

The Media We Need

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Commercial journalism's collapse is now indisputable. But as a society we have yet to face up to what this means. No new business model 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 the United States. It is questionable whether commercial news media ever fully aligned with society's democratic needs, but now it is abundantly clear the market cannot support the level of journalism—especially local, international, policy, and investigative reporting—that democracy requires.

The past decade has witnessed a precipitous decline in newspaper revenue and readership, reducing the number of the nation's newsroom employees by nearly half. Actual journalism is vanishing, misinformation is proliferating, and our public media system—which ideally could provide a safety net for when the market fails to support the press—remains impoverished compared to its global counterparts. The economic threats facing journalism—from the collapse of its advertising-dependent business model to the dominance of platform monopolies like Facebook and Google—comprise a structural crisis for our news media system. But this crisis is also an opportunity to entirely reinvent journalism.

If we acknowledge that no entrepreneurial solution lies just around the bend—if we stop grasping for a magical technological fix or a market panacea—we can begin to look more aggressively for non-market-based alternatives. In doing so, we can dare to imagine a new public media system for the digital age, one that privileges democracy over profits. A journalism that goes to where the silences are in society and ruthlessly confronts those in power. An information system that keeps a laser-like focus on climate change, hyper-inequality, mass incarceration, and other pressing social problems. How would we design such a system?

History offers fleeting glimpses of this alternative journalism—investigative reporting that exposes corruption, changes policy, and benefits all of society. Every now and then, we encounter media coverage that tells stories and introduces voices we otherwise would never hear. But for far too long, these moments have been the exception. The history of the US media system is a history of misrepresentation, misrepresentation, exclusion, and ongoing market failure. But it did not—and does not—have to be this way. Another media system is possible, one that is more democratically governed and accessible to all. The biggest obstacle to this vision is a constricted view of what can be. We must broaden our political imaginary.

If we are willing to recognize the root of the problem facing journalism's future—namely, the relentless pursuit of increasingly unattainable profits—we can begin to address the

crisis. If we find ways to minimize structural threats caused by rampant 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 else, we must see journalism as an essential public service—a core infrastructure—that democracy needs to survive.

Infrastructures of Democracy

We learn in school that an informed society—a bedrock of self-governing society—requires a free press. However, we as a society rarely reflect on the infrastructures and policies that are required to maintain a healthy press system. Today, as we look to journalism to protect us against misinformation and corruption, the press is in a structural crisis. Journalism's institutional support is collapsing, leaving entire regions and issues uncovered at a time when reliable information and robust reporting is desperately needed. The crisis is disproportionately harming specific communities and vulnerable groups.

A growing body of scholarship documents the negative social effects caused by information scarcity, the proliferation of misinformation, and the rise of news deserts. As we saw in chapter 3, studies show that those lacking access to reliable sources of news are less informed about politics, less civically engaged, and less likely to vote. Moreover, these communities are more polarized and face rising levels of corruption in their local governments. Much evidence suggests that many of these problems will only worsen in the coming years. The loss of journalism and rampant misinformation are structural problems that require structural solutions. More to the point, they are social problems that require policy interventions.

With increasing public attention focused on threats to the integrity of our news and information systems, now is an opportune moment to consider reforms that reorient US journalism for the digital age. While a public media system is not the perfect panacea for all that ails our communications, it can provide a strong base for a healthy information ecosystem. Accumulating evidence attests that public media are beneficial for strengthening political knowledge and democratic engagement as well as for encouraging diversity and independence in news coverage. Furthermore, public media systems are guided by a normative commitment to ensure that all members of society have access to information and communication systems.

True inclusion means that communities are not only receiving high-quality news, but are also deeply engaged in the news-making process itself. Community members should be involved in the governing process and empowered to organize their own newsrooms and collaborate in participatory journalism. Community engagement in the news-making process is the best way to create a new kind of journalism, one that is accountable and trustworthy.

With these concerns and emphases in mind, we must address the following questions: What might a new public media system look like? What policies, discourses, and politics are required to establish such a system in the United States? In some key respects, we have been here before, and historical knowledge about what worked and what failed in the past is instructive. Lessons gleaned from previous policy battles and media crises—including the

decades-long campaign to establish a public broadcasting system in the United States—have much to tell us about charting a way forward.

