

**Lincoln Talk, March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

**From Mass Media to Public Media? Radical Change and the Politics of Communication**

**Dan Hind**

**@danhind**

**1. Introduction**

I'd like to thank Professor Richard Keeble for inviting me to speak here today, and Florian Zollmann and Huseyin Kishi for recommending that he do so.<sup>i</sup>

Here's what I plan to do in this talk.

I am going to sketch two quite distinct currents of republican thought. I am going to talk about an important tradition from the United States – a tradition that can be traced back via [John Dewey](#) and [C. Wright Mills](#) to [Abraham Lincoln](#) and the [Founding Fathers](#). It is a tradition that provides us with a starting point for a conversation about public media versus mass media.

And I am also going to talk about a recent move in academia to disinter classical and early [modern republicanism](#) and explore its relevance in the modern era, what's sometimes called neo-republicanism.

Finally, I am going to argue that these two traditions need to be brought into a much closer dialogue. Doing so will, I think, benefit a number of academic disciplines. But it will also help invigorate the wider debate about [political economy](#).

Before I start outlining these two traditions and pointing out the ways in which they can be made to inform one another, I should say a few words about why anyone should care.

There are two points I want to make here. Firstly, there's the argument from self-interest. Many of you are hoping to have careers in the media in some capacity. But the media are changing very fast– in ways that are increasingly threatening to journalism as a reputable profession or honest trade.

Your prospects for a rewarding and worthwhile career depend to a considerable extent on what is happening now in the communications industry. If you want work that isn't mechanical and demeaning then you need to get to grips with arguments that are going on now, mostly behind closed doors, and you need to make yourselves heard. You also need to fashion a language that will make your claims persuasive in the wider culture. The two republican movements I am going to outline will help you in that task.

Secondly, there's the argument from the common interest. The media are failing in their central responsibility – they are not providing us with information that is timely, relevant and proportionate. We are soaked in the suds of trivia and yet we run mad with thirst for reliable journalism about matters of deep importance. The mechanisms on which we rely – balance, professional judgement, and so on – are not working. Unless we change the institutional structure of the

communications system – change the rules by which the game is played – then the prospects are bleak.

We can't just wring our hands and blame someone else. We are all implicated in the problem. The financial crisis should have made it clear that serious-minded and educated people were every bit as clueless as the tabloid readers they held in contempt. People are ill informed and distracted for good reasons. That won't change until you change the structure of incentives and threats in the communications media. If you want to promote the common interest, then you want to reform the media.

To put it more bluntly, if you don't want to reform the media you aren't really that serious about the common good.

So, if you want a job, listen up. If you want to improve society, listen up.

## **2. An American Tradition in Communications Theory**

In the 1920s the United States was the venue for a confrontation between two models of communication, two ways of thinking about the relationship between the media and the political process. In one corner stood [Walter Lippmann](#), the boy wonder of the American reaction. In the other was [John Dewey](#), the astonishingly prolific and maddeningly vague champion of popular democracy. Their argument was part of an epic battle between two visions of America.

In [Public Opinion](#) and [The Phantom Public](#), Lippmann argued powerfully for a thorough re-organization of America's national systems of knowledge. He

wanted to create a self-confident directorate of experts, which would be responsible for managing and directing the great majority, what he memorably described as 'the bewildered herd'. America was just too big and complex to function as what he called a 'spontaneous democracy'. Casual experience can only supply citizens with the information they need to exercise sovereign power when the conditions of life 'approximate those of the isolated rural township'. The commercial press couldn't be relied on to organize public opinion: the press itself would have to be regimented by men – and it would be men, as far as Lippmann was concerned – with the talent and training to see beyond stereotypes and grasp the more complex reality.

He was inspired in his vision of a rationally organized system of national communications by the British Foreign Office, by the way. And this gives you some idea of what lies behind his proposals. Lippmann wanted the Americans to put their adolescence as an insular republic behind them. He wanted them to grow up and become a great empire.

John Dewey was provoked by Lippmann to write [\*The Public and Its Problems\*](#) a few years later. In it he started to outline another response to the problems of scale that Lippmann identified. He agreed with Lippmann's diagnosis. But he rejected Lippmann's proposals for treatment.

