municipal newspaper in the world . . . owned by the people of the community in which it is printed." It described its mission as being "created by the people, for the people, and built for them under their control. It is in this sense unique."⁷¹ The newspaper's masthead declared simply and boldly: "a newspaper owned by the people."

The *Los Angeles Municipal News* focused on hard news, including government operations, the proceedings of various agencies, and public school events. However, it also reported on popular culture, including women's fashion and music. Its editorials typically focused on city government problems and citizen responsibilities. The paper included equal treatment of arguments for or against specific city ordinances being proposed to voters. While it did accept local commercial advertisements, it also offered free classified advertisements to individuals for jobs and other important information.

This model's supporters argued that all major cities should have publicly owned daily newspapers to compete with the commercial press. Reformers across the country watched the Los Angeles experiment closely. One article noted:

In view of the growing realization on the part of the public that the commercialization of the great daily newspapers of the country presents one of the most serious problems connected with the movement toward democracy, the career of this newspaper owned by the taxpayers will be watched with interest everywhere.⁷²

But despite widespread enthusiasm, the experiment was short-lived. Feeling threatened by the *Los Angeles Municipal News*, the commercial newspapers in Los Angeles, including the *Los Angeles Times*, banded together to oppose the initiative. When public funding for the newspaper appeared on the ballot again in 1913, it was voted down in an election with very low turnout. Many supporters believed the paper fell victim to a misinformation campaign fueled by the ideological opposition of the commercial publishers. In addition to voter apathy and other problems that beset newspaper delivery early on, the editor blamed an “antagonism, carefully and consistently fostered by the private press and its representatives,” that impeded progress and discouraged erstwhile supporters.⁷³

Toward the end of its final run, the paper announced on the top of its front page in big capital letters “THE MUNICIPAL NEWSPAPER IDEA CANNOT BE KILLED.” Although the paper conceded that the “first municipal newspaper passes into history,” it was undeterred in promoting the idea that citizens needed access to a newspaper that was not simply the “private property of some millionaire,” but offered a “service . . . for all and not for a few.”⁷⁴ The editor urged other cities to not be dissuaded from launching similar newspapers that informed people about city government and the policy positions held by a wide range of political parties. One nonpartisan—though sympathetic—post mortem described the paper as a “successful experiment” brought down by “active determined opposition” from the city’s local capitalists, demonstrating the need for more such newspapers to fight political corruption and expand “civic service” and “impartial information” similar to that of schools and libraries.⁷⁵ Voted into existence by residents and supported by local taxes, the municipal paper stands testament to a largely forgotten alternative to the commercial newspaper.⁷⁶

One of the most profound structural challenges to the commercial journalism model came from journalists themselves when they unionized. Founded in 1933, the Newspaper Guild fueled its campaigns to reform the newspaper industry with a radical critique of the commercial media system.⁷⁷ Under the leadership of the journalist and editor Heywood Broun, news workers organized themselves to challenge the industry's commercial logic, especially around issues of ownership and control. The guild's objectives ranged from calls for increased wages for news workers to more radical proposals for newspapers to be owned and controlled by journalists themselves. Guild members disseminated their arguments and positions—steeped in class conflict—via their newspaper the *Guild Reporter*. Their activism quickly grew militant, including a two-year strike against William Randolph Hearst-owned papers in Chicago.⁷⁸

Beyond fighting for better work conditions, the guild saw itself as directly confronting the fundamental commercial logic driving newspapers. Ben Scott, a leading historian of the guild, has noted that its members “explicitly understood their efforts as rooted in core principles of the public’s First Amendment rights.” They saw themselves as part of something much bigger, a social democratic project then sweeping the country. “This was not a side road adjacent to the main currents of political and economic history during the 1930s,” Scott argues. “The Guild was in the midst of the industrial union movement, wrapped up in the biggest New Deal reforms, and grappling with a powerful, rising force in American political economy.”⁷⁹ By establishing strict autonomy from newspaper publishers and external political and economic pressures, the guild attempted to create a truly democratic institution, embracing professional norms that embodied a more radical notion of journalism’s role within a society. Its ultimate goal was nothing less than to redefine American notions of freedom of the press.

