

The media democracy needs – and deserves: A response to ‘Seven trends in old and new media’

By E. J. Dionne Jr.

INTRODUCTION



E.J. Dionne Jr. is a senior fellow and the W. Averell Harriman Chair in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution.

We live in a time where a friend is at least as likely to ask if we have seen someone’s “post” or “Vine” or video as to ask whether we have read someone’s news story. At the same time, that friend is no less inclined than in the past to ask a question that begins with the words, “Did you hear that” – and then to refer to news about, say, Donald Trump, the Golden State Warriors, the Islamic State, or Justin Bieber.

These two propositions might be seen as defining what is new and what isn’t about the new media world.

Only someone without a computer or smartphone can doubt that the ways in which Americans receive information, opinion, and even gossip have changed radically over the last two decades. In their thoughtful and sprightly paper describing seven trends in the old and new media, my colleagues Elaine Kamarck and Ashley Gabriele are clearly correct in their first six propositions, beginning with their Big Trend Number One: “Newspapers are Dinosaurs.” At the same time, each of their propositions needs to be qualified.

The larger issue is that there has been absolutely no change—not in recent years, and not in the last several hundred—in people’s curiosity about what is going on around them. Most of us still want to hear the latest about the news, sports, weather, and a host of other matters. Some of us are more curious about certain aspects of life than others, and the new media allow people to narrow the range of interests and opinions to which they expose themselves. There will always be a great many who are far more interested in ESPN and the sports pages, actual or digital, than in the latest Des Moines Register Iowa Poll. But this is not very different from a past in which families parceled out different sections of the paper after it hit their doorstep. The Kamarck-Gabriele paper—and the lively discussion it prompted at a Brookings session that drew together Ken Bode, the veteran political reporter, Howard Fineman, the Global Editorial Director at

The Huffington Post, and Emma Green, managing editor of *TheAtlantic.com*—raise a series of questions that need to be disentangled. The first concerns the financial crisis of the old media, particularly newspapers.

MONOPOLY PROFITS AND JOURNALISM AS A PUBLIC GOOD

What needs to be emphasized is that the trouble for newspapers began *before* the rise of most of the institutions in the new media world. In a sense, these initial difficulties created a vacuum in which the new media entered; only subsequently did the new media begin to pose a severe competitive threat to the traditional news outlets. Before there was *Huffington Post*, there was direct mail, and Craigslist. The financial crisis of the newspaper came first.

Paul Starr of Princeton University offered one of the best analyses of the plight of the newspaper. His thesis might be summarized this way: Newspapers enjoyed monopoly profits for decades because of their indispensable role in delivering customers to local advertisers. Out of these monopoly profits, the papers financed a public good—more or less unbiased journalism that included an important watchdog role over local, state, and national government. The need for the public good provided by journalism has not gone away. The monopoly profits have.

In his 2009 essay in *The New Republic*, Starr noted that in the previous hundred years, newspapers were “able to develop and flourish partly because their readers have almost never paid the full cost of production...as consumer markets expanded, newspapers increasingly sold not just news to readers, but also readers to advertisers. And the more advertisers they gained, the less dependent they were on any single one.” This last point was essential to the ability of newspapers to remain relatively independent of those who bought ads and thus financed the entire operation.

Then came the crisis. Starr writes:

If there is one overriding factor behind the current financial crisis of the press, it is simply that the Internet has undermined the newspaper’s role as market intermediary. Advertisers do not need to piggyback on the news to reach consumers, and consumers have other ways to find out about products and sales. Newspapers also cannot possibly duplicate online the monopoly position that they have enjoyed in print during recent decades as the sole surviving papers in their metropolitan area, and so they no longer have the pricing power for ads that [Warren] Buffett describes as “economic heaven.” Craigslist, eBay, and many other sites provide alternatives—and none of them bears any cost of news production.

The challenge from new technology, in other words, came first from alternative online advertising and sales vehicles. Then came the competition to the journalistic product itself. The double-whammy can be seen as especially devastating because the old newspaper model had been so profitable. “Newspapers [had] been able to make money from their print editions at both ends: by charging advertisers for eyeballs, and by charging the eyeballs, too,” Starr wrote. “But online there are other news sources such as sites run by TV and radio stations, which have never charged their viewers or listeners. So, for newspapers, there goes circulation as well as advertising income.”¹ The newspapers themselves aggravated the problem in many cases by making their product free online, which accustomed readers to expecting that the news would always be “free.” This practice of providing the newspaper’s many forms of information at no charge has begun to change only in recent years.

