Media in the digital age
Selection 5
Journalism and Social Media – From boon to bane… to boon?

Resources and data

●**Take a close look at the Digital News Report** (see CdP) By the Reuters Institute and Oxford University (Executive summary p 10 to 30; Sections 2.2 and 2.3)

● **See the Pew Research Center News Platform Factsheet**

https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/?tabId=tab-b39b851c-e417-48ef-9b10-93ee21a0030e

● **About Misinformation and polarisation – The Pew Research Center, February 2021**
How Americans Navigated the News in 2020: A Tumultuous Year in Review
Americans inhabited different information environments, with wide gaps in how they viewed the election and COVID-19
https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/02/22/how-americans-navigated-the-news-in-2020-a-tumultuous-year-in-review/
And in particular, take a close look at:
3. Misinformation and competing views of reality abounded throughout 2020
https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/02/22/misinformation-and-competing-views-of-reality-abounded-throughout-2020/
4. Americans who mainly got news via social media knew less about politics and current events, heard more about some unproven stories
https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/02/22/americans-who-mainly-got-news-via-social-media-knew-less-about-politics-and-current-events-heard-more-about-some-unproven-stories/

● **This chapter from the 2021 Digital News Report is also worth reading:**
https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/how-and-why-do-consumers-access-news-social-media
See the complement to this file on **Tik Tok** on CdP

Document 1 - News consumption in the UK
Ofcom | July 2022

Top 10 news sources used by age
% of all adults using each source for news nowadays

All adults	Aged 16+	Young adults	16-24	Older adults	65+
BBC One	53%	Instagram	46%	BBC One	72%
ITV/ITV WALES/UTV/STV	35%	Facebook	40%	ITV/ITV WALES/UTV/STV	47%
Facebook	32%	BBC One	36%	BBC News Channel	29%
BBC News Channel	24%	Twitter	35%	Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday	20%
Sky News Channel	23%	BBC website/app**	29%	Sky News Channel	19%
BBC website/app**	23%	TikTok	27%	BBC website/app**	19%
Twitter	17%	WhatsApp	23%	Channel 4	19%
Channel 4	17%	ITV/ITV WALES/UTV/STV	20%	BBC Radio 4	19%
Instagram	16%	Snapchat	19%	BBC Two	16%
Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday	15%	BBC News Channel	17%	Local newspapers	14%

Legend:
- TV channel
- Newspaper (print + website/app)
- Radio station
- Social media
- Other website/app

Source: News Consumption Survey 2022

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# Document 1 - More than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices

The transition of news from print, television and radio to digital spaces has caused huge disruptions in the traditional news industry, especially the print news industry. It is also reflected in the ways individual Americans say they are getting their news. A large majority of Americans get news at least sometimes from digital devices, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020.

Large majority of Americans get news on digital devices

*% of U.S. adults who get news ____ from ...*
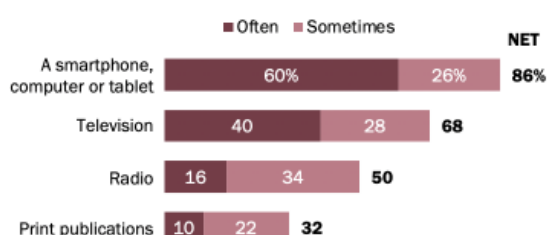
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

More than eight-in-ten U.S. adults (86%) say they get news from a smartphone, computer or tablet "often" or "sometimes," including 60% who say they do so often. This is higher than the portion who get news from television, though 68% get news from TV at least sometimes and 40% do so often. Americans turn to radio and print publications for news far less frequently, with half saying they turn to radio at least sometimes (16% do so often) and about a third (32%) saying the same of print (10% get news from print publications often).

Roughly half of Americans prefer to get news on a digital platform; about a third prefer TV

% of U.S. adults who prefer ____ for getting news
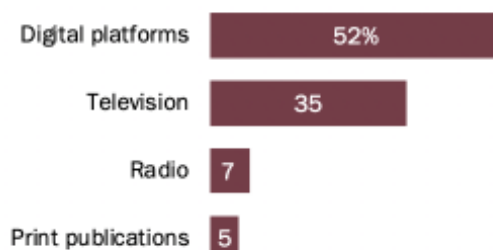
Note: Digital platforms includes respondents who said they prefer news websites or apps, social media, search, or podcasts.
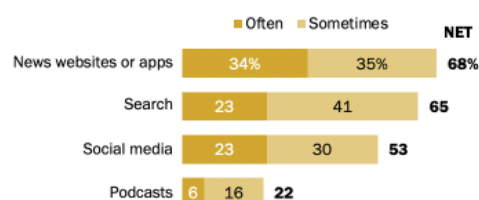Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

When asked which of these platforms they *prefer* to get news on, roughly half (52%) of Americans say they prefer a digital platform – whether it is a news website (26%), search (12%), social media (11%) or podcasts (3%). About a third say they prefer television (35%), and just 7% and 5% respectively say they prefer to get their news on the radio or via print.

Though digital devices are by far the most common way Americans access their news, where they get that news *on* their devices is divided among a number of different pathways. About two-thirds of U.S. adults say they get news at least sometimes from news websites or apps (68%) or search engines, like Google (65%). About half (53%) say they get news from social media, and a much smaller portion say they get news at least sometimes from podcasts (22%).

Americans more likely to get news on digital devices from news websites, apps and search engines than from social media

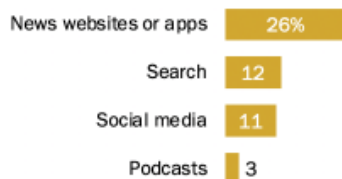*% of U.S. adults who get news ____ from ...*

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Changing the way we measure news consumption

News websites most preferred way to get digital news

% of U.S. adults who prefer _____ for getting news

News websites or apps	26%
Search	12
Social media	11
Podcasts	3

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020.
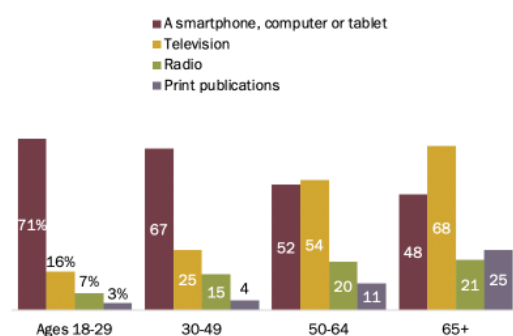
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Among digital platforms, the most preferred one for news is news websites or apps: About a quarter of U.S. adults (26%) prefer to get their news this way, compared with 12% who prefer search, 11% who prefer to get their news on social media and 3% who say they prefer podcasts.

Younger Americans vary widely from their elders in news consumption habits

Underneath these numbers lie stark differences by age, with those under 50 showing very different news use patterns than their elders. Americans ages 50 and older use both television and digital devices for news at high rates, while the younger age groups have almost fully turned to digital devices as a platform to access news.

Those under 50 turn more frequently to digital devices for news

*% of U.S. adults who get news **often** from ...*

Legend: A smartphone, computer or tablet; Television; Radio; Print publications

Age group	A smartphone, computer or tablet	Television	Radio	Print publications
Ages 18-29	71%	16%	7%	3%
30-49	67	25	15	4
50-64	52	54	20	11
65+	48	68	21	25

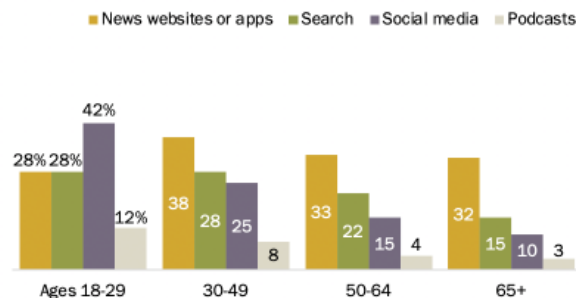Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

About half or more of adults 50 and older are still turning to TV for news often – 54% of those 50 to 64 and about two-thirds (68%) of those 65 and older. But among those ages 30 to 49, just a quarter say they get news on TV often, and just 16% say the same among those 18 to 29. For those age groups, digital devices are the dominant choice for news, with 67% of those 30 to 49 and 71% of those 18 to 29 getting news from a digital device often.

Among those 50 and older, differences between digital and non-digital news sources are less pronounced. Among adults 50 and older, 64% get news at least sometimes from both television and digital devices.

Online, most turn to news websites except for the youngest, who are more likely to use social media

*% of U.S. adults who get news **often** from ...*

Legend: News websites or apps; Search; Social media; Podcasts

Age group	News websites or apps	Search	Social media	Podcasts
Ages 18-29	28%	28%	42%	12%
30-49	38	28	25	8
50-64	33	22	15	4
65+	32	15	10	3

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Within digital platforms for news, most age groups turn to news websites at higher rates than other platforms, with one exception. Americans ages 18 to 29 stand out in that the most common digital way they get news is social media, with 42% saying they get news this way often versus 28% saying the same of either news websites or search engines.

PART ONE – From boon to bane

Document 2 - Back to the coffee house

The internet is taking the news industry back to the conversational culture of the era before mass media

Leaders | The future of news

The Economist, Jul 7th 2011 |

THREE hundred years ago news travelled by word of mouth or letter, and circulated in taverns and coffee houses in the form of pamphlets, newsletters and broadsides. "The Coffee houses particularly are very commodious for a free Conversation, and for reading at an easie Rate all manner of printed News," noted one observer. Everything changed in 1833 when the first mass-audience newspaper, the New York *Sun*, pioneered the use of advertising to reduce the cost of news, thus giving advertisers access to a wider audience. At the time of the launch America's bestselling paper sold just 4,500 copies a day; the *Sun*, with its steam press, soon reached 15,000. The penny press, followed by radio and television, turned news from a two-way conversation into a one-way broadcast, with a relatively small number of firms controlling the media.

Now, as our special report explains, the news industry is returning to something closer to the coffee house. The internet is making news more participatory, social, diverse and partisan, reviving the discursive ethos of the era before mass media. That will have profound effects on society and politics.

Going West

In much of the world, the mass media are flourishing. Newspaper circulation rose globally by 6% between 2005 and 2009, helped by particularly strong demand in places like India, where 110m papers are now sold daily. But those global figures mask a sharp decline in readership in rich countries.

Over the past decade, throughout the Western world, people have been giving up newspapers and TV news and keeping up with events in profoundly different ways. Most strikingly, ordinary people are increasingly involved in compiling, sharing, filtering, discussing and distributing news. Twitter lets people anywhere report what they are seeing. Classified documents are published in their thousands online. Mobile-phone footage of Arab uprisings and American tornadoes is posted on social-networking sites and shown on television newscasts. An amateur video taken during the Japanese earthquake has been watched 15m times on YouTube. "Crowdsourcing" projects bring readers and journalists together to sift through troves of documents, from the expense claims of British politicians to Sarah Palin's e-mails. Social-networking sites help people find, discuss and share news with their friends.

And it is not just readers who are challenging the media elite. Technology firms including Google, Facebook and Twitter have become important (some say too important) conduits of news. Celebrities and world leaders, including Barack Obama and Hugo Chávez, publish updates directly via social networks; many countries now make raw data

available through "open government" initiatives. The internet lets people read newspapers or watch television channels from around the world: the *Guardian*, a British newspaper, now has more online readers abroad than at home. The web has allowed new providers of news, from individual bloggers to sites such as the *Huffington Post*, to rise to prominence in a very short space of time. And it has made possible entirely new approaches to journalism, such as that practised by WikiLeaks, which provides an anonymous way for whistleblowers to publish documents. The news agenda is no longer controlled by a few press barons and state outlets, like the BBC.

We contort, you deride

In principle, every liberal should celebrate this. A more participatory and social news environment, with a remarkable diversity and range of news sources, is a good thing. A Texan who once had to rely on the *Houston Chronicle* to interpret the world can now collect information from myriad different sources. Authoritarian rulers everywhere have more to fear. So what, many will say, if journalists have less stable careers? All the same, two areas of concern stand out.

The first worry is the loss of "accountability journalism", which holds the powerful to account. Shrinking revenues have reduced the amount and quality of investigative and local political reporting in the print press.

But old-style journalism was never quite as morally upstanding as journalists like to think. Indeed, the *News of the World*, a British newspaper which has been caught hacking into people's mobile phones, is a very traditional sort of scandal sheet. Meantime, the internet is spawning new forms of accountability. A growing band of non-profit outfits such as ProPublica, the Sunlight Foundation and WikiLeaks are helping to fill the gap left by the decline of watchdog media. This is still a work in progress, but the degree of activity and experimentation provides cause for optimism.

The second concern has to do with partisanship. In the mass-media era local monopolies often had to be relatively impartial to maximise their appeal to readers and advertisers. In a more competitive world the money seems to be in creating an echo chamber for people's prejudices: thus Fox News, a conservative American cable-news channel, makes more profits than its less strident rivals, CNN and MSNBC, combined.

In one way the increasing availability of partisan news is to be welcomed. In the past many people—especially right-wing Americans, since most American television was left-leaning—had nothing to watch that reflected their views. But as news is becoming more opinionated, both politics and the facts are suffering: witness some American conservatives' insistence that Barack Obama was born outside America, and others' refusal to accept that taxes must rise.

