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Terraforming the Internet: The media's plan for the Overton Window 2.0

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The *Overton Window* marks the boundary between ideas deemed acceptable for public discourse, and those considered too extreme.¹ In principle, the Overton window could operate without any deliberate effort by the powers-that-be to control it. Even an unbiased media would tend to avoid radical ideas in the same way that most of us trim the sharp edges off our opinions in public so as not to provoke or annoy others. Individuals and media organizations alike fear ostracism or punishment for offending the sensitivities of the public, and the natural precautionary response to this fear is to stick to safe topics or to keep quiet—leading to a phenomenon the political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann referred to as the *spiral of silence*.²

In reality, newspapers and television networks, by virtue of their monopoly on the control of information, are perennially tempted to exert a powerful influence on public opinion, or to shift the Overton window, by promoting ideas and shaping the perceived acceptability of these ideas. Opinion makers have traditionally used this power to advance their own interests, those of their commercial sponsors and ideological allies, and the interests of society *as they see them*. As a powerful ideological institution, the media, in collaboration with politicians, the intellectual class, corporations and think tanks, engage in what Walter Lippmann and, later, Noam Chomsky referred to as *manufacturing consent* by carrying out a "system-supportive propaganda function," operating according to "market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship."³

For an illustrative example of how a shift in the Overton window occurs, take the issue of illegal immigration in the United States. In a 2003 appearance on the John Gambling Radio Show, Hillary Clinton reassured voters that she was

"adamantly against illegal immigrants" and that "people have to stop employing illegal immigrants."⁴ As recently as 2015, at a town hall meeting in Iowa, she told an audience member that she had "voted numerous times...to spend money to build a barrier to try to prevent illegal immigrants from coming in."⁵ Shortly thereafter, anyone foolish enough to assert these views publicly was met with righteous outrage from those who until recently held exactly the same opinions. Straightforward opposition to illegal immigration, let alone support for the deportation of illegal aliens, had become taboo. The presidential candidacy of Donald Trump triggered a campaign by the information gatekeepers to shift the Overton Window on immigration by, among other things, blurring the distinction between legal and illegal immigration, equating support for immigration measures with the political right, promoting human interest stories featuring illegal immigrants, and emphasizing the 'we are *all* immigrants' narrative (in reality of course America was conquered, settled, and colonized—not necessarily in that order). The media succeeded in cultivating resistance towards Trump among their audiences^{6,7} but failed to thwart his election victory. To the accompaniment of journalistic caterwauling, Trump campaigned and won on the basis of policies that enjoyed popular public support but at the same time were judged by the media to be *beyond the pale*: straightforward opposition to illegal immigration, and the building of a 'big, beautiful wall' to prevent border-crossings. Trump's victory would have been inconceivable had the media succeeded in designating opposition to illegal immigration as lying outside of the Overton Window. Trump's triumph over the opinion makers through unconventional means such as Twitter marks the decline of traditional newspaper and television control of the Overton window, and it

raises the question of whether the Overton Window can survive in the Internet age.

Media malpractice

The purpose of this article is not to attack the idea of a free press, but to show how the media abuses its power. Concerns about media bias and malpractice are as old as the media itself. More than 200 years ago Thomas Jefferson deplored the "malignity, the vulgarity, and mendacious spirit" of journalists, and complained of newspapers that, "Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle"⁸. 50 years later, Thomas Carlyle characterized it as a *fourth estate* (Oscar Wilde quipped that by his time it was the only estate left, having eaten up the other three), explaining as follows how information control equates to the exercise of power in free societies:

Whoever can speak, speaking now to the whole nation, becomes a power, a branch of government, with inalienable weight in law-making, in all acts of authority. It matters not what rank he has, what revenues or garnitures. The requisite thing is, that he have a tongue which others will listen to; this and nothing more is requisite. The nation is governed by all that has tongue in the nation: Democracy is virtually there.⁹

A report commissioned by Henry Luce, the founder of Time, Life, and Fortune magazines in 1947, concluded that the press wielded enormous power for its own ends, propagated its own opinions at the expense of opposing views, allowed advertisers to dictate editorial content, resisted social change, emphasized the superficial and sensational, endangered public morals, invaded privacy, was dominated by one socioeconomic class, and interfered with the open marketplace of ideas.¹⁰

All of this explains why politicians in the West, particularly those with worldviews misaligned with the majority media, have resigned themselves to formulating policy with trepidation as to *how it will be covered in the press*. In contemporary America this means pleasing a media aligned with the Democratic Party (96% of donations from journalists went to Hillary Clinton pre-2016 election¹¹). Currently, measures to curb illegal immigration, for example, can expect to receive hostile coverage.

