

The Public Media Option

Confronting Policy Failure in an Age of Misinformation

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Events leading up to and following the 2016 election exposed long-standing structural pathologies in the American media system.¹ Commercial excesses in television coverage, profit-seeking platform monopolies, and various kinds of “news deserts” helped usher in a dangerous politics. Despite racist, sexist, and xenophobic messaging, news outlets willingly amplified Trump’s campaign. At every turn along the way, venal commercialism trumped democratic imperatives in the American news media system. The now-disgraced CEO of CBS, Les Moonves, acknowledged that Trump’s campaign might be bad for America, but it was “damn good for CBS.”²

Despite the media’s unscrupulous behavior, one bright spot – if it could be called that – is that this political crisis has reminded Americans why democracy needs a functioning fourth estate. While many of us learn this truism in school, we usually take the press for granted, without reflecting on the necessary policies, laws, and infrastructures that sustain it. There is now, however, a fleeting window of opportunity to reimagine our news media system. In this sense, our current crisis may also be an opportunity – but it will require much intellectual and political work to make it so. Most of all, it will require Americans to move beyond the libertarian paradigm that has governed their media polices for decades. They must reclaim a social democratic tradition that can challenge market fundamentalism and protect public goods like news and information from systemic market failure.

Today, as we look to journalism to protect us against everything from misinformation to fascism, the press is in a deep structural crisis.

Journalism's institutional support is collapsing, leaving entire regions and issues without coverage at a time when we desperately need reliable information and robust reporting. How did this happen and what is to be done? In the following, I will argue that creating a new public media system is not the only answer, but it must be part of the solution.

WE HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE

Many of the media-related challenges facing us today – misinformation, unaccountable monopolies, news deficits – are actually old problems. Donald Trump's election was symptomatic, not the cause, of a deeper institutional rot within America's core systems, including its media system. These preexisting structural conditions, I argue, are the direct result of media policy failures over time – a long history of policy actions and inactions that led to contemporary crises in our information systems. These include the failure to 1) maintain open and democratically operated communication infrastructures, 2) confront monopolistic control of key sectors of the American news and information system, and 3) sustain public service journalism.³ Linking all of these policy failures is a systemic market failure arising from commercial imperatives that – with important exceptions – have long plagued the American media system.

The argument I propose in this essay is that many of the problems facing our communication systems today are structural problems and therefore require structural interventions. And more to the point, they are social problems that require policy interventions. While many analyses have focused on the growing lack of trust, partisanship, and other problems on the audience side of the equation – all significant issues worthy of our attention – I am suggesting here that at least as much emphasis should be placed on the supply-side. Any society that aspires to be a democracy must ensure the existence of a reliable news and information system. This is a baseline requirement. Without a functioning press system our many other social problems – from global warming to hyper-inequality – become insurmountable.

With such a focus in mind, this chapter begins to sketch out a public policy program that can confront the journalism crisis and democratize our media system. This requires a combination of regulating or breaking up media monopolies, creating public alternatives to commercial news outlets, and enabling workers, consumers, and communities to create

their own media. Historical lessons gleaned from previous policy battles and media crises – ranging from contesting yellow journalism (what some might call “clickbait” today) to the decades-long campaign to establish a public broadcasting system in the USA – have much to tell us about charting a way forward. In the following, I discuss some of this context before turning to a set of concrete policy proposals for confronting the twin problems of misinformation and the crisis in journalism.

THE ROOTS AND COSTS OF THE JOURNALISM CRISIS

It is generally indisputable that journalism today faces many challenges, especially economic threats such as the collapse of its advertising-dependent business model and the dominance of platform companies like Facebook and Google. The past decade has witnessed an accelerating decline in revenue and readership, leaving the nation’s newsroom employees reduced by more than half. Reliable journalism is vanishing, misinformation is proliferating, and our public media system – which ideally could provide a safety net for those occasions when the market fails to support the press – remains weakly supported compared to its global counterparts.

