

Hannah Arendt and the Protean Universe of Social Media

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The practice of journalism has undergone many transformative changes in the half-century since Hannah Arendt's death. From the demise of print and broadcast media to the rise of the internet and the emergence of social media, the contemporary news landscape is almost unrecognizable compared to what it was in 1975. And yet, Arendt's work is perhaps more relevant now than ever before. As we continue to struggle with the challenges brought forward by the online media landscape, essays like "Truth and Politics" and "Lying in Politics" remain invaluable resources providing us with crucial insights into the nature and purpose of journalism that can help guide us through the challenges of the day.

Among the changes brought about by social media, perhaps the most dramatic has been the collapse of nearly all forms of journalistic authority. Where print and broadcast media once restricted information flow to a unidirectional, top-down movement, social media makes possible a mode of communication in which information flows multilaterally, from a plurality of diverse sources, before converging on users' "news feeds." At the time of its inception, early tech utopians like Howard Rheingold and John Perry Barlow had hoped that this change would help to enhance the conditions for democratic discourse by emboldening public participation, strengthening individual and collective autonomy, and providing greater overall access to truth.¹ Thus far, sadly, the result has been quite the opposite.

Far from improving conditions for democracy, social media has helped to destabilize democratic discourse by increasing polarization, commodifying engagement, and undermining our ability to discern true from false. By removing traditional barriers of entry into journalism and dissolving the unquestioned authority of the "professional" journalist, social media has established a new and largely unregulated information environment wherein misinformation, disinformation, falsities, and flat-out fabrications run rampant. In the words of Alan Rusbridger, the result is that "we are, for the first time in modern history, facing the prospect of how societies would exist without reliable news."²

1 See: Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1993).

John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," Davos, Switzerland, February 8, 1996, <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>

2 Alan Rusbridger, *Breaking News: The Remaking of Journalism and Why It Matters Now* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), xix.



Though blissfully unaware of the future that social media technology would bring, Arendt was no stranger to the reality of what can happen in the absence of reliable news. A prolific journalist herself, and someone with firsthand experience of the destruction of press freedom, she recognized that facts play an indispensable role in both our individual and collective lives. Like her philosophical mentor, Martin Heidegger, Arendt held that human life is fundamentally conditioned by what might be called “facticity.”³ From the moment we are born, to the time of our final passing away, the world that appears before us is underpinned, shaped, and contextualized by what we take to be the facts. These facts not only give us a sense of direction and orientation but also help to bind us together as members of a shared community and common world.

Metaphorically, Arendt writes, truth is “the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us.”⁴ This means that without reliable sources of information, journalists and truth tellers, who are willing and able to provide the public with trustworthy access to the facts, “we should never find our bearings in an ever-changing world and, in the most literal sense, would never know where we are.”⁵

At the same time, Arendt also warns that truth (factual truth in particular) is not invulnerable to manipulation. Because facts are always contingent, they can be altered without directly offending reason, and because facts are reliant on the infamously unreliable, i.e., testimony of witnesses and documentation, their legitimacy can easily be doubted. Factual truth, therefore, exists in a continuous state of precarity. And to make matters worse, unlike other forms of truth, factual truth is not likely to be rediscovered once lost. Should all evidence that two plus two equals four be erased from the earth and from our memory, it nonetheless remains possible that we might rediscover it by simply applying our capacity to reason. Should all evidence that the First World War began on July 28, 1914, suddenly disappear, however, its not clear how this fact could ever be recovered.

Given the fragility of factual truth, it is entirely possible, Arendt thinks, that the facts on which we rely to bind us together and provide us with a common ground can be so undermined that the world itself begins to shake in a great “trembling wobbling motion.”⁶ This happens, for example, when lies enter *en masse* into the public sphere. While lies themselves are no stranger to the world of politics and while the impact of a single lie may not be profound, when lying becomes widespread and organized the effect can leave us suspended in a state of confusion and collective disorientation.

Importantly, Arendt’s fear is not that an environment saturated with lies will lead to people believing in what is false, but that “the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world [...] is being destroyed.”⁷ For when what we hear from different sources is

3 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* tr. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 53-62.

4 Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics” *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 257.

5 Ibid, 257.

6 Ibid, 253.

7 Ibid, 252.

constantly in conflict with one another, and when what we experience firsthand all too often fails to align with what we hear from others, then the distinction between truth and falsity begins to blur and it becomes difficult if not impossible to believe in anything at all. When this happens, all sense of direction is lost, we start to lose touch with one another, atomization and loneliness start to set in, and individuals slowly blend into shapeless masses yearning for a lost sense of being at home. In effect, the conditions for totalitarianism ripen.⁸

Thus, in the context of social media, the impact of the influx of unreliable information has been to dissolve our once stable sense of grounding and thereby to foster the conditions for derealization and the reemergence of totalitarianism. Ironically, then, while traditional authorities like Walter Cronkite and Peter Mansbridge no doubt held an outsized amount of influence over the facts that previously secured our common sense of reality, being liberated from their influence has only increased the risk of a new despotism. In Arendt's words,

[The loss of authority] is tantamount to the loss of the groundwork of the world, which indeed has begun to shift, to change and transform [...] with ever increasing rapidity from one shape into another, as though we were living and struggling with a protean universe where everything at any moment can become almost anything else.⁹

While Arendt here refers to the much wider loss of authority in the modern world, the passage does, with eerie accuracy, describe the impact that the erosion of journalistic authority has had in the early twenty first century.

