

CAN COLUMNISTS BE CIVILISED?

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Early in the winter of 1950, as the cold war threatened to turn hot, Joseph and Stewart Alsop sat down to do something they had never done before. Although still young, the Alsop brothers had already cemented their position among the nation's leading columnists. Consummate Washington insiders, related by marriage to the Roosevelts, hosts of the city's most important dinner parties at a time when America's power and prestige were at their peak, they seemed to have little to fear. Yet, what they were proposing, Stewart wrote to a close friend, "had my palms visibly sweating." They were planning to accuse Louis Johnson, Harry Truman's secretary of defence, of lying.

The reaction was thunderous. No matter how compelling the brothers' case against Johnson may have been, the New York Herald Tribune, their main employer, could not bring itself to use the word 'lie'. Papers to which the column was syndicated refused to run it, with some reminding the brothers of the press' responsibility to uphold the country's institutions, respect its most senior officials, and be measured in tone and outlook. It was a lesson the Alsop brothers, who their biographer rightly calls "the guardians of the American century," would never forget [Merry, 1996: 190-192].

All that seems light years away. Even before Donald Trump had entered the White House, *The Washington Post* had begun to refer to his claims as lies; *The New York Times* followed suit a few months later. The election, New York Times executive editor Dean Basquet said in October 2016, "forced us ... to get comfortable with saying something is false;" in doing so, he added, it "changed journalism," burying—to the acclamation of some and the condemnation of others—what little remained of the ethic of self-effacement which had characterized the Alsop era [Pressman, 2018: 251].

That change comes on top of many others. Already weakened by the rise of broadcasting, newspapers have been hammered by the Internet, which has fragmented the media environment into millions of pieces while forcing newspapers to compete with every other form of content for consumers' scarce, and often fickle, attention. At the same time, the advertising revenues on which newspapers relied for a high and until then rising share of their income have shrunk as new, more effective advertising channels emerge, both in the form of

competing content providers and of platforms such as Google, Facebook and Twitter. Forced by intensified competition for advertising to ramp up their subscriber numbers if they are to survive, many newspapers are being driven to be more partisan and strident, reaching out—above the din of the Internet—to those readers who have strong views and are willing to pay to see their view confirmed.

As for the columnists, their position is even worse: time-starved consumers, their opinions already largely fixed, have little tolerance for subtleties; they may eat salad at lunch but for commentary they demand red meat, delivered quickly, preferably with the blood dripping. Adding to the pressures, consumers are no longer merely passive readers; rather, whatever columnists write is promptly put through the grinder by on-line mobs whose default mode is frequently the insult and whose default style is frequently the tirade. And with editors desperate for snippets that could go viral, everything is pushing commentary to be even more polarized than the paper as a whole, unleashing a race in which columnists and commentators try to be heard by turning up the volume.

That picture is, of course, a vast simplification of a reality that is complex, marked by exceptions and affected by counter-tendencies; yet it captures the terms in which our predicament presents itself. Can intelligent commentary, which is willing to clearly stake its ground, but does so by appealing to reason rather than to instinct, survive in an age of anger? And even if it can, is it destined to play any useful role?

There are no sure or simple answers to those questions. But what may be helpful is to place the issues into the perspective of how we got to where we are. In his *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel said, I believe rightly, that philosophy is our time apprehended in concepts. What he meant is that when they think historically, people are giving and asking for reasons, in more bloodless and dispassionate terms than is the case in historical reality. We try, in looking at the past, to understand our own subjectivity: why things present themselves to us as they do. Human history is littered with setbacks and even horrors; but there always remains the need for self-comprehension which picks up the pieces and sets out anew.

In setting off on that journey, it seems reasonable to adopt the narrative pattern so aptly recommended to the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*: “‘Begin at the beginning’, the King said gravely, ‘and go on till you come to the end: then stop.’”

As far as beginnings are concerned, suffice it to say that while printing spread enormously rapidly in Europe after Gutenberg introduced his movable-type printing press in 1450, the first periodic English newsheets did not appear until the early 1620s; it took another fifty years for the term ‘newspaper’ to enter the English language, and it was only in the first two decades of the eighteenth century that the terms ‘journalist’ and ‘editor’ were coined [Ward, 2015: 115, 116, 121]. Nonetheless, by the time those terms had become part of the vocabulary it was clear that the rise of the print media was both a major contributor to, and an integral part of, a broader reshaping of Western society.