The journalism crisis is also disproportionately harming specific groups and regions, especially communities of color, rural areas, and low income neighborhoods. A growing body of scholarship documents the negative social effects caused by information scarcity and the rise of news deserts. Studies show that those communities lacking access to reliable sources of news are less informed about politics, less civically engaged, less likely to vote, more polarized, and experience rising levels of corruption in their local governments. These problems are likely to only worsen in the coming years.

With these concerns in mind, my essay addresses the following questions: how can we bolster reliable news media, especially the vitally important types of journalism that the market inadequately supports, such as local, international, investigative, and policy reporting? How are other democratic nations addressing similar crises, and what has America done historically to support journalism? Are there alternative models less vulnerable to market failures, especially within digital media systems? If so, what reforms and public policies could support them?

History suggests that when faced with seemingly insurmountable social quandaries, democratic societies can meet them with sound public policy. But this requires careful study and discussion about the structural roots of social problems. Exciting experiments and policy proposals are

beginning to emerge, but they are still in their infancy. The many problems facing our media have outpaced research, but a growing empirical record shows that communities with access to strong public media systems are better protected against misinformation. However, the American public media system is under-funded and increasingly forced to rely on quasi-commercial support to maintain its current level of news production. Whereas public media systems in Europe and Japan may receive annual funding of approximately \$50 to \$150 per capita, the US system receives annually a paltry \$1.40 of federal funding per capita. How can we build a new American public media system for our digital age, one that is fully funded, truly public, and can serve America's critical information needs?

PUBLIC MEDIA'S MOMENT

The current crisis is also an opportunity to reinvent journalism and strengthen our democracy. With increasing public attention focused on threats to the integrity of our news and information systems, now is an apt moment to consider reforms that reorient American journalism for the digital age. The analysis I am proposing here brings into focus the structural nature of the journalism crisis and potential systemic alternatives. Namely, I propose that we as a society design a new public media system. Toward this aim, we must consider what policies and politics are required to establish such a system. Drawing from the historical and international record of public media can help inform a policy program for establishing a new, multi-media network in the USA. As consensus crystalizes that journalism's advertising-dependent model is irreparably flawed, the search is on for systemic reforms and structural alternatives, especially nonprofit and noncommercial models.

In particular, America's journalism crisis and the misinformation problem require public options. A growing body of literature shows that public media are beneficial for strengthening political knowledge. Increasingly, public media systems are intervening directly into the journalism crisis. For example, the BBC has leveraged its resources to shore up the UK's struggling news industry by funding 150 "local democracy reporters" at media organizations across the country to focus on local politics and share coverage with other news outlets. Other collaborative projects include a massive "local news partnership," a "local democracy reporting service," and a "news hub" giving news partners access to a vast trove of BBC video and audio footage.⁴

A “public option” for journalism can help address endemic problems in commercial media that render our information systems vulnerable to crisis. Looking at international models that address gaps in local coverage – as well as the history of American public media infrastructures, such as the postal system and public broadcasting – can help us envision what a new public media system might look like in our digital age. Such a comparative and historical research agenda can help us think through key questions, from normative considerations about public media’s role in a democracy to more technical and policy-oriented questions about design and governance, especially as public media institutions adapt to digital formats. Studying other public media systems can help us reimagine ours.

PRESS SUBSIDIES AROUND THE WORLD

Many kinds of state-supported journalism exist around the world, and a wide range of international media policies mandate proactive government engagement to ensure diverse media.⁵ Most democratic societies have long invested in strong, publicly subsidized broadcast media systems. In addition, many countries, especially in western and northern Europe, also directly and indirectly subsidize print media. For example, Norway subsidizes newspapers to lessen commercial pressures and prevent newspaper monopolies.⁶ This model has been taken up in many Nordic countries, which have maintained media diversity and pluralism, and rank high globally in terms of democratic indicators.