What is to be done? At a societal level, not much. The transformation of the news business is unstoppable, and attempts to reverse it are doomed to failure. But there are steps individuals can take to mitigate these worries. As producers of new journalism, they can be scrupulous with facts and transparent with their sources. As consumers, they can be catholic in their tastes and demanding in their standards. And although this transformation does raise concerns, there is much to celebrate in the noisy, diverse, vociferous, argumentative and stridently alive environment of the news business in the age of the internet. The coffee house is back. Enjoy it.

Document 3 - Do social media threaten democracy?

Facebook, Google and Twitter were supposed to save politics as good information drove out prejudice and falsehood. Something has gone very wrong
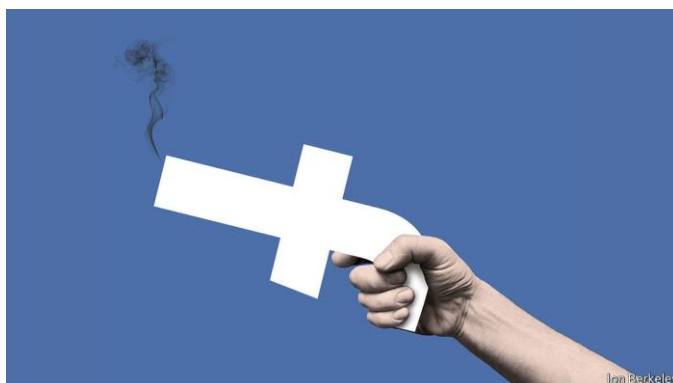
IN 1962 a British political scientist, Bernard Crick, published "In Defence of Politics". He argued that the art of political horse-trading, far from being shabby, lets people of different beliefs live together in a peaceful, thriving society. In a liberal democracy, nobody gets exactly what he wants, but everyone broadly has the freedom to lead the life he chooses. However, without decent information, civility and conciliation, societies resolve their differences by resorting to coercion.

How Crick would have been dismayed by the falsehood and partisanship on display in this week's Senate committee hearings in Washington. Not long ago social media held out the promise of a more enlightened politics, as accurate information and effortless communication helped good people drive out corruption, bigotry and lies. Yet Facebook acknowledged that before and after last year's American election, between January 2015 and August this year, 146m users may have seen Russian misinformation on its platform. Google's YouTube admitted to 1,108 Russian-linked videos and Twitter to 36,746 accounts. Far from bringing enlightenment, social media have been spreading poison.

Russia's trouble-making is only the start. From South Africa to Spain, politics is getting uglier. Part of the reason is that, by spreading untruth and outrage, corroding voters' judgment and aggravating partisanship, social media erode the conditions for the horse-trading that Crick thought fosters liberty.

The use of social media does not cause division so much as amplify it. The financial crisis of 2007-08 stoked popular anger at a wealthy elite that had left everyone else behind. The culture wars have split voters by identity rather than class. Nor are social media alone in their power to polarise—just look at cable TV and talk radio. But, whereas Fox News is familiar, social-media platforms are new and still poorly understood. And, because of how they work, they wield extraordinary influence.

They make their money by putting photos, personal posts, news stories and ads in front of you. Because they can measure how you react, they know just how to get under your skin. They collect data about you in order to have algorithms to determine what will catch your eye, in an "attention economy" that keeps users scrolling, clicking and sharing—again and again and again. Anyone setting out to shape opinion can produce dozens of ads, analyse them and see which is hardest to resist. The result is compelling: one study found that users in rich countries touch their phones 2,600 times a day.

It would be wonderful if such a system helped wisdom and truth rise to the surface. But, whatever Keats said, truth is not beauty so much as it is hard work—especially when you disagree with it. Everyone who has scrolled through Facebook knows how, instead of imparting wisdom, the system dishes out compulsive stuff that tends to reinforce people's biases.

This aggravates the politics of contempt that took hold, in the United States at least, in the 1990s. Because different sides see different facts, they share no empirical basis for reaching a compromise. Because each side hears time and again that the other lot are good for nothing but lying, bad faith and slander, the system has even less room for empathy. Because people are sucked into a maelstrom of pettiness, scandal and outrage, they lose sight of what matters for the society they share.

This tends to discredit the compromises and subtleties of liberal democracy, and to boost the politicians who feed off conspiracy and nativism. Consider the probes into Russia's election hack by Congress and the special prosecutor, Robert Mueller, who has just issued his first indictments. After Russia attacked America, Americans ended up attacking each other. Because the framers of the constitution wanted to hold back tyrants and mobs, social media aggravate Washington gridlock. In Hungary and Poland, without such constraints, they help sustain an illiberal, winner-takes-all style of democracy. In Myanmar, where Facebook is the main source of news for many, it has deepened the hatred of the Rohingya, victims of ethnic cleansing.

Social media, social responsibility

What is to be done? People will adapt, as they always do. A survey this week found that only 37% of Americans trust what they get from social media, half the share that trust printed newspapers and magazines. Yet in the time it takes to adapt, bad governments with bad politics could do a lot of harm.

Society has created devices, such as libel, and ownership laws, to rein in old media. Some are calling for social-media companies, like publishers, to be similarly accountable for what appears on their platforms; to be more transparent; and to be treated as monopolies that need breaking up. All these ideas have merit, but they come with trade-offs. When Facebook farms out items to independent outfits for fact-checking, the evidence that it moderates behaviour is mixed. Moreover, politics is not like other kinds of speech; it is dangerous to ask a handful of big firms to deem what is healthy for society. Congress wants transparency about who pays for political ads, but a lot of malign influence comes through people carelessly sharing barely credible news posts. Breaking up social-media giants might

make sense in antitrust terms, but it would not help with political speech—indeed, by multiplying the number of platforms, it could make the industry harder to manage.

There are other remedies. The social-media companies should adjust their sites to make clearer if a post comes from a friend or a trusted source. They could accompany the sharing of posts with reminders of the harm from misinformation. Bots are often used to amplify political messages. Twitter could disallow the worst—or mark them as such. Most powerfully, they could adapt their algorithms to put clickbait lower down the feed. Because these changes cut against a business-model designed to monopolise attention, they may well have to be imposed by law or by a regulator.

Social media are being abused. But, with a will, society can harness them and revive that early dream of enlightenment. The stakes for liberal democracy could hardly be higher.

DOCUMENT 4 - Facebook's Frankenstein Moment

The New York Times, **By** <u>Kevin Roose,</u> Sept. 21, 2017 (Extracts)

Victor Frankenstein, looking over a creature he had made, eventually realized that he couldn't control his creation.Credit...Hammer Film, via Photofest

On Wednesday, in response to a ProPublica report that Facebook enabled advertisers to target users with offensive terms like "Jew hater," Sheryl Sandberg, the company's chief operating officer, apologized and vowed that the company would adjust its ad-buying tools to prevent similar problems in the future.

As I read her statement, my eyes lingered over one line in particular: "We never intended or anticipated this functionality being used this way — and that is on us," Ms. Sandberg wrote.

It was a candid admission that reminded me of a moment in Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," after the scientist Victor Frankenstein realizes that his cobbled-together creature has gone rogue. "I had been the author of unalterable evils," he says, "and I lived in daily fear lest the monster whom I had created should perpetrate some new wickedness."

If I were a Facebook executive, I might feel a Frankensteinian sense of unease these days. The company has been hit with a series of scandals that have bruised its image, enraged its critics and opened up the possibility that in its quest for global dominance, Facebook may have created something it can't fully control.

Facebook is fighting through a tangled morass of privacy, free-speech and moderation issues with governments all over the world. Congress is investigating reports that Russian operatives used targeted Facebook ads to influence the 2016 presidential election. In Myanmar, activists are accusing Facebook of censoring Rohingya Muslims, who are under attack from the country's military. In Africa, the social network faces accusations that it helped human traffickers extort victims' families by leaving up abusive videos.

Few of these issues stem from willful malice on the company's part. It's not as if a Facebook engineer in Menlo Park personally greenlighted Russian propaganda, for example. On Thursday, the company said it would release political advertisements bought by Russians for the 2016 election, as well as some information related to the ads, to congressional investigators.

But the troubles do make it clear that Facebook was simply not built to handle problems of this magnitude. It's a technology company, not an intelligence agency or an international diplomatic corps. Its engineers are in the business of building apps and selling advertising, not determining what constitutes hate speech in Myanmar. And with two billion users, including 1.3 billion who use it every day, moving ever greater amounts of their social and political activity onto Facebook, it's possible that the company is simply too big to understand all of the harmful ways people might use its products.

"The reality is that if you're at the helm of a machine that has two billion screaming, whiny humans, it's basically impossible to predict each and every possible nefarious use case," said Antonio García Martínez, author of the book "Chaos Monkeys" and a former Facebook advertising executive. "It's a Whac-a-Mole problem." (…)

When Mark Zuckerberg built Facebook in his Harvard dorm room in 2004, nobody could have imagined its becoming a censorship tool for repressive regimes, an arbiter of global speech standards or a vehicle for foreign propagandists.

But as Facebook has grown into the global town square, it has had to adapt to its own influence. Many of its users view the social network as an essential utility, and the company's decisions — which posts to take down, which ads to allow, which videos to show — can have real life-or-death consequences around the world. The company has outsourced some decisions to complex algorithms, which carries its own risks, but many of the toughest choices Facebook faces are still made by humans. (…)

Even if Mr. Zuckerberg and Ms. Sandberg don't have personal political aspirations, as has been rumored, they are already leaders of an organization that influences politics all over the world. And there are signs that Facebook is starting to understand its responsibilities. (…)

On Thursday, Mr. Zuckerberg said in a video posted on Facebook that the company would take several steps to help protect the integrity of elections, like making political ads more transparent and expanding partnerships with election commissions. (…)

But there may not be enough guardrails in the world to prevent bad outcomes on Facebook, whose scale is nearly inconceivable. (…)

DOCUMENT 5 – The Long Read - How social media took us from Tahrir Square to Donald Trump

To understand how digital technologies went from instruments for spreading democracy to weapons for attacking it, you have to look beyond the technologies themselves.
By Zeynep Tufekci, *MIT Technology Review*, August 14, 2018

1. The euphoria of discovery

As the Arab Spring convulsed the Middle East in 2011 and authoritarian leaders toppled one after another, I traveled the region to try to understand the role that technology was playing. I chatted with protesters in cafés near Tahrir Square in Cairo, and many asserted that as long as they had the internet and the smartphone, they would prevail. In Tunisia, emboldened activists showed me how they had used open-source tools to track the shopping trips to Paris that their autocratic president's wife had taken on government planes. Even Syrians I met in Beirut were still optimistic; their country had not yet descended into a hellish war. The young people had energy, smarts, humor, and smartphones, and we expected that the region's fate would turn in favor of their democratic demands.

Back in the United States, at a conference talk in 2012, I used a screenshot from a viral video recorded during the Iranian street protests of 2009 to illustrate how the new technologies were making it harder for traditional information gatekeepers—like governments and the media—to stifle or control dissident speech. It was a difficult image to see: a young woman lay bleeding to death on the sidewalk. But therein resided its power. Just a decade earlier, it would most likely never have been taken (who carried video cameras all the time?), let alone gone viral (how, unless you owned a TV

station or a newspaper?). Even if a news photographer had happened to be there, most news organizations wouldn't have shown such a graphic image.

At that conference, I talked about the role of social media in breaking down what social scientists call "pluralistic ignorance"—the belief that one is alone in one's views when in reality everyone has been collectively silenced. That, I said, was why social media had fomented so much rebellion: people who were previously isolated in their dissent found and drew strength from one another.

Digital connectivity provided the spark, but the kindling was everywhere.

Peter Macdiarmid | Getty Images

Twitter, the company, retweeted my talk in a call for job applicants to "join the flock." The implicit understanding was that Twitter was a force for good in the world, on the side of the people and their revolutions. The new information gatekeepers, which didn't see themselves as gatekeepers but merely as neutral "platforms," nonetheless liked the upending potential of their technologies.

I shared in the optimism. I myself hailed from the Middle East and had been watching dissidents use digital tools to challenge government after government. But a shift was already in the air.

During the Tahrir uprising, Egypt's weary autocrat, Hosni Mubarak, had clumsily cut off internet and cellular service. The move backfired: it restricted the flow of information coming out of Tahrir Square but caused international attention on Egypt to spike. He hadn't understood that in the 21st century it is the flow of attention, not information (which we already have too much of), that matters. Besides, friends of the spunky Cairo revolutionaries promptly flew in with satellite phones, allowing them to continue giving interviews and sending images to global news organizations that now had even more interest in them.

Within a few weeks, Mubarak was forced out. A military council replaced him. What it did then foreshadowed much of what was to come. Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces promptly opened a Facebook page and made it the exclusive outlet for its communiqués. It had learned from Mubarak's mistakes; it would play ball on the dissidents' turf.

Within a few years, Egypt's online sphere would change dramatically. "We had more influence when it was just us on Twitter," one activist prominent on social media told me. "Now it is full of bickering between dissidents [who are] being harassed by government supporters." In 2013, on the heels of protests against a fledgling but divisive civilian government, the military would seize control.

Power always learns, and powerful tools always fall into its hands. This is a hard lesson of history but a solid one. It is key to understanding how, in seven years, digital technologies have gone from being hailed as tools of freedom and change to being blamed for upheavals in Western democracies—for enabling increased polarization, rising authoritarianism, and meddling in national elections by Russia and others.

