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COMMENTARY

Public Knowledge and Expertise Under Authoritarian Siege: A Defense of Academic Freedom from *Digital Journalism Studies*

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the growing global assault on academic freedom—a cornerstone of democratic societies now under increasing threat from authoritarian regimes. It highlights a global decline in that freedom since its peak 20 years ago, focusing on the United States in 2025 to illustrate rapidly escalating academic silencing, even in a country with well-established democratic freedoms and institutions. Drawing on the collective expertise of international scholars in digital journalism studies (DJS)—a field situated at the crossroads of vulnerable institutions—and informed by anonymous reports from U.S.-based academics as well as the wider academic literature, this commentary examines the impact of political interference, censorship, and self-censorship in academia. It argues that DJS as a field must develop approaches that actively resist authoritarianism and uphold freedom of expression and inquiry. The commentary concludes with a normative framework for doing this, proposing a three-pronged approach to defending the larger field, the scholarship within it, and the wellbeing of individual scholars of digital journalism studies.

KEYWORDS

Digital journalism studies; authoritarianism; censorship; self-censorship; academic freedom; freedom of expression; autocracy; freedom of inquiry

Introduction

Freedom of expression and academic freedom are cornerstones of any democratic society, and some of the first freedoms to come under siege in authoritarian countries. Authoritarianism is marked by consolidation of power within the state and can take multiple forms of governance, where the very institutions designed to foster critical thought and expand the free flow of information in the public arena are targeted and subject to censorship and ideological control.

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This commentary focuses on these concerns through the lens of our own scholarly field: digital journalism studies (DJS), an emergent interdisciplinary research field that examines the roles and practices of journalism as both a profession and an institution in society. In supporting the inter-related values of independent inquiry, verifiable evidence, and research integrity, carried out within the context of higher education, we share the concerns expressed elsewhere about increasing the threats to science, which we seek to understand from our own vantage point. Here we use "science" as an umbrella term for academic research of all types and disciplines, including those in the social sciences and humanities. Positioned at the intersection of higher education, research, and journalism—all of which we argue are under attack, our field is particularly obligated to raise concerns about threats to academic freedom—and to public knowledge and expertise more broadly.

This commentary has been co-authored by a group of scholars associated with the Digital Journalism editorial team and its editorial board. While most of us reside in democratic countries, some of us are based in countries with democratic backsliding or authoritarian regimes. We work from nations with different degrees of academic freedom and have different political beliefs, but we join together to write this commentary as scholars who want to defend independent scientific inquiry. We express our solidarity and support for those who risk their safety, careers, and sometimes even lives to uphold academic freedom.

As the linchpin of intellectual inquiry and societal progress, academic freedom protects researchers' ability to work independently and without interference from politicians and other sources of power. This freedom has declined globally since its peak in 2006, making it increasingly difficult for researchers in numerous countries to do their work, obliging them to carefully navigate their research agendas in relation to factors such as the political and cultural climate, being mindful of their expressions and potential repercussions (Kinzelbach, Lindberg, and Lott 2024; Lott 2024). Nowadays, academic freedom is besieged by those who seek to censor or suppress scientific inquiry and discourse. Such interventions, ranging from direct censorship of research and publications to the imposition of ideological conformity within curricula, and in the worst cases imprisonment and even killing of researchers, undermine the very foundations of critical thinking and scholarly integrity.

Darian-Smith (2024) documents a global surge in antidemocratic movements, marked by the rise of predominantly far-right authoritarian figures. This surge, with its destabilizing effects on societies, poses a significant threat to higher education and academic freedom. Consequently, the production of evidence-based knowledge and scientific expertise faces unprecedented challenges. Because academia's guiding principles lie in opposition to the authoritarian drive for control, it becomes a target. The latest, most notable and worrying case is the United States, where the "the assault on science" has been decried by the editors of *Nature* (2025). Recently, we have seen other important statements, such as the brief note "Public Statement on Supporting Science for the Benefit of All Citizens," co-authored by 13 senior scholars in the U.S. and signed by more than 100 scholars across various disciplines. They write:

> The quest for truth—the mission of science—requires that scientists freely explore new questions and report their findings honestly, independent of special interests. The [administration is engaging in censorship, destroying this independence. It is using executive

> orders and financial threats to manipulate which studies are funded or published, how results are reported, and which data and research findings the public can access. (Aslin et al. 2025, 1)

We place a special emphasis on the United States in 2025 based on a concern that we are currently witnessing an "authoritarian takeover" in that country (Goldstein and Gutkin 2025), comparable with a more general autocratization movement in many countries (Nord et al. 2025). Indeed, a strong consensus has emerged among historians and political scientists that authoritarianism is advancing, marked by, among other indicators, consolidation of executive power, weakening of the civil service, politicization of the military, and attacks on countervailing institutions, and erosion of traditional political norms, including willingness to peacefully accept electoral outcomes (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Snyder 2017). The assault on science unfolding in the U.S. is especially significant not only because of the country's economic and political power, but also due to its historic importance for the development of global academia.

We recognize that our choice to emphasize the U.S. could be criticized as overly focused on a single country in the Global North, particularly when assaults on science and journalism have long been prevalent in other authoritarian regimes. We focus on the U.S.to call attention to the ongoing and significant assaults on science more broadly, given its outsized role in global politics andinternationally strong universities, leading in research funding, publication output, doctoral training, and global influence in many disciplines. Furthermore, the U.S. historically has positioned itself as a model of democracy, academic freedom, freedom of expression, and press freedom. When such well-established constitutional principles are undermined in the U.S., which we argue is taking place, it risks normalizing or legitimizing similar violations elsewhere.

Thus, this commentary takes as its point of departure the actions of the current U.S. presidential administration and considers the consequences for independent university research, education, and the public production and dissemination of knowledge. Knowledge and its material forms are produced in and essential to the organization of social life, making assaults on science and knowledge by their very nature attacks on that life.

