

## **Saliency principles for democracy\***

**Susanna Siegel**

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"A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press  
will produce in time a people as base as itself"  
-Joseph Pulitzer, 1904

For a significant segment of people, to focus mainly on their own interests, interactions, and social pressures means living within horizons that leave politics and state institutions in the background. Political life may become salient through elections, contact with the government on a special occasion such as jury duty, or by the need for a license to drive, build, hunt, buy or sell things, or a "brush" with the law. But in this mode of life, absent any large-scale political crisis, political consciousness largely stays in the background of consciousness.

John Rawls seems to endorse such a stark division of attention between the private and the political. "In a well-governed state," he wrote, "only a small fraction of persons may devote much of their time to politics. There are many other forms of human good".<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, Walter Lippmann saw the diversion of attention from politics as an unavoidable yet seriously problematic consequence of attempts to govern democratically on a large-scale. For Lippmann, exactly the kind of epistemic situation Rawls points to would make a mockery of democratic governance. "In the cold light of experience," he wrote in his 1927 book *The Phantom Public*, "the private citizen knows that his sovereignty is a fiction":

The private citizen today has come to feel rather like a deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery... but who cannot manage to keep

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\* I first began thinking about the types of norms that might govern saliency and attention in 2015 through many extensive and illuminating discussions with Sebastian Watzl. My initial writings about this topic in (2017) and more recently in "Are there norms of saliency?" focused on norms of rationality that apply to individual minds. Sebastian and I discussed for years whether there might be some sort of rational pressure on individuals to pay more attention to what's more important, but we struggled to pinpoint the kind of importance at issue. The microstructure of the world is important, and so are fire departments; but there seems to be no general rational pressures to pay attention fire departments, and the sense in which everyone faces a rational pressure to study the periodic table and other wonders of the world remained elusive to me. Since the examples that struck me as illustrating the general idea that what's important should be attended had always involved journalism, I came to suspect that journalism itself might best illuminate importance norms of saliency. At that point the target of my thinking shifted from norms of rationality to norms that constrain us by virtue of the type of political community some of us live in, which I call an aspirational democracy. For help in thinking through this idea I'm indebted to Justin Pottle, Emma Ebowe, Denish Jaswal, and most of all to Danielle Allen and the attendees of her Fall 2020 seminar.

<sup>1</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, section 36.

awake. He knows he is somehow affected by what's going on. Rules and regulations continually, taxes annually, and wars occasionally remind him that he is being swept along by great drifts of circumstance.

Yet these public affairs are in no convincing way his affairs. They are for the most part invisible. They are managed, if they are managed at all, at distant centers, from behind the scenes, by unnamed powers. As a private person he does not know what is going on, or who is doing it, or where he is being carried.... He lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand, and is unable to direct...

Contemplating...his actual accomplishments in public affairs, [he can] contrast...the influence he exerts, with the influence he is supposed according to democratic theory to exert." (p.3)

Where Rawls seems to suggest that directing attention to public affairs is optional in a nearly-just democracy, Lippmann suggests that everyone's doing so is all but impossible - to the detriment of democratic aspirations.

The informational disconnect that Lippmann highlights can be bridged only by means of mass communication. Modern democracy, on this view, needs mass communication.<sup>2</sup> But what kind does it need?

Lippmann thought it needed newspapers overseen by an editor who would select and oversee news stories shaped by the goal of finding out hidden truths about complex things that matter to the public. Journalists would need to draw on another institution at the interface between journalism and government: "political observatories," designed to pre-digest the technical expertise that the politicians draw on, and to make the complexities of governing legible to non-experts. Political observatories would enable journalists to convey complex issues of everyday governance to the public, and would give them information they'd need to hold both governmental officers and corporations accountable to the public.

The deaf spectator is politically bewildered, Lippmann thought, because "no newspaper reports his environment so that he can grasp it" (p.4). By publicly presenting simplified technical information, journalists could begin to rectify this situation. And by using information about the processes of governance to hold officials accountable to the people, journalists could bridge the epistemic gap between government and the public. In this picture, professional journalists become second-hand experts whose role is to un-bewilder an otherwise clueless population. They address the public from the distance of an informed commentator - as Lippmann was himself.

Though Lippmann's paradigm of a "deaf spectator" is someone who is only "occasionally reminded" by war or taxes that the political order impacts everyday life, the need for journalism he identified applies equally to people with ongoing awareness of this basic fact. In a crisis such as a ground war, a hurricane, or a pandemic, the fact that everyday

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<sup>2</sup> By "modern democracy" I mean representative democracies at a large enough scale that each member of the polity is personally acquainted with only a small fraction of everyone else in it.

life can be made steady or unsteady by political order or disorder is glaringly plain. And absent crises like these, there are at least two sets of people for whom the impact of political institutions regularly occupies the foreground of consciousness: political elites, whose job relates them directly to the government, and incarcerated persons or others living under frequent or even constant surveillance by the state. Whether the precariousness involved in large-scale social coordination are hidden or evident, the need for journalism remains.

Professional print journalism as it emerged in the 1920's in the US was shaped by Lippmann's vision of mass communication.<sup>3</sup> It institutionalized a *salience principle of importance*: make salient information that is important for the public to know about. In this principle, which I'll call the importance principle for short, "newsworthiness" is a normative notion, tied to whatever is actually important for the public to know about. I'll use "newsworthiness" in this normative sense. A different notion would define newsworthy content as whatever content will in fact attract attention if reported in a news outlet, whether it is important to know about or not. In a digital context, the newsworthy in this other sense would align with being 'shareworthy'. But its use is not the one at work here.

What would the news be like, if it lived up to the importance principle? In the ideal defined by the principle, the news would be full of things worth paying attention to, and it wouldn't be the case that most newsworthy things are left out of the news.

This paper is about a problem that arises from this ideal. I call it the problem of democratic attention. The problem is that some roles for journalism in democracy depend on readers actually taking in the information that would be made salient by journalism, when journalism fulfills the importance principle. But for much important information, many readers have no antecedent interest in it, feel no prior motivation to learn it, and face substantial obstacles to paying attention to information even when it is widely available, and even when it would yield knowledge that would be useful to have. The problematic upshot is that democracy imposes an attentional demand that can't easily be met.

Democracy in many of its guises has frequently been held to be too demanding. Does representative democracy rely on a population with stable, well-formed opinions about public policy, who are disposed to select representatives ready to respect their preferences? Achen and Bartels (2016) argue that people simply don't have such stable preferences, so any democratic scheme on which they guide voters in selecting representatives demands more of voters than they can give. Does democracy's ideal of political equality rely on sidelining powerful group affinities, even when doing so would yield political losses? Delany (1852) had his doubts that white supremacy in America would ever allow democracy there to flourish - doubts felt forcefully by some theorists

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<sup>3</sup> On the emergence of professional journalism and its contrast with the "partisan" press that preceded it in the nineteenth century US, see Schudson (1978) and (2020).

today.<sup>4</sup> Would true self-governance require citizens to deliberate and discuss political matters with one another? Mansbridge (1980) argues that in practice, deliberation historically ended up distinctly *undemocratic*, leading to domination by better-educated citizens - a generalization echoed by Mutz (2006).

These criticisms point to ways in which representative, deliberative, and liberal democracy seem to ask a lot of our abilities to detach from group allegiance, or deliberate, or form policy preferences. By contrast, the problem of democratic attention concerns our capacity to take in the information on the basis of which we would do any of those things. The challenge finds obstacles to forming even our most basic understandings of public political life - a precondition for our forming opinions, preferences, or allegiances regarding our political arrangements.

The problem of democratic attention arises in part from the importance principle. I'll argue that a different, more specific salience principle can help address it: the public-as-protagonist principle.

In Part I of this paper I develop the challenge of democratic attention. Since there is little point in addressing a merely apparent problem, it is worth considering the point of view from which the purported problem isn't really a problem, either because the roles for journalism in democracy do not after all exert normative pressure on attention, or because respecting the importance principle is enough to ensure that the public pays attention to the degree it has to. Against these perspectives, I argue that the problem is indeed a challenge for journalism in aspirational democracies.<sup>5</sup>

In Part II I develop the public-as-protagonist principle. I'm presuming without argument that it would be a good thing for democracy - and a good thing, period - if news was selected and framed by this principle, and if readers saw themselves and all their fellow denizens of the polity in the ways the principle invites them to: as political protagonists with a stake and a say in the political future. On this assumption, the principle is worth developing, regardless of whether it helps solve the problem of democratic attention. But I'll argue that there are reasons to think it would help.