A rapid and successful unionization drive indicated that this project deeply resonated with working journalists. The guild aligned itself with the feisty leftist Congress of Industrial Organizations and quickly began setting up chapters across the country. In the span of just five years, the union had forty-seven signed contracts and nearly seventeen thousand members from three hundred papers.⁸⁰ By the end of the 1930s, over half of all working journalists belonged to the guild, with even higher membership percentages at the big metro dailies.⁸¹ These union members played a key role in expanding craft unions while bolstering class-consciousness among all media workers.⁸²

The Newspaper Guild, like many other leftist organizations, came under intense political pressure in the late 1940s. Years of red-baiting made the union's membership skittish, and communists were purged from its ranks. One leading press historian argues that red-baiting within the guild had a far-reaching effect, even defining "journalistic objectivity and the media's obligation to the public in nationalist, anti-radical terms."⁸³ Nonetheless, the movement still had some fight left in it, even as the guild became more accommodating of the commercial order. In the mid-to-late 1940s, the guild continued to inject radical media criticism into the nation's political discourse as a growing reform coalition advanced major regulatory and legal challenges to the commercial press.

The Crystallization of Modern US Journalism

Many contemporary ideological assumptions about the nature of the press in the United States crystallized through a cluster of policy battles in the 1940s. This moment was a critical juncture when social movements, media institutions, and regulators struggled over defining news media's role in democracy. The statements and actions of government regulators, media critics, and labor unions attest to a society-wide debate about the nature of the press, calling into question the presumed natural, laissez-faire arrangement between the US government and the press that remains intact to this day.⁸⁴

While the Newspaper Guild and other radical activists challenged newspapers over fundamental questions of ownership and control from below, New Deal liberals hatched plans to rein in the industry from above, at the policy level. These actions began in the late 1930s and carried on into the late 1940s. In 1938, President Roosevelt made the unusual move of issuing a five-page letter to the *St. Louis Dispatch* that questioned whether a profit-driven model was compatible with freedom of the press. He called for a more progressive vision for media, articulating Americans' freedom to access quality news.⁸⁵ That same year, the Department of Justice (DOJ) quietly began collecting information on print media concentration for a secret report focused on "restraints of trade in the newspaper industry."⁸⁶

The report noted that the news industry "was ripe for a thorough governmental investigation and possible intervention." Because the news industry is already "under general suspicion by the public," the report argued, if they were to further expose its "notorious" monopolistic infractions, "their mere

recitation should forever lay low the shibboleth of ‘freedom of the press.’” Stating that the newspaper industry had become a “big business” that suppressed competition, the report observed that only the extremely wealthy could afford to establish and maintain a new paper (in fact, by the 1940s no one had launched a new profitable US daily newspaper in decades).⁸⁷ It found that newspaper publishers were only “concerned with making money” and their coverage was deeply prejudiced against labor protections and other New Deal initiatives. Describing a “pervasive system of censorship” by a small number of companies that monopolized much of the newspaper industry, the report concluded that without immediate government intervention, the newspaper industry would also “own and control most of the radio stations in the country.”⁸⁸

Several years later, the DOJ targeted the newspaper industry under the Sherman Antitrust Act and sued the Associated Press (AP), accusing it of hindering trade by refusing wire services to the liberal *Chicago Sun* while maintaining an exclusive market contract with the conservative *Chicago Tribune*, owned by the far-right publisher Colonel Robert McCormick. The 1943 court case became a confrontation between a more expansive, “positive” concept of press freedom that emphasized citizens’ rights to access diverse opinions and sources of news, and a libertarian “negative” argument that the press’s First Amendment rights exempted the newspaper industry from antitrust interventions. A lively national debate ensued among opposing intellectual camps, but the positive view ultimately prevailed in a federal district court’s split decision.

Judge Learned Hand argued that the democratic imperatives of the press not only superseded newspapers’ economic interests but also fell under the protection of the First Amendment because “that industry serves one of the most vital of all general interests.”⁸⁹ Namely, Hand reasoned, the press should be dedicated to disseminating information “from as many different sources, and with as many different facets and colors as is possible.” The *Chicago Sun*’s rights to the wire fell under First Amendment protections because the “right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues, than through any kind of authoritative process.” Judge Hand famously concluded: “To many this is, and always will be, folly; but we have staked upon it our all.”

