Paul Starr, in his ambitious new book, argues that political decisions played a central role in the development of the media between the American Revolution and the end of World War II. Too often, Starr believes, we see the story of the media through the lens of technology. New technologies are certainly important. But, Starr writes, the media’s development was also shaped by the “constitutive choices” of American leaders at critical moments. These choices, once made, direct how new technologies are implemented and govern the relationships among the media, the state, and the market. Bringing a comparative perspective to his analysis, Starr notes that Europeans and Americans used the same technologies—the press, the telegraph, the telephone, the radio, and the television—in fundamentally different ways. These diverse paths prove that politics has “a direct hand in shaping communications for both instrumental and symbolic purposes” (2).

To those concerned about the role of the press in fostering, or hindering, public discourse today, Starr’s study serves two purposes. First, Starr helps us understand how we got to where we are. He describes the key decisions made by political leaders and the way those decisions affected the structure of the media. By emphasizing politics, however, Starr also reminds us that the emergence of the modern media was far from preordained. Specific decisions affected the shape and the role of the media in American democracy. Starr teaches us that political leaders and voters need not be passive in the face of today’s large media corporations, but can use policy to ensure that the media continues to live up to its democratic purposes.

Starr examines three particular ways in which political decisions affect the development of the media—legal and normative rules governing free expression, privacy, and intellectual property; the specific design of communications networks and the organization of industries; and educational and research institutions that produce human capital. Political decisions about the three above factors provide the normative framework for the role of the press in democratic deliberation. In other words, these three constitutive elements structured the American public sphere in different ways at different times.

The American media experienced four waves of institutional development: the Revolution and its aftermath; the emergence of new technological networks in the 1840s, and a concomitant need to find new policies to govern them; the rise of the mass media (press and motion pictures), which led to concerns about the moral order as well as to the birth of modern First Amendment jurisprudence; and, beyond the scope of his book, the expansion of public investment in science, technology, and higher education in the post-World War II era.
The American Revolution profoundly affected the American state’s relationship to the media. While many European nations continued to stifle free speech, the American state not only provided constitutional protection for it but enacted policies to encourage it. The United States’ early leaders believed that a republican citizenry had to be educated if they were to vote wisely and watch over their elected leaders. The media was considered the most important way for citizens to oversee their leaders. Americans thus turned to the state to encourage the circulation of information. The federal government invested significant resources to create a national postal service. Under the Postal Service Act of 1792, newspapers could be shipped at reduced rates and printers could exchange papers with each other for free. At a time when many other governments used their postal services for espionage purposes, the 1792 act mandated that correspondence be private. To American leaders, the circulation of information among citizens was vital to democracy. Although violations of privacy did occur, the American government went well beyond its Old World counterparts in protecting the freedom of expression.

The media expanded dramatically in the decades following independence. Changes in the economics of printing brought prices down, but even more important was the growth of new markets. Political parties in the 1790s turned to the press to get out their message. Most newspapers in this era were tied to party leaders. This became even more true during the 1820s and 1830s after almost every state passed universal white male suffrage. By the 1830s, a national network of newspapers encouraged political deliberation. Although the press remained dependent on party leaders, voters were exposed to diverse viewpoints and sustained political argumentation. More importantly, with the exception of the 1798 Sedition Act, the state did not seek to censor the press.

The second major phase of development began in the 1840s with the discovery of the telegraph. In Europe, the telegraph and later the telephone were both placed under state control. In the U.S., however, both were developed largely with private capital. This was a political decision. The public sector could have subsidized or controlled telegraphy, as it did the postal service and various other internal improvements such as turnpikes and canals. In fact, the first operating telegraph in the U.S., which ran between D.C. and Baltimore, was financed by the
federal government, then under control of the Whig party. In 1844, however, the Democrats took power. Democrats embraced laissez-faire principles and distrusted the state. As a result, it would be up to the market to provide, and it did.

Telegraphy was at first a competitive market, with as many as fifty competing companies in 1851. By 1866, however, Western Union had gained a monopoly of the wires, raising new concerns about the freedom of information. For the first time, it seemed, a private entity might control the circulation of information more effectively than the state. This development would become the central challenge facing political leaders as they struggled to balance the media's independence from the state—in accord with the principles of the Revolution—with the growing power of private companies. The leaders of the American Revolution had been concerned with the dangers of state censorship. The First Amendment prohibits the federal government from interfering with the media but says nothing about private corporations. Could a private entity that controls access to a new media technology threaten democracy as much as the state?

Centralization, Starr argues, had its advantages. It made possible a national network, and in alliance with the Associated Press, circulated information across the country. A wary public, moreover, kept Western Union from abusing its power too egregiously. Its proprietors were aware that some Americans favored following Britain’s example and nationalizing the wires. Nonetheless, in the 1876 presidential election, AP’s general agent, an avid Republican, used his control over information to favor the candidacy of Rutherford B. Hayes, illustrating how private control of information might undermine democratic deliberation.