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<sup>4</sup> Hooker (2017). And in considering "the security [white Americans'] identity provide[s]", Melvin asks pointedly: "who among us would readily give up such security, even for the noble values of equality, freedom, and justice?...[W]e must grapple with...the possibility that white supremacy generates far too many psychological, libidinal, cultural, political and economic goods to be sufficiently destabilized or decentered." (p. 181).

<sup>5</sup> What is an aspirational democracy? I mean a society with democratic political institutions, such as regularly holding free and fair elections to determine political succession, with a history full of actors claiming to aspire to democratic political culture that will fulfill the promise of those institutions. Long-standing debates in US history concern which political actors, among those who expressed such aspirations, were genuinely committed to them, and which have used aspirational language as a guise. A parallel question arises about the functions of purportedly democratic institutions. As many writers have shown, aspirational democracies in this sense are compatible with political cultures that are deeply anti-democratic in many respects (a point developed recently using examples from many parts of the world by Keane 2020, Ben-Ghiat 2020). For the democratic roles of journalism to get their purchase, however, the cultural entrenchment of claims to democratic aspiration is enough.

## Part 1. The problem of democratic attention

I'll explicate the problem of democratic attention for the specific case of the United States, where most of my examples will be drawn from. But the problem is general. It could face any aspirational democracy that contains journalism in the professionalized form born in the 1920's United States. It arises from the combination of three points:

- (1) Professional journalism is governed by an importance principle of salience.
- (2) Some roles for journalism in democracy depend on readers actually taking in information that would be made salient by journalism, if journalism fulfilled the importance principle.
- (3) For much important information, many readers have no antecedent interest in it, and feel no prior motivation for taking it in.

I'll argue that taken together, these points create a problem: large swaths of any public are liable to lack a disposition to pay attention to important information made salient by journalism, even though they face pressure to do just that by virtue of living in an aspirational democracy.

To feel the force of problem, and to recognize potential solutions to it, its central notions need to be unpacked. Regarding point (1): what exactly is the importance principle and how does it regulate the news? Regarding point (2): what are journalism's roles in democracy, and what kinds of demands do they place on the public's attention? Regarding point (3): what principles of salience in news journalism facilitate or anti-facilitate democratic forms of political engagement?

### 1.1 Journalism and the importance principle

Salience and attention are closely related. To make something salient is to put it forward as both demanding attention and deserving it. On the receiving end, when something becomes salient to us we experience it as demanding our attention. Whether we experience it as also deserving attention is a further question.<sup>6</sup> The more salient something is to someone, the more easily available to them it is, so that they can react to it.

When a newspaper publishes a story or an image, it presents that content as something that calls for attention, and makes it available to be noticed. A news story is more easily available, and therefore more salient, if it is on the front page of a print or

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<sup>6</sup> In Siegel (2014) I discuss nuances surrounding the phenomenology of salience, including the possibility of experiencing something as *demanding* attention without experiencing it as *deserving* attention. For more on the phenomenology of salience see Munton (forthcoming), Watzl (2019) and Watzl (this volume), and for comprehensive discussion of the differences between salience in linguistic contexts (where salience of linguistic content can explain framing effects) and contexts of cognition, see Whiteley (2019).

digital newspaper, than if it is several clicks or pages away. In a digital context, a story is more salient, the more places a link to the story appears.

Salience is distinct from actual uptake. In principle, a news story can be salient without anyone actually noticing it, let alone reading it, understanding it, remembering it, reacting to it, drawing any conclusions from it, or otherwise integrating it with anything else they know, suspect, want, feel, or believe.

Some stimuli capture attention as soon as they become salient. Think of bright flashes or honking horns. News stories are not quite in this category. No matter how salient they are, their salience is not a guarantee of their uptake.

A principle of salience for a type of communication system is a guide to what should be made salient and what should not be. In the context of professional news journalism, the principle of salience is the importance principle. The importance principle says to make salient the things that are important for the public to know about.

The formal aspect of this principle applies to journalism in any type of regime, whether it is democratic or not. The formal aspect is distinct from procedural and substantive aspects, which can reflect political values.

The formal aspect of the importance principle is that merely by including a story, image, or information under the guise of "news" in a newspaper, its content is presented as important for readers to pay attention to. The formal aspect is evident in a structure of presenting information that makes it more prominent than others. Print media reserves a "front page" for the stories presented as most important. Digital media preserves a structure that uses degrees of prominence to mark degrees of importance. A digital version of a newspaper treats the first things you see as more important than stories found several clicks away within the newspaper's interface.<sup>7</sup>

In its formal aspect, the importance principle applies to journalism in any type of regime. Consider the role of mass communication in the type of autocracy led by a strongman, as described by Ruth Ben-Ghiat:

"the strongman has turned politics into an aesthetic experience, with him as the star. The communication codes and celebrity cultures of film, television, and now digital storytelling shape the leader's self-presentation and the images he releases of both followers and enemies."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Using spatial structure to mark importance was an innovation of professionalizing journalism. During the nineteenth century, in newspapers in the US and Europe, the contents of newspapers were a miscellany of poems, fiction, verbatim reports, and often the order in which things appeared reflected the order in which these items arrived at the news office. Schudson (1978) and (2020).

<sup>8</sup> Ben-Ghiat 2020, p. 93.

Such leaders aim to develop a cult of personality in which they remain the central spectacular protagonist. Often they are demagogues who purport to have a special direct relationship to "the people" in the polity that they aim to govern. A newspaper, news reel, radio or television program that facilitates these narratives fulfill the formal aspects of the importance principle, by circulating stories that satisfy the leader's modes of self-presentation, while presenting them under the guise of information that is important for the public to understand.

In its formal aspect, the importance principle is compatible with the types of mass communication made for pointedly *anti*-democratic politics. A demagogic strongman refuses to treat "the people" as an abstraction that can only be evoked indirectly by the principles of government that should unite it, and instead tries to present the public as a palpable crowd that he addresses directly in rallies, where he brings the narratives conveyed by newsreels, radio addresses, or twitter feeds to life. Mass rallies build a direct emotional connection between the strongman and follower, giving the impression that the public can be seen and felt. In the live crowd bewitched and unified by the strongman's speeches, the public becomes whole. This kind of public is not *represented* by the leader, but partly constituted by him.<sup>9</sup>

These observations bring out an unstated assumption in Lippmann's construal of the need for journalism, an assumption that Dewey made explicit: the public is nebulous and cannot be perceived or grasped directly.<sup>10</sup> It takes act of imagination for the public to figure in its members' minds. As Danielle Allen puts it:

"Democracy's basic term is neither 'liberty' nor 'equality', but 'the people.' But where and what is this thing, the people?...How can one even hold an idea of this strange body in one's head? Only with figures, metaphors, and other imaginative forms."<sup>11</sup>

The elusiveness of the public presents a challenge: what features of society will enable people to grasp the polity to which they belong?

In the character of mass communication, we find completely opposite answers to this question. The mass rallies essential to fascist demagoguery purport to make the public concrete, by generating enormous crowds that give the impression of being so massive as to include nearly everyone who matters in the region. The leader tries to stoke their feelings of righteousness, using chants and jeers against political enemies construed as illegitimate and deserving of violence. As the epigraph from Pulitzer suggests,

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<sup>9</sup> "We won the election," said Trump after he lost the election. "It was stolen from us". (Egan 2021). Winners and losers of elections are candidates. But in narratives shaped by this grammar, there is no public protagonist distinct from the leader.

<sup>10</sup> Dewey (1927) characterized the nebulous nature of the public when he wrote "If a public exists, it is surely as uncertain about its own whereabouts as philosophers since Hume have been about the residence and make-up of the self" (p. 150).

<sup>11</sup> Allen (2004), p. 69.

professionalized journalism can echo this way of imagining the public. But when it does, it plays second fiddle to the direct channels of communication that strongman leaders depend upon to cultivate their idea of a public made whole by the leader.

The democratic potential of professionalized journalism derives from its capacity to portray a pluralistic public, and for its reports to involve protagonists other than and even opposed to a strongman. That is why fascist politics is hostile to journalism. Its democratic potential comes from further constraints on the importance principle, which can be found in the structures and genres of professional journalism. In "Liberty and the News", Walter Lippmann writes:

"[t]he newspaper is in all literalness the bible of democracy, the book out of which a people determines its conduct...Now the power to determine each day what shall seem important and what shall be neglected is a power unlike any that has been exercised since the Pope lost hold on the secular mind."