A Policy Approach to the Journalism Crisis

The road to the misinformation society has been paved with policy failures. Many of the media-related challenges facing us today—misinformation, unaccountable monopolies, insufficient journalism—are actually old problems. Donald Trump’s election was a symptom, not a cause, of a deeper institutional rot within the United States’ core systems, especially its media system. These long-standing structural pathologies, 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. The failure to sustain public service journalism created a fertile environment through which misinformation and low-quality news coverage proliferated. The failure to maintain open and democratically operated communication infrastructures limited access to reliable information and democratic participation. The failure over time to prevent monopolistic control of key sectors of US information systems created a wide range of harms, including news gatekeeping, lack of media diversity, and extreme commercialism. These overlapping policy failures maintain a “systemic market failure” arising from commercial imperatives that have debased the US media experiment for much of its existence.

Any society that aspires to be a democracy must ensure the existence of reliable news and information systems. This necessitates approaching the journalism crisis as a major social problem and, therefore, a public policy problem. Transforming the US media system into a democratic force requires a robust policy program of regulating or breaking up information monopolies, creating public alternatives to commercial news media, and empowering media workers, consumers, and communities to engage with and create their own media.

The Path Forward: De-Commercializing Journalism

Beyond the politics and policies required to actualize these alternatives, establishing a noncommercial vision as a long-term normative goal is in itself a worthwhile project. Of course, removing commercial imperatives will not solve all journalism-related problems. Deeply embedded cultural orientations, hierarchies, and routines—both within newsrooms and throughout society—will persist after removing journalism from the market. Nonetheless, de-commercialization is an important first step toward democratization. Removing commercial values (an emphasis on sensational, conflict-driven, trivial news that attracts attention to advertising) and adding public values (an emphasis on high-quality information, diverse voices and views, and reporting that confronts concentrated power and social problems) could foster a journalism that is universally accessible but attentive to diverse cultures and social contexts.

Salvaging a nonprofit model from the ashes of market-driven journalism goes far beyond nostalgia for a golden age that never existed. This project is not about finding the right business model to preserve the status quo or to resuscitate a past that was steeped in

inequality and discrimination. Any path toward reinventing journalism must acknowledge that the market is its destructor, not savior. Commercialism lies at the heart of this crisis, and removing it could be transformative. The ravages of the market escape the same level of alarm compared to other risks facing news media today. While journalism's external threats range from oppressive state governments to changes in audiences and technologies, the market poses an existential challenge. We should therefore either remove news production from the market entirely or, at the very least, minimize commercial pressures.

The late sociologist Eric Olin Wright left us a useful schematic that can help society think through the possibilities for de-commercializing journalism and creating a truly public media system. Wright was a key thinker in envisioning "real utopias" and he provided a vocabulary for imagining a different social world. He proposed four general models for creating alternatives to capitalism, each one based on a different logic of resistance: smashing, taming, escaping, or eroding. After assessing these four approaches, Wright suggested that the strategies of eroding and taming capitalist relationships over time offered the best chance for change. On the one hand, we can push for reforms to the existing system that greatly improve the everyday lives of people (taming), and on the other hand, we can create alternative structures that will gradually replace commercial models (eroding).

We can apply this strategic vision of taming and eroding capitalistic relationships to free our media system from commercial logics. There are five general approaches conducive to such a project:

- Establishing "public options" (i.e., noncommercial/nonprofit, supported by public subsidies), such as well-funded public media institutions and municipal broadband networks.
- Breaking up/preventing media monopolies and oligopolies to encourage diversity and to curtail profit-maximizing behavior.
- Regulating news outlets via public interest protections and public service obligations such as ascertainment of society's information needs.
- Enabling worker control by unionizing newsrooms, facilitating employee-owned institutions and cooperatives, and maintaining professional codes that shield journalism from business operations.
- Fostering community ownership, oversight, and governance of newsrooms, and mandating accountability to diverse constituencies.

While society should pursue all of these approaches simultaneously, the most surefire way to tame and erode commercial media is to create a truly public system, one that can pressure for-profit outlets to be more responsible and provide a structural alternative to systemic market failure.

Creating a New Public Media System

If we agree that nonprofit outlets alone are beneficial but insufficient, then a public media system is vitally necessary. We should be clear up front that any such national network for providing news would require tremendous resources. In the United States, proposing the

idea of massive public subsidies for news media usually elicits two immediate objections. One is the concern that a publicly subsidized system would create a mouthpiece for the state. The other objection is its cost.