THE CRISIS OF NEWS

The paradox is that “newspapers”—if they are defined not as the old paper product alone but as including the many forms in which they now get to readers—are healthier than ever in terms of readership. In October, *The Washington Post* passed *The New York Times* in “multi-platform unique visitors,” taking a 66.9 million to 65.8 million lead.² Yes, my role as a *Washington Post* columnist may have led me to report this fact here, and the two papers are likely to keep battling back and forth. But the point is that *both* numbers are impressive. In a more competitive environment, *The Post* and *The Times* are winning a great many readers. As Fineman pointed out at the Brookings discussion: “Is print dead? No. Print is just not on paper. Print is very much alive.” This is true not just of the older outlets, he noted, but also of “web native” or “social native” outlets.

Moreover, traditional news brands fare very well even among the youngest Americans. As Kamarck and Gabriele reported from 2012 numbers, after “The Colbert Report” and “The Daily Show,” the next top news preferences of those under 30 were *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

The fact that new online readers do not provide the same advertising base that old, locally-oriented newspaper readers did needs to be balanced against the continued interest in what older, non-partisan media have to offer.

But if the crisis of newspapers is about money, not readership, Kamarck and Gabriele are right to note that the financial crisis in newspaper reduces the ability of older media to cover news. Especially troubling is their difficulty in financing accountability journalism of federal and, even more strikingly, state and local governments. As the Pew Research Center reported, between 2003 and 2014, the number of full-time statehouse reporters declined by 35 percent, slightly higher than the overall decline in newsroom staffing.³ This is a genuine problem for democracy.

None of this is to say that new media are doing nothing to replace lost capacity in the old media. On the contrary, both Green and Fineman noted that some of the leading new media outlets have beefed up reporting capacity. For the long run, Green is surely right when she says: “I think platform agnosticism is an important part of the story... it matters less what media information is traveling through and more the quality of that information, how it’s being sourced and reported, by what types of organizations, and then also how a filtering process is happening.”

But we do not yet live in a world in which the lost reporting capacity of older media has been replaced. This is a challenge with which democratic governance must grapple.

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY IN THE RISE OF OPINION

We forget, as Fineman noted, that “if you know your history, you know that journalism in America began without the thought that anything could be objective in the true, scientific sense. Most newspapers were organs of partisanship and of political parties.”

This is true, and it’s important as we ponder the growing role of opinion on television, radio, and online. What we are seeing now is a return to an earlier era. From the beginning of the republic in the 1790s until the turn of the late 19th Century, one of the central purposes of newspapers was to mobilize support year round for their points of view and the political parties that supported them. The newspapers were raucously engaged – and, sometimes, corruptly so.

But during the Gilded Age, as the historian Christopher Lasch pointed out in “The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy,” parties got a bad name.⁴ Reformers who looked for professionalism as the alternative to bossism in politics eventually turned to seeking professionalism in journalism as well. The professional model was dominant for most of the 20th Century, though, as Michael Schudson noted in his masterly book, “Discovering the News,” the model began to decay from the late 1960s forward with the rise of “new journalism” and a growing skepticism in mainstream journalism of official accounts which led to the rise of “investigative” or “adversary” journalism.⁵

The attack on the old model gained steam when the Nixon Administration pioneered a sweeping attack on the media as “liberal.” In the short run, this was a push-back against established institutions. But over time, it led to the rise of alternative conservative voices on op-pages, then on talk radio, eventually on Fox News, and today online. For a variety of reasons, progressives have never matched conservative influence on AM radio, and while MSNBC for a time provided an alternative to Fox on the left, it has been moving back toward a traditional news role. But progressives did gain a strong foothold online, partly because the new media became popular at a moment of widespread revolt against the Iraq War and the administration of George W. Bush, and also because young Americans, the web pioneers, were more progressive than their elders. The broader story of this transition has been told elsewhere. The question is whether this new heyday of opinion journalism is beneficial to democracy. (I should note that as a newspaper columnist, my own work crosses the boundary between old and new. The job description I carry pre-dates the new media, but the new media have worked to amplify the reach of columnists.)

