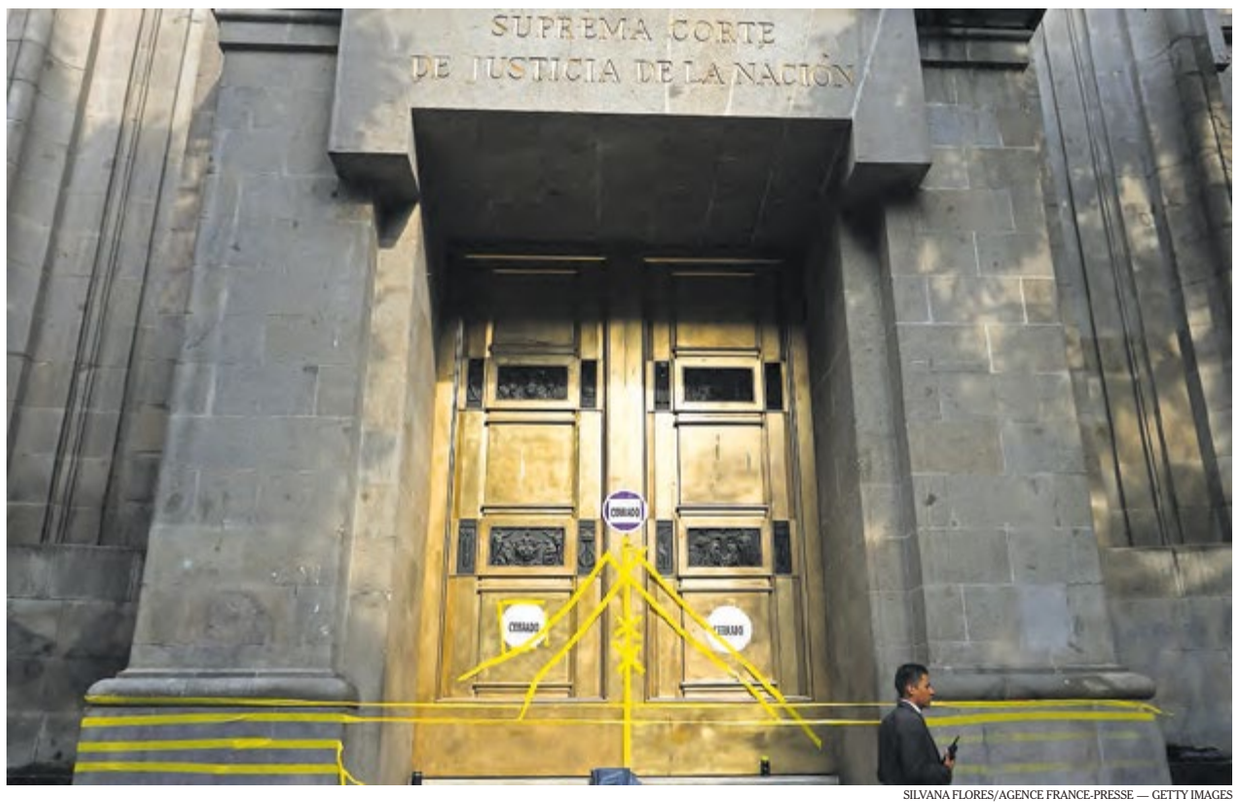
ATHENS DEMOCRACY FORUM



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Globally, democracy is put to the test

BERLIN

A year of elections will reveal the resiliency of democratic values

BY STEVEN ERLANGER

Elections are being held this year in as many as 60 countries, including seven of the world's 10 most populous. They will test the ability of democracies to defend their values, especially with the increasing influence of extremist and populist parties and the politicians who lead them.

But as democracy tries to defend itself, it faces the challenge of doing so while adhering to its own values. Prime among them must be its central tenet: the right of every citizen to vote and to have a voice. The rise of the far right would suggest that liberal democrats should be careful not to patronize those who disagree with them, analysts say, let alone consider them, in Hillary Clinton's exasperated words eight years ago, a "basket of deplorables."

There are numerous reasons for more widespread disaffection with liberal democracy and its performance, analysts say, many of them stemming from slow economic growth, unemployment from automation and globalization, and anxieties over migration and ethnicity — all of which challenge traditional ideas of identity and national character.

