

Introduction

When Commercialism Trumps Democracy

This book is about the journalism crisis and the policies we need to confront it. Challenges to our news and information systems have taken on greater urgency in recent years, with concern growing about misinformation and the unaccountable power of platform monopolies. As public attention turns to these media failures, now is an opportune moment to address core weaknesses in US communication infrastructures and push for alternatives. Recent criticism has understandably focused on problems with television news, print journalism, and social media platforms, but too little of this scrutiny recognizes that these are mere symptoms of deeper maladies. To understand what ails our news media and what reforms are needed, we must penetrate to the roots of systemic problems. Toward this aim, *Democracy Without Journalism?* underscores the *structural* nature of commercial journalism's collapse while exploring entirely new models. Ultimately, the goal should be to *reinvent* journalism. Although my analysis focuses on the United States, where the journalism crisis is most pronounced, similar problems afflict democratic societies to varying degrees around the world.

US News Media Pathologies

Systemic problems typically remain overlooked until shocks to the status quo render them more visible. Donald Trump's ascendance and the 2016 US presidential election revealed a number of structural pathologies in the US news and information systems, especially toxic commercialism that prioritizes profit over democratic imperatives. From imbalanced, low-quality coverage in traditional news media to the proliferation of misinformation on social media, commercial imperatives drove news organizations to popularize a dangerous politics.

Television coverage exhibited some of the worst of these media malpractices. TV news outlets lavished far more attention on Trump than all other presidential candidates. During a critical period in the primary season, he received nearly three times more coverage than Hillary Clinton and sixteen times more than Bernie Sanders.¹ Various estimates show that news outlets gifted Trump billions of dollars' worth of free advertising in the run-up to the election, often allowing him to simply phone in to their popular news shows.² Despite constant campaign coverage, content analyses show that our leading news media—including major print outlets such as the *New York Times*—barely covered candidates' policy positions prior to the election.³ These informational deficits in mainstream news media coincided with torrents of misinformation circulating through social media. However, simplistic explanations that blame Trump's rise on "fake news" amplified on Facebook are clearly insufficient. While these platforms are now the subject of well-deserved scrutiny for facilitating various kinds of dis/misinformation, traditional news media contributed as much if not more to the lack of high-quality information leading up to the elections.⁴

These data points paint a depressing portrait of the entire US news media apparatus. Yet they are merely surface-level symptoms of a deeper structural rot in our news and information systems. What is it about the US media system that encourages such socially irresponsible coverage? What are the historical conditions that produced such a system in the United States? What are the policies and ideologies that keep it intact? This book highlights specific media failures and recommends new models.⁵

"Damn Good for CBS"

Three core media failures helped enable Trump's election.⁶ First, the news media's excessive commercialism—driven by profit imperatives, especially the need to sell advertising—resulted in facile coverage of the election that emphasized entertainment over information. For ratings-driven news outlets, the always-controversial Trump was the ultimate boon. CNN's CEO Jeff Zucker, ever seeking to "maximize the emotional impact of the moment" (as a *New York Times* article put it), approvingly compared CNN's election coverage to that of ESPN's sports commentary. He casually professed, "The idea that politics is sport is undeniable, and we understood that and approached it that way."⁷ The now-disgraced CEO of CBS Leslie Moonves

admitted that “[Trump’s candidacy] may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS.” He continued: “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.”⁸

These comments reveal how US news media privilege profits over public service. Although many prominent news outlets have since become more adversarial toward Trump—and more likely to call out his brazen lies and resist his attacks—their coverage continues to focus on his impolitic behavior while giving short shrift to growing income inequality, institutional racism, environmental collapse, and other severe problems exacerbated by his policies. Constantly reporting on the reality-television-like “Trump Show” spikes ratings and ad revenue. Prime-time ratings have more than doubled at CNN and nearly tripled at MSNBC since Trump took office.⁹ Part of this financial windfall comes from the fact that Trump coverage is cheap to produce: pundits and panels of experts can simply discuss the President’s latest tweets and outrageous comments. This kind of superficial coverage is irresistible for profit-driven commercial news media but detrimental to democratic discourse.

A second failure in the US media system is the tremendous amount of misinformation circulating on social media platforms, especially Facebook. Although many analysts attribute the problems with misinformation to political polarization and foreign interference, commercial incentives facilitate its dissemination. Facebook’s reckless behavior stems from maximizing advertising revenues, and more generally from its unregulated monopoly power. Some observers have downplayed concerns about “fake news” (a deeply problematic term) as little more than moral panic and social hysteria. And skepticism is certainly warranted, especially since much of the criticism is ahistorical, often stemming from a desire for simplistic, mono-causal explanations of Trump’s unexpected election.