To take one example, a similar model for funding local journalism exists in Sweden. When faced with a newspaper crisis fifty years ago, the Swedish government implemented a press subsidy model similar to Norway’s and began taxing newspaper ads. It created an independent agency that supported struggling papers and prevented bankruptcies. The government used these subsidies to support smaller newspapers and diversify news discourse via an administrative governmental body called the Media Subsidies Council that allocates funds based on circulation and revenue to newspapers other than the dominant paper in a particular market.⁷ Although these subsidies account for a relatively small percent of the papers’ total revenue, they have helped prevent one-newspaper towns from proliferating.⁸ Financial aid in the form of reduced taxes and direct distribution subsidies also supports Swedish newspapers.⁹

Canada is also pursuing significant journalism subsidies, reflected in important reforms to the Canadian tax code to allow for tax-deductible contributions to non-profit media institutions. The Canadian government also earmarked money for a refundable tax credit for news organizations to offset labor costs. An independent commission will determine the qualifying organizations and the precise percentage of the fees credited. The budget also established a 15 percent tax credit for individuals' subscriptions to qualifying digital news media. The government allocated a total of \$595 million (CAD) over five years in addition to a previous pledge by the Canadian government of \$50 million to local journalism.¹⁰ These proposals have been met with some criticism – especially from smaller publishers who feel that these subsidies favor large incumbents – but they have initiated important conversations about public policy interventions that can support journalistic institutions.

Probably the best example of subsidizing news media is the previously mentioned BBC experiment. In 2019, the BBC proposed a new charity, the Local Democracy Foundation, to oversee and expand its local “democracy reporting” program. In conjunction with tech companies and other potential contributors, the BBC foundation would fund regional public interest journalism to cover council meetings and other local events that otherwise would likely go unreported. With over 50,000 stories published through this collaborative model so far, proponents hope the programs will continue to expand.¹¹ However, this might be unrealistic, given the BBC's recent cuts to its local news division and difficulties in finding additional external funding. Meanwhile, other countries, such as New Zealand, are beginning to consider or implement their own versions of such programs.

Despite positive developments, the BBC project, similar to the Canadian model, has faced accusations that its model reinforces market concentration by favoring large publishers. For example, the BBC has placed the vast majority of its reporters with local newspapers owned by only three major regional publishers, leading to charges that the program allows debt-laden publishers to exploit taxpayer support to compensate for their earlier profit-seeking measures – irresponsible actions that helped create the very journalism crisis that the program seeks to remedy.¹² Nonetheless, the program offers a glimmer of hope at a time when the market is failing to support the journalism that a democracy requires. At the very least, it can provide the basis for future reforms to build upon, gradually removing news operations from the destructive effects of the market.

POTENTIAL FUNDING MODELS FOR A NEW PUBLIC
MEDIA SYSTEM

Even the United States is beginning to see the rise of nonmarket experiments, including investments in public media and subsidies for local journalism. For example, in 2018, the New Jersey legislature passed a bill dedicating \$5 million to the “Civic Information Consortium,” an innovative nonprofit focused on revitalizing local media. The media reform organization Free Press first proposed the project and further developed it during two years of grassroots advocacy and community engagement. Its primary mandate is to help provide for New Jersey residents’ information needs, especially in underserved, low-income areas, and communities of color. The consortium will subsidize both legacy and start-up news outlets, as well as support media literacy and civic engagement programs.¹³ While \$5 million is tiny – and further reduced by the NJ government to \$2 million – in comparison to the news industry’s catastrophic losses over the last decade, it serves as a significant proof-of-concept that government can financially support local journalism and other media projects.

One promising recent development with public media has seen local outlets shoring up local journalistic institutions under duress. For example, the New York City’s public radio station WNYC helped salvage the defunct local news site *Gothamist*.¹⁴ Other local public media stations around the United States are increasingly collaborating with other local news institutions and civil society groups to produce various kinds of digital print media – from investigative print journalism to stand-alone reports – in addition to traditional radio and television broadcast media. Increasingly, public media outlets are buying up outright digital journalism outlets – sometimes in partnership with philanthropic organizations – and this model could be replicated across the country.¹⁵

However, for these media experiments to be universally accessible, we must figure out a way to pay for their expansion at a systemic level. The most straightforward approach is that the USA could simply join the rest of the democratic world by funding a strong public media system. Indeed, the United States could finally guarantee long-term financial support by removing public media’s budget from the congressional appropriation process and instead create a permanent trust that would shield it from political pressures and provide economic security. With a larger funding base, the US public media system could experiment with new formats and

expand its reach. Furthermore, in addition to the existing public broadcasting system, it could include community and low-power radio stations, public access cable television, independent community news outlets, and other local media. Such multimedia centers could combine resources and collaborate on the local and investigative reporting vacated by vanishing commercial newspapers.