Some of the propaganda techniques

commonly used by the contemporary American media include the following: It uses quotes isolated from context to support its chosen narrative framing of issues¹²; it assumes bad faith on the part of ideological opponents and admonishes them for their cruel motivations¹³; it manufactures outrage then reports the outrage as news¹⁴; it relies to an unprecedented degree on anonymous sources for its stories, and on political consultants (spin doctors) or lobbyists for commentary. In interviews and press conferences, gotcha questions and 'performing monkey' demands are the norm¹⁵; it interprets any use of metaphor, hyperbole, or joke on the part of political opponents literally when it suits its own purposes¹⁶; it blurs or ignores the boundary between news and commentary; it targets members of the public for retribution^{17 18}, and it uses identity politics to instigate conflict¹⁹. Like many politicians, the media is typically facile and self-righteous, relies on clichés and hammers home talking points²⁰.

In recent years journalists have become obsessed with 'fact-checking.' In practice the set of facts that people will agree on in the social arena is remarkably small, particularly when it comes to politically contestable statements of opinion. Thus fact-checkers come in two political varieties: those such as Newsbusters who challenge the left, and those like Politifact who do the same to the right (both critique their own side on occasion in order to give the illusion of impartiality). The media purports to be concerned about fake news, but as a political activist class much of its own coverage falls under this category since truth telling is a secondary consideration for politicians and political activists—rather, they use language to *do* things. The most notable fake news propagated by the media in recent years was the charge that Trump colluded with Russia to steal the election. For two years the media served as star struck cheerleaders for the Mueller investigation despite the lack of any corroborating evidence.^{21 22}

In his book *The Mighty Wurlitzer*, Hugh Wilford describes how the intelligence services once boasted in private about how they controlled and manipulated domestic US news networks.²³ In recent years news organizations work *openly* with spy agencies they have traditionally purported to guard the citizenry *against*. CNN, for example, employs at least 11 former spooks, all of whom retain close links and loyalties to their former agencies^{24 25}. Among them are the former Director

of National Intelligence James Clapper and Former CIA Director Michael Hayden.

Sweating under the spotlight

The ability to manufacture consent, or to control the Overton Window, requires a monopoly on the control of information, but the information age dispossesses the mainstream media of this awesome power by providing online alternatives to the public. Adding insult to injury, the Internet allows the everyman to document and publicize instances of media manipulation, meaning that the media is continually being humiliated by *having its nose rubbed in its own mess*.

In the information age content-production, filmmaking, journalism and commentary are democratized. A stupendous number of blogs, podcasts and Youtube channels feature sincere citizen journalism and political commentary. The quality is, to say the least, mixed, but at its best the depth and variety of political discourse on the Internet is far superior to that of older modalities. To take one example: In a contemporary TV news interview the discussion is typically tightly constrained, as the longer it continues the more likely ideas from outside the Overton Window are likely to sneak in. A guest may have only three minutes on air, and by the time he has defended himself against the set of prepared attacks his time is up. In a Youtube or podcast interview, by contrast, discussions can run for hours. Guests are allowed to put forth their arguments to the best of their abilities. These ideas may be challenged, but discussions are much more likely to be held in good faith, and the audience is more likely to be left to make up its own mind²⁶ rather than being assaulted by soundbites.

The wide range of ideas available on the Internet, made possible in part by the ability to participate anonymously, has led many to the realization that the Overton Window as traditionally maintained by the media is so narrow as to exclude the politics and opinions of a significant number of citizens. Consequently, friction arises between those with *acceptable* opinions who get to talk in the media and those with *unacceptable* opinions who, if they are allowed to participate in the public dialogue at all, are brought on for target practice, to receive a

public scolding and to demonstrate the outrageousness of their views and the baseness of their character. Further, to paraphrase Neal Devers²⁷, a constrictive Overton window causes significant collateral damage on the ability of a society to think clearly: If some thoughts are unacceptable, and the truth about a certain issue happens to fall outside the polite consensus, then society will run into situations it simply cannot handle.