The word ‘newspaper’ itself hints at the change. After all, the essence of modernity is the conviction that the present is unlike the past and that the future will differ from the present. The very idea that there is always news—something novel and important in the universe—was new: yes, it was obvious to the medieval mind that things happened, but those events were disturbances—such as wars, plagues, or natural disasters—against the backdrop of a fixed reality. The notion that reality itself was constantly changing as a result of purposive human action marked the rise of a radically different world view.

However, every bit as important was the evolving context in which this world view took hold. It is well-known that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries European societies underwent a process of functional specialization. Under feudalism, political, economic and social life were essentially merged; in the transition to the modern world, each of these became a separate domain. Political functions—the task of ruling—became the duty of specialized structures, which today we would call the state; economic activity moved out of the home into markets, which were rapidly growing; and a secular social sphere emerged, taking forms that went from formal structures—such as lodges and fraternities—to informal meeting places such as coffee houses, reading rooms and salons.

A crucial interaction occurred between this social sphere and the political domain. The idea that rulership rests on some type of consent had a long history: for example, in *Behemoth*, written in 1668, Hobbes articulated the principle that “the power of the mighty hath no foundation but in the opinion and belief of the people.” And although *Behemoth* remained unpublished during Hobbes’ lifetime, the relation of rule to consent was clearly expressed by

Locke and given a foundation in human reason by Montesquieu, only gathering strength after that.

The process by which that strength became overwhelming was complex and protracted; what matters here is that the development of a social sphere, distinct from both church and state, implied that there was now an actor, a social subject, which was the source of the consent whose foundational role those writers and others asserted. That actor was ‘the public’, which expressed itself through what came to be known as ‘opinion,’ a term which, like the Greek word *Doxa*, referred to beliefs that rather than having the certainty which characterizes statements of fact or logical inferences, involve an element of human judgement. Moreover, deliberation—the process of arriving at and testing opinion in the light of reason—gave judgements some type of legitimacy or of validation as truth. Finally, and crucially for our purpose, deliberation was inherently public, with the print media both underpinning the process and reflecting its outcome [Koselleck, (1959) 1988; Habermas, (1962) 1989; Raeff: 1983].

It is therefore in this period that Rousseau, in the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750), coined the term ‘public opinion’; in England, a similar term— ‘general opinion’—had developed, but ‘public opinion’ replaced it in 1780s. The Physiocrats had used the term “enlightened opinion” to mean “an opinion purified through critical discussion in the public sphere to constitute a true opinion;” thus a clear link was established between the formation of opinion, critical public commentary, and truth, with the whole presupposing and resting upon some underlying communicative process.

As that link was being forged, another important notion was gaining ground: that of civility. One can, somewhat unusually, identify a time and a place for the arrival of this term in its modern meaning: the publication of Erasmus’ *De Civilitate Morum Puerilium*—On Civility in Children—which appeared in 1530 and which, by the standards of its age, became an extraordinary bestseller, going through some 130 editions over the next two centuries [Elias (1978) 1994: 42]. Erasmus’ text is almost entirely concerned with outwardly behaviour: how to present in public (a term which itself came to mean something along the lines of ‘in the presence of others’) and more broadly, how to relate to other people. Those were vital questions as the rise of cities and the growth of commerce meant entering into relations with

strangers, in dealings which were governed neither by hierarchical nor by familial codes of conduct. The answer as to how those relations should operate lay partly in new standards of etiquette; but it mainly involved cultivating from childhood an incessant form of self-control that instead of the warrior ethic of honour and fealty, took stability, predictability, and the taming of passions as its core virtues.

Civility was, in that sense, an indispensable ingredient in rational deliberation; without the calm, informed and considered exchange of views, arguments degenerated into quarrels and quarrels into violence. And it also became the expected standard for discussions in print, with those who deviated from that standard being roundly criticized.

