

POLITICAL JUNKIES

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ALSO BY CLAIRE BOND POTTER

*War on Crime:
Bandits, G-Men, and the Politics of Mass Culture*

POLITICAL JUNKIES

From Talk Radio to Twitter,
How Alternative Media Hooked Us
on Politics and Broke Our Democracy

**CLAIRE
BOND POTTER**

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For Nancy Barnes



CONTENTS

Introduction:	Press Pass	000
Chapter 1:	The Political Newsletter	000
Chapter 2:	Public Broadcasting	000
Chapter 3:	Creating Partisans	000
Chapter 4:	Electronic Democracy	000
Chapter 5:	Scandal	000
Chapter 6:	Netroots	000
Chapter 7:	Blogging the News	000
Chapter 8:	MyBarackObama	000
Chapter 9:	Tea Party Time	000
Chapter 10:	White House 2.0	000
Chapter 11:	Hashtag Populisms	000
Chapter 12:	Democalypse Now	000
Conclusion:	Post-Truth	000
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	000
	<i>Notes</i>	000
	<i>Index</i>	000



== Introduction ==

PRESS PASS

I arrived at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center in National Harbor, Maryland, after the Secret Service had locked it down. Vice President Mike Pence was giving a keynote, and no one was getting in until it was over. It was the last week in February 2018, and a swelling group of rueful Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) attendees had all made the same mistake. I sat down on a bench with a married couple: I learned that Kathy was a minister, and Jake was running for Congress in a Midwestern Republican primary. In addition to her storefront ministry, Kathy also had an internet radio show, which offered a Christian perspective on contemporary politics and culture. They were at CPAC to connect with Christian broadcasters and other alternative media outlets that might support Jake's campaign. The weekend would probably cost them over \$2,000.

But what a weekend it is! Almost a half-century after its founding in 1974, CPAC exemplifies the divisive populisms that have been resurgent in American politics since the 1960s, a phenomenon that this book ties to the rise of alternative media.¹ As I chatted with Kathy and Jake, I was exactly where I wanted to be: in a gathering of conservative activists and Donald Trump enthusiasts linked to each other by a network of computers, podcasts, print,

and televisions. CPAC is a feast designed for a political junkie like me, one who needs to leave New York City's progressive media, and my own university, behind to immerse myself in conservative activism. My friend Ryan, an alternative media journalist, helped me connect to people in his network; and the live program allowed me to hear entire speeches, not just the decontextualized clips that appeared on the evening news. While the main stage featured numerous members of the Trump administration, as well as the president himself, the keynote speakers who created the most excitement were populist alternative media stars like Laura Ingraham, Ben Shapiro, and Sheriff David A. Clarke (a podcaster and one of fewer than a half-dozen African Americans on the program). *Breitbart News* editor Steve Bannon, a perennial favorite who had just lost his job as White House chief strategist, was notably absent, as were paleo-conservatives and neo-conservatives, a small coalition of intellectuals and politicians known as "Never Trumpers" who, together, have increasingly opposed the rise of populism in the Republican Party.

And of course, there was also "Prison Hillary," an actor walking around in a striped jumpsuit, a blond wig, and a smiling Hillary Clinton mask, her handcuffed hands held out beseechingly.

"Prison Hillary" is a character we were all familiar with from the memes that showed up in our social media feeds during the 2016 campaign: Clinton's agonized face, photoshopped behind bars. She is a fantasy, born on alt-right electronic forums and promoted by Trump partisans, a post-truth figure who does not represent the "facts" about Hillary Clinton, but rather what many populists *feel* is true about her.² And she is a symbol of why political media, and democracy, are broken. *Political Junkies* shows how debates about politics have been reshaped by alternative media; and how this dynamic has created an overheated, populist political atmosphere that offers the greatest challenge to American democracy and government since the Civil War. But this book is also a story about technology: it demonstrates how the rise of opinion journalism, and editorializing, has been replaced by *political storytelling* designed for "you." Always intended to attract an audience of political junkies and create new ones, in its digital form, alternative media has

undermined a common idea of what news really is and what role the news should play in constituting a public square where everyone can agree on basic facts.

There is no more persuasive example of the importance of alternative media in contemporary conservative populism than CPAC, which devotes a substantial portion of its programming to alternative media workshops. Some helped students working at conservative campus publications get jobs at digital newspapers and web magazines. Others trained activists to become alternative media producers, offering tips and techniques for establishing and promoting a blog, podcast, or a YouTube channel. The media section in the main convention hall was jammed with correspondents from alternative operations: nearly all the women had long, dyed blond hair, in imitation of stars like Ann Coulter, Laura Ingraham, and most of the female anchors on *Fox News*.

