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Natalie Fenton, **Democratic Delusions: How the Media Hollows Out Democracy and What We Can Do About It,** Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2024, 272 pp., 29.95 (paperback), $69.95 (hardcover).

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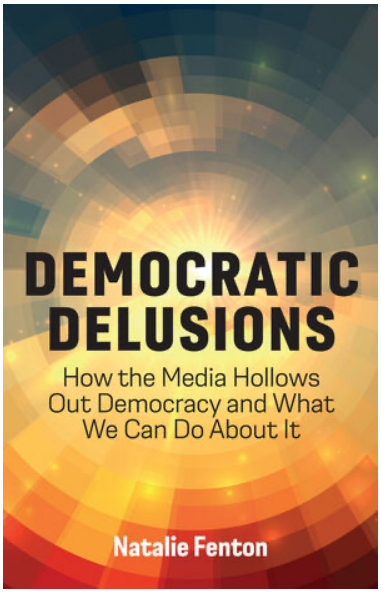

To read mainstream news in 2025 is to feel the dread of watching democracy, at least the version of it we have known, teetering on the edge of an abyss. One potential savior, we are often told, is better media, particularly journalism that informs a citizenry without fear or favor and relentlessly holds power to account. The relationship between the two—journalism and democratic rule by the people, for the people—is often treated as a given, but is it warranted? Is what we call "democracy" even democratic to begin with? In ***Democratic Delusions: How the Media Hollows Out Democracy and What We Can Do About It***, author Natalie Fenton answers the latter with a clear no, while examining the relationship between media and democracy in depth.

Fenton, author of several books on media and politics and professor of media and communications at Goldsmiths, University of London, wastes no time getting to the point, arguing immediately that "our major media outlets and digital intermediaries are captured by global capitalism to the detriment of democracy" (p. 1). Rather than clinging to what remains of our media ecosystem, Fenton urges us to drop the pretense. Only the most surface-level assessment of what many still call democracy would actually suggest genuine democratic character. Far more than the people, our governments are subservient to corporate behemoths. And more than serving as a check on entrenched power, our media ecosystem has long been a tool to advance the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, with all its attendant injustices and inadequacies, as the dominant way of life on the planet.

To reckon with the failures of what we have so far called democracy and our media under capitalism requires a deconstruction of our delusions—the "false and irrational beliefs that are held on to, even when there is evidence that they are not real" (p. 5)—that we hold about democracy and the media. For Fenton, two "grandiose" delusions rise above the others: 1) that our current forms of media are "one of democracy's vital organs" (p. 5); and 2) that (neo)liberal democracy, as it exists today, is actually not democratic at all. Shedding these delusions requires affirming or reaffirming what we mean when we say "democracy" in the first place. Fenton approaches democracy as "a creed defined by constant struggle and a permanent construction site" (p. 9), wherein "social and political practices of justice" are foregrounded, and all who are subjected to systems of oppression are instead able to "participate as equals in codetermining the institutionalized social order to which they belong" (p. 9).

With democracy so imagined, Fenton structures the book's remaining chapters to question and explicate key concepts related to democracy, synthesizing a breathtaking number of thinkers and scholars

to offer normative definitions of each concept and focusing on how it has been "appropriated by capitalism and hollowed out of meaning" (p. 8). Throughout, Fenton includes recommendations as to how each concept could be reclaimed for genuine democratic practice and examples of media entities that are organized democratically and actually work in service of democracy.

Chapter 2 examines power and powerlessness, arguing that understanding liberal democracy as acts of voting and Habermasian (1989) "public sphere"-style deliberation has led more to "neoliberal capture of democracy" (p. 28) than actual democratic practice. Instead, we should understand democracy as a set of fluid power relations and, in particular, understand powerlessness in order to promote the "constitutive power" of people to participate in their own rule. Drawing on examples from the Cambridge Analytics scandal and the 2008 financial crash, Fenton illustrates how media institutions have consistently failed to hold the powerful to account while further advancing neoliberal capitalism and entrenching their own power. She then nods to media cooperatives, including the UK's "grassroots, community-led media cooperative" (p. 38) *The Bristol Cable*, to illustrate how media organizations could be democratically structured and operated in a manner that better prioritizes holding power to account while also raising the voices of marginalized communities.