All this ascribed a lofty role indeed to the ancestors of today's mastheads, who were to be the bearers and recorders of the process of rational will formation; and no one expressed that role in loftier terms than Immanuel Kant. The Kantian conception is as complex as it is brilliant. Reduced to a handful of propositions, it stated that ultimately the legitimacy of state action can only rest on morality; morality, in turn, can only be known through reason; reason's proper exercise presupposes communication, for—as Kant put it in *The Critique of Pure Reason*—“The touchstone whereby we decide whether our holding a thing to be true is conviction or mere persuasion is ... the possibility of communicating it and of finding it to be valid for all human reason” [*The Critique of Pure Reason*, A820; B848]; as a result, “The public use of one's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men” [*What is Enlightenment?*, 55].

To be legitimate, the sovereign's decisions therefore had to be public and open to scrutiny—this was Kant's ‘Principle of Publicity’; but for that public scrutiny to confirm those decisions' legitimacy, ‘the public’ needed the ability, underpinned by the freedom to speak and write, to debate their merits in the light of reason. Informing that debate was the task of the print media.

In many respects, our ideal of the press' role has not changed since that formulation—seen in terms of public purpose, newspapers should seek to enlighten: they should help citizens understand the world they live in, grasp its ever-changing realities, scrutinize public action, explain and clarify competing points of view, and in all those ways, support civil discussion and the formation of a rational public will.

Our conception of what the print media should do therefore dates back to the 1700s; but our notion of how papers should actually do it only emerged in the closing years of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. The driving force was a dramatic change in the newspaper industry's economics.

Until the late 1800s, there were few economies of scale in the production of newspapers: the costs involved in setting up a newspaper were relatively low, as were the fixed costs of ongoing supply relative to the variable costs of paper, printing and distribution. As a result, larger circulation papers could coexist with a multitude of smaller papers, generating intense competitive pressures and low newspaper prices in those countries which permitted open entry. With commercial advertising still in its infancy, the financial viability of many papers depended on subsidies from current or aspiring office-holders, leading to a press that was intensely and unashamedly partisan [Sheppard, 2007].

Beginning in the late 1870s, almost every aspect of that picture was transformed. The development of very high speed presses brought enormous advances in the printing process: the maximum daily printing capacity of a press increased 16-fold between 1874 and 1895 before trebling again in the next seven years. In 1870, the largest press made 17,000 impressions per hour; barely thirty years later, it made well over a million. At the same time, a slew of technical improvements reduced the cost of newsprint by about two-thirds and made it efficient to purchase newsprint in extremely large lots. From being artisanal, the production of newspapers became industrial and highly capital intensive, with large circulation papers having much lower unit costs than their smaller rivals [Owen, 1975: 66, 76].

No less importantly, advertising markets were also transformed. Two factors interacted: on the one hand, urbanization, income growth and rising literacy laid the foundations for a mass consumer base; on the other, consumer good industries such as soaps, processed foods, tobacco products and household fittings themselves became marked by high capital intensity and vast economies of scale, making them capable of supplying standardized goods in huge quantities at highly affordable prices. Bringing the two together—connecting consumer goods firms seeking sales with consumers seeking inexpensive, reasonable quality goods—was the development of systematic marketing, giving birth to national brands that ranged from Singer Sewing Machines to Colgate, Kellogg and Nestle [Chandler, 1977]. Most importantly for the

newspaper industry, the rise of national brands created a rapidly expanding market for display advertising in which large circulation papers had enormous advantages.

The most obvious result was a spectacular increase in concentration levels as some newspapers expanded, and came to control a local market, and others collapsed: in the United States, for example, while the number of newspapers continued to grow, the number of cities with two or more daily papers declined by two-thirds in the interwar years; by 1940, for every city which had two daily papers or more, there were nine which had only one. But underpinning that rise in concentration—and the rise to power of the legendary media barons—was intense competition to be the top paper, with the subscription prices for American newspapers, adjusted for inflation, falling by about two-thirds from the 1890s to the 1920s [Owen, 1975: 77, 79].

Yet prices were only one element in the race for scale—and perhaps not the most significant. Rather, what also changed was the entire ethos of the newspaper.

While signs of the change can be seen in the pioneering French daily, *Le Matin*, which was founded in 1884, the great innovator was Adolph Ochs, who in 1896 purchased *The New York Times* as it teetered on the brink of bankruptcy [Ferenczi, 1993; Hamilton, 2003].