Nonetheless, concerns about widespread misinformation deserve serious attention. Some reports suggest that fabricated stories circulated more often than fact-based news during the weeks leading up to the election.¹⁰ With Americans—as well as people around the world—increasingly accessing their news through Facebook, concerns about the company’s central position within the entire media system is entirely warranted.¹¹ However, much scrutiny continues to overlook the structural roots of misinformation, especially the commercial motives that accelerate it. Because its business model depends on user engagement, Facebook is not incentivized to address the

problem, opting instead to rely on outside parties, crowdsourcing, and algorithmic tweaks to stem the flow of misinformation.

The rise of misinformation is one more manifestation of the asymmetric relationships stemming from Facebook's status as a gigantic social media monopoly with profound political-economic power and little independent oversight—all while dodging responsibilities that normally belong to media companies.¹² As a global internet platform and an algorithm-driven publisher, Facebook has tremendous gatekeeping power over much of the world's information system. Yet, unlike “natural monopolies” or public utilities of old, Facebook has avoided close regulatory oversight and shirked any obligation to uphold a social contract with meaningful public interest requirements in exchange for the many benefits that society grants it. As I will discuss in chapter 4, growing media monopoly power—from Facebook and Google to Sinclair and AT&T—is a major threat to the integrity of news and information systems.¹³

A third systemic failure is the slow-but-sure structural collapse of professional journalism. As market support for news production erodes, the number of working journalists has continued to decline. Print newsrooms have lost more than half of their employees since 2000.¹⁴ Yet newspapers still provide the bulk of original reporting, serving as the information feeder for the entire US news media system. Even casual observers will note that television news coverage is typically pegged to issues covered in that day's newspapers. On leading cable news shows, the host's routine often consists of essentially reading the headlines of the latest breaking newspaper stories to their viewers. Similarly, news content from social media—where Americans increasingly consume their information—derives largely from professional news organizations.

While it is difficult to see how, exactly, the collapse of professional journalism has affected what is or is not being covered—or how issues are being covered differently—some trends are obvious. In particular, the rise of “news deserts”—entire regions bereft of news media coverage and access to reliable information—is undeniable.¹⁵ Furthermore, information scarcity and news deficits are disproportionately harming specific groups and areas, especially communities of color, rural districts, and lower socioeconomic neighborhoods. This phenomenon represents a major failure in US media policy.

Taken together, these structural flaws in the US news media system create the ideal conditions for what I call the “misinformation society”¹⁶—an

electorate that is increasingly served sensationalistic news coverage, clickbait, and degraded journalism instead of informative, fact-based, policy-related news. While many demand-side challenges have emerged, including a growing lack of trust and polarization, these and other audience-related problems are intertwined with an increasingly diminishing supply of reliable news and information and proliferating misinformation and low-quality news media. Unless we first address the supply-side problems—especially the commercialism that lies at the center of the system’s maladies—we cannot overcome the other harms plaguing American news media.

Competing Narratives about Journalism

To highlight the structural nature of the journalism crisis, this book will scrutinize the ways that we talk about journalism. Several meta-narratives about journalism emerged after Trump’s election. The first narrative was that news media enabled Trump’s ascendance—especially television news coverage, but the critique also applies to print news. In addition to giving him an inordinate amount of attention, news organizations often overlooked Trump’s troubling history or falsely equated his actions with other candidates’ imperfections. Typical news media coverage also sensationalized and trivialized the elections via “horse-race” coverage that fetishized polling data and personal insults hurled by candidates instead of offering critical analysis of their policy positions.

The second narrative, in tension with the first, is a newfound appreciation for the Fourth Estate. Many people increasingly see news institutions as the last bulwark of civil society, protecting them against everything from fake news to fascism. As Trump attacked the press, public sympathies naturally redounded to news organizations (although the opposite appears true for Trump partisans). One direct result was a “Trump bump,” in which many publishers saw a sudden and dramatic spike in subscriptions shortly after the 2016 election. However, this desperately needed boost in financial support did not solve media organizations’ economic problems and moreover turned out to be short-lived for most outlets.

This leads us to a third narrative that predates the election: Despite an increasing need for public service journalism (local, policy-related, and investigative news), it is precisely this kind of reporting that is failing economically. As consumers and advertisers have migrated to the web, where digital

ads pay pennies to the dollar of traditional print ads (with most of that revenue going to Facebook and Google), the 150-year-old advertising revenue model for commercial newspapers is now beyond repair. In many ways, advertising previously served as a subsidy for media organizations, with news and information a kind of byproduct or positive externality resulting from the primary exchange between advertisers and newspapers. Because this advertising revenue model has been around for so long, it appears to be part of the natural order, with alternative models falling beyond our policy discourse and political imagination.

