

News media in the United States: a case study

The news media system in the United States is considered to have one of the highest standards of press freedom in the world, and enjoys a considerable level of international influence. In terms of its regulatory environment, the US media landscape is not subject to state control or regulation, as freedom of expression -- and thus freedom of the press -- is a value constitutionally protected under the First Amendment. However, due to global media decentralisation and the evolution of digital networking, the news industry has undergone significant transformation. As the digital internet-based journalism model increasingly usurps traditional publishing, American news media's historical reliance on ad revenue has increasingly become an unsustainable business model. Global media developments such as digital communication technologies have also caused upheavals to national media regulatory environments by granting independent entities, transnational technology corporations, and foreign governments the ability to steer media coverage according to their own agendas -- often in collaboration. Additionally, as of 2016, political developments have been precipitated under unprecedented circumstances, in part through the technological capabilities of the online networked public sphere. In turn, the corresponding shifts in state-mandated regulations under the new administration have negatively impacted national levels of press freedom.

Although US news journalism, since its inception, has been chiefly reliant upon advertising revenue, this business model is becoming increasingly non-viable, and has not generated

sustainable revenue gain as news media migrates from print formats to the internet. One major reason for this revenue crisis is that online ads garner merely “a fraction of their paper-based counterparts” (Pickard, 154, 2014). Another factor is the development and exponentially growing global audience use of ad-blocking software, such as Adblock and uBlock Origin. In the US, ad-blockers are primarily used on desktop devices; as of 2016, no mobile ad-block service has yet become widely popularised in the US, but it is predicted that a solution will inevitably gain traction -- as it has done in the Asia-Pacific, where 94% of global mobile ad-block usage is located (PageFair, 3, 2017). A spectrum of strategies have been employed by different news organisations to combat the loss of revenue that results from ad-blocking behaviour. These range from strict site-wide walls that prevent users from accessing content unless they disable their ad-blocker (The Washington Post), to unskippable ads (Forbes), to more passive pop-up requests/appeals for users to turn off their ad-blockers. However, the vast majority (74%) of users display a preference for exiting the website rather than attempting to circumvent any ad-block walls (Pagefair, 2017). As a consequence, despite spending on digital advertising growing by 20%, increases in digital subscription or website traffic (which are mixed at best) “have not translated into viable revenue solutions” -- over the past decade, there has been a steady decline of gross news media revenue for both print and digital formats (Mitchell; Holcomb, 4, 2016) These issues are symptoms of a larger market failure phenomenon that unfailing results from “public good” media services being driven by commercial forces (Pickard, 153-5, 2014). The continued failure of online advertising to produce revenue that has not been satisfactorily resolved, and is an ongoing issue that news media businesses and organisations are still grappling to find effective solutions for.

It is clear from the the ongoing ad revenue crisis that technological developments have had a major impact on news media financing models. But, more importantly, the rise of powerful transnational technology companies have also profoundly influenced the essential nature of journalism production and distribution itself (Mitchell, Holcomb, Weisel, 6, 2016). Indeed, this is particularly relevant as the US is the world's leading site of technological development, being birthplace of the internet and some of the largest corporations that provide internet-based services. The business environment surrounding US media is historically bound by "concentrated ownership", in which a small number of corporations control a large percentage of services; in the digital age, the online news sector falls into a similar pattern of being at least partially reliant upon a small number of large technology companies (Pickard, 153, 2014). Traditionally, news media organisations would oversee their services end-to-end -- from editorial principles, to reportage and production, to packaging and finally delivery. In the digital era, however, the continuing growth of the technology sector has seen corporations such as Google, Facebook and Apple "become integral, if not dominant players" in many of these journalistic processes, "supplanting the choices and aims of news outlets with their own choices and goals" (Mitchell, Holcomb, Weisel, 6, 2016). For example, Facebook, primarily a social networking site, evolved to explicitly include a news aggregation function in the form of the "Trending Topics" sidebar. Upon Trending's introduction in 2014, news items were curated by a number of editors who seemed to lack a common editorial standard, and were "instructed to artificially 'inject' selected stories into the trending news module" -- the political bias of which was essentially determined

