

What Has Become of the Press?

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Course

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During the 19th century, technological advances in printing led to a proliferation of small-scale newspapers, or “rags.” This seemed to offer an immediate correction to the blanket sheet journals that had benefited by monopolizing limited resources and distribution channels. However, when the rags overtook America, they focused mainly on sensationalistic news and gossip. Moreover, they were contained mostly in large urban centers. Innis (1951) had argued that “the party machine bridged the gap between the government and public opinion,” (p. 165) inundating the public with politically-manufactured newspapers. Information was more available than ever before, but moneyed interests quickly found a way to narrow the flow of information and homogenize public opinion.

Contemporary media culture is not dissimilar. In theory, the internet, and particularly, social media, should have ushered in a variety of viewpoints with equal access to the eyes of readers. In practice, however, the essential free market of the internet is hindered by the corporate consolidation of media organizations. The result is mass media that is highly nationalized, highly polarized, and less trusted overall. In the end, government intervention might become necessary to prevent large conglomerates from monopolizing the public square and silencing independent voices in the press.

Before Consolidation

It can seem counterintuitive to say that the news media produced a more straightforward and more unified narrative before the era of corporate consolidation. However, that is the case. For example, consider the Civil Rights era Freedom Marches of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. Before this era, the struggles of Black Americans were largely ignored by major news outlets in the United States. Even in the Civil War, when the question of Emancipation was

at the forefront of all political discourse, the position of Black Americans almost exclusively existed in small, Black-owned newspapers.

In the Civil Rights era, however, leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., recognized the opportunity of engaging establishment media, especially television. There was an understanding that if the world saw the brutality these protesters faced in the Deep South, public opinion would shift in favor of substantial Voting Rights legislation (Goodwin, 2019).

The media effectively played its role in this dynamic, not by coordinating a message but by pursuing a common goal of gathering the most vital news. This was an era when American newspapers and news stations were still mostly owned and managed by families and partnerships. They came to the south not with a corporate or political agenda but with a sense of professional duty to report on what was happening. Upon seeing, photographing, and filming the beatings, dog attacks, arrests, and fire hoses, the media reported a unified narrative. The majority of the public accepted it.

Compare this to today's social justice struggles: gay and trans rights, Black Lives Matter, the historic subjugation of indigenous peoples, and the fight against sexual harassment. The media conversation around these topics is hopelessly divided. The reason lies in a consolidated media landscape that comprises two or three hardened ideological viewpoints, magnified, narrowed, and echoed by an internet-based distribution network.

The Death of Competition

There have been many examples of media mergers and acquisitions in the news space in the last half-century. This is a global phenomenon. It has coincided with the emergence of internet distribution. In many ways, the digitization of news only speeded up the process of consolidation. Web-based access to journalism has decimated advertising revenue and inspired a

generation of citizen consumers to get their information from Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and internet-based aggregation sites.

The rise of internet journalism and the destruction of print has led to counterintuitive trends. The elevation of many voices through the internet would seem to promote a democratization of news. While this era has produced some citizen journalists of note and several influential web-based outlets like *Vox* or *Slate*, it has supercharged the homogenization of traditional news and primarily enabled people to create an endless echo chamber of the same consolidated reporting.

The essential effect of all this corporate consolidation is the death of competition in the way it existed in the middle of the 20th century. As stations and papers fall into the balance sheets of multinational corporations, “news divisions have become just another profit center for their conglomerate parents,” no different from a new video game, film, or consumer electronic (Champlin & Knoedler, 2016, p. 459). Whereas individual journalists might still believe their role is to inform the public, this is only allowed if it fits within the corporate goals of their parent company.

In the end, the current state of play illustrates how allowing a few large conglomerates – Disney, Comcast, NewsCorp – to control most of the news turns all information into a mass that people either accept unquestioningly or reflexively reject. As Cooper (2003) notes, in their analysis of media consolidation, that “It has long been recognized that the technologies and cost structure of commercial mass media production in the 20th century are not conducive to vigorous, atomistic competition” (p. 35). Cooper also claims that the proximity of corporate and political advertising to ostensibly journalistic content on television, and, by extension, on the internet, further blurs the line between serious news and a product to be sold.

Partisanship is the Product

It would be unfair and inaccurate to imply that conglomerate-owned news is not a competitive product. No major corporation achieves success without improving market share. However, how contemporary news competes is different from the competition of organizations in the middle of the last century.

One need only look at the aforementioned Civil Rights reporting or the Watergate coverage of the following decade to see how competition thrived, and the public benefited greatly. In the latter example, a series of individual journalistic gambles led to huge disclosures about Richard Nixon's White House: The *New York Times*' publishing of the Pentagon Papers, the Woodward and Bernstein reporting of the *Washington Post*, and even the development of long-form nightly newscasts to recap the trials. Each outlet wanted to plant a flag in the sand to attract viewers and readers searching for a comprehensive, well-sourced story.