Consequently, we call for a reorientation of our field's normative foundations—one that not only emphasizes democracy but also resists authoritarianism, thereby more explicitly defending freedom of expression and inquiry. Reese (2022) has made a similar point, arguing that with a journalistic institution in crisis, media scholars must now be both critic and champion. This commentary seeks to clarify the dynamics and scope of the authoritarian assault on science in the U.S., considers the context of broader political and institutional developments, and concludes by discussing potential strategies for responding to this problematic challenge (cf. Westlund et al. 2024).

We acknowledge at the outset that academia and journalism, like other elite institutions, are not immune from critique; they are increasingly mistrusted by people across the political spectrum for appearing to be aloof, disingenuous, and out of touch (Lewis 2024). To cite one example: In recent years, many U.S. universities—under pressure from students, faculty, and outsiders—have been criticized for being too quick to "cancel" voices and perspectives, leading to growing concerns about a lack

of political diversity on college campuses and an overall culture of ideological conformity that stifles the robust intellectual debates that universities are intended to stimulate (e.g., Camp 2022). Also left-leaning academics are beginning to recognize how progressive groupthink is harming science and policy-making when conservative or controversial arguments are excluded (Macedo and Lee 2025). However, while journalism and higher education need reform, they still represent some of the strongest institutional expressions of free expression and open inquiry—principles that are at the heart of this commentary. To defend the work of journalists and researchers, therefore, is to defend the essential contributions of free inquiry, particularly against the growing threats of authoritarian control.

We draw upon our collective expertise, secondary sources about developments in the sector, as well as anonymous reports we have gathered from U.S.-based scholars. Initial conversations with these colleagues indicated an increase in suspicion and caution regarding online communication, preferring end-to-end encrypted messaging applications, such as Signal, and virtual meeting platforms, including Zoom and Teams, over traditional email. Recognizing that many U.S. scholars possess valuable insights but were hesitant to share them *via* conventional channels, we designed an anonymous online form using a secure, university-provided service in Norway. The form consisted of eight questions, specifically addressing perceptions of political interference in research and education.

We used a hybrid sampling strategy, combining strategic, convenience, and snowball sampling. A link to the form was distributed through our networks of journalism and communication scholars at U.S. universities, yielding 17 responses from March 18 to April 9. The goal was to gather firsthand accounts and experiences with open-ended responses offering insights into a wide array of issues, with respondents giving consent for inclusion of anonymised views in our DJS editorial. Crucially, the need for using this anonymous and confidential feedback demonstrates that recent developments in the U.S. have already had real and tangible effects on academic freedom; this is not merely an alarmist reaction to political change. We recognize that anonymous responses are not ideal but are called for in circumstances like these, given the extreme sensitivities around these issues. Our goal here was to get a general understanding of the threats faced by scholars, helping elaborate on examples reported elsewhere and confirmed by our own experiences. We collected responses on two key elements that structure this commentary: (1) the influence on research agendas and funding, and (2) research censorship and self-censorship, whether in science broadly or DJS specifically. The anonymous reports encompass both personal experiences and observations about emerging patterns. We treat the responses as originating from informants offering reliable accounts, but have also added corroborating sources in support.

The next section sets the context by discussing how assaults on science around the world harm society as a whole, followed by a section on how the assault on science manifests in the U.S., with a focus on the salient perspective of DJS. The commentary concludes by advancing a normative framework, offering responses that scholars can adopt to collectively defend academic freedom amid authoritarian pressure.

The Assault on Science amid Global Ascent of Authoritarianism

Having assessed the state of academic freedom in 179 countries in 2023, the most recent Academic Freedom Index found it lacking and deteriorating even in historically strong contexts (Kinzelbach, Lindberg, and Lott 2024, 2). The index reports that 23 nations experienced a decline associated with ongoing democratic backsliding, including the U.S., Mexico, the United Kingdom, Russia, Venezuela, and many countries in Asia and Africa (Kinzelbach, Lindberg, and Lott 2024; Lott 2024).

The year 2024 marked a milestone: for the first time in more than 20 years, the world now features more autocracies (91) than democracies (88). The ongoing "third wave" of autocratization, spanning some two decades, has dramatically reshaped the global political landscape. Alongside the undermining of elections and civil society, autocrats primarily employ media censorship to consolidate power. The status of freedom of expression is alarming, as it was worsening in 44 countries in 2024 (Nord et al. 2025).

Throughout history there are many examples of authorities suppressing independent researchers (and journalists) under various justifications. Prominent cases include Galileo Galilei's conflict with the Catholic Church in the seventeenth century, Voltaire's defense of free speech in the eighteenth century, and Marie Curie's struggle against institutional barriers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The most extreme example is Nazi Germany, where during the first weeks of his reign, Hitler enforced laws that prohibited Jews, socialists, and communists from having positions at German universities. The institutional pressure, paired with an exclusionary and racist ideology, led to a mass exodus of scholars from Germany, including luminaries such as Nobel Prize winner Albert Einstein, as well as Kurt Lewin and other key figures in early communication studies.

These historical patterns provide important reference points for understanding the threats to free expression and inquiry. The concept of authoritarian legalism refers to how regimes manipulate legal frameworks within the judiciary, electoral systems, media, and education to consolidate control and stifle opposition. Hungary offers a recent European example, as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his associates in the Fidesz party have curtailed academic freedom and faculty governance, including through the forced closure of Central European University (CEU) and the elimination of gender studies (Weinstein and Blanchard 2023).

In the lead-up to the 2024 U.S. presidential election, legislation was introduced directly targeting academic freedom. These state-level initiatives, driven by Republican-dominated legislatures, sought to dismantle academic freedom in three key areas: (1) shared governance, (2) autonomy in teaching and research, and (3) tenure and collective representation (Weinstein and Blanchard 2023). The evidence is clear, we argue, that the Trump administration in 2025 is carrying out a systematic assault on the traditional principles of free inquiry (AAUP 2025; PEN America 2025; United Nations Human Rights Council 2025). In our view this is echoing the long-standing practices of authoritarian regimes around the world, which are consolidating their power. Once regarded as a democratic beacon of freedom of expression, the U.S. now represents one of the most recent and striking manifestations of this authoritarian trend.

