Twitter Thread by Paul Matzko



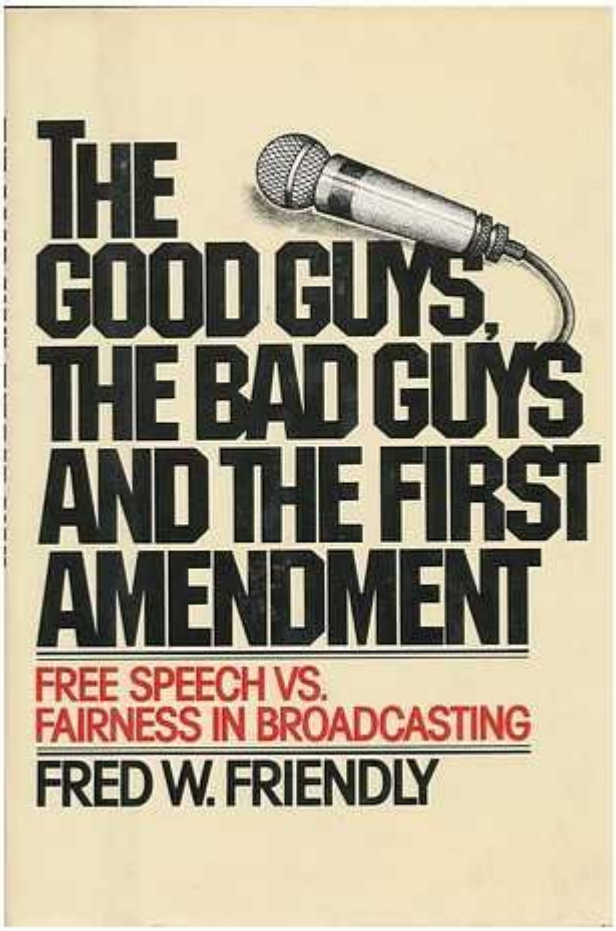
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I wrote a book about the Fairness Doctrine and how it was responsible for one of the worst episodes of government censorship in US history.

So I am somewhat alarmed at the calls percolating on Twitter for a new, internet Fairness Doctrine. This is a thread about why that is.

Let's start with what most people think when they hear "Fairness Doctrine." They imagine a time at an indeterminate point in the past when mass media was reasonable, balanced, equitable, and fair. It was a veritable golden age of mass media and the Fairness Doctrine was to thank.

Back then, radio & tv stations couldn't just air their opinions, spreading unchecked misinformation. No, they had to let the other side of any given issue have a say, giving the good guys a chance to check the bad guys when they told bald lies.



However, the problem with this narrative is that it is almost entirely a myth. In actuality, the Fairness Doctrine was a tool wielded by political interests in order to suppress dissident speech & prevent activists (from both Left & Right) from exposing the lies of the powerful.

But telling that story requires going back before the first major test of the Fairness Doctrine in 1963, before the rules were created in 1949, all the way back to the first meaningful attempt at federal regulation of radio in 1927.

The key phrase in the Radio Act of 1927 was the idea that the federal government would have discretionary licensing power over the airwaves with an eye to promoting "the public interest, convenience, and necessity."

Does that sound vague to you? Good; it did to station owners back then as well! Whose convenience are we talking about? What's necessary and what's non-essential? Is there such a thing as a singular public interest?

All very good questions and all opportunities for rent-seeking. As it turned out, the more political connections and capital one had, the more public interest merit your license application effectively had.

The government regulatory body, then the Federal Radio Commission (FRC), was a revolving door with the industry, and the big radio networks like CBS used their influence to consolidate a previously more indie radio landscape.

If you weren't the radio equivalent of the all-American quarterback, your chance of getting a license went down precipitously.