Here, Lippmann makes explicit that newspapers select things that should be treated as important *for democracy*. His guiding idea of democracy is that "a people determines its conduct." What kinds of things are important, given this construal of democracy?

As Lippmann recognized, in the American context, the guiding democratic idea that "a people determines its conduct" involves a delicate balance between popular preference, constitutional constraints, and expertise. People who lack expertise of various kinds would have little idea which cooperative schemes would be best; but leaving all terms of coordination up experts would remove any pretense to political equality or accountability. In Lippmann's vision, journalism can help to strike this balance, by building channels of communication between experts and everyone else, and by making public the stakes and challenges of social coordination. That makes journalists a locus of mediation between overlapping publics, figures of political establishments, and experts - the very forces whose balance determines the extent of liberal democracy.

Lippmann took for granted a political structure in which leaders were representatives of the people, and therefore accountable to them. The roles for journalism he outlined stem from this assumption.

How is journalism supposed to contribute to the correct balance? For a start, the organizational structure of newspapers traditionally divided the "news side" from the "business side" (sometimes denoted using exalted terminology of "Church and State", where the business side is the Church). Institutionally, the news and business sides traditionally had separate modes of management, different offices, and different staff.<sup>12</sup> For

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<sup>12</sup> A separate topic, sidelined here, is the ways the economics of news helps construct a public (see Strömberg (2002)). Ads that reach more people are more effective and therefore more lucrative for newspapers, a fact that may pressure the news to become 'bland' and avoid 'extremes'. An older example: National Organization for Women began with a protest against the New York Times' sex-segregated ads, in which the same job was



the many decades in which print newspapers were lucrative, newspapers would not typically be financially threatened by running stories critical of their advertisers, and they did. A famous case from 1950 illustrates this: the Wall Street Journal published an article that offended General Motors, who then pulled their ads from the paper. The paper was unapologetic, and said ultimately no one would read the newspaper if they thought its content was controlled by their advertisers.<sup>13</sup>

This institutional division is a procedural aspect of the importance principle. It is a negative constraint: don't let the news be unduly influenced by advertisers. But beyond the negative constraint, what substantive constraints are there on the importance principle?

The major substantive constraint is in professional journalism's brief to "follow the story", and the skills needed to carry it out. A "story" is something that has been followed - not invented by a strongman or demagogue. A story is built of facts - not of lies that suit the teller or promote a campaign of persuasion. Given this conception of a story woven from facts, it follows the skills journalists need are literary and epistemic. The literary skill is knowing how to tell a story, and the epistemic skill is knowing how to verify reliable sources, how to establish which things are true. Taken together, these skills amount to an ability to inquire. To follow a story, one needs to know which questions to ask, and how to determine which answers to them are correct. Once again, we can see why journalism construed in this way falls out of favor with modes of government that shun transparency and have no structure of accountability, and why conversely it is essential for democratic modes of government oriented around accountability.

Other substantive constraints are evident in the main genres of news journalism. There is accountability or watchdog journalism, and reporting on the workings of government or political campaigns. There are portraits of a neighborhood or a subpopulation; reporting focused on problems that arise from sharing public space, or disputes about which things are public goods, or public health concerns; and investigations of possible crimes,<sup>14</sup> especially 'white-collar' ones occurring within powerful institutions.<sup>15</sup> The prevalence of these genres of reporting in American journalism shows that the substantive constraints in the importance principle have been clearly operative, and that they are designed for a multitude of publics and plurality of points of view.

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advertised for men and women in different places so that different wages could be listed - also lucrative for the newspapers (Rosen 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Abramson (2019) paints a vivid picture of the pressures on this traditional division in the digital age, making evident the weight of the tradition. The GM example is on p. 70.

<sup>14</sup> In a paper keyed to American democracy and aptly titled "Six or seven things news does for democracy", Schudson (2008) gives a related list: (i) inform about doings of powerful leaders; (ii) investigate doings of elected officials; (iii) simplify complex information about government; (iv) portray the many modes of life in a polity in a way that casts them with a pall of acceptability; (v) provide a public forum, e.g. via letters to the editor and op-eds; (vi) mobilize and advocate; (vii) report on the workings and findings of accountability mechanisms internal to the executive branch, or their dissolution, including (in the U.S.) the offices overseeing Freedom of Information Act requests, the General Accounting office, Federal Election Commission, and the Department of Justice.

<sup>15</sup> This last example includes government accountability but is not limited to it. A contemporary example is Miami Herald reporter Julie K. Brown's reporting on the Jeffrey Epstein's large-scale sex trafficking operation, which was used by the prosecution (a point made by Sullivan in her (2020)).

Substantive constraints on the importance principle are also evident in public criticisms of journalism charged with failing to make salient important events, facts, or inquiries. Consider a recent six-part retrospective series by the Kansas City *Star* re-examining how it has covered issues affecting Black Kansas Citizens for the past 140 years.<sup>16</sup> One of its starkest self-criticisms concerns reports about the newspaper's neglect to investigate the underlying reason that a local school district made dozens of boundary changes during a two-year period, some of which were only a single block. These reports could not be faulted for inaccuracy or lack of verification, but are now criticized for what they failed to make salient: that it was an attempt to bypass desegregation laws. Mará Rose Williams, the reporter who instigated the retrospective review, voices the criticism like this:

"We may have written about a boundary change as it occurred at a school board meeting. But what we didn't do was make the connection as to why they were making these boundary changes. We didn't dig in deep enough to make the connection that it was to keep the schools segregated, to keep White children in one part of town and Black children in another part of town, which was also a violation of federal law at the time."<sup>17</sup>

This example illustrates that sometimes for journalists to make important information salient to the public, questions that open important lines of inquiry must first be salient to the journalists.

The same retrospective review notes other examples of omissions that failed to report on things that were important for the public to know about. In his introduction to its six-art series, editor Mark Fannin describes how the newspaper covered the devastating 1977 flood by reporting on property damage of J.C. Nichols, a wealthy white developer. Fannin writes:

"The Star [and its then-sister paper, the Times] quickly dubbed it "The Plaza Flood." That set the stage for the papers...to focus mainly on property damage at the Country Club Plaza, not so much the 25 people who died, including eight Black residents."<sup>18</sup>

He adds: "White businessman J.C. Nichols got plenty of ink. His advertisements promoting segregated communities ran prominently in The Star and Times. Nichols, who developed the Country Club Plaza, was a protege of The Star's founder, William Rockhill Nelson, who enthusiastically supported his effort." Fannin is suggesting here that the newspaper failed to respect the importance principle twice over. Procedurally, it failed to insulate judgments of newsworthiness from business interests; and substantively, it neglected to include stories it should have reported.

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<sup>16</sup> Fannin (2020).

<sup>17</sup> NPR interview with Mará Rose Williams and Mark Fannin about Kansas City Star, December 20, 2020. See also Williams (2020b)

<sup>18</sup> Fannin (2020).

Another type of criticism based on the importance principle focuses on the inclusion of facts and pursuit of inquiries that should not have been made salient, but were.

For example, during the U.S. Presidential campaign in 1992, the talk show host Phil Donahue focused his interview with Bill Clinton on his marijuana use, and the recent revelations by Gennifer Flowers to a tabloid that of an extra-marital affair lasting many years. The focus on those “personal” things was roundly criticized, even by some of Clinton's opponents, for being the wrong kind of thing for the press to focus on during a presidential campaign.<sup>19</sup> Where was the discussion of his platform and principles and policies? How would the focus on “character” help people understand how this candidate would connect politics to government, if he were elected? The Phil Donahue type of questioning added to US political journalism’s poor reputation at that time. People thought news coverage wasn’t focused on the right things.

For the importance principle to operate in a culture of journalism, there need not be consensus on what is important to include or exclude, even in retrospect. Consider the e-mails hacked by Russian intelligence operatives in the summer of 2016.<sup>20</sup> Once the emails were released, the press coverage focused intensely on the content of the emails – not on the fact that Russia, a rival power, had infiltrated one of the two main political parties of the US. By focusing on the contents of the emails treated those contents as information that was important for the public to know, instead of focusing the story on the electoral interference itself.