It is often stoked by politicians making false claims and playing off popular prejudices.

Prime among the major threats to democracy now, the analysts suggest, is "democratic backsliding" — the tendency for existing democracies to slip backward toward more authoritarianism. Leaders often elected in the name of reform can use existing powers to weaken democratic institutions and checks and balances, including the independence of the judiciary and of the media, to try to preserve power for themselves and their parties in future elections, which may be less free and fair.

Examples, the analysts say, can be found in Hungary, Slovakia, Turkey, Mexico, the United States and India, too — established democracies that have already slid backward or are veering in that direction, in what is sometimes called "democratic deconsolidation."

"You cannot take as a fact that an established democracy will always remain one," said Shashi Tharoor, a member of the Indian Parliament and a former under secretary general of the United Nations, who is scheduled to be one of the speakers at the Athens Democracy Forum in Greece this week in association with The New York Times. (The event, first convened in 2013, explores the challenges to democracy through panels and interviews with scores of experts on the subject from around the world.)

"Elections can be mostly free and fair, but once a government is elected there is no obligation to respect the time-honored conventions that make democracy democracy," Mr. Tharoor said in a phone interview. Key among them? Legal fairness, the autonomy of institutions, the integrity and independence of the central bank and electoral commission, and the independence of the media and the judiciary.

"Democracy is a process, depending on how governments and voters conduct themselves between elections," he said. "That's where the changes are."

The threats are both external and internal, said Arancha González Laya, dean of the Paris School of International Affairs at Sciences Po and formerly foreign affairs minister of Spain.

"Democracy is backsliding, and it's one of the most serious issues we face," she said in an interview at the Ambrosetti Forum in Cernobbio, Italy. "When democracy backslides it becomes more difficult to make decisions on security, migration and ways to improve our economies."

The threat from outside comes from foreign interference, she said, amplified by disinformation, lately enhanced by artificial intelligence, to confuse voters and undermine the integrity of democratic choice. Russia and China have been regularly accused by the United States and European countries of trying to influence elections to degrade democratic integrity, damage alliances and create divisions within society.

"As they did during Covid, they also push this idea that autocracies are more efficient and question the ability of democracies to deliver for our citizens," she said.

The enemies of democracy from within are the self-styled "illiberal democracies," like Hungary, and "the political leaders and parties that work to remove checks and balances, weaken democratic institutions and concentrate media power to degrade the quality of democracy from within," she said.

And often they try to do so in the name of efficiency and even democracy itself, she said, "supposedly cutting red tape or keeping 'unelected technocrats' from

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Global disruption Top row, from left: In Mexico, judicial reforms proposed by the departing president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, led to a recent suspension of the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation, and on Sept. 17, thousands in Dhaka, Bangladesh, demanded a democratic transition after the expulsion of Prine Minister Sheikh Hasina. Other countries where democracy is being challenged include, bottom row from left, India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Steven Erlanger is chief diplomatic correspondent, Europe, for The New York Times, based in Berlin.

ATHENS DEMOCRACY FORUM

Democracy is being put to the test

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making political decisions."

A recent example, she said, has been the effort by the departing Mexican president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and his party to pass a law shifting the judiciary from an appointment-based system largely grounded in training and qualifications to one where voters elect judges but there are few requirements to running. The result would be the removal of 7,000 judges from their jobs, from the chief justice of the Supreme Court down to those at local courts.

The enemy inside is also using the same tools and technology for disinformation, Ms. González said, diminishing voters' ability to discern when they are being fed a lie. "It's getting harder," she said. "The line between truth and falsehood is getting more and more porous."

Many suggest that the cause of backsliding is democracy's failure to deliver to voters, or globalization, or increased economic inequality. "But the data don't really bear that out," said Laura Thornton, senior director for global democracy programs at the McCain Institute, based in Washington, D.C., and part of the University of Arizona. "I fall into the camp of cleavages in culture and values, the way people see their country and their identity changing," which is dividing societies into those who favor multiculturism and diversity, and those who want to return "to the old hierarchies" of race, ethnicity, gender and religion, she said, "who often see women and minorities as being in their way."