Throughout the first months of 2025, the U.S. administration has threatened federal funding for universities unless they comply with its requirements. Several universities, most notably Columbia University, capitulated to these demands, but in response the administration escalated new requirements. However, on 11 April 2025, the American Association of University Professors and its Harvard Faculty Chapter filed a lawsuit against multiple federal departments and agencies in the Massachusetts district court (President and Fellows of Harvard College v. US Department of Health and Human Services 2025). In their filing, they wrote: "This action challenges the Trump administration's unlawful and unprecedented misuse of federal funding and civil rights enforcement authority to undermine academic freedom and free speech on a university campus….Harvard, like all American universities, depends on federal funding to conduct its academic research. Threats like these are an existential 'gun to the head' for a university." Hundreds of U.S. universities have expressed their support.

In a recent article in the American Association of University Professors's *Journal of Academic Freedom,* the author Darian-Smith (2024) argues, "As part of this global trend, higher education and academic freedom have increasingly come under attack, presenting a range of challenges to the production of evidence-based knowledge and scientific expertise". Indeed, scholarly independence is intrinsically linked to the ability of researchers to define their research agendas, prioritize research problems, and select research designs. Drawing on our joint expertise and a review of the most relevant articles on the topic, we identify two key outcomes of the assault on this independence: (1) the influence on research agendas and related funding, and (2) research censorship and self-censorship. These are not mutually exclusive but are interrelated.

Problem 1. Influence on Research Agendas and Funding

The erosion of public research funding, increasing encroachment on academic freedom, and government interventions into funding decisions all directly impact researchers' academic freedom. As public funding for universities continues to decline in many countries, university researchers are increasingly required to compete for external funding from an ever-shrinking pool of government-supported, charity, and industry-affiliated funds. In a highly competitive funding environment, researchers must align their projects with the strategic priorities of these funders. This dependence significantly impacts the direction of scientific inquiry, favoring research that addresses immediate political or economic priorities over exploratory or fundamental research. Naturally, this is not only an issue under autocratic governments, and no funding source is without its challenges.

The Trump administration was quick to begin freezing finances and spending across many sectors, including universities and research bodies (Blake 2025). Numerous U.S.-based scholars and their international collaborators have witnessed their project funding, awarded through competitive application, abruptly frozen or terminated. The sudden loss of funding for multi-year projects has severe consequences for researchers, including those based outside the U.S., causing both the early termination of existing research projects and the withdrawal of planned projects and positions. For example, U.S. scholars have reported that some departments have had to inform incoming

Ph.D. students that their admission had been withdrawn due to dramatic changes to federal research funding (Garisto 2025).

Indeed, during the first couple of months of 2025, those funding cuts have included active projects with international collaborators funded by the U.S. Department of State, which in most cases addressed topics that ran counter to the Trump administration's political agenda. Among areas affected are health and climate change (PhysOrg 2025), but also projects focusing on journalism and fact-checking (Meyers 2025). National Institutes of Health funding termination has also been associated with grants' links to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI).

Beyond these issues, other cuts include initiatives designed to foster international collaboration, such as the Fulbright Program. Similarly, the Trump administration was accused of "blatant foreign interference" when, in March 2025, it sent a survey to Canadian, Australian, British, and European Union researchers who receive U.S. funding, asking them to confirm that their research was in the interest of the U.S., didn't study DEI topics, and wasn't focused on climate or environmental justice (Cassidy 2025). The termination of research funding also resulted in active datasets being closed, causing researchers to withdraw journal articles under peer-review, because they were unable to share datasets or other materials to ensure replicability. Politicizing independent research poses a critical threat to scientific inquiry (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2017; Goldman et al. 2020).

The U.S. situation is not the only example. In Australia, for instance, a conservative government minister recently vetoed six humanities grants that the country's research council had recommended for funding because, in the minister's view, the research did not "demonstrate value for taxpayers' money nor contribute to the national interest" (Lu 2022). In Latin America, financial support for research comes mostly from governmental institutions but is usually insufficient and largely dependent on the ideology of the party in power (Ciocca and Delgado 2017).

This influence of government is felt in other places through prioritizing particular research topics as socially important while deeming others as not worthy of public funding. The European Union allocates research funds primarily through its Framework Programmes, currently Horizon Europe. Managed largely by the European Commission *via* direct calls for proposals, this system aims to address societal challenges and enhance EU competitiveness. National research councils frequently utilize strategic councils and advisory boards to direct funding toward priority areas. For example, the United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) body employs a strategic framework to address key societal issues. Similarly, the Research Council of Norway (RCN), guided by expert panels and strategic councils, uses funding initiatives to address national priorities, such as sustainable energy and artificial intelligence. Ultimately, research councils are increasingly influenced by strategic frameworks, economic and political agendas, and targeted funding mechanisms, some of which are closely linked to political influence. In the Netherlands, for example, the minister for science, culture and education announced in 2025 that the government will have a stronger role to make sure education and research contribute to "issues of public interest" (Kamerbrief 2025); its government has decided to cut university funding by 1.2 billion euro and there is currently a strong political lobby against "unnecessary" disciplines (*NL Times* 2025; Times Higher Education 2025).

Problem 2. Censorship and Self-Censorship of Research

Beyond the issues of funding cuts lies a deeper concern over limiting what can be researched. Research censorship occurs when external actors suppress the investigation, publication, or dissemination of scientific findings deemed controversial or undesirable. This suppression can be driven by various motives and can take different forms, such as pressuring researchers to unsubmit manuscripts currently under peer-review, withdraw publications, or alter their findings to align with external interests. An unwillingness to "name" a certain threat in science may lead disciplinary fields such as political communication to lack the frameworks and conceptual tools to better study and understand contemporary far-right movements (Knüpfer, Jackson, and Kreiss 2024). Self-censorship, on the other hand, takes place when researchers avoid certain areas or refrain from publishing controversial results, driven by concerns about potential backlash. A culture of fear and paranoia creates a "chilling effect" that hinders free inquiry.