When media commentators debated whether the contents of the emails should have been revealed, the debate illustrated that the importance principle operates in the culture of news production. Both sides assumed the importance principle. They disagreed about which information was important to reveal.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Reprinted in Kurz 1992, cited by Rosen 1992, who discusses these criticisms. At the time, Clinton’s liaison with Flowers was viewed simply as part of his personal life, and not as potential locus of sexual domination. A quarter-century later, in 2018, Gennifer Flowers [told](#) Fox News host Laura Ingraham that although she didn’t see it that way at the time, the liaison began as what she would now consider sexual harassment (Mikelionis 2018). Had the issue been framed that way in 1992, it might not any longer have seemed merely to be sensational facts about Bill Clinton’s personal life. It might have been considered a political matter: does this person understand sexual forms of domination and will he oppose them?

<sup>20</sup> Shortly after the release of the Access Hollywood tape in which the Republican presidential candidate boasted of sexual assault, and just before the Democratic National Convention in July which would kick off Hilary Clinton’s presidential campaign, Russian intelligence operatives released to Wikipedia a trove of emails that had been sent to Democratic Party Chair John Podesta. The emails had been hacked by Russia’s Internet Research Agency, one branch of the successor to the Soviet-era KGB. They detailed the inner workings of the Clinton campaign.

<sup>21</sup> In the specific case, some people took the contents of the emails to be important to publish because they provide a window in the workings of a party that had long seemed impenetrable and insidery, while others argued that a political party has a right to decide how to present itself at its convention (Shimer 2020, Snyder 2018, p. 234). The latter position sees the invasion of the DNC

## 1.2 Journalism's roles in democracy and their demands on public attention

The importance principle is the first ingredient in the puzzle of democratic attention. The second ingredient is a set of demands on public attention.

News stories are addressed to any readers of the newspaper. We could say that they address the superset of politizans: denizens of a polity, of any size ("politizans" - a contraction of "denizens of a polity").<sup>22</sup> Some news stories will be important for all politizans, other stories will be most important to some and less important to others. But for any story, there is a public it most closely concerns.

Phenomenologically, like anything salient, a story, image, or headline in a newspaper is presented as something that deserves attention of readers - whether it really does deserve such attention, or not. When content that does not deserve attention are presented as if they do, we could say its demand is a sham. It exerts no genuine normative pressure on readers to pay them any attention.

When news stories fulfill the importance principle, by contrast, we can ask: what kind of attention do they demand, and of whom?

One extreme response rejects the presumption that news stories demand anything at all of readers. It is enough simply for news to be salient, and that happens as soon as it is published. Availability is enough. On this view, the role of a newspaper in a democracy is analogous to a public records office, and that role is complete once information is available, regardless of whether anyone actually reads it.

This extreme response is at odds with the central roles for journalism in democracy envisaged by Lippmann. If one of journalism's roles is to provide simplified technical information such as explaining the basic points of a health care or police reform bill, or the reasons for a new traffic safety measure, or how to prevent or stem the tide of a pandemic, this role will be incomplete if hardly anyone actually learns about these things. If such information was presented in the news but got no uptake from the public, the public could easily remain just as bewildered as they would be without the information.

A different role, associated more with John Dewey than with Lippmann, is to make a public aware of problems that affect a range of different stakeholders, and in doing so,

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emails as comparable to an invasion of personal privacy by a voyeur who invades a family's privacy, planting a camera in their bathroom and bedroom, spying on people in their private moments. It would be grotesque if the press reported on what the camera saw, as part of the report of the crime. If anything is a matter of public concern it is the fact that privacy was invaded.

On the ethics of reporting on information obtained unethically, see Shafer 2017, Sullivan 2019.

<sup>22</sup> This handy term avoids the overly specific implications of "citizens", and allows us to describe polities at any scale - school, company, neighborhood, city, country, international organization, etc.

make visible which stakeholders are connected to one another by those problems.<sup>23</sup> For journalism to help politizens become aware of the different stakeholders who are connected by a problem, there is no way for it to play this epistemic role without actual uptake. This point holds at large scales and small: in a company, a school community, a group of people who want or need to use the same space in multiple and potentially conflicting ways, a city, a country, and so on.

What about accountability or watchdog journalism? Does it demand any actual uptake? And if it does, from whom?

In discussing journalism's watchdog role, Michael Schudson suggests that only an "inner circle" of citizens have to pay attention to accountability reporting:

"Journalism performs its institutional role as a watchdog even if nobody in the provinces is following the news. All that matters is that people in government believe that some people somewhere are following the news. All that is necessary to inspire this belief is that an inner circle of attentive citizens is watchful. This is sufficient to produce in the leaders a fear of public embarrassment or public discrediting, public controversy, legal prosecution, or fear of losing an election."<sup>24</sup>

If Schudson is correct, the problem of democratic attention might seem to dissolve for the crucial case of accountability journalism. On this picture, watchdog journalism's demands on attention are both mild and easy to meet, because the demand on attention affects only those people who are disposed to pay attention anyway. For journalism to play a watchdog role, it is enough for the news in this category to be known by the "inner circle" that matters for politics. Their attention is enough to effectively monitor the workings of powerful leaders.

Is this picture correct?

Let's distinguish reports on actual cases of graft and corruption from the regular presence of journalists at meetings of school boards or city councils. The mere presence of journalists at government meetings lowers the cost of local governance, and helps prevent corruption.<sup>25</sup> It plays its preventive role in part by affording the possibility of publicizing corruption, were it to occur. This role is also played by reporting on ho-hum proceedings. Public records of such meeting proceedings are important for record-keeping, but few people read them, and arguably the reports don't even exert pressure on anyone to read them. Does this kind of reporting then undermine the idea that fulfilling the importance principle generates demands on the reading public's attention?

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<sup>23</sup> Dewey (1927). An example of reporting that does this is Nanos and Leung (2020).

<sup>24</sup> Schudson (2008), p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> On lowering costs, see Gao et al 2018. For evidence of links between local accountability journalism, civic engagement, and corruption, see Sullivan 2020 and (for a discussion focused on Missouri) Kendzior 2020.

No, because reports of uneventful meetings, or reports made for record-keeping, often do not fulfill the importance principle. It is not important for the public to know that nothing untoward happened in the day to day business of governing. If this reassuring fact is proven by publishing a story that notes the ho-hum proceedings, and such a story counts as part of watchdog journalism, then we should conclude that the importance principle is not the only principle of salience. This fact does not undermine the problem of democratic attention, because the problem arises only if much of the public is *not* disposed to pay attention to news that *does* fulfill the importance principle.

Is Schudson's picture correct for reporting on actual corruption? Schudson mentions people "in the provinces." Let's assume they are voters to whom the leaders are officially accountable. If the leaders could be confident that these voters would not learn about their graft or other forms of corruption, why should they fear public embarrassment? Schudson's picture assumes if the voters outside the inner circle have any political role at all, their role is fully determined by the power of the inner circle to discredit a corrupt leader in the eyes of those voters, without the voters ever hearing about the corruption. And this pushes the question back one step: if voters "in the provinces" are not paying attention to the leader, they are presumably also not paying attention to the watchful inner circle, which makes it hard to see how the inner circle could influence them.

The watchdog role in making offenses costly to powerful leaders requires that the leaders' fear of public embarrassment is reasonable. They lose any reason to fear embarrassment, if they can be confident that the population at large won't care about the offense, either because they don't know about it, or because they but don't know its significance.<sup>26</sup> So the watchdog role seems to require actual uptake. When Mark Meadows was Trump's chief of staff, he defended the repeated violations of the Hatch Act by high-ranking members of the Trump administration by asserting "No one outside the Beltway cares" about such offenses.<sup>27</sup> As Meadows and the administration he worked for knew, convincing the public not to believe, listen, or care about violations of the Hatch Act is a good way to make such violations seem like no big deal.

### **1.3 Can the public meet journalism's demands?**

So far, I've highlighted several roles for journalism in democracy: monitoring powerful leaders, closing informational gaps, and making different segments of

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<sup>26</sup> A related problem is that powerful leaders are not embarrassed at all by corruption, even if people all over do know about it, because they are confident that they will not face consequences for illegal actions (see Burgis (2020), *Kleptopia*, Keane (2020), *The New Despotism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press). On the role of journalism in monitoring such anti-democratic divisions, Schudson's seventh role for news in his (2008) is relevant: reporting on the internal systems of accountability in government, or on the need for such systems if they have been dismantled. When framed by the public-as-protagonist principle, such reporting would highlight the consequences for the public of losing such institutions and making vivid for readers what it could be like if such institutions were in place.

<sup>27</sup> Choi (2020)

overlapping publics visible to one another. For news stories to play these roles, I've argued, they require actual uptake on a wide scale.

If some of the things that are important to know about lie entirely outside our concerns, then it's an open question what, if anything, might motivate us to actually pay attention to them. And here there are at least two major obstacles to mobilizing attention.

