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Recommended Citation

Pickard, V. (2016). Media Failures in the Age of Trump. *The Political Economy of Communication*, 4 (2), 118-122. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/753

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Media Failures in the Age of Trump

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Media Failures in the Age of Trump

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Donald Trump's election exposed structural pathologies in America's media system. This commentary addresses three broad media failures that combine to imperil democratic society: the news media's extreme commercialism; Facebook's proliferation of misinformation; and the crisis of newspaper journalism. I then outline a policy program that can begin to address these structural pathologies.

Commercial imperatives of the news media

Many factors contributed to Trump's rise, but the news media, particularly cable and network television, deserve special scrutiny [1]. Media outlets help set discursive parameters around political debates during elections. This was abundantly evident during the 2016 elections when typical coverage depicted a false equivalence between Trump and Clinton while emphasizing spectacle over substantive policy issues (Patterson, 2016). Longstanding critiques associated with the Frankfurt School and British cultural studies demonstrate the tendency toward spectacle within highly commercialized societies such as the US (Kellner, 1984). Moreover, decades of media criticism show how these same values and logics are reflected in media systems (Bennett, 2016; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; McChesney, 1999). But rarely have these tendencies been so pronounced, and with such dire consequences.

Such commercial excesses were on full display with television's constant exposure of the Trump campaign, especially during a critical stage in the early primary season. Breathless coverage popularized Trump and normalized a fascistic politics that never warranted such legitimacy. Indeed, the qualitative and quantitative differences in campaign coverage were stark. One study calculated that in 2015 Trump received 327 minutes of nightly broadcast network news coverage, compared with Hillary Clinton's 121 minutes and Bernie Sanders' 20 minutes (Tyndal Report, 2016). By various estimates, Trump received between \$2-3 billion in free media coverage during his campaign (Confessore and Yourish, 2016; Schroeder, 2016).

Throughout his campaign, Trump manipulated and managed the media in numerous ways. He corralled and abused reporters at his campaign events, he feuded with journalists deemed unsympathetic toward his candidacy, and he gave special access to those in the media who were more compliant. He even threatened to change libel laws when he became president. But despite his attacks, Trump was also a financial boon for major media outlets. Cable news organizations, for example, reportedly made a record-breaking \$2.5 billion during the election season (Gold and Weprin, 2016).

For ratings-driven news outlets, the always-controversial Trump was the gift that kept giving. As CBS CEO Leslie Moonves admitted: “[Trump’s candidacy] may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS.” He went on to say: “The money’s rolling in and this is fun . . . this is going to be a very good year for us . . . bring it on, Donald. Keep going” (Collins, 2016). This lust for ad revenue lays bare the toxic hyper-commercialism driving American news media that privileges profits over all other considerations.

Facebook and the rise of the misinformation society

While monocausal explanations of Trump’s election that blame “fake news” are clearly insufficient, widespread misinformation disseminated via Facebook is a legitimate concern. As an algorithm-driven global editor and news gatekeeper, Facebook has tremendous power over much of the world’s information system. With Americans increasingly accessing news through its platform (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016), Facebook’s role in the recent presidential elections has drawn well-deserved scrutiny. Numerous reports suggest that fake news was circulated more often than real news during the weeks leading up to the election (Silverman, 2016).

Of course, the recent panic over fake news may seem overblown and ahistorical. Various forms of misinformation and propaganda, whether hatched by governments or the likes of Fox News, have been circulating through media for decades, if not centuries. But the profound media power residing in one monopolistic platform arguably presents a unique threat. Even as Facebook is coming under increased public pressure to be held accountable for the misinformation it purveys and from which it profits, the core problem is often overlooked: the proliferation of fake news is symptomatic of an unregulated news monopoly, one that is governed solely by profit imperatives.

To make matters worse, Facebook (along with Google) is devouring the lion’s share of digital advertising revenue (Sweney, 2016). This further weakens institutions that provide real news. It is tragically ironic that Facebook expects some of these same struggling news organizations to help fact check against fake news (Newitz, 2016).

