
China's Strategic Devaluing of American Social Capital

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China's Strategic Devaluing of American Social Capital

Abstract

The information technology era has opened a myriad of new battlespaces through which nations engage each other. China has advanced their “three warfares” doctrine – political warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare – behind a robust and aggressive economic agenda. Direct financial investment and tightly controlled access to both their large consumer market and cheap labor force has given them considerable leverage in key sectors of American industry, particularly those in the communication sphere. The narrative crafting capabilities increasingly acquired by China are beginning to appear as genuine cultural hegemony. This indicates an ability to shape the American collective consciousness by shifting values and behaviors, and ultimately weaken the social bonds within the population. This article thus frames the nature of warfare in the information age as the strategic devaluing of social capital. This reframing of adversarial strategies may be helpful to countering such efforts by providing new insight into the tactics currently employed.

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Introduction

Military adaptations appear in many forms ranging from physical means to concepts, strategies, and tactics, to ideological shifts. Conceptualizations of warfare beyond the physical battlefield have developed over a long trajectory. In the West, Machiavelli gave warfare its necessary political, economic, and social context in the 16th century.¹ By the early 19th century, Clausewitz transformed that context into a comprehensive worldview by contrasting and interrelating the politics of war from its realities, emphasizing war's psychological elements. Clausewitz contended that the will of the people fueled a government's capacity for war, or as Peter Paret interprets, "a government channels psychic energy [from its society] into rational policy, which the army carries out."² By draining or confounding that energy, an adversary could vitiate another polity's ability to effectively wage war. Targeting a nation's people, its energy, became the basis for George Kennan's appeal to the U.S. government to further develop political warfare in 1948. He differentiated between the use of white propaganda, the "clandestine support of 'friendly' foreign elements," and black propaganda, which he defined as "psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states."³ The use of propaganda as a form of warfare, a trend that began prior to Kennan's memo, burgeoned in the Cold War era as political warfare gained clarity in the West.

These conceptions of warfare developed separately, and far earlier, in China. Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, written between 475 and 221 B.C.E., served as a guiding thesis in East Asian military thought. The work extolls the "divine art of subtlety and secrecy," the value of coyness, and posits the importance of the "divine manipulation of threads" which is the leveraging of information through spy networks.⁴ The role of information in achieving political and social goals has remained paramount to Chinese military strategy. Just as the Cold War forced strategic reassessments in the West, the twilight of the 20th century refocused Chinese military policy. For the People's Liberation Army (PLA), a major element of its refocus is a pivot towards the strategic devaluing of adversary social capital.

21st Century Warfare

In 1999, the People's Liberation Army published *Unrestricted Warfare* as an exploration of Chinese military strategy in the new millennium. Its authors, colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, posit that kinetic warfare (direct armed conflict) is rapidly becoming obsolete in the information technology era—instead of targeting rival militaries, they argue that nations in competition will target adversary societies directly. Liang and Xiangsui propose that “common people,” or the “living social organism” will become the focal point of military operations that utilize nonmilitary domains.⁵ This is warfare that operates at a visibility below armed conflict, a level that is sub-kinetic. The exponential possibilities of combining nonmilitary domains into military strategy become clear when surveying some of the examples Liang and Xiangsui offer: Psychological warfare, smuggling warfare, media warfare, political warfare, drug warfare, network warfare, technological warfare, fabrication warfare, resources warfare, economic aid warfare, cultural warfare, and international law warfare.⁶ Liang and Xiangsui assert that successfully coordinating an omni-dimensional blitzkrieg would conquer a society before the possibility of retaliation. By the end of 2003, the People's Liberation Army created a formal organizational structure to pursue psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare; this became known as the *Three Warfares*.⁷

Many Americans seem aware of China's successful economic strategies (for example, the economic impact of losing manufacturing jobs to China was a major discussion point in the 2016 elections), but they fail to conceptualize these policies as sub-kinetic warfare.⁸ The subterfuge of Chinese strategy is likely by design. Sun Tzu advised that, “the spot where we intend to fight must not be made known; for then the enemy will have to prepare against a possible attack at several different points.”⁹ If the PLA perceives economics as a domain of warfare, then Chinese military strategy would likely demand the concealment of this shift in battlefield focus. The three warfares doctrine aims to wage war without incurring the consequences of war.