by “whoever was on shift” (Nunez, 2016). Editors were also prohibited from pushing stories about Facebook itself, making it impossible for the Trending section to be objective about the corporation that created it. Eventually, in 2016, Facebook fired these editors, instead relegating the selection of news topics to an algorithm. Within days, the algorithm had circulated an inaccurate story about Megyn Kelly, a host on Fox News, and published inappropriately vulgar viral links to the Trending section (Thieman, 2016). This case study demonstrates more traditional news media schema being edged into by technology corporate interests. It also raises concerns about the intrinsic value of human curatorial judgement to govern newsworthy items as opposed to populist or viral links, as well as the questionable ability of algorithm-driven aggregation sites like Facebook to provide legitimate news services.

The digital social networking and publication capabilities of the internet have also led to the emergence of “the role of the individual” in the US journalistic public sphere -- most notably in the case of independent organisations like Wikileaks that possess the capability to reach a mass audience without having to fully rely on state or corporate-based media outlets. Founded in 2006 by Julian Assange, Wikileaks is an online document archive, the stated purpose of which is to publish documents that expose “powerful governments or corporations anywhere in the world...regarding matters of enormous global public concern” (Benkler, 317, 2011; Fuchs, 226, 2016). Permeated by ideological traditions of “libertarian hacker culture” and “technologically enabled transnational leftist movements”, Wikileaks received a number of Freedom of the Press awards for releasing documents of cross-national origin regarding a wide variety of political

regimes, industries, and abuses of power (Chadwick, 92, 2013; Benkler, 315-7, 2013). By partnering in varying extents with traditional news organisations to break these stories, it appeared that Wikileaks was spearheading the evolution of a novel model of the “watchdog” fourth estate -- forming a hybridisation between the traditional news media sphere and networked media systems (Benkler, 397, 2011).

However, controversy began to snowball following Wikileaks’ online publication of a video titled “Collateral Murder” that depicted “trigger-happy” US soldiers aboard a helicopter shooting down unarmed civilians, as well as the release of the Afghanistan and Iraq war logs. It was the 2010 publication of confidential US State Department embassy cables that finally triggered a US-government initiated “cross-system” prosecution against Wikileaks under the 1917 Espionage Act. Wikileaks began to be widely characterised by US state leaders as a global terrorist threat, rather than a legitimate whistleblowing or journalistic entity (Benkler, 321-30, 2011; Beyer, 2014). By 2016, Wikileaks’ mission had drifted from its original globalist techno-libertarian principles, instead becoming consumed with engagement in oppositional partisan politics in the US. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Wikileaks, in collaboration with Russian hackers, orchestrated a series of highly publicised data leaks which were explicitly stated to be an attempt at sabotaging Hillary Clinton’s campaign and influencing the voting public (Karpf, 200, 2017). With the purpose of arousing conflict among Democrat supporters, almost 20,000 emails were misappropriated from the Democratic Party and released to coincide with the Democratic National Convention. This was followed by a mass publication of emails

from the personal Gmail account of Clinton's campaign chairman, leading to potentially inflated mainstream media coverage and scrutiny of the "scandal" (Karpf, 201, 2017). All of this has troubling implications for the future of news media and the role of the fourth estate in the US. Wikileaks as an organisation has been pivotal in upending the processes of "traditional" media institutions -- but not necessarily always in a constructive or ethical manner. More than anything, these progression of events demonstrate that independent entities are gaining increasingly powerful abilities to drive the content of news media coverage and supersede news organisations with their own agendas -- in the case of Wikileaks, this manifests as the power to act as a transnationally disruptive political agent.