I quickly grasped how little of this vibrant and eclectic event was being covered in the mainstream media, even in conservative publications like the *Wall Street Journal*. On Broadcast Row, an exhibit hall of alternative media outlets just outside the main stage, producers like NRATV (a now-defunct operation established by the National Rifle Association, a major CPAC 2018 sponsor) were broadcasting live as crowds of conference attendees looked on. Podcasts of the keynote speakers were dropped on iTunes, SoundCloud, and Google Play minutes after they ended. On the lower level of the exhibition hall, I dodged a cardboard cutout of Senator Elizabeth Warren wearing a Plains Indian headdress and bumped into two talkative young women who, as college students, had established a thriving web magazine aimed at the campus right called *Lone Conservative*.

CPAC is an annual event where conservatives of all ages network, and it is a particularly important site for college students to become involved in a Republican Party that has enthusiastically given itself over to the internet, Donald Trump, and conservative populism. But its thriving alternative media exhibits were not unique. At Netroots Nation, the younger, progressive equivalent of CPAC, I would have seen a similar array of alternative media vying for the attention of Democrats. In 2019, the born-digital sites

Alternet, RawStory, and Front Page Live, as well as an array of PACs, unions, and the Democratic National Committee, anchored the exhibit hall as premier sponsors. Lesser sponsors like Bonfire Media (which produces “powerful and creative pieces that raise public awareness”), the Center for Story-Based Strategy (“harnessing the power of narrative for social change”), Firefly Partners (“custom digital solutions for progressive nonprofits”), and SBD Digital (“multiplatform matching to meet audiences where they are”) testify to the extraordinary amount of influence that alternative media wields in contemporary American political culture. What progressive and conservative alternative media have in common is that they are explicitly ideological and seek to reach motivated audiences of political junkies.

Alternative media outlets, right and left, also position themselves against the so-called mainstream media, a collection of news outlets that they view as aligned with the interests of corporate and political elites. Also known as “old media,” “traditional media,” or “legacy media,” these newspapers and broadcasting companies are, or have evolved from, family-owned corporations that predated digital distribution. Most importantly, the mainstream media is viewed by alternative media outlets and the activists that patronize them as insufficiently ideological, part of a political, media, and corporate establishment that cannot be trusted to tell the truth or hold the powerful to account. Since its origins in the 1950s, alternative media has sought to recruit readers who were passionate about politics, to jolt Americans alienated from politics out of their apathy, and to cultivate activist information networks. And they have done this in the interests of a more transparent, inclusive, and principled politics that each side, conservative and progressive, believes would represent a fairer political system.

In the 1950s, where *Political Junkies* begins, alternative media producers believed that a more transparent media, a more explicitly ideological media, and a media that positioned itself in opposition to the political establishment could promote a better democracy. By 2016, it seemed that many digital alternative media sites had acquired a sinister power. Sites designed to distribute fake news heightened animosity between the partisans they targeted,

undermined the electoral process, and divided voters into acrimonious factions. By the 2018 American midterm elections, over a third of Democrats voted, not to endorse their own party's policies, but to oppose Republican rule; and more than a quarter of Republicans voted, not for their own party's policies, but to keep Democrats out of power.³

And yet, the media that drew us into politics have made us angrier at, and more contemptuous of, our democratic institutions. Although we consume news all day on our digital devices, the vast majority of Americans are more alienated from each other and from a political system that requires citizen participation to function, than they have ever been. From talk radio to Twitter, right and left stay in their red and blue lanes, mainlining ideology, shouting insults across the political divide, and seeing conspiracies everywhere. How has political talk become so extreme and political engagement so anemic? How has a partisan alternative media that is in many cases just as profitable and entrenched come to be perceived by many as equally, or more, reliable than an establishment media that invests billions of dollars a year on reporting, writing, and broadcasting the news?

And how has American democracy, founded on the idea of a free press and free expression, become so broken?

Political Junkies is a history of how Americans got hooked on alternative media and ended up craving satisfaction that politics can never deliver. It is about how, beginning after World War II, some alternative media channels repurposed mass media technologies for political work, imagining new forms of journalism that appealed to a specialist audience critical of the political and media establishment. *Political Junkies* is also a story about how technology creates communities out of dissidents otherwise isolated from each other, and how it forges majorities out of minorities. And it is about how enterprising alternative media entrepreneurs delivered their message to a chosen public, recycling and refreshing older technologies and adopting new ones that suited their resources, talents, objectives, and audience.

But most of all, *Political Junkies* is a story about you and me. It is about the emotional bond that can be created between those who make political news and those who consume it; and it is a history of an identity—“political junkie”—that now binds us as makers and users of political entertainment. It is also about how serving political junkies came to supersede another ideal: that well-reported, objectively written news, organized around facts, could help well-informed, reasonable citizens make collective choices. These imagined communities, as Benedict Anderson called them, bound together by print, established the emotional and political legitimacy of the modern democratic nation-state by creating a collective understanding of politics that could survive partisanship.⁴