Ochs realized that the vast investments required in very high speed printing equipment and physical distribution could only be viable if the paper attracted massive advertising revenues—which was only possible if it had an equally massive readership; and he also realized that the paper would never secure that readership if it remained narrowly partisan. He therefore set down two slogans which its editors were to take as imperative guidance: that the paper would “give the news impartially, without fear or favour,” and that it was to be a “paper of record,” providing “all the news that’s fit to print.” Thus was born what became known as the ‘objectivity standard,’ which was soon adopted as the core ethical norm both by the American Society of Newspaper Editors and by the Society of Professional Journalists, before quickly diffusing overseas.

Objectivity never meant political neutrality: publishers such as Ochs, Hearst, Northcliffe and Beaverbrook had strong views, and wanted to advocate them. But it did mean attempting to draw a line—one sharper than could ever be drawn in reality—between the reporting of facts

and the analysis and evaluation of those facts. This partly involved a change in substance: the task of reporters, and the content of news reports, was narrowed to the collection and recording of the four W's and one H: who, what, when, where and how, with the 'why' question left to others. At the same time, the shape of newspapers changed: analysis, opinion and editorials were segregated from ordinary reporting and given separately identified pages of their own [Broersma 2007]. Until then, the distinction between reporters, correspondents and columnists was blurred; now, a clear distinction was drawn, including in terms of where they appeared in the paper, between correspondents, who reported facts, and columnists, who stated a point of view, giving the writing of opinion a visibility and prestige it had not previously enjoyed [Riley, 1998: 80-103].

At least in principle, this was a happy coincidence of theory and practice. In terms of theory, the Kantian legacy stressed the role of the press in supporting the rational formation of public opinion through objective, civil presentation of facts and analyses; and in terms of practice, the commercial incentives faced by publishers pushed them to adopt that role as their lodestar. Moreover, for all the slips between the ideal and the reality, it would be fair to say that this unexpected coming together of commerce and philosophy seemed to 'deliver the goods.'

It is, in effect, a humbling experience to re-read the great columnists of the period from the end of the Second World War to the closing years of the 1970s, when this model was at its height. It is not merely a question of English language writers such as Walter Lippmann and the Alsop brothers in the United States or George Orwell in Britain; even in continental Europe, the leading daily papers carried columns by the likes of Albert Camus and Raymond Aron in France and Norberto Bobbio, Nicola Chiaromonte and Indro Montanelli in Italy, all of whom wrote, week after week, with style, verve and erudition. Set against the great sweep of history, it is hard to think of another period when such depth of insight and civility of tone were brought to huge numbers of readers, helping to create the expectation that this was how what Hobbes dubbed "the conversation of mankind" was to be conducted.

None of these writers confused civility with the refusal to take a point of view, even one that was strongly partisan. Their sense of moderation was anything but 'une philosophie pour les âmes tendre,'—a philosophy for tender souls—as Jean-Paul Sartre dismissively called it. Thus,

reflecting toward the end of his life on his intellectual path, Raymond Aron, a man of the centre-right who (unlike Sartre) had been among the first to join the French resistance, wrote that “the liberalism in which I sought and found my spiritual home has nothing in common with a philosophy for tender souls;” rather, it demands of the writer a good dose of courage to swim against the current, and to draw, as clearly and explicitly as possible, “the lessons, however uncertain, of historical experience” [Aron, 1984: 81-82]. Equally, Norberto Bobbio, a man of the left who was also active in the resistance to Mussolini and then Hitler, defined his style as one that combined frankness and directness with ‘mitezza’ or mildness, which he termed the virtue involved in refusing submissiveness without falling into arrogance.

There is, in that sense, considerable truth in Alan Wolfe’s recent reappraisal of the development of American political culture, where he refers to the first decades after the Second World War as a time when the dominant values in the public conversation were political maturity and the sense of historical irony [Wolfe, 2018]. Perhaps no one expressed those values better than the literary critic Lionel Trilling, when he asserted that after the horrors of the war and the holocaust, there was, on each and every participant in the public conversation, a “moral obligation to be intelligent,” which demanded being “intellectually mature, ... willing to judge by reason, observe facts in a critical spirit, and search for the law of things” [Trilling, 2008: 390.]