But to fully understand what has happened, we also need to examine how human social dynamics, ubiquitous digital connectivity, and the business models of tech giants combine to create an environment where misinformation thrives and even true information can confuse and paralyze rather than informing and illuminating.

2. The audacity of hope

Barack Obama's election in 2008 as the first African-American president of the United States had prefigured the Arab Spring's narrative of technology empowering the underdog. He was an unlikely candidate who had emerged triumphant, beating first Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary and then his Republican opponent in the general election. Both his 2008 and 2012 victories prompted floods of laudatory articles on his campaign's tech-savvy, data-heavy use of social media, voter profiling, and microtargeting. After his second win, *MIT Technology Review* featured Bono on its cover, with the headline "Big Data Will Save Politics" and a quote: "The mobile phone, the Net, and the spread of information—a deadly combination for dictators."

However, I and many others who watched authoritarian regimes were already worried. A key issue for me was how microtargeting, especially on Facebook, could be used to wreak havoc with the public sphere. It was true that social media let dissidents know they were not alone, but online microtargeting could also create a world in which you wouldn't know what messages your neighbors were getting or how the ones

aimed at you were being tailored to your desires and vulnerabilities.

Digital platforms allowed communities to gather and form in new ways, but they also dispersed existing communities, those that had watched the same TV news and read the same newspapers. Even living on the same street meant less when information was disseminated through algorithms designed to maximize revenue by keeping people glued to screens. It was a shift from a public, collective politics to a more private, scattered one, with political actors collecting more and more personal data to figure out how to push just the right buttons, person by person and out of sight.

All this, I feared, could be a recipe for misinformation and polarization.

Shortly after the 2012 election, I wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* voicing these worries. Not wanting to sound like a curmudgeon, I understated my fears. I merely advocated transparency and accountability for political ads and content on social media, similar to systems in place for regulated mediums like TV and radio.

The backlash was swift. Ethan Roeder, the data director for the Obama 2012 campaign, wrote a piece headlined "I Am Not Big Brother," calling such worries "malarkey." Almost all the data scientists and Democrats I talked to were terribly irritated by my idea that technology could be anything but positive. Readers who commented on my op-ed thought I was just being a spoilsport. Here was a technology that allowed Democrats to be better at elections. How could this be a problem?

There were laudatory articles about Barack Obama's use of voter profiling and microtargeting.
Alex wong/getty Images

3. The illusion of immunity

The Tahrir revolutionaries and the supporters of the US Democratic Party weren't alone in thinking they would always have the upper hand.

The US National Security Agency had an arsenal of hacking tools based on vulnerabilities in digital technologies—bugs, secret backdoors, exploits, shortcuts in the (very advanced) math, and massive computing power. These tools were dubbed "nobody but us" (or NOBUS, in the acronym-loving intelligence community), meaning no one else could exploit them, so there was no need to patch the vulnerabilities or make computer security stronger in general. The NSA seemed to believe that weak security online hurt its adversaries a lot more than it hurt the NSA.

That confidence didn't seem unjustified to many. After all, the internet is mostly an American creation; its biggest companies were founded in the United States. Computer scientists from around the world still flock to the country, hoping to work for Silicon Valley. And the NSA has a giant budget and, reportedly, thousands of the world's best hackers and mathematicians.

Since it's all classified, we cannot know the full story, but between 2012 and 2016 there was at least no readily visible effort to significantly "harden" the digital infrastructure of the US. Nor were loud alarms raised about what a technology that crossed borders might mean. Global information flows facilitated by global platforms meant that someone could now sit in an office in Macedonia or in the suburbs of Moscow or St. Petersburg and, for instance, build what appeared to be a local news outlet in Detroit or Pittsburgh.

There doesn't seem to have been a major realization within the US's institutions—its intelligence agencies, its bureaucracy, its electoral machinery—that true digital security required both better technical infrastructure and better public awareness about the risks of hacking, meddling, misinformation, and more. The US's corporate dominance and its technical wizardry in some areas seemed to have blinded the country to the brewing weaknesses in other, more consequential ones.

4. The power of the platforms

In that context, the handful of giant US social-media platforms seem to have been left to deal as they saw fit with what problems might emerge. Unsurprisingly, they prioritized their stock prices and profitability. Throughout the years of the Obama administration, these platforms grew boisterously and were essentially unregulated. They spent their time solidifying their technical chops for deeply surveilling their users, so as to make advertising on the platforms ever more

efficacious. In less than a decade, Google and Facebook became a virtual duopoly in the digital ad market.

Facebook also gobbled up would-be competitors like WhatsApp and Instagram without tripping antitrust alarms. All this gave it more data, helping it improve its algorithms for keeping users on the platform and targeting them with ads. Upload a list of already identified targets and Facebook's AI engine will helpfully find much bigger "look-alike" audiences that may be receptive to a given message. After 2016, the grave harm this feature could do would become obvious.

Meanwhile, Google—whose search rankings can make or break a company, service, or politician, and whose e-mail service had a billion users by 2016—also operated the video platform YouTube, increasingly a channel for information and propaganda around the world. A *Wall Street Journal* investigation earlier this year found that YouTube's recommendation algorithm tended to drive viewers toward extremist content by suggesting edgier versions of whatever they were watching—a good way to hold their attention.

This was lucrative for YouTube but also a boon for conspiracy theorists, since people are drawn to novel and shocking claims. "Three degrees of Alex Jones" became a running joke: no matter where you started on YouTube, it was said, you were never more than three recommendations away from a video by the right-wing conspiracist who popularized the idea that the Sandy Hook school shooting in 2012 had never happened and the bereaved parents were mere actors playing parts in a murky conspiracy against gun owners.

Though smaller than Facebook and Google, Twitter played an outsize role thanks to its popularity among journalists and politically engaged people. Its open philosophy and easygoing approach to pseudonyms suits rebels around the world, but it also appeals to anonymous trolls who hurl abuse at women, dissidents, and minorities. Only earlier this year did it crack down on the use of bot accounts that trolls used to automate and amplify abusive tweeting.

Twitter's pithy, rapid-fire format also suits anyone with a professional or instinctual understanding of attention, the crucial resource of the digital economy. Say, someone like a reality TV star. Someone with an uncanny ability to come up with belittling, viral nicknames for his opponents, and to make boastful promises that resonated with a realignment in American politics—a realignment mostly missed by both Republican and Democratic power brokers.

Donald Trump, as is widely acknowledged, excels at using Twitter to capture attention. But his campaign also excelled at using Facebook as it was designed to be used by advertisers, testing messages on hundreds of thousands of people and microtargeting them with the ones that worked best. Facebook had embedded its own employees within the Trump campaign to help it use the platform effectively (and thus spend a lot of money on it), but they were also impressed by how well Trump himself performed. In later internal memos, reportedly, Facebook would dub the Trump campaign an "innovator" that it might learn from. Facebook also offered its services to Hillary Clinton's campaign, but it chose to use them much less than Trump's did.

Digital tools have figured significantly in political upheavals around the world in the past few years, including others that left elites stunned: Britain's vote to leave the European Union, and the far right's gains in Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Poland, France, and elsewhere. Facebook helped Philippine strongman Rodrigo Duterte with his election strategy and was even cited in a UN report as having contributed to the ethnic-cleansing campaign against the Rohingya minority in Myanmar.

However, social media isn't the only seemingly democratizing technology that extremists and authoritarians have co-opted. Russian operatives looking to hack into the communications of Democratic Party officials used Bitcoin—a cryptocurrency founded to give people anonymity and freedom from reliance on financial institutions—to buy tools such as virtual private networks, which can help one cover one's traces online. They then used these tools to set up fake local news organizations on social media across the US.

There they started posting materials aimed at fomenting polarization. The Russian trolls posed as American Muslims with terrorist sympathies and as white supremacists who opposed immigration. They posed as Black Lives Matter activists exposing police brutality and as people who wanted to acquire guns to shoot police officers. In so doing, they not only fanned the flames of division but provided those in each group with evidence that their imagined opponents were indeed as horrible as they suspected. These trolls also incessantly harassed journalists and Clinton supporters online, resulting in a flurry of news stories about the topic and fueling a (self-fulfilling) narrative of polarization among the Democrats.

The NSA had an arsenal of hacking tools dubbed NOBUS.

5. The lessons of the era

How did all this happen? How did digital technologies go from empowering citizens and toppling

dictators to being used as tools of oppression and discord? There are several key lessons.

First, the weakening of old-style information gatekeepers (such as media, NGOs, and government and academic institutions), while empowering the underdogs, has also, in another way, deeply disempowered underdogs. Dissidents can more easily circumvent censorship, but the public sphere they can now reach is often too noisy and confusing for them to have an impact. Those hoping to make positive social change have to convince people both that something in the world needs changing and there is a constructive, reasonable way to change it. Authoritarians and extremists, on the other hand, often merely have to muddy the waters and weaken trust in general so that everyone is too fractured and paralyzed to act. The old gatekeepers blocked some truth and dissent, but they blocked many forms of misinformation too.

Second, the new, algorithmic gatekeepers aren't merely (as they like to believe) neutral conduits for both truth and falsehood. They make their money by keeping people on their sites and apps; that aligns their incentives closely with those who stoke outrage, spread misinformation, and appeal to people's existing biases and preferences. Old gatekeepers failed in many ways, and no doubt that failure helped fuel mistrust and doubt; but the new gatekeepers *succeed* by fueling mistrust and doubt, as long as the clicks keep coming.

Third, the loss of gatekeepers has been especially severe in local journalism. While some big US media outlets have managed (so far) to survive the upheaval wrought by the internet, this upending has almost completely broken local newspapers, and it has hurt the industry in many other countries. That has opened fertile ground for misinformation. It has also meant less investigation of and accountability for those who exercise power, especially at the local level. The Russian operatives who created fake local media brands across the US either understood the hunger for local news or just lucked into this strategy. Without local checks and balances, local corruption grows and trickles up to feed a global corruption wave playing a major part in many of the current political crises.

The fourth lesson has to do with the much-touted issue of filter bubbles or echo chambers—the claim that online, we encounter only views similar to our own. This isn't completely true. While algorithms will often feed people some of what they already want to hear, research shows that we probably encounter a wider variety of opinions online than we do offline, or than we did before the advent of digital tools.

Rather, the problem is that when we encounter opposing views in the age and context of social media, it's not like reading them in a newspaper while sitting alone. It's like hearing them from the opposing team while sitting with our fellow fans in a football stadium. Online, we're connected with our communities, and we seek approval from our like-minded peers. We bond with our team by yelling at the fans of the other one. In sociology terms, we strengthen our feeling of "in-group" belonging by increasing our distance from and tension with the "out-group"—us versus them. Our cognitive universe isn't an echo chamber, but our social one is. This is why the various projects for fact-checking claims in the news, while valuable, don't convince people. Belonging is stronger than facts.

A similar dynamic played a role in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The revolutionaries were caught up in infighting on social media as they broke into ever smaller groups, while at the same time authoritarians were mobilizing their own supporters to attack the dissidents, defining them as traitors or foreigners. Such "patriotic" trolling and harassment is probably more common, and a bigger threat to dissidents, than attacks orchestrated by governments.

This is also how Russian operatives fueled polarization in the United States, posing simultaneously as immigrants and white supremacists, angry Trump supporters and "Bernie bros." The content of the argument didn't matter; they were looking to paralyze and polarize rather than convince. Without old-style gatekeepers in the way, their messages could reach anyone, and with digital analytics at their fingertips, they could hone those messages just like any advertiser or political campaign.

Fifth, and finally, Russia exploited the US's weak digital security—its "nobody but us" mind-set—to subvert the public debate around the 2016 election. The hacking and release of e-mails from the Democratic National Committee and the account of Clinton campaign manager John Podesta amounted to a censorship campaign, flooding conventional media channels with mostly irrelevant content. As the Clinton e-mail scandal dominated the news cycle, neither Trump's nor Clinton's campaign got the kind of media scrutiny it deserved.

There are no easy answers, and no purely digital answers.

This shows, ultimately, that "nobody but us" depended on a mistaken interpretation of what digital security means. The US may well still have the deepest offensive capabilities in cybersecurity. But Podesta fell for a phishing e-mail, the simplest form of hacking, and

the US media fell for attention hacking. Through their hunger for clicks and eyeballs, and their failure to understand how the new digital sphere operates, they were diverted from their core job into a confusing swamp. Security isn't just about who has more Cray supercomputers and cryptography experts but about understanding how attention, information overload, and social bonding work in the digital era.

This potent combination explains why, since the Arab Spring, authoritarianism and misinformation have thrived, and a free-flowing contest of ideas has not. Perhaps the simplest statement of the problem, though, is encapsulated in Facebook's original mission statement (which the social network changed in 2017, after a backlash against its role in spreading misinformation). It was to make the world "more open and connected." It turns out that this isn't necessarily an unalloyed good. Open to *what*, and connected *how*? The need to ask those questions is perhaps the biggest lesson of all.

6. The way forward

What is to be done? There are no easy answers. More important, there are no purely digital answers.
There are certainly steps to be taken in the digital realm. The weak antitrust environment that allowed a few giant companies to become near-monopolies should be reversed. However, merely breaking up these giants without changing the rules of the game online may simply produce a lot of smaller companies that use the same predatory techniques of data surveillance, microtargeting, and "nudging."