Self-censorship is indeed an increasing concern across countries and disciplines. As a recent UNESCO report highlights, perceived threats, such as online harassment and professional ostracism, can be as damaging as direct violence, because they pressure scientists to alter or withhold their work, ultimately undermining academic freedom (Gerards and Schattevoet 2024). Examples of this trend are numerous. In Norway, researchers studying politically sensitive issues like immigration, gender, and climate change reported high levels of harassment, often even from colleagues. This has led to significant self-censorship, particularly among public health and immunology experts during the COVID-19 pandemic (32). In the Netherlands, gender-based intimidation, especially against female scientists, has further contributed to a climate where controversial topics and public engagement are increasingly avoided (33). These examples illustrate how both external and internal pressures can erode scientific integrity and limit the societal impact of academic research.

In 2025 the administration has terminated DEI-related programs across public and private universities. Many U.S. universities are not unfamiliar with external pressures regarding these issues, particularly in states such as Florida and Texas, which have enforced new restrictions on university curriculum and programs (Darian-Smith 2024). For instance, in 2021, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones was denied a tenured position at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, reportedly because her involvement in a major *New York Times* project about the legacy of slavery in America upset school funders (Robertson 2021). Similarly, in 2023, Texas A&M University recruited Kathleen McElroy, a respected journalist and academic, to run the university's journalism program as a tenured professor, only to renege on the offer over concerns about her work on race and diversity in newsrooms (McGee 2023). In both cases, pressures from conservative groups and the universities' respective boards of trustees, together with accusations of "propaganda" and "woke" ideology, undermined the hiring of these two black women (McGee 2023; Robertson 2021). Also in 2023, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed a bill banning DEI initiatives in public universities (Díaz 2023), demonizing critical race theory and gender ideology, and undermining the work of scholars doing research on DEI-related topics. These examples are concerning but pale in comparison to the heavy-handed centralized offensive now waged by the Trump administration.

The Assault Associated with DJS in the U.S.

Clearly, all sorts of academic research is being targeted, but in this section, we consider the effects on our own field, in keeping with the remit of this journal as not only a repository of articles but an important voice for the collective interests and concerns of this field. *Digital Journalism* publishes cutting-edge, interdisciplinary research examining the role of digital journalism in diverse global contexts (Eldridge et al. 2019; Steensen and Westlund 2021), disseminating scientific knowledge and providing valuable insights for researchers, educators, professionals, policymakers, and the public. Since 2018, the *Digital Journalism* editorial team has actively promoted pioneering exceptional research from a global community of scholars, guided by a commitment to mindful inclusion (Eldridge et al. 2019). Over the years, we have been in contact with scholars, even those based in democratic nations, facing harassment and threats due to their research on alt-right movements and alternative news media, leading our editorial team to deliberate on how to respond to these concerns. For example, scholars in Northern Europe advancing research about the far right and its digital communication have been exposed to online harassment and threats.

Our journal supports researchers working in countries with limited freedom of expression and democratic governance, and assists scholars who conduct research under precarious conditions within or about authoritarian regimes. We have learned firsthand how scholars, fearing official repercussions, have requested the omission of specific terminology in their articles. Now, for the first time, on March 16, 2025, a scholar made a request to withdraw a research article from *Digital Journalism* for political reasons. This U.S. scholarcited "the current tense political situation in the United States and the subject of my paper" for withdrawing a study on the impact of social media platforms' content moderation policies, adding, "I'm grateful for the reviewers' and editorial board's thoughtful comments, suggestions, and time. This was a difficult decision to make, I hope you understand. I'm just not comfortable moving forward in this climate." The editorial team offered to place the submission on pause, as well as the option to proceed with anonymous publication. Although this obviously undermines the academic recognition for the author, it gives researchers the possibility to publish critically important research even in the face of potential risks.

There are limits to freedom of expression in many countries, restricting what scholars and students can say and write without consequences. This has increasingly been the case in the Global North. In a notable incident in March 2025, U.S. Homeland Security seized and detained a graduate student at Columbia University, a legal foreign resident who had engaged in Palestinian activism. Since he was not charged with any specific crime, many international students became afraid of being detained as well for exercising free speech around politically sensitive issues—and rightfully so, given the growing list of politically active students being detained in the U.S. (AP 2025). The Columbia Journalism School made a public statement on its website soon after: "We write to affirm our commitment to supporting and exercising First Amendment rights for students, faculty, and staff on our campus." In its statement, the School raised concerns about the chilling effect on free speech and promotion of self-censorship, particularly among the 13 million legal foreign residents currently in the U.S. "These actions represent threats against political speech and the ability

of the American press to do its essential job and are part of a larger design to silence voices that are out of favor with the current administration" (The Faculty of Columbia Journalism School 2025). Indeed, there are growing concerns about Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) carrying out raids at universities, affecting not only the researchers and students being seized and detained, but also their supportive peers and colleagues (Gary and Stahl 2025).

A further area of concern over academic freedom involves the free flow of people. In recent cases, ICE has denied entry to the U.S. for some inbound travellers, both scholars and tourists, placing them in solitary confinement and thereafter sending them back. ICE is reported to search digital devices, as well as scan activities online and on social media. Even if the risk of search and detainment is low for any individual visitor, the mere prospect of such treatment has resulted in some international communication scholars expressing concerns about going to key communication conferences in the U.S., for fear of being denied entry. The president of the International Communication Association (ICA) recently had to assure members that airport authorities at the host city, Denver, had assured him they would support incoming travellers to the annual conference in June. It is worth noting how upsetting it is to the scholarly community for the U.S., as a pioneer in free speech and academic freedom, to become the object of fear of detainment and deportation. All of this cannot help but have a chilling effect.

Political Influence and (Self-)Censorship Taking a Toll on DJS Scholars

Given the climate of caution and self-censorship in the U.S., we circulated an online form to collect anonymized testimonies regarding how the assault on science is affecting scholars in our field. Some colleagues appreciated the initiative and immediately shared the form with their close networks, but others did not want to engage with this form and were hesitant to even share the link with colleagues and graduate students. We understand and respect their position, and after reading the testimonies provided by our informants, we see why especially junior faculty, international scholars, and graduate students might be afraid of sharing their personal experiences. We deeply appreciate the responses we received, and document here the toll that the current political climate is taking.