Somehow – and he never explained exactly how – Dewey wanted to re-establish the links between face-to-face communication and the determination of national policy. As he put it: 'the local community is the medium in which a vast but dormant intelligence can be made articulate and intelligible'. Central to Dewey's opposition to Lippmann is his view of democracy as conversation – a process of mutual exchange and transformation in which we engage in conditions of equality and where our efforts to persuade others are balanced by their efforts to persuade us.

Lippmann, on the other hand, was intensely relaxed about the idea of communications as a one-way process, in which experts managed a passive audience for their own – and its - good. Where Dewey argued passionately for a public culture, Lippmann appealed to the self-love of an aristocracy of intelligence. And if there was to be an aristocracy, there would have to be a mass also.

In his 1956 book [The Power Elite](#) the American sociologist C. Wright Mills sketched the difference between a public and a mass society in terms of the characteristic forms of communication found in each. He did so in terms that map quite closely onto the Lippmann-Dewey debate.

For Mills the archetype of public communication is a conversation between equals. In a public society ‘virtually as many people express opinions as receive them’ and ‘communications are so organized that there is a chance immediately and effectively to answer any opinion expressed in public’. Citizens can also translate its opinions into effective action – the public can change policy as its opinions change. Mills adds that in a public society citizens can respond to what they are told without fear of reprisal. Furthermore they can be secure in the knowledge that ‘no agent of formal authority moves among the autonomous public’.

The archetype of mass communication, on the other hand, is a broadcast that delivers one unanswerable voice to millions of listeners. There is little or no scope for individuals to answer back to the messages they receive. Indeed in a mass society perfectly realized even private dissent carries penalties and open disagreement is forbidden. There is certainly no way that the inhabitants of a mass society can translate their opinions into politically effective action. Not only that, ‘the public is terrified into uniformity by the infiltration of informers and the universalization of suspicion’.

The public society and the mass society are two ends of a continuum that stretches from the ideal type of the democratic republic at one end to the ideal type of the totalitarian state at the other. In one the majority are passive and organized by external actors. In the other they are self-governing and are able to exert their will over the institutions of the state.

It is worth reflecting for a moment on where our society stands on this spectrum. How many of us can speak with fearless candour about matters of common concern? What are the penalties for doing so? What impact can we expect to have if we challenge the existing arrangements? To what extent does the state interfere in – and seek to manipulate – public deliberation? We already have some evidence that the police were infiltrating the [Occupy movement](#). This should worry us, if we have any lingering desire to live in a democracy, especially because the police are working closely with private security agencies that in turn sell information about prospective and serving employees to companies. Political activism starts to look like a luxury few of us can afford.

What's important about the mass/public distinction in Mills, and the wider debate from which it derives, is the recognition that communications media and politics are inextricably linked. The same formal constitution can function very differently, given different media structures.

### **3. Neo-Republicanism**

By the time Mills was writing *The Power Elite* in the 1950s the argument between Lippmann and Dewey had been settled in Lippmann's favour. A handful of television networks by then dominated the commanding heights of a truly national organization of knowledge. Publishing and radio broadcasting became increasingly centralised in the decades that followed. The state presided over the systems of communication on which most people relied. Experts conferred among themselves and decided on the limits of acceptable controversy. They

then presented the public with the information they deemed relevant. America was successfully Anglicised.

(England itself was anglicised during the Revolutionary Wars of the late eighteenth century, in a way that eerily prefigures the Red Scare of the late 1940s. But I digress.)

Part of American process of Anglicisation was the suppression of the Deweyan model of democratic communication as a conversation between equals. The assembly-as-medium was also downplayed, being relegated in mainstream coverage to the heritage curiosity of the New Hampshire Primaries. In the 1960s the New Left and the Civil Rights movements both sought to break the hold of Lippmann's directorate of experts. Both were successfully re-imagined and misrepresented to suit the needs of that same directorate.

The Civil Rights movement became exclusively about race, the New Left became exclusively about youth. Their significance as attempts at deep constitutional change – as challenges to the political settlement as a whole – was downplayed.