In parallel to Wikileaks' questionable dissemination of nevertheless authentic data, the US news landscape has recently seen the increased proliferation of "fake news" -- distorted news coverage that portrays outright inaccurate, propagandistic, or conspiratory messages as truth, leading to public misperception -- in the journalistic sphere (Allcott & Gentzkow, 212, 2017). The concept of fake news is by no means unique to the digital era. However, the phenomenon has been exacerbated through the use of digital communication technologies that are characterised by a lower barrier of entry and the ability to instantaneously transmit messages to a global audience -- as previously discussed in the case of Facebook's Trending News section. Independent "alt-right" news sites, such as Breitbart, "frequently disseminated highly nationalistic or nativist messages...and at times false or propagandistic coverage." (Freedom of the Press, 2017) Significantly, from a partisan perspective, the fake news phenomenon was found to be strongly

biased in favour of Donald Trump (Silverman, 2016). Furthermore, fake news is not just bound by national borders -- in an ongoing investigation, it has been strongly alleged that Russian intelligence agencies had taken part in manipulating US national election news coverage by “promoting certain stories, some of them false or misleading, through state-owned media and networks of social media accounts” (Freedom of the Press, 2017). This transnational manipulation of US state media is one consequence from the emergence of a global, technologically networked public sphere that fosters “political codecision” (Castells, 91, 2008). Although the allegations that fake news was crucial factor to Trump’s election are (to date) quantitatively unproven, it is evident that all of these events are symptomatic of a profound shift in the way citizens interact with and participate in the online public sphere, and has been a contributing factor to the public erosion of trust in news journalism (Allcott & Gentzkow, 232, 2017). A 2016 Gallup poll revealed a historically low level of national public trust in news media institutions -- only 32% of respondents said that they have "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust in news journalism. Additionally, there was a sharp decrease in Republican-aligned citizens expressing trust -- from 32% in 2015 to just 14% (Swift, 2016). Digital technologies played a part, to some degree, in influencing political outcomes, and has influenced the publically perceived legitimacy of news media systems. The issue of fake news, when viewed in conjunction with the evolution of Wikileaks, reveals the threats that decentralisation and the emergence of a networked public sphere present to traditional media regulatory systems at the national level, which must balance freedom of expression with the provision of a responsible public service.

Consequently, the shifting policies of the administration have influenced -- and perhaps threatened -- the regulatory functions of news media. The administration's general contempt for and attempts to undercut the news media are fuelled by Trump's self-proclaimed "running war with the media", and his statements that journalists are "among the most dishonest human beings on earth" (Kellam, Stein, 2016). Correspondingly, the 2016 Freedom of the Press report found that the "political environment" index -- which contributes to the overall "freedom" score -- has worsened in the US by two points (on a 40 point scale) since 2015 (Freedom of the Press, 2017). Such a strained relationship between the US government and traditional media outlets has seen Twitter emerge as a crucial site of media practice -- especially considering Trump's own notorious use of the platform. For instance, after Trump's inauguration, the Badlands National Park service tweeted that "the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is higher than at any time in the last 650,000 years". Swiftly following this, Trump issued an order prohibiting US federal institutions -- including the National Parks Service, the Department of Agriculture -- from "independently communicating to the public" (Kendzior, 2017). This unprecedented regulation represents a major obstruction in the ability of news media to function as a public check on state entities. These are obviously still-evolving developments; nevertheless, the implications of such governmental decisions are unpromising. It will be enlightening to examine the developing state of news media under the Trump administration, and examine the question of whether freedom of the expression been significantly compromised within the networked public sphere -- and if so, to what extent.

The news media landscape of the United States has historically been centred around freedom of expression as a core value. Transnational companies that are originally technology-based, but nevertheless have developed to embody media functions, have profoundly influenced the operation of news journalism by entrenching deep dependencies between news media and the technology that supports them. Ultimately, as we look forward into the future, major issues facing the news media sector in the US will be shaped by the ongoing development of digital communication technologies and the ways in which the journalism industry is compelled to keep abreast of those developments.

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