The ongoing American journalism crisis

A less visible, but no less significant news media failure is the ongoing journalism crisis (Pickard, 2015a). The American newspaper industry has lost over a third of its staff since 2006. Newspaper revenue and circulation are also in steep decline (notwithstanding the significant increase in some newspapers’ subscriptions immediately following Trump’s election). Bankruptcies are on the rise, and some major metropolitan papers are reducing home deliveries or going online-only. As readers and advertisers migrate to the web where digital ads generate a fraction of traditional print ad revenue, the American newspapers’ business model—which has always been over-reliant on ad revenue compared to newspaper industries around the world—is disintegrating.

No other revenue model—including that from online subscriptions, memberships, and events—is commercially viable at a systemic level. Some non-market-based models that rely on the support of foundations or wealthy benefactors show promise, but they cannot replace the tens of thousands of news jobs lost in recent years. What this translates to is less reporting, especially local, investigative, and hard-hitting policy news. These gaps create “news deserts” where entire regions and beats are going uncovered (Stites, 2011).

Yet, because the US funds only a very weak public media infrastructure, its entire information system still relies on the beleaguered commercial newspaper industry for original reporting. And

while ascertaining exactly what is not being covered in the news media is always difficult, it can be safely assumed that a weakened press system is a great advantage for autocratic leaders like Donald Trump.

What is to be done?

Taken together, these failures in the American news media system threaten democratic self-governance. Until significant structural reforms are implemented, these failures will have worsening consequences. There is no easy path forward, with Donald Trump as President and with a Republican-led neoliberal hegemony over Congress, regulatory agencies, and much of the court system. Nonetheless, now is an opportune moment to develop long-term policy visions and narratives while focusing on those initiatives that can be advanced even during dark political times. First and foremost, we must try to take the profit out of news. There are generally three methods of reducing commercial pressures on news media (Pickard, 2015b). The first is to build and properly fund public, non-profit alternatives, ranging from community broadband networks to public broadcasting. The second is to dismantle media monopolies and prevent further market concentration. Some observers hoped that Donald Trump's populist campaign rhetoric might open up opportunities for preventing mergers and breaking up oligopolies. His political appointees suggest otherwise, betraying a cynical and phony populism. The third method is to closely regulate monopolies when network effects render competition impractical.

Facebook might fit into this last category. Meaningful competition to Facebook is unlikely at this stage, but allowing it to be governed solely by unfettered profit motives has created a number of social problems. Addressing these problems requires several steps. Facebook must be treated as a media company and held to norms of social responsibility. Thus far, Mark Zuckerberg has refused to even acknowledge that Facebook is anything more than a technology company (Ingram, 2016). Society must decide what these responsibilities should look like. This discussion should be held publicly—and internationally—with the participation of diverse constituencies. Democratic societies must decide how these responsibilities should be enforced. Again, this should be a bottom-up process, even if it ultimately involves establishing new watchdog institutions made up of independent experts and editors.

Beyond self-regulation, external oversight of Facebook's behavior is necessary. At the very least, an independent press council could help monitor Facebook's actions and pressure it to be more transparent and accountable. In the meantime, the repercussions of Facebook's profit-driven control over the world's media will likely only worsen. This is an untenable situation; democratic societies must challenge Facebook's monopoly power on multiple fronts.

To be clear, the structural pathologies discussed in this essay all require policy interventions. These problems will not be resolved by simply shaming media corporations to be good. Ideas for such interventions are numerous; what is lacking is the political will. Shifting policy debates and launching structural reforms requires sustained activism and the power of progressive social movements. Nothing less than democracy is at stake.

Author Bio

Victor Pickard is an associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. His research focuses on the history and political economy of media institutions. He has edited or authored four books, including *America's Battle for Media Democracy*; *Media*

Activism (with Guobin Yang); *The Future of Internet Policy* (with Peter Decherney); and *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights* (with Robert McChesney).

Endnotes

- [1] I have written about these issues in several popular essays, most recently for the magazine *Jacobin*. See Pickard (2016).

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