I have been arguing throughout this book that media subsidies are not a slippery slope toward totalitarianism. Indeed, democratic nations around the globe have somehow figured out how to create strong public media systems while enjoying democratic benefits that put the United States to shame. Nonetheless, independence from government capture is certainly a legitimate concern. An ironclad prerequisite for any public media system is that it must be firewalled from government (as well as from other powerful influences). Regardless of the funding source, a key requirement is severing all previous ties once money enters the trust. All donations must be cleansed of any institutional or personal attachments to ensure that journalism retains complete independence from any funder or government entity. These donations should follow the “double-blind” process mentioned earlier: No one will know exactly what kind of journalism their money is funding, and no grantee will know from whence their funding came. This political autonomy must be tethered to economic independence—in other words, adequate funding and resources—otherwise this new system would simply reenact the earlier errors of public broadcasting and create another weak system susceptible to political and economic pressures.

Creating a solid foundation for a new public media system will require tens of billions of dollars. This may seem large, but relative to the scale and type of problem—a first order need on par with public health, a standing military, and other non-negotiable expenses—it is actually a modest proposal. This is especially true if we consider the enormous opportunity costs to society if we proceed without a functioning news media system. Americans rarely question the cost of government actions deemed necessary for the country’s survival, such as public education and other core systems and infrastructures. A functioning press system is arguably as essential as these other imperatives, and we therefore should not require its funding to be budget neutral, which is an ideologically-loaded position passed off as hard-headed realism. A viable press system is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Similar to a classic merit good discussed in chapter 2, journalism is not a “want,” but a “need.” We should treat it accordingly and draw a budget of \$30 billion from the treasury on an annual basis—a miniscule amount compared to massive tax cuts and military budgets passed in recent decades.

While a guaranteed annual budget derived directly from the US Treasury is the ideal means of supporting a new public media system, a second option would be a large public media trust fund supported by multiple revenue streams. As discussed in chapter 5, there are many possible means of funding this trust. Most importantly, this financial support should not be a political football left to the mercy of the congressional appropriations process. Instead, it might rely on charitable contributions from foundations and philanthropists, already-existing subsidies, and other sources. Protected from powerful interests, this trust should be publicly operated and remain autonomous from government. While individuals could also contribute to the trust, a project of this scope requires large funders. Other possible sources of funding (all mentioned in chapter 5) might include consumer taxes on electronics and devices, tax vouchers, repurposing international

broadcasting subsidies (worth hundreds of millions), and proceeds from spectrum sales (worth tens of billions of dollars). Two other major methods of funding a public media system are taxing platform monopolies and having foundations pool their resources to serve as “incubators” for what can later become a public media system.

Platform monopolies are not solely responsible for the systemic market failure undermining digital journalism, but Facebook and Google are certainly exacerbating the crisis. It is tragically ironic that this duopoly starves the very institutions they expect to fact-check the misinformation proliferating through their platforms. To offset some of the damage they are causing, these firms could help fund local news, investigative journalism, policy reporting, and other kinds of coverage that democracy requires regardless of whether its profitable for monopolistic firms. Thus far, Google and Facebook have supported journalism at a level that amounts to a public relations initiative. Google has pledged \$300 million over three years for its News Initiative (less than 1 percent of Google’s 2017 profits). For its part, Facebook has launched a \$3 million journalism “accelerator” (representing about 0.007 percent of the company’s 2017 revenues) to help ten to fifteen news organizations build their digital subscriptions using Facebook’s platform. It also launched a program “Today In” to aggregate local news in communities across the United States, but ran into problems when it found many areas were already entirely bereft of local news. These efforts are woefully insufficient.

Redistributing revenue as part of a new regulatory approach could address the twin problems of unaccountable monopoly power and the loss of public service journalism. Facebook and Google (which owns YouTube) should help fund the very industry that they simultaneously profit from and eviscerate. These firms could pay a nominal “public media tax” of 1 percent on their earnings, which would generate significant revenue for a journalism trust fund. Based on their 2017 net incomes, such a tax would yield \$159.34 million from Facebook and \$126.62 million from Google/Alphabet. Combined, this \$285.96 million would go a long way toward seeding an endowment for independent journalism, especially if combined with other philanthropic contributions that accumulate over time. A similar, but more ambitious, plan proposed by the media reform organization Free Press calls for a tax on digital advertising more broadly, potentially yielding \$2 billion dollars per year for public service journalism.

These firms could certainly afford such expenditures, since they currently pay preciously little in taxes. In recent years, the European Commission has suggested instituting a new tax of between 1 and 5 percent on digital companies’ revenues. The British Media Reform Coalition and the National Union of Journalists have both proposed allocating the money from such taxes specifically for public service journalism. These campaigns have thus far been unsuccessful, but they reflect rising awareness about the connections between digital monopolies’ illegitimate wealth accumulation, the continuing degradation of journalism, and the rise of misinformation. If we are to grant platform monopolies such incredible power over our vital communication infrastructures, a new social contract must protect democratic society from such harms.