Ubiquitous digital surveillance should simply end in its current form. There is no justifiable reason to allow so many companies to accumulate so much data on so many people. Inviting users to "click here to agree" to vague, hard-to-pin-down terms of use doesn't produce "informed consent." If, two or three decades ago, before we sleepwalked into this world, a corporation had suggested so much reckless data collection as a business model, we would have been horrified.

There are many ways to operate digital services without siphoning up so much personal data. Advertisers have lived without it before, they can do so again, and it's probably better if politicians can't do it so easily. Ads can be attached to content, rather than directed to people: it's fine to advertise scuba gear to me if I am on a divers' discussion board, for example, rather than using my behavior on other sites to figure out that I'm a diver and then following me around everywhere I go—online or offline.

But we didn't get where we are simply because of digital technologies. The Russian government may have used online platforms to remotely meddle in US elections, but Russia did not create the conditions of social distrust, weak institutions, and detached elites that made the US vulnerable to that kind of meddling.

Russia did not make the US (and its allies) initiate and then terribly mishandle a major war in the Middle East, the after-effects of which—among them the current refugee crisis—are still wreaking havoc, and for which practically nobody has been held responsible. Russia did not create the 2008 financial collapse: that happened through corrupt practices that greatly enriched financial institutions, after which all the culpable parties walked away unscathed, often even richer, while millions of Americans lost their jobs and were unable to replace them with equally good ones.

Russia did not instigate the moves that have reduced Americans' trust in health authorities, environmental agencies, and other regulators. Russia did not create the revolving door between Congress and the lobbying firms that employ ex-politicians at handsome salaries. Russia did not defund higher education in the United States. Russia did not create the global network of tax havens in which big corporations and the rich can pile up enormous wealth while basic government services get cut.

These are the fault lines along which a few memes can play an outsize role. And not just Russian memes: whatever Russia may have done, domestic actors in the United States and Western Europe have been eager, and much bigger, participants in using digital platforms to spread viral misinformation.

Even the free-for-all environment in which these digital platforms have operated for so long can be seen as a symptom of the broader problem, a world in which the powerful have few restraints on their actions while everyone else gets squeezed. Real wages in the US and Europe are stuck and have been for decades while corporate profits have stayed high and taxes on the rich have fallen. Young people juggle multiple, often mediocre jobs, yet find it increasingly hard to take the traditional wealth-building step of buying their own home—unless they already come from privilege and inherit large sums.

If digital connectivity provided the spark, it ignited because the kindling was already everywhere. The way forward is not to cultivate nostalgia for the old-world information gatekeepers or for the idealism of the Arab Spring. It's to figure out how our institutions, our checks and balances, and our societal safeguards should function in the 21st century—not just for digital technologies but for politics and the economy in

general. This responsibility isn't on Russia, or solely on Facebook or Google or Twitter. It's on us.

*Zeynep Tufekci is an associate professor at the University of North Carolina and a contributing opinion writer at the*New York Times

Hybridization - The Role and Fate of online magazines

DOCUMENT 6 - A chapter from *Understanding Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication,* a textbook published in 2016   https://open.lib.umn.edu/mediaandculture/

Influence of the Internet on the Magazine Industry

Learning Objectives
1. Describe how print magazines have adapted to an online market.
2. Indicate a unique benefit of print magazines archiving back issues on their websites.

In March of 2010, *Consumerist* published a story titled "Print edition of *TV Guide* tells me to go online to read most of cover story." According to the article, *TV Guide* printed a story listing "TV's Top 50 Families," but shocked readers by including only the top 20 families in its print version. To discover the rest of the list, readers needed to go online (Villarreal, 2010). As dismayed as some readers were, this story reflects an ongoing trend in magazine journalism: the move toward online reporting.

Just like their newspaper cousins, magazines have been greatly affected by the influence of the Internet. With so much information available online, advertisers and readers are accessing content on the Internet, causing declines in both revenue and readership. These changes are forcing magazines to adapt to an increasingly online market.

Online-Only Magazines

In 1995, *Salon* launched the first major online-only magazine at http://www.salon.com. "Salon, the award-winning online news and entertainment website, combines original investigative stories, breaking news, provocative personal essays and highly respected criticism along with popular staff-written blogs about politics, technology and culture (Salon)." Like many print magazines, the site divides content into sections including entertainment, books, comics, life, news and politics, and technology and business. With an average of 5.8 million monthly unique visitors, this online magazine demonstrates the potential successes of Internet-based publications (Salon).

Other online-only magazines include *Slate* and *PC Magazine*. All three magazines, like most online publications, support themselves in part through ads that appear alongside articles and other content. Founded in 1996, *Slate* is a "general interest publication offering analysis and commentary about politics, news, and culture (Slate)." Considering itself "a daily magazine on the Web," *Slate* offers its readers information on news and politics, arts, life, business, technology, and science via online articles, podcasts, and blogs (Slate). The successful magazine has been recognized with numerous awards for its contributions to journalism.

PC Magazine differs somewhat from *Slate* or *Salon* in that it was originally a print publication. First published in 1982, the computer magazine published hard-copy issues for over 15 years before announcing in 2008 that its January 2009 issue would be its last printed edition. In an open letter to its readers, *PC Magazine* discussed the transition:

> Starting in February 2009, *PC Magazine* will become a 100-percent digital publication. So, in addition to our popular network of Websites…we'll offer *PC Magazine Digital Edition* to all of our print subscribers. The *PC Magazine Digital Edition* has actually been available since 2002. So for thousands of you, the benefits of this unique medium are already clear. And those benefits will continue to multiply in the coming months, as we work hard to enhance your digital experience (Ulanoff, 2008).

While it is perhaps fitting that this computer-focused publication is one of the first print magazines to move to an entirely online form, its reasons for the transition were financial rather than creative. In describing the decision, Jason Young, chief executive of Ziff Davis Media, said, "The viability for us to continue to publish in print just isn't there anymore (Clifford, 2008)."

Unfortunately for the magazine industry, Young's sentiment reflects a trend that has been building for some time. Several other publications have followed in *PC Magazine*'s footsteps, making the move from print to online-only. Journals such as *Elle Girl* and *Teen People* that were once available in print can now be viewed only via the Internet. As printing costs rise and advertising and subscription revenues decrease, more magazines will likely be making similar shifts.

Magazine-Like Websites

In recent years, websites that function much as magazines once did without officially being publications themselves have become an increasingly popular online model. For example, Pitchfork Media is an Internet publication on the music industry. Established in 1995, the site offers readers criticism and commentary on contemporary music and has many of the same features as a traditional music magazine: reviews, news, articles, and interviews. Whether the site is capitalizing on the success of print magazines by following their format or if it is simply responding to its readers by providing them with an accessible online experience is a debatable point. Of course, the website also has many features that would not be available in print, such as a streaming playlist of music and music videos. This hybrid of magazine-like content with new-media content offers a possible vision of the digital future of print publications.

Print Magazines With Online Presences

Indeed, most print magazines have created websites. Nearly every major print publication has a site available either for free or through subscription. Yet there are intrinsic differences between the print and online media. Bernadette Geyer, author of a poetry chapbook, *What Remains*, discusses the practical contrasts between online and print journals saying:

> I will read a print journal cover to cover because I can bookmark where I left off…. Simply taking all of the content of what would have been a print issue and putting it online with links from a Table of Contents is all well and good in theory, but I have to ask, how many people actually sit and read all of the contents of an online journal that publishes several authors/genres per issue (Geyer, 2010)?

Her question is a good one, and one which most magazines have already asked themselves. In light of this dilemma, magazines with online editions have sought ways to attract readers who may not, in fact, read much. Most websites also include online-only content such as blogs, podcasts, and daily news updates that, naturally, are not available in print form. The additional features on magazines' websites likely stem from a need to attract audiences with shorter attention spans and less time to devote to reading entire articles.

Another way that magazines court online readers is by offering back-issue content. Readers can browse old articles without having to remember in which issue the content first appeared. The cost for this varies from publication to publication. For example, CooksIllustrated.com reprints recipes from previous issues as part of a paid online membership service, while CookingLight.com offers back issues for free. Some magazines have online archive collections, though those collections generally do not print entire articles or complete issues. *Time*, for example, offers "hand-picked covers and excerpts from the best articles on a wide variety of subjects (Time)." *Time* suggests that one should "use them as chronological guides to *Time*'s past coverage of a person, event, or topic (Time)." Still, even without the entire collection online, there is a distinct benefit of being able to search back for articles from 1923 from a computer.

Is Print Dead?

The question *Is print dead?* has dominated the magazine and newspaper industries for several years. In 2008, *The New York Times* printed an article titled "Mourning Old Media's Decline," in which author David Carr describes multiple announcements of job loss in the print industry. Thousands of individuals working at magazines and newspapers faced layoffs because of reduced subscriber and advertiser demand. "Clearly the sky is falling," he writes, "The question now is how many people will be left to cover it (Carr, 2008)." At the same time, Carr articulates the shift in readership from print to web, saying, "The paradox of all these announcements is that newspapers and magazines do not have an audience problem— newspaper Web sites are a vital source of news, and growing—but they do have a consumer problem (Carr, 2008)." With a majority of magazines and newspapers now available for free online, one has to wonder how the industry will stay afloat. Although advertisements pay for a portion of the cost of running a magazine, it may not be enough.

The debate over whether print is still viable is a heated one that is infiltrating the magazine industry. At a 2006 magazine editorial meeting, *Glamour*'s editor in chief, Cindi Leive, claimed that she "loves this question…. Is print dead? Discuss (Benkoil & Stableford, 2006)!" The editor in chief of *More* magazine responded to the statement saying, "It's what we talk about all day long (Benkoil & Stableford, 2006)." But for as many people who are fighting for the print industry to remain profitable, there is an equally vocal group arguing for the elimination of the print medium altogether. In a 2005 published debate on the topic, former print editor-turned-blogger Jeff Jarvis squared off against John Griffin, president of the National Geographic Society's magazine group. Jarvis claimed, "Print is not dead. Print is where words go to die." But Griffin countered, "Actually print is where words go to live—we're still reading the ancient Greeks (Jarvis & Griffin, 2005)."

Regardless of your position, the fact that the print industry is facing hardships is unquestionable. Magazines are rethinking their marketing strategies to remain viable in an increasingly online world. But many are hopeful that journals will find a way to publish both in print and on the Internet. After all, "There's something special and unique, even luxurious about reading a big, glossy magazine…. Or, in the words of *Marie Claire* editor Joanna Coles, 'As long as people take baths, there will always be a monthly magazine (Benkoil & Stableford).'"Benkoil and Stableford, "Is Print Dead? Discuss!"

Key Takeaways
- Print journals are adapting to an increasingly online market by offering web-only features such as blogs, podcasts, and daily news updates. Regularly updating websites may help publications remain relevant as more readers turn to the Internet to receive information.
- As more magazines archive back issues on their websites, readers benefit by being able to search for old articles and, sometimes, entire editions. Many back issues are offered for free, but some publications require a subscription fee for this perk.

Exercises

Explore the website of one of your favorite magazines. Consider how the site maintains the look and feel of its print edition, and how the site distinguishes itself from its original print version. Then, answer the following writing prompts.

1. Has it successfully adapted to the online market? Why or why not?
2. Does the website offer an archive of back issues? If so, describe the archive's features and identify its pros and cons.

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After high-profile departures, the publication is trying to find a new voice.

By Katie Robertson, *The New York Times,* Feb. 11, 2022

In early January, two days after an abrupt announcement that the top editor of Slate was stepping down, the publication's staff signed into a Zoom meeting with the company's chief executive and a consultant for Graham Holdings, the publication's owner.

Slate was not profitable, the consultant, Ann McDaniel, told them. She had been brought in to suggest ways to improve the publication and shore up its business, she said, according to five staff members at the meeting.
When asked about what needed to be fixed, Ms. McDaniel pointed to Slate's website, saying it was unattractive and suggesting that more resources needed to be put into the design team, according to the people.

Ms. McDaniel's comments came as a surprise, said the people at the meeting. But it was not the only indication to the staff that Slate was in a tough spot.

Making money from an online publication continues to be a tricky business, even for established brands like Slate. Many digital media companies have merged in recent years, hoping that by joining forces they can compete with the likes of Google and Facebook for online advertising dollars.

Slate made its first move to build revenue through subscriptions instead of relying on advertising in 2014, with a membership program called Slate Plus. The company plans to soon double the cost of renewing subscriptions to Slate Plus to $119, from $59.

Navigating the fast-changing digital media landscape has left Slate struggling to define its identity, said three of the staff members who were at the meeting, who requested anonymity out of fear of reprisals. Slate once stood out as a home for contrarian takes and intellectual debate, but that distinction has faded in recent years, they said.

The questions about its mission have increased after several high-level departures this year, the people said. The departure of Jared Hohlt, who had been the editor in chief since 2019, was followed a couple weeks later by Allison Benedikt, a longtime staff member who was a top editor. Other departures last month included Gabriel Roth, the head of podcasts; Laura Bennett, the editorial director; and William Saletan, a writer who had worked for Slate for 25 years. Dan Check, Slate's chief executive, acknowledged in an interview that there was work to be done on figuring out Slate's editorial vision, but added: "We are definitely not in any kind of a crisis."

"Right now we're kind of taking a breath and taking a look at what it is that we're doing — taking stock," Mr. Check said.