At least as far back as 1999, the PLA understood that the American military had a settled, narrow, and ultimately vulnerable, conception of war. In keeping with Sun Tzu's charge that “success in warfare is gained by

carefully accommodating ourselves to the enemy's purpose," China placates a rules-based world order, but works to unsettle that order.¹⁰ Liang and Xiangsui describe this surreptitious approach:

The new concept of weapons will cause ordinary people and military men alike to be greatly astonished at the fact that commonplace things that are close to them can also become weapons with which to engage in war. We believe that some morning people will awake to discover with surprise that quite a few gentle and kind things have begun to have offensive and lethal characteristics.¹¹

The PLA advocates for the leveraging of information technology to weaken the social bonds that form society. Social capital theory provides a useful analytical lens for framing the value and role of social bonds in society.

Destabilizing a Society

Hanifan first articulated social capital theory in 1916, however, Bourdieu lionized the concept when he explored it in 1992.¹² Bourdieu defined social capital as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition."¹³ Social capital theory essentially argues that the relationships between people have actual value; this value can translate into financial capital, for example a friend helping you get a better paying job, physical capital such as borrowing a tool from a neighbor, and human capital like a parent's advice to their child. Social capital facilitates necessary interdependence between people. The more complex societies become, the more people rely on and thrive from these systems of interdependence.¹⁴

Devaluing financial capital creates considerable vulnerabilities for the nation-state, but devaluing its social capital represents a clear end in itself: Destroy the microlevel social bonds between individuals and you collapse the macrolevel systems of interdependence that summate the functions of that society. Political scientist Robert Putnam comprehensively explored trends in 20th century American social capital in his book *Bowling Alone*. Here, Putnam outlines the importance of social capital and its impetus:

The touchstone of social capital is the principle of generalized reciprocity... [it] is so fundamental to civilized life that all prominent moral codes contain some equivalent of the Golden Rule... As Tocqueville pointed out, American democracy worked not because Americans obeyed impossibly idealistic rule of selflessness, but rather because we pursued “self-interest rightly understood.”¹⁵

The principle of generalized reciprocity, what Tocqueville credited with the efficacy of American democracy, is the basic idea that a society that facilitates mutual help will also facilitate trust, honesty, and greater civic engagement.¹⁶ So, it is a set of underlying values, or virtues, that give social capital its value. Without these shared values, social capital has no meaningful exchange. Mutual exchanges of help, even if that help is strictly socioemotional, creates value within interpersonal relationships. On a broader level, this dynamic forms the basis for the principle of generalized reciprocity.

Putnam, drawing from Bernard Williams, delineates the basic value of generalized reciprocity between “thick trust” and “thin trust.”¹⁷ Thick trust develops through strong interpersonal connections, but thin trust is societally more important because it speaks directly to how an individual perceives their society and informs their behavior. Thin trust develops within a society when people assume that others will generally do the right thing. Societies with weak thin trust, then, are more dishonest, suspicious of each other, less willing to help each other, and less civically engaged. As Putnam summarizes:

People who trust others are all-around good citizens, and those more engaged in community life are both more trusting and more trustworthy. Conversely, the civically disengaged believe themselves to be surrounded by miscreants and feel less constrained to be honest themselves.¹⁸

Personal values shape social interactions based on how tightly-coupled these values are to the individual, but also by individual perceptions of others’ fidelity to those values. If a person feels they are in an environment where kindness is not reciprocated, they lack social incentivization to act kind. Putnam illustrated that social capital and its mycelium of underlying

values was well on its decline by the end of 1990's, concluding that, "our growing social capital deficit threatens educational performance, safe neighborhoods, equitable tax collection, democratic responsiveness, everyday honesty, and even our health and happiness."¹⁹ Weak American social capital, then, creates a strategic vulnerability. By weakening microlevel ties between the American people further, an adversary threatens macrolevel societal functions. Analyzing sites of cultural production, the foundation of social values, becomes crucial to assess adversarial influence operations.

The Social Production of Values

What a people believe—what they agree is moral, just, and normative—forms a consensus known as a "collective consciousness."²⁰ The clearest way to affirm this social consensus is to define and subsequently punish behaviors and ideas that deviate from what is normative.²¹ Formal and informal institutions often weave these moments of moral definition into a broader narrative tapestry. For example, moments like the trial of Derek Chauvin, the police officer who murdered George Floyd, engender considerable moral outrage that reshape narratives surrounding topics like race in America. Consolidating sufficient influence throughout institutions to enable the shaping of these moral narratives is what Gramsci called "cultural hegemony."²² He asserted that those that owned the means of ideological production, the ruling class, crafted cultural narratives to suit their own ends.