During the recent elections in the states of Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg in Germany, the far-right extremist Alternative for Germany, AfD, which came in first in Thuringia and a narrow second in the others, had a poster: "Heimat statt Multikulti" — roughly, "homeland instead of multiculturism."

Democratic backsliding is threatening established democracies in the West, but it has taken place mostly in the so-called Global South and among developing democracies, argued Thomas Carothers, who has studied comparative democratization at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

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It is important to distinguish between democratic backsliding and authoritarian hardening, he said in an interview, where countries that have never been very democratic become less so, like Russia, Venezuela, Cambodia, Iran and Belarus.

"Actually in established democracies not very much backsliding has happened," Mr. Carothers said. Hungary is the worst case, followed by Poland, "but Poland has come through it" with the election in 2023 of Donald Tusk as prime minister, whose centrist alliance defeated the government led by Jaroslaw Kaczynski, which had worked to control the judiciary and the media. Bangladesh, too, has just expelled its longtime leader turned autocrat, Sheikh Hasina, with an outcome still unclear.

But backsliding has been most obvious in places like India, Turkey, Brazil, Indonesia and Egypt, Mr. Carothers said. Serbia is questionable, as is Israel, especially if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu succeeds in his effort to undercut the independence of the judiciary and make it subject to Parliament. "In Israel, is it serious tremors or backsliding?" he asked.

As in Israel, numerous Western democracies have had "tremors," like the United States, France, Britain and Germany, "shaken by the far right, by citizen alienation and tired elites, and political parties that have run out of ideas and energy," he said. But so far most democratic checks and balances have held.

Mr. Carothers, too, believes that blaming inequality or poor economic growth is unconvincing. "The problem is more that a lot of countries came to democracy late, in the 1990s. Their institutions are weak, and they elect predatory, entrepreneurial leaders who consolidate more power in office, and it's hard to stop them," he said.

Values and identity are important too. "A lot of Europeans are unsettled by high levels of immigration and economic stagnation, and Europeans can feel threatened by a world it wants to keep out." But that's a problem of citizens, "not necessarily backsliding," Mr. Carothers said, even if it can feed the parties that want to undermine the current democratic system.

And one must be careful not to take a particular European problem and argue that it's a global trend of populism or the far right, he cautioned. In India, for example, it's difficult to put Prime Minister Narendra Modi on a traditional left-wing or right-wing spectrum. Similarly in Tunisia, or even Germany, where the AfD and a similar party, the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance, combine nationalism with socialism.

"It's the erosion of democracy from within that now poses the gravest threat," wrote Ivo Daalder, a Dutch-born former American ambassador to NATO and president of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, in an essay describing his choice to become American. The victory of authoritarian leaders "is made possible by the steady erosion of the norms, rules and basic rights that are the foundation of democracy," he said.

Mr. Daalder warned about the aims of former President Donald J. Trump, now the Republican Party presidential nominee, including stated promises to "demolish the deep state," "throw off the sick political class that hates our country" and "rout the fake-news media."

Project 2025, a blueprint for a Trump presidential transition prepared by the conservative Heritage Foundation, describes the way it might be done. Mr. Trump has distanced himself from the document, but both he and his vice-presidential choice, JD Vance, have endorsed many of its aims, which focus on strengthening executive control over the government. Mr. Trump has told his followers to get out the vote for him, "just this time." Because once back in power, "it'll be fixed, it'll be fine, you won't have to vote anymore."

Mr. Trump has denied that he intends to remain in office no matter what and has said that his remarks were aimed at his audience of Christians, "who vote in very small percentages," to assure them they would never need to vote again once he is elected and sorts out the country. He has argued that he is trying to preserve American democracy from his opponents, whom he has variously described as both fascist and communist.

Ms. González of Sciences Po said that weakening democracy from within, by those who understand their country and its politics, is hard to confront. "That's why the choice Americans are making in November is so important," she said. "Because the champion of this weakening is Donald Trump, who admires the European champion, Viktor Orban. But it's a big echo chamber, and all of them associate themselves with Mr. Trump," including Mr. Netanyahu.

"It's not all Trump's fault, of course," she said. "But he gives a lot of oxygen to those in Europe who want to weaken democracy."