The AP lost again two years later in its appeal to the Supreme Court. Justice Hugo Black upheld strong positive freedoms in the majority’s opinion, stating that the First Amendment assumes that “the widest possible dissemination of

information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public.” Because “a free press is a condition of free society,” he wrote, “freedom to publish means freedom for all and not for some.” Delineating a progressive role for government, the decision clearly articulated the necessity of state-guaranteed public interest protections: “Freedom of the press from governmental interference under the First Amendment does not sanction repression of that freedom by private interests.” Nothing in the First Amendment prevented the government from maintaining the conditions necessary for a healthy press system. “It would be strange indeed,” Justice Black wrote, “if the grave concern for freedom of the press which prompted adoption of the First Amendment should be read as a command that the government was without power to protect that freedom.”⁹⁰ In his concurring opinion, Justice Frankfurter went even further to underscore that journalism was not a commodity “like peanuts or potatoes” that is valued by “having merely a commercial aspect.” Rather, the press is an essential public service that is “indispensable to the workings of our democratic society,” and therefore deserving of special “considerations.”⁹¹

These opinions affirmed three key points. First, when democratic imperatives were at stake, media institutions were fair game for government intervention and could not hide behind the First Amendment. Second, the press’s commercial concerns were not as important as its democratic obligations to the public. And third, the press was invested with special public-service attributes; it was not a mere commodity and therefore should not be treated as one under the law. Ultimately, the public’s positive rights to a diverse media system are more precious than publishers’ negative individual rights shielding them from government regulation.

The legislative branch, too, turned its regulatory eye to the newspaper industry in the mid-1940s. Congressional critics began probing newspapers’ monopolistic practices and issuing reports that focused on media consolidation, the prohibitive costs of starting up a new newspaper, the loss of competition and localism, and the effects that these developments had on democracy. Concerns about the rise of one-newspaper towns led to a major congressional study in the mid-1940s titled, “Survival of a Free Competitive Press: The Small Newspaper, Democracy’s Grass Roots.” Democratic Senator James Murray released the seventy-one-page report and called for more federal oversight of the newspaper industry, including congressional hearings on how newspaper ownership concentration was hurting small publishers. Murray’s committee saw democracy itself at risk: Given that the “future of

the small press business is linked with the future of . . . political democracy” and that the “traditionally valued American system of small competing press units is now in such serious jeopardy,” the situation “warrant[ed] the immediate attention of Congress.”⁹²

Congressional Democrats had planned on more hearings about possible government intervention into the media landscape, but these plans were jettisoned after Democrats lost the House to a Republican wave in the 1946 midterm elections. The Republican-controlled congress shifted attention away from the threat of media monopolies to focus on newsprint shortages, and Murray’s report soon fell into obscurity.⁹³ Nonetheless, while the congressional investigation into the disappearance of small newspapers did not amount to a serious policy intervention, this regulatory activism and key court decisions alerted the commercial press that it needed to either self-reform or risk losing its privileged autonomy from public oversight. Media owners could no longer simply hide behind the First Amendment.

The Rise of Professionalism

The professionalism of news work in the early twentieth century largely arose in response to growing public criticism. Newspaper publishers and editors were concerned that untrustworthy journalism, sensationalism, and an overall lack of legitimacy would ultimately diminish their commercial prospects. In an effort to repair their damaged credibility, they embraced the trappings of balance and objectivity. A hallmark of this professionalism was to provide fact-based, dispassionate news that was ostensibly neutral and unbiased in its coverage. Journalists could achieve this kind of reportage by relying heavily on official sources without taking a strong position on political issues—or by avoiding controversial issues altogether.