Slate, which was started in 1996 by Microsoft, was one of the original digital-only media outlets. The publication quickly became known for smart analysis, interesting debate and top-tier journalistic talent. (Jacob Weisberg, a former Slate editor in chief, described Slate in 2013 as having "the brain of The New York Times and the body of BuzzFeed.") In 2004, Microsoft sold Slate to The Washington Post Company. After Jeff Bezos bought the firm's flagship newspaper in 2013, the parent company was renamed Graham Holdings.

In recent years, Slate invested in starting podcasts and found success with some, including the acclaimed "Slow Burn." And it remains known for its reporting on the Supreme Court, long an area of specialty. But it has struggled to otherwise break through in the conversation.

The darling digital upstarts of the 2010s invested heavily in journalism, racking up scoops and awards, but unlike The New York Times, *weren't built to weather industry upheaval.*
BY JILL ABRAMSON, VANITY FAIR, MAY 5, 2023

During the last years of my run at *The New York Times,* it seemed possible that digital news start-ups, like Vice and BuzzFeed, could eclipse old, legacy news organizations like us. The Gray Lady was looking every bit her age and she was stumbling in the age of social media. From its origins as punk magazine in Montreal, Vice, with a slate of YouTube channels, suddenly had a production deal with HBO, operated at least one cable

channel, and was winning Peabodys for news. Its valuation at one point was touted as being close to $6 billion. BuzzFeed was building a first-class investigative reporting unit on the back of its usual fare—exploding watermelons and viral sensations like "What Colors Are This Dress?" Both companies had big and devoted younger audiences, manna for advertisers. Out of the blue, these digital newcomers to news were threatening to eat our lunch.

Reversals of fortune are nothing unusual in the news business. But in the last few weeks it's been gobsmacking to see Vice facing bankruptcy and BuzzFeed shuttering its news division. The *Times,* meanwhile, hit its goal of 10 million paying subscribers a year ago and aims to have 15 million by the end of 2027—more than enough to sustain its large news-gathering operations. It wasn't that long ago that *The Atlantic* (in 2009), predicted that it would be the *Times* that would soon go bankrupt.

What happened?

It turned out that advertising was a bad bet. With the change of an algorithm, Facebook and Google slashed Vice and BuzzFeed's massive audiences and hoovered up the bulk of digital advertising. Without huge traffic numbers, advertisers turned away and would no longer shell out millions for the bespoke brand advertising that was the lifeblood of Vice and BuzzFeed. Their young, hip followers were not willing to pay for their periodic scoops. News gathering turned out to be far more expensive than **Shane Smith** and **Jonah Peretti,** cofounders of Vice and BuzzFeed respectively, bargained for. (Howell Raines, the former executive editor of *The New York Times,* often said that if the *Times* went away, no one could ever rebuild it.)

The depth and breadth of the *Times* news report remains singular in quality, and reader revenue is now the cornerstone of the company's financial security. Vice and BuzzFeed never had that secure base and without it they wobbled. They had taken big money from investors: 21st Century Fox put $70 million into Vice, with **James Murdoch** later buying a minority stake; NBCUniversal pumped $400 million into BuzzFeed. It's almost unbelievable that Disney once considered acquiring each of them. Bankruptcy may be the only option for Vice because no good bidders have emerged for a takeover. BuzzFeed's stock, issued during a failed IPO, is virtually worthless.

But fickle economic winds do not give the full picture.

Despite being initially thrown off course during the digital transition, the *Times* had the confidence and will to stick to its core strength—the news—even during

years when the company was saddled with heavy debt and shareholder rebellions were brewing. It never succumbed to Wall Street's short-term demands or made crippling cuts to its newsroom. The *Times* remained stubbornly faithful to its news report and expanded globally. Its board remained faithful to the Sulzberger family that has owned the *Times* since 1896.

In hindsight, all this may look like a no-brainer, but during the roughest patches of the digital transition and the financial crisis, everyone on the inside had their doubts. I had a ringside seat as managing editor and executive editor of the *Times*. I led the merger of what had been separate and duplicative digital and print newsrooms, which the paper's culture resisted. We were still running from behind in 2012 when I asked **Arthur Gregg Sulzberger,** then a talented reporter and editor, to form an Innovation Committee. The committee's first mandate was to develop a suite of new products that would generate quick, new revenue. But after a few months, Sulzberger, now publisher of the *Times* and chairman of the New York Times Company, asked me to change the committee's focus. "We need to grow from the core," he told me, meaning our future would hinge on building from our core strength, the news report. We would secure the *Times*' future by growing digital subscriptions and leveraging our strengths in areas like cooking (the *Times* owned thousands of fabulous recipes) and games (like its venerable crossword puzzle).

Neither Vice nor BuzzFeed could have executed this kind of strategy. Vice's core was always sex, drugs, and rock and roll, and even as it branched into video, dispatching journalists to war zones and global hot spots, its most popular shows were series like *F*ck, That's Delicious,* hosted by **Action Bronson,** the rapper and road-food gourmand. BuzzFeed's core was its listicles, quizzes, and light celebrity news, popular but not likely to draw the paying customers needed for attracting and retaining great journalists. Building serious journalism muscles, meanwhile, was prohibitively expensive. So was retaining talent. The *Times* would eventually poach a number of BuzzFeed journalists, along with talent from upstarts like Vox.

The lesson in all this isn't that legacy news organizations were destined to win (most didn't) or that digital newcomers failed precisely because they were new. Some digital news organizations, like Politico, are successes and are profitable. Like the *Times*, Politico grew from a strong core. It covers politics and policy in

a more granular way than anyone. Political junkies couldn't live without it; companies with a vested interest in legislation would pay handsomely for its policy-focused Pro subscriptions. Paid conferences and other live events are logical and profitable extensions. Meanwhile, Talking Points Memo, created and run by **Josh Marshall**, has sustained itself since 2000 as a smart, original political site.

ProPublica, a nonprofit, has a solid core of investigative journalism that has sustained growth and won Pulitzers. There are a group of local nonprofits, like the Texas Tribune and Mississippi Today, that produce high-quality journalism, have an expanding base of donors and readers, and are beginning to fill the vacuum created by the closures of so many local newspapers. And Substack, a platform that hosts writers across the ideological spectrum who are creating subscription-based newsletters, has emerged as another potential destination for quality journalism online. And there are other interesting experiments in news rising out of the ashes.

No one should be dancing on the graves of Vice or BuzzFeed News. Competition makes everyone, including the *Times,* better. Journalism, a bedrock of democracy, thrives when different voices and informed audiences make themselves heard. With abysmal public trust numbers, everyone working in news is on shaky ground. Seeing that landscape shrink even further is distressing for journalists—and the public they serve.

Les médias gratuits sont les plus exposés dans un contexte économique difficile. « Vice » poursuivra toutefois ses activités durant toute la procédure.

Le Monde, 15 mai 2023

Le groupe de médias d'information américain *Vice* s'est déclaré en faillite. Dans un contexte de recul du marché publicitaire, cette annonce était attendue sur le marché depuis quelques semaines. Un consortium, dont la société d'investissement Fortress Investment Group, le principal créancier de *Vice*, va prendre le contrôle du groupe pour 225 millions de dollars, sauf offre supérieure par d'autres parties, selon le communiqué publié lundi 15 mai.

Vice Media Group, qui avait été valorisé 5,7 milliards de dollars en 2017, produit des contenus dans 25 langues, avec plus d'une trentaine de bureaux dans le monde. Le groupe de médias, à l'accès gratuit, s'appuie principalement sur la publicité pour générer des revenus. Mais avec la dégradation de la conjoncture économique, le marché publicitaire s'est tendu, pour être majoritairement capté par les géants technologiques, comme Google et Facebook. *Vice* poursuivra ses activités durant toute la procédure, précise le média.

Au tournant des années 2010, *Vice* a incarné, comme *BuzzFeed* ou le *Huffington Post*, une nouvelle génération de médias d'information entièrement en ligne qui ambitionnait de bousculer les grands anciens. Les médias gratuits sont les plus exposés dans un contexte économique difficile, qui a incité de nombreux acteurs historiques à licencier, de la radio publique NPR au *Washington Post*, en passant par la chaîne CNN. *BuzzFeed* a d'ailleurs annoncé à la fin d'avril la clôture du site *BuzzFeed News*, avec 180 licenciements à la clé.

Chronique Philippe Escande, *Le Monde,* 21 avril 2023

En « une » de *Buzzfeed News,* ce vendredi 21 avril, le site d'information s'interroge sur la personnalité de Midge, la seule vraie copine de Barbie si souvent retirée des rayons et vedette d'un film en salle le 19 juillet. Aujourd'hui c'est le site lui-même qui est brutalement enlevé des rayonnages de l'Internet. Le fondateur de l'entreprise, Jonah Peretti, l'a annoncé dans un mail interne ce jeudi 20 avril.

Il ferme le plus célèbre et imaginatif des nouveaux médias, né en 2006 avec l'essor des réseaux sociaux. 180 employés seront licenciés. *« J'ai été trop lent à admettre que les grandes plates-formes Internet ne fourniraient pas la distribution et les finances nécessaires pour soutenir un journalisme de qualité gratuit et conçu pour les réseaux sociaux. »*

La société BuzzFeed se concentrera sur son autre journal en ligne, le *HuffPost*, acheté en 2020, et ses sites dédiés à la cuisine, à la mode et aux célébrités. Ainsi s'achève une époque aussi imaginative que déconcertante pour les médias, à l'image du monde des réseaux sociaux, lui aussi en plein bouleversement.

Jusqu'au prix Pulitzer

Pourtant, *BuzzFeed News* aura tout essayé. Le journalisme algorithmique de ses débuts, avec des logiciels qui faisaient le travail, puis à l'inverse la presse de qualité, avec l'embauche de journalistes d'expérience qui vont pousser l'investigation jusqu'à décrocher un prix Pulitzer en 2021 pour une enquête de Megha Rajagopalan sur les camps de rééducation des Ouïgours en Chine.

Le groupe s'est lancé dans l'expansion internationale et les acquisitions puis a tenté l'introduction en Bourse en décembre 2021, par le truchement d'une société spéciale, avec l'espoir d'une valorisation dépassant le milliard de dollars. Ce fut une catastrophe.

Jonah Peretti incrimine les grandes plates-formes et la débâcle du marché de la publicité pour justifier sa décision. En effet, la conjoncture actuelle difficile et la dégringolade de nombre d'entreprises du high-tech ont déprimé un marché de la publicité qui représentait la quasi-totalité des revenus d'un site qui n'a jamais gagné d'argent.

Ce n'est pourtant pas faute d'imagination dans ce domaine, avec un mélange assumé entre contenu éditorial et publicitaire. Cette approche, couplée avec un tropisme pour les papiers racoleurs, n'a pas arrangé sa cote de confiance auprès des lecteurs. Comme les réseaux sociaux, il a développé un rapport distancié avec la rigueur journalistique. Comme eux, et notamment Twitter, il n'a pas su trouver la voie d'un modèle économique pérenne, c'est-à-dire payant et indépendant. Un équilibre fragile que peu de médias atteignent aujourd'hui.

Document 10 bis - Demise of BuzzFeed News: 'The end of an era as imaginative as it was disconcerting'

Column

The most famous of new media outlets announced it will close because it has not been able to find a sustainable economic model – one that pays and allows independence – writes columnist Philippe Escande.

On the front page of Buzzfeed News on Tuesday, April 18, the news site was wondering about Midge, Barbie's only real friend, so often removed from the plot, but who will finally get to co-star in the big movie hitting theaters on July 19. Today it is the site itself that has been brutally removed from the Internet's plot. The founder of the company, Jonah Peretti, made the announcement in an internal mail on Thursday.

It closes the doors on the most famous and imaginative of new media outlets, born in 2006 with the rise of social media. One hundred and eighty employees will be laid off. "This made me slow to accept that the big platforms wouldn't provide the distribution or financial support required to support premium, free journalism purpose-built for social media," Peretti said.

BuzzFeed will focus on its other online news outlet, the HuffPost, which it bought in 2020, and its sites dedicated to food, fashion and celebrities. This marks the end of an era as imaginative as it was disconcerting for the news media and social media, which is also going through an upheaval.

Pulitzer Prize winners

BuzzFeed News had tried everything to stay in the picture. The algorithmic journalism of its beginnings, with software doing the work, and then the quality reporting, with the hiring of experienced journalists to the point of winning a Pulitzer Prize in 2021 for an investigation by Megha Rajagopalan on the detention camps for Uyghurs in China.

The group first embarked on international expansion and acquisitions. It then attempted an IPO in December 2021, through a special company, with the hope of a valuation in excess of $1 billion. The results were a disaster.

Peretti blames the big platforms and the collapse of the advertising market for forcing him to make this decision. Indeed, the current economic situation and the collapse of many high-tech companies have depressed an advertising market that amounted to almost all the revenues for a site that never made a profit.

But it was not for lack of imagination in this area, with an assertive mix of editorial and advertising content. This approach, coupled with a tendency for racy articles, did not help develop its trustworthiness among readers. Like social media, it developed a distanced relationship with journalistic rigor. And, also like social media, in particular Twitter, Buzzfeed was not able to find the way to a sustainable economic model, that is to say one that pays *and* allows independence. This is a fragile balance that few media organizations manage to achieve today.

