

SUPER MAD AT EVERYTHING ALL THE TIME

Political Media and
Our National Anger

ALISON DAGNES



Super Mad at Everything All the Time

“*Super Mad at Everything All the Time* takes on the important subject of political culture, in particular, the political talk which results from the transformation of American political culture in the past several decades. While this change was the product of several factors, this book makes a compelling case that changes in media systems, broadly defined, is one of the primary factors that drove this change. While the subject is quite complex, Dagnes’ argument and writing makes the book an accessible, and importantly, highly interesting read.”

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East Carolina University, USA*

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“*Super Mad at Everything All the Time* expertly delineates the deep political divisions in the country. But, we did not get here by accident. Dr. Dagnes provides a clear and compelling examination of the history of the how and the why that have brought us to this point in our political and media discourse. An outstanding contribution to the field.”

—Danilo Yanich, *Professor, School of Public Policy & Administration,
University of Delaware, USA*

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Political Media and Our National Anger

palgrave
macmillan

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For Jerry Mileur

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PROLOGUE

In the fall of 2015, I was waiting for my daughter at her volleyball practice, which was held in a community gym in my small, central Pennsylvania town. This was Rec League volleyball so a small group of 13-year-olds was practicing their serves and spikes, and an even smaller number of parents were sitting in bleachers waiting for their children. There were so few parents in attendance, none of whom I knew, that I was able to sit alone at the top of one set of bleachers and grade papers. Out of the periphery of my vision, I saw a man whom I did not know turn to look up at me. He had been sitting much lower down on the next set of seats, and when he moved his whole body to face me I raised my head and made eye contact. He opened his mouth and spoke:

“I’ll tell you what. This country is gonna be MUCH better when Donald Trump is president.”

I was caught totally off guard, completely surprised, without an idea of what to say. I must have stared at him blankly because he went on:

“And I’ll tell you what. When Obama was elected, I KNEW this country was gonna fail and it did. You know why? Because he’s not an American. And he don’t even salute the troops!”

At this point, I was able to get out a “What?” and the man continued:

“I gotta friend at Letterkenny [Army Depot] and he says Obama don’t even salute the troops and my friend served in Iraq and he knows that Obama don’t even salute the troops and he’s not a real American.”

I realized at this point that my mouth was actually hanging open because I was flabbergasted; I could not figure out where this came from, who this guy was, or how to respond. Luckily, I did not need to reply because the man was wound up and spinning like a top:

“And I’ll tell you what. I got nothing against women. I like women. My boss is a woman and she don’t take no bullshit from no one and I like women. You know what I’m saying? So I don’t got no problem with a woman president. Not Hillary -- she’s shady as fuck. But a woman president? I got no problem with that. You know who would make a good woman president?”

Blank stare.

“Sarah Palin.”

In what felt like ten minutes but was probably closer to two or three, my new friend railed against the Democrats, Obama, “illegals,” and Hillary in a stream of expletive-laden vitriol and anger. I was dumbfounded and literally rendered speechless, so totally thrown by his fury and by the topic that I couldn’t find the words to respond to a single thing he said. As abruptly as he began, the man stopped talking, motioned to the stack of graded papers on my lap, and asked: “You a teacher?” I nodded. “That’s cool.” And with that, he turned back around and focused once more on his iPhone.

I could not believe what had just happened, so I did the only thing a smarty-pants professor would do: I went home and I blogged about it. The next day, I told the story to my students and they laughed (especially at the “Hillary is shady” part) while they nodded and said “Yeah. That’s nuts. But he’s right, Donald Trump is great,” which pulled me up short again. Wait. What? I was well-versed and well-read in American politics, the system, and the politicians; I knew the lay of the political land. Furthermore, I read *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*

every day. I had push alerts on my phone from *CNN* and *Politico*. Donald Trump was great? The guy who said Mexicans were rapists? The guy who said John McCain was not a hero because he was a prisoner of war? The guy who made fun of the disabled, used explicitly racist and misogynistic language? *That* Donald Trump? What was I missing?

Turns out, I was missing a segment of the country who got their news from different places than I did. At the time this happened, I acknowledged (in my blog post) that I lived in a filter bubble where very few people thought about Sarah Palin anymore. I admitted that we were deeply divided as a country and I wrote: “We have stopped talking to each other and have started talking past one another.” At least I got that right. Almost everything else, I got wrong. I woefully underestimated the power of the media, especially the outlets that I did not consume. I did not watch *Fox News*, but then again I did not watch any cable news because it was all too howling and loud. I did not read *Breitbart* and *Drudge*, but I did not read *Huffington Post* or *Daily Kos* either. I figured that my media choice did not matter, because we were debating the same issues from varying perspectives using the same information and the same set of facts. I was very wrong.