Papers also began imposing a strict boundary between the news and business sides of their operations. This firewall between “church and state” would presumably shield journalism from commercial pressures. Although always a porous barrier, journalists came to see this protocol as one of their most sacred tenets. Losing this “Chinese Wall,” it was widely believed, would threaten their credibility and independence. According to legend, the Chicago Tribune Tower even maintained separate elevators for business and editorial staff to prevent undue communication between the two types of personnel.⁹⁴

These norms and ethical codes helped stabilize a newspaper market undergoing systemic change at the turn of the twentieth century. They also became the founding doctrine taught in the major journalism schools that were all being established at this time—themselves another avenue to professionalizing journalism. Toward the end of his life, Joseph Pulitzer endowed Columbia University with funding for a journalism school specifically to train reporters to cultivate an “anti-commercial” attitude.⁹⁵ Publishers like Pulitzer seemed to acknowledge that they would need to contain—or at least camouflage—their commercial imperatives if they wished to retain legitimacy, stave off government intervention, and continue to reap commercial rewards. As the twentieth century progressed, the US press system transitioned from the excesses of yellow journalism into a more respectable news organ.

The journalistic norm of objectivity became a cornerstone of this professionalization project. Dominant interpretations of this phenomenon often describe it as a cultural shift that reflected a broader democratization of US society and changing attitudes among journalists about their social standing.⁹⁶ However, a growing number of revisionist historians have underscored the economic origins of the objectivity norm. Drawing from a more political economic approach, their interpretation does not see the development of modern journalism as reflecting an increasingly enlightened mainstream culture. Instead, these scholars argue that professional codes ultimately aimed to satisfy advertisers’ and newspaper publishers’ commercial imperatives.⁹⁷ The consensus history, in contrast, tends to naturalize processes of commercialization while downplaying conflict around journalism’s normative role. Such a whiggish narrative of cultural progression in US journalism history risks erasing age-old public debates and ongoing reform efforts over the commercial press system’s fundamental design and democratic role.

Without this context of earlier conflict between competing visions of journalism, we are less likely to understand today’s journalism crisis as a culmination of long historical processes and endemic tensions in the commercial press. Moreover, the professionalization process did not come to full fruition until after World War II. The period leading up to what Nerone calls the “High Modern Moment” has been described as a transitional phase of “proto-professionalization” during which journalists gradually took on a tone of objective authority.⁹⁸ This professionalization project was primarily an attempt to negotiate key tensions arising from commercial pressures. It

served as a form of soft self-regulation by which journalists can exert subtle but significant agency over their reporting. Curran describes this system as “a great media experiment” in which commercial journalism tries to negate the market’s adverse effects by developing “a tradition of professionalism among journalists” who endeavor to be “accurate, impartial, and informative.”⁹⁹ To the extent that this experiment has succeeded, it serves as a reminder that commercial news institutions are indeed capable of producing high-quality journalism. But throughout its history, too often we see the telltale signs of a failed commercial experiment in which negative externalities far outweigh positive ones.

Concerns about these structural failures had begun to materialize in the 1940s. Toward the end of WWII, magazine publisher Henry Luce sponsored a commission tasked with defining the proper role of media in a democracy.¹⁰⁰ Formally known as the Commission on Freedom of the Press, the Hutchins Commission (named after its chair, University of Chicago president Robert Hutchins) helped establish the ethical foundations for the modern US press system.¹⁰¹ Its members focused on two implicit questions: What is the role of media in a democratic society, and how should that role be ensured? They grappled with these questions over numerous meetings and consultations with a wide range of experts, ultimately producing six book-length studies on the US media system.

Early in its deliberations, the renowned legal theorist Zechariah Chafee described one of the commission’s central tasks as deciding “whether the giants should be slain or persuaded to be good.”¹⁰² The implication was that the “giants” (large media institutions) could be dismantled if they failed to adhere to basic ethical guidelines. But the newspaper industry fiercely opposed even light oversight, arguing that regulation was antithetical to US press freedoms. Struggling to agree on the meaning of press freedom, after a long debate the commissioners concluded that news media institutions should practice social responsibility but remain self-regulated with the government intervening only sparingly and in very limited ways.

However, archival evidence from unpublished reports and transcripts suggests a less well-known story. At various points in their deliberations, the commissioners considered a number of more radical alternatives before ultimately jettisoning them. They discussed structural reforms such as subsidizing news institutions in one-newspaper communities, launching local citizen newspaper councils, and treating the press as a utility or common carrier that guaranteed access to critical information. The commissioners

declared that the news should not be left solely in the hands of private companies and discussed how a federal agency modeled after the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) could regulate newspaper content. They also proposed breaking up newspaper chains and preventing new ones from forming. Archibald MacLeish, the most radical voice on the commission and the primary author of their main report, argued forcibly for a democratized news media system that guaranteed public access—otherwise, he argued, the very principle of freedom of the press was farcical.