Resistance
In September, a member of Mexico's Congress held up a sign to protest the judicial reforms proposed by the departing president, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

A lawyer's case for putting Putin on trial

Geoffrey Robertson argues that it would vindicate international law

BY FARAH NAYERI

HM Prison Frankland is a maximum-security prison in northeastern England with an infamous inmate: Charles Taylor, Liberia's former president. He is serving a 50-year sentence there for "aiding and abetting as well as planning some of the most heinous and brutal crimes recorded in human history" during the decade-long civil war in Sierra Leone that began in 1991.

One lawyer played a crucial role in Mr. Taylor's conviction: Geoffrey Robertson, a British Australian human rights barrister. He helped set up the Special Court for Sierra Leone (established by the government of Sierra Leone and the United Nations) and sat on it as an appeal judge.

Speaking out
Geoffrey Robertson, a British Australian human rights barrister, is the author of "The Trial of Vladimir Putin."

Mr. Robertson is now going after a far more powerful leader: the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin. In a new book, "The Trial of Vladimir Putin," Mr. Robertson — a speaker at this week's Athens Democracy Forum — demands that Mr. Putin be prosecuted for his February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, on the grounds of aggression: one state using armed force against the sovereignty, integrity or independence of another.

"Putin's truculence and his nuclear power make his actual trial unlikely in the foreseeable future," Mr. Robertson admits in the book. So he suggests that Mr. Putin be tried in absentia — "if the alternative is to have no trials at all."

Mr. Robertson was a law student at the University of Sydney when he first became interested in human rights law. He wrote a study on the unfairness and prejudice that the Aboriginal community faced under English law.

A Rhodes scholar, he attended Oxford University and later established a human-rights law practice: Doughty Street Chambers in London. His clients have included the author Salman Rushdie, the Washington Post war correspondent Jonathan Randal and the WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

In a telephone interview, Mr. Robertson explained why he was so determined to see Mr. Putin in the dock. He also remembered a former protégé: Keir Starmer, who is Britain's new prime minister. The following conversation has been edited and condensed.

What was the trigger for you to write this book?

The legacy of the Nuremberg trials in 1945 against high-ranking Nazi officials. Nuremberg established that leaders who were responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths would be prosecuted in this life, rather than left to history or an afterlife.

The Putin invasion on Feb. 24, 2022, was so obviously a breach of the law against aggression as defined by the International Criminal Court that I just wanted to follow through and apply Nuremberg and see what would happen.

How would that work?

It's a long shot, and I'm the first to admit that it's a long shot, but you never know. There was one revolt against Putin that didn't succeed. If the Russian mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin had followed through to Moscow and rattled him, who knows?

It may be that Putin will be overthrown. It may be that the army will put him out. It may be that he'll end up like Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic: No one thought that Milosevic would end up in the dock at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, but he was swapped for an easing of sanctions.

If Putin is not in the dock, how would his trial have impact? How would it get international attention?

The International Criminal Court prosecutor Karim Khan certainly got international attention last year when he announced that he would apply for a warrant against Putin over the estimated 20,000 children who have allegedly been kidnapped and trafficked from Ukraine. It shows that the question of indicting Putin is still alive.

If the tribunal is under the banner of the United Nations, if it contains judges from powerful countries not otherwise involved, if it presents an authoritative statement of the facts and the law, and if both sides are allowed to argue the case, then it would be an important decision. It would carry authority, and to that extent, international law could be vindicated.

NICOLE TUNG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Visual evidence
The aftermath of a missile strike in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, in October 2022. "I don't think there's very much that Putin could say," Mr. Robertson said of the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin. "We've got television pictures of his tanks rolling toward Kyiv. We know exactly what he did, what he ordered."

I don't think there's very much that Putin could say. We've got television pictures of his tanks rolling toward Kyiv. We know exactly what he did, what he ordered.

You write that trying him in absentia is better than not trying him at all.

Yes, it's the best we can do. The trial of Putin would be publicized. The judgment would be clear and would be condemnatory.

It would be shameful if Putin were to walk away without a glove laid on him.

The tribunal that prosecuted Charles Taylor, the former Liberian president, which you had a major role in, seems a template for what you would like to see done to Putin, right?

Yes, absolutely. The Sierra Leone court is often mentioned as exemplifying the kind of court that could be established for Putin.