The three warfares doctrine pursued by the People's Republic of China is an attempt to gain cultural hegemony in adversary nations. Access to the means of cultural production allows for the setting of moral boundaries and the selection of values. With sufficient cultural leverage, an adversary can supplant values that bolster generalized reciprocity, like cooperation and patience, with values that undermine social civility and endanger healthy democratic engagement. By emphasizing desired perspectives on cultural events, media can shift narratives to define moral boundaries.

Even institutions that explicitly exist to affirm moral boundaries, like the Department of Justice, require the narrative support of popular media to adequately shape the collective consciousness. The example of George Floyd's death is one of many that illustrates how media attention to

specific incidents of misjustice led to periods of moral crisis and repudiation of these institution. The media plays an integral role in shaping values, affirming moral boundaries, and indoctrinating a people into what is normative and acceptable behavior. The media, then, heavily sculpts what amalgamates to the collective consciousness. The value of social capital, its meaningful exchange, is in part generated by the symbolic economy produced by the media.

For the purposes of this discussion, media is separated into three categories: Entertainment, news, and social media. Regardless of category, media's defining characteristic is that it is designed for consumption, and most importantly, to generate profit. The PRC utilized the financial incentives of the free market to gain influence within American media institutions. This came in the form of direct investment as well as leveraging access to their own market and labor force.

Entertainment

Entertainment is so central to our shared social reality that people will often equate it to culture itself—movies, music, sports, and tv shows commonly define people's understanding of culture. While there is concern over PRC influence in American sports and music, their influence in cinema has garnered greater attention in recent years.²³ From an information warfare perspective, this is particularly concerning because film was a once a popular outlet for the U.S. government's domestic white propaganda.

The *Why We Fight* film series illustrates a notable case study into the role of film in shaping the collective consciousness. In 1942, the Department of War commissioned popular Hollywood director Frank Capra to produce this seven-film series. The goal was to garner collective American support for the second World War, a clear attempt to gain the psychic energy that Clausewitz believed was necessary to effectively wage war. These films portrayed the motives of the Axis powers as more insidiously American centric by intentionally mistranslating the domestic propaganda films of these adversary nations; this is a disinformation technique known as parallel editing. The dubbed over footage was more offensive to the average American than their accurate translations would have been. The films were mandatory viewing for servicemen but were also released to the

general public—it is estimated that by July of 1945, over 54 million Americans had viewed them.²⁴ These films helped solidify the necessity of total war against the Axis powers in the American collective consciousness.²⁵ As Kathleen German concludes in her analysis of the series, “the patterns which film displays become part of the code for understanding its meaning.”²⁶ Stylistically, the films were a successful indoctrination tool.

The indoctrination capabilities of film stem from eliciting cognitive responses in an audience. The study of the neurological effects of film, or neurocinematics, has revealed key insights into how the medium can cognitively prime an audience to receive narratives. Neuroscientists have found that when the “neural states evoked by the movie are stable and reliable” it becomes entirely feasible to “control the viewers’ neural response.”²⁷ These neural responses can be powerful enough to trigger empathetic cognitive and emotional states with the subject matter of the film, a response known as embodied simulation (ES).²⁸ The emotional connection between narrative elements in film are what allow for moral boundary setting, and thus value attainment, to occur. In a film like *John Wick*, the title character would be no more than a mass murderer without the poignant context of his puppy’s death by the organization he then targets. The ES evoked by witnessing a puppy’s execution cognitively primes the audience to accept the protagonist’s actions as righteous revenge; it is the emotion ascribed to behavior that sets a moral boundary. The audience not only empathizes with the protagonist’s emotional loss, they celebrate in the triumph of his revenge.

When themes, like revenge, inculcate an audience within a given social space, the behavior proscribed within the moral boundary being set becomes normative and latent values become more acceptable—if a culture continually extolls revenge, then vengeful behavior becomes more normative. Entertainment mediums are especially effective vehicles for propaganda because audiences are cognitively engaged while not critically analyzing the messaging.²⁹ To this end, audiences have “little ability or motivation to generate counterarguments. Absorption into a narrative is believed to be a convergent process, where all mental faculties are engaged in the narrative experience.”³⁰ In the case of revenge themes, people could reasonably come to uphold civically antithetical values like retribution while rejecting pro-civic values like forgiveness. Film is one major avenue

to achieve the moral inculcation required for boundary setting, value attainment, and ultimately the shaping of the collective consciousness.