The first obstacle is the mere cognitive load that meeting every demand on attention that important news would impose. Here, important news is on par with much else that's worthwhile to know about. It would be worthwhile for me to know more about the many amazing regularities captured by the periodic table of elements. The same is true for countless histories, problems, stories, poems, and facts that live between the covers of the books, journals, and archives in libraries all over the world. I am unlikely to pay any attention to most of it, given how much of it there is. The library is full of good books, and the sad fact is that none of us will ever read them all.

Cognitive load would be far less significant an obstacle to taking in important news if we found the news to be readily engaging. This observation brings us to the second and perhaps even bigger obstacle to journalism's demands on attention. Stories about things that are important to know about may lack the features that tend to engage attention readily. Important news is often not sensational. It only sometimes provokes fear, indignation, offense, humor or joy – all things that prompt “viral” circulation in modes of mass communication that are governed by different salience principles from the one governing professional journalism. Social media platforms highlight content that tracks the time spent with a browser occupied by a website. There is no editor deciding what is important to make public, no entrenched culture of an institution meant to serve an essential role in democracy, and no libel laws criminalizing the publication of harmfully false information.<sup>28</sup>

Few people have to be urged to check their social media accounts. Instead we are sometimes admonished (and sometimes admonish ourselves) not to spend so much time on those platforms.<sup>29</sup> Virality is a measure of one kind of engagement, but the markers of virality are not co-extensive with information that is important for the public to know about.<sup>30</sup> Journalism's importance principle and social media platforms' engagement principle each select different content to bring to salience.

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<sup>28</sup> On this last issue, see D. Citron and M. Franks (2020) “The internet as a speech machine and other myths confounding section 230 speech reform.” Boston University Law School, Public Law and Legal Theory paper 20-8.

<sup>29</sup> J. Lanier (2018); Center for Humane Technology (<https://www.humanetech.com/>)

<sup>30</sup> That virality will not track importance is evident from the factors that prompt virality. These factors include formats of lists (“10 tactics to help you find a husband”, “29 things I learned from spending two days with Rick Santorum”) and quizzes (“which Muppet/Billionaire Tycoon/etc are you?”), and short-lasting, low-impact modes of affect: images or stories that ‘restore faith in humanity’, nostalgia, the short arousals expressed by LOL, cute, Fail, WTF. Content markers of virality include celebrities, animals, and food. These examples come from Abramson's excellent

So there appears to be a mismatch. Professional journalism purports to generate importance norms of attention, while social media does not; but attention gravitates much more readily to social media platforms governed by principles of engagement than it does to news outlets governed by importance principle – even when conformity with the importance principle is far from perfect. The mismatch suggests an uphill battle when it comes to drawing wide attention to things that are important for the public to understand.

## 2. Is the problem merely apparent?

A skeptic might propose that the problem is merely apparent, because it is actually an artifact of the failure of news media to live up to its own importance principle. On this view, the only problem in the vicinity is that too often, the importance principle *isn't* actually fulfilled. Even though new outlets present their content under that mode of presentation of importance, the things they deem newsworthy are frequently not actually important for the public to understand, and that is why people devote less attention to them. Truly important information is also always engaging, on this view, and that is why there is no real problem of democratic attention. The appearance of such a problem is merely an artifact of news media's failure to live up to its own importance principle.

This approach to the problem of democratic attention evokes Aristotle's idea that we are essentially political animals.<sup>31</sup> All you have to do is show us the information that matters to our political life, and we will be interested in it, because it is in our political nature to be so interested.

Whatever elements of truth this Aristotelian picture may contain, there are strong reasons to think that the problem of democratic attention would not automatically dissolve if the importance principle were consistently fulfilled.

A first reason is that as any student of style knows, there are many ways to convey the same basic information. Compare the [style](#) of the report by special counsel Robert Mueller on then-president Trump's dealings with Russian operatives, with the concise, straightforward [op-ed](#) written by Anonymous in the early days of the Trump administration written as a warning to the public.<sup>32</sup> Both pieces of writing aimed to convey serious crimes committed by the Trump and other central figures in the administration. But the op-ed was easy to understand, whereas the report was full of indirection and legalese. The difference was not only in content and length, but in style.

A second reason to think the puzzle of democratic attention could challenge even a news media that fulfilled the importance principle was acknowledged by both Lippmann

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historical analysis of BuzzFeed in her (2019). As Snyder (2018) points out, when combined with political content, some of these types of arousal produce an illusion of becoming informed.

<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* (1958).

<sup>32</sup> Anonymous (2018). On the style of the Mueller report, see Toobin (2020).



and Dewey in their discussions of the complexity of democratic society. In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey emphasizes the indirect consequence of interactions in society that affect people who cannot trace those consequences back to their source. For instance, before the 1970's, it was not known that the acidic rain and snow falling in the northeastern U.S. was caused by industrial sites in the Ohio Valley. This discovery helped identify the health impact of people living in Sweden and Norway from factories in Germany and England.<sup>33</sup>

Dewey observed that we remain unaware of many of the laws, practices, and interactions that shape our lives. Given these epistemic limitations, we are often unaware of the set of people whose lives are all affected by the same factors. We don't know with whom we share a stake in a problem, or who has different or opposing stakes in the same problem. When decisions taken in one place by one set of actors affect the health of people in a different place, these people form a 'public' in Dewey's sense. In this sense, modern publics are often invisible, and it takes journalism, among other types of institutions and practices, to make them visible.<sup>34</sup> As we saw from the Kansas City *Star's* retrospective overview, journalists can distort their portrait of a public though their choices about which inquiries to pursue and which stories to make salient.

Taken together, these observations show that the category "information that important for the public to know about" leaves open how that information is presented, how it is framed, which parts are emphasized, and whether or not its importance is made manifest. The puzzle of democratic attention is not therefore merely an artifact of the failure of news outlets to fulfill the importance principle. The importance principle can be fulfilled in ways that make the importance of the content relatively more manifest or relatively less so.

An informal observation may help illustrate this point for readers familiar with a mainstay of television news in the mid-1970's and 1980's: the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour. Many momentous things occurred during these years, and on the show they were discussed at length. But the discussions always sounded the same, regardless of the topic. The two unflappable anchors with the same demeanor never reacted much differently from

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<sup>33</sup> Likens 1999, Oreskes and Conway 2010.

<sup>34</sup> There are two ways to describe the removal of these epistemic limitations, and Dewey uses them both. If you describe it by saying that the public exists all along but is invisible until the epistemic limitations are removed, then you're talking about the public as a sets of people whose lives are affected by the same things (laws, interactions, practices) - whether or not they care about those things, and whether or not they know which things affect what they care about. When a sign is posted at a construction site that says "Notice of public hearing", the operative meaning of 'public' is roughly 'anyone who may be affected'. When Dewey talks about the public's 'eclipse' and 'submergence' (chapter 4, 1927), he is talking this way.

At other times in (1927), he talks about the public coming into being only when the indirect consequences of interactions are made visible (chapter 2). Here, "the public" includes a type of political consciousness: one's awareness of a whole to which one belongs. Becoming aware of the factors that affect you indirectly makes you aware of the whole. It's that awareness that constitutes a public, which is therefore more than just the set of people who are affected by a set of laws, practices, and interactions.

one occasion to the next, regardless of what anyone else said. If you weren't already interested in the topics under discussion, you would probably not become interested in them from listening.

But boring news shows are not the root of the problem of democratic attention. If they were, the problem would be analogous to the one faced by some parents: their young children should eat vegetables but they much prefer to eat cupcakes. This type of problem concerns only what to ingest: vegetables or cupcakes. The nutritive results of ingestion take care of themselves.

If the problem of democratic attention concerned merely what information to ingest, the solution would be infotainment: the genre that packages information in short spurts without extensive narratives, but still aims to convey supposedly important facts. As the parent of a picky toddler might coat brussels sprouts in maple syrup but avoid broccoli which can't plausibly be sweetened, infotainment partly compromises importance, selecting only the important content that can be fit into an entertaining frame.

Ingestion is a poor model for the underlying problem, because the problem concerns a type of uptake that involves more than merely consuming information. As the case of the Hatch Act suggests, the mechanisms of accountability to work fully, the publics to whom a leader is accountable have to feel invested in the outcomes. They have to feel that they have a stake in whether the leader governs properly or not. In the case of how public money is used, these stakes are straightforward: instead of using it to maximize public goods, a leader may use it extremely inefficiently, or use it to further his political career, or at an extreme, simply put it in his pocket. Merely staring at the television or website while it broadcasts reports that speak to whether this is happening or not may be a good start, but if the information had no further interactions with anyone's attitudes toward politics, the broadcasting would have no more effect than a sit-com or a movie.<sup>35</sup> Entertainment is the wrong model of accountability journalism.