But alternative media outlets, because they gave voice to outsider and minority perspectives within the larger media environment, have been essential to maintaining the integrity of both the journalism establishment and democracy itself, and to changing mainstream conversations. Because making political decisions mattered, eighteenth-century printers of newspapers, pamphlets, and broadsides were viewed as some of the most influential, and necessary, citizens in the English Atlantic world, each having an organic relation to the other. As the United States broke apart and came back together in the nineteenth century, mainstream partisan newspapers recorded and increasingly drove the conversations that moved politicians, but alternative newspapers and pamphlets, written primarily by white abolitionists, free African Americans, and women, drove political change.⁵

Yet no nineteenth-century reader would have viewed these distinctions as constituting a “mainstream” and an “alternative” media. This was in part because all printed news was partisan until journalism became a profession in the late nineteenth century when, like other literary and scholarly pursuits, it adopted ideals of objectivity.⁶ After World War I, newspapers favored the notion that while individual news outlets might be aligned with one of the two parties, democracy, in general, was better served by reporting that did not editorialize or analyze, but rather delivered the facts and stood above the political fray. This idea extended itself to mainstream radio in the late 1920s, and to television in the 1950s, as both

mediums became crucial platforms for distributing political news.⁷ After World War II, alternative media on the left and the right began to insist on a greater voice for underrepresented political positions, people, and social movements as well as the necessity of criticizing a liberal media and political establishment. After 1952, objectivity itself became increasingly suspect, an unspoken value invoked when liberals lambasted conservative outlets and conservatives assailed the “liberal media” as lacking in fairness or purveying “fake news.”⁸

Although both genres seek to inform, mainstream and alternative media have important differences and similarities. Both can be corporate, and there is no one business model: some alternative media have become surprisingly profitable, even as some mainstream media outlets, specifically newspapers and news magazines, have steadily lost subscriptions and advertising revenue. But most importantly, while even contemporary conservative mainstream media outlets see themselves as institutions whose primary mission is to inform conversation in the public square, purveyors of alternative media are activists, emanating from, or advocating for, social movements. They emphasize a personal, partisan connection to the reader and often exhort that reader to political action. Whereas twentieth-century mainstream media made a claim, like all mass culture, to educate an undifferentiated audience and to provide a public service for a profit, alternative media outlets were defined by their commitment to a partisan demographic that was already persuaded and needed only to be mobilized with more information and analysis that enhanced closely held beliefs.⁹

By the twenty-first century, these two distinct genres began to borrow from each other. Alternative media outlets like the *Huffington Post* and *Breitbart News* have become profitable, corporate outlets; while *Fox News* and *MSNBC*, two television news outlets owned by mainstream media corporations, deliberately cultivate partisan audiences. This is an ambiguity that readers of this book will have to tolerate, as I have, and it explains a great deal about why Americans sometimes wander to the frontiers of digital journalism to get information they believe they can trust without being sure why that “news” is or is not reliable. But throughout *Political Junkies*, alternative media does retain one distinct characteristic.

While these outlets aren't always populist, populism—which is, by definition, adversarial to the mainstream political and media establishment—thrives in the dissident atmosphere of alternative media. While readers will sometimes see me describe partisan divisions as “conservative” and “liberal,” “Republican” and “Democratic,” those labels obscure what alternative media have done on both sides: activate “the people” to resist what they perceive as the domination of cultural, economic, and political elites. As Richard Viguerie pointed out in his 1983 book, *The Establishment vs. the People: Is a New Populist Revolt on the Way?*, populism is practical politics, a way of thinking that “identifies with the ‘common man,’ that is, the man or woman who works for a living . . . it is more than simply a political ideology; it is an attribute of character[.]”¹⁰

However, twenty-first century populism is distinctly marked by the power of our media choices to divide us. This was not always true. Dating back to the agricultural movements of the late nineteenth century in the Southern and Midwestern United States, populism often served to unite activists across party, and even racial, lines. While many historians have pegged populism's resurgence to segregationist George Wallace's 1968 presidential bid, Richard Hofstadter saw the right-wing extremism that took Barry Goldwater to the 1964 Republican nomination, particularly in its hostility to the intellectual and political establishment, as a link to the American populist past.¹¹

Beginning with the Goldwater campaign, the New Right explicitly claimed the mantle of conservative populism. Left movements—even Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter (now part of the Movement for Black Lives)—rarely used this word until the 2016 election, when the progressive coalition that formed around Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, and subsequently Justice Democrats, was routinely described as populist.¹² Yet, even without making a claim on the word, by the 1960s, the audiences most dedicated to, and driven by, left alternative media also promoted an anti-establishment “people's politics.” Their legacy is today's progressive populism. These political movements are generally horizontal; community-based; seek fairness by reining in, or disempowering,

capitalism; and see the Washington political establishment as a barrier to putting government to work for “the people.”¹³

Readers will want to keep a keen eye out for the many differences within populisms, not just right and left, but *within* right and left. However, there are broad containers that help distinguish populisms, and the media that promote them, as having roughly aligned with either the Republican or the Democratic Party since 1950. When I use the phrase “conservative populism,” I mean movements and organizations bound together by, among other things, a belief in the virtues of small government, faith, family, military strength, anti-Communism, and a retreat from compacts with other nations.¹⁴ The phrase “progressive populism” describes movements and organizations mostly aligned with the historical tradition I described in the previous paragraph, sometimes articulated in the United States today as democratic socialism. Progressive populists believe in *using* government to rein in, and even replace, the capitalist establishment, creating mechanisms for horizontal democracy, mobilizing communities around principles of social equality, and implementing ideas about governance that originate at the grass roots.¹⁵