Less direct government subsidies are also possible, and other countries are proposing plans such as tax vouchers that people can put toward their choice of media.¹⁶ Other experiments might include establishing an AmeriCorps-style, government-subsidized journalism jobs program, perhaps drawing inspiration from New Deal-era WPA programs. Yet other subsidy models could be developed without increasing government expenditures by, for example, repurposing funds for international broadcasting (worth hundreds of millions of dollars); charging commercial operators for their use of the public spectrum or outright selling it (worth tens of billions of dollars); implementing an equivalent to the universal service charge added to monthly phone bills; or placing a small consumer tax on electronics.¹⁷

An even more ambitious plan that I have discussed elsewhere would convert existing public infrastructure, such as post offices, public broadcasting stations, and public libraries, into local media centers. In addition to providing public internet access – perhaps as part of a community broadband network – these spaces could be used to produce local reporting through various kinds of media.¹⁸ The Indymedia experiment of the early 2000s could serve as a potential blueprint. However, these new community media centers should be publicly funded and/or receive financial support from local governments instead of relying on all-volunteer labor, which was always a major challenge for this model and a contributing factor to its decline.¹⁹

By competing with and thereby pressuring commercial outlets to be more responsible, diverse, and informative, strong public institutions can benefit the entire media system. Commercial media's limitations in providing society with reliable news and information are readily apparent, yet significant barriers remain to making such arguments for public investments. Many Americans – including journalists themselves – assume that government support translates to state control over media content. Much evidence contradicts this assumption, but nonetheless, the necessary politics for creating a new public system in America are currently lacking. Therefore, the first step toward actualizing this system is to reorient discourses around public media subsidies. In doing so, we could take a page from the playbook of the libertarians and right-wing intellectuals

who for decades toiled within think tanks and policy shops to craft economic arguments that we now take as almost commonsensical.

CREATING INFRASTRUCTURES FOR DEMOCRACY

The current journalism crisis presents a rare opportunity to reinvent American public broadcasting as a new media system dedicated to public service journalism across various media. Increasing public attention on the threats to the integrity of our news and information systems has created an opportunity to recalibrate American journalism for the digital age. While not the perfect panacea for all that ails our communications – and many variations are possible – a strong public media system can provide a solid foundation for a healthy information system. Evidence suggests that public media strengthens political knowledge and democratic engagement, encourages diverse and independent news coverage, and seeks to ensure universal access to information and communication infrastructures.

Beyond receiving high-quality news, we must also make sure that communities are deeply engaged in the news-making process itself. Community engagement is the best way to create a new kind of journalism, one that is accountable, representative of diverse views and voices, and trustworthy. Moreover, community members should be involved in the governing process, empowered to organize their own newsrooms, and able to collaborate in making their own media. Therefore, we must address the following questions. What might a new public media system look like? What policies and politics are required to establish such a system in the United States?

It is fair to conclude that our current misinformation problems are the direct result of policy failures. These include the failure to fund public service journalism, which created the ideal conditions for misinformation and low-quality news coverage to propagate; the failure to maintain open access to reliable information and democratic participation; and the failure to prevent monopolistic control of key sectors of American information systems. This latter failure created a wide range of harms, including news gatekeeping, lack of diversity, and sensationalistic content. These policy failures perpetuate a systemic market failure that has compromised the American commercial media experiment since its beginning.