Out of fear of sounding like socialists, however, the Hutchins Commission gradually fell back on calls for self-regulation, while leaving the door open for such government interventions as antitrust proceedings. It also called for such uncontroversial measures as requiring the press to cover important issues of the day. In the viciously anti-Communist climate of the late 1940s, the established press rejected even these fairly innocuous calls for reform as radical. Ironically, the norm-setting codes of professionalization that the landmark commission established helped shield the industry from subsequent reform. The commission ultimately elevated an intellectual rationale for self-regulation based on a libertarian understanding of the First Amendment that placed the press's freedom from government interference above citizens' rights to a democratic press—an interpretation that the Supreme Court had only recently dismissed.

In 1956, the foundational book *Four Theories of the Press* codified these media ethics as the “social responsibility” model.¹⁰³ Drawing some of its core precepts from the Hutchins Commission, this book became required reading in many US journalism schools for generations of students, shaping their thinking about the roles and responsibilities of the press.¹⁰⁴ The book discussed four press models—authoritarian, Soviet, libertarian, and social responsibility—with the latter held up as the gold standard for ethical journalism. In many ways, however, “social responsibility” was merely a rebranding of the libertarian model. The newspaper economist Robert Picard has argued that an overlooked fifth model would be a “democratic socialist” model like that practiced in the Nordic countries.¹⁰⁵ This model, similar to a “social democratic” approach to journalism, legitimates a proactive role for the state in guaranteeing public service journalism.¹⁰⁶ In the 1950s, though, the social democratic approach was clearly off the table. The US media industry was spared significant structural reform—only to erupt in crisis once again in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

Despite a growing grassroots press reform movement and challenges from all three branches of government, an industry-friendly version of “freedom of the press” emerged triumphant at a historical juncture in the 1940s. Notions of journalistic professionalism legitimated this project, seeking to stave off regulatory intervention, appease the public, and ensure significant profits for media owners. This lightly regulated commercial model that the United States pursued has remained the dominant paradigm for US news media for the past six decades. However, significant exceptions have emerged—such as the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, which I turn to in chapter 5. Moreover, the long tradition of government support for news media—for instance, postal subsidies—suggest that this was not a foreordained outcome. Key court decisions in the 1940s planted seeds for an alternative vision of the First Amendment, one that protected positive rights of access to a diverse news media system. Even the Hutchins Commission’s watered-down proposals contained potential avenues for a more robust freedom of the press, leaving the door open to state intervention if the commercial press were to fail in its responsibilities.

Nonetheless, the corporate libertarian arrangement that emerged from the 1940s continues to frame many of our conversations and assumptions surrounding today’s journalism crisis. This is especially true of the notion that government should maintain a *laissez-faire* position toward media institutions—even if this notion contradicts the history of the government’s involvement with the press. And while this dominant model would become normalized and take on an air of inevitability, the commercial nature of the press has continued to galvanize criticism in our modern era.

Modern Media Criticism

The heavily commercialized media system that we largely take for granted today was possible only because earlier reform movements to democratize the media failed. A social democratic vision of the media collapsed in the face of red-baiting and market fundamentalism, and few structural challenges to the dominant model have emerged since the 1940s. Nonetheless, journalistic professionalism and the embrace of “social responsibility” did not simply mollify critics, despite a widely held belief that the postwar period was a “golden age” for investigative journalism. Many structural problems in

the commercial press continued, and even a casual glance at public criticism suggests that these flaws did not go unnoticed.

Moreover, academic studies from recent decades empirically substantiate many radical critiques from this earlier period. Taken together, these studies present accumulating evidence that commercial values shape media content over time in predictable patterns according to constraints and tensions associated with market-driven news values. While social science analyses of media are generally hesitant to ascribe strong media effects or suggest fundamental flaws in the underlying economic system—often reflecting a similar commitment to “objectivity” and the status quo as professional journalism—even mainstream scholarship has empirically borne out many of the radical claims of the Progressive and New Deal era media critiques.