If the U.S. government once held a monopoly on the narrative moral boundary setting of film in America, it clearly does not anymore. Although China's movie market had been expanding rapidly for about a decade, they remained the number two market under the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic decimated American movie ticket sales, allowing China's box office to overtake the American box office by \$400 million in 2020 and \$3.3 billion in 2021.³¹ The booming Chinese movie market has altered Hollywood's incentive structures. Access to Chinese audiences, however, is controlled strictly by the Chinese Communist Party.³² While it is common for countries importing foreign movies to censor certain content, China does so routinely and explicitly. To cater to the dominant Chinese market, American movies have already begun the process of "anticipatory self-censorship."³³ American movie production companies now censor movies, even movies released in the United States, to align with CCP cultural narratives. For example, Disney rewrote a Tibetan character as Celtic in *Doctor Strange* (2016) to secure access to the Chinese market.³⁴ In addition to the censorship of symbols and narratives, the CCP is actively introducing propaganda into films. DreamWorks' 2019 film *Abominable* (2019) subtly supported China's disputed claim to the South China Sea, the "nine-dash line," which led to the film's banning in Malaysia.³⁵

Criticisms of China are likely the chief concern of Chinese censorship, but this level of narrative control extends beyond the realm of public relations. Gaining hegemony within an information space allows for the psychological inculcation required for shaping a collective consciousness. Within the United States, values that support American civic engagement—the cornerstone of American social capital—are vulnerable to an adversary nation that has espoused a twenty-year interest in directly attacking the living social organism of their enemies.

Leveraging access to the largest box office is only one means by which the CCP influences American film. Major Morgan Martin and Major Clinton Williamson at the Naval Postgraduate School were able to map out financial ties between 106 American film studios and the PRC. Prominent studios like Paramount Pictures, Warner Brothers, and Universal Studios have produced over 140 films while taking Chinese investment.³⁶ Martin

and Williamson found that Disney's *Mulan* (2020), for example, had "the script approved by the Central Propaganda Department [of the CCP]" prior to filming.³⁷ Entertainment narratives can be enduring and culturally relevant, but narratives stemming from news media can be even more impactful because they can serve as the basis for 'objective' truths.

News Media

If, as Putnam posits, thin trust in our neighbors is integral to social capital, then messaging about those neighbors plays a significant role in the strength of American social capital. The information people largely receive about their neighbors, locally and nationally, comes from news media. Over the last twenty years, the CCP has been steadily increasing investment in American media corporations conceivably as part of their "strategy to create favorable public opinion globally for [the party's] agenda."³⁸ Chinese media propaganda generally seems to target two different groups: The roughly 40 million people that make up the Chinese diaspora and adversarial information environments.³⁹ The contours of this strategy follow Kennan's conceptualization of political warfare as the use of white and black propaganda. White propaganda targeting the Chinese diaspora appears to be a major focus of the United Workers Front Department of the CCP to retain Chinese emigrant loyalty to the mainland.⁴⁰ While this effort amounts to affirming moral boundaries that support existing narratives, the second target of curbing global public opinion indicates a shifting or shaping of moral boundaries for a foreign audience. To this end, the Chinese government spends approximately \$1.3 billion annually in foreign media, broadcasting state-run television and radio news in 140 countries in 65 languages.⁴¹

In 2011, Li Congjun, former head of *Xinhua* (Chinese state-run media) and current member of the CCP's Central Committee, published an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* titled, "Toward a New World Media Order."⁴² Congjun claimed that "the human community needs a set of more civilized rules to govern international mass communication" and compared journalism to games of bridge and ping-pong.⁴³ A 2019 report by Reporters Without Borders (RWB) outlines the situation well: China ranked 176th out of 180 countries in the 2018 World Press Freedom Index, yet it has rapidly expanded its influence in international news media.⁴⁴ China speaks of noble goals, like the need to "maintain the world's

diversity,” but refuses to allow journalists to investigate the ongoing Uyghur genocide.⁴⁵ Officials like Congjun speak of media as if it is only a vehicle for propaganda; news companies exist to shape the collective consciousness for the benefit of the party-state. As a 2020 Heritage Foundation report notes, “the Chinese never developed limitations on the power of their sovereign rooted in universal human rights.”⁴⁶