In the digital age, alternative media have created new imagined communities defined by hyper-partisanship, sometimes called “silos,” “echo chambers,” or “filter bubbles,” virtual spaces that now can be found working in tandem with mainstream outlets to create a feedback loop of partisan news.¹⁶ These information silos provide robust, if sometimes unfactual, alternatives to consensus political views promoted in the mainstream, at the expense of pulling us into different ideological corners.¹⁷ Cheap and free digital tools introduced in the 1990s cleared the way for new voices from the political margins to find each other and become visible as audiences. These audiences became the new markets for information and advertising, but also new constituencies for politicians. As user-friendly digital media tools—partisan websites, email, blogs, and social media, to name a few—proliferated after 1998, technology that initially promised a more satisfying and productive engagement with the political process produced a world of political talk that many find uncompromising and vicious, a cauldron of

conspiracy theories, propaganda, and fake news that drowns out the information users really want and need.¹⁸

Importantly, while mainstream media represent a consensus about what news should be and do at any given moment, alternative media are innovative, emerging from the wreckage of mainstream, and even other alternative, media. As an example, political talk radio took advantage of corporate journalism's move to television by amplifying an existing genre and making it more partisan; similarly, newsletters, and then blogging, moved into spaces vacated by newspaper journalism.¹⁹ Although alternative media styles that emphasize rebellion and dissent were learned in mainstream mediums like talk radio, alternative media always promised its consumers that it was against the establishment—and *for you*.²⁰ News and political opinions written by a trusted source for a chosen reader have adapted to new technologies over the years, that often drew on, and recollected, their predecessors. Delivered in partisan newsletters by the 1950s; on public broadcasting by the 1970s; via a talk radio host by the 1980s, and in a blog by the 1990s, each promised a growing audience of dedicated political junkies something unique that could not be obtained in the mainstream. By the 2000s, internet-only news sites, and by 2010, podcasts, often reached millions more consumers than mainstream news sites did—still promising political news personally tailored to readers' needs. And as television, radio, and newspapers struggled to keep their audiences by mastering social media, they, too, sharpened their appeal to the specific, and often partisan, media consumer. In examining the use of social media that helped to elect Donald Trump president in 2016, the *New York Times* discovered that while it was ranked 7 in national shares, *Breitbart News* was a close 14: "Online, Everything is Alternative Media," the doleful headline read.²¹

The star of this book is, of course, the "political junkie": a person who has a compulsion to immerse herself in politics, political news, and political gossip. It is an identity that mainstream journalists were ambivalent about when it first came into general use in the 1970s. To them, it conveyed an almost recreational lack of seriousness and an unseemly fascination with politicians, rather than with political principles. Differently, alternative media producers, and

often political consultants, embraced their identities as political junkies, seeing it as a bond, and a commitment, they shared with their audiences. Although the feelings, and compulsion toward politics, that define the political junkie are clearly visible in the first two chapters, the phrase will barely make an appearance there for the simple reason that it is almost impossible to find it written down, anywhere, until 1973. That year, Hunter S. Thompson, a practitioner of the “new journalism” who was well acquainted with recreational pharmaceuticals, announced that he had become a “politics junkie” during his time as a *Rolling Stone* correspondent on South Dakota Senator George McGovern’s presidential campaign. Thompson’s sentiment is critical to how twenty-first-century Americans would come to describe the compulsion toward digital alternative media more generally: an almost physical addiction to the adrenaline rush of politics that often overwhelmed reason and objectivity. Being a politics junkie, Thompson explained, was as much about feeding a physical need as being a heroin junkie. “[When] a journalist turns into a politics junkie,” he wrote, “he will sooner or later start raving and babbling in print about things that only a person who has Been There can possibly understand.”²²

Sound familiar? It’s that sense of politics being authentic at last, not just a bunch of faces on a screen. It’s how we feel when we are tweeting a political debate and a pundit or political journalist we admire retweets or @’s us. It’s like being—to quote Aaron Burr in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*—in the room where it happens.