What was it like setting up that tribunal?

I went to Sierra Leone, and it wasn't easy to construct a court in a country where people were still fighting. It was a three-way war, and we managed to prosecute all three sides. We got the provocateur Charles Taylor, who's still in prison.

Others see it as the most successful U.N. tribunal. I was deeply involved in establishing it, setting up the rules of the court and seeing it through for the first five years. It was quite an experience, in the ruins of a country that was the poorest in the world and so badly affected by the civil war.

One of your mentees at Doughty Street Chambers, Keir Starmer, is now the prime minister of Britain.

Yes, I was responsible for giving him his place in Doughty Street Chambers. I was on the interviewing committee. He didn't interview very well.

Why not?

He was very nervous. But I thought, and always have thought, that you've got to go beyond the kind of interview at which hale and hearty Brits always succeed — at which the upper-class Old Etonians do well. They're trained to do well in that situation.

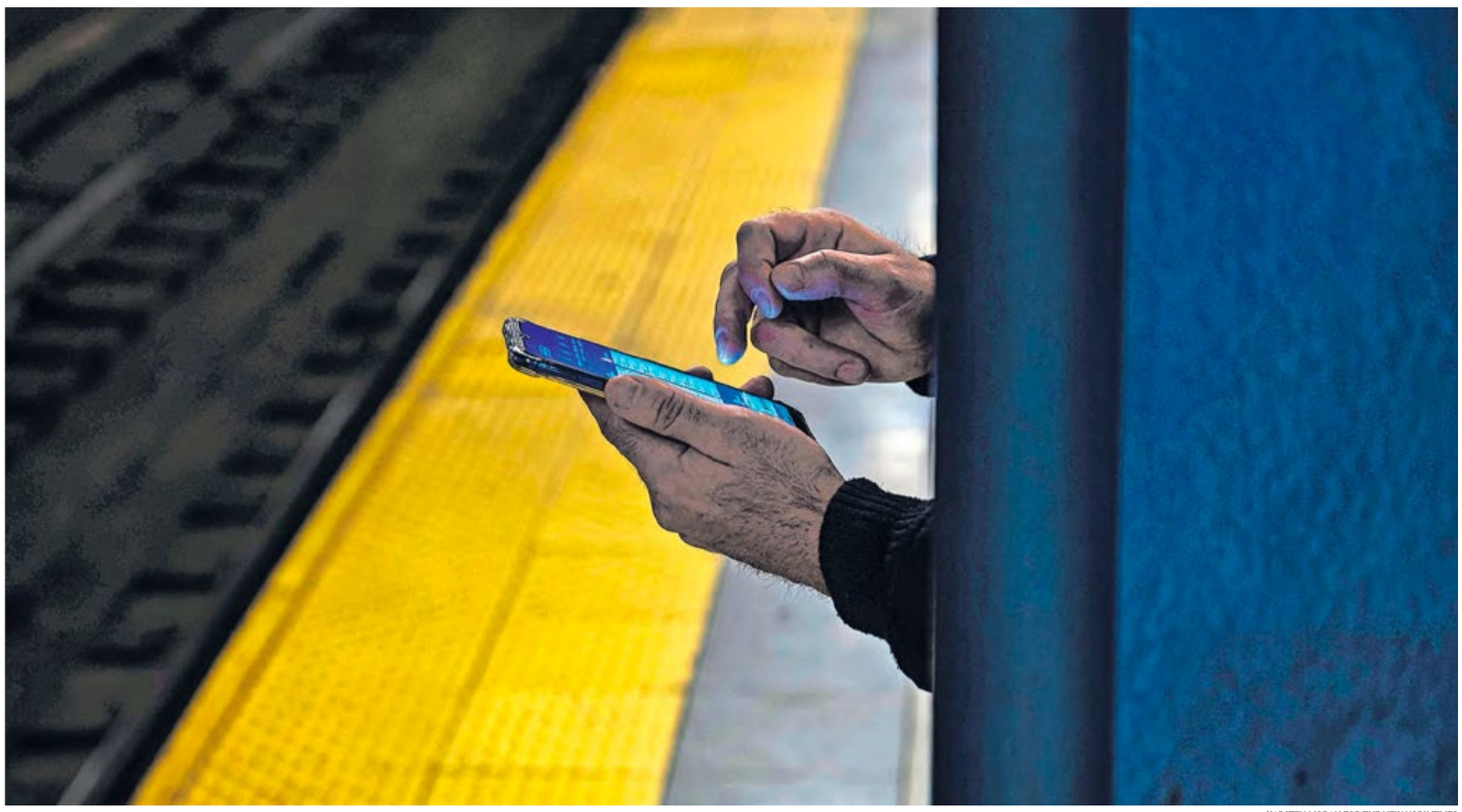
Keir Starmer was brilliant. I took him to Europe for a couple of big cases, and he was a very good lawyer, not in a bombastic sense. He's not a great orator, but he impressed judges by the logic and coherence of his arguments. He goes for arguments or for solutions that will have real effect. He's prepared to stop popular initiatives even if it's not going to bring him favor. He's sane and sensible.