None of that is said in the spirit of what would be a misplaced nostalgia. But Hannah Arendt was right when she wrote, echoing the lines in *The Tempest*, that we should relate to the past “not in order to resuscitate it,” but “like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea” to retrieve lost treasures that “having undergone a sea change” lie there “in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements,” awaiting the intrepid soul “who will bring them up into the world of the living” [Arendt (1955), 1968]. Viewed from today’s perspective, the spirit of that age seems like a lost treasure indeed, lying “full fathom five.”

Yet however dazzling that lost treasure may seem, it also had its stern critics.

Writing in a neo-Marxist tradition, the scholars of the Frankfurt School—particularly Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorn, Herbert Marcuse and, at least in his early work, Jürgen Habermas—cast the media, with its highly concentrated ownership, as pacifying, manipulating and distorting public opinion, narrowing the range of controversy and creating

a consensus that was as contrived and repressive in fact as it was tolerant and open-minded in theory. Thus, in his rightly celebrated book on *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas argued that in mass communications, “sophisticated opinion-moulding services,” operating “under the aegis of a sham public interest,” had voided the Kantian process of deliberation of its substance, replacing it with a spectacle in which “the criteria of rationality are completely lacking” [Habermas, (1962) 1989: 195, 249].

Only slightly later, commentators on the right also lambasted the media, claiming that the few communications channels it offered—including the leading newspapers—had been captured by what Americans call ‘liberals,’ who were using their control to spread left-wing propaganda.

It would be easy to show that critics on both the left and the right shared a greatly exaggerated sense of the media’s importance in shaping political outcomes. They held what might be termed the hypodermic needle view of media influence: whatever the media said was injected, as if by a hypodermic needle, into the mind of the recipient, altering his or her opinions. However, already in the late 1940s, research undertaken at Columbia University by the Austrian-born sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld had cast doubt on whether the media had anywhere near as much impact on opinion formation as the hypodermic needle model implied; and subsequent work, filling many volumes of statistical journals, has only strengthened that scepticism [Neuman, 2016].

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to dismiss the critics entirely. There is, after all, no doubt that media ownership was highly concentrated, reflecting the economies of scale involved in assembling mass audiences and delivering them to advertisers. There is equally no doubt that, as C. Wright Mills claimed in his enormously influential book, *The Power Elite*, the media did not provide *public* communications, it supplied *mass* communications. The crucial difference between these, as he articulated the concepts, was that while public communications allowed for give and take, mass communications involved narrow channels that operated in one direction only: far fewer people expressed opinions than received them, and the recipients had no scope to answer back immediately or with any effect [Mills, 1956: 303-304]. And it is undeniable that the political culture on which this system rested was elitist: indeed, elitism had permeated the model of public deliberation from the outset.

In effect, its core concept of ‘public opinion’ always begged the question: who is ‘the public’? Or put slightly differently, whose opinion matters—and whose doesn’t? None of the thinkers who shaped the theory of public deliberation conceived of the public in especially inclusive terms. Kant had wanted to restrict participation in the public debate to property owners; as for Rousseau, he rigorously distinguished the ‘general will’, which should determine the laws, from the mere ‘will of all,’ devising mechanisms which limited or even prohibited free association and severely restricted debate [Urbinati, 2006: 97-114].

By the middle of the 19th century, those narrow views of the scope of the deliberative public had, if anything, hardened. The French Revolution, with its descent into the terror, played a crucial role in that respect. In the Revolution, the Kantian public had met its antithesis—not the autocratic monarch, who the philosophes had elevated into an ‘enlightened despot’, but the mob, in whose “madness,” “horrors and crimes,” Carlyle saw what he called “the crowning Phenomenon of our Modern Time” (CFR, I, 17). Behind the rioter, said Hippolyte Taine in his widely read history of the Revolution, lay the savage [McClelland, 1989: 132-134].