In order to find out why I was so far afield, I decided to re-examine the modern political media system. I have spent the better part of my life consuming, working within, and researching the American political media, but the past decade brought mammoth changes to a system I thought I understood. There were explanations that, taken individually, were correct but incomplete. I tried to plot a course where I could examine the whole media and put the pieces together in a way that made sense, but it was a mess. I was lost, dissatisfied with my results, unhappy with the confusion I was creating in my own mind. This is where the wisdom and kindness of a sexagenarian named Eunice saved the day.

In 2012, Eunice and I sat together at a community dinner where I was brought in as the guest speaker, there to talk about that year’s elections. We so thoroughly enjoyed our time together that we made plans to meet for coffee, and our conversations have continued for years. As I was struggling through this mess of information, I confided to Eunice that I felt disoriented. She offered me the piece of advice that changed the trajectory of the research project: interview an expert. Eunice argued that if I could find that one key authority to question, they could help guide me through the topic. This may sound like an easy recommendation, but it was more prescient than Eunice could have imagined. She

was right: I needed expert advice to help me make sense of this, and because the American political media are so expansive in size and power, I realized that I needed more than one expert. I needed several dozens.

I sorted the general areas to investigate and I let my interview request letters fly. I began to talk with Communications Directors from think tanks because I (correctly) assumed they would understand the scholarly nature of my query. I was lucky enough to speak with three people from important DC institutes: Khristine Brookes, Communications Director at Cato; Bridget Lowell, Communications Director at Urban; and Darrell West, Vice President at Brookings. I went into these interviews without a set of specific questions, because I had no idea where the research was going. Instead, I asked them what they thought of the modern media system in Washington and how they did their job. Ms. Brookes led me through the new ways that think tanks engage the public and opened my eyes to the amplification of discourse because of all the competition for airtime. Ms. Lowell and I talked about the importance of authenticity and the new nature of data-driven journalism. And Dr. West had a lovely and brilliant observation about how to plant the seeds to change our angry discourse which informed my conclusions while it also gave me hope.

The answers I received from the think tank leaders led me to interview three more communications experts, these from interest groups. I spoke with Joe Bonfiglio, President of the Environmental Defense Action Fund; Kaylie Hanson-Long, Communications Director NARAL Pro-Choice America; and Jason Pye, who had been the Comms Director at FreedomWorks but shot up the ladder to become Vice President of Legislative Affairs. Mr. Bonfiglio and I had one of the best conversations in memory about the state of the political parties and the new strength of activists. I have incorporated his insight into more academic talks than I can count, and although I could not use it all in this work, I could write another book just to reference his insight. Ms. Hanson-Long discussed the different communication techniques of liberals and conservatives, and the way interest groups are increasingly personalizing their messaging. I was connected to Mr. Pye by my former student Tyler Williams, and my visit to FreedomWorks was one of my favorites, even though everyone there cheerfully acknowledged that I was not exactly their target audience. Pye led me through the wilds of an activist group with candor and insight so incredibly useful, I decided to open the book with him.

Thanks to these first interviews, I had a sharper focus and moved toward the issue of polarization. I met with political ad guys from both sides of the aisle: Julian Mulvey (Democrat), a partner at Mulvey Devine Longabaugh, and from Guy Harrison and Brad Todd, both partners at OnMessage (Republican). Our discussions were valuable as they helped me to understand our divisions and the resulting changes to the profession of politics. Mr. Mulvey and I discussed authenticity in a highly mediated world, and he had incredible insight into the generational differences of various audiences; his take on polarization was one of the best I have heard and I return to his perception regularly. Guy Harrison from OnMessage was introduced to me by another Ship alumnus, Tom Dunn. Tom and Guy talked to me about how they make ads in an age of cord cutting, how Democrats speak collectively and Republicans speak individually, and how every election cycle brings innovation and new challenges. Brad Todd, fresh off his own book tour, described to me the new Republican landscape in terms that I had not considered, and now I cite him with frequency. He expanded on Mr. Harrison's discussion of advertising innovation and told me about the new models for mobile. It was a delight to talk with my former student, Tom Dunn, about his work and he gave me a skillful analogy that I use throughout the book and in all of my teaching about American politics: You gotta put your jersey on and know what team you're rooting for. I learned several things from all of these gentlemen: that keeping up with the technology is a necessity, that the new media system is a blessing and a curse, and that our smartphones give up more information about us than we could have predicted.