Chapter 3 considers political participation, which she defines as "our interactions with and influence on the institutionalized exercise of power" (p. 48) and associated exclusions. Initial hopes about digitally networked technology fostering greater participation have, Fenton argues, given way to political silences and exclusions, cut along the same lines of broader societal inequities and exacerbated by an unmanageable flood of content across digital platforms. Locally focused media, like newspapers, which support participation, have been gutted on a global scale, while media giants accelerating political exclusions have accumulated power. Truly advancing participation requires not only more media from more sources but "social ownership and collective control" (p. 70) of the media and institutions serving democratic aims.

In chapter 4, Fenton looks at freedom and repression, arguing that the so-called freedom of expression found on social media is more toxic than liberatory, forging bonds based on the spread of hateful content and leading to disregard and lack of care for society. The ideal of freedom of the press, meanwhile, is co-opted to support the values of corporate media and eliminate alternative possibilities. Instead of focusing on individual or organizational independence, we should focus on the multiple forms of *interdependence* between media and political or private interests, orienting media relationships around a conception of democracy that is rooted in the public interest.

Chapter 5 examines equality and injustice, considering how capitalism is fundamentally at odds with equality and therefore leans on the ideology of meritocracy, which obscures capitalism's political and economic inequality. The massively widening inequality of the 20th century only accelerates the kinds of sexist and racist discrimination that are increasingly prevalent in the nations forming capitalism's core. Instead of perpetuating systemic inequality that prevents healthy democracy, Fenton wants a democratically structured "media commons" that could "interrogate who is doing what for whose benefit" (p. 129) and foreground the redress of structural injustices.

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Chapter 6 works to disentangle concepts of the public good from private interest, recognizing that the latter has too often acted as though it were one and the same as the former, to democracy's significant cost. Even concepts like freedom of speech and the press are too often leveraged as tools to reduce media regulation that stands in the way of market dominance and maximizing profits. Using the BBC as an example, Fenton shows how even a highly valued media entity with a mission in service of the public interest is threatened "both ideologically and structurally" (p. 150) by politicians working in concert with private interests to undermine its mission. Fenton argues that public service media instead could be one part of a larger media commons that recognizes the *intra*dependence of those who create public media with those who exist in the media environment and is generally subject to democratic, not elite, control.

In chapter 7, Fenton discusses trust and distrust, arguing that the decline in trust in media is inseparable from treating journalism as a commodity and the corruption infecting our media organizations and institutions over the course of several global crises and political upheavals. If trust in journalism is to be regained, it should be through work that is "fully accountable, democratically organized, and for everyone" (p. 189). She closes in chapter 8 with a brief examination of hopelessness, examining how deeply media have failed the public in the face of our most daunting human struggles, like catastrophic climate change, before turning to hope. For Fenton, hope lies in a "holistic rearticulation of our media and tech industries" (p. 212) that prioritizes the public good and common ownership and contribution.

Each of Fenton's chapters is dense, offering a rich dialogue between many different scholars and perspectives that is, at times, challenging to keep pace with. Fenton's examples of media commoning or cooperatives are also made more complex by the book's end, where she writes that while such groups act in service of social justice and democracy, they also "threaten to merely make capitalism more bearable" (p. 198) rather than confront capitalism through a larger counter-hegemonic project. Thankfully, she closes by offering several "navigational aids" for creating the conditions required for a truly democratic media commons across economic, political, social, and ecological considerations. If these aids feel brief, that is perhaps unavoidable in comparison to the analysis that has come before. And as Fenton also acknowledges, they are meant to begin the conversation about creating democratic media, not bring it to conclusion.

While Fenton wrote the book prior to our current political and economic context, the service she performs here only grows more valuable. She deconstructs the delusions that have brought democracy as we know it now to the brink of collapse with urgency and rigor while offering concrete recommendations for building a system of commonly controlled media that serves equality, justice, and human flourishing. In times that may lend themselves to despair, *Democratic Delusions* offers hope through its clear-eyed analysis and by pointing the way toward transformative action.

Reference

Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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