**It’s Time for a Radical Rethinking of the News Ecosystem**

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The 2016 election exposed a significant crisis for U.S. democracy: the failure of our news media system.

This was an election in which false news was consumed as if true; in which polls were significantly off-base; in which journalists missed the stories both of Trump supporters, who came out in unanticipated numbers, and former Obama voters, who defied predictions to stay home.

The easy response, in the wake of these multiple failures, is to focus on one specific weakness. If only journalists had interviewed more white people in the Rust Belt! If only pollsters had looked at a different data-set! If only Facebook were not so dominant, or fake news sites so plentiful….

Such essays in search of simple answers represent no more than collective wishful thinking. Systemic failures have systemic causes. Repairs to the system may not be enough. We need to put time and resources now into transforming our news media system.

**What Went Wrong (1): A Broken Revenue Model for Local News**

Why did we not know that voters in the Rust Belt were willing to vote for an anti-regulation racist populist, even when doing so might go against their values and self-interest? Likewise, why did news organizations fail to anticipate what appears to be a [lower turnout of black voters](https://www.facingsouth.org/2016/11/black-vote-surges-final-days-north-carolina-early-voting) in North Carolina (with its new voter suppression laws)?

It’s not that journalists in those communities were not doing their job; it’s that there are very few journalists left to tell the stories of those communities.

Over the past twenty years[, according to Pew](http://www.journalism.org/2016/06/15/state-of-the-news-media-2016/), the number of journalists employed by newspapers has shrunk by 39%. In the past ten years, 126 newspapers closed down. Over the same period, circulation has fallen 7% at the papers that remain.

Similar numbers can be found for local radio and TV news stations. Viewership for local TV news is slipping, and staffing levels (never high) remain stagnant or are decreasing. Over a third of all local radio news stations are owned by CBS, which is looking to spin them off.

The reason for these falling numbers is fairly clear. In the 1970s and 1980s, the local news business in print, TV and radio consolidated, with most properties owned by a handful of large corporate players. Their business was based on reaping ad dollars from local communities. The advent of internet shopping—and advertising—killed that business. Now Google (and to a lesser extent Yelp et al) owns local advertising and as a result, the local news business has been crippled.

The 20,000 journalism jobs that were lost over the past twenty years were lost from these local news outlets. The journalists cut were mainly local beat journalists—the reporters who worked in and with the communities they knew best. The handful of digital news sites that have flourished in the Google era—Vox, Buzzfeed, WashingtonPost.com—have few if any reporters on the ground between the coasts.

To make up for this loss, national news organizations have increasingly turned to Big Data, using numbers to stand in for people. While data sets can tell us a tremendous amount about financial flows, the composition of air and water, and the movement of people, it cannot tell us the how and why. One reason the polls were so wrong in this election is that they were context-less data. They measured who had voted before, and the answers people gave to surveys, without any context around how these people were thinking.

To report on the United States we need reporters in every state. News organizations need journalists that are engaged with individuals and their communities. Dropping a New York journalist into Madison, WI, or adding a few more questions to our polls will not lead to accurate reporting. Journalists once again have to build trust within communities so that indivdiuals become willing to share their thoughts and feelings.

In short, instead of asking why our polling data weren’t better or why we failed to record the views of white rural voters, we need to ask:

How can we transform the news media ecosystem so that journalists will once again be engaged directly with the communities they serve?

**What Went Wrong (2): A Broken Distribution Model for News**

A quick review of “what went wrong” stories shows that most outlets are focusing on the [role “fake news” played](http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/11/23/503146770/npr-finds-the-head-of-a-covert-fake-news-operation-in-the-suburbs) in the election. Especially in the final three months of the campaign, digital entrepreneurs discovered that the American public was eager for sensational stories, especially those that were critical of Hillary Clinton and positive towards Donald Trump. Such stories included “Pope endorses Trump” (he did not) and “Hillary sold weapons to Isis” (she did not).

Sensationalism is not new—tabloids and “yellow journalism” always thrived on stories so exaggerated that they came closer to falsehood than truth. What prevented outright false stories in the past, however, were libel laws—even the tabloids had to keep reasonably near the truth to avoid being sued.