I knew that I needed to ground this work in what academics call "the literature," and so I decided to read a hearty number of books and journal articles and then interview scholars in this field. I was fortunate to speak with some of the biggest names in American political behavior, all of whom patiently answered my questions about their work. This gave me even more to think about. I spoke with the Doctors Kevin Arceneaux from Temple University, Lara Brown of George Washington University, Lisa George from Hunter College, Roderick Hart from the University of Texas at Austin, Matthew Levendusky of the University of Pennsylvania, and Michael Wagner from the University of Wisconsin. Vin Arceneaux and I talked about social media and how our filter bubbles can lead to political overconfidence, and he made the prescient observation that our social identities have been so politicized it is now difficult to see another side of an argument. Lara Brown provided fascinating historical

context for our current political era and layered in the technology and financial imperatives of the media in a brilliant overview. Dr. George offered a priceless summary of the economics of the news media, tracing the development of advertising through the centuries to explain how to follow the money in an increasingly complicated commercial industry. Dr. Hart was the first person to make the observation that President Trump's tweets were modern day press releases, something repeated to me several times throughout my interviews, but since Rod was the first to note this I give him full credit. Rod's consideration was rooted in an optimism that was rare throughout my research, and he argued that the strength of our democracy could be found in our grassroots discussions.¹ Dr. Levendusky and I spoke about the effects of the partisan media, what the next big thing would be, and how the political system has changed. Michael Wagner noted that journalists found "costly" talk to be newsworthy, and that one solution is to make an effort to listen more. I also spoke with David Levinthal who is a reporter and editor at the Center for Public Integrity, and who writes about the confluence of money in politics. He was especially instructive on the topic of academic funding by conservative billionaires and led me to even more research in this area. All of these scholars helped put the research into context and connect the theories with practice.

After that, I interviewed journalists from print, television, and digital outlets. In the process, I scored newsroom tours from Paul Farhi from the *Washington Post* and Sara Fischer, Media Reporter at *Axios*, and I took up too much time in the *Baltimore Sun's* newsroom with David Zurawik. Mr. Farhi and I spoke about money in media, and he gave me the quote I used as the title of a conference paper: "Everyone hates the media but they still use it." He also gave me a positive spin on the benefits of a flattened media system, which was supremely helpful. Sara Fischer shared her encyclopedia-level media knowledge, which provided the structure for much of this book, and her observations about the right-wing media circle were invaluable. I could have easily spoken to Dr. Zurawik for weeks to gain even more from his instrumental insights into biases and balances. His faith in journalism as a profession was encouraging and delightful.

I spoke with Eliana Johnson, the National Politics Reporter from *Politico*, who graciously gave me her time and attention as she was in between running down a story and appearing on *Meet the Press*. Ms. Johnson

provided me with a great lesson in modern Washington media, and Lloyd Grove, Editor at Large of *The Daily Beast*, told me about gatekeeping and the value of traditional journalism norms. Matthew Sheffield, Staff Writer at *Salon*, offered a mastery of conservative ideological philosophy that matched his knowledge of the modern media and was vital in my framing of conservative and right-wing media. I went “home” to my alma mater *C-SPAN* and spoke with the award-winning Brian Lamb, and we discussed money and the new rules of journalism, which veer far away from what they used to be. He gave me a copy of Walter Williams’ “Journalist’s Creed,” which hangs in the National Press Club and which I quote at the end of this book. I talked at great length with my fellow SPANial, Steve Chaggaris, who was the Political Director of *CBS News* at the time, and I interrupted the birthday celebration of *CBS* White House Correspondent Major Garrett² who provided experienced opinions about the distrust in the media today, as well as a thorough explanation of the current broadcast news environment. I even interviewed someone from the *CNN* investigative unit who asked to remain anonymous because the climate in Washington had so politicized working for *CNN*.