On the whole, I would argue the proliferation of opinion has been and will remain positive for democratic deliberation and participation—but *only as long as opinionated journalism is not seen as a replacement for older forms of reporting and only if we can find ways of bolstering such reporting.*

Those are big “if’s.” Your view of the current situation depends in large part on whether you believe those conditions will eventually be met.

It’s clearly true that the new opinionated media forms are meeting a great need that traditional journalism was not always answering. The new opinion outlets exist primarily to engage citizens in the joys and obligations of political participation. To say this is not to overlook the fact that opinion journalism often does convey important and accurate information, in many cases information overlooked by the mainstream. Nonetheless, what Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel have called “journalism of affirmation,” by purpose and design, draws people into the democratic fight.⁶ They have made millions of people feel that their voices will be heard somewhere and, when aggregated, can have a real influence on the outcome of policy debates and elections.⁷

But, yes, there are limits to this view. The new world of opinion becomes a problem when it becomes a source of falsehood. Referring to presidential campaigns, Bode expressed worry that the new technologies are, at times, “really polluting what gets put into the national conversation about these candidates, their policies, their backgrounds, their character.”

Nastiness and incivility in politics are seen as having reached especially high levels, even if we have had other moments like this in our history, and parts of the new media play a role in this. And there is a fear—not fully realized, but not unfounded—that many Americans are retreating into media cocoons in which neither their viewpoints nor

their factual claims are ever challenged. That Donald Trump has been able to make statements utterly at odds with the truth without much penalty might be a symptom of the problems created in this new environment.

Moreover, on the conservative side of politics, as Jackie Calmes noted in an important paper for Harvard's Shorenstein Center, right wing media have partly usurped the role of party leaders themselves. "If leaders of the Republican Party are not setting its agenda, who is?" Calmes asked. Her answer:

As many of them concede, it is conservative media – not just talk-show celebrities Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Mark Levin and Laura Ingraham, but also lesser-known talkers like Steve Deace, and an expanding web of "news" sites and social media outlets with financial and ideological alliances with far-right anti-government, anti-establishment groups like Heritage Action, Americans for Prosperity, Club for Growth and FreedomWorks. Once allied with but now increasingly hostile to the Republican hierarchy, conservative media is shaping the party's agenda in ways that are impeding Republicans' ability to govern and to win presidential elections.⁸

Yet for all the problems of opinion journalism, we do need to cultivate argument as an essential component of the democratic process. Much of what passes for "argument" in our political culture, of course, is not argument at all, but a cacophony of parallel assertions and invective that pretend to pass for argument. In real argument, as Lasch asserted, the parties involved genuinely try to persuade each other and are, at least in principle, open to persuasion themselves. What we need is not less argument, but more authentic argument.

If I would register one dissent from the Karmarck-Gabrille paper, it is to their assertion: "For the younger generation, news is delivered through comedy." There is no doubt that this was true for some time. The question is whether this "trend" was largely a product of the extraordinary creativity and popularity of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart. Their disappearance from Comedy Central has already reduced the salience of news-through-comedy.

And comedy has been a source of news for some time, for the old as well as the young. Late night television has often served as a source of enlightenment as well as entertainment. So has "Saturday Night Live," and long may it continue its work of poking at political pretention and encouraging engaged laughter as an alternative to alienation.

VALUING A TRADITION, REJECTING NOSTALGIA

It is not an accident that Emma Green, the youngest member of the panel that responded to the Kamarck-Gabriele paper, offered some of the most hopeful and forward-looking observations. She argued that new developments in the media should prompt neither "outrage" nor "dismay." Rather, they are "something to engage with" and be treated as "a really interesting and creative challenge."

Green is right because there is no alternative. Nostalgia is futile. Technological change cannot be rolled back. Newspapers will never restore their monopoly positions, and the days of only three major television networks are long gone.

Moreover, there is much to celebrate in the new world. Citizens can now access entire political speeches that they might once have known about only through a few sound-bites in news stories. They can check the information in news stories themselves, and the best news outlets provide links through which readers can work their way back

through a reporter's public sources. Data-bases are easily accessed. So, too, are alternative forms of information, including news outlets in other countries. Errors can be caught immediately by informed readers and corrected quickly. It is now easy to check if a politician (or opinion writer) is contradicting an earlier position. For those not intent on remaining inside their own ideological worlds, a vast range of opinion and analysis is readily available. And this is only a very partial list of the benefits of technological breakthroughs.