Our informants mentioned they have reconsidered submitting sensitive research for publication, and expressed suspicion, anxiety, and caution regarding online communication in this climate of surveillance, choosing to transition some communication to encrypted platforms instead. As one writes, "*I am part of a private group chat where folks are more open about what they're seeing and feeling. Not only does the fear directly manifest in the work they choose to do, but the feeling of helplessness is seriously hampering the ability to even focus on work. There is a collective trauma developing around this.*"

Responses also reveal reluctance to participate in research on sensitive topics like disinformation, due to fears of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, malicious targeting, "doxxing," and other repercussions. Additionally, researchers have already begun avoiding federal funding opportunities, such as National Science Foundation grants that impose restrictions on politically relevant topics, and they are altering

planned research projects to circumvent these limitations. This demonstrates an adaptation to perceived pressures by scholars, now keenly aware that some research areas will be much more likely to be exposed to political interventions than others. One informant writes "*My research is on climate change communication and I feel like it's going to be an unfavorable topic under this administration*." Another informant reports that the U.S. administration has cancelled an ongoing NEH project focused on *"how corporate interests are shaping policy debates around the future of AI,"* adding that the political situation in the U.S. has resulted in *"a lot of stress and anxiety."*

Restricting specific terms related to race, gender identity, sexuality, disability, and other protected characteristics raises serious concerns for our informants. Consistent with the administration's opposition to DEI programs, the federal government reportedly informed IT staff at some U.S. universities in March 2025 that they would be deploying automated systems to scan faculty servers for designated DEI terms as well as other terms such as "anti-Semitism," "marginalized," "Palestine," and "Israel". Universities have been required to review documents on their websites and within educational software platforms, such as Canvas, and cloud storage services, such as Box. In February 2025, a memorandum to all Department of Justice (DOJ) employees from Attorney General Pam Bondi informed that the DOJ's Civil Rights Division "will investigate, eliminate and penalize illegal DEI and DEIA preferences, mandates, policies, programs and activities in the private sector and in education institutions that receive federal funds" (Office of the Attorney General 2025).

U.S. colleagues have reported widespread anxiety among universities and faculty regarding these scans and their potential consequences. Their universities have in turn instructed faculty to remove such terms from official course documents. Informants have also mentioned changes in classroom practices, including the cessation of lecture recordings (to avoid having them posted to social media, for instance) and revising potentially controversial course content.

Institutional concerns and the threat of funding cuts exacerbate this climate of fear and uncertainty. Amid these concerns about academic security, informants reflect on the emotional labor placed upon faculty to address student and colleague anxieties. A large proportion of graduate students in U.S. communication programs are international, and so they face daunting questions about what they can research or whether they should travel for conferences or even for personal reasons. In many cases, these international students are accustomed to returning to their home countries to reconnect with family and friends in the summer—only now, in many cases, they have been warned by their universities not to leave the U.S. to avoid the possibility of being denied re-entry because of uncertainties at the border. Faculty must help students with this anxiety even as they manage their own stress, underscoring the broader personal impact of political uncertainty on academic communities, which extends beyond research and teaching to encompass emotional support.

Other informants express apprehension regarding evolving immigration policies and the rise of anti-science rhetoric, demonstrating a tangible impact on the academic climate. They report that such anxiety extends to undergraduate students, who are reluctant to engage in certain assignments or public demonstrations due to fear of harassment—including "doxxing"—and institutional retaliation. The experiences collected in our anonymized form highlight the heightened vulnerability of individuals

with marginalized identities, as well as undocumented students. Some universities, for example, have Mexican students who have been crossing the border regularly for education, and who now face increasing threats of ICE raids.

Defending Digital Journalism Studies: The Field, Scholarship, and Its Scholars

The defense of knowledge-producing institutions is a defense of democratic values. Weinstein and Blanchard asserted that we must "recognize that autocracy requires the suppression of academic freedom, just as democracy demands support of it" (2023, 9). We agree with this position and argue that from a normative standpoint, DJS scholars should articulate their positions more explicitly, which for us means actively supporting key freedoms and importance of verified information and knowledge. This normativity relates to the underpinnings in scientific approaches, and extends to the research questions that scholars pursue and the methods they employ. We reconsider current normative frameworks in the field, which essentially work under the assumption that scholars have academic freedom and study journalism based on democratic ideals—an assumption increasingly under threat in autocratic regimes.

Consequently, while this commentary primarily focuses on identifying the key problems, we also seek to initiate a dialogue on potential actions that scholars, particularly in the field of DJS, can take to help mitigate the harm of assaults on science and corrupting influences, even as we acknowledge the difficulty of offering definitive answers within this format. In light of current democratic backsliding, scholars must increasingly view their work as a form of social responsibility. Importantly, in the following segments, we focus on the type of initiatives that individual scholars can undertake, both generally and within the field of DJS, while excluding measures that require formal institutional support from universities or governments. Although this framework pertains to our field specifically, we intend it as a guide for academic disciplines more broadly. Our suggestions are grouped into three key approaches for defending DJS as a field, as a body of scholarship, and as a scholarly community, synthesized in our three-pronged approach introduced below.

A Three-Pronged Digital Journalism Studies Approach for Defending Academic Freedom

DJS field	DJS scholarship	DJS scholars
Rethinking DJS normative frameworks amid democratic backsliding	Cultivating DJS scholarship for strengthening of democratic institutions	Fostering critical outsider research
Advancing DJS amid digital authoritarianism	Defending DJS knowledge through public engagement	Recognizing emotional labor
Examining the political role and power of digital technology	Privileging domain-specific and evidence-informed expertise	Nurturing and protecting emerging scholars

Defending the Field: Re-considering DJS amid Authoritarianism

DJS is an interdisciplinary field focusing on the intersection of journalism and digital technology (Eldridge et al. 2019; Westlund et al. 2025). Normativitiy in our field

encompasses how scholars approach the definition and ideal of journalism as a practice, such as assuming journalism to be important for informing citizens and holding those in power accountable. Steensen and Westlund (2021) problematize these normative assumptions in light of other social functions of journalism, the co-presence of additional forms of verified information, and the existence of digital journalism within non-democratic contexts, such as authoritarian regimes. In such regimes, it cannot be assumed that journalism as an institution, and journalists themselves, have the capacity to hold those in power accountable, nor that informing citizens necessarily enables their participation in a democratic process. Indeed, in DJS, the role of digital technology has been normatively framed in both optimistic and pessimistic terms: positively as a potential asset for journalism and democracy, and negatively in terms of how it may undermine journalism, weaken democratic structures, or enable autocratic regimes to consolidate power. In what follows, we discuss the necessity of reconsidering existing normative frameworksin response to democratic backsliding and the rise of authoritarianism. We then offer specific recommendations for advancing DJS scholarship amid conditions of "digital authoritarianism."