Armed with information about the ways of Washington and the meaning of the messages, I continued my queries to drill down on the right-wing media. I had learned an incredible amount from everyone up to this point, and I realized that there was a separation between the right-wing media and the rest of the media. To figure out what was happening and why, I spoke with three tremendous experts in this area: Jared Holt, Research Associate at People for the American Way; Howard Polskin, writer of *TheRighting*, a daily tip sheet that aggregates the top stories on the right-wing media Web site; and Will Sommer, Reporter at *The Daily Beast* and the author of *The Right Richter*, a tip sheet on the right-wing media. Jared Holt was especially helpful in our discussion about deliberate efforts to delegitimize the mainstream media, and shortly after our interview, he single-handedly brought down Alex Jones from social media (Marcotte 2018). Will Sommer and I discussed epistemic closure, high-context culture, and the rise of conspiracy theories. He also checked and added to my diagram of the right-wing media circle, which proved to be instrumental in my research. And Howard Polskin provided me with enough material to write a second book, especially in the area of topics covered within the right-wing media circle, the politics of fear, and the effect of a polarized media on our broader political culture. These interviews were more explanatory and instructive than Eunice could have

predicted. What had been a tangle of ideas had come into clear focus. It took two years for me to make sense of it all but Eunice was correct: I had needed experts to show me the way. It is my greatest hope that I made sense of their wisdom and can add productively to the larger discussion about political media in a polarized age.

After all of these interviews and after more research, I found that there was not a two-sided political media system which divided news and commentary into left and right. Instead, a small, tightly closed circle contains right-wing media outlets. With the exception of *Fox News*, which is the focal point of the circle, these outlets are not journalistic: Their mission is not to uncover difficult truths or break news and speak truth to power. They have a negative objective, which is to cast aspersions on those they oppose. They provide commentary and analysis, some of which is brilliantly written and argued, practically none of which is self-effacing. Those within the right-wing media circle compete against one another only for an audience, and even in this regard, they are generous with their support of one another, featuring players from other organizations on varying platforms. They do not challenge others within their sphere; they do not race to break news that contradicts the narrative or politicians that they support. They have their own set of facts, truths, and explanations, and these do not match up *at all* with those outside the circle.

I was able to more fully understand the anger of the man from the volleyball practice in 2015. He is one of many Americans who feel ignored by politics, by the “establishment” leaders in Washington and the media that cover them. The news and information my volleyball buddy receives is very different from the media I consume, which is highly problematic because we cannot communicate effectively without a common set of ideas, facts, and truths. We do not have to agree with one another politically, but we should be able to have a conversation that is informed by the same reality. He and I live in the same town, but we might as well live in different countries because we are so deeply divided in our understandings of the world around us. Our sharpest resemblance is how angry we both are, although we are angry about different things. We are not alone in our frustration and it feels like the whole country is annoyed, indignant, and unwilling to compromise. The rest of this book explains how we became so furious. My hope is that by understanding the reasons we have grown so divided, we can try to unite, if only to lower the political temperature and repair our discord.

NOTES

1. I strongly recommend Roderick Hart's book, *Civic Hope*, which expands on this point.
2. True story.

REFERENCE

Marcotte, Amanda, "Meet Jared Holt, the guy who's getting Alex Jones kicked off the internet". *Salon*, August 8, 2018. <https://www.salon.com/2018/08/08/meet-jared-holt-the-guy-whos-getting-alex-jones-kicked-off-the-internet/>.



CHAPTER 1

Two Truths

Jason Pye is in his thirties with a hipster beard, cool-nerd glasses, and a big smile. He wears baggy pants and a hoodie around the offices of FreedomWorks where he is the Vice President for Legislative Affairs. Pye says that he is one of the oldest guys in the office and that Millennials dominate his libertarian advocacy group specifically, and DC politics in general. Cans of Mt. Dew litter the FreedomWorks desks, which may be one reason Pye talks so fast, and the overall vibe of the office is something that Aaron Sorkin would have created if he were writing a TV show about an ideological activist group in the twenty-first century. Pye came to FreedomWorks without a college education or any formal political experience: He was a blogger.