Another possibility for supporting public media—an idea I touch on throughout this book—is for foundations to serve their historic role of incubating new media models. As we

saw in chapter 5, foundations such as Ford, Carnegie, MacArthur, and many others played a key role in shaping what became US public broadcasting. They could play a similarly important role in creating the next public media system, especially in its early stages of development. Once a new public media system becomes established and demonstrates its utility, public monies could be increased as reliance on private foundations decreases. This would be similar to US public broadcasting's development in the late 1960s, but a key distinction between then and now is that major foundations—especially Carnegie—encouraged government to step in and fund these infrastructures. Regardless, this time we should forbid the new public media system from taking voluntary corporate donations to avoid the *quid pro quos* that come with sponsorship and ensure that we do not repeat the same mistakes.

Given permanent support through a combination of private philanthropic contributions and public subsidies, a well-funded national journalism service could help guarantee universal access to quality news. This “public option” for journalism can address commercial media's endemic problems that render our information systems vulnerable to crisis.

What Would a Truly Public Media System Look like?

The fight for a truly independent public media system does not stop with funding. Once we have created the structural conditions for these new journalistic spaces, we have to make sure they remain truly public and democratic. Therefore, we must have structures in place that ensure these institutions are controlled by journalists and representative members of the public and operated in a bottom-up, transparent fashion in constant dialogue with engaged local communities. In short, these newsrooms must look like the communities they serve.

We might envision this project constituted in layers: the funding layer (how will this public media system be financially sustained?); the governance layer (how will resources be allocated and how can these decisions be made democratically?); the ascertainment layer (how will information needs be determined?); the infrastructure layer (how can we ensure distribution of and access to information, including universal broadband service?); and the engagement layer (how can we ensure that local communities are involved in making their own news and contributing their own voices and stories?). While administrators can distribute resources via a centralized hub, local media bureaus that represent the communities in which they reside should make key governance decisions. Federal and state-level commissions can calculate how resources should be deployed to target news deserts, meet special communication needs, and focus on addressing gaps in news coverage (e.g., around elections, inequality, global warming, and other specific social needs and problems).

Actualizing this system will require a public media consortium comprised of policy experts, scholars, technologists, journalists, and public advocates that specialize in work relevant to each of these layers. Most importantly, each layer must engage local communities. Researcher Lindsay Green-Barber reminds us that “engaged journalism” must “respect and include the public in its processes and practices.” Ultimately, she

concludes, this journalism is about reflecting lived realities, meeting information needs, and “cultivating and listening to sources throughout the community, rather than in niche sectors or in the upper echelons of power” (her emphasis). A related project is “solutions journalism,” which focuses on addressing social problems while highlighting local voices and ground-level sourcing.

In short, our goal should be to create a robust and well-funded media system that is truly public, designed for our digital age, and democracy-driven, not market-driven. Whatever form they ultimately take, building viable noncommercial models will be a long, hard slog. Many flowers will bloom and wither, but the experiments will continue. Starting with the premise that commercial journalism is a dead end allows us to reorient tired conversations about the future of news. It frees us to think more boldly and creatively. Liberating journalists from commercial constraints would allow them to practice the craft that led them to the profession in the first place. In other words, it would let journalists be journalists. This means they should have a stake in the ownership and governance of media institutions. At the very least, journalists need strong unions to protect labor conditions and democratize newsrooms. Beyond that baseline, 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 reporting they take on.

Ultimately, public media means public ownership of media institutions. This requires a social democratic paradigm that sees the Fourth Estate as an indispensable countervailing force against concentrated power. Any progressive agenda worth the name must fight for an adversarial news media that provides accurate information about social problems, challenges powerful interests, and opens up a forum for underrepresented voices and alternative visions for society. The US media system is riven with stark inequalities—it reflects class and racial divides, just as it perpetuates them. But given the right structural conditions, journalism can instead be a force for social justice and radical change.

Unhooking media from profit imperatives and commercial pressures does not solve all of journalism’s problems, but it is a necessary starting point. Absent subsidies for noncommercial media, it is impossible to support journalism that is expensive to produce but rarely profitable. Left entirely to the market, stories that do not attract advertisers and wealthy interests will go untold. Anything that captures our attention for advertisers—from shouting heads on cable television to clickbait online—is likely to be amplified. Commercial news values bolster the status quo; they rarely challenge it. Too often, market forces are treated as a guarantor of a free press and a free people. This faux-populist “give the people what they want” mythology naturalizes the powerful and profitable and treats oppositional journalism as a risky anomaly. The demise of local journalism should serve as the proverbial canary in the coalmine. It is a telltale sign that we need a radical media project that penetrates to the roots of market censorship. Otherwise, we face a future in which the market crushes actual journalism and a few corporations choose which stories we hear.