Now these arrangements are being called into question, on both sides of the Atlantic. Occupy has revived the notion of assembly-as-medium. New technology has called into question the transitive model of communications while undermining many traditional media businesses. One doesn't have to be a naïve techno-utopian to see that social media allow for new kinds of exchange and new forms of participation. That's not to say that the long delayed triumph of Dewey is now inevitable. This is exactly the issue that the next few years will see resolved.

To repeat, the state is busy infiltrating social media and the protest movements that develop out of them. A few companies are capturing a growing percentage of

all online traffic. Something like the old system of media conglomerates is emerging. While there are new opportunities for engagement with peers and independent inquiry, these new gatekeepers – notably Google, Facebook, Yahoo, and Microsoft – between them are in a strong position to decide what is, and is not, going to be accessible to large audiences. The sum of what is widely known will be determined in large part by the employees of private companies.

Running parallel with this debate about the future of the media is a largely unconnected, but highly relevant trend, in political theory – the revival of interest in republicanism in Anglo-American scholarship.

In classical terms, a republic exists when the state is the shared possession of a sovereign public. In Cicero's words 'respublica [est] res populi' – 'the republic belongs to the people'. And it is only in a republic that individuals can truly consider themselves free. Possession of the state by all citizens has important consequences for the whole of a society. Institutions subordinate to the state are all subject to revision by an invigilating public. A sovereign public can dismantle structures it does not like and crush powers it decides are illegitimate. No one is helpless in the face of arbitrary interference or abuse.

Without effective ownership of the state citizens are placed in a position of unacceptable vulnerability. They might be left to pursue their interests, but they can have no confidence that their good fortune will last. In the words of a republican from another era, Abraham Lincoln: 'Allow all the governed an equal voice in the government and that, and that alone, is self-government'.<sup>ii</sup> I hope there is some kind of prize for getting in a reference to Abraham Lincoln in Lincoln. Perhaps the town was named after him?

This notion of freedom as something inextricably bound up with control of the state was largely ignored or dismissed in the liberal tradition of political theory. Isaiah Berlin, for example, influentially argued in [Two Concepts of Liberty](#) that the only freedom that matters is the freedom to do as one pleases, without undue hindrance or interference by either the state or by private agents. In a minor masterpiece of unfair innuendo Berlin managed to associate efforts to realise individual liberation through collective control of the state with communist and fascist totalitarianism – a notion that carried a particular charge during the Cold War.

Whether he knew it or not, Berlin offered an account of freedom that was perfectly adapted to the needs of Lippmann’s experts. The great mass of people should feel confident and expansive, the better to encourage economic growth. But they shouldn’t trouble themselves with business of government. His was a masterful updating of Charles I’s complaint on the scaffold that freedom “consists in having of government, those laws by which their life and their goods may be most their own. It is not for having a share in government, Sir, that is nothing pertaining to them. A subject and a sovereign are clean different things”.

But a movement in academia has begun to re-examine the ideas of classical, renaissance and early modern republicanism. Political theorists taking their lead from [Quentin Skinner](#) in particular are engaged in a project to strip away liberal assumptions about the nature of liberty. The notion of freedom as non-interference in an essentially private life is being called into question. In [Philip Pettit](#)’s work in particular we can see a sustained effort to re-describe government in republican terms.

Interest in republican ideas is, I think, likely to grow in the next few years. The financial crisis has exposed the important ways in which the private economy and the state are intertwined through the banking sector. This has made liberal

quietism about the economy much less easy to justify. If our private efforts to improve our material conditions are unavoidably influenced by decisions made by governments then the notion that freedom consists merely in being left alone starts to look increasingly vacuous. Indeed, to borrow a loaded term from the Athenian vocabulary of political abuse, liberalism begins to look *idiotic*, witlessly limited to the narrow concerns of private life, as though, absent a voice in government, we could ever hope to govern ourselves successfully.

Now remember Lippmann's point about spontaneous democracy and the isolated rural township. As soon as one begins to think about republican government on any larger scale one runs into the problem of knowledge: how can a population secure the information it needs if it is to maintain its status as a sovereign public? After all, those who can successfully manipulate the voters of a democracy can expect almost limitless opportunities for wealth, celebrity and power.