Simply through its openness the Internet has therefore had a deeply enriching effect on public political discourse, although in recent years, for the West this has come at the price of political polarization and acrimony as the traditional mechanisms for manufacturing consent have lost effectiveness. This is as true for the media as it is for the political establishment that Cas Mudde, writing for the Guardian, refers to:

Ever since Brexit and Trump took the political establishment by surprise, its representatives have been claiming that we are living in a "post-truth" world, where facts and experts are no longer trusted, and information is dominated by "fake news". This is an understandable, if self-serving, coping mechanism of liberals and establishment conservatives to deal with their shocking loss of political power.²⁸

Adding to the tribulations of the media, the Internet documents, raises awareness of, and allows for critique and condemnation of mainstream journalism. Source materials such as press conferences, which in the past were only experienced *through* the media, are now streamed directly to the public. To those who watch them, it is clear when newspapers and TV news subsequently add spin to their reportage. During the 2020 protests and riots in Minneapolis, Youtubers live-streamed police radio channels, helicopter video feeds, and on-the-ground footage from citizen journalists, showing rampant rioting, looting, and arson. TV networks deliberately suppressed this footage to support the *peaceful protests* narrative. "There are *reports* of looting," the Guardian live-blog informed its readers as *this* reader, at least, watched the looting and street fighting in real time on Youtube. The BBC reported without irony that London "protests" that saw 27 police officers injured were "largely peaceful but...marred later by *disturbances*."²⁹ MSNBC journalist Ali Velshi reported on live TV that the riot occurring around him was "mostly a protest. It is

not, generally speaking, unruly,” while a building burned in the background.³⁰ For those motivated to do a little independent research, the sordid truth about how the news sausage is made has never been more apparent.

Fighting back

As long as a significant number of people rely on the morning newspaper, the New York Times website, or the evening news to understand what is happening in society, the legacy media will retain significant power. If, as seems likely, there is a generational shift from mainstream news to the new news media, the newspapers and TV networks risk becoming just one of many partisan voices in the fray. But no institution willingly gives up its power, and the media conglomerates are now attempting to adapt to the Internet not simply by migrating to it, but by changing its nature, and with it the threat it poses to their control of the Overton Window. Luckily for them, the leadership of many of the big tech platforms belongs to similar social circles, shares a positive disposition towards the Democratic Party and the neo-liberal project, and feels equally as negative toward Trump. By co-opting big tech the media is shifting its mission from controlling the Overton Window to *policing* it—covertly if possible, overtly when necessary. The most immediate manifestation of this change in modus operandi was a dramatic increase in the number of articles denouncing troublemakers, trolls, and extremists on the Internet, targeting them for punishment (they subsequently report the outrage they have whipped up as straight news, of course). The proliferation of articles about the dangers inherent to the Internet itself, social media, the threat of 'hate speech' and of course 'fake news,' and calls for big tech to regulate the Internet should also come as no surprise. The media may not be able to control the Internet directly, but it can advocate for others to do it on its behalf until it gains a strong enough foothold in this new territory.

Recent years have seen social media platforms, under pressure from, and in collaboration with the media, abandon support for free speech and open platforms in favor of monitored virtual spaces that use speech codes and moderators to keep *undesirables* out—more moderate versions of the Guardian comments section (possibly the most censored place on earth outside of North Korea).

Reddit, founded as a free speech platform, has been banning sub-forums for years now, starting with openly racist or Nazi-supporting communities, but swiftly descending the slippery slope to ban the Trump-supporting *r/thedonald*, the left-wing *r/chapotraphouse*, and the transgender ideology-critical *r/genderskeptic* subreddits—all done in the name of 'protecting the vulnerable.' Youtube demonetizes videos whose content diverges from (constantly changing) government-approved 'facts' about COVID-19. Twitter, perhaps the most censorious of all the major platforms, has reached the point of adding warning labels and fact-checking labels to hyperbolic Presidential Tweets. All of these platforms manipulate algorithms to promote advertiser-friendly material and suppress wrongthink. They also use *shadow banning*, whereby the user's output, unbeknownst to him, is effectively hidden from other users. This censorship, on platforms that are of such enormous scale as to constitute new *public spaces*, has motivated entrepreneurs to set up alternative platforms. TheDonald members set up their own SNS site, while Gab and Parler have been established as alternatives to Twitter, and BitChute as an alternative to Youtube. But since the first users of these platforms tend to be political refugees from mainstream social media platforms, the content is inevitably scabrous by mainstream standards, leaving these new companies vulnerable to attack from the media as 'hate sites.'^{31 32} They also find it hard to secure funding, since organizations such as Paypal, GoFundMe, and Patreon have been co-opted to the censorious cause. Since private companies run all of these platforms, there is no first amendment protection for users: The new public space is governed by the totalitarian dictatorship of the unelected Mark Zuckerberg, Jack Dorsey, their Silicon Valley friends, their army of moderators/censors (many of them working for slave labor wages in the third world), and algorithms that determine what becomes popular and what appears in searches.