And yet, alternative models are exactly what we should be discussing. With the exception of a brief period in 2008 and 2009, there has been little public discussion, and virtually no policy response; meanwhile, the crisis in US journalism keeps getting worse. Already in 2016 the Pew Research Center—the gold standard for assessing the health of US news industries—warned that “this accelerating decline suggests the industry may be past its point of no return.”¹⁷ For Pew to make such a statement speaks volumes about the severity of journalism’s collapse. Such a serious social problem deserves a public conversation proportionate to the scale of what should be seen as a national crisis.

The American Journalism Crisis

How we talk about the demise of journalism matters. Some narrations of the journalism crisis naturalize it as a kind of evolutionary metamorphosis of the “media ecosystem.”¹⁸ Others see it as a shift into a “post-industrial” era for the US press system.¹⁹ Taking for granted the internet’s role in journalism’s “creative destruction,” many observers typically downplay the commercial news model’s endemic structural vulnerabilities, especially its overreliance on advertising support. Metaphors and phrases such as “perfect storms” and “disruptive innovation” implicitly construct the crisis as something beyond our control and outside the realm of public policy.

While some scholars and pundits view this structural transformation as a tragic loss for democracy and a once-noble profession, for others it has been a source of great excitement. These optimists—albeit a decreasing lot in recent years—argue that new digital start-ups herald a potentially better future for journalism. Such analyses overlook these models’ questionable sustainability and the low number of journalists they employ relative to the tens

of thousands of jobs lost from traditional newsrooms. These more utopian views tend to emphasize digital journalism's potential for innovation and enabling greater citizen participation, while often neglecting negative externalities such as the proliferation of clickbait and misinformation.

Vexing questions remain about new digital technologies: What is the normative role of journalism in today's digital age? Should we be concerned about the growing prominence of invasive and deceptive forms of advertising within digital journalism's business model? What are the social implications as news work becomes increasingly precarious, reliant on free or low-paid labor? What happens as local journalism disappears? What should society do when a functioning press system no longer exists? If this loss amounts to a crisis, what accounts for the absence of any public policy response?

In what follows, I argue that policy discourses about the future of news in the United States are constrained by libertarian assumptions. If we are to break free of this discourse, we must first understand where it comes from. To that end, this book situates the journalism crisis within specific political and historical contexts. Such an analysis can begin to flesh out under-examined assumptions about the normative relationship between the press and the polity. This framework positions the journalism crisis as a social problem that requires a social democratic alternative—namely, a public media option.

Focus of the Book

Democracy Without Journalism? focuses on the structural transformations in US journalism while emphasizing their implications for democracy. Thus far, our social imaginary about the ramifications of journalism's deinstitutionalization—and what should be done about it—has been outpaced by its material collapse. It is perhaps symptomatic of our neoliberal age that many have looked to charitable and entrepreneurial individuals—and mostly wealthy, white men such as Jeff Bezos—to save journalism. But the crisis requires a deeper conversation about the considerable stakes for local communities, democratic culture, and society writ large. This book intervenes in this debate by pushing normative questions about journalism's democratic imperatives back to the fore. In doing so, it historicizes seemingly new developments and proposes structural alternatives to today's failing commercial models. The book also addresses many of the issues facing

today's digital news media, from the loss of net neutrality to concerns about monopoly power—from Fox News to Facebook.

Given that the ongoing crisis is inextricably bound up with how we think and talk about journalism, this approach requires a critical analysis of contemporary policy discourses. To give one example: First Amendment assumptions that privilege negative-freedom interpretations (concerns about “freedom from” government interference) ultimately protect corporate power, delegitimize government regulation, and impoverish the US regulatory imagination. These factors all contribute to the ongoing policy failures in addressing the journalism crisis. *Democracy Without Journalism?* interrogates these often-invisible discursive parameters within policy debates, particularly regarding the legitimacy of government intervention into media markets.

Throughout the book, I examine contemporary discourses about what journalism's public service mission should be in a democratic society—and government's role in protecting that relationship. I draw from historical materials, policy documents, and industry data to contextualize the journalism crisis. My analysis also incorporates a decade's worth of participant observations of hearings and meetings about the journalism crisis and numerous conversations with journalists, media analysts, and scholars who are actively engaged in the ongoing debate about journalism's future.