As [Machiavelli](#) once warned:

“It is necessary for anyone who organizes a republic and establishes laws in it to take for granted that all men are evil and that they will always act according to the wickedness of their nature whenever they have the opportunity.”

Given the temptations there will be no shortage of people willing to put self-interest above the common good. The media are, literally, the things in the middle. They interpose themselves between what happens and what we know. If Machiavelli is right we should expect that people in the media will work hand in glove with the political class and other powerful interests to frustrate general understanding of important issues. We should also expect that the media on which most people rely on for news and analysis will ignore or underplay wrongdoing by themselves and others while seeking to disparage or marginalise their critics.

Machiavelli is right.

So far this key problem – the problem of knowledge - has been largely absent from the new academic engagement with republicanism. While Pettit, for example, acknowledges the need for the state to intervene to support plural media, the notion of direct and ongoing popular participation in shaping the public sphere is lacking from the prescriptions for republican government he sets out in [Republicanism](#). As I say, this is perhaps the most sustained effort to explore the real world implications of republican ideas so the contrast with the Deweyan tradition is very striking.

Dewey and his successors like Mills had no doubt that republican self-government and its absence related intimately to the institutional structure of the communications system. They also understood that few-to-many media were inherently problematic and had to be countered by a public able to articulate its views and assert them in the realm of policy. For myself, I can see no solution to the problem they identify except widespread participation in the shaping the public sphere, along the lines set out below.

The revival of interest in classical republicanism in political theory presents an opportunity for scholars and students of media and communications, I think. If effective control of the state in a large polity is only possible if people have access to reliable and relevant information, then the structure of the media becomes a central – perhaps the central – concern of political theory. If you engage with republican ideas – particularly if you relate them to the history of quite recent efforts to preserve republican democracy in America – you will secure a new prominence for your discipline and you will have a chance to shape the new media settlement in ways that help secure your own interest as well as the common good. While we are evil, we are also intermittently noble and never

more so than when we are young. There are important resources in the republican tradition, if you will only take them up.

Of course, you could instead seek to advance yourself in the current arrangements and learn the skills of the courtier. But you need not do so. It is a choice.

#### **4. Republican Media**

If the organization of the media is crucial to the cause of liberty properly understood, what does a republican media system look like?

That's a question I answer at somewhat greater length in my second book, *The Return of the Public*. I will sketch what I say there.

We need to begin by recognising that the state is an indispensable player in the institutional game of the media institutions. This is as true of nations like the United States that don't have a powerful state broadcaster as it is of nations like the United Kingdom that do.

To put the matter bluntly, as one declassified National Security Council memorandum does, "the nation's domestic and international telecommunications resources, including commercial, private and government-owned" are "essential elements in support of US national security policy and strategy". Anyone who wants a significant amount of power in the US media system must make an accommodation with those who determine national

security policy and strategy. This is as true for Google and Twitter as it is true for CBS and Disney.

It goes without saying that this is also true of the UK media. The internal security service MI5 stopped formally vetting prospective BBC employees in the early eighties, as far as we know. But it would be unforgivably naïve to imagine that the main components of the communications system are left to their own devices by the state. The recent appointment of former cabinet minister [James Purnell](#) only underlines what should be obvious: the BBC is an essential element in support of UK national security policy and strategy, albeit one that does without the plausible deniability provided by private ownership.

So the state is a player. In a republican state this would remain true. But state engagement with the communications sector would be transparent and, crucially, characterised by participation. In the model I propose each of us would dispose of some small power to determine the content of the public sphere – the constantly shifting sum of things that are widely known and that are taken as being relevant in political debate. As citizens, as members of the public, we would have some say in commissioning journalism and determining the prominence given to the results. This power would need to be individuated, inalienable and optional.