What is new this election season is the predominance of Facebook as the primary distributor of news. Very few of the absolutely false news stories came from any kind of ongoing publication, digital or otherwise. Instead, they appeared on fly-by-night, often foreign websites, and were distributed via Facebook. Facebook insists it does not create content—and is not a media site at all—precisely so that it cannot be sued for libel. Thus the public was fed the sensationalist content it has always craved free of any need for that content to be anchored in fact.

The problem of fake news, however, goes beyond Facebook’s refusal to police content on its site. In the past, consumers had multiple avenues for news. You knew, if you picked up a tabloid that you were getting sensationalism. You knew, if you picked up the New York Times or tuned to NPR, that you were getting establishment voices. And so on.

## Facebook, however, purports to bring you news “from your friends.” In doing so, the medium itself is agnostic to the sources of stories, putting them all on the same footing. A person who leaned toward Trump might have difficulty separating out a story that State Department emails were found on accused pedophile Anthony Weiner’s computer (true) and a story that an FBI agent investigating Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server killed himself (false). One result was that [fake news outperformed real news on Facebook](https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook).

## At the root of the fake news problem is a much more critical issue for news: the majority of Americans now get their news via Facebook instead of looking at the originating news source. A recent study shows that [67% of U.S. adults](http://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/) use Facebook, with 44% getting their news primarily via Facebook. The audience is on Facebook, so producers of news go there, using Facebook’s Instant Articles and Facebook Live to push their content through this social medium to reach consumers.

## If Facebook, however, is a platform agnostic to journalism, what happens if and when almost all news content gets pushed out over Facebook? In short, the question we should be asking is not “How do we convince Facebook to stop pushing fake news.” Instead, the question we need to ask:

## How can we transform the news media ecosystem to provide a non-monopoly distribution mechanism that gives consumers a way to better distinguish different types of information sources?

## What Went Wrong (3): A Broken Model of Journalism

## There is a reason that many Americans have turned to Facebook for their news content. They trust their friends but they don’t trust the people they are told are journalists. A Pew study in 2013 showed that [less than 28% of the public](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/07/25/respect-for-journalists-contributions-has-fallen-significantly-in-recent-years/) believe journalists contribute “a lot” to society’s well-being. Unfortunately, neither journalists nor academics have chosen to explore the basis for the public’s growing disdain of the profession.

## To understand what Americans don’t like about journalism, we should look at what they choose instead. The [most influential news site](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/14/business/media/breitbart-reveling-in-trumps-election-gains-a-voice-in-his-white-house.html) in the 2016 election was Breitbart.com. One reason was that [Breitbart understood how to use Facebook.](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/11/business/media/online-everything-is-alternative-media.html) However, Buzzfeed, the Washington Post, and other “mainstream” journalism outlets also excel at social media. What sets Breitbart apart from those outlets is its transparently right-wing point of view.

## Over the past century, news organizations developed the belief that content is only “journalism” if it is “unbiased,” “objective,” “fair” and “balanced.” Those arguments emerged from the old advertising business model—the aim was to convince the public that journalists were not influenced by their advertisers.

## That model is so broken that today one of the primary forms of advertising is advertiser-sponsored content that looks and feels exactly like editorial and shows up mixed with regular editorial content. In other words, the wall between advertising and news has been almost completely broken. Yet many of the largest news organizations continue to use the idea of editorial objectivity in order to win public trust, with results that would be comical if they weren’t so distressing

## CNN was the worst offender this election season. In the name of “balance,” the cable news network hired Corey Lewandowski, as an “expert” on the right, even though he was [still on the Trump campaign’s payroll](http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/09/cnns-corey-lewandowski-deal-is-increasingly-embarrassing.html). In the name of “objective” reporting, news outlets that endorsed Hillary Clinton for president spent most of their investigative resources on her email scandal, pratically ignoring Donald Trump’s multiple conflicts of interest. Yet, even the $2 million in free airtime that the major networks gave to Trump did not convince his supporters that the “liberal” media was not biased against him.

Those who study and think about journalism have put the stalking horse of objectivity to rest. In the words of the mainstream [American Press Institute](https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/bias-objectivity/lost-meaning-objectivity/), “In the original concept, in other words, the method is objective, not the journalist. The key was in the *discipline* of the craft, not the aim.” In short, journalists come to topics with a particular bias, but what makes them journalists is that they follow their investigations wherever the facts lead.