Rethinking DJS Normative Frameworks Amid Democratic Backsliding

Given that autocracy has become more commonplace than democracy across the world, (Economist Intelligence Unit 2024; Freedom House 2024; V-Dem Institute 2024), DJS scholars have already emphasized that they cannot assume that liberal democratic theories are a self-evident point of departure. With the global rise of authoritarianism, scholars must reconsider some, if not all, normative frameworks used to assess the format, function, and consequences of journalism in diverse societies. As researchers in related disciplines have already noted (Knüpfer, Jackson, and Kreiss 2024), the field is currently ill-equipped to properly address emerging journalistic threats and innovations within a rapidly evolving political landscape. As a field born from disruption, DJS is grounded in scholarship tackling the economic, societal, and technological disruptions of the past few decades (Steensen and Westlund 2021). Building on this foundation, we argue that future efforts to advance normative frameworks in DJS should explicitly integrate research on authoritarianism. As Knüpfer, Jackson, and Kreiss (2024) recently argued in the context of political communication research, "If the far right aims to undermine academic values and practices, then we must take a clear stance on what we are defending in our political communication scholarship. Beyond this, to accurately conceptualize and categorize increasingly dominant actors, our field requires a firm perspective and vantage point" (1009–1010).

We hereby make two key points. First, we affirm DJS as a field marked by interdisciplinary, multi-methodological, and dynamic approaches that seek to study and conceptualize emerging challenges, primarily at the intersection of journalism and digital technology. DJS should continue this trajectory, and do so more explicitly in light of the rise of authoritarianism, as demonstrated by an upcoming special issue we began processing in early 2024.

Second, DJS scholars should more boldly identify and name specific threats, as Knüpfer and colleagues argue. This is particularly important for scholars operating in

countries where they can speak out, thus amplifying the voices of colleagues working under oppressive conditions. We argue that the rise of authoritarianism and autocracy threatens not only our field, but journalism and freedom of the press more broadly. Our normative ideals of what journalism *should* be will diverge significantly from what it actually *is* in autocratic states, necessitating a critical reassessment of how we study and understand these changes. This extends to the question of whether—and how—DJS scholarship could transcend purely academic boundaries by engaging more actively in public discourse, everyday conversations, ongoing policy-making processes, and political debates (see Wilner et al. 2024), with the explicit goal of actively defending the democratic values upon which the field is built. This form of knowledge dissemination is already central to academic work, but it takes on additional urgency in the context of the challenges outlined above.

Advancing DJS Amid Digital Authoritarianism

Authoritarian practices such as surveillance can occur regardless of how political actors come into power, as authoritarianism is not solely defined by the absence of free and fair elections (Glasius and Michaelsen 2018; Hintz and Milan 2018). A country becomes more authoritarian when its administration enforces executive orders that restrict both academic freedom and press freedom. Defining authoritarianism solely as a system characterized by centralized power structures, a lack of state accountability, and the repression of political dissent (Linz 1964) no longer sufficiently captures the contemporary dynamics of the phenomenon. The use of censorship and media control to shape public opinion, once primarily associated with authoritarian regimes (Sinpeng and Koh 2022), is now increasingly prevalent in other types of political systems as well.

The same is true for the use of technology to surveil, control, limit, and manipulate public debate. In traditional authoritarian regimes, arbitrary surveillance, secrecy, disinformation, propaganda, and the suppression of free expression have been closely intertwined; this interconnectedness continues in the digital era (Glasius and Michaelsen 2018), giving rise to what scholars term digital authoritarianism (DA). Originally introduced by Erixon and Lee-Makiyama (2011), the term gained wider recognition after its inclusion in a Freedom House (2018) report. The practices of DA worldwide, including those observed within the U.S. administration, emphasize that such authoritarian dynamics are not confined to non-democratic governments. As scholars expand the definition of authoritarianism to include practices found in both democratic and non-democratic countries, the concept of DA has also been adapted accordingly, to recognize the proliferation of surveillance, disinformation, propaganda, and other repressive practices across liberal democracies, authoritarian states, and hybrid regimes (Freedom House 2018).

In the struggle over the digital space, the goals of DA stand fundamentally opposed to those of journalism (Glasius and Michaelsen 2018). While the former aims to control and manipulate the public sphere, the latter seeks to illuminate it and inform the public. DJS scholars should be explicit about their normative values as they study and assess how authoritarian regimes deploy digital communications and technology to exert power over journalism as well as scholars who research it.

Examining the Political Role and Power of Digital Technology

The DJS field has a long history of assessing the role of digital technologies, including early debates centered on technological determinism versus the social construction of technology. Scholars have examined areas such as data journalism, analytics and metrics, automation, algorithms, and platforms. Initial approaches to digital platforms often emphasized opportunities for journalism, including uncritical studies of social media adoption for reaching younger audiences. However, both industry and scholarship have adopted increasingly critical perspectives (Steensen and Westlund 2021). We argue that DJS scholars must recognize the growing significance, agency, and power of digital technologies, especially platforms and artificial intelligence (AI) companies, in the political sphere. Research has shown how platform and AI companies control the flow of information, thereby influencing how users perceive political events and figures. These companies amplify certain voices while silencing others, potentially swaying public opinion and election outcomes. Concerns about misinformation, censorship, and foreign interference in elections underscore the complex and crucial relationship between digital technology and political power, which should be a core concern of the field.