There need be no constraints on private endeavour in the media. Everyone, rich and poor, would enjoy the same perfect freedom to buy a national newspaper or television channel. But the journalism created by private and public service media would be subject to effective challenge. If quite small groups of people were motivated to question some aspect of the prevailing consensus they would have the means to do so. The journalism they supported would in turn be subject to challenge and critique. If it appealed to a disinterested public then it would gain a greater salience.<sup>iii</sup>

This system of public commissioning need not spring fully formed like Athena from the head of Zeus. The principle is what matters. If we pay for a thing, then we should have opportunity to shape its operations. This is as true of journalism as it is of anything else. Perhaps we could begin with the power to send very broad signals to one another and to the controllers of the media, about the kinds of journalism we want more or less of. The ability to do so would gain important insights into what other people think, what concerns them, and so on. This in itself would be no small achievement. At the moment we rely on cartoonish generalisations from the major media when we try to understand each other. Though the people we meet in the world seem more or less reasonable and well intentioned, the public that we see on our screens and in our newspapers is all too often a contemptible and inarticulate mob, the bewildered herd of Lippmann's imagination.

Over time we could come to enjoy much more close-grained powers of oversight and direction, should we wish to exercise them. Perhaps some of us will become busybody public editors. Perhaps some of us will only pay intermittent attention to the process of public deliberation, until and unless something seems to require our urgent attention.

I do not imagine that we will suddenly become a community of saints. We will be distracted by trivia and taken in by charlatans as we are now. But we would no longer be quite so helpless. We would have the means necessary to challenge lies and deceptions and to popularise – publicise – a better account of reality.

Certainly the system I propose would be a playground for cranks and obsessives. Those who worry about that should spend a little time reading the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*. I would accept a little more unofficial fantasy in the public

sphere in exchange for the power to stop the nightmarish fictions that the powerful can stampede into our living rooms at will.

If you find the 9/11 Truth Movement more offensive or ridiculous than the advocates of the War on Terror and the War on Drugs you are, I submit, in the grip of a kind of mania, no less pernicious for being endemic.

So, yes, all manner of nonsense would secure a public hearing through public commissioning. But everything would also be open to effective refutation. It isn't unduly idealistic to believe that matters of persistent controversy could be debated in a way that clarified them for a general audience. Perhaps organized interests will mobilise to promote their world-view. Does anyone imagine that doesn't happen already? But in the system I propose if a world-view is incomplete or inadequate it will be improved even as it gains greater prominence. While we may love our prejudices we also love the truth.

Collectivities held together by fictional means would lose their appeal. Politicians would have to rely more on fact than sentiment. There are a number of other mechanisms that could run alongside public commissioning. We could, for example, introduce juries to inject some popular oversight into the operations of the BBC. And we could also introduce juries to consider matters of general concern and televise their deliberations.

We could also elect journalists, although here I am wary. The key question is how we can secure the information we need if we are to make sensible decisions as voters. Voting for journalists in the current information conditions risks merely given a democratic rubber stamp to a system that remains essentially unaccountable. What's crucial, I think, is that we illuminate precisely those editorial processes that are currently plunged in a technocratic darkness. We can

only understand how the system works if we have an active and conscious part to play in its operations.

For while, as liberals like to say, education empowers, it is also true that power educates.

Note how destructive these apparently modest proposals would be of existing prerogatives and privileges in the media system. News would no longer solely consist of what a small number of professionals decided it was. Public opinion would cease to be the lumbering creature of private calculation. It would become instead reflexive and self-aware in a process of constant refinement and recalibration. The competence of public oversight would gradually increase and the scope of popular curiosity would widen to include those areas currently held too complicated to be of interest to the great majority. The government of science and technology, where so many decisions are currently made in effectual secrecy, would become a matter for general deliberation. The future would no longer strike most of us as a series of pleasant or unpleasant surprises. We would instead exercise at least some degree of conscious control over the world we leave to the generations that follow us.

Note also that I am not proposing that we all become citizen journalists. There is nothing wrong with the idea of having professional journalists. The question is only ever who they work for, whose interests they must take into account, whose sensibilities they must respect. At the moment journalists work for people we, for the most part, don't know and are subject to incentives and threats that they are unlikely to discuss at length in public. They will not work for us until we are in a position to supervise, encourage and dissuade them.

## **5. What, then, is to be done?**

So, that, at least in outline, is what republican media look like. There's much more to be said about the nature of the neo-republican state and the implications of republican theory for revolutionaries and radical reformers. But, again, let me emphasise the importance of systems of communication for those who are serious about the cause of republican liberty.