For example, much scholarship confirms that one of the most pronounced weaknesses in the US news media system is an over-reliance on official sources.¹⁰⁷ The fear of appearing controversial and jeopardizing access to elite sources often leads journalists to reproduce official accounts. This tendency was cast into stark relief in news coverage during the build-up to the Iraq War in 2003. When asked at a Harvard forum about press performance from this time—what is seen now as a major press failure—the famous news anchor Dan Rather conceded that “more questions should have been asked.” But then he said: “Look, when a president of the United States, any president, Republican or Democrat, says these are the facts, there is heavy prejudice, including my own, to give him the benefit of any doubt, and for that I do not apologize.”¹⁰⁸ While this arrangement has come under considerable strain during the Trump era, journalists have often been overly credulous toward elite accounts, creating a media environment through which misleading information is easily amplified. Content analyses bear this out by showing how US news media echo presidential rhetoric that is strategically crafted to discourage public debate.¹⁰⁹ Given the tendency of the US news media to report official messages almost verbatim (even when they are criticizing official claims, such as those made by President Trump), this style of reporting easily propagates misinformation about a wide range of crucially important issues—from the case for war to the causes of climate change.

Other research suggests that the press implicitly indexes its coverage to the parameters of elite opinion.¹¹⁰ According to this “index model,” if consensus exists among elites, regardless of grassroots opposition to the status quo, little dissent may enter into mainstream news discourse. To make sense of why mainstream journalism failed to ask tough questions in the run up to the Iraq

War, *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius explained, “journalists were victims of their own professionalism. Because there was little criticism of the war from prominent Democrats and foreign policy analysts, journalistic rules meant we shouldn’t create a debate on our own.”¹¹¹ Despite opposition voiced by numerous international experts, more than a hundred members of Congress, and millions of protestors around the world who took to the streets to challenge the case for the Iraq War, major news media uncritically accepted and repeated official rationales in stenographic fashion. Journalism professor Jeff Cohen, the former senior producer of MSNBC’s Phil Donahue show, offers a stark example of media’s profound bias against anti-war voices. He carefully documented his firsthand account of how MSNBC instructed him and his colleagues that, for every anti-war guest they had on the show, they had to balance that person with two pro-war guests. MSNBC eventually fired Donahue for his anti-war views.¹¹²

While blatant cases of overt corporate censorship are rare, more subtle effects of commercialism on news coverage are often discernible.¹¹³ For example, commercial imperatives may skew news discourse through “news framing,” namely “persistent selection, emphasis, and exclusion.”¹¹⁴ Political communication scholar Robert Entman suggests that “frames have at least four places in the communication process: the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture,” which work together to select aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient to promoting a particular moral evaluation.¹¹⁵ This framework provides a template for assembling facts, quotations, and other story elements in a news article, encouraging specific types of narration and orienting audiences toward particular interpretations of the news.¹¹⁶ These framing studies help bring into focus the varied ways that media maintain official narratives. One study recasts the traditional “watchdog” role of the press as a “guard dog” that protects the legitimacy of status quo power structures from dissent.¹¹⁷ Similar research suggests that the press tacitly “manages” who gets to speak in news stories and what issues are covered.¹¹⁸ Media sociologist Todd Gitlin argues that commercial media do not actually manufacture the status quo, but rather reproduce and relay elite ideology and—to a much lesser extent—messages from dissident interest groups and social movements.¹¹⁹

Other critics level a more structural critique by focusing on commercial restraints within the press system. In their view, recurring omissions in media coverage point to endemic flaws, ranging from corporate media ownership to extreme commercial pressures on news production. Most of this criticism

looks beyond individual reporters and seeks to explain the patterns of disinformation and misinformation in the news by examining the larger power relations within which the news industry is embedded. Understood this way, controversial reporting that alienates elites and scares away advertisers is antithetical to advancing profit goals.