Although there is a general unease toward policy interventions in the American media system, political economic scholarship has long established that tendencies inherent in media markets often lead to various

externalities.²⁰ It is the role of government policy to manage them – to minimize the negative and maximize the positive externalities for the benefit of democratic society. Moreover, the democratic imperative of maintaining reliable news and information systems requires approaching the journalism crisis as a major social problem that necessitates public policy interventions.

Democratizing the American media system necessitates a robust public policy program aimed at de-commercializing news media. This program has three components. First, it must regulate or break up information oligopolies; second, it must create public alternatives to commercial news media; and third, it must empower media workers, consumers, and communities. Of course, de-commercializing journalism will not solve all media-related problems. Problematic cultural orientations and power hierarchies within newsrooms and throughout society will continue even after removing journalism from the market. Nonetheless, de-commercialization is a first step toward democratizing the news media. Stripping commercial values (an emphasis on sensational and conflict-driven news) and instilling public values (an emphasis on high-quality information and confronting concentrated power), could help engender a journalism that is committed to universal service but sensitive to diverse social contexts.

Cultivating a nonprofit news model from the wreckage of market-driven journalism goes well beyond nostalgia for a mythological golden age. Any path toward reinventing journalism must see the market as part of the problem, not the solution. In many ways, commercialism drives the journalism crisis, and therefore removing it could be transformative. While the challenges facing journalism are legion, the ravages of the market pose an existential threat. We should therefore either remove journalism from the market entirely or minimize commercial pressures as much as possible.²¹ This is the only way we can create true structural alternatives.

The late sociologist Erik Olin Wright provided a useful framework that can help us envision what a truly public media system might look like and how we can get there. He proposed four general models for creating alternatives to capitalism, each one based on a different logic of resistance: smashing, taming, escaping, or eroding.²² Wright suggested that eroding and taming capitalist relationships offered the best prospects by reforming the existing system in ways that greatly improve people's everyday lives (taming), while also creating alternative models to gradually replace commercial structures (eroding).

We can adapt this strategic vision toward freeing our media system from commercial logics. As I discuss in the conclusion of my recent book, there are five general approaches conducive to such a project: 1) establishing “public options” (i.e., noncommercial/nonprofit, supported by public subsidies), such as well-funded public media institutions and municipal broadband networks; 2) breaking up/preventing media monopolies and oligopolies to encourage diversity and to curtail profit-maximizing behavior; 3) regulating news outlets via public interest protections and public service obligations such as the ascertainment of society’s information needs; 4) enabling worker control by unionizing newsrooms, facilitating employee-owned institutions and cooperatives, and maintaining professional codes that shield journalism from business operations; and 5) fostering community ownership, oversight, and governance of newsrooms, and mandating accountability to diverse constituencies. While society should simultaneously implement all of these strategies, creating a truly public system – which remains the best defense against systemic market failure – should be paramount.

FOUNDATIONS FOR A NEW PUBLIC MEDIA SYSTEM

Proposing the idea of massive public subsidies for news media in the United States typically invites two immediate objections. One concern is cost, and the other is that a publicly subsidized system would inevitably become a mouthpiece for whomever controls government. While recent actions by the Trump administration should give us pause, media subsidies do not necessarily invite totalitarianism. Democratic nations around the planet maintain strong public media systems as well as democratic freedoms that compare favorably to America. Nonetheless, preventing government capture is certainly a legitimate concern. An uncompromised safeguard for any public media system is that it must be firewalled from government control and interference. Regardless of the funding source, all contributions to a public media fund should be severed of any institutional or personal attachments to ensure that journalism retains complete independence. Any donations to a public media trust should follow a double-blind process whereby no funder will know what kind of specific reporting their contribution is supporting, and no grantee will know the origins of their financial support. Public media’s political autonomy must be founded on adequate funding and economic independence.