In future the public sphere – that realm of widely shared and politically relevant descriptions – will largely be brokered online. At the moment it seems that most of us will have no more say in this process than we did in the bad old days of broadcast. There will be a great show of accountability and interactivity. But the key decisions will be taken in private, by people whose activities are rarely discussed. Every now and again we will hear that someone has moved from a technology company to the State Department, that a former politician has become head of strategy at the BBC, and so on. But the significance of these developments will elude us. We will be encouraged to think, as we are now, that what is widely available is adequate to our needs, and that only ingrates and misfits have fundamental concerns about this best of all possible worlds.

Mae West once said that sincerity is the most important thing. Fake that, she said, and you've got it made. The same is true of accountability in the media.

Those who benefit from the current arrangements will try their best to manage change in order to maintain their privileges. They will not particularly want to see republican ideas widely discussed, except on terms that they find agreeable. Media reform will, as ever, struggle to get a hearing.

But there are reasons to be hopeful. For one thing the new digital technology does have considerable emancipatory potential. It won't set us free by virtue of

its innate properties. We will have to decide to use it in ways that strengthen the cause of freedom properly understood. But if we decide to do so the prospects are really quite good.

There is enough communicative power in this room to make a good start. How many friends and followers can we collectively reach here and now? What impact would we have if we decided to make the case for republican media?

And we have an important advantage in the fact that the country main media operation is publicly funded. The BBC is, nominally, a public institution. Its number one stated goal is to promote citizenship. What could be more in keeping with that than to make it a space for reasoned deliberation between equals? We can, and should, insist that some fraction of the BBC's budget be made accessible to public direction and assessment.

Once we begin to share these ideas, and to argue for changes to the ways in which we communicate with one another, it will rapidly become impossible to ignore us. If everyone in this room decided to buy my pamphlet on republicanism, [\*Maximum Republic\*](#), and to promote it via social media, then this would support me in my work. I am not likely to be commissioned by the BBC to produce a documentary series about media reform. Nor am I likely to be given a job as a columnist on a national newspaper. So you have to decide whether you want to see me continue to act as an advocate for republican freedom.

More than the help it would give to me, sales of *Maximum Republic* provide evidence of popular interest in republican ideas. At the moment editors and producers can tell themselves that their indifference to the subject reflects the indifference of the population at large. A few years ago no one was interested in offshore finance and so the media were free to ignore the subject. Thanks in part

to a bestselling book, [\*Treasure Islands\*](#), and to a campaign of direct action by [UK Uncut](#), that is no longer true. Now politicians scramble to tell us how concerned they are about a subject that they once happily ignored.

Plausibility, like the appearance of sincerity and accountability, matters. Politicians and the media must keep up with public opinion when it changes. Though they will do their best to talk about almost anything else, even media reform can become part of the agenda. It's up to you.

If you decide individually and collectively, to engage with neo-republican ideas and relate them to the history of neo-republican struggle in the twentieth century, then you help advance the cause of freedom. If you decide that there is nothing to be done, except to compete on the demeaning terms set by others, then you advance the cause of tyranny.

I can't draw on the resources of charismatic leadership to persuade you of the merits of republican self-government. If you want uplift, go listen to a speech by Bill Clinton or Tony Blair. I am not on anybody's payroll either, so I can't afford to pretend to be disinterested. I have made media reform my cause and I live or die on its success.

So I can only recommend that you start to think more carefully about the structure of the media you have, and the structure of the media you want. With thought and care, you can remake what we have, until it serves the common good, as well as the demands of individual excellence.

If not us, then who? If not now, then when?

---

<sup>i</sup> Huseyin Kishi also added some explanatory hyperlinks to the original text, another cause for gratitude.

<sup>ii</sup> Abraham Lincoln, 'Speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act', March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1854, available online at <http://www.vlib.us/amdocs/texts/kansas.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Admirers of Kant will perhaps detect here the influence of his answer to the question *What is Enlightenment?* It is an enlightened public sphere – a communications system that promotes the exercise of disinterested, that is public, reason – that concerns us here, ultimately.