One significant outcome of the 2016 election has been the widespread awareness that the corporate media system failed all of us this year. Relying too heavily on polls, our current media system missed the story of the angry Trump voter and the dissatisfied Democrat. Excited by the entertainment value of Mr. Trump’s tweets, corporate media gave him $2M of free air time while, in the name of balance, spending an inordinate amount of time on Clinton’s wayward emails.

Seeking a scapegoat on which to blame the outcome of this election, pundits are focusing on the fake news distributed by Facebook. It’s true that Facebook, by refusing to acknowledge its growing monopoly on the distribution of news, was easily hijacked by profiteers and propagandists who were able to push fake news to the top of many news feeds. Yet we cannot blame the misreading of this election—nor its outcome—on Facebook alone. Even if Facebook had not existed, corporate media fell down on their task of informing the public.

Those failures took three major forms:

* Infotainment instead of news;
* “Non-partisan” balance instead of context-setting;
* Data without people-centered stories;

Each of these choices led to programming that took attention away from the significant differences between the candidates. Instead of looking for the sources of widespread anger over a declining standard of living or analyzing whether candidates’ proposals would remedy the problems they purported to solve, we got content without substance.

The one sector of the national media system that did provide substantive reporting was, unsurprisingly, not answerable to either corporate (or government) shareholders. The independent news media—and particularly mission-based outlets—spent the past six months laser-focused on issues, from the minimum wage to climate change. Their only failure was their inability to reach enough people to make a difference.

I suggest the time has come to stop trying to fix our broken media system. The corporate media failed because it has lost touch with the people it serves. Now that this failure has been laid bare, we can begin to think about how to truly transform our news media based on the approach to journalism we are seeing come out of the independent news sector.

**Failure #1: Corporate Media Provides Infotainment instead of News**

Accountable to shareholders rather than the public, major media networks on both the center-left (MSNBC) and center-right (FOX) gave Trump over $2 million dollars of free airtime. That free media included very little time on Trump’s policies, and a lot of time on his emotive but content-less pronouncements. Despite the fact the the corporate media overwhelming endorsed Hillary Clinton for president on their editorial pages, they gave her far less free airtime because there was no money in it: Clinton is notably not as interesting a celebrity as Donald Trump and stories on Clinton do not receive an audience share as large as stories on Trump receive.

Just so we don’t think the Trump media frenzy was the exception to the rule, consider what happened in the primaries. Dr. Ben Carson, who was never a contender but who was a highly colorful personality, received more airtime than Ted Cruz ([http://thebea.st/1oY4zMc)](http://thebea.st/1oY4zMc%29), the most viable establishment candidate.

Corporate media executives argue that they have to prioritize infotainment in order to get the high ratings—ratings which drive their ad dollars and thus their business. However, that argument falls rather flat when we look at highly entertaining topics the corporate media chose not to present. Despite a high level of interest in Bernie Sanders, for example, the pro-socialist anti-corporate candidate received [far less media coverage](http://reverbpress.com/features/bernie-sanders-was-right-media-blackout-badly-hurt-campaign-harvard-study-confirms/) of any kind than Hillary Clinton.

The same was also true outside the election content. 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 corporate media coverage.

In contrast, Standing Rock has been 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 corporate media came when Democracy Now! journalist Amy Goodman was arrested during a Standing Rock protest.

Sadly, climate change was not the only big story the corporate media missed. 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.

**Failure #2: Attempts at Balance that Ignore Context**

The lack of coverage around Sanders, Standing Rock, and a host of other issues should put to rest the stalking horse of objectivity and non-partisan balance that continues to disguise how news desks actually work.

At every news desk, editors and producers choose what questions they will ask. Those questions are guided by a set of values. “Progressive” editors that value the rights of indigenous peoples, for example, began covering #StandingRock as soon as the local Sioux tribes began their protest, while “conservative” [editors](http://www.redstate.com/diary/energyrabbit/2016/08/08/marita-noon-pipeline%E2%80%99s-approved.-environmentalists-angry./) that value the jobs that fossil fuel energy can bring were on the story even earlier.

The value set that CNN, ABC, et al bring to their news desks seems at best to focus on market values—a bias towards saving money by ignoring hard-to-cover policy issues and instead building market share through false equivalences.

To cover up the fact that they were doing almost no original reporting on the issues, CNN et al instead provided a false sense of “objectivity” and “balance” by asking partisans from different camps to debate each other. Such debates may be entertaining, but are not news. Worse, by creating a false equivalency to news, these “firing lines” can cloak partisans in the appearance of credibility. In this cycle, CNN’s decision to hire former Trump campaign manager Corey Lewandowsky as an “expert” provided this partisan with the cover of neutrality to spread a pro-Trump message.

The fact that the corporate media’s coverage was not at all balanced was also made clear by the fact that the corporate media networks published and [produced three times more stories](http://www.politicususa.com/2016/10/26/media-spent-3-times-airtime-discussing-clintons-emails-policy-2016.html) on Hillary Clinton’s email servers than on all other policy issues combined!

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 assume they come to reporting with a bias. What differentiates the journalist from the propagandist is the journalistic method. Journalists ask questions, and follow the story wherever the answers lead. Propagandists make statements that they are unwilling to change, no matter what facts come to light.

This year, the public did not fall for the false neutrality and balance of corporate media. Instead, the media outlet that made the most impact was Breitbart, a propaganda machine that transparently supported Trump and all that Trump represents. If we want to get back public support for news, news media will have to trust the public. We need to be transparent about what our bias is, and then demonstrate to the public that what matters most is not the questions we ask, but how we look for answers.

**Failure #3: Data Without People-Centered Stories**

In the past decade, an increasing number of journalists and journalism outlets searching for an unabashedly objective journalism method have focused on what is called data journalism. Using data sets to uncover bad actors and trace illicit financial flows is an essential element of investigative journalism. Independent outlets and larger for-profits were able to use data effectively this election to track voter suppression (Pro Publica), VA complicity in opiate prescriptions (Reveal), Koch funding of state legislation (CMD), Trump’s charitable donations (WaPo) (there were almost none), and yes, Hillary’s email saga (NYTimes).

However, there was an over-reliance on data journalism during this campaign. Polls designed to call the presidential “horse race” proliferated and yet were proven wrong in the primary and the election. The Wikileaks data dump from Hillary Clinton’s server this fall proved irresistible to journalists, even though extensive analysis turned up no more than the FBI had revealed in June. Less discussed but just as critical, the contextless data stories based on immigration rates provided no information on why those immigrants had come to the US; what they were doing here; nor why so many resented their presence.

What we have seen is the rise of data without story. What we have discovered is what good journalists have always known, that data without context—which is to say, facts without people—both make little impact and can easily mislead us.

The best stories this year were stories that combined data with stories about people or arose from a deep understanding of and engagement with individuals and communities.

like Shane Bauer’s decision to become a prison worker in order to report on prisons that led to a conversation-changing piece on the malfeasance of prison guards.