When looked at this way, the problem of democratic attention looks more specifically like a problem of standing attitudes that facilitate democracy, not occurrent intake with no further impact on a listener's mind. To solve it, what's needed is a way to orient the reader. The crucial questions then become: which attitudes are democracy-facilitating attitudes? And which principles of selection and framing of news stories can cultivate them?

Viewing the problem in this way has implications for how to measure the kind of uptake that would constitute democratic attention. Occurrent engagement can be measured by how much time one spends taking it in, because by definition it lasts only as long as it occupies attention. When digital sites estimate occurrent engagement with content by measuring how much time one spends on a website displaying it, they don't

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<sup>35</sup> A different point against infotainment is implicit in Snyder's (2018) observation that in the US, presenting news as national entertainment made news vulnerable to political opportunists who exploit the tools of entertainment to create harmful political fictions (p. 247).

measure directly whether people actually take in the information, let alone whether they remember it or whether it affects how they feel or think about their political communities.

By contrast, *attitudinal* engagement makes a more lasting impact by surviving in memory, where it remains available for further inferences and action. Attitudes are lasting mental states. They contribute to the standing dispositions a person has. To measure attitudinal engagement, instead of asking how much time people spend taking content in, we would ask how the person's attitudes were affected by it. If one never spends any time with the content at all (zero occurrent engagement), it will not engage one's attitudes, either. But there may be no further correlation between time spent and attitudes affected.

I'll argue that the core democratic attitude is seeing oneself and one's fellow politizans as potential political protagonists - a role excluded, I'll argue, by the strongman principle of salience, which tailors messages to construe listeners as loyalists to the strongman who remains the seat of political agency. The principle is to frame and select stories in a way that invites readers to see themselves as on a par with other politizans as potential political protagonists in public affairs. I'll call this principle of salience the public-as-protagonist principle.<sup>36</sup>

This reorientation of the problem does not sidestep the pitfalls of boredom and the challenge of how to capture attention in the first place. Practically anything can be made boring or uninviting, including news articles that address readers as potential political protagonists. But if the problem of democratic attention is ultimately a problem of democratic attitude, then merely capturing attention is not sufficient to address it.

To make the case that the public-as-protagonist principle helps solve the problem of democratic attention, in the rest of this paper I explain what the principle says and illustrate with three kinds of examples. Since principle itself is independent of the dialectical role in the problem that I'm claiming for it, even readers who think there is no problem of democratic attention, or who come to doubt that the public-as-protagonist principle helps address it, may nonetheless be interested in exploring and evaluating the principle as a potential guide for selecting and framing of news stories.

## **Part II. The public-as-protagonist principle**

The public-as protagonist principle recommends framing and selecting information to invite readers to view themselves and one another as potential political participants. Whatever else a news story reports, it should make explicit, when it can, the ways in which the reading public has a stake in how the situation reported unfolds; and it should make

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<sup>36</sup> The movement known as "public journalism" has a similar label, but the major difference is that public-as-protagonist principle concerns the way that news stories are framed and selected, whereas public journalism is a larger class of efforts, on the page and off, to mobilize readers in civic participation. On the varieties of approaches to public journalism and criticisms of it see the papers in Glasser (1999), especially Schudson (1999).

explicit the ways in which they could affect its outcome. The stakes can be economic, political, or affective.

In this general form, the principle may sound simple. But many complexities arise, including well-known imprecision of the very idea of a public. Is there just one public or are there many? If two people belong to the same public, will they necessarily be aware of this fact? Will they necessarily share the same 'public interests' in the important situation being reported? If there are multiple publics, or publics with different interests, what do the principle's recommendations amount to?

The rest of this paper works with the following general answers. There are many publics. Two people (call them A and B) belong to the same public only if the outcome of a situation matters to them (not necessarily in the same way). A and B need not know each other. They need not know what stakes they hold in a problem, and need not know that an outcome matters to them, or how. In general, A and B can belong to the same public, while being quite epistemically impoverished about the situation that affects them.

Removing epistemic limitations like these results in a type of political consciousness. Lifting such limitations leaves one aware of one's interests, or one's potential interests in an outcome. It also brings to light relationships to other people in the polity. As often happens in inquiry, removing one layer of ignorance may introduce another. For instance, learning that one is susceptible to the effects of acid rain may leave one with a rash of questions, including which industries are responsible, whether any measures can be taken to guard against its ill effects, what the prospects are for future prevention, and so on.

Not every reader will be a potential protagonist in every story. But if the importance principle is fulfilled and the public-as-protagonist is applied consistently, then every regular reader is likely to encounter a story in which they feel addressed as a potential protagonist eventually.

### **3.1 Examples**

I'll draw on three types of examples to illustrate the public-as-protagonist principle at work, representing three major types of stories that connect news journalism directly to democracy: elections, accountability, and loss of life. These examples are meant to illustrate the principle at work. The reasons to think that applications of the principle can meet the challenge of democratic attention will come in section 4.

#### **3.1.1 Elections**

A common approach to election coverage regards the campaigns as determined primarily by the candidates and their interactions. The role of journalists is to decipher the criticisms the candidates launch at one another, and convey the state of play to the public. Like reporting on a horse race that provides a continuous stream of information about which horse has forged ahead and which has fallen behind, this approach highlights who is ahead in the polls.

The "horse race" approach treats the voting public as an audience who is interested in the micro-dynamics of the campaign. By contrast, according to the public-as-protagonist principle, the purpose of election coverage is to help voters set the agenda for the campaign by communicating which issues they think the candidates should address. This approach treats the voting public as stakeholders who need to make a decision and may have questions about how policy will connect with government. It does not matter whether journalists undertake this kind of opinion polling or rely on other outlets, so long as the opinions about which issues candidates should address are made salient.<sup>37</sup>

Another way to portray voters as inquirers as opposed to people who simply react is to make explicit how candidates' positions unfold over the course of a campaign. Rosen (1999) gives an example of election coverage by the *Wichita Eagle* that elegantly created a way to display these responses by displaying campaign statements chronologically. Each week, the newspaper added updates to a list of commitments of each candidate, including whether the candidate restated a position on an issue, or adjusted it. Using this format, the newspaper could highlight questions from the public and answers by the candidates.

By having an entry for each week and displaying the whole timeline, the newspaper made it possible to report if nothing had changed that week, if anything was clarified, or if any new positions had been taken. By creating a space in which a candidate's responsiveness or failures to respond to voters' reactions could be made salient, it implicitly treated candidates' positions as changeable in response to voters' reactions.

### **3.1.2 Accountability**

A second illustration of the principle concerns reporting on grift or other forms of corruption, such as using public resources to fund a political campaign. In reporting on misuses of taxpayer money, the taxpaying public figures as a protagonist just by virtue of the focus of the story. But there are further choices that can either foreground the specific communities who may be harmed by the misuse of funds, as the public-as-protagonist principle recommends, or leave them out of the picture altogether.

Consider the multiple charges of corruption made against the Republican politician Josh Hawley during his term as Attorney General of Missouri. All of the charges were based on information uncovered and reported by the *Kansas City Star*. This reporting gives us several examples of the public-as-protagonist principle at work, as well as examples where it could have been applied more extensively.

Hawley was investigated by Missouri Secretary of State for using of taxpayer money to hire political consultants from Massachusetts and Louisiana during 2017 and 2018 to set

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<sup>37</sup> As an example of public journalism, Rosen (1999) describes an effort in Charlotte, North Carolina, undertaken jointly by the *Charlotte Observer*, a local television station and the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, that undertook telephone polling of readers to find out which issues they wanted candidates to discuss in an upcoming election, and then directed campaign coverage to those issues.

the agenda for the Attorney General office.<sup>38</sup> The agenda they set seemed to be geared toward raising Hawley's national profile in preparation for his run for senate against Democrat Claire McCaskill, whom he eventually defeated in the 2018 election. His office was also charged with violating Missouri open-records laws after he both [declined to use government email](#) and declined to turn over records of communications between the Attorney General's office and political consultants, which would help determine the extent and nature of the role of political consultants.<sup>39</sup>

Because it played a major role in instigating the investigations and in publicizing the results, the Kansas City *Star's* reporting was successful accountability journalism, by the standard set by the importance principle. It could have played this role without doing much to successfully engage readers' attention. But the reports took a step toward highlighting the potential political roles of readers by [including](#) the email address and telephone number of the whistleblower hotline at the state auditor's office, in case any readers had further information, and noting that under state law whistleblowers can remain anonymous.<sup>40</sup>

Most members of the public are not in a position blow any whistles. But by including this information in the article, the journalists are highlighting that any such whistleblowers are regular members of the public, rather than political insiders to whom journalists have special access. In these ways, the coverage was treating the public as potential contributors in an inquiry that matters to everyone, and as people with a stake in how the inquiry turns out.