In terms of funding this system, other scholars and I have suggested that tens of billions of dollars should be drawn from the Treasury to create

a solid foundation for a new public media system. Although this may seem exorbitant, relative to the profundity of the problem – as much as a priority as national security and other non-negotiable expenses – it is actually a modest proposal. Furthermore, if we consider the enormous opportunity costs incurred by going without an operable press system, the status quo of doing nothing becomes untenable. Americans rarely scrutinize the costs of maintaining essential services and systems, such as roads and public education. A functioning news media system is as vitally important as these other core infrastructures, and should be treated accordingly. In other words, we must not leave journalism's survival to individual desires but rather treat it as a social necessity. We should sustain this vital service by providing the requisite tens of billions of dollars – a modest amount compared to massive tax cuts, military expenditures, and stimulus spending in recent years.

A second option would be a large public media trust fund supported by multiple funding sources. It could be supported in various ways, but instead of following the path of public broadcasting in being left to the mercy of the congressional appropriations process, this fund might rely on charitable contributions from foundations, philanthropists, and other sources mentioned earlier. This trust should be democratically operated and remain autonomous from government. While individual citizens could contribute to the trust, such a large fund requires well-resourced institutions and large funding streams. This might include collecting taxes from platform monopolies and having foundations pool their resources to serve as “incubators” for what can later develop into a fully-fledged public media system.

Platform monopolies such as Facebook and Google did not cause the systemic market failure undermining digital media, but they are certainly exacerbating the journalism crisis as they starve the very institutions that they expect to fact-check the misinformation that is proliferating through their platforms and networks. To offset some of their social harms, these firms should help fund local news, investigative journalism, and other kinds of coverage that a healthy democracy requires. In recent years, Google and Facebook each promised \$300 million for news-related projects, and they are gradually increasing their support for similar programs. Google has pledged this money toward its News Initiative, and Facebook has sponsored several projects, including its \$3 million journalism “accelerator” to help ten to fifteen news organizations build their digital subscriptions using Facebook's platform and its “Today In” feature, which aggregates local news in communities across the United States. The latter

program ran into problems when Facebook found many areas already denuded of local news. More recently, Google announced it would tailor its algorithms to better promote original reporting and Facebook has promised to offer major news outlets a license to its “News Tab” that will feature headlines and article previews. These efforts are woefully insufficient given the scope of the problem.²³

Mandating that platforms redistribute a small percentage of their revenue as part of a new social contract could address the related harms associated with unaccountable monopoly power and the loss of public service journalism. Facebook and Google should help fund the very industry that they simultaneously profit from and defund. I have argued in the past that these firms could pay, for example, a nominal “public media tax” of 1 percent on their earnings, which would generate significant revenue for the beginnings of a journalism trust fund. Such a tax would yield hundreds of millions of dollars that could seed an endowment for independent journalism, especially if combined with other philanthropic contributions that accumulate over time. A more ambitious plan proposed by Free Press calls for a tax on digital advertising more broadly, potentially yielding \$1 – 2 billion dollars per year for public media.²⁴

These digital monopolies could certainly afford such outlays given that they currently pay a pittance in taxes.²⁵ The European Commission has suggested instituting a new tax on digital companies’ revenues, and policymakers and advocates around the world are beginning to consider allocating such tax revenues specifically toward funding public media. In the United Kingdom, for example, the British Media Reform Coalition, the National Union of Journalists, and leading politicians all have proposed similar schemes. More recently, the Ofcom chief, Sharon White, called for a levy on digital firms to help fund public broadcasting. While such arguments have thus far been unsuccessful, they reflect rising awareness about the connections between digital monopolies’ unaccountable power, the continuing degradation of journalism, and the destructive role of misinformation in society.²⁶

In addition to taxing platform companies, foundations could return to their historic role of incubating new public media experiments. Leading foundations such as Ford, Carnegie, and MacArthur played a key role in shaping what would become American public broadcasting in the 1960s. They could play a similarly important role today, especially in laying the groundwork for a new public media system until government can step in to fund these infrastructures. Given permanent support through a combination of private philanthropic contributions and public

subsidies, a well-funded public service media system could help guarantee universal access to quality news and information. This “public option” for journalism can help compensate for commercial media’s endemic flaws that render it vulnerable to market failure. What would this new system look like?