Jason Pye is successful at FreedomWorks, the firebrand organization that takes great pleasure in shuttering the government, because of his ability to craft messages quickly and stay on-brand. His brand is libertarianism. Pye speaks about the future of political communication in terms of “rapid reaction” and “hits” and “followers” which fits in neatly within the political messaging environment of today: Quick and immediate missives are blasted from far and wide on capricious platforms. Jason Pye is at FreedomWorks at a time when the American public wants their political alerts in strident bursts of ideological fervor; fast, direct, and emotional, delivered so the public can respond and react with equal zeal and feeling. The modern American political media climate is crowded with voices from countless places, where politicians jockey for attention, and the public is fired up and fuming. Jason Pye is good at his

job; accordingly, the right-leaning portion of the American public hears from (and about) FreedomWorks often. The job of the FreedomWorks communications staff is to keep their members angry and active, because the best way to motivate a political base is through wrath and alarm. Most political messaging, from FreedomWorks, or any other political activist, ends with what is termed a “call to action,” a direction for the public to do something. Most calls to action are answered because of anxiety and anger.

FreedomWorks is located on Capitol Hill, close to the action of government, blocks from both Congress and the Supreme Court, and is an easy cab ride to the White House. In that way, FreedomWorks represents the norm of traditional American politics; they are located in the right spot and the office is chock-full of eager recent graduates of Political Science programs. But beyond the standard-issue cubicle furniture and whiteboards where they plot government shutdowns, FreedomWorks represents the new Washington. It is not just the beer kegs that are tapped in their kitchen (signaling a bro-culture of ideological warriors), but the cell phones, monitors, and data that dominate their workspaces and dictate every action and response. The new political communication landscape is hard-wired and built for speed. This is for a good reason: The country is similarly connected, and the public is just waiting to hear from FreedomWorks—or the Environmental Defense Fund or the National Abortion Rights Action League or any of the other political groups that play such a big role in American politics today. Other interest groups may not have the kegs tapped in their kitchens, but their Communications Directors and Legislative Affairs reps share Jason Pye’s intensity and drive. They will tell you that politics today is a war and the first side to reach the most people will win. It is more than the reach in the “emails sent” way; it is the persuasion and the connection to a specific, segmented, and ideological audience. It is about reaching an American public who are super mad at everything all the time, and keeping them that way.

A growing number of people who work in politics embrace the new Washington media culture. While many have noted the expansion of government, what has grown even more profoundly are the numbers of political consultants, interest group activists, and unelected advisors who play critical roles in the policymaking process. There are more political players in DC today who have to communicate to both politicians and to the voting public, and luckily they do not have to fight for limited

coverage in a few select newspapers, or for precious airtime on three television channels. Everyone involved in politics has had to raise their communications game in the last decade because media technology has changed so dramatically, which has consequently magnified the landscape. The media have exploded in size, form, and reach, and as a result there are seemingly endless outlets to utilize in political communication efforts. Politicians and other political actors need this media system in order to reach the public, and they clamor for the attention of a disparate and finicky audience. Forget Warhol's twentieth-century idea that everyone gets their 15 minutes of fame; in today's political media environment, everyone has to put in their 15 minutes of face time just to keep the whole thing running. Because the media are ubiquitous, and because the public chooses not to escape from the relentless push-notifications and alerts, Americans are awash in news and information. There are so many places to find news content, politicians and politicians have to work hard to attract serious attention while news outlets have to elbow away a mounting volume of competition. The current political messaging landscape has a sizeable (and growing) number of people all vying for attention from an audience that has too many options.

This is at once democratizing because the abundance of voices leads to a diversity of perspectives, but also tricky because the media terrain is so vast and crowded that it is hard to be heard over the din. The word "media" is the plural of "medium," and today there are many different platforms on which to communicate, and all are interlinked. There are no stand-alone political programs or forums; something broadcast on TV or radio will also have a Web site, something online will also stream video content, all print media have journalists who blog, tweet, and podcast, and everyone wants you to like them on Facebook. Jason Pye knows that in the old days, a well-placed newspaper story or cable news story about FreedomWorks would suffice, but today these outlets are only one piece of a very large puzzle.

Pye keeps his eye on news organizations and trade publications, on bloggers and pundits and fellow activists, and now more than ever FreedomWorks interacts with their members on social media. What used to be a fairly linear public relations push to sell policy (or an ideology or a candidate) is now far more serpentine. It is also focused on two separate and disparate audiences: As a figurehead of FreedomWorks, Jason Pye needs to communicate with other political players in Washington, and so he is frequently quoted in mainstream political outlets like *The*