Use of the term “political junkie” skyrocketed after 1973.²³ Political consultants used it to describe a passion for politics that caused them to destroy their bodies and marriages to work on campaigns. “A political junkie,” consultant Joseph S. Miller wrote in 2008, “is distinguished by one universal characteristic—a fascination-absorption-compulsion-passion for politics that sometimes defies rationality.” But the phrase also came to describe political groupies, such as a Capitol Hill astrologer profiled by the *New York Times* in 1977. In the 1980s, journalists both identified with the term and disavowed it. They would coyly use the phrase to invoke their passion for their work, but then explicitly dis-identify with it because it connoted partisanship and amateurism. By 1991,

the phrase “political junkie” came to describe highly visible anti-establishment alternative media stars, like superstar conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh.²⁴

But perhaps because of Limbaugh and a new generation of political bloggers giving the mainstream media a run for their money, being a political junkie became cool. Arguably Limbaugh, who had bounced around in the secondary radio market, and Nate Silver, a statistics nerd from the University of Chicago, were radically uncool before discovering a passion for politics. But political junkie also described, not just a passion for politics but a kind of extreme politics fan, and a relationship to that fan, that mainstream journalists and pundits soon tried to cultivate. Beginning in the late 1980s, established media figures like Russell Baker, Chris Matthews, Tom Brokaw, and Gabe Pressman proudly labeled themselves political junkies, and in 2000, National Public Radio’s Ken Rudin launched a political news show called—yes, *Political Junkie*.²⁵ At the same time, the expanding mass audience for political news that was fed by alternative media, and by establishment cable television shows like *Fox News*, *CNN*, and *MSNBC* that offered political entertainment, also became known as political junkies. In his 2004 celebration of the role of alternative media in driving the rise of conservative populism, Richard Viguerie looked back on the days when the only media available to political junkies were liberal and mainstream. Around the same time, political bloggers like Taegan Goddard, Ben Smith, Heather “Digby” Parton, and Kevin Drum referred to the audience for their work as political junkies.²⁶

By the start of the twenty-first century, both the *newsmaker* and the *audience for the news product* were embraced by the phrase political junkies. More importantly, alternative media was defined by the needs of the political junkie—and so was democracy itself.

Political Junkies begins at a moment when news values were being challenged by McCarthyism, by advertising-driven models for writing and broadcasting that seemed to favor news palatable to corporate sponsors, and by editorial practices that firmly separated objective reporting from opinion writing. After World War II, the

United States developed “a remarkable form of censorship,” critic Paul Goodman commented in 1956. Everyone had the “political right to say what he believes,” but American minds were smothered by “newspapers, mass-circulation magazines, best-selling books, broadcasts, and public pronouncements that disregard what he says and give the official way of looking at things.” If what an American was thinking was not what other people were talking about, it wasn’t considered “newsworthy.”²⁷

The first three chapters explore the rise of media professionals who began their careers in mainstream journalism and, in some cases, politics, but came to believe that it was necessary to establish an alternative, even independent, method of delivering the news. Chapter 1, “The Political Newsletter,” explores the revival of a print format that allowed partisans on the right and the left to distribute news the mainstream media would not report. Left-wing journalist Isidor F. Stone’s *I. F. Stone’s Weekly* tapped into an audience of left and liberal citizens who craved in-depth news from a political insider. Over the next several decades, Stone became an inspiration to and a touchstone for left alternative media producers. His readers, although they didn’t use the term, were among the original political junkies, and Stone’s writing retains its power today. Glenn Greenwald, a founding editor of the alternative webzine the *Intercept*, admitted that when he began reading the *Weekly* online, he “instantly became almost an addict[.]”²⁸ But Stone was not the only alternative journalist to seek a highly personal connection to, and make a good living from, self-publishing. Newsletters, sometimes combined with radio broadcasts and mail-order books, expanded the audience for right-wing ideas as well, creating a powerful grassroots movement for Barry Goldwater’s presidential bid in 1964.

The 1960s were characterized by rebellions against the establishment, and journalism was no exception to that. Chapter 2, “Public Broadcasting,” explores efforts to create new forms of news targeted at people who wanted to think deeply about politics. It features television news innovator Robert MacNeil who, in 1975, co-created a highly focused half-hour evening news show with journalist Jim Lehrer. Organized around a few topics selected from the day’s news, it was called the *Robert MacNeil Report* and was the

first iteration of what is the PBS *NewsHour* today. MacNeil believed that the role of all news was to inform and that the standard evening television format—multiple stories ripped from the headlines and told in 120 seconds or less—failed to do that. In 1968, dismayed by his network’s inability, or unwillingness, to report the Vietnam War honestly, MacNeil turned to public television as a place defined by its independence from the political and media establishment. MacNeil and Lehrer produced gavel-to-gavel coverage of the Watergate hearings in 1973 and then proposed a new kind of evening news format that replicated the design of *I. F. Stone’s Weekly*: in-depth reporting on a few stories became the basis for analysis, expert commentary, and conversation. Such a show would be produced, not for a mass audience, but for a discerning audience that was passionate about the news, an audience MacNeil characterized after the show’s debut as “political junkies.”

Chapter 3, “Creating Partisans,” focuses on two prominent alternative media experts, Paul Weyrich and Richard Viguerie, who, using alternative media, activated and educated the conservative populist base they named the New Right. They put what had been a fringe minority at the center of the Republican Party, using direct mail fundraising to support political candidates and new conservative institutions like the Heritage Foundation, the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress, and the American Legislative Exchange Council. Direct mail appeals served as personal, mini-newsletters that explained principles and objectives, hooking recipients on politics and weaning them off “biased” mainstream news. Taking us to the brink of the digital age, the chapter shows how Weyrich and Viguerie amplified their impact with computer technology and the creation of institutions staffed by New Right experts who pumped out news, opinions, and analysis to politicians and a growing national constituency of political junkies on the right.