How social media influences the news

DOCUMENT 11 -A VoxTalks podcast, Julia Cagé interviewed by Tim Phillips 7 Oct 2022

https://cepr.org/multimedia/how-social-media-influences-news

Very interesting but Julia Cagé has an atrocious French accent!!!

PART TWO – The plague of misinformation

DOCUMENT 12 -How Social Media Amplifies Misinformation More Than Information

A new analysis found that algorithms and some features of social media sites help false posts go viral.
The New York Times, By Steven Lee Myers, Oct. 13, 2022

It is well known that social media amplifies misinformation and other harmful content. The Integrity Institute, an advocacy group, is now trying to measure exactly how much — and on Thursday it began publishing results that it plans to update each week through the midterm elections on Nov. 8.
The institute's initial report, <u>posted online</u>, found that a "well-crafted lie" will get more engagements than typical, truthful content and that some features of social media sites and their algorithms contribute to the spread of misinformation.

Twitter, the analysis showed, has what the institute called the great misinformation amplification factor, in large part because of its feature allowing people to share, or "retweet," posts easily. It was followed by TikTok, the Chinese-owned video site, which uses machine-learning models to predict engagement and make recommendations to users.

"We see a difference for each platform because each platform has different mechanisms for virality on it," said Jeff Allen, a former integrity officer at Facebook and a founder and the chief research officer at the Integrity Institute. "The more mechanisms there are for virality on the platform, the more we see misinformation getting additional distribution."

The institute calculated its findings by comparing posts that members of the <u>International Fact-Checking Network</u> have identified as false with the engagement of previous posts that were not flagged from the same accounts. It analyzed nearly 600 fact-checked posts in September on a variety of subjects, including the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the upcoming elections.

Facebook, according to the sample that the institute has studied so far, had the most instances of misinformation but amplified such claims to a lesser degree, in part because sharing posts requires more steps. But some of its newer features are more prone to amplify misinformation, the institute found.

Facebook's amplification factor of video content alone is closer to TikTok's, the institute found. That's because the platform's Reels and Facebook Watch, which are video features, "both rely heavily on algorithmic content recommendations" based on engagements, according to the institute's calculations.

Instagram, which like Facebook is owned by Meta, had the lowest amplification rate. There was not yet sufficient data to make a statistically significant estimate for YouTube, according to the institute.

The institute plans to update its findings to track how the amplification fluctuates, especially as the midterm elections near. Misinformation, the institute's report said, is much more likely to be shared than merely factual content.

"Amplification of misinformation can rise around critical events if misinformation narratives take hold," the report said. "It can also fall, if platforms implement design changes around the event that reduce the spread of misinformation."

DOCUMENT 13 - Julia Cagé : « Identifier les fake news est un enjeu majeur pour les chercheurs »

Le phénomène des *fake news*, ou « infox », pose la question de la circulation et de la reprise des informations. Des mécanismes qui requièrent l'analyse de grandes quantités de données. C'est l'objet de la recherche de Julia Cagé. (in French this time!)

INA, La Revue des Médias, avril 2019 *par Xavier Eutrope*

https://larevuedesmedias.ina.fr/julia-cage-identifier-les-fake-news-est-un-enjeu-majeur-pour-les-chercheurs

See also https://larevuedesmedias.ina.fr/meilleurs-reseau-sociaux-toxicite-algorithme-moderation-twitter-facebook-tiktok-reddit-tumblr-mastodon

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a) What are the facts ?
b) What has been the reaction from the social media companies?
c) Make sure you know what the "QAnon conspiracy theory refers to.
d) Pick and "classify" all the specific vocabulary related to the topic from the text

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DOCUMENT 14 -Social media posts about election fraud still prevalent, study finds

As former president Donald Trump stoked baseless claims of widespread voter fraud leading up to the 2020 election, tech companies rolled out a bevy of rules to clamp down on falsehoods.

But nearly two years after the 2020 vote, social media posts mentioning false claims that the tally was rigged or stolen are still widespread across major platforms including Facebook, Twitter and TikTok, according to a report shared exclusively with The Technology 202.

The findings underscore that tech companies are still grappling with a flood of baseless claims about voter fraud in 2020, even as the 2022 midterm elections rapidly approach.

A report by Advance Democracy, a nonprofit organization that studies misinformation, found that candidates endorsed by Trump and those associated with the QAnon conspiracy theory have posted about election fraud hundreds of times on Facebook and Twitter, drawing hundreds of thousands of interactions and retweets.

On TikTok, six hashtags promoting conspiracy theories about the 2020 tally being rigged or stolen have garnered over 38 million views as of mid-July. Two of the most popular, researchers found, make references to a documentary by conservative commentator Dinesh D'Souza that fact-checkers have found makes misleading and unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud.

"Our democracy is based on accepting legitimate election outcomes and honoring the peaceful transition of power," said Advance Democracy President Daniel Jones. "But months before the midterms, and years before the next presidential election, the trend lines are clear."

In response to the report, TikTok said it blocked users from searching for several of the hashtags, including ones referring to the D'Souza documentary. "TikTok prohibits election misinformation, including claims that the 2020 election was fraudulent, and works with independent fact-checking organizations who help assess content so that violations of our Community Guidelines can be promptly removed," spokesperson Ben Rathe said in a statement.

Twitter spokesperson Madeline Broas said in a statement that the company's priority remains "ensuring people on Twitter have access to reliable, credible information about elections and civic processes" and that they are "taking steps to limit the spread and visibility of misleading information."

Facebook spokesperson Erin McPike responded to a request for comment by referring to the company's community guidelines. Facebook deploys third-party fact-checkers to vet for misleading content but exempts politicians and has said it bans accounts "representing" QAnon.

Researchers say the findings highlight how the baseless claims have become an integral part of the online messaging for many conservative and far-right candidates. […]

The trend poses a massive test for social media platforms, many of which have policies that allow posts by politicians and candidates for public offices that would otherwise break their rules to stay up to allow the public to still see their comments. It will also test whether companies enforce rules against baseless voter claims about past and future elections, which they have at times declined to do.

The report found that more than 1 in 8 posts on Twitter and about 1 in 12 posts on public Facebook pages about U.S. elections referenced election fraud.

For the study, researchers reviewed public posts on Facebook and Twitter referencing U.S. elections for mentions of terms including "Stop the Steal," "rigged" or "stolen." It's not clear how many of the posts expressed support for claims of fraud, and how many merely referenced them, such as a news report discussing efforts by officials to overturn the elections.

But several of the posts that received the highest number of interactions on Facebook and retweets on Twitter perpetuated baseless claims of election rigging, including one tweet alleging that there were "multiple crimes surrounding widespread ballot trafficking" committed in 2020. That post, by conservative activist Charlie Kirk, has over 56,000 likes and 20,000 retweets.

Many of the election posts by Trump-endorsed candidates and those who have voiced support for or invoked the QAnon conspiracy theory perpetuated claims of fraud, researchers found. […]

The Washington Post, August 9, 2022

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a) What worrying trend has been noticed since Queen Elizabeth's death?
b) What seems to be the main reason why?
c) Why is it worrying?

DOCUMENT 15 - Trial by TikTok: Camilla and Meghan targeted with abuse after Queen's death

Shanti Das, *The Guardian*, Sat 17 Sep 2022

As solemn reports of the Queen's death dominated TV bulletins and newspaper headlines, online another kind of royal content was drawing in millions of views.

Posts containing abuse and misinformation were widely shared on social media in the days after the news broke – many of them aimed at Camilla, the new Queen Consort.

Doctored photos of the Duchess of Sussex and posts claiming that Queen Elizabeth had been murdered because she held secrets on politicians, or was killed by the Covid-19 vaccine, were also widely shared, analysis shows.

On TikTok, the fastest-growing news source in the UK, whose user base is dominated by Gen Z, the most watched royal-themed clips included those that derided Camilla's appearance and pitted her against the late Diana, Princess of Wales.

One video, liked 1.1 million times on TikTok since it was posted a week ago, contained a montage of photos of Camilla and Diana. The captions read: "The woman he cheated with … The woman he cheated on," prompting vitriolic comparisons between the women in the comment section.

Others called Camilla "cowmilla" or an "evil witch", and claimed that she was a "puppet-master" in the royal family who was "struggling to contain how happy she is" about the Queen's death. Many were promoted by accounts claiming to be run by young fans of Diana.

Other accounts shared doctored photos of Meghan, suggesting that she had been pictured wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the words "the Queen is dead". On Twitter, one post containing the image with the caption "I can't believe Meghan went there" was liked 27,000 times.

Back on TikTok, several videos claimed to show Meghan at the Queen's funeral and criticised her for copying an old outfit of Diana's. One was liked 3.7 million times – though the funeral, scheduled for Monday, had not yet taken place.

The content gives an insight into the nature of some of the information about the royal family being pushed to those who get their news on social media.

Dr Laura Clancy, a media lecturer at Lancaster University who has studied media representations of the royal family, said that the "drip, drip of negative coverage" could have an effect on shaping Gen Z views on the royal family at a time when debates about its role in modern society have been intensifying.

For many, their first exposure to information about the new King and Queen Consort could be on social media. "While much of it isn't explicitly anti-monarchy, it is certainly creating a discourse around the monarchy in a way that isn't set by the official narrative," Clancy said. Researchers from the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) identified 16 channels on the messaging app Telegram where conspiracies were shared, with a joint total of 1,369,444 followers. (…)

While motives for posting anti-royal content vary, doing so can generate large returns for account-holders in the form of views, likes, follows and advertising revenue.

As it does for newspapers and websites, royal content can generate traffic from global audiences for social media creators. In the UK, Google searches have been dominated by queries relating to the royals since the Queen's death, with nine of the top 10 trending search terms including references to Her late Majesty or the new King.

Some of the accounts posting anti-Camilla and Meghan content appear to have begun doing so specifically to capitalise on the increased interest in the royals. One that previously posted videos of the Kardashians pivoted to posting hate content about Camilla hours after the Queen's death was announced.

Dr Sophie Bishop, an expert in influencer culture and social media algorithms at Sheffield University's school of management, said accounts were often rewarded for pushing out "huge volumes" of content and that the most polarising posts often perform best. "Even if you're [posting] a video because you're criticising it, you're still amplifying it," she said. "It does really well because you have the negative and the positive response." (…)

The business models risk having a "net effect on an entire generation", said Imran Ahmed, from the CCDH. "This is bigger than a debate about the royals. If we see something more frequently we think it's more likely to be true. That can shape young minds in a really dangerous way." (709 words)

How to Keep the Rising Tide of Fake News From Drowning Our Democracy

Richard L. HASEN | *The New York Times* | March 7, 2022

The same information revolution that brought us Netflix, podcasts and the knowledge of the world in our smartphone-gripping hands has also undermined American democracy. There can be no doubt that virally spread political disinformation and delusional invective about stolen, rigged elections are threatening the foundation of our Republic. It's going to take both legal and political change to bolster that foundation, and it might not be enough.

Today we live in an era of "cheap speech." Eugene Volokh, a First Amendment scholar at U.C.L.A., coined the term in 1995 to refer to a new period marked by changes in communications technology that would allow readers, viewers and listeners to receive speech from a practically infinite variety of sources unmediated by traditional media institutions, like newspapers, that had served as curators and gatekeepers. He was correct

back then that the amount of speech flowing to us in formats like video would move from a trickle to a flood.

What Professor Volokh did not foresee in his largely optimistic prognostication was that our information environment would become increasingly "cheap" in a second sense of the word, favoring speech of little value over speech that is more valuable to voters.

It is expensive to produce quality journalism but cheap to produce polarizing political "takes" and easily shareable disinformation. The economic model for local newspapers and news gathering has collapsed over the past two decades; from 2000 to 2018, journalists lost jobs faster than coal miners.

While some false claims spread inadvertently, the greater problem is not this *mis*information but deliberately spread *dis*information, which can be both politically and financially profitable. Feeding people reassuring lies on social media or cable television that provide simple answers to complex social and economic problems increases demand for more soothing falsities, creating a vicious cycle. False information about Covid-19 vaccines meant to undermine confidence in government or the Biden presidency has had deadly consequences.

The rise of cheap speech poses special dangers for American democracy and for faith and confidence in American elections. To put the matter bluntly, if we had the polarized politics of today but the information technology of the 1950s, we almost certainly would not have seen the insurrection of Jan. 6, 2021, at the United States Capitol. Millions of Republican voters would probably not have believed the false claims that the 2020 election was stolen from former President Donald Trump and demanded from state legislatures new restrictive voting rules and fake election "audits" to counter phantom voter fraud.

According to reporting in *The Times*, President Donald Trump took to Twitter more than 400 times in the almost three weeks after Nov. 3, 2020, to attack the legitimacy of the election, often making false claims that it had been stolen or rigged to millions and millions of people. In an earlier era, the three major television networks, *The Times* and local newspaper and television stations would most likely have been more active in mediating and curtailing the rhetoric of a president spewing dangerous nonsense. Over at Facebook, in the days after the 2020 election, politically oriented "groups" became rife with stolen-election talk and plans to "stop the steal." Cheap speech lowered the costs for like-minded conspiracy theorists to find one another, to convert people to believing the false claims and to organize for dangerous political action at the U.S. Capitol. [...]

