

Speech and Sedition in 2021

The progressive press decides that dissenters should be suppressed.



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A mob of supporters of President Donald Trump storm the U.S. Capitol Building, Jan. 6.
PHOTO: LEAH MILLIS/REUTERS

Most Americans learn in school about flagship political excesses in U.S. history like Joe McCarthy's 1950s inquisitions, the post-World War I Red Scare and the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. Yet a

recent Washington Post opinion piece purports to [explain](#) "what the 1798 Sedition Act got right." The law banned a wide range of political speech and publication. It was passed by the ruling Federalists to suppress the rival Democratic-Republicans, whom they saw as seditious. The Post piece argues that though their solution was "flawed," the Federalists had reason to worry about "unregulated freedom of the press."

We highlight this as one example among many of the emerging appetite for viewpoint suppression among journalists, intellectuals and Democrats in the wake of the Trump Presidency. They increasingly see domestic enemies wherever they look, and are devising ways to use levers of power to restrict, regulate and boycott opposition. It's an extraordinary and ominous turn in a democracy.

Many calls to sanction opposition media come from voices that claimed to be most alarmed by [Donald Trump](#)'s attacks on the free press. Margaret Sullivan, the Post's media columnist, [wrote this week](#) that "corporations that advertise on Fox News should walk away," declaring that the outlet's "role in the 400,000 U.S. lives lost to the pandemic and in the disastrous attack of Jan. 6" has been "deadly."

Nicholas Kristof of the [New York Times](#) called for "pressure on advertisers to withdraw from Fox News so long as it functions as an extremist madrasa." He [added](#) that "cable providers should be asked why they distribute channels that peddle lies." A CNN writer [asserted](#) that providers

like [Comcast](#) “have escaped scrutiny and entirely dodged this conversation.” By conversation he means political bullying from the left.

Thomas Friedman in the Times also [called for](#) a business boycott of some Fox News shows and announced that [Facebook](#) needs to “surprise us by once and for all stopping the elevation—for profit—of news that divides and enrages over more authoritative, evenhanded news sources.” (Fox and the Journal share common ownership.)

Only non-divisive sources will be allowed, such as those that compare popular media outlets to an “extremist madrasa.” A former Facebook executive was more straightforward when he said on CNN, “we have to turn down the capability of these conservative influencers to reach these huge audiences.”

Much of American journalism, which was supposed to revert to its historic role as a check on those in power after Donald Trump left town, is now devoted to shutting down the commercial lifeline of other media. Think of the precedent for the next populist Republican President who might declare pro-choice publications “deadly.”

The trend arrives when one party runs nearly all of Washington and has the loud support of virtually every elite cultural institution and many of the largest corporations. Social-media firms increasingly respond to government pressure in content decisions. With progressives filling out the administrative state, expect politicians and regulators to find new ways to put their thumb on the scale.

There are already calls for the Federal Communications Commission to revive the Fairness Doctrine that enforced speech rules when there were three dominant TV networks. It died in the 1980s. The Axios website [complained](#) that “the U.S. government has done next to nothing to regulate misinformation on large tech platforms,” and the founder of the liberal fact-checker Politifact [floated](#) “regulations and new laws” to marginalize right-wing media.

The deplatforming pressure is spreading from social media—with the destruction of [Twitter](#) competitor Parler as the most prominent recent example—to other forms of communication. A petition now [urges](#) publishing houses to reject book proposals from anyone who worked in the Trump Administration, and the Associated Press is calling podcasts a “loophole” in social-media moderation.

“Misinformation” is the all-purpose excuse given to justify new and aggressive censorship, as if disagreement and falsehoods are a never-before-seen phenomenon in politics. “If we can protect

against counterfeit dollar bills, we should be able to protect against fake news that we now know has the potential to kill people,” declared MSNBC host Nicolle Wallace.

Which takes us back to the Federalists’ 18th-century Sedition Act against “false” political speech—which they believed was needed to save the country from domestic enemies. The noted American historian Gordon Wood told the Journal [in a 2018 interview](#) that “the Federalists never thought that they were a party. They were the government.” Opposition to the government was naturally seditious.

Today’s liberal elite swoon over [Alexander] “Hamilton,” who supported the Sedition Act, and perhaps they’re becoming the arch-Federalists of the current political era. Today the press, prominent CEOs and all elected branches of government also find themselves in closer political alignment than at any time in decades. The liberal temptation to define their point of view as the only legitimate one—to view themselves as “the government,” rather than one of two parties—is growing stronger.

Amid the summer Black Lives Matter protests, prominent media outlets, universities and corporations [underwent internal purges](#) as leftists made demands of liberals. Now conservative figures and institutions are under fire from society’s commanding heights.

The problems of polarization, lies and political violence are real, on both sides. America’s leaders should reach for the country’s best traditions, not its worst, in pursuing a better civil society.

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