This first portion of the book describes “one-to-many” communication, in which a trusted voice, or institution, conveyed political knowledge to a devoted audience. The next three chapters describe the rise of “many-to-many” communication, horizontal exchanges of information made possible after 1984 by the affordable personal computers that created a digital alternative media revolution.

Chapter 4, “Electronic Democracy,” describes the early years of personal computing, as well as efforts to create engaged citizens, and reverse partisan divides, through the cultivation of a virtual public sphere. Cyber-intellectuals like Howard Rheingold imagined renewed connections and conversations between citizens that expanded the possibilities for community problem-solving and political consensus. Lightly moderated but not edited, Rheingold and other early internet theorists viewed the alternative platforms that hosted these engaged exchanges as supplementing, and eventually even replacing, information distributed by the media and political establishments. These early experiments did create new possibilities for political organizing. But they also demonstrated that the possibility of heightened conflict and division was baked into the design of a medium where users could easily choose others who shared their own views and ignore those who did not.

As the internet became searchable, and alternative media producers migrated to free digital platforms, political junkies discovered a feast of ways to participate in politics from personal computers, at home and at work. Chapter 5, “Scandal,” takes a deep dive into a world of escalated partisanship during the Clinton administration, driven by the rise of alternative political media. Here, I focus on freelance journalist Matt Drudge’s gossip-laced political news site, the *Drudge Report*. Like Izzy Stone, Drudge promised to tell the truth about the Washington establishment. But the *Drudge Report* did not delve into public documents, relying instead on unnamed tipsters and inside sources. Drudge opened the door to the possibility that digital alternative media could be agenda-setting in a mainstream media landscape that deplored rising partisanship, but was increasingly speeded up by, and forced to respond to, internet sites. Even when Drudge’s news was accurate—as it was when he broke the story of President Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky—the *Drudge Report* told a story about democracy that was designed to divide, sucking readers into the seamy side of political life and feeding popular suspicions that the establishment was conspiratorial and corrupt.

The political crisis detonated by the Lewinsky affair also demonstrated that the internet could have a larger role in electoral politics:

the first netroots mobilization, MoveOn, organized to defend Clinton, but soon established itself as a permanent, progressive political action committee. By the early twenty-first century, campaign consultants began to experiment with using alternative media to woo political junkies to their clients. Chapter 6, “Netroots,” looks at the 2004 Howard Dean campaign, a historic turning point in putting digital media innovators to work in partisan politics. Joe Trippi, Dean’s campaign manager, had not only been one of the first political strategists to use personal computing in a get out the vote (GOTV) effort, he had also become immersed in the philosophies of electronic democracy that I discuss in chapter 4. In January 2003, Trippi saw young activists using alternative media platforms—blogs, MoveOn, and the social media tool Meetup—to raise money and rebuild political communities at the grass roots. These political junkies—a mix of left populists, Libertarians, and traditional Democrats—had been drawn to Dean’s anti-establishment candidacy and particularly to his early opposition to the Bush administration’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Trippi saw these supporters organizing themselves on the internet, just as Howard Rheingold had predicted. As importantly, Trippi understood that web tools as alternative media could be mobilized to amplify outsider candidacies that would otherwise be overpowered by the political and media establishment.

Dean lost his fight for the Democratic nomination, a loss remembered for “the Scream,” a wild yell that proliferated on cable news networks as the first political meme. But the campaign demonstrated the power of combining alternative media with traditional campaign organizing.—as well as its pitfalls. Just as the Scream had zoomed across the internet and cable news channels, social media platforms, then in their infancy, could be used to stoke outrage by distributing unedited video and information about opposition candidates. Chapter 7, “Blogging the News,” leads with Virginia Senator George Allen, considered a rising star in the Republican Party, whose 2006 re-election campaign was derailed by a video depicting his taunting a college student with a racist slur. Here, I examine the rise of political blogging, then a form of mostly progressive alternative media, that exploded in popularity that year.

Bloggers did independent research and covered neglected stories so well that they were repeatedly pushed back into the mainstream news cycle. This semiprofessional blogging network was enhanced by a new social media environment. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, MySpace and other “many-to-many” platforms allowed political junkies, media professionals, and campaigns to share stories, organize, host political conversations, and generate their own networks among like-minded partisans.