Over the years, many analysts have tried to make sense of journalism's structural transformations by focusing on technological and cultural changes among audiences or the practices and routines of journalists themselves. Increasingly, scholars and commentators discern new categories of newsgathering, with much discussion centering on data journalism, hacker journalism, networked journalism, and many other variants. In heralding these purportedly new forms of journalism, many optimists assume that new technological affordances enable journalists and entrepreneurs to produce better journalism with less time and money and in ways that are inherently participatory and democratic. Yet, it remains doubtful that legacy media institutions can innovate themselves out of this crisis, that new digital start-ups can fill the journalism vacuum, or that technology and the market will combine to produce sustainable forms of journalism. Many advocates still hope that some new profit-seeking model will emerge triumphant, despite little evidence that digital models have long-term commercial viability. Others feel that we can rely on media billionaires and foundation-supported news institutions with varying motives to support news outlets. None of

these models is sufficient. By critically examining how they fall short, this book sheds new light on the perilous future of the US press and shows that a public media system is journalism's last, best hope.

Toward this objective, I underscore the historical and ideological contingency of US press freedoms, the structural contradictions of contemporary news institutions, and potential policy interventions aimed at changing these arrangements. I draw attention to the US media system's normative foundations, especially as they are historically situated—and often contested—within ongoing policy debates.²⁰ This book operates from the assumption that most democratic theories presuppose the existence of healthy information and communication systems. Without a viable news media system, democracy is reduced to an unattainable ideal.

My theoretical approach to misinformation and the journalism crisis falls within the communication research tradition of political economy. This subfield focuses on how media institutions are organized, owned, and controlled, and how media figure within larger power relationships. For example, political economists look at how concentrated markets perpetuate power hierarchies and foreclose on media's democratic potentials. In general, this framework scrutinizes how power operates through communication systems, asking questions like: What ideologies are implicitly embedded in a media system's design? Whose interests are being served? What is the basis for ownership and control, terms of access, production, and dissemination of media? In addressing these structural questions, political economy traditionally has been committed to anti-fascism and progressive social movements.²¹ With a clear normative vision, it interrogates power structures in the hopes of changing them.²² By challenging dominant assumptions and relationships, such an approach ultimately aims to not just describe the way things are but to denaturalize and ultimately transform the status quo.

Every theoretical framework has strengths and weaknesses that illuminate certain aspects of social phenomena while deemphasizing others. A political economic analysis is an explicitly structural approach to understanding dominant social relationships and institutions. One of its strengths is that it facilitates collective action by ascertaining the big picture—the forest and perhaps not as much the trees. In confronting the journalism crisis, this framework historicizes our problems with misinformation as the culmination of explicit policy choices, always subject to political struggle, with open-ended possibilities. By framing these challenges as supply-side problems that

all of society must confront—problems that are contingent, not inevitable, and open to human intervention—this analysis situates journalism as susceptible to human agency and social change.

In laying out core concerns about journalism and democracy, the book moves thematically across several broad areas. Chapter 1 focuses on the historical and normative roots of US journalism, with an emphasis on the commercial logics that were internalized early in the press system's formation. Chapter 2 focuses on the recent history and missed opportunities in contemporary debates about the future of news. Chapter 3 looks at the ongoing degradations of digital news, with an emphasis on potential alternatives. Chapter 4 examines structural threats to journalism, especially the negative impacts that platform monopolies such as Facebook have on journalism. Chapter 5 discusses the roots of "US media exceptionalism" and discusses public alternatives to commercial news in historical and global contexts. The conclusion returns to the big picture and addresses the question: What is to be done?

In addressing these concerns and questions, I make seven basic arguments:

1. Commercial journalism has always been in crisis.
2. The nature of this crisis is deeply structural and requires a systemic fix.
3. The journalism crisis is a threat to democracy.
4. This threat amounts to a major social problem that requires public policy interventions.
5. These policies should be founded on a social democratic vision of media.
6. The best hope for public service journalism is a public media option.
7. This crisis is an opportunity; it allows us to reimagine what journalism could be.

By focusing on the ongoing structural collapse of commercial journalism, this book seeks to contextualize the crisis as symptomatic of long-term historical contradictions baked into the heart of the US commercial news media system. In addition to teasing out the various pathologies and social implications of this transformation, this book attempts to reframe the debate about journalism's future as a public policy problem. I conclude the book with recommendations for systemic reform. In doing so, my hope is to help jump-start a long overdue conversation about the severity of the journalism crisis and what we as a society must do about it. It is time to envision what journalism should be.