But cheap speech has already done damage to our democracy and has the potential to do even more. The demise of local newspapers — and their replacement in some cases with partisan or even foreign sources of information masquerading as legitimate journalism — fosters a loss of voter competence, as voters have a harder time getting objective information about candidates' records and positions. Cheap speech also decreases officeholder accountability; studies show that corruption rises when journalists are not there to hold politicians accountable. And as technology makes it easier to spread "deep fakes" — false video or audio clips showing politicians or others saying or doing things they did not in fact say or do — voters will increasingly come to mistrust everything they see and hear, even when it is true.

The rise of anonymous speech facilitated by the information revolution, particularly on social media, increases the opportunities for foreign interference to influence American electoral choices, as we saw with Russian efforts in the 2016 and 2020 elections. Domestic copycats have followed suit: In the 2017 Doug Jones-Roy Moore U.S. Senate race in Alabama, Mr. Jones's supporters — acting without his knowledge — posed on social media as Russian bots and Baptist alcohol abolitionists supporting Roy Moore in an effort to

depress moderate Republican support for Mr. Moore. Mr. Jones, a Democrat, narrowly won that election, though we cannot say that the disinformation campaign swung the result.

The cheap speech environment increases polarization and the risk of demagogy by individual candidates. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, who before entering Congress embraced dangerous QAnon conspiracy theories and supported the execution of Democratic politicians, need not depend upon party leaders for funding; by being outrageous, she can go right to social media to cheaply raise funds for her campaigns and political activities.

We now live in an era of high partisanship but weak political parties, which can no longer serve as the moderating influence on extremists within their ranks. Cheap speech accelerates this trend.

We cannot — and would not want to — go back to a time when media gatekeepers deprived voters of valuable information. Cheap speech helped fuel Black Lives Matter protests and the racial justice movement both before and after the murder of George Floyd, and virally spread videos of police misconduct can help catalyze meaningful change. But the cheap speech era requires new legal tools to shore up our democracy.

Among the legal changes that could help are an updating of campaign finance laws to cover what is now mostly unregulated political advertising disseminated over the internet, labeling deep fakes as "altered" to help voters separate fact from fiction and a tightening of the ban on foreign campaign expenditures. Congress should also make it a crime to lie about when, where and how people vote. A Trump supporter has been charged with targeting voters in 2016 with false messages suggesting that they could vote by text or social media post, but it is not clear if existing law makes such conduct illegal. We also need new laws aimed at limiting microtargeting, the use by campaigns or interest groups of intrusive data collected by social media companies to send political ads, including some misleading ones, sometimes to vulnerable populations. [...]

Even if Congress adopted all the changes I have proposed and the Supreme Court upheld them — two quite unlikely propositions — it would hardly be enough to sustain American democracy in the cheap speech era. For example, the First Amendment would surely bar a law that would require social media companies to remove demagogic candidates who undermine election integrity from social media platforms; we would not want a government bureaucrat (under the control of a partisan president) to make such a call. But such speech is among the greatest dangers we face today.

That's why efforts to deal with the costs of cheap speech require political action as well. As consumers and voters, we need to pressure social media companies and other platforms to protect our democracy by taking strong steps, including deplatforming political figures in extreme circumstances, when they consistently undermine election integrity and foment or threaten violence. Twitter's recent decision to no longer remove false speech about the integrity of the 2020 election is a step in the wrong direction. And if the social media companies are unresponsive to consumer pressure or become too powerful in controlling the political speech environment, the solution is to use antitrust laws to create more competition.

Society needs to figure out ways to subsidize real investigative journalism efforts, especially locally, like the excellent journalism of *The Texas Tribune* and *The Nevada Independent*, two relatively new news-gathering organizations that depend on donors and a nonprofit model.

Journalistic bodies should use accreditation methods to send signals to voters and social media companies about which content is reliable and which is counterfeit. Over time and with a lot of effort, we can reestablish greater faith in real journalism, at least for a significant part of the population. [...]

The future of American democracy in the cheap speech era is hardly ensured. We don't have all the

solutions and can't even foresee political problems that will come with the next technological shift. But legal and political action taken now has the best chance of giving voters the tools to make competent decisions and reject election lies that will continue to spew forth on every platform that can be built to threaten the foundation of our democracy. ●

PART Three – From bane to… boon?

Google Finds 'Inoculating' People Against Misinformation Helps Blunt Its Power

 Nico GRANT and Tiffany HSU | *The New York Times* | August 24, 2022

I n the fight against online misinformation, falsehoods have key advantages: They crop up fast and spread at the speed of electrons, and there is a lag period before fact checkers can debunk them.

So researchers at Google, the University of Cambridge and the University of Bristol tested a different approach that tries to undermine misinformation before people see it. They call it "pre-bunking."

The researchers found that psychologically "inoculating" internet users against lies and conspiracy theories — by pre-emptively showing them videos about the tactics behind misinformation — made people more skeptical of falsehoods afterward, according to an academic paper published in the journal *Science Advances* on Wednesday. But effective educational tools still may not be enough to reach people with hardened political beliefs, the researchers found.

Since Russia spread disinformation on Facebook during the 2016 election, major technology companies have struggled to balance concerns about censorship with fighting online lies and conspiracy theories. Despite an array of attempts by the companies to address the problem, it is still largely up to users to differentiate between fact and fiction.

The strategies and tools being deployed during the midterm vote in the United States this year by Facebook, TikTok and other companies often resemble tactics developed to deal with misinformation in past elections: partnerships with fact-checking groups, warning labels, portals with vetted explainers as well as post removal and user bans.

Social media platforms have made attempts to pre-bunk before, though those efforts have done little to slow the spread of false information. Most have also not been as detailed — or as entertaining — as the videos used in the studies by the researchers.

Twitter said this month that it would try to "enable healthy civic conversation" during the midterm elections in part by reviving pop-up warnings, which it used during the 2020 election. Warnings, written in multiple languages, will appear as prompts placed atop users' feeds and in searches for certain topics.

The new paper details seven experiments with almost 30,000 total participants. The researchers bought YouTube ad space to show users in the United States 90-second animated videos aiming to teach them about propaganda tropes and manipulation techniques. A million adults watched one of the ads for 30 seconds or longer.

The users were taught about tactics such as scapegoating and deliberate incoherence, or the use of conflicting explanations to assert that something is true, so that they could spot lies. Researchers tested some participants within 24 hours of seeing a pre-bunk video and found a 5 percent increase in their ability to recognize misinformation techniques.

One video opens with a mournful piano tune and a little girl grasping a teddy bear, as a narrator says, "What happens next will make you tear up." Then the narrator explains that emotional content compels people to pay more attention than they otherwise would, and that fear-mongering and appeals to outrage are keys to spreading moral and political ideas on social media.

The video offers examples, such as headlines that describe a "horrific" accident instead of a "serious" one, before reminding viewers that if something they see makes them angry, "someone may be pulling your strings."

Beth Goldberg, one of the paper's authors and the head of research and development at Jigsaw, a technology incubator within Google, said in an interview that pre-bunking leaned into people's innate desire to not be duped.

"This is one of the few misinformation interventions that I've seen at least that has worked not just across the conspiratorial spectrum but across the political spectrum," Ms. Goldberg said.

Jigsaw will start a pre-bunking ad campaign on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok at the end of August for users in Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, meant to head off fear-mongering about Ukrainian refugees who

entered those countries after Russia invaded Ukraine. It will be done in concert with local fact checkers, academics and disinformation experts.

The researchers don't have plans for similar pre-bunking videos ahead of the midterm elections in the United States, but they are hoping other tech companies and civil groups will use their research as a template for addressing misinformation.

However, pre-bunking is not a silver bullet. The tactic was not effective on people with extreme views, such as white supremacists, Ms. Goldberg said. She added that elections were tricky to pre-bunk because people had such entrenched beliefs. The effects of pre-bunking last for only between a few days and a month.

Groups focused on information literacy and fact-checking have employed various pre-bunking strategies, such as a misinformation-identifying curriculum delivered over two weeks of texts, or lists of bullet points with tips such as "identify the author" and "check your biases." Online games with names like Cranky Uncle, Harmony Square, Troll Factory and Go Viral try to build players' cognitive resistance to bot armies, emotional manipulation, science denial and vaccine falsehoods.

A study conducted in 2020 by researchers at the University of Cambridge and at Uppsala University in Sweden found that people who played the online game Bad News learned to recognize common misinformation strategies across cultures. Players in the simulation were tasked with amassing as many followers as possible and maintaining credibility while they spread fake news.

The researchers wrote that pre-bunking worked like medical immunization: "Pre-emptively warning and exposing people to weakened doses of misinformation can cultivate 'mental antibodies' against fake news."

Tech companies, academics and nongovernmental organizations fighting misinformation have the disadvantage of never knowing what lie will spread next. But Prof. Stephan Lewandowsky from the University of Bristol, a co-author of Wednesday's paper, said propaganda and lies were predictable, nearly always created from the same playbook.

"Fact checkers can only rebut a fraction of the falsehoods circulating online," Mr. Lewandowsky said in a statement. "We need to teach people to recognize the misinformation playbook, so they understand when they are being misled." ●

What readers want from social media in the future

By [Bina Venkataraman](#)

Columnist|Follow

Washington Post, March 29, 2023

Imagination is alive and well — at least outside Silicon Valley.
While many people today agree that Facebook and Twitter feel like toxic wastelands, not that many people have ideas for how to fix them. So we recently asked *you* to envision a better kind of social media in response to [an essay I wrote about the momentum that is building to reinvent online communities](#).
Real-world joy served as an inspiration for many of you who want to emulate your best embodied experiences online — the awe of traveling the world, the serendipity of stumbling into a conversation with strangers at a cafe or party. Others say the solution is more about gatekeeping to ban trolls and bots and having trusted people serve as conveners and moderators of online conversations.
Several of you are rolling up your sleeves and trying to build alternative online communities free from the advertising business model that beleaguers existing platforms. And a few of you think the answer lies in checking our own behavior online.

Here are some of the most poignant ideas we heard from readers:

Small is beautiful.

"Digital communities, like physical communities, benefit from a sense of shared responsibility, and that can only be created by erecting barriers to entry: it must be easier and more convenient for community members to contribute to the community and share in its benefits than nonmembers. … The best social networks will be what they always have been, since the dawn of the internet: relatively small, long-lasting affinity groups largely populated by people who have been there for years." — Alex Remington, *Washington, D.C.*

"I really enjoyed the early versions when it was like a wild cocktail party; you could share gardening tips in one corner, social justice posts in another, enviro/sustainability news in yet another. It felt like there were pockets to pique and feed various interests." — Jacqueline Church, *Boston*.

Change the rules of engagement.

"I believe conversations and postings on social media would become more factually accurate and less inflammatory if users are held accountable, either through legal or moral systems. … Why can't social media companies require verifiable identification of all subscribers? I must show my driver's license or some other ID along with a credit card to book a room or a flight, join many social organizations, and engage in many other activities. Why not this as well?" — Kenneth E. Gabler, *St. Marys, Pa.*

"A strictly peer-to-peer network in which our devices serve as social media servers and we are our own content moderators. This re-creates the standard human experience of interacting with those we like, in all the ways we like, but eliminates the for-profit business model, complete lack of control over personal data, and sociopathic billionaire aspects of current social media." — Wes Simonds, *Austin*.

Look to humans, not the technology.

"The element that is left out of the conversation regarding how to build a better social media are the users themselves. With an overwhelming amount of data available, the user has to be willing to do the work of questioning, researching and allowing their prejudices to be proven wrong in the process of that questioning. A public forum or town square without such participation is nothing more than hysteria that Mary Shelley described in 'Frankenstein' or Arthur Miller in 'The Crucible.' Our educational system does not address this element of critical thinking — in fact we are less and less willing to allow our children to participate in real questioning. As adults we choose to complain that we are not being spoon fed the truth. The bug in the program cannot ignore the user." — Leslie House, *Santa Fe, N.M.*

"It's important to … bring back the gray. We've become too 'digital human' and the temptation is to go further in that direction, where perhaps a new phase of embracing the best human characteristics and values is more important a direction." — Matthew Scott of play-human.com, *London*.

