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Reply to: Private media, public funds, and democratic allocation: Outlining the civic strategy in media policy

Abstract

How do we nurture high-quality journalism in a digital age, in which intense financial pressure is dragging new and legacy titles alike down into partisan hackery, tabloid sensationalism, and AI slop? Rubén Marciel's excellent recent paper 'Private Media, Public Funds and Democratic Allocation' sets out to explore the 'civic strategy', which aims to distribute public funds amongst private news organisations in accordance with the preferences of citizens. In this brief reply I want to pull out, examine, and challenge a key assumption he makes about how we should understand and evaluate journalism. That assumption, which I think is widely shared, is that the political significance of journalism derives primarily from its role in legitimating democratic states, and should be evaluated exclusively on that basis. Though journalism certainly has this role, I think we should be more pluralistic about the ultimate political values that journalism can help us to realise. In this reply, I want to support that claim by focusing on its contribution to one such value, the stability of democratic political communities in the sense of their capacity to maintain their commitment to democratic principles and procedures.

How do we nurture high-quality journalism in a digital age, in which intense financial pressure is dragging new and legacy titles alike down into partisan hackery, tabloid sensationalism, and AI slop? Rubén Marciel’s excellent recent paper ‘Private Media, Public Funds and Democratic Allocation’ sets out to explore the ‘civic strategy’, which aims to distribute public funds amongst private news organisations in accordance with the preferences of citizens. By examining four such proposals in impressive detail, Marciel (2026a, p.1) aims to “extract some lessons for designing more effective civic media policies in the future.” Though Marciel makes a number of points that merit discussion, in this brief reply I want to pull out, examine, and challenge a key assumption he makes about how we should understand and evaluate journalism. That assumption, which I think is widely shared, is that the political significance of journalism derives primarily from its role in legitimating democratic states, and should be evaluated exclusively on that basis. Though journalism certainly has this role, I think we should be more pluralistic about the ultimate political values that journalism can help us to realise. In this reply, I want to support that claim by focusing on its contribution to one such value, the stability of democratic political communities in the sense of their capacity to maintain their commitment to democratic principles and procedures. I shall begin by outlining Marciel’s assumptions about the function of journalism. I will then explain why I think his approach is too narrow, arguing that stability is relevant to determining what we should count as good journalism and, therefore, must also be kept in view when we design and evaluate media policy.

Marciel (2026a, p.4-5) outlines two desiderata that a successful civic strategy must meet. First, it must generate “quality journalism”, as measured

against the “deliberative ideal”. This ideal stipulates that editorial decisions be made in accordance with standards of public reason, that the profession itself be inclusive and representative, and that it operates sufficiently independently of political, social, and economic pressures. Second, it has to promote media pluralism, not only in terms of the numbers of available sources, but also across viewpoints and formats.¹

Marciel grounds both of these desiderata in an admirably clear vision of the purpose of journalism. He (2026a, p.4) tells us that “the main function of journalism is to promote high-quality democratic deliberations by providing citizens with the information needed to engage in such deliberations”. Though Marciel is mostly focused in this paper on the ins and outs of the four civic media strategies he examines, elsewhere (Marciel 2023) he does an excellent job of summarising the extensive agreement across several academic disciplines that performing this function of supplying citizens with information ultimately matters because it is critical for the legitimacy of states, which is to say the moral permission that states require to make binding decisions on our behalf, and to enforce them by deploying coercive force if necessary.²

We can distinguish between two dimensions of legitimacy, and an informed public is indispensable for both of them.³ First, procedural legitimacy

¹ Over the course of the paper it becomes clear that the most important of these is the first, because Marciel, rightly, is wary of funnelling public money to media outlets that are not committed to basic democratic values, and thus more likely to corrupt the public discourse than contribute to it.

² Arguably the most influential thinker on the relationship between journalism and legitimacy is Habermas (1995; 1996; & 2008). For more recent examples of interesting work that presumes the centrality of legitimacy to the role of journalism see Herzog (2023) and Heawood and Peter (2024).

³ There is a vast literature on political legitimacy, but for helpful starting points see Buchanan (2002), Estlund (2008), and Peter (2023).

depends on how decisions are made, and whether they are taken in accordance with the principle of political equality. An uninformed public cannot be empowered to play a meaningful role as political equals in decision-making, because, simply put, they won't know what they're doing. Second, outcome legitimacy requires that states produce tolerable results. If the public lack relevant information and have poor understanding then it is highly unlikely that they can help ensure that good, rather than bad, decisions are made and so that good, rather than bad, outcomes are achieved.

However, though this is all fundamentally correct, there are two points that need to be considered. First, if we are in the business of determining the quality of journalism in accordance with its ability to perform a function, there are several other functions that journalism is often thought to serve beyond informing the public. Can these really be ignored? Second, these functions are themselves justified in accordance with deeper values, and they point us to an important political value beyond legitimacy that journalism can help (or hinder) us to realise. This value is the stability of a democratic political community, which is sensitive in a range of ways to how journalism is conducted. Both of these points have the same upshot: if we are trying to decide what makes for good journalism and then, downstream from that, the eligibility criteria we should apply to ensure that public funds are deployed wisely, then we ought not to cut ourselves off from relevant considerations.

