



By: *Carla Norrlöf*

# When information loses its force, impunity follows



“Democracy Dies in Darkness” became the motto of the Washington Post in 2017, four years after Jeff Bezos, the Amazon founder and one of the world’s richest men, purchased the newspaper.

Today, however, Bezos, who has throttled the **Post’s opinion page** and now slashed the newspaper’s staff, seems determined to demonstrate that a free press, an essential component of democracy, can be killed off in broad daylight.

Democracy is dying in America because those in positions of power – starting with President Donald Trump but including media and tech owners like Oracle’s Larry Ellison, who is doing to CBS News what Bezos has been doing to **the Post** – have learned how to make facts harmless.

What began as a disinformation campaign has matured into a systematic project aimed not at controlling what people think, but at dismantling the structures that turn facts into consequences.

For years, the crisis in journalism was described largely in terms of partiality, polarization, and declining trust.

Those problems are real, and they have provided cover for treating the mainstream media’s supposed “liberal bias” as a justification for weakening professional standards.

But there is now a deeper crisis: those who were previously pursuing this institutional weakening no longer need to bother winning an argument with the press.

Instead, they have diminished the press’s ability to impose accountability at all.

After Trump’s first election in 2016, many commentators argued that universities, newsrooms, and cultural institutions had lost touch with the public, and that this mattered politically.

But building credible alternatives to such

institutions takes years and requires money, talent, distribution channels, and trust.

## Original reporting can still circulate, but it simply won’t matter

So, rather than trying to outcompete the established players in the marketplace of ideas, why not reduce their ability to set agendas, validate facts, and trigger consequences?

Why not decrease journalistic institutions’ capacity to pursue deep investigations, and discredit their authority when they do? Original reporting can still circulate, but it simply won’t matter.

This strategy does not require banning or censoring, because silence is not the goal.

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Whereas Joseph Goebbels needed censorship and terror to enforce the Nazis’ single official reality, this is not classical fascism.

The strategy unfolding in the US relies on different means: stripping disfavored stories of reach, credibility, and consequence until one narrative dominates without the state having to outlaw the rest.

The mechanism at work is not control of speech, but immunity to facts.

## The ability to be consequential

Investigative journalism is expensive. It requires time, legal backing, editorial depth, and reporters who can spend months on a

single story.

When major newsrooms are hollowed out through layoffs and cost-cutting, as the Washington Post's just-announced **30% staff reduction** illustrates, they lose the ability to be consequential.

Single scoops are easily dismissed or waited out. Repeated, rigorously documented reporting over time is harder to ignore.

### Downsizing a newsroom lowers the pressure that serious reporting can bring to bear

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Another part of the strategy concerns public media, where the target is not just investigative capacity but services that cut across state borders, demographics, and ideology.

Defunding **National Public Radio** (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), as Trump has done, is not merely about cultural grievance.

The point is to apply structural pressure, eroding the shared facts on which democratic argument depends.

## The accountability system starts to crumble

But distribution is perhaps the most underappreciated front. For more than a decade, **Twitter** functioned as the central circulatory system for American public discourse.

Journalists, academics, public officials, business leaders, and engaged citizens all argued in the same place.

Reporting and research could travel quickly, face criticism and correction, and translate

directly – and sometimes immediately – into agenda-setting pressure.

Then Elon Musk bought the platform, gutted its staff, and renamed it X. Soon enough, it stopped functioning as a shared civic distribution system for verified information.

It now prioritizes engagement over verification, weakens credibility cues, and makes reach less predictable.



*Today, fewer journalists and academics bother to post on X*  
– Elon Musk

Today, fewer journalists and academics bother to post on X, and even when they do, verified information no longer translates reliably into agenda-setting or yields any consequence at all.

The results are far-reaching, because when the infrastructure for elite information exchange no longer reliably rewards accuracy or sustained explanation, the entire accountability system starts to crumble.

And the same dynamic extends beyond platforms into ownership. When a major newsroom sits inside a conglomerate that is navigating mergers, regulatory scrutiny, and political exposure, independence can narrow without the need for an explicit instruction from the top.

That is why it matters that Skydance – headed by David Ellison, Larry Ellison's son – took over Paramount, which controls CBS. Direct censorship is not required when everyone can see which stories will cost the parent company money or jeopardize its deals.



## Self-censorship becomes rational

Under such conditions, self-censorship becomes rational. It is implicit in the stories that never run, the investigations that are dropped because they might invite lawsuits or regulatory retaliation, and kid-glove coverage of politicians or corporate figures who could make the parent company's life difficult.

Once editors understand that certain fights have become corporate liabilities, risk avoidance becomes the new normal.

Taken together, these moves form a system. Journalism and facts still exist, but the chain that once ran from reporting to shared reality to institutional response begins to break apart.

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Accurate reporting no longer compels action, because facts can be published, verified, and still fail to trigger a response. When information loses its force, impunity follows.

Disinformation once aimed to make people believe false things. The new objective is to make the powerful immune to truths that previously would have harmed their interests or forced them to change their behavior.

We are witnessing a systemic attack on American institutions and the American public's ability to hold power to account.

Democracy does not die only when speech is banned. It also dies when truthful speech ceases to matter.

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