Furthermore, we contend that DJS scholars must explicitly address the links among platforms and AI companies, their ownership, and their role in politics. For example, Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter and its transformation into X has increasingly associated the platform with right-wing populism (Tapper 2024). In early 2025, Meta's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, announced a shift in platform governance, signaling a departure from DEI principles and a reduction in support for fact-checking partnerships (Isaac and Schleifer 2025). This shift aligns with the policies of the Trump administration, whose inauguration was attended by Zuckerberg, alongside other prominent billionaires and platform company executives (Ingram 2025; Peters 2025).

This situation echoes historical patterns, when scholars and policymakers scrutinized the concentration of power among news publishers and the influence of owner ideology in the twentieth century. DJS scholars must now apply similar scrutiny to digital platforms and AI, where we have witnessed an unparalleled concentration of economic wealth, media power, and political influence. The exodus to Bluesky by many users unhappy with the changes in X illustrates a trend in which political ideology is linked to platform choice, exacerbating political polarization (Holtermann 2024). The principle of network neutrality, which asserts that network providers should not discriminate against content, websites, or applications, is crucial. A robust free speech system depends not only on the absence of state censorship but also on a strong digital infrastructure that sustains free expression and protects media freedom. At the same time, we need to be mindful of the role and accountability of digital platforms in allowing an unprecedented volume of misinformation and extremism to threaten democratic life.

Defending the Scholarship: Democracy, Public Knowledge, and Expertise

Authoritarian states are known for censoring knowledge, shaping a singular way of knowing that suits them, and making it more difficult for the public to think freely and critically. Authoritarian leaders often spread propaganda and false information,

and in their pursuits to undermine journalism and researchers cause the public to question the possibility of the truth itself. It is alarming when the public stops trusting legitimate sources of information, placing scientific research findings in the same box as re-posts on X. DJS scholars need to revisit public communication, taking into account different political and public contexts. This section argues for defending democratic institutions, knowledge, and expertise.

Cultivating DJS Scholarship for Strengthening of Democratic Institutions

A characteristic of autocratic regimes is the purposeful undermining of democratic institutions and the system of checks and balances designed to control unfettered power., whether through attacks on democratic voting processes, disregard for courts and parliaments, or efforts to weaken the role of journalism and academic research as critical watchdogs. It is crucial to understand that both journalism and academia as societal institutions are neither a given nor safe from attacks that challenge their independence and functioning. Instead, these institutions represent historical achievements of liberal democracies, outcomes of long and arduous struggles marked by significant hardship and sacrifice. Autocracies aim to control and limit both academia and journalism, placing them in a dependent role within a strictly hierarchical system. In such a system, scientific knowledge merely reinforces the predefined rule of the few, and journalism becomes a device of mass control. Research plays a vital role in unmasking and signaling tendencies toward such autocratic shifts, in creating normative frameworks that identify and critique authoritarian actions, and in contributing knowledge on how to strengthen democratic institutions. We encourage DJS scholars to contribute solutions to prevent democratic degradation by providing scientific insight and data, ideas for action, tools to expose and stop autocrats, and proposals for making social structures resilient against authoritarian attacks.

The digital transformation of journalism illustrates these challenges clearly. AI and digital technologies hold significant opportunities to enhance the democratic role of the media in scrutinizing power, informing the public, and ensuring accountability. Yet, digital transformation simultaneously features profound imbalances in economic, technological, and political power, potentially serving as a vehicle for perpetuating ideologies and becoming an instrument for autocratic states. DJS scholars should therefore intensify research into the interrelationships between political actors, the wealthy, and tech companies, thereby advancing insights into how these actors mutually reinforce one another for financial and political advantage, often at significant cost to the public and society as a whole.

Defending DJS Knowledge Through Public Engagement

Universities are known in democracies as one of the most influential knowledge-producing institutions. Restricting and politicizing research on disinformation, climate change or health, for example, harms not only the academic community but society as a whole. Faculty members are encouraged to share their research with the public, by being available to journalists, writing op-eds, giving public lectures, and so forth. In this

respect, research and journalism are closely related and share common cause, making it increasingly important that researchers make themselves and their research accessible to journalists, contributing vital expertise and knowledge to public life. University research and journalism should serve society as a whole, not individual politicians, governments, or (very large tech) companies.

Indeed, the rise of authoritarianism challenges both the production and dissemination of scientific evidence and aims to undermine the trust of the public in research and universities as democratic institutions. There is a task here for universities to strengthen alliances with citizens and societal stakeholders, making it clear and observable how they produce and contribute knowledge that addresses societal problems. We hope that DJS can be an example of how collaborations between researchers and stakeholders like media organizations and journalists advance academic knowledge and strengthen democratic institutions. And in a time when autocratic regimes co-opt truth and use public communication to polarize, divide and disseminate disinformation, researchers have a critical task in unmasking these strategies, creating evidence-based counter-narratives and alternative visions for society. We encourage DJS scholars to improve our communication with the wider public, in ways that engage them. While acknowledging that science often has presented itself as a detached observer of political processes, we argue that DJS scholars should defend democratic values and communicate research that speaks to those values.

Privileging Domain-Specific and Evidence-Informed Expertise

Artificial intelligence companies are currently developing their offerings by continuous training on diverse datasets, which may include research publications and journalistic news materials. The current U.S. administration has aligned itself with certain high–profile tech sector leaders, such as Elon Musk, helping root out alleged inefficiency, replacing some domain-specific experts in a government department with an AI chatbot (Dellinger 2025). Meanwhile, a recent study reveals that large language models can overestimate relevance due to the choice of query terms, raising concerns about their reliability as replacements for human assessors, and their vulnerability to manipulation through SEO strategies (Alaofi et al. 2024). Similarly, the rise of generative AI as an easily accessible tool raises a host of potential issues around facticity, algorithmic bias, and people outsourcing their critical thinking to computers—issues that threaten to become even more prevalent in areas where research into topics like bias, inclusivity, and fairness are actively suppressed by governments.