Advertorials, or paid advertisements that appear as objective editorials, provide access for propaganda into American newspapers. News outlets like the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, and Los Angeles Times regularly publish Chinese advertorials for the price of roughly \$250,000 apiece.⁴⁷ The China Daily (an official CCP publication) purchased upwards of 700 online ads and 500 print pages in six major American newspaper between 2012 and 2019.⁴⁸ Beyond inserting direct propaganda, the CCP controls news narratives through investment. One example that RWB gives is of how the Chinese owned investment firm, H&H Group, bought a Tijuana-based radio station in 2018 in order to gain access to airwaves across Southern California.⁴⁹ If the goal of such investments is to shape American attitudes, it appears to be working: A recent Pew survey found that only 13 percent of American respondents directly associated China as a threat; only 3 percent mentioned the Uyghur genocide in China.⁵⁰ While news media is likely to remain impactful, but much of its influence is now mitigated by social media.

Social Media

Some research has found that social media’s networking platforms help to generate social capital given the emphasis on creating user connections.⁵¹ The strength, and consequently the value, of such online connections is debatable: Simply following an account on Twitter or Facebook requires no commitment and no socioemotional investment.⁵² More importantly, social media presents as an ideal medium to weaponize information. Users are less likely to critically engage with every headline in the deluge of their newsfeed, allowing disinformation to pass as just another story. Social media disinformation, which is in effect black propaganda in the digital age, is gaining significant attention from popular media, congress, and the research community.⁵³ The primary concern in this growing body of research is the narrative shaping capabilities of disinformation campaigns. The PRC seem uniquely adept at utilizing social media to sow conflicting

narratives within a population.⁵⁴ Beyond the values latent within the asserted narratives, simply creating conflicting narratives can degrade social capital. The polarized nature of American political discourse has created deep schisms in the collective consciousness. Much of this polarization is a disagreement about accepted narratives and the values upheld by such narratives.

China has adopted an asymmetric approach to social media, banning all major Western social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, and allowing only CCP controlled platforms such as WeChat and Weibo.⁵⁵ Conversely, China has invested heavily in Western social media. Large investments have come from the CCP controlled Tencent, the seventh largest company in the world.⁵⁶ Tencent alone has invested over \$2 billion in Snapchat, \$150 million into Reddit, and undisclosed portion of a \$150 million funding round in Discord.⁵⁷ The growing popularity of Chinese-owned TikTok represents an even larger potential threat as the relationship between its parent company and the CCP is murky at best.⁵⁸ In June 2022, a commissioner of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission implored Google and Apple to remove TikTok from their app stores, labeling the app a “national security risk.”⁵⁹

Aside from the largest Western platforms, specialized social media sites have also received large Chinese investments in recent years. PatientsLikeMe.com, a social media platform that allows users to upload medical information to connect with other patients, received over \$100 million in 2017, its largest investment ever.⁶⁰ That same year, Chinese-owned Renren bought 100 percent of Trucker Path Inc.—a social media platform for long haul truckers that tracks “more than 33 percent of all United States long haul truck drivers.”⁶¹ These two investments are likely for data collection purposes (PatientsLikeMe.com generated “38 million data points” between 2011 and 2017), but there are still networking and value shaping possibilities latent in these platforms.⁶² Despite the internal bans, the CCP is content to use these platforms to shape international narratives—in 2019 they bought promoted tweets that made the Hong Kong protests appear violent.⁶³

The efficacy of social media on narrative crafting stems from its appearance as being primarily user-generated content. When a user sees a post trending in their feed, there is a democratic veneer that this post has

resonated with a swath of the virtual population, its popularity generating pseudo-credibility. But this is simply not true. Algorithms determine what content populates to a user and a company can design its algorithms however it chooses. Access to user data is a problem but having leverage over algorithms means controlling an important means of cultural production, and thus, value attainment. Stories and user posts that articulate values are suppressed easily. This is a clear manifestation of Liang and Xiangsui's call to weaponize the "commonplace... gentle things" that people use every day.⁶⁴ Furthermore, social media is crucial to networking in the digital era which has direct implications for social capital and social movements—a conspicuous effect following the Arab Spring, and more recently, American acts of civil disobedience like the January 6th Capitol attack.⁶⁵

Regenerating Social Capital

To summarize, normative behavior and social values stem from a collective understanding of cultural narratives; social cohesion is largely determined by how tightly coupled these cultural narratives are within a population. Narratives are most heavily shaped by institutions and media in the communication sphere. In the United States, an adversary nation has gained significant leverage within the communication creating the ability to shape cultural narratives. The ability to deteriorate civility amongst the American population, sow division and distrust, and shape its collective consciousness represents a clear strategic vulnerability. By devaluing American social capital, China wages an effective war without using conventional arms. The living social organism of the United States must adapt or face *Lingchi*, death by a thousand cuts.