In other ways, the Kansas City *Star's* accountability reporting on Hawley kept the reading public at a distance from the situation it reported. It focused repeatedly on the disconnect between Hawley's statement that he was "not the type of ladder-climbing politician who would continually seek higher office", and his behavior while in office of allegedly devoting public resources to his political campaign.<sup>41</sup> In the same vein of identifying instances of hypocrisy, the *Star* reminded readers that Hawley "had criticized Hillary Clinton's use of a private server for sending and receiving emails while she was U.S. secretary of state" while campaigning for election to Attorney General, even though he appears to have done the same thing himself. "Sec. Clinton's outrageous conduct & lack of prosecution shows we need an AG who knows how to win for the rule of law," they reported him as having [tweeted](#) during his campaign.<sup>42</sup>

Pointing out this kind of hypocrisy is a way of discrediting the politician, and inviting the public to do the same.<sup>43</sup> In a story that highlights politicians' hypocrisy, the

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<sup>38</sup> Wise et al (2018a).

<sup>39</sup> Government email unlike private email becomes part of the public record. Ultimately Hawley was found not to have violated election law. See Hancock 2019a, Hancock et al 2019b.

<sup>40</sup> Wise (2019)

<sup>41</sup> Hancock et al 2019c.

<sup>42</sup> Wise 2018a, Hawley 2016.

<sup>43</sup> This position was reflected in the *Star's* editorials that were highly critical of Hawley [cite]. It is an example of a newspaper's editorial outlook shaping the selection and framing of stories it reports. I discuss the

reading public is implicitly framed as a spectator of disappointing politics.<sup>44</sup> The disappointment may be warranted, and it may justifiably make readers angry. But leaving things there relegates the reading public to the background. If the Attorney General has served his own political career at taxpayer's expense, and that's the end of the story, then the story treats it as an open possibility that there is no other way things could be.

A more extensive application of the public-as-protagonist principle could list pending allegations, or past known infringements that were never litigated, or controversies over potential corporate, governmental or environmental infringements that affect the readers. This point of focus would make the monitoring function itself salient, instead of highlighting a politician's failure to perform it. The monitoring function turns the focus onto what the office is supposed to do for the public.

### 3.1.3 Life and death

Election coverage and watchdog reporting focus on relationships between politicians and the people they aim to govern. Because elections and accountability in government are two defining features of a democracy, journalism plays an important role in facilitating democratic politics when it is designed to bolster accountability and participation in elections.

A third defining feature of democracy is political equality among the governed. Political equality is a relationship between members of the public, rather than the relationship between the government and the governed.

The decisions made by journalists about how to narrate losses of life and property can facilitate or anti-facilitate a sense of political equality. How?

When a newspaper publicizes deaths from traffic fatalities, an epidemic, natural disaster, or homicide, it can depict those deaths as losses by making salient *what* was lost when the people died: the people, places, and activities they cared about; the reactions of the people who cared about them; the roles they played in their community, and so on.

If the people lost happened to occupy a position of public service, such as being a janitor in a public school, the loss would be a loss of a public servant, and to that extent a loss to the public. But what if the people weren't officially public servants? Is publicizing what is lost simply satisfying to the people who knew the deceased? It is likely to affect them most strongly. It may also affect people who didn't know them, if they identify in some way with their situation. But there will often be scores of people who remain relatively indifferent to losses distant from their concerns. So what role could depicting such losses play in a democracy?

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relationships between outlook and selection including its epistemic dimensions in "Are there norms of salience?" (Siegel (ms)).

<sup>44</sup> As commentators over the years have noted, hypocrisy in politics is hardly ever the main problem (Shklar 1984, Dover 2019, Siegel 2020).

If the depiction of lives lost aim to evoke a feeling of loss, no matter who the deceased people are, then those depictions reflect an assumption of equal value of life. Consider reporting on the 1977 flood by the Kansas City *Call*. Unlike the *Star*, the *Call* featured stories and photos about the eight Black flood victims, interviews with residents who survived the flood, and stories about damage to the Bo Dollar riding club, where twenty-five horses drowned. The *Call* estimated that in losing the horses and the club, 250 young people from the east side of Kansas City lost the place where they learned to ride and care for horses. This story makes salient what the property damage means to the people most directly affected by it.<sup>45</sup>

This example illustrates a type of loss and a depiction of it that makes the losses legible as losses, even to readers who had never even heard of the riding club and had no interest in horses.

Why does it matter for everyone, even those who are socially distant from a loss like this, how the loss is depicted, and whether they are depicted at all?

First, the various political roles of journalism that we've considered here are interdependent. The premise of a newspaper is that there is a constant stream of events passing by a large population of readers who need to be kept up to date. From one issue of a newspaper to the next, some things are held constant while other things vary. The stories reported vary. The format of the newspaper stays constant, with its structure that gathers stories into one digital or printed location, making some stories in the unity more salient than the others.

The unity is most palpable in a print version, when a reader has to interact with the entire newspaper in order to read any part of it. But whether a newspaper is in print or digitized, the same reading public is addressed by all the stories in it. When the Kansas City *Star* photographs a white fellow who managed to rescue his cat from the flood, they aim to elicit sympathy from anyone who can understand what it's like to care about saving their cat.<sup>46</sup> They are implicitly including this fellow and anyone who identifies with him as members of polity. When the same newspaper sidelines or omits losses of Black Kansas Citians, or presents them as undeserving of sympathy, the newspaper is excluding them from the reading public.<sup>47</sup> But the reading public is presumed to be the same as the political

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<sup>45</sup> The contrast between reporting by the *Star* and the *Call* noted in the *Star*'s retrospective mirrors a contrast found in *The East St Louis Massacre*, a pamphlet submitted by Ida B. Wells in 1919 to then-Governor L of Illinois which included both her own reporting during the aftermath of the mob attacks on Black people and their property, and eyewitness reporting from the *Chicago Tribune* during the attack. In Wells-Barnett's reporting, the reader meets the people whose houses were ransacked and stolen from: we learn their names, how long they lived in East St Louis, their families and jobs, and sometimes what their house looked like and some of the things that were in it. From the *Tribune*'s reporting, one learns only about the death of nameless persons, that they were Black, the location of crimes committed against them, and finally (and this was the reason for including it in the pamphlet) the indifference and inefficacy of the National Guard.

<sup>46</sup> Williams (2020).

<sup>47</sup> According to the Kansas City *Star*'s former architecture critic Donald Hoffman, who worked for the paper when it was paired with the *Times*, "When I first came to the papers, I worked at police headquarters, and we were instructed not even to pay attention to Black murders or Black traffic fatalities. They just weren't reported. Cited in Adler (2020)



public addressed by watchdog reporting and election coverage. So in excluding Black Kansas Citizens from narratives of losses, the type of asymmetry criticized in the *Star's* retrospective overview manifests an attitude of political inequality.<sup>48</sup>

The second reason that public depictions of loss matter for democracy concerns the epistemic situation of people belonging to the same polity. In a democratic polity, each citizen is supposed to have a say in decisions that affect fellow citizens. But if the losses of people on your side of town are not legible as losses to the people on the other side of town, why should you trust them to make decisions that will affect you? By making losses and their meaning publicly legible, a newspaper helps to foster trust among citizens in a political process.

Here it may be useful to contrast the public-as-protagonist principle with the strongman principles of salience. As a guide to what to make salient and what to background, the strongman principle does not focus on losses to a pluralistic public. The public is addressed and presented as reactive loyalists. If it is a protagonist at all, it gets that status from being imaginatively merged with the leader. In proto-fascist political culture, communications are meant to cultivate a range of hostile negative reactions to those citizens who according to the ideology do not belong in the polity at all.