Today, things are far different. Major papers and news outlets stake their claim on ideological grounds. A news organization is known for either skewing liberal or conservative, pro-corporate or populist. In many ways, this mirrors the ongoing debate of political campaigns: is it better to persuade the undecided voter or mobilize a base that already agrees with you? Whereas once, the press sought to appeal to a general viewer or reader whom they assumed wanted unbiased, accurate reporting, now media groups look for their tribes. By and large, they seek a consumer base that has already accepted their viewpoint and desires a news product that will support that viewpoint. If the perspective and all associated reporting also helps the conglomerate's financial interests, so much the better.

Widespread Trust is Lost

When considering how large swaths of the public lose faith in the press, one should consider both the nature of the news they consume and the channels through which they receive news. As discussed, when multiple media outlets are bundled under a single corporate parent and seem to parrot that corporation's partisan viewpoint or serve its financial interests, that erodes confidence.

Yet there is also the issue of how the news arrives to us. So many people now receive their media through platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter. These private companies want the broadest possible reach, which comes at a distinct ethical cost. As these social media platforms seek to do business in countries with more hostile attitudes toward a free press, they often need to withhold certain information in those repressed cultures (Abassi & Al-Sharqi, 2015). In the end, this means the private tech companies that have largely displaced more traditional means of news distribution are engaged in widespread censorship on behalf of repressive regimes. The question of free speech does not even come into play in this scenario because these platforms regularly contend that they are not publishers of content.

Cumulatively, the public is left with a situation where their news sources, both local and global, are likely owned by huge conglomerates. This leads to news outlets dutifully espousing the ideological and financial preferences of the conglomerate, often on a platform that will choose to censor the content if a wealthy oligarch demands it. What sort of trust can the public possibly have?

It is no surprise that while 72% of Americans had faith in the media in 1976, just after Watergate, only 32% had faith in the press in 2016 (Lewis, 2018). Both of these were incredibly divided, partisan times in the West, but by 2016, there was no longer an agreed-upon mediator of truth. There was no universally-trusted journalistic community that could answer the

fundamental questions of who was lying and who was telling the truth. On the contrary, most people now seem to view any given news outlet as a political instrument likely funded by the same people that fund political campaigns.

In Canada, this distrust manifests itself in a civil society where “democratic engagement, particularly among the youngest citizens, is at levels too low for the maintenance of healthy democracies” (O’Neill, 2017, p. 37). While Canadians claim to want traditional news options and are among the most prolific internet users in the world, their media engagement is primarily connected by party, with new consumption correlated to widening distrust of the ideological other (O’Neill, 2017). The lone bright spot is that engagement with almost all forms of media, including internet, television, and print, results in more robust political engagement. However, this does not appear to lead to more thoughtful, open-minded civic activity. As with most of the world, Canadians are primarily inclined to retreat to their political corners and consume the monolithic news conglomerate that best matches their preexisting beliefs.

Conclusion

It is perhaps nostalgic to suggest that the news media of the mid-20th-century was able to change minds through sheer force of integrity. Before the age of corporate news acquisitions and consolidations, plenty of stubborn, retrograde individuals refused to accept any news story that ran counter to their prejudices.

Even so, there was a more dynamic and competitive news sphere in the 1950s through the 1970s. In the West, complacent middle-class consumers could not avoid seeing the brutalizing of protesters, the death toll in Vietnam, or the latest revelations of Watergate (to name just a few examples). It is not an overstatement to say that these stories struck the overall conscience of

media consumers. They were the products of news-writers determined to inform the public at all costs.

Conversely, today's media exists primarily as a money-making venture for conglomerates, and the surest way they have to maximize profits is through partisan outrage. The news one consumes is as much an indicator of your allegiance as it is a way to stay informed. This reality is unlikely to change anytime soon since all profit drivers point toward continuing and intensifying consolidation.

Yet this does not mean that there is no hope for a dynamic press. Indeed, there are examples of other news markets that have fought hard to promote diverse, independent voices, notably Indonesia. Until the late 1980s, the government and five large companies controlled basically all media communications in the country, but in 1998, a series of legislative actions ended the monopolistic control of news. From 1998 to the present, the number of media outlets in Indonesia ballooned from around 300 to 47,000, including print, digital, and everything in between (Sukmayadi, 2019). This vast output is seeing a decent amount of consolidation, and Indonesians continue to debate how best to keep the press free.

It is difficult to argue that government intervention is the only solution since states have a long history of repressing independent media. However, democracies rely on their government to stop monopolies from strangling free enterprise. In Canada and throughout the West, governmental action has a role to play in preventing financially-dominant corporations from killing competition and turning the press into little more than a consumer good. Unless the value of independent journalistic voices are considered, a continued deterioration of the journalism the public consumes is inevitable. As such, the health of democracy requires us to fight against corporate consolidation actively.

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