The Department of Defense's 2020 China Military Power Report found that, "the [PLA] conducts influence operations by targeting cultural institutions, media organizations, business, academia, and policy communities in the United States."⁶⁶ Banning foreign investment in these industries is a logical solution to curbing PRC influence, but the economic impact of such a proposal would need to be examined carefully. Defensive strategies in the arena of political and information warfare must consider how they create vulnerabilities in other battlespaces, like economics. If banning foreign investments in U.S. industry is more pyrrhic than

strategic, then perhaps the United States can focus on more manageable reforms in the communication sphere.

Reforming the American information space is politically difficult, but necessary. There are several potential solutions to the problem of foreign influence. First, American institutions can regain their cultural hegemony and bolster civic narratives through effective messaging. There are, however, considerable social obstacles before this is viable. The American collective consciousness has long grown accustomed to the paradigm of being at war with itself. The consequences of these wars—to include the War on Drugs exploding the prison population and War on Terror's vast domestic surveillance—decayed public trust in institutions.⁶⁷ American public trust in national government plummeted from 73 percent in 1958 to 24 percent by 2021.⁶⁸ A 2022 Gallup poll also revealed that public confidence in American institutions hit record lows, with faith in the presidency and television news sitting around 23 percent and 11 percent, respectively.⁶⁹

If institutions were to attempt to craft a coherent, unifying cultural narrative, the American public may respond with justifiable skepticism. The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a recent case-in-point: A 2021 Harvard study reported that only 52 percent of Americans had strong trust in information from the CDC. The National Institute of Health and the FDA fared even worse with only 37 percent of those surveyed attesting to strong trust in information from these institutions (3 percentage points lower than “your friends and family”).⁷⁰

American institutions can potentially regain public trust through truth and transparency. Vaccine hesitancy in communities of color, for example, often spurs from historical abuses by medical institutions.⁷¹ While the federal government has admitted to abuses like the Tuskegee experiments, a myriad of similar incidents remains unacknowledged.⁷² Formal institutions could regain public trust by creating civilian co-opted internal affairs departments that investigate historical and on-going public programs and initiatives. Institutions would release these reports with clear solutions to prevent further abuses, centering people's experiences in public policy. Ideally, these reports would be accessible and legible to laypersons. Perhaps a larger body could oversee these efforts. This body could work in a matter akin to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

formed in post-apartheid South Africa.⁷³ The notable difference here being the emphasis on formal institutions. Regaining public trust could prove to be a difficult but essential venture in repairing the American civil sphere.

Broader reforms may also help regenerate American social capital. Legislation could, theoretically, ban foreign and corporate ownership of media entities, but media corruption has marched in lockstep with political corruption. Reforms could disincentivize foreign investment in media by requiring the explicit disclosure all financial ties prior to the display of content.

Alternatively, the Federal Communications Commission could restore its Fairness Doctrine, requiring the media to present opposing viewpoints.⁷⁴ Congress tried to preserve this doctrine by passing the Fairness in Broadcasting Act of 1987, but President Reagan vetoed the effort.⁷⁵ Without the fairness doctrine or effective oversight, the highly-profitable partisan media paradigm formed and entrenched the American psyche in a divided culture war. This corporate news infrastructure was a major avenue through which foreign investment seized to wage a social war on the common people of the United States.

Conclusion

The solutions outlined in this article would be a conscientious effort to reclaim the civic values that foster healthy communication amongst Americans and bolster their social capital. Openness, not censorship, is the lifeblood of a strong democracy. It is no coincidence that as faith in American democracy shrinks, the communication sphere continues to lionize the value of censorship.⁷⁶ It is patently destabilizing for a free and open society, like the United States, to move across the political J-curve towards authoritarianism.⁷⁷ Instead, trusted institutions could draw the deleterious cultural narratives into the light of the public square and give the American collective an alternative they can have reasonable faith in. This narrative alternative could couple values of patriotism with forgiveness, integrity with social responsibility, and encourage engaging in civic life. Then, the American community might be able to trust its neighbors again and rebuild their collective social capital. The United States government must now confront its relationship with the institutions populating its communication sphere or risk further strategic vulnerabilities.

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