Traditionally, journalism is thought to serve three key democratic functions.⁴ Aside from informing the public, journalists are also expected to act

⁴ Marciel is well aware of this and points readers to Christians et al. (2009) who provide helpful discussion of various different approaches to theorising the democratic roles of journalism. See also Marciel (2026b) where he acknowledges and discusses these functions.

as the watchdog of the public by holding the powerful to account, and as a representative body – a fourth estate – that articulates and promotes the interests and opinions of the public. To the three traditional roles we might also add a fourth: creating a shared news agenda. Though Marciel is surely correct that his three forms of pluralism are important, there is also clearly value in settling on a broadly-agreed list of the main things that deserve our attention and processing by the political system. Without that agreement it is difficult to have a productive discourse. If you think that the most important issues of the day are climate change, corruption in public life, and income inequality, and I think they are trade policy, trans athletes in sports, and paedophile conspiracies amongst the rich and powerful, then rather than deliberating together we are largely going to be talking (as well as organising and voting) across purposes.

Marciel prioritises the informative role of journalism because he is coming from the perspective of deliberative democracy, hence his “deliberative ideal”, but even if we focus exclusively on the contribution that journalism can make to state legitimacy,⁵ it seems these other functions should be acknowledged as relevant to the task of determining eligibility criteria for receiving public funds. We have already seen why a shared news agenda is important for a meaningful public discourse, which means that it bears on both procedural and outcome legitimacy. A state that tacitly allows some subset of its citizens to get away with breaking its rules because of their power or wealth has a problem with its procedural legitimacy, and one that fails to utilise the

⁵ On this conception of the relationship between journalism and deliberative democracy see also Marciel (2025).

capacity of the press to host and articulate public opinion is missing a trick on both procedural and outcome grounds.

We might, though, also ask whether legitimacy is the only relevant value to consider here. Let's revisit the idea of journalism as a public watchdog. By holding feet to the fire when there has been wrongdoing, and especially wrongdoing that stems from the pursuit of personal interests at the expense of the public interest, it addresses the concern that those to whom we grant power will take advantage of their position and turn the system to their own purposes. This is one manifestation of a deeper fear we have about social cooperation generally. John Rawls's (1999, pp.295-296) moral psychology is instructive here. In any rule-governed enterprise there will be opportunities to free ride. That is problematic in itself, but a more insidious threat emerges from the knowledge that others will have these opportunities and be tempted to take them. However confident you might be in your own ability to do the right thing under pressure, how sure can you be that others can be trusted too? Why should you be the sucker who plays by the rules when others do not? If enough of us come to feel that we cannot take that risk, and should instead act pre-emptively to pursue our own interests at the expense of the shared rules, then it becomes much more difficult, if not impossible, to have an open, democratic community. We are, I think, beginning to wake up to just how corrosive this kind of suspicion can be, and how it can be manipulated, especially online, by malign actors.

To survive and thrive, states must thus be stable in a particular sense. They must be able to preserve their commitment to democratic values and procedures in spite of shocks and setbacks such as recessions or pandemics

that make material circumstances harder and thereby make restraining pursuit of one's own interests feel riskier.⁶ In order for stability of this sort to exist, a high proportion of citizens must be prepared to make sacrifices and show restraint in order to uphold a fair set of common rules. Stability is a fragile resource because reciprocity is sensitive to our beliefs about the dispositions of others. To prevent a brutal Hobbesian logic taking hold, we must ensure that we have institutions that can be relied upon to call out and punish unjust behaviour rather than allowing it to be swept under the rug.

We can now see how a problem emerges from the narrowness of the deliberative ideal, because there are familiar journalistic practices like combative interviews, doorstepping, and undercover 'sting' reporting, that do not easily fit into the deliberative paradigm because they are aimed at accountability rather than at facilitating an ideal discourse. For that reason, these practices, and their practitioners, may be undervalued and miss out on vital support. Journalists may also find themselves incentivised to shape those practices in ways that prioritise deliberative goals over others.

This is not to claim that monistic deliberative approaches to journalism must deny that such practices have any worth at all. Rather, the problem is that they are inclined to interpret their significance exclusively within the deliberative framework and then blow past them too quickly once a deliberative function is identified. For instance, in another paper Marciel (2026b, p.16) says this: "[t]he point of reporting on the misconduct of the powerful, at least from a deliberative perspective, shouldn't merely be to

⁶ This conception of stability is inspired by how Rawls uses the term, though where he envisages stability as a property of principles of justice, I understand it as a property of existing states.

inform the public when corruption happens but, more ambitiously, to spark debate on how to prevent further corruption in the future.” However, if what I have argued about stability is right, then we would lose something important if we rushed through the practice of holding wrongdoers accountable in order to more quickly commence a general debate about what the best rules and structures would be.

Of course, broadening out our understanding of the functions that journalism should serve in a democratic system, and the underlying values that it can thereby help us to secure, greatly complicates the task of providing principles to guide public policy. However, given the breadth and scope of the actual practice of journalism this is as it should be. Marciel’s contributions to the debate about the civic strategy remain of considerable value, and are to be welcomed.

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