Hill and *USA Today*. This is his inside game: Capitol Hill reporters likely know that they should find Jason Pye for a good quote about economic liberty. As a figurehead of a group that remains ideologically connected to the Tea Party, Pye also needs to communicate with a more specific audience of ideologues, and so he is quoted on *Breitbart*, *Newsmax*, and *Hot Air*. These outlets are within a right-wing media circle that is tightly closed and specific: This circle includes talk radio shows, Web sites, media conglomerates, and *Fox News*, and its mission differs from the mission of rest of the political media. This right-wing circle exists because of a long-standing opposition to the so-called liberal media, and because of its origin story this circle has a negative objective: Their purpose is to support conservative ideals but even more to oppose those outside of their bubble. If the rest of the mainstream media (to include liberal, centrist, and conservative outlets) work to break stories with scoops and investigative reporting, the right-wing media circle works to oppose an enemy. Jason Pye pitches his press releases to the broader press, but much of the time the outlets within the right-wing media circle are the ones that run them because they share a philosophy. Vehemently anti-Washington, raging against liberals and the institutions of government that have left them behind, the right-wing media circle encapsulates resentment. Much of the content produced within this circle is not journalism in classic sense of breaking stories, but it is considered “news” to a segment of the population who has no use for any other media source because they simply do not trust them.

It would be false equivalence to say there are two equal ideological media bubbles since the right-wing circle is small, focused, and closed off, while the rest of the mainstream media exists around it. Yet those inside this right ring see themselves fighting against everyone who opposes them, and this battle is one constant source of their fury. Concurrently, while the mainstream media is not a tightly controlled circle, today the public can sense a similarly intense anger in the press, felt across a wide expanse of programs and platforms, focused on much of what the right-wing media circle espouses, targeting the politicians supported by the right. In this manner, there are two opposing media sides today even though they may be differently constructed and varying in size, scope, and mission. Journalism today is a combative industry, reflective of the genuine fury all over politics. The American political system has always been ideologically divided, but now the political media are divided as well with audiences on both sides pointing at the other saying

“Can you believe what those people are saying?” There are now two very different news narratives informing the public. Both narratives expose and feed our anger.

The right-wing media and the mainstream news media might be separated by ideology but they operate in similar ways: They both race the clock to be first with a story because being first means more attention (and more profit) from a content-hungry public. They both feature journalists and media stars who bounce from program to program, across platforms in order to gain recognition, capture an audience, and sell their media brand, and they also include politicians like Jason Pye who lend expertise and authority to their content. They are dedicated to delivering stories to their audiences that they will find interesting, stories that make the public feel strongly. Yet despite these structural similarities, the missions of these two media sets are different and so their product is too, which means that their audiences have dissimilar information experiences. The mainstream media break news and varying outlets will build on a big story, adding facts and analysis to make it their own. Within the right-wing media circle, the commentators and reporters will provide their own take on a situation that stays in line with what others in the circle articulate. One important quality of outlets within the right ring is how unified they are in their messaging, how uncritical they are toward one another.

The broader mainstream media is so vast that it cannot maintain such a united purpose. Everything outside of the right ring includes liberal Web sites such as the *Huffington Post* and *Salon*, centrist news organizations such as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Axios*, and the *PBS Newshour*, and conservative sources such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Weekly Standard*, and *The National Review*. Certainly, there are ideological clusters within the mainstream media but they are not as cohesive, reinforcing, or unified as those in the right-wing circle.¹ Size matters here, too: Within the right-wing circle, there are only a few dozen outlets while the mainstream media includes many, many more. This means that it is easier for the right ring to stay on-message, while the rest of the mainstream media have a harder time doing this.

Additionally, the ambitions of the mainstream news media differ from their right-wing counterparts as well. The professed journalistic dedication to the First Amendment may come off as sanctimonious, but the craving for professional success and the profit imperatives of news organizations support the self-aggrandizing. In modern news journalism,

newspapers, television networks, and Web sites are rewarded for breaking news, either through major scoops or minor scooplets. The intense competition between the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* (and the resulting financial gains for both) is one example of how those engaging in actual journalism are compensated for their efforts. To stay profitable, a news organization has to supply something, and the mainstream news media supplies breaking news, while the right-wing media circle furnishes the counter narrative.