Little wonder then that Tocqueville, perhaps the most democratic of the century’s liberals, opposed every extension of the franchise that was proposed during his period as a parliamentarian [Adcock, 2014: 34; Kaledin, 2011: 137]. John Stuart Mill, for his part, saw little merit in popular opinion and rejected the claim that “the multitude [should] ... decide according to their own judgement;” instead, Mill advocated “that political questions be decided not by a direct appeal to the insight or the will of an uninformed multitude, but only by appeal to the views, formed after due consideration, of a relatively small number of persons specially educated for this task.” Finally Bagehot took it as obvious that a workable democracy required inducing the “self-satisfied, stupid, mass of men to admit its own insufficiency” [Prochaska, 2012: 50].

But whatever the philosophers may have thought, ultimately, it was the technology which determined who had access to communications channels; and if it did nothing else, the rise of the Internet democratized access as thoroughly as the most radical of democrats might have wanted. The mass communications C. Wright Mills pilloried—in which only the few can communicate to the many—was dead; the age of what he called public communications, in which the many are firmly in control, had arrived.

The dawn of that era was, in its own way, an old dream of the utopians. For example, in his wildly popular *Looking Backwards*, which was first published in 1888, Edward Bellamy imagined that by the year 2000, a technological web would not only allow people to hear the finest music and lectures in their home but also to find, merely by turning a few knobs, some that closely match their interests. This marvel, he hinted, might even permit many different voices to be heard, inaugurating the happy marriage of democracy and communications.

And a marvel the Internet indeed is. But while the benefits it has brought are beyond doubt, it is equally clear that its rise has left the newspaper industry reeling, while redefining political cultures worldwide.

Many economic models, in some cases of great technical sophistication, have been developed to analyse how the newspaper industry might react to the shocks the Internet has unleashed, including the collapse in advertising revenues and the struggle to persuade readers to bear a much higher share of the industry's costs. But those models are inevitably very sensitive to the assumptions on which they rest, and can yield many different outcomes when the assumptions are modified [Ergas, Pincus and Schnittger, 2018]. That is not a failing of the models; it is a sign of the fundamental indeterminacy of the reality in which the industry now operates.

There are nonetheless reasons to believe that there remains a substantial demand for a quality press which differentiates its product by scrupulous attention to facts, probing investigative reporting and careful curating of the structure and presentation of the paper as a whole. As many mastheads claw their way back from the precipice, it is becoming clearer that the newspaper, that symbol of modernity, will not disappear from this earth.

But as heartening as that is, there are also reasons to believe that the mature, measured analysis which characterized newspapers in the age of the Alsop brothers is seriously threatened—indeed, it was in grave peril even before the Internet arrived. As Matthew Pressman has brilliantly shown, competition from news magazines—such as *Time* and *Newsweek*—and from television led American newspapers to abandon the fact/analysis distinction by the late 1970s; at the same time, their political positioning became more pronounced [Pressman, 2018: 29-44]. Now, that trend has become universal, as newspapers

seek readers who are sufficiently interested in news and current affairs to pay for access—and for better or worse, most of those readers hold firmly defined views.

In and of itself, the trend to greater political polarization among newspapers might cause little concern: after all, the mere fact that Camus wrote for papers that were clearly on the centre-left, and Aron for papers that were equally clearly on the centre-right, did not undermine the depth of their insight or the civility of their writing. However, looking across the advanced democracies as a whole, there is little doubt that the tone of commentary and of opinion has become increasingly shrill, posing a challenge to what remains of the deliberative ideal.

In part, the shrillness is just a response to the features of the online environment. To begin with, consumers are drowning in an incessant flow of competing content. An admittedly rough calculation for 2005 finds that for every minute of mediated content consumed there were some 1000 minutes of mediated content on offer [Neuman, 2016: 132]—but that was before Facebook, Twitter and Instagram brought the real torrents of content to bear. To be heard above the roar one must be loud and piercing—and the pressure on publishers to generate the hits, re-tweets, Facebook likes and the other indicators that determine advertising revenues puts a premium on extreme views, simply presented.

The rise of anonymous comments as the primary form of online interaction has aggravated the problems. It is, as the Talmudic sages remind us, no accident that in Genesis, Adam and Eve acquire names only after the fall: to have a name is to be responsible for one's words and deeds, and hence for the good and evil one's actions cause. Nor is it an accident that for the ancients, the public sphere was where one acted in the open, and hence could be named and held accountable, as against the private sphere where one acted in the secrecy afforded by the walls of one's home. Unburdened by that obligation of responsibility, anonymous commentary, though sometimes well worthwhile, is all too often mere abuse that has served to push the deterioration in public discourse a step further.