ATHENS DEMOCRACY FORUM

Can mainstream media save itself?

A panel will explore how journalism can regain influence and trust

BY FARAH NAYERI



KARSTEN MORAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Scroll culture The smartphone provides a way to obtain news with little effort or expense. One academic described it as "passive news consumption."

On the first day of the fall semester at Boston University, Michelle Amazeen, an associate professor of mass communication, asked her graduate students to fill out a questionnaire listing their favorite movie, band, book and news source. She was in for a surprise.

Next to news source, many of her 16 students left a blank. Several mentioned TikTok, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter). One named a mainstream publication (The New York Times) as their source of news and information.

"By and large, young adults are getting their news, if they get it at all, from social media," Ms. Amazeen said. As far as they're concerned, "social media is exciting and it's accessible," because there's little effort or expense required: just a scroll down a smartphone screen.

This practice — which Ms. Amazeen called "passive news consumption" — is among a variety of factors plaguing the mainstream media.

Traditional outlets, especially newspapers, have closed or reduced their staffs because of shrinking audiences and revenues.

The income from advertising and subscriptions that had long kept print and other local media alive has gravitated to digital coverage, generating far less income.

Tech companies and online media outlets like YouTube, X and TikTok have become supercharged competitors, while political rifts and divisive figures have convinced increasing numbers of people that traditional outlets are biased or otherwise untrustworthy.

The trends portend poorly both for mainstream journalism and for the future of democracy, experts said.

"Without a true, vibrant and diverse free press, we will not have a vibrant democracy," said Mickey Huff, a professor of journalism at Ithaca College in New York who is also the director of Project Censored, which teaches critical media literacy and pushes back against what it describes as forms of news censorship.

The disaffection with the legacy media will be explored this week by a panel at the Athens Democracy Forum in Greece, an annual gathering of policymakers, business leaders, academics and activists organized in association with The New York Times.

One of the panelists, Persiana Aksentieva — a 28-year-old Bulgarian marketing professional based in Germany who is a member of the International Youth Think Tank, a global network of young people promoting democracy — explained why she and other young people spurned mainstream media.

Ms. Aksentieva said her predominant source of news and information was her Instagram feed. And while she followed the Instagram account of the German television and online news agency Tagesschau, she otherwise got her news on important topics — climate change, women's rights, abortion rights, freedom of speech — from posts and reposts by friends, young professionals, activists and reliable influencers appearing on her social media feed.

Young people, Ms. Aksentieva said, feel that behind traditional news organizations, "there is some kind of authority or institution," with an agenda.

Broadly speaking, "we are way more skeptical toward the truthfulness of information," because there is so much of it, she added.

Besides, she said, "you connect better with someone who looks like you, or is similar to you somehow," referring to her social media sources.

"They speak in a very authentic way," Ms. Aksentieva said, using "simple language that shows us the most important issues in a way that we can really assimilate."

The movement away from legacy journalism is a global phenomenon. A poll by the online research firm YouGov of more than 95,000 people in 47 countries, released recently by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, indicated that only 40 percent of respondents had trust in the news, while 39 percent said they sometimes or often avoided it.

Among 18- to 29-year-olds in the United States, an October 2022 survey by the Pew Research Center showed that half had some or a lot of trust in the news and information from social media sites. Only 56 percent said they trusted information from national news organizations.