But if nostalgia is wrong-headed, valuing what was best about the older media forms is not. The crisis in reporting is real because the incomes of media institutions have declined. News outlets will continue to look to the marketplace to find new revenues. But non-market supports for journalism are likely to become more important: foundation grants; experiments with not-for-profit status (along the lines of NPR); cooperative ventures with think tanks and universities; and perhaps changes in the tax and regulatory treatment of journalistic institutions.

Journalism itself will also have to change. In his challenging book "Beyond News: The Future of Journalism," Mitchell Stephens, a professor at New York University, made the case for what he called "wisdom journalism" whose purpose involves "strengthening our understanding of the world." It would involve "the more rarified forms of reporting – exclusive, enterprising, investigative" while also stressing "informed, interpretive, explanatory, even opinionated takes on current events."⁹ And as Kovach and Rosenstiel have argued, the new media environment places a greater responsibility on citizens to work their way through the thicket of fact, opinion, reporting, and bloviating that all seem to merge together. The title of their book tells the story: "Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload." What some have called "news literacy" is now an important part of citizenship.¹⁰

And rather than bemoan the rise of opinionated takes on events, we need to raise our aspirations for what opinion journalism and political argument should look like. We should insist that opinions be based on a fair reading of the facts; that those taking issue with others respond to their best arguments and try to resist the temptation to build straw men; and that the spirit of the enterprise be animated by a search for truth and not simply by the quest for power or victory.

Lash was eloquent on how argument is not only necessary to democracy but can be one of its greatest public achievements. "If we insist on argument as the essence of education," he wrote, "we will defend democracy not as the most efficient but as the most educational form of government, one that extends the circle of debate as widely as possible and thus forces all citizens to articulate their views, to put their views at risk, and to cultivate the virtues of eloquence, clarity of thought and expression, and sound judgment."¹¹

We are a long way from meeting Lash's standard, but it is the standard to which our democracy and its media institutions should aspire.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Paul Starr, “Goodbye to the Age of Newspapers (Hello to a New Era of Corruption),” *New Republic* (March 4, 2009). <https://newrepublic.com/article/64252/goodbye-the-age-newspapers-hello-new-era-corruption>
- 2 Jordan Valinsky, “Washington Post tops New York Times online for first time ever,” *Digiday* (Nov. 13, 2015). <http://digiday.com/publishers/comscore-washington-post-tops-new-york-times-online-first-time-ever/>
- 3 Jodi Enda, Katerina Eva Matsu, Jan Lauren Boyles, “America’s Shifting Statehouse Press: Can New Players Compensate for Lost Legacy Reporters?” Pew Research Center (July 10, 2014). <http://www.journalism.org/2014/07/10/americas-shifting-statehouse-press/>
- 4 Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1996) p. 171.
- 5 Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (Basic Books, 1978), pp. 4, 179, and 182.
- 6 Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *Blur: How to Know What’s True in the Age of Information Overload* (Bloomsbury, 2011), p. 132.
- 7 I elaborate on this view in my 2006 Theodore H. White Lecture at the Shorenstein Center at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government from which a few of these sentences are drawn. See: http://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/th_white_2006_dionne.pdf
- 8 Jackie Calmes, “ ‘They Don’t Give a Damn about Governing’: Conservative Media’s Influence on the Republican Party,” paper for the Shorenstein Center at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (July 27, 2015). <http://shorensteincenter.org/conservative-media-influence-on-republican-party-jackie-calmes/#Overview>
- 9 Mitchell Stephens, *Beyond News: The Future of Journalism* (Columbia University Press, 2014), p. xxvi.
- 10 Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Blur*, 202.
- 11 Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, 171.

GOVERNANCE STUDIES

The Brookings Institution
1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20036
Tel: 202.797.6090
Fax: 202.797.6144
brookings.edu/governance

EDITING

Elizabeth Sablich

PRODUCTION & LAYOUT

Nick McClellan

EMAIL YOUR COMMENTS TO GSCOMMENTS@BROOKINGS.EDU

This paper is distributed in the expectation that it may elicit useful comments and is subject to subsequent revision. The views expressed in this piece are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the staff, officers or trustees of the Brookings Institution.

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.