The political junkies who flocked to social media, many of them young, were adept at producing and distributing digital alternative media that could now be made on a desktop. In 2008, Barack Obama, building on the progressive populist appeal of the Dean campaign, lit the spark that mobilized them as an effective real grassroots movement. Chapter 8, “MyBarackObama,” looks at how the populist organizing strategies that had fallen short in 2004 carried the first African-American presidential candidate to victory amid promises that his media-savvy administration would be the most open and transparent in history. While the Obama team was, in many ways, a very traditional and disciplined machine that sometimes reined in social media activists behind the scenes, it was also the first presidential campaign to embed a social media professional, Facebook cofounder Chris Hughes, into its communications team. In short, the Obama campaign reached out to constituencies, particularly youth and youth of color, who had been historically indifferent to politics, and made them into political junkies too.

But social media had expanded the networks of conservative populists too, many of whom were dismayed by Obama’s win, and particularly by his plan to create a national health insurance system. The final four chapters explore populist insurgencies on the right and the left, movements driven by alternative media that delivered a seismic blow to the political and media establishments and drove Americans into separate ideological corners by 2016. Chapter 9, “Tea Party Time,” explores how conservative populists, activated by Libertarian Ron Paul’s 2008 presidential bid, organized to “reboot” the system, as an anonymous columnist in the digital alternative media platform *Breitbart News* described it. The Paul campaign, and its aftermath, reveals the rise of a coherent

conservative populist ecosystem that combined many-to-many social media organizing on the part of grassroots organizations like the Tea Party with new digital one-to-many publications like *Breitbart*. These outlets manufactured “news” about the corruption of the liberal establishment that was sometimes relayed, often without basic fact-checking, by mainstream media outlets pushing to keep up with the digital alternative media environment.

But these conservative populists also knew that winning elections mattered. While they were determined to remain outside the establishment, they chose to fight their fight by demonstrating against Obama, voting, and endorsing political candidates who exemplified their values, like Minnesota Congressperson Michele Bachmann, who organized a Tea Party Caucus in the House of Representatives. At the same time, the Obama administration sought to replicate its historic victory by creating an unmediated connection between the government and the American people. Chapter 10, “White House 2.0,” shows how the Obama administration tried, and failed, to duplicate its campaign success by establishing governance and popular consultation through alternative media. Attempting to capture the social movement atmosphere of the campaign and build on earlier ideas about electronic democracy, the Change.gov portal promised to put citizens in direct contact with the president’s team and to value citizens’ ideas and feedback.

The 2008 campaign caused all politicians and their media consultants to take a closer look at the ways social media could effectively bypass the need to cultivate the journalism establishment. During Obama’s first term, senators, representatives, and New York City real estate developer and reality television star Donald Trump, who had been toying with a presidential run since the 1990s, all began to use Twitter to broadcast their opinions. This bare-bones platform, usually used on mobile devices in its early years, also became extraordinarily useful to activists dismayed by how little change Obama was able, or willing, to accomplish. Chapter 11, “Hashtag Populisms,” examines the particular role that Twitter played in the rising tide of progressive populist groups in the United States following the 2010 social media–driven revolutions in the Middle East known collectively as the Arab Spring.

Directly broadcasting their criticisms of actually existing democracy allowed Occupy Wall Street and #BlackLivesMatter to hold the United States political establishment, including the Obama administration, accountable for economic exploitation, systemic racism, and violence against communities of color. Using the # symbol, activists could create narrative threads that conveyed news in the moment, and in an authentic, unfiltered style. Although the hashtag could be used to tell any kind of story—a weather event, a response to a favorite television series, or a firsthand account of an incident—when used to express dissent, it made a new kind of political junkie, the populist activist, hypervisible to potential allies, to enemies, and to the establishment. While organizers' ambitions often outstripped their ability to make the changes they envisioned, their inventive use of social media opened a new chapter in alternative media, one that would turn the 2016 election cycle on its head.

That year, for the first campaign, alternative media—particularly on alt-right and alt-light platforms—seemed to overwhelm the political and media establishment, and Donald Trump rode alternative media into the White House. Chapter 12, “Democalypse Now,” shows how the Trump campaign combined Twitter, Facebook, and the alt-right platform *Breitbart News* to construct an alternative media machine and a winning coalition of conservative populist political junkies. Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton organized a disciplined, well-financed campaign that made much of her credentials and preparation for the job and was expected to win. Clinton also had a lively digital presence, replete with self-organized partisans, political junkies who swarmed social media platforms on her behalf. But, attacked by populists from the left and the right, Clinton's alternative media strategy collapsed, her campaign narrative undermined, countered, and overwhelmed by an army of trolls. Supporters of socialist Senator Bernie Sanders—many former Deaniacs, Ron Paul supporters, and activists inspired by Occupy Wall Street—invaded the social media feeds of Clinton supporters to produce some of the most vicious infighting the Democratic Party had seen since 1972. And on Clinton's right, Donald Trump and his campaign advisor, *Breitbart News's* Steve Bannon, whipped conservative populists into a frenzy at rallies and on alternative media,

assuring them that he would tear down the establishment on their behalf and topple “a rigged system” and a “swamp” that were destroying the America they loved.

When the dust settled on November 9, 2016, a nation of political junkies was exhausted, the mainstream media were in shock, and democracy seemed to be broken beyond repair. This is the story of how we got there—and how we might fix it.