But the Internet's features are the not whole story. Rather, it is important to also consider the impacts of the changing composition of the public that newspapers address.

There is, in that, an element of irony. If the thinkers who highlighted the deliberative role of the public sphere were elitist, it was not because they believed in their own inherent

superiority; it was because education was only available to the very few. They therefore looked forward to an era in which mass education would lay the foundation for universal participation in reasoned, civil and informed deliberation.

At least as far as newspapers are concerned, that era has presumably arrived: the newspaper reading public has more years of education than ever before. As late as 1966, 48 percent of readers of The New York Times had never attended college; by 2016, virtually all had at least a four year college degree—the exceptions presumably being Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, who are probably wealthier than all its other readers put together. Yet it is these highly educated readers who seem to demand the polarized, dogmatic and petulant expressions of opinion that have become more widespread. The elite, it might be said, have become the mob our intellectual ancestors so anxiously feared.

There is a rich vein of observers who believe that reflects a deterioration in personal character. At least since Tocqueville, Weber and Freud, analysts have forged a link between individual character and social context. Beginning with Christopher Lasch's 1979 bestseller, *The Culture of Narcissism*, which denounced what Lasch called the illiteracy of the highly educated, writers in that tradition have seen secondary narcissism—that is, the narcissism that reduces the world to love and hate—as the dominant personality trait of our era. Incapable of overcoming the wounds of prolonged childhood, narcissists lack the strength required to become independent, free-thinking individuals, says Eli Zaretsky, and hence cannot be “rational coequal participants in creating the binding forces ... and resisting the destructive forces” of civilization [Zaretsky, 2015: 146]. Instead, they act out their passions and frustrations, fluctuating between adoration and fury.

While that is not implausible, how broadly it holds is difficult to say; and it is not clear how it might be tested. But what has been shown, notably by the American political scientist Alan Abramowitz, is that highly educated voters are different. They are not only more politically polarized than less educated voters, but also tend to have a lower tolerance for cognitive dissonance: quite unlike less educated voters, they hold their views as a tightly bound coherent package, rationalizing away all discordant facts and never admitting of concessions to the other side [Abramowitz, 2012; Abramowitz, 2015]. Rather than the open-minded citizens John Stuart Mill had expected universal education to produce, it may have created a

public whose salient feature is its unwavering and unquestioning commitment to a fixed point of view.

In short, commentary is affected by three forces at once: the supply side pressure on publishers to obtain the Internet hits that are advertisers' core metric; the demand side pressures from readers, who are time starved and politically polarized; and the quality-destroying features of the Internet. Trapped in the cross-fire, civility risks becoming a distant memory.

Or perhaps not. We are, it might fairly be said, moral hypochondriacs—always worried that the thin veneer of civility which holds societies together is on the verge of collapse. There are good grounds for that constant anxiety: as Norbert Elias, the great scholar of civility, emphasized on the basis of his experience of Nazi Germany, it takes centuries to go from barbarism to civility but minutes to go the other way. The hypochondria, deeply engrained by millennia of natural selection, may help ensure that when danger looms, we change course. But it is only if we understand what is imperilled and why it matters that such a change of course will be possible.

In my view, the ideal of a community which takes political decisions through rational deliberation retains all of its validity; so does the need for it to be informed by thoughtful, civil commentary which helps each and every person fulfil the definition Kant gave, more than two centuries ago, when he asked the question: "What is Enlightenment?" Enlightenment, he answered, is *Sapere aude*—dare to know.

Dare to know: that, I believe, is the essence of the civilization we have inherited; when the learning is long forgotten, it remains, for each of us, the jewel whose glow illuminates the future. In thanking all of you for your patience, I am confident that—thanks to the efforts of the Ramsay Centre, the moral integrity of my fellow columnists, and the commitment of all of you—we will be able to say, like John Hooker, the great 16th century Anglican defender of faith and reason, "Posterity shall know that we have not loosely through silence permitted these great things to pass away."

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