Reframing the Debate

The current crisis could fuel a period of bold experimentation with new journalistic models. If society treats news as only a commodity, 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 market pressures, return news production to local communities, and sustain public media into perpetuity, just as we preserve permanent spaces in society for museums, parks, libraries, and schools. Commercial constraints have long created barriers for particular voices and views in the press. Journalism's public service mission and its profit motives have always been in tension. Indeed, the very project of developing ethical codes and professional standards was to prevent journalism from being overwhelmed by business priorities.

Unfortunately, these earlier lessons have been either ignored or forgotten. Today we are witnessing an apotheosis of those tensions, a culmination of long-standing structural contradictions in commercial journalism. Yet, there are positive signs that US society is slowly coming to realize that these flaws in commercial journalism—to use contemporary parlance—are not a bug in the system but a feature. However, our analyses of this crisis remain deeply impoverished. In the United States, we treat the market's effects on journalism—as we treat the market's effects on nearly everything—as an inevitable force of nature beyond our control or, at the very least, a public expression of democratic desires.

This “market ontology” simultaneously naturalizes the market's violence against journalism and forecloses on alternative models. Ultimately, this fealty to the market ensures that society will not attempt a serious public policy response to a major social problem. By this logic, if publics (or rather, advertisers, investors, and media owners) do not support certain kinds of journalism, we must let them wither. This position's inherent absurdity is cast into stark relief if we designed our public education according to a similar commercial logic. If students elect not to pay for civics class, then it is discontinued. Or consider academic labor: If scholars' journal articles do not receive enough clicks or likes, they must abandon their research agendas. While it seems preposterous when applied to other areas of society, this savage logic is snuffing out journalism in broad daylight.

All democratic theories and foundational principles—including the First Amendment itself—assume a thriving press system. The Fourth Estate's current collapse is a profound social problem that screams for public policy intervention. That no such intervention has occurred stems as much from discursive capture as it does from regulatory failure. Discourses about digital journalism's democratic potential often overlook the policy roots and normative foundations of our communication systems. An abiding faith in technological liberation discouraged public policies that could prevent corporate capture of our core information systems. This discursive orientation at least partly explains why US society ever allowed platform monopolies—driven by a ruthless “surveillance capitalism”—to obtain such tremendous and unaccountable power in the first place. It also helps explain the meager policy responses to our ongoing journalism crisis. The degraded media system resulting from these policy failures created a fertile landscape for various kinds of misinformation to thrive.

The Road Ahead

Since the market cannot provide for all our information needs, a policy program based on a social democratic vision of public media would facilitate policies that do the following: reduce monopoly power; install public interest protections; remove commercial pressures; and build out public infrastructure. At the state and local levels, we can work to support programs to build community broadband services and local journalism initiatives. For inspiration, we can look to past experiments—from municipal newspapers to cooperative telephone networks—to imagine what these nonprofit experiments might look like.

Other elements of this program lend themselves to a long-term transformation at the federal level—driven by grassroots social movements from below—to create a new national public media system. Now is the time for creating counter-narratives and radical alternatives to the still-dominant libertarian paradigm. It is precisely during dark political moments such as ours that we should envision and plan for a more enlightened future. The journalism crisis—as well as the commercialization and corporate monopolization of our news and information systems—are significant social problems. They fall within the realm of policy, and therefore, politics.

For too long, US society has held the wrong debate over what new business model might support journalism. Too many otherwise smart people—conditioned not to see capitalism’s corrosive impact on journalism—misdiagnosed the problem because they failed to see commercialism at its core. Instead, we must clarify the structural roots of the crisis, expand the political imaginary for potential futures, identify alternatives, and help chart a path toward actualizing them. Most importantly, we must look ahead rather than behind us. Waxing nostalgic about a golden era of newspaper reporting, or pining for the days of three major television networks when Walter Cronkite told us “and that’s the way it is,” brings us no closer to the type of public media system that democracy requires. Our goal must be to reinvent news media, not shore up old commercial models. Our focus should be on the future of journalism, not the plight of newspapers or any other specific medium. If we unhook journalism from commercial imperatives to create truly public alternatives, we just might design a media system that serves democracy.