



Social media versus journalism and democracy

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Among the many problems facing contemporary journalism, one stands out most in my mind: social media firms, especially Google and Facebook, have decimated the business model that provided journalism with most of its revenue. For many years, journalism thrived by delivering readers to advertisers who paid for their attention, on the expectation that this would translate into purchases of their goods and services. Today, Google controls about 40 percent of the digital advertising market in the United States and 44 percent worldwide, whereas Facebook takes in about 20 percent of the US market and 18 percent worldwide (eMarketer, 2017; Marketing Charts, 2017). These figures have been relatively steady for the past 4 years, meaning that two firms comfortably operate a duopoly over the most lucrative ad markets in the world. Meanwhile, newspapers continue to experience declines in their share of both print and online advertising, leading to cutbacks in support for journalism and outright closures of newspapers.

Google and Facebook are also having a profound impact on key elements of political life – including public opinion and elections. For all of their shortcomings, newspapers historically balanced commercial requirements against a set of news values that aspired to objectivity, fairness, and service to communities, along with ethical standards for reporters and editors. The fact that newspapers often fell short of maintaining this balance is not in question. However, the two leading social media companies – now the primary sources of information for much of the world's population – have no incentive to limit the drive for profit. As a result, Google search rankings and Facebook's 'newsfeed' are filled with material that bears little relationship to accuracy and truth, including racist, sexist, and other extremist content. As a Facebook vice-president put it in a leaked memo intended for employees:

Maybe someone dies in a terrorist attack coordinated on our tools. And still we connect people.

The ugly truth is that we believe in connecting people so deeply that anything that allows us to connect more people more often is **de facto** good. (Selk, 2018)

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The efficient delivery of clicks, attention, and massively detailed user information to advertisers, governs the duos' corporate practices, despite regular promises to change their ways; other social media firms follow suit.

The Facebook alliance with Cambridge Analytica made headlines, but it was not the only case of private companies using information gathered about subscribers that seriously violated reasonable privacy expectations and helped sway elections (most notably, the 2016 US presidential contest). The scandal brought down Cambridge Analytica in May 2018. But it remains the case that a journalism of fact, objectivity and ethical restraint stands little chance against this unbridled corporate assault on the digital infoscape.

Much has been made about journalism's failure to take advantage of the emerging digital world, missing opportunity after opportunity – until the power of information technology companies became so entrenched as to make it nearly impossible to do anything more than hope that Big Tech would make their journalism available to users. But there is little to be surprised about here: in the history of the communication industry, it is hard to find established companies capable of making the risky changes needed when massive technological change arrives. Western Union could not make the leap into telephony and American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) failed to dominate broadcasting. While some broadcasters made the jump from radio to television, they failed to take advantage of cable and satellite television. However, all of these industries – not just journalism – missed the arrival of the online world.

Nevertheless, these were not just missed opportunities and calcified business plans. Government regulation intended to foster innovation made it difficult for companies like AT&T to move into emerging industries. Indeed, what is most surprising about today's digital world is the complete reluctance of the US government to take any action that would impede the march of its leading companies to take near monopoly control over their respective domains. As a result, the Big Five (Apple, Google, Microsoft, Amazon and Facebook) are now the five richest companies in the world. Free market rhetoric aside, the US government was not reluctant in the past to apply its anti-trust powers and regulation when communications companies threatened to dominate markets.

Admittedly, it did not repeat the creation of a government-operated public utility – the United States Postal Service – that was written into the nation's constitution. Yet, the federal government did threaten Western Union when the firm abused its power, and made it difficult for the telegraph powerhouse to dominate telephony. The same government also limited AT&T's ability to extend its monopoly over the new technologies of broadcasting. Almost from the beginning, the broadcasting industry was subjected to regulation, anti-trust intervention, content regulation of both programming and advertising, and the requirement to demonstrate that it served the public interest. Subject to the oversight of regulatory agencies and the Department of Justice, the broadcasting system was generally viewed as a public trust – even as it grew more commercial. Indeed, the medium was considered so powerful, and the requirement to serve citizens so important, that public radio and television networks were established to ensure that trust. When new forms of broadcasting appeared, such as cable and satellite television, these too were subjected to government regulation and oversight.

One might reasonably expect that the tradition of regulation in the public interest would extend to the next wave of new technology that brought the Internet. But none was forthcoming, even while Democrats controlled the White House. As a result, by the end of the Obama administration, the Big Five – especially Facebook and Alphabet, parent to Google – dominated the US marketplace and extended their power internationally with few limitations (such as growing competition from China’s information technology sector). By 2018, Facebook, with its 2.3 billion users, was the largest distributor of news and information in history, despite lacking a proper newsroom.

It is hardly surprising that those who worried about the degree of control these companies exercise over journalism, politics, and democracy would look to a new wave of technology for relief. But that is not likely to be found in the systems constituting what I call the Next Internet. As I describe in *Becoming Digital* (Mosco, 2017), the convergence of cloud computing, big data analytics, and the Internet of Things, along with the growth of next generation (5G) telecommunications systems, significantly expands the capacity to gather, store, process and distribute information. The Next Internet is largely controlled by the Big Five tech firms and a handful of telecommunications providers. In the absence of major changes in governance, these companies will deepen their power, including their control over digital information and the algorithms that govern how information is turned into decision-making. Traditional journalism will find niches, but the capacity to shape the public conversation will remain in the hands of social media outlets with no incentive to pursue journalistic integrity.

Addressing the crisis in journalism and the threat to American democracy requires a strong plan to rein in the power of Big Tech, particularly Facebook and Google. There are numerous ways this can be accomplished, most of which have proven reasonably effective over the course of American history. These include strengthening and vigorously applying anti-trust laws, to roll back these companies’ capacity to use market power to threaten journalism and democracy. Google and Facebook arguably provide essential services in an online world, so they should be regulated as utilities, to make it more likely they will operate in the public interest. The implementation of strong privacy legislation is essential to limit the massive abuses that the Big Five have committed. The European Union General Data Protection Regulation – which imposes strict controls over the collection and dissemination of data for companies operating in the European Union (EU), and which punishes abuses severely – offers a good beginning.

It is also essential to return control over data and information to those who provide it – including individuals who make use of social media sites, and organizations that create the research and the stories vital to the preservation of democracy. It should be the right of users to withdraw information from social media sites and provide it to those of their choosing. Moreover, strict rules governing the uses and abuses of algorithms – such as those that filter searches through commercial imperatives – must be enacted, with a special focus on making them as transparent as possible. This should be integral to a general commitment to develop artificial intelligence for the common benefit of humanity. Finally, the data abuses committed by research firms and advertisers must be stopped through a combination of legislation and regulation.

These are not simple solutions, and they ought to be debated thoroughly and implemented with great care. But the most significant danger is that essential policies will be

either dismissed as too radical, postponed or watered down, on the expectation that technological solutions will provide the *deus ex machina*. These positions will only make more inevitable the continuing erosion of both journalism and what remains of democracy.

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