THE POLITICAL NEWSLETTER

On November 2, 1952, the day before the *Daily Compass*, New York's last left-wing, subscriber-supported newspaper, printed its farewell edition, editor Joe Barnes called each of his writers individually to tell them the bad news. A successor to the *Star* and *PM*, the *Compass* was part of a grand experiment in progressive publishing that had lasted only a dozen years. Underwritten by philanthropists like Marshall Field, Anita McCormick Blaine, and Corliss Lamont, these newspapers had been part of an alternative journalism experiment: producing news that was supported by subscribers and un beholden to corporate advertisers. But even subsidized by progressive millionaires, with only 30,000 subscribers, the *Daily Compass* had struggled to meet its expenses from the beginning. Every time it broke even, as publisher Ted Thackrey told readers earlier that year, “the rising living costs of our employees, which are of course translated into higher wages, have forced us back into the red.”¹

Alternative journalism in New York City seemed to be failing. Its financial problems were accelerated by declining popular, and government, tolerance for the Communist, socialist, and Popular Front politics that these papers promoted and that had flourished in New York before World War II. By 1952, two years after Senator

Joseph McCarthy had waved a scrap of white paper at the Republican Women's Club of Wheeling, West Virginia, to warn that the State Department was infiltrated by Reds, the purge of so-called radicals in broadcast and print media was well under way. This informal blacklist meant that the veteran journalists released by an unapologetically leftist paper like the *Daily Compass* would struggle to find another employer willing to take a chance on them. If an editor dared to hire one, it was likely that a pair of FBI agents would show up to explain why the decision should be reversed. One of the men fired by Barnes that day, Isidor Feinstein Stone, probably knew when he hung up the phone that this would be his fate: he was already under government surveillance. Known to his readers as "I. F. Stone" and to friends as Izzy, he had been a popular editorial and opinion writer at the *New York Post* and the *Nation* before working for Barnes at the *Daily Compass*.²

Despite their accommodation to anti-Communism, and even their willingness to fire accomplished, progressive writers, editors and publishers remained under intense pressure to report news that hewed to McCarthy's conservative populist reality. One tactic the senator from Wisconsin used to harass the press was to intimidate individual reporters from papers that opposed the government's hunt for subversives. At his rallies around the country, the pugnacious senator regularly depicted journalists from prestigious newspapers as enemies of the American people. One regular ritual at these raucous events was to ask a reporter to rise and show the audience "what a reporter from a communist paper looks like." This would prompt the crowd to turn and rain a chorus of boos on the entire press section. As one blacklisted journalist remembered, the range of tactics used to root out subversion and principled opposition took its toll: with a few exceptions, by 1952, the mainstream media had become conformist and largely uncritical in its approach to political reporting.³

Urban journalism was also becoming financially vulnerable. Advertising dollars, like newspaper readers, were migrating to the suburbs. When office workers boarded morning trains for New York City from their freshly built, ice cream-colored tract houses in Long Island and New Jersey, they were more likely to have one of the

new, local papers touting President Dwight D. Eisenhower's moderate Republican politics, with ads from stores in the local shopping mall, tucked under an arm. The loss of these readers, and the advertising revenue they brought with them, was compounded by a new competitor to legacy newspapers: television. Occupying pride of place in living rooms everywhere, for fifteen minutes every evening, TVs delivered digestible bites of national news, summarizing top newspaper stories, to nearly every home. By 1960, the number of major dailies feeding New York's appetite for news was trimmed to ten; two major strikes would cut that number to four a decade later. Newspapers were dying.⁴

Yet, if advertising dollars were the Achilles' heel of the mainstream press, could refusing corporate advertising still be a model for financing alternative media? Izzy Stone, a reporter's reporter, thought it could, particularly if labor and production costs were low and the product was good. Infuriating to some, beloved by others, rumped, pudgy Izzy, prematurely deaf and wearing Coke-bottle thick glasses, was a ball of energy. Unable to compete for attention in, or report accurately from, a press conference because of his disabilities, Stone's specialty was crafting stories from public, government documents that other journalists had no time to find or digest, a form of reporting that also freed him from cultivating entangling alliances with politicians and their staffs. Some of Stone's best qualities as a journalist were infuriating to employers. He insisted on writing the story he wanted to write, regardless of what editors, publishers, and advertisers thought. He was so bullheaded that even Freda Kirchwey at the *Nation*, a left-wing weekly news and opinion magazine almost a century old, had fired him for good in 1947 after he disappeared for several weeks. It turned out he had gone undercover on a Mediterranean freighter for a story about Holocaust survivors being illegally smuggled to Palestine.⁵

After beating the bushes for work, Stone took a step over the cliff: he decided to found and self-finance his own newsletter. Combining his savings with a \$3,500 check from the *Daily Compass*, he launched *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, a four-page publication without advertisers whose editorial independence would be supported by reader subscriptions. Unlike the *Daily Compass*, Stone would have