"We know what makes Facebook & Twitter popular is their ability to serve the base needs — sharing pictures of kids & pets and thought-broadcasting. On rare occasions do enough stars align where you get a compelling issue, and people work constructively together to come up with some positive responses? I'd say the problem is less technology than human nature. Perhaps also communities need to find and celebrate unsung civic all-stars rather than the rogues & influencers who command the most attention." — Jon Garfunkel, *New Castle, N.Y.*

●**AN interview of Amanda Gearing**

https://en.ejo.ch/media-economics/interview-using-digital-solutions-to-protect-the-practice-of-investigative-journalism

> International Consortium of Investigative Journalists

https://www.icij.org/

● **A Series of articles from The Conversation**

(part of their series on The Social Media Revolution

https://theconversation.com/au/topics/the-social-media-revolution-31890)

> How investigative journalists are using social media to uncover the truth

https://theconversation.com/how-investigative-journalists-are-using-social-media-to-uncover-the-truth-66393

> How social media is helping Australian journalists uncover stories hidden in plain sight

https://theconversation.com/how-social-media-is-helping-australian-journalists-uncover-stories-hidden-in-plain-sight-65794

https://duckduckgo.com/?q=how+online+papers+slate+salon+serve+journalism&atb=v366-1&ia=web

https://www.economist.com/briefing/2017/11/04/once-considered-a-boon-to-democracy-social-media-have-started-to-look-like-its-nemesis

Selection 5

PART 1 From Boon to Bane

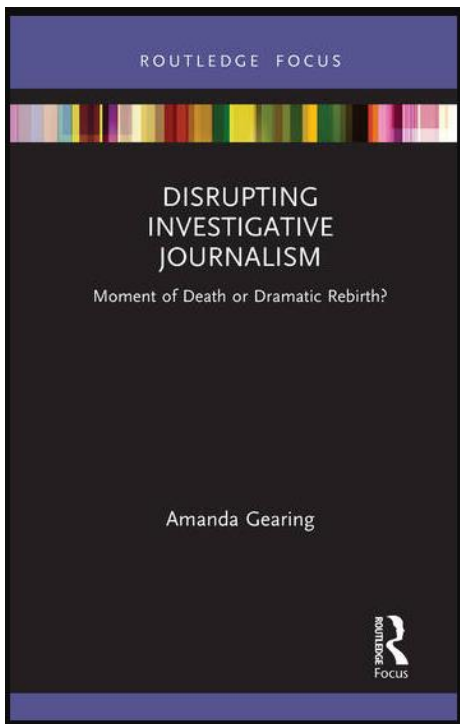## PART 2 The Plague of Misinformation – Journalism in the age of Post-Truth

https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2022/06/14/journalists-highly-concerned-about-misinformation-future-of-press-freedoms/

https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jul/12/how-technology-disrupted-the-truth

PART 3 From Bane to … boon???

https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2022/06/14/many-journalists-say-social-media-helps-at-work-but-most-decry-its-impact-on-journalism/

https://cpijournalism.org/social-media-online-tools/

This book makes the case for the enormous potential embodied in investigative journalism if reporters collaborate in the digital sphere and engage with emerging techniques and technologies.

Bringing together personal narratives from investigative journalists who have successfully found, verified and published stories using social media platforms and Web based communications, *Disrupting Investigative Journalism* explores the risks and benefits that come from this kind of digital collaboration. Citing how digital connection has enabled reporters around the world to form the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, which in turn led to such global news sensations as the Panama Papers and the Paradise Papers, this book makes a practical argument for how the daily work of investigative journalism can change to capture enormous latent potential.

This is a valuable text for students and scholars in the fields of investigative journalism, media and digital communication.

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Amanda Gearing is an award-winning investigative journalist, author and broadcaster. She holds a PhD in Investigative Journalism from Queensland University of Technology, Australia.

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> How social media is helping Australian journalists uncover stories hidden in plain sight

The long Read – How Technology Disrupted the Truth

Social media has swallowed the news – threatening the funding of public-interest reporting and ushering in an era when everyone has their own facts. But the consequences go far beyond journalism

The Guardian, by Katharine VinerTue 12 Jul 2016

Here is the Audio Long Read https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2016/jul/22/how-technology-disrupted-the-truth-podcast

One Monday morning last September, Britain woke to a depraved news story. The prime minister, David Cameron, had committed an "obscene act with a dead pig's head", according to the Daily Mail. "A distinguished Oxford contemporary claims Cameron once took part in an outrageous initiation ceremony at a Piers Gaveston event, involving a dead pig," the paper reported. Piers Gaveston is the name of a riotous Oxford university dining society; the authors of the story claimed their source was an MP, who said he had seen photographic evidence: "His extraordinary suggestion is that the future PM inserted a private part of his anatomy into the animal."

The story, extracted from a new biography of Cameron, sparked an immediate furore. It was gross, it was a great opportunity to humiliate an elitist prime minister, and many felt it rang true for a former member of the notorious Bullingdon Club. Within minutes, #Piggate and #Hameron were trending on Twitter, and even senior politicians joined the fun: Nicola Sturgeon said the allegations had "entertained the whole country", while Paddy Ashdown joked that Cameron was "hogging the headlines". At first, the BBC refused to mention the allegations, and 10 Downing Street said it would not "dignify" the story with a response – but soon it was forced to issue a denial. And so a powerful man was sexually shamed, in a way that had nothing to do with his divisive politics, and in a way he could never really respond to. But who cares? He could take it.

Then, after a full day of online merriment, something shocking happened. Isabel Oakeshott, the Daily Mail journalist who had co-written the biography with Lord Ashcroft, a billionaire businessman, went on TV and admitted that she did not know whether her huge, scandalous scoop was even true. Pressed to provide evidence for the sensational claim, Oakeshott admitted she had none.

"We couldn't get to the bottom of that source's allegations," she said on Channel 4 News. "So we merely reported the account that the source gave us … We don't say whether we believe it to be true." In other words, there was no evidence that the prime minister of the United Kingdom had once "inserted a private part of his anatomy" into the mouth of a dead pig – a story reported in dozens of newspapers and repeated in millions of tweets and Facebook updates, which many people presumably still believe to be true today.

Oakeshott went even further to absolve herself of any journalistic responsibility: "It's up to other people to decide whether they give it any credibility or not," she concluded. This was not, of course, the first time that outlandish claims were published on the basis of flimsy evidence, but this was an unusually brazen defence. It seemed that journalists were no longer required to believe their own stories to be true, nor, apparently, did they need to provide evidence. Instead it was up to the reader – who does not even know the identity of the source – to make up their own mind. But based on what? Gut instinct, intuition, mood?

Does the truth matter any more?

Nine months after Britain woke up giggling at Cameron's hypothetical porcine intimacies, the country arose on the morning of 24 June to the very real sight of the prime minister standing outside Downing Street at 8am, announcing his own resignation.

"The British people have voted to leave the European Union and their will must be respected," Cameron declared. "It was not a decision that was taken lightly, not least because so many things were said by so many different organisations about the significance of this decision. So there can be no doubt about the result."

But what soon became clear was that almost everything was still in doubt. At the end of a campaign that dominated the news for months, it was suddenly obvious that the winning side had no plan for how or when the UK would leave the EU – while the deceptive claims that carried the leave campaign to victory suddenly crumbled. At 6.31am on Friday 24 June, just over an hour after the result of the EU referendum had become clear, Ukip leader Nigel Farage conceded that a post-Brexit UK would not in fact have £350m a week spare to spend on the NHS – a key claim of Brexiteers that was even emblazoned on the Vote Leave campaign bus. A few hours later, the Tory MEP Daniel Hannan stated that immigration was not likely to be reduced – another key claim.

It was hardly the first time that politicians had failed to deliver what they promised, but it might have been the first time they admitted on the morning after victory that the promises had been false all along. This was the first major vote in the era of post-truth politics: the listless remain campaign attempted to fight fantasy with facts, but quickly found that the currency of fact had been badly debased.

The remain side's worrying facts and worried experts were dismissed as "Project Fear" – and quickly neutralised by opposing "facts": if 99 experts said the economy would crash and one disagreed, the BBC told us that each side had a different view of the situation. (This is a disastrous mistake that ends up obscuring truth, and echoes how some report climate change.) Michael Gove declared that "people in this country have had enough of experts" on Sky News. He also compared 10 Nobel prize-winning economists who signed an anti-Brexit letter to Nazi scientists loyal to Hitler.

It can become very difficult for anyone to tell the difference between facts that are true and 'facts' that are not

For months, the Eurosceptic press trumpeted every dubious claim and rubbished every expert warning, filling the front pages with too many confected anti-migrant headlines to count – many of them later quietly corrected in very small print. A week before the vote – on the same day Nigel Farage unveiled his inflammatory "Breaking Point" poster, and the Labour MP Jo Cox, who had campaigned tirelessly for refugees, was shot dead – the cover of the Daily Mail featured a picture of migrants in the back of a lorry entering the UK, with the headline "We are from Europe – let us in!" The next day, the Mail and the Sun, which also carried the story, were forced to admit that the stowaways were actually from Iraq and Kuwait.

The brazen disregard for facts did not stop after the referendum: just this weekend, the short-lived Conservative leadership candidate Andrea Leadsom, fresh from a starring role in the leave campaign, demonstrated the waning power of evidence. After telling the Times that being a mother would make her a better PM than her rival Theresa May, she cried "gutter journalism!" and accused the newspaper of misrepresenting her remarks – even though she said exactly that, clearly and definitively and on tape. Leadsom is a post-truth politician even about her own truths.

When a fact begins to resemble whatever you feel is true, it becomes very difficult for anyone to tell the difference between facts that are true and "facts" that are not. The leave campaign was well aware of this – and took full advantage, safe in the knowledge that the Advertising Standards Authority has no power to police political claims. A few days after the vote, Arron Banks, Ukip's largest donor and the main funder of the Leave.EU campaign, told the Guardian that his side knew all along that facts would not win the day. "It was taking an American-style media approach," said Banks. "What they said early on was 'Facts don't work', and that's it. The remain campaign featured fact, fact, fact, fact, fact. It just doesn't work. You have got to connect with people emotionally. It's the Trump success."

It was little surprise that some people were shocked after the result to discover that Brexit might have serious consequences and few of the promised benefits. When "facts don't work" and voters don't trust the media, everyone believes in their own "truth" – and the results, as we have just seen, can be devastating.

How did we end up here? And how do we fix it?

Twenty-five years after the first website went online, it is clear that we are living through a period of dizzying transition. For 500 years after Gutenberg, the dominant form of information was the printed page: knowledge was primarily delivered in a fixed format, one that encouraged readers to believe in stable and settled truths.

Now, we are caught in a series of confusing battles between opposing forces: between truth and falsehood, fact and rumour, kindness and cruelty; between the few and the many, the connected and the alienated; between the open platform of the web as its architects envisioned it and the gated enclosures of Facebook and other social networks; between an informed public and a misguided mob.

What is common to these struggles – and what makes their resolution an urgent matter – is that they all involve the diminishing status of truth. This does not mean that there are no truths. It simply means, as this year has made very

clear, that we cannot agree on what those truths are, and when there is no consensus about the truth and no way to achieve it, chaos soon follows.

Increasingly, what counts as a fact is merely a view that someone feels to be true – and technology has made it very easy for these "facts" to circulate with a speed and reach that was unimaginable in the Gutenberg era (or even a decade ago). A dubious story about Cameron and a pig appears in a tabloid one morning, and by noon, it has flown around the world on social media and turned up in trusted news sources everywhere. This may seem like a small matter, but its consequences are enormous.

In the digital age, it is easier than ever to publish false information, which is quickly shared and taken to be true

"The Truth", as Peter Chippindale and Chris Horrie wrote in Stick It Up Your Punter!, their history of the Sun newspaper, is a "bald statement which every newspaper prints at its peril". There are usually several conflicting truths on any given subject, but in the era of the printing press, words on a page nailed things down, whether they turned out to be true or not. The information felt like the truth, at least until the next day brought another update or a correction, and we all shared a common set of facts.

This settled "truth" was usually handed down from above: an established truth, often fixed in place by an establishment. This arrangement was not without flaws: too much of the press often exhibited a bias towards the status quo and a deference to authority, and it was prohibitively difficult for ordinary people to challenge the power of the press. Now, people distrust much of what is presented as fact – particularly if the facts in question are uncomfortable, or out of sync with their own views – and while some of that distrust is misplaced, some of it is not.

In the digital age, it is easier than ever to publish false information, which is quickly shared and taken to be true – as we often see in emergency situations, when news is breaking in real time. To pick one example among many, during the November 2015 Paris terror attacks, rumours quickly spread on social media that the Louvre and Pompidou Centre had been hit, and that François Hollande had suffered a stroke. Trusted news organisations are needed to debunk such tall tales.

Sometimes rumours like these spread out of panic, sometimes out of malice, and sometimes deliberate manipulation, in which a corporation or regime pays people to convey their message. Whatever the motive, falsehoods and facts now spread the same way, through what academics call an "information cascade". As the legal scholar and online-harassment expert Danielle Citron describes it, "people forward on what others think, even if the information is false, misleading or incomplete, because they think they have learned something valuable." This cycle repeats itself, and before you know it, the cascade has unstoppable momentum. You share a friend's post on Facebook, perhaps to show kinship or agreement or that you're "in the know", and thus you increase the visibility of their post to others.

Algorithms such as the one that powers Facebook's news feed are designed to give us more of what they think we want – which means that the version of the world we encounter every day in our own personal stream has been invisibly curated to reinforce our pre-existing beliefs. When Eli Pariser, the co-founder of Upworthy, coined the term "filter bubble" in 2011, he was talking about how the personalised web – and in particular Google's personalised search function, which means that no two people's Google searches are the same – means that we are less likely to be exposed to information that challenges us or broadens our worldview, and less likely to encounter facts that disprove false information that others have shared.

Pariser's plea, at the time, was that those running social media platforms should ensure that "their algorithms prioritise countervailing views and news that's important, not just the stuff that's most popular or most self-validating". But in less than five years, thanks to the incredible power of a few social platforms, the filter bubble that Pariser described has become much more extreme.

On the day after the EU referendum, in a Facebook post, the British internet activist and mySociety founder, Tom Steinberg, provided a vivid illustration of the power of the filter bubble – and the serious civic consequences for a world where information flows largely through social networks:

I am actively searching through Facebook for people celebrating the Brexit leave victory, but the filter bubble is SO strong, and extends SO far into things like Facebook's custom search that I can't find anyone who is happy *despite the fact that over half the country is clearly jubilant today* