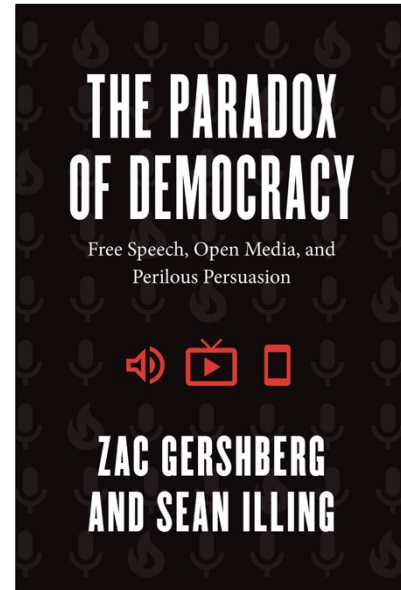


Zac Gershberg and Sean Illing, **The Paradox of Democracy: Free Speech, Open Media, and Perilous Persuasion**, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022, 320 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

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The age of *small-l liberal democracy* is over. As the dominant global political structure, it has already died. Importantly, its demise did not come by the hands of antidemocratic assassins, but, as with autoimmune diseases, by turning the body against itself. Paradoxically, rapid changes in communication technologies, and particularly digital and online revolutions, have made the world more democratic, but less liberal. In their technological infancy, the founders of Reddit, 4Chan, Parler, and other so-called free speech platforms did all they could to eschew any editorial role. Even Mark Zuckerberg built Facebook around the libertarian myth that people—if left to their own devices, would surface the “best” content. But throughout history, mechanisms put in place to ensure free speech, from the Greek’s *isegoria* to the U.S. First Amendment, did not guarantee quality or truth. A truly open communication environment could promote justice and progress and shed light on corrupted power, but it can just as well breed misinformation, conspiracy theories, and hate speech. And anyway, the Internet was never a true open communication environment but rather one that prioritizes and incentivizes engagement, sensationalism, and power (Hindman, 2018).



That is the main thesis of Zac Gershberg and Sean Illing’s book, **The Paradox of Democracy: Free Speech, Open Media, and Perilous Persuasion**. As human storytellers, we want to believe in linear, progressive, and causal narratives of technology, progress, and development. We hold techno-utopian dreams that innovations will always advance us forward toward connection and enlightenment. Against this backdrop, the rise of populist leaders with autocratic inclinations, like Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Viktor Orbán, Jair Bolsonaro, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Benjamin Netanyahu, have been interpreted by many as evidence for the death of democracy (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This is why the Trump presidency was followed by a flux of publications desperately attempting to make sense of what was for many a complete shock and surprise.

We should not have been surprised, though. Masha Gessen, a journalist who has experienced political turmoil in both Russia and the United States, has warned that the biggest risk to the stability of democracies is our lack of imagination (Umansky, 2016). Hiding behind wishful optimism and blindness, we keep telling ourselves that it could never happen here. In 21st-century America, a political coup, encouraged by the president, is inconceivable. In a literate world, it’s unthinkable that educated people would refuse vaccines during a deadly epidemic based on online rumors. But these authors’ review, spanning thousands of years of democracy, demonstrates that each of these events were in fact reasonable outcomes of democracy. These stories, taken together, validate that “democracy has no essence or a shape; it is simply open society and its consequences” (p. 249).

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For proponents of liberal democracy, the 1990s were full of hope. The Soviet Union had collapsed, countries around the world seemed willing to adopt democratic values; international collaborations, from the United Nations to the European Union projected cooperation; and fears of global wars were replaced by the celebration of globalization. For a moment, this world seemed safe, stable, and secured. But these, the authors claim, were misleading times, a calm before the storm.

*The Paradox of Democracy* should be read by scholars, students, and concerned citizens alike. I predict that two issues will determine acceptance or rejection of its main thesis. First, some may struggle with the authors' definition of democracy not through institutional, organizational, or representational systems, nor through liberal values, such as "mutual tolerance" and "forbearance" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), but rather as a mere communicative ideology. Other thinkers discussed in the book, like John Dewey and Hannah Arendt (p. 256), have in the past made variations on the argument that democratic citizenry requires a cooperation among individuals that could only be achieved by means of communication. But some scholars will inevitably debate the book's claim that open communication is a sufficient condition for democracy, even in the absence of liberal foundations. These critics would argue that a democracy must be based on a self-government, duly elected to represent the majority and safeguard the rights of minorities, the principles of liberalism.

In addition, some readers may struggle with the book's proclivity toward technological determinism. The authors often understand historical events and dynamics through the intellectual eyes of Harold Innis, Marshal McLuhan, and Neil Postman, all of whom remain contentious among scholars. Proponents and opponents of deterministic explanations may find a middle ground in the book's argument that new media are, at the very least, disruptive. It is exactly in these crucial moments in a democracy's lifespan that autocratic leaders can appeal to a sense of stability and identity, which may look attractive at times of crisis, even if they are earned at the expense of giving up civil freedoms.

Critically, the authors argue that communicative disruptions may result not in the collapse of democracies but rather reshaping them as illiberal ones. Democracy, they remind us, does not secure liberalism and freedom. If citizens are persuaded by, and choose to follow, illiberal leaders, one should not decry the death of democracy, but rather come to terms with its inherent paradoxes that are bound to bubble to the surface at times of uncertainty and turmoil. Our current era, of wild neoliberalism, endless consumerism, and rapid technological challenges, may bring the paradox to its boiling point.

The authors do not resist the argument that democracy hangs in the balance these days. They simply argue that it always did, and that understanding this uncomfortable fact would elucidate more potential ways forward. After all, democracy gave us Socrates, but democracy also brutally took him away. The same open communication mechanisms that brought millions together to protest police brutality against African Americans could also provide a fertile ground for the rise of White-nationalist conspiracism (Ophir et al., 2022). As frustrating as it is, it would be our eternal role to work hard to "continually re-achieve democracy" (p. 270).

This is a rather dark realization. It suggests that the repeal of *Roe v. Wade*, aggressive gerrymandering, or a Western leader inciting his followers to storm the Capitol, are not democratic anomalies but parts of the game. It's a representation of how vulnerable democracies are to the pursuit and abuse of power, especially in light of declining trust in institutions of governance (e.g., Congress) or knowledge (e.g., journalism and science).

This environment threatens the future of democracy, especially when autocratic leaders, chosen via democratic means, move to attack open communication itself—whether by restricting access to the media, harassing journalists, threatening academic freedom, or violently suppressing protests. It is at this point, according to the authors, where democracies really die and are replaced with something else.

The authors do offer some comforting solutions. First, they recommend accepting that manipulation and persuasion are part of democracy, and that we must, therefore, educate citizens to use their democratic opportunities in ways that don't threaten the system as a whole. This could ameliorate the damages caused by the lack of imagination that Gessen warned about. Second, we must improve media literacy, so citizens understand the dangers of contemporary sophistry and propaganda. This effort should focus not on factual knowledge, but on understanding of how media work. Finally, we need to revive and support local media and fight back against the shift from local to national political identities, which often caricaturizes the ideologies of left and right and incites affective polarization (Mason, 2018). It is in this oversaturated nationalized media environment that politics, particularly in a two-party system, are reduced to culture warfare and virtue signaling.

Sustaining and adapting the democratic enterprise in the 21st century requires overcoming many challenges. But despite realizing how deep the paradox is—which in the past led the likes of Plato and Walter Lippmann to suggest abandoning it altogether (p. 7)—the authors (and hopefully the reader) acknowledge that democracy is worth the price of admission. In my view, part of the solution would be to stop asking what the media do to us, and instead follow thinkers like Elihu Katz who asked what we can do with the media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). The authors leave the reader with a shred of hope, reminding us that “just as Sisyphus chooses to find meaning in his fate, so we democrats must decide what to make of our own boulder” (p. 269). If it will tumble in the direction of dictatorship or liberal democracy is still up to us, and whether this fact is a blessing or a curse remains unknown for now.

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