Of course, such an impact has not gone unfelt, and in an attempt to provide solutions many ideas have been put forward. In the mid-2010's, for example, many social media companies attempted to mitigate the destabilizing effects of their platforms was to replace traditional authorities with third-party fact-checkers who would analyze the site content, identify problems, and remove problematic content from circulation. Very quickly, however, it became apparent this was not an effective strategy and in less than a decade the fate of the fact-checker was sealed.¹⁰ Despite the reasonable arguments and rational explanations put forward to support the fact-checking system, the public simply refused to accept this new externally imposed authority.

For Arendt, the reason for this failure is that authority is not something that can be imposed on the unwilling. While anyone can use violence or psychological manipulation to control others, only those with authority can do without such measures. As she explains in her essay on the nature of authority, "if authority is to be defined at all [...] it must be in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments."¹¹ What this means is that authority is never something that can be install by decree or imposed undemocratically on the public; it arises only by free consent.

8 See: Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), 305-388.

9 Hannah Arendt "What is Authority?" *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 95.

10 "Meta Says It Will End Its Fact-Checking Program on Social Media Posts" *The New York Times Company*. January 7, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2025/01/07/business/meta-fact-checking>

11 Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?", 93.

Today, of course, the prospect that widespread consent could be given to a new authority appears nothing short of a miracle. And yet, Arendt's work also reminds us that miracles can and do happen. They occur, not by divine intervention, but by the power of action, which she calls "the one miracle working faculty of man."¹² To bring about the miraculous, one must step out of the shadows of private solitude into the light of the public sphere, and there take a stand, and act on principle. Arendt's miracle worker, therefore, is not a servant of God, through whom He works His mysterious ways, but simply a human being who is by nature a beginner.

Taking inspiration from the ancient Greek concept of *arete*, Arendt also describes how, through free public action, actors reveal themselves to their peers and are given the opportunity to win public recognition for their deeds. She explains that virtuosity, "has always been assigned to the public realm where one could excel, could distinguish oneself from all others."¹³ People become virtuous heroes not by adhering to strict moral rules or codes of conduct, but by acting in public, initiating new beginnings, and thereby setting new precedents. Just as Achilles showed the Greeks what courage meant, the virtuous actor is one who models, by their own virtuous actions, the deeds that set standards for future judgement.

On Arendt's view freedom is not something inherently opposed to authority. In fact, the two complement one another in a profound way. An actor becomes an authority, not by force or coercion but by exercising their freedom, entering the public sphere and declaring who they are and what they stand for. Theirs is the authority of the *exemplar* not the manager or the dictator. What this means in the context of the crisis in journalism is that the miracle needed to restore a sense of factual stability and to re-ground public discourse is for journalists and truth-tellers to step forward into the public sphere (now a digital sphere) to witness to the facts and to do so with virtuosity and excellence. Only in this way can they win the status of an authority and begin to weave a common foundational fabric of a shared world.

Indeed, as we face the very real prospect of what the *New York Times* once called a "future without the front page,"¹⁴ Arendt helps us to see how crucial it is that journalists and truth tellers not be dismayed by the chaotic and disorienting nature of the social media landscape, and instead choose to step forward, to act, and to become an exemplar for others to follow. She shows us that our greatest hope lies not in the imposition of a new, domineering "authority" but in miraculous power of human action and she gives us reason to be optimistic that, one day, those who are trustworthy and deserving of authority will emerge out of that chaos to light the way forward.

In an interview that Arendt did with Roger Errera in 1973, in the wake of the Watergate scandal in the U.S., she outlined the importance of having a free press. In a somewhat ominous tone, she explained:

¹² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 246.

¹³ Ibid, 49.

¹⁴ "A Future Without the Front Page" *The New York Times Company*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/01/us/news-deserts-future.html>

You know, there are certain things that happen automatically in politics if you leave them unchecked. As long as we have a free press there is a limit to what can happen. The moment the press is no longer free [...] anything can happen. You know what really makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other kind of dictatorship to rule is that the people are not informed.¹⁵

Still, despite the dire state of affairs we find ourselves in, Arendt is optimistic (without being expectant) that the loss of authority “does not entail, at least not necessarily, the loss of the human capacity for building, preserving, and caring for a world that can survive us and remain a place fit to live in for those who come after us.”¹⁶

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¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, “Interview with Roger Errera” *Thinking Without a Banister* ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2018), 491.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, “What is Authority?”, 95.