If news organizations were scrutinized on the basis of their methods, rather than their bias, we might see a return to stories on issues. In this past election, the real breakdown wasn’t that reporters were biased for or against a particular candidate. The breakdown was that news organizations did so little reporting on the issues. .According to the [Tyndall Report](http://tyndallreport.com/comment/20/5778/), the three major network’s nightly coverage of elections issues included “No trade, no healthcare, no climate change, no drugs, no poverty, no guns, no infrastructure, no deficits.” No wonder so many people do not vote—if they were watching network news, they would think the election had nothing to do with them at all.

## To win back public trust in journalism, we have to get past the false battle around objectivity. Instead of asking, “how can we make sure coverage in the next election is more balanced,” we need to ask:

## How can we transform the news media system to rebuild public trust?

## Pointing Towards Solutions

## The breakdown of our news media system requires more than a simple repair job. We need to radically re-imagine what journalism and the news business will look like in the future.

## There are a number of efforts already underway that can give direction, if we are willing to take the time to study them.

## 1. The remergence of true community media. Public access channels and community radio, long ignored as irrelevant to journalism, are rapidly becoming physical centers of community journalism, especially in news deserts. Together with alternative newsmedia, they can form the backbone of a new type of local reporting.

## 2. The growing power of podcasts and Black twitter. Communities of color are finding alternative media in which to share stories and engage in news reporting. As American demographics change, engaging these communities is critical to developing a new news ecosystem.

## 3. The rise of the membership model. Progressive media have spent the past decade developing a membership model for journalism. Transparent about their bias, these outlets ask supporters to fund reporting with the understanding that the outcomes might not be exactly what supporters hope to hear.

## 4. Building stories through collaboration. The era of a federal news service with branches in every city is gone. To replace it, outlets and entrepreneurs are working on collaborative models that bring together journalists with a special expertise in local, demographic, or topical reporting to tell a larger story.

## 5. The death of the audience—and the rise of the news interlocutor. Instead of a model in which media provide infotainment to passive audiences, new tools around engagement invite community members to support editorial teams in identifying news stories. Such engagement builds trust—and helps news teams uncover bigger stories.

## The efforts above are all happening within independent media at outlets that are especially resourceful because they are underresourced. Through this election, the outlets that focused most heavily on issues rather than on the “horse race” were often unabashedly progressive news outlets.

As just one example, since August, the #StandingRock protest against the North Dakota pipeline has provided compelling story lines, a high level of visual interest, and most importantly, a condensed snapshot of a significant number of critical issues facing the United States: climate change; energy needs; environmental protection; local vs. federal vs. native rights; the role of corporate money in politics; police brutality; press freedom, and more. Yet, StandingRock received very little mass media coverage before the election.

In contrast, Standing Rock was a top story for 30 progressive news outlets between August 22, when the protest got going, and October 1. You can see coverage from all of these angles and more [here]. Ironically, the only coverage it got on the networks came when Democracy Now! journalist Amy Goodman was arrested during a Standing Rock protest.

After an event like Election 2016, it is very easy for pundits and powerbrokers, foundation officers and academics, to ignore smaller independent and community news outlets and instead to look for a magic bullet. It is at times like this that we get calls to build a new network (remember Air America) or invest in one type of journalism (Big Data anyone) or one technology (virtual reality, on the horizon).

Those interventions make everyone feel good, but they won’t fix the deeply systemic problems facing journalism. What journalism requires at this moment is

1) immediate support for those outlets, individuals and entrepreneurs that are successfully engaging demographic, geographic and topic-centered communities around news reporting.

2) an open, transparent, and in-depth conversation among the many different stakeholders in the news ecosystem, including especially those who rarely are invited to the table;

3) a deep and ongoing investment in efforts to build new connections and new tools that will encourage community-based reporting.

## The Media Consortium is one of several organizations that represents independent news outlets. We invite all who are interested to come to our conference March 1-4, 2017 in Washington, DC to begin this deeper conversation on transforming our media ecosystem.