A TRULY PUBLIC MEDIA SYSTEM

The many challenges to creating a truly independent public media system do not end with procuring adequate resources. To ensure that this system remains truly public and democratic, we must also address questions of governance, production, and dissemination of media. Moreover, we must devise a democratic system of determining a community’s information needs (what I refer to as questions of “ascertainment”). We must provide for the proper underlying infrastructure (everything from open broadband networks to cable television access). We must also have structures in place that guarantee these institutions – controlled by journalists and representative members of the public – are operated in a bottom-up, transparent fashion. These newsrooms must be constantly engaged with local communities.

Regional media bureaus that represent local communities should make key governance decisions while administrators can distribute resources democratically via a centralized hub. Federal and state-level commissions can deploy resources so as to target news deserts, meet special information and communication needs, and focus on addressing gaps in existing news coverage, especially at the local level.

Independent oversight could rely on a public media consortium comprised of activists, policy experts, scholars, technologists, journalists, and public advocates. Most importantly, this system should follow principles of “engaged journalism” and “solutions journalism,” with an emphasis on addressing social problems while highlighting local voices and narratives, especially from traditionally underrepresented communities.²⁷

Freeing media-makers from commercial constraints might allow them to actualize the journalistic ideals that led them to the profession in the first place. News workers, under the protection of strong unions, should have a stake in the ownership and governance of their media institutions. Indeed, a truly public media system should include worker-run cooperatives and other forms of collective ownership. Journalists, in close conversations with local communities, should dictate what issues they report on. In other words, public media should mean public ownership of media

institutions.²⁸ This requires a social democratic vision that sees journalism as an indispensable countervailing force against concentrated power – a public good that requires public investments.

Under a heavily commercialized ownership structure, journalism too often bolsters the status quo and perpetuates social inequalities. But with the right structural conditions, journalism can be liberated to serve social justice and progressive change. Removing commercial pressures from our news media would not solve all of journalism's problems, but it is a necessary starting point. Absent social-democratic policies that subsidize noncommercial media, it is impossible to support journalism that is expensive to produce but rarely profitable. Journalism left entirely subject to commercial logics creates a kind of "market censorship" whereby stories that do not attract advertisers and wealthy interests will be omitted in our news media.

Now more than ever, we need adversarial journalism that provides accurate information about social problems, challenges powerful interests, and opens up a forum for dissenting voices and alternative visions for our future. This is the media we need.

IMAGINING THE MEDIA WE NEED

If society treats news as only a commodity to be monetized and sold on the "free market," then it is rational to maximize profits by any means possible. But if we see journalism as primarily a public service, then we should try to minimize commercial pressures, return news production to local communities, and sustain public media for future generations, just as we preserve permanent spaces in society for parks and schools. Commercial constraints have long filtered out particular voices and views from the press. Journalism's public service mission and its profit motives have always been at odds. The purpose of developing ethical codes and professional standards for journalism was to prevent it from being overwhelmed by business priorities. Too often, these earlier lessons have been forgotten.

As we witness an apotheosis of long-standing structural contradictions in commercial journalism, our current crisis could fuel a period of bold experimentation with new journalistic models. Unfortunately, in the United States, we understand journalism and its crisis within the discursive confines of a market ontology, which encourages us to see the market's effects on journalism as an inevitable force of nature. With some resignation, perhaps, we see the crisis as beyond our control or an unfortunate public expression of democratic desires. This paradigm

simultaneously naturalizes the market's violence against journalism and forecloses on alternative models. Moreover, it invites political paralysis in the face of an enormous social problem.

Despite this fealty to the market, all democratic theories and notions of self-governance assume a functioning press system. The fourth estate's current collapse is a profound crisis in dire need of public policy interventions. The ongoing policy failure to address this crisis for democracy stems as much from discursive capture as it does from regulatory ineptitude. Such discourses typically overlook our communication systems' policy roots and normative foundations. Combined with an abiding faith in technological solutionism, this discursive orientation at least partly explains why American society ever allowed platform monopolies to obtain such unaccountable power in the first place.²⁹ The degraded media system resulting from these policy failures created an ideal landscape for various kinds of dis/misinformation to flourish.