Political media organizations from both sides face the challenges of financial solvency, but again this reveals itself in different ways. Within the right-wing media circle, speed is important and the competition among these outlets is to be first. There is very little real competition between these organizations given the bunker mentality of this partisan press corps, but the right-wing media outlets do race against each other to attract as many clicks and hits as possible. This is how they make money. The financial imperatives of the mainstream media are more complicated since (a) legacy outlets in the mainstream press have had to transform themselves in the face of a rapidly evolving technological landscape and (b) the competition among news organizations is ferocious. Time, technology, and circumstance collided to force the mainstream media to renovate and that transition has been rocky. Mainstream news organizations, be they legacy or digitally native, now have a very different set of tools to use in an evolving media environment, but they have had to learn how to use these tools while on the job. They are reliant upon the journalistic norms of traditional politics but are now tied to the new American media mandates of speed and splashy content while news competitions pop up like mushrooms. The political media business is both booming and struggling at exactly the same time.

Understandably, with all of the content available today the public can be overwhelmed by political storytelling that comes in the form of news, analysis, opinion, headlines, rumors, conspiracies, and satire. There is an abundance of material now, all coming from outlets who are trying hard to capture our attention, yet in the boom times there are also drawbacks. While the public can access information with unprecedented speed, and while this *should* be a good thing for American democracy, we are veering sharply into concentrated discord. Never before has the public had as much access to data, analysis, and opinion from such a wide array of sources, but far from inspiring, we have cocooned ourselves in bubbles that comfort and reaffirm but do not challenge or encourage. Polls

consistently show that the American public is distrusting of the news, of our elected officials, of our neighbors. We are polarized in ways that are deeply painful and seem lasting, and in the course of this polarization we are fast losing the ability to compromise for the better of the whole.

This book is about political media and their role in our devolving national political discussion. Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1967 that the “medium is the message,” where a media form has a profound impact on how a message is understood, but today there are too many questions that McLuhan could not have foreseen. What transpires when everyone has access to a medium and anyone can become a messenger? What happens to the news media in this content-heavy climate? What occurs when there is so much information that Americans are drowning in it? When politicking turns into a machine-gun spray of reactions and positions? When the once vaunted information institutions are shunned in favor of targeted hits and social media, and the news organizations struggle to survive?

Politics becomes angry, loud, and urgent, and the media help to spread the discontent. There are now two sets of truths in American politics making it impossible to find common ground. The public is super mad at everything all the time.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Nothing happens all at once, nor does one single thing trigger an enormous cultural shift. The American public did not wake up one day and wonder “why is everyone yelling at each other?” because we have gradually grown accustomed to the noise and have progressively contributed to it. We did not go from three broadcast channels to Twitter overnight. Spiro Agnew might have called the media “nattering nabobs of negativism” in 1970, but at that time the public writ large did not hold the Fourth Estate in such snarling disdain. There are four primary reasons that we have the political media we have today, and all of them are interconnected.

1. For there to be a divided media system, the ground had to be fertile for a separation. For fifty years, conservatives have disparaged academics, the government, and the media as being liberally biased, to the point that alternatives to all three were pursued.

2. Technological advancements made the media faster and more personal, shifting print to broadcast, broadcast to cable, and then moving everything online. This led to the creation of niche narrowcasting which generated partisan news.
3. The new, conservative alternative to the perceived liberally biased media was profitable and produced imitators, the technology available furthered the growth of a separate right-wing media bubble.
4. Our deepening political divide that has been growing through the decades has intensified into a sharp polarization, and this has now spread to apolitical areas of our lives. The public cocoons itself in ideological filter bubbles, especially in regard to media choice.

We have the political media system that we do because of all of these components, all put together. In this book, however, they are addressed independently first and then brought together.

SHIFTS IN THE POLITICAL CLIMATE

A hyperpolarized media must be built upon a foundation of anger, and Chapter 2 delves into the history and development of this foundation. There are several important factors that lay the groundwork for the political communicating we do today, all of which have to do with trust. While many Americans may adhere to the belief that the country has always been great and has grown progressively greater with time, those who long for the old days often speak of the lost faith in our leaders. The public used to trust experts, elected officials, and newsmen far more than today, in part because of events that sparked social and political changes which then produced a backlash against liberalism and ideas about higher learning, governing, and journalism. Derision of these institutions became constants in conservative dogma, which grew and flourished in the mid-twentieth century. Without the constant rejection of politics and the news media, the hunger for something new would not be there to drive innovation and adaptation, nor would the vehemence against the news industry land so solidly. A polarized media is only possible if doubt is cast on these existing institutions.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the government grew in size and leaned forward to assist groups who had heretofore been victims of discrimination. Also during this time, the news media's coverage of the Vietnam War and Watergate further contributed to a perception that the press was at