This is part of a larger trend of misusing data and making decisions based on computer models without understanding or accounting for the human and social context. In response, we argue that decision-makers should engage with and listen to human experts rather than assume AI necessarily offers a superior solution. As researchers, we need to contribute to better AI literacy among politicians and the public, and this includes the use of data as a basis of decision making, with or without AI. The actions of the U.S. administration's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) have shown how a lack of understanding of the meaning of data can lead to problematic decisions, and also how seemingly "logical, AI-based" processes may seem like rational cost-cutting, while in effect serving pre-defined political goals

(House Oversight Committee 2025; Vanity Fair 2025; Washington Post 2025). Evidence-based science can serve as an antithesis to emotionalized, illogical "arguments" that are frequently used by authoritarian politicians to achieve desired effects among their supporters. AI, when applied with care for a better analysis and understanding of data, can help strengthen rather than attack science.

Defending the Scholars: Emotions and Care

Amid assaults on science and journalism across the globe, we must more explicitly recognize the problems DJS scholars are facing in their research and work. The free pursuit of academic inquiry may well have imminent costs and consequences, such as repercussions from authorities and online harassment. We recognize a resulting need for collegial care and support structures, and, recognizing emotional labor, especially for emerging scholars and for those conducting what we call "critical outsider research."

Fostering Critical Outsider Research

The assaults on science, restrict scholars from advancing research and knowledge in their countries. To address this research deficit, scholars living outside of more extreme authoritarian regimes may consider conducting more investigations in those areas. We term these scholars as "outsider researchers." Being able to examine developments from the outside can firstly shed light on issues within these authoritarian societies that cannot be explored due to restrictions faced by "insider" scholars. Additionally, an outsider researcher has the ability to see a situation with fresh eyes, detached from it and hence more removed from emotional biases that might result from one's direct involvement. We therefore welcome more of such research, so that more voices may be heard on important issues.

It is important, however, that such research still be sensitive to context (Wu 2024), and paints an accurate picture of journalistic practice. Outsider researchers may well have moral sensitivities and expertise, but scholars must be careful when applying normative frameworks about what journalism is and should be in democracies when studying practices and perceptions in authoritarian contexts. DJS scholars across democratic and autocratic contexts should recognize that they share similar normative goals, and that they should seek out collaborations based on how they can each contribute to achieving those goals. There are several cross-cultural and comparative research projects in the field already established that foster collaborations among scholars across democratic and autocratic countries, which we firmly believe should be encouraged.

Recognizing Emotional Labor

It is essential to recognize the complex forms of emotional labor required by DJS scholars, who are affected by profound and worrying transformations in the conditions for research. While various types of emotional labor are embedded in the very fabric of academic work under "normal" circumstances (Lawless 2018), these demands are

dramatically increased with authoritarian assault on universities. For colleagues based in the U.S., they must contend with the emotional impact of rapid changes including the abrupt withdrawal of research funding, closure of courses and programmes, challenges to academic freedom, and firings and deportations of colleagues and students. This entails managing their own emotions as well as those of others surrounding them, with particular challenges for those in more precarious positions or from minority or marginalized communities (e.g., Mudde 2025).

At the same time, DJS scholars tend to be emotionally and normatively invested in journalism as an institution and a practice (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020), and therefore experience emotional distress from the assaults on their object of study which endanger its very existence. In the first instance, we must acknowledge the impact of this emotional labor, with its experience of depletion and exhaustion (e.g., Grandey and Gabriel 2015; Thomson 2021). For scholars in less-precarious settings, it is imperative to embed an ethics of care underpinned by compassion in our interactions with colleagues doubly-affected by the assault on both science and journalism. Such an ethics of care involves, first of all, gaining an understanding of the concrete challenges faced by our colleagues and, secondly, "responding to others' needs in ways that are contextually sensitive and culturally attuned" (Koggel and Orme 2010, 112). We need to recognize, at our core, that DJS scholars are part of a global community and that we have a responsibility for the well-being of every member of that community.

Nurturing and Protecting Emerging Scholars

We as senior scholars have to identify how best to train the next generation of journalism scholars and practitioners. What skills, methods, and supportive networks are needed, and how can we address the vulnerabilities of those without job security, voice and negotiation power? It may be difficult to entice students to enter the field given the precarity and threats that they may face, with far fewer protections than established scholars have. Yet we need to recognize that the vibrancy of this field, and its ability to keep up with developments in practice and theory, depends on nurturing—and protecting—our field's future.

This can take several forms, from just being aware of and validating the anxieties that emerging scholars have about their safety, to creating active support networks, safe channels to signal abuse, and speaking out in public on their behalf. There are many actions we can take, from being creative about allowing for online presentations at conferences to tackling the insecurities of the academic job market and reconsidering the way we evaluate academic performance. For scholars working in countries with greater protections, thinking about the forms of institutional support for inviting and hosting emerging scholars who lack these protections is paramount. If there is a societal role for DJS researchers to engage and work with stakeholders towards strengthening democratic processes and fundamental rights, doing so must be recognised and awarded, including in the context of academic assessments. If publications in academic journals are all that matters for making an academic career, we cannot hope to nurture an active and engaged new generation of critical scholars that takes its societal role seriously.

Concluding Note

This commentary has established that knowledge-producing institutions, and those working at them, face a concerted assault. As we have argued, these problems are not isolated incidents, but symptomatic indicators of a broader attack, resulting in the erosion of trust in expertise and the deliberate undermining of evidence-based discourse. The U.S. has historically positioned itself as a guardian of freedom of expression, inquiry, and journalistic independence–a country known worldwide for productivity in research, producing the most published articles in journalism studies over the past decades (Schatto-Eckrodt and Quandt 2023). The assaults we have cited stand in stark contrast to the country's well established constitutional and democratic foundations, and its tradition of promoting democratization abroad. The devaluation of academic expertise erodes access to reliable information, a cornerstone of democratic societies, and causes the public to distrust information providers in general, regarding systematically produced scientific knowledge with the same skepticism as disinformation and propaganda. This situation challenges us as individual researchers who navigate increasingly hostile political landscapes. We have introduced our normative framework—the *Three-pronged Digital Journalism Studies Approach for Defending Academic Freedom*—which calls for specific ways we can contribute to defending the field, its scholarship, and its scholars. Ultimately, we must use the strengths and abilities of our academic profession to produce evidence-based research that enhances public accountability, work together as a research community to help defend academic freedoms against creeping authoritarianism, and actively find ways to stay resilient in our continued quest to produce the kind of knowledge and expertise so important in sustaining democratic life.

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