Since the market alone cannot provide for all our communication and information needs, a policy program based on a social democratic understanding of public media would facilitate policies that 1) reduce monopoly power, 2) install public interest protections, 3) remove commercial pressures, and 4) build out public alternatives. More locally, we can work to support programs to build community broadband services and local journalism initiatives. American historical experiments – such as municipal newspapers and news cooperatives – can help us imagine what these nonprofit experiments might look like. Driven by grassroots social movements from below, now is the time for creating counter-narratives to the still-dominant corporate libertarian paradigm.

Commercial journalism's collapse is now incontrovertible, but as a society, we have yet to face up to this reality. No new business model or innovation that can save journalism is waiting to be discovered. No purely profit-driven model can address the growing news deserts that are sprouting up all over America. It is abundantly clear the market cannot support the level of journalism – especially local, international, and investigative reporting – that democracy requires. If we acknowledge that the market will not solve this crisis – if we stop grasping for a magical technological fix or an entrepreneurial solution – we can begin to look more aggressively for nonmarket-based alternatives. And we can dare to imagine a new public media system that penetrates silences and ruthlessly confronts the powerful.

History offers tantalizing glimpses of an alternative media system. Sometimes good journalism exposes us to stories and introduces voices

we otherwise would never hear. There are periodic cases of investigative reporting that reveals corruption, changes policy, and benefits all of society. But these moments have been the exception. The history of the American media system is a history of exclusion and ongoing market failure. But it does not have to be this way. Another media system is possible, one that is more democratically governed and publicly owned. The biggest obstacle to this vision is a constricted view of what is possible. It is precisely during dark political moments such as ours that we should imagine policies for a more democratic future.

Of course, a strong public media system will not serve as the sole panacea for all of our informational woes. There also is a dark side to public broadcasting in cases where it is misused by governments, especially under illiberal and undemocratic regimes.³⁰ Moreover, there is compelling evidence across the world that even in nations with stronger public media, problems related to dis/misinformation are severe. And many countries are discouraging their public media from directly engaging with the journalism crisis, at least partly due to pressure from newspaper industries who fear competition. Furthermore, in many countries the demographic for public media is aging, with younger citizens inclined to consume news from social media feeds. This all begs the question whether creating a stronger public media is a worthwhile venture that can address core communication problems.

While these are legitimate concerns, and we should not assume that if we build it, everyone will come, a strong public media system is a baseline necessity for tackling the media problems facing us today. First and foremost, journalism is a public good and the market will not provide for our information needs. Tweaking markets, shaming commercial media firms, and slapping regulations on platforms – even outright trust-busting – is not enough. What is needed instead is a system founded on a non-market-based means of support that is liberated from commercial logics. Much research shows public media doing significantly better in terms of informing people, engagement, and trust.³¹ However, such institutions alone cannot solve all media-related problems. While we need to look to European models as a starting point to broaden the American regulatory imagination, they are by no means the Platonic ideal.

Indeed, we should not glorify the BBC, even if it is noteworthy that British public media are directly confronting the journalism crisis. After all, the BBC has long been fraught with elitist tendencies and deep-seated structural problems.³² In the United States, what we need is not simply an American BBC but something more ambitious. Of course, we cannot

simply throw money at it and expect that wide audiences will immediately manifest. But if we engage local communities in their own media production and create a new public media system that is truly publicly owned and controlled, we might have a fighting chance. Anything short of a major structural overhaul to our failing media system reduces us to placing Band-Aids on an irreparably flawed system.

If we are willing to recognize the root of the problem facing journalism's future – namely, systemic market failure – we can begin to address the crisis. If we find ways to minimize structural threats caused by unchecked commercialism, we may actually achieve this new kind of journalism. But we must first consider the strategic frameworks and policies needed to realize this vision. Above all, we must see journalism as an essential public service – a core infrastructure – that democracy needs to survive.

NOTES

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