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A WORLD WITHOUT NEWS?

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There is an economic crisis threatening the press. The good news is that digital advertising is growing, to make up for falling print sales and advertising. The bad news is that two companies - Google and Facebook - are taking more than 65 % (some say closer to 80%) of all the growth.

But the crisis goes deeper than money. Jay Rosen, professor at NYU has listed the “perfect storm” of factors that are creating an unprecedented threat to the press. They include:

- A low-trust environment for most institutions and their leaders, the same ones who are regularly featured in the news
- A broken and outdated model in political journalism, which tries to connect to the public through “inside” or access reporting about a class whose legitimacy is itself eroding
- An organized movement on the political right to discredit mainstream journalism
- Lack of diversity in newsrooms
- Trust in the news media as an institution lower than ever in living memory, while popular anger reaches an all-time high
- Facebook slowly taking charge of the day-to-day relationship with users of the news system
- The increasingly dim prospect that there will be a fact-based debate to which journalists can usefully contribute
- Weak leadership and a thin institutional structure in the American press, which is not accustomed to organizing itself to fight back or act assertively in any coordinated way
- News & political debate subordinated to entertainment values by media companies obeying commercial imperatives, while claiming a public service mantle

News as a public service was considered to be the classic justification for the press. Citizens would be better informed, and thus make better-informed decisions about who to represent them.

Today, everyone can create, publish and share news. Famously, the President of the US speaks daily and directly to 32m followers on Twitter. He uses the same medium to discredit the most respected newspaper in the world, decrying its content as “fake news”. He has been criticised for creating his own “alternative facts.”

Societies which can no longer tell what is true or not are in deep trouble and cannot make good decisions about the choices facing them.



The technology for distributing journalism has changed dramatically. The old model placed a great deal of power and influence in the hands of the few who owned printing presses; and created one form of journalism. But that “vertical” transmission of news has been complemented (some would say, overtaken) by a vast tide of “horizontal” communications which is, to a large extent, invisible and poorly-understood.

These new tides of information clearly have immense influence and contribute to events which repeatedly catch the mainstream media off guard. One response is to blame the new West Coast giants which facilitate these new forms of communication and democracy. In the recent General Election many voters “disobeyed” the “instructions” of newspaper editors telling them how to vote.

Conventional regulation of these giant companies may be unworkable. There are good reasons to expect them to take more responsibility for their power and to be “better citizens.” But it is silly to paint Facebook or Google in the darkest colours, just as it is complacent to imagine that the established press works to the highest standards of enabling citizens to make good choices. The crisis of trust facing all institutions bites on journalism in an unforgiving way. It is time to take notice.

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