The shift is driving the demise of many independent print and broadcast sources. According to a 2023 report by Northwestern University on the state of local news, more than 130 U.S. newspapers closed or merged in the preceding year alone, out of a total of 2,900 that have shut since 2005.

Victor Pickard, author of "Democracy Without Journalism?," said print newsrooms in the United States had lost more than half of their staffs since 2000. Whole regions of the country are "news deserts," he wrote, with zero access to reliable information.

As for television and radio, large chains such as the conservative Sinclair Broadcast Group have gobbled up independent TV stations in the United States. In August, one of two all-news local radio stations in New York City, WCBS Newsradio 880, was shuttered as its owners switched to all sports.

Local newspapers are "in a state of dramatic collapse," said Dean Baquet, who was the executive editor of The New York Times from 2014 to 2022.

"There's less confidence in the media," said Mr. Baquet, who now leads The Times's Local Investigations Fellowship, which gives a dozen reporters every year the chance to produce investigative journalism in the state or region where they are based.

"Some of it isn't our fault," Mr. Baquet said in a video interview ahead of the Democracy Forum. "Politicians have spent a lot of time attacking traditional media. It's hard to hold the kind of confidence we used to have when you have a former president of the United States who relentlessly attacks the press, who relentlessly lies about the press — and that's true of other world leaders."

Martin Baron, who was executive editor of The Washington Post from 2013 to 2021, attributed some of the disaffection to the internet.

The internet gave people who were "excluded from the conversation" an "opportunity to have a voice, and that was a good thing," he said in a phone interview.

But it has also meant that "everybody can be a broadcaster now, everybody can be a talk-show host, everybody can be an influencer."

"Some are good and some are lousy, but there are a lot of them," Mr. Baron said.

The result is information silos, he said. "There are places to go that just affirm your pre-existing points of view" — even "the most outlandish conspiracy theory," he said.

"People have become increasingly tribal," dismissing anything that counters their tribe's beliefs, he said — including documented facts, the mainstay of independent journalism.

"Not only do we not share a common set of facts," but "we can't agree on what a fact is," Mr. Baron said. "All of the things that we have historically used to establish facts are being devalued and dismissed and denied."

Traditional media outlets have not helped themselves, experts said.

"The legacy media doesn't report to young people about the things that are affecting their lives in an honest way: the student debt crisis, what's happening in higher education, the utter and absolute lack of affordability of real estate," said Mr. Huff, of Ithaca College.

The legacy media did not reflect a range of opinions and realities, including alternative views that students were interested in, and gave an incomplete picture, he said.

In his classes, he added, "I try to help them understand that in a world that pushes us to be black and white, there are a whole lot of colors in between."

Trends portend poorly for mainstream journalism and for the future of democracy, experts say.

Mr. Pickard, the author, said that in an effort to stay in business, the traditional media was more and more commercialized, leaving the way open for the "misinformation society," meaning "an electorate that is increasingly served sensationalistic news coverage, click bait and degraded journalism instead of informative, fact-based, policy-related news."

There are also signs of what might be labeled "the disinformation society."

In Southport, England, a 17-year-old boy killed three young girls in a knife attack on July 29. Falsehoods instantly spread online about the killer being a Muslim asylum seeker, setting off days of racist and anti-immigrant rioting across the country and leading to hundreds of arrests. In fact, the suspect was born in Cardiff, Wales.

Many experts suggest that one way to restore trust in traditional media and win back readers is through a return to ambitious and aggressive reporting of local news, which has been largely abandoned in recent years.

Mr. Baquet said The Times was looking to expand and develop its Local Investigations Fellowship, which is in its second year.

"The kind of service journalism that local news used to deliver is not being delivered," Mr. Baquet said, and "people have lost touch with journalism that's close to them."

Why does that matter? Because "so many of the national issues that the country is struggling with are actually local issues writ large," he said.

But mainstream media also has to do more to adapt to the ways people consume news, he said.

"The part that we have to work on," Mr. Baquet said, is figuring out how to be on "the platforms where young people get their news" and how to "tell our stories in a different way," using more images and video.

"We had, over generations, developed the habit of expecting the readers to come to us," he said. But the last decade has shown that media organizations have "to go to the readers."

"We have to fight for every reader," Mr. Baquet said.