The communications guided by the strongman principle of salience do not foreground any other differentiation within the public, besides the division between the people in the base and the others who supposedly do not belong in the polity. Here, an authoritarian style of governing that is served by the strongman principle has no need to highlight the varied contours of a pluralistic public, with a range of hopes and fears, losses and setbacks, aspirations and milestones. Whatever differences they have are eclipsed by their emotionally charged relationship to the leader, who claims to come from them, be part of them, and therefore especially well-placed to lead them.<sup>49</sup>

When it is applied to narrating losses, the public-as-protagonist aims to make the varieties of loss legible to the entire public, both for the readers for whom the losses are most proximate, and the readers to whom they are most distant, because deaths are an occasion to depict what was lost in losing the life.

#### **4. How does the public-as-protagonist principle meet the challenge?**

I've attempted to illuminate the public as protagonist principle both by characterizing its values and the attitudes it attempts to cultivate, and by illustrating how it would orient three types of reporting. We're now in a position to consider whether it helps address the problem of democratic attention. We can break down the probe into two questions. One question concerns how journalism cultivates readers' attitudes, and another whether it contributes to capturing attention at all:

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<sup>48</sup> For more on the manifestation relation, see Siegel, "Are there norms of salience?." It is well-documented how cultivating attitudes of political inequality degrade, erode, undo or preclude democracy. For examples outside the American context, see P. Pomerantzev (2019), chapter 1 on Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines; and A. Applebaum (2020) chapter 4 on the rise of Spain's Vox Party.

<sup>49</sup> Ben-Ghiat 2020, Posner 2020.

Q1. Does journalism conforming to the public-as-protagonist principle cultivate attitudes that facilitate democracy?

Q2. Is journalism conforming to the public-as-protagonist principle more likely to attract attention in the first place, compared to journalism that respects the importance principle but does not highlight the roles for members of the public as potential political protagonists?

Regarding Q1, the democracy-facilitating attitudes in question are: an awareness of the different public stakes in a problem; the presumption that one is a potential protagonist; and a disposition, or at least a psychological possibility, of inquiring further into at least some of the problems highlighted in the news that respects the importance principle. The public-as-protagonist principle is designed to cultivate those attitudes. Are there reasons to think it actually will cultivate them?

An experimental approach to testing whether it works would have to operationalize both salience principles - the importance principle and public-as-protagonist principle - and then find a way to measure the self-conception of readers of the two experimentally relevant categories of important news stories: those that conform to the public-as-protagonist principle and those that do not. This type of experiment would have to be conducted over an extended period, in which participants were shielded from one type of journalism while being exposed to another. It would also need to control for other factors that could influence that self-conception. For instance, it could turn out that to have any effect, such journalism needs reinforcement from other modes of encouraging civic engagement through education or other organizations. If it turned out that the journalism guided by the public-as-protagonist principle contributed nothing to democratic attitudes, then that would be a reason to think it doesn't fully address the challenge posed by the problem of democratic attention.

Independent of any such experiment's results, plausibility considerations make it reasonable to hypothesize that applying the principle could have some effect on attitudes. Treating audiences as consumers seeking entertainment made infotainment seem like a normal guise for the news, so that in seeking news one could also be seeking entertainment. By analogy, treating audiences as if it were culturally normal for them to consider themselves and one another as political protagonists might make it seem more culturally normal to consider oneself in this way. Lasch (1990) claims that people in the US were never more politically engaged than they were during the era of "partisan" journalism, which was addressed people as if they were politically opinionated. If he is right, that conclusion may favor the idea that journalism conforming to the public-as-protagonist principle would cultivate democratic attitudes.

More specifically, it seems reasonable to expect different effects on attitudes depending on the starting state of the audience. Consider three categories: (a) people tuned out of politics entirely, who tend not to take in much news media; (b) people involved on local organizing in which they response to threats they feel to their own security or well-being, or that of their communities, but tuned out of most national and international

politics; (c) political hobbyists who follow all sorts of news closely, because for them it is entertaining or otherwise emotionally engaging, or intellectually satisfying, or both.<sup>50</sup>

These categories are obviously not exhaustive. A community organizer could also be well-informed about issues beyond the ones they are focused on, and nothing stops a news junkie from joining political organizations. But at least one political scientist, Hersh (2020), claims that groups (b) and (c) are cultural archetypes: people from group (c) primarily seek power to influence how the government operates; people from group (b) primarily track how power is distributed. People from group (a) do neither.

When journalism respects both of the importance principle and the public-as-protagonist principle, it is reasonable to expect differential effects on each these groups. On the people tuned out of politics entirely, it would seem to have a better chance at cultivating the attitudes it aims to cultivate, compared with journalism that doesn't try to show readers why they should care about the stories, if they don't already. By contrast, for people who already see themselves as political protagonists, it might simply reinforce this presumption. It may have less effect on hobbyists, if they are determined to maintain the stance of an ironist, observing the political scene from a distance. I put these ideas forward as plausibility considerations, subject to adjustment from experimental or other considerations.

Regarding Q2, there is indirect evidence that systematically failing to treat the public as protagonists will drive readers away. Consider the Kansas City *Star-Times*' retrospective verdict that for over a century, their coverage systematically excluded of Black Kansas Citians as political protagonists, both in the ways that losses were narrated (as the flood example shows) and in the omission of reporting "the achievements, aspirations and milestones of an entire population." The Kansas City *Call* did not have this problem, and it had greater credibility with Black readers - presumably a precondition for more occurrent engagement.<sup>51</sup> Between 1915 and 1925, the Chicago *Defender*, the Black newspaper with the largest circulation in the US during the 20th century, played a major role in the Great Migration through its coverage of violence in the south and job and housing opportunities in northern cities. Here, they were urging Black Americans to leave one polity and join another. Their readers were addressed as political protagonists. The fact that *Defender's* circulation rose steadily during these years and after reinforces the natural suggestion that readers are indeed attracted in part by being treated as members of a polity whose lives, decisions, and options matter.

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<sup>50</sup> Hersh (2020) draws a useful distinction between two kinds of political engagement, by focusing on the distinction between people in groups (b) and (c). One of his examples of type (b) is a bus monitor from Haverhill, MA who leads the Latino Coalition, a community organization that monitors its local government (police, school superintendent, mayor) on issues related to its residents who have immigrated from the Spanish-speaking parts of Latin America, such as how the city will interact with ICE under the Trump administration and whether there will be Spanish-speaking staff at schools. He contrasts this type of organizing with the mode of political engagement done by college-educated people, which consists primarily in informing themselves about a large range of political issues by reading about them online where they interact with others by sharing reactions, and argues that while type (c) may feel like political engagement and may even superficially appear that way, it has little effect on actual political change.

<sup>51</sup> Eligon, J. and Gross, J. 2020.

For the case of watchdog journalism, a similar argument may apply. Suppose the only people with a major role in holding powerful leaders accountable were journalists who ask "tough questions" at hearings. If the effects on the public of accountability or unaccountability are left out of the news story, then the links to the stakes for various publics have to be drawn by readers who may be unable to draw them, putting them into a position analogous to Lippmann's deaf spectator. Journalists who frame their stories in a way that comports with this picture do not offer readers any way to locate themselves in relation to the event reported as people affected adversely or positively, as people who can have any effect on the political future. By contrast, if journalism makes clearer along the way why it matters to the public, there is at least something explicit in the story that a reader could identify as a reason for her to be taking it in.

I conclude with a leftover question.

I've focused on a specific kind of journalism: the kind produced by the professionalized apparatus developed in the 1920's in the US. Its professional structure includes newspapers that gather different kinds of stories in one print or digital place; editors who by their own lights are supposed to publish news that is important for the public to know about; a profession that trains writers in methods and inculcates them into a code of ethics; and institutions that grant press passes.

Both the problem of democratic attention and the public-as-protagonist principle are separable from this specific kind of journalism. As the example of the *Chicago Defender* shows, journalists before professionalization produced stories that fulfilled both principles, and in recent times, citizen journalism has played similar roles. The professional structure of newspapers made familiar in the last century is clearly not the only way to fulfill these principles. A residual question raised by this discussion is what the relative advantages and drawbacks are, compared with other forms that journalism could take.<sup>52</sup>

Zooming out even further, journalism's roles in democracy are unified by the ways their contribution to building a set of overlapping publics through what it chooses to make salient and how it selects and frames its stories. Professionalized journalism can do this, and so can its adjacent forms. Seen in this light, journalism is but one means among others of shaping the contours of civic engagement and education and defining the publics that operate in aspirationally democratic polities. But a society without an entrenched culture of following a story where it leads, whether that culture is found in professionalized journalism or not, would be vulnerable to profoundly anti-democratic principles of salience.

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