Encapsulating many of these themes, Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky's famous "Propaganda Model" provides a conceptual framework—of what they refer to as a "guided market system"—for understanding how news coverage selectively filters out some bodies of evidence while privileging others. Their model suggests that framing patterns, journalistic routines, and news values can be attributed to five filters present in commercial media: corporate ownership; advertising; reliance on official sources; flak from interest groups (predominantly right-wing); and anti-communism (anti-terrorism in more recent formulations), or anti-whomever or whatever the official enemy is at a particular historical moment. These filters combine to create specific, and largely predictable, patterns in press coverage that link up with other trends noted by scholars, from the rise of journalistic professionalization to news norms guided by the sole criterion of shareholders' profits.¹²⁰

Left-of-center critics have raised thoughtful and nuanced criticism of the propaganda model over the years. Herman addressed some of this criticism directly in a classic essay published in the *Monthly Review*. In critiquing professional news norms, he points to commercial constraints:

Professionalism and objectivity rules are fuzzy, flexible, and superficial manifestations of deeper power and control relationships. Professionalism arose in journalism in the years when the newspaper business was becoming less competitive and more dependent on advertising. Professionalism was not an antagonistic movement by the workers against the press owners, but was actively encouraged by many of the latter. It gave a badge of legitimacy to journalism, ostensibly assuring readers that the news would not be influenced by the biases of owners, advertisers, or the journalists themselves. In certain circumstances it has provided a degree of autonomy, but professionalism has also internalized some of the commercial values that media owners hold most dear, like relying on inexpensive official sources as the credible news source.¹²¹

These critical frameworks all have strengths and weaknesses, obscuring some aspects of our media system while illuminating others. What is striking,

however, is the consistency of this criticism over time. Media criticism has gained new relevance and resonance in the age of Trump, but the media failures they describe—whether misinformation within social media or sensationalism in mainstream news media—are not new problems. A historical analysis brings into clear focus how these structural problems are actually continuities—not disjunctures—within commercial media systems. The sooner we recognize these long-standing structural problems, the sooner we can strike at the root problem and create real systemic alternatives to a failing commercial news model.

What This Historical Context Tells Us

By focusing on commercial journalism's structural contradictions, the history outlined in this chapter differs in some key respects from standard media histories. This long history of media criticism and reform efforts reveals recurring challenges to the commercial model of the press and the unremitting vision for structural alternatives. This history also suggests that our normative foundations and democratic theories of the press are not natural or static, but rather contingent on previous conflicts over journalism's role in society.

The counter-narrative that I sketch here questions the often-implicit assumption that the default position for the press in the United States has always been a version of the liberal/libertarian model. To the contrary, history shows us a long—if uneven and often besieged—tradition of radical media criticism, affirmative government media policy, and alternative media models that directly challenged the commercial model of the press. Earlier reformers understood that the root of journalism's endemic problems stemmed from the commercial logic that drove much of the US press system.

The radical tradition of US media criticism emerged as a response to the press system's deeper structural problems. These problems became especially pronounced during journalism crises in the Progressive Era and again in the New Deal era, characterized by simultaneous developments in the modern commercial press, contradictions between public service and private profits, and the professionalization of journalism. This historical trajectory exposes journalism's structural vulnerabilities, suggesting that crisis is baked into the commercial press system's very DNA. The market has been an unreliable provider for the public service journalism that democracy requires. But within

dominant discourses about journalism, it has been almost verboten to point that out.¹²²

Before we expand the parameters of the debate around journalism's future, we must situate our media system's structural design as a core problem for democratic society. We must bring into focus journalism's normative foundations, economic structures, and policies that often evade scholarly scrutiny.¹²³ In particular, we must underscore that public service journalism—reporting that focuses on local coverage, watchdogging those in power, and giving voice to the many silenced in society—has always been in tension with commercial imperatives. Despite this often-observed relationship, the United States has essentially conducted a hundred and fifty-year experiment in commercial journalism by treating news as both a commodity and a public service. With the latter function driven into the ground by the market, this experiment has largely failed.

The next chapter will look at the most recent moment when these structural contradictions flared up: the modern journalism crisis that metastasized in 2009. During this time, critics, commentators, and regulators once again challenged the press's normative foundations and democratic responsibilities, in the process affirming many age-old critiques of commercial news media. For decades, a highly profitable business model based on advertising revenues overshadowed these tensions. But as this model collapsed during the financial freefall of 2008–2009, commercial journalism's long-standing structural tensions erupted into full view.