The rise of the telephone in the 1870s followed a similar route as the telegraph. Again, the state left development to private capital. The number of telephones per capita rose dramatically as companies scrambled for market share. By the early 1900s, however, the Bell companies dominated the field, although smaller companies—including grassroots rural cooperatives—continued to compete. Progressive-era trustbusters worried that AT&T’s relative dominance might be dangerous, but a telephone monopoly had the benefit of integrating what at the time were mutually exclusive telephone networks. As a result, first the states and then the federal government opted for regulation over breaking up AT&T’s monopoly. Political leaders sought to balance the advantages of centralization with its dangers. One outcome was the formation of a single telephone network that was open to all users. But, without competition, the spread of telephones into rural areas slowed. Under this regulated environment, AT&T secured 81% of the telephone industry by 1932.

The third major technological breakthrough was the radio. Originally, the radio was not seen as a form of media but as a tool for point-to-point communications. Radios would connect ships and planes to the shore or allow individual people to communicate with each other. The advent of broadcasting raised new questions. Broadcasters did not communicate with one or two people but with the public. Unlike the traditional press,
however, broadcasting was a limited sum game: there was only so much space on the bandwidth. Some force, whether the market or the government, would have to decide who could broadcast. It took time for leaders to figure this out. At first, the use of the airwaves was seen as a right. But, as broadcasting technology improved, and as companies began to invest in selling radios, access to the airwaves became a political question.

In the Radio Act of 1912, the government for the first time stepped in to regulate the press. Stations would need licenses from the federal government to broadcast. This decision, while perhaps necessary, raised new concerns. For example, should the government regulate radio content, or would this violate the freedom of the press? In addition, by what right should private companies interested in providing entertainment for profit gain access to the publicly regulated airwaves? The public interest in freely flowing information had to be located somewhere between state censorship and private market control. In practice, however, early regulators tended to favor corporate interests. As Starr remarks, “Instead of extending democracy, therefore, radio threatened to distort it” (347–8).

The 1927 Radio Act subdivided the spectrum between high, medium, and low power stations, seeking a balance between centralization and local autonomy. But, Starr notes, larger firms were better able to broadcast to rural areas; access to radio information was improved by centralization. Herbert Hoover, first as Secretary of Commerce and later as President, also favored larger firms. Moreover, as NBC and CBS began to develop national networks and produce new shows, the public came to think of radio programming as entertainment rather than information. As a result, there was little popular pressure to treat access to the radio market along the same terms as there was for print media. Radio became dominated by a few large firms while the government used a heavier hand censoring content than it would have done for print.

Admittedly, because radio programming is broadcast to the public, the public might have a legitimate interest in keeping radio clean. On the other hand, the state’s oversight of the broadcast media raises concerns dating back to 1776. The distinction between entertainment and information enabled broadcasters to gain greater control over the American media than might otherwise have been permitted. American citizens, in their capacity as consumers, were untroubled by who provided the entertainment so long as it was enjoyable. Even if we are unconcerned about the effects of centralization on American culture, we should be more worried about the role these media play in shaping democratic deliberation. Does the distinction between entertainment and information provide private interests a smokescreen that hides the control they have gained over political information?

The market plays a complicated role in Starr’s story. The market provided Americans better access to newspapers, the telegraph, the telephone, and radio (and television) than was available in European states. The market also allowed the press to gain autonomy from both the state and from political parties. With
the emergence of the penny press, publishers could sell more newspapers directly to the public and depend less on party patronage. Under the entrepreneurial leadership of Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, the press exerted its independence. More newspapers circulated with more news. But wider circulation does not necessarily mean that the press is free. The creation of news empires such as Hearst’s put significant power into the hands of private interests. This was even more true for radio and television. This tension between the creative energy of the market and the dangers of monopoly reflect the political challenges that faced Americans in the first half of the twentieth century and do so still today.

The American media, according to Starr, is a “hybrid of capitalism and democracy” (401–2). On the one hand, market competition spurred development. On the other hand, the public purpose of the media since the American Revolution has been to educate voters. The danger, Starr concludes, is that capitalist interests will trump democratic ones. But Starr does not offer much guidance on how to disentangle economic motives from civic ones, in part because the two have been historically intertwined. Nonetheless, as private enterprises, the interests of media companies are often at odds with the needs of a democracy. New technologies such as the Internet, as well as old technologies such as the print media, may still provide the possibility for more open democratic discourse.

Starr’s *The Creation of the Media* demonstrates that political decisions have always shaped how effectively the media can serve its democratic functions. Political decisions, once made, affect the implementation of new technologies as well as determine who controls them. His study provides an invaluable correction to those who might see the current state of the media as the inevitable outcome of impersonal technological or market forces. *The Creation of the Media* should be read by any citizen interested in a nuanced discussion of the complex relationship between democratic deliberation and the market. Moreover, to those concerned about the threat media centralization poses to public discussion, Starr reminds us that today, as in the past, it is up to us, as citizens in a republic, to make future choices to ensure that the press can continue to serve its democratic mission.

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