In this way the media is spearheading a campaign to replicate on the Internet the same control over the Overton Window that it exercises in print and on television. It faces one significant obstacle: privacy. Anonymity on the Internet may allow for the expression of non-mainstream viewpoints, including extremist ideas, and it certainly leads many of us into the type of obnoxiousness and tribalism the media professes to

be concerned with. But a free Internet cannot function without anonymity, in the same way that a free society cannot operate without privacy. In the real world we are members of various social groups that maintain some control of membership and enforce differing behavioral norms. Without the ability to enforce their own rules, social groups cannot function. However, such real-world social groups do not scale up to something as large as the Internet. Enforcing monolithic speech codes on a 'group' of billions is totalitarian.

Do not be fooled. The desire to regulate the Internet does not arise from a desire for politeness, to protect the vulnerable, or to ensure that people take responsibility for their online behavior. It is a means of identifying and targeting those who express the wrong ideas, of enforcing self-censorship, and of constructing a new Overton Window, with the same old media playing a starring role as informational gatekeepers.

The Overton Window 2.0

It is no coincidence that historically low levels of public trust in the legacy American news media have accompanied its loss of control over the Overton Window³³. While this state of affairs may delight those of us who oppose its hegemony, vigilance is required, because a cornered, injured media is at its most dangerous. The media is using its dwindling power to maintain its power, consequences be damned. In partnership with ideological and commercial allies it is advocating for the regulation of the Internet and pressuring big tech to police the Internet-based Overton Window 2.0 through speech codes, censorship, de-platforming, and retribution. It also advocates on its own behalf the use of search engine and social media filters that dictate which news sources are untrustworthy, and which are safe and dependable (the legacy news media). It remains to be seen if the media will succeed in its mission to migrate to the Internet and 'terraform' it to its own purposes.

Let us hope that they fail, for the Overton Window 2.0 is not simply a means of ensuring that a pacified majority consumes the usual spoon-fed diet of easily digestible, blandly safe opinions in a different medium and format. Since our lives are increasingly lived online, this *Overton Gulag* would reach much further than print and television media

ever could into the personal interactions of citizens, exerting control over the opinions they express, who they can interact with, the ideas they can access, and who they can send money to. It is by its nature an operation along the lines of that which the Chinese Communist party has been developing in recent decades.

The preferable alternative would be for the constitutional protection of free speech to be extended to the virtual public space. Like the real world this public space would be conflict-ridden—even more so given the nature of anonymous interaction. But we have had a free Internet in the past, and the world did not come to an end. The tribalism of the Internet is preferable to monopolistic, turgid, electronic authoritarianism, even if it were to become a buyer's market for canned truth.

Perhaps we shall have to settle for a partial failure. The Overton Window 2.0 will exist on the big tech platforms, but smaller, private communities and forums will thrive in response, allowing a minority, at least, to decide their own speech codes. Perhaps there will even be a widespread movement among those who enjoy discussing politics to delete their Facebook and Twitter accounts and leave those platforms to holiday pics, cat videos and top ten lists—may the banal electric dictatorship reap what it sows.

Underlying a consideration of these issues are deeper questions pertaining to human nature and culture. How did the West move from responding to offensive opinions with a shrug and a throwaway "well, it's a free country..." to hyperventilation and demands for retribution? How hard will the general public fight for a free Internet, and how many of them have the time or inclination to resist the constraints of the Overton Window 2.0? Does the public want or even *need* to be propagandized by a (superficially) benevolent elite in this bewilderingly complex yet atomized new world? Given current appalling standards of journalistic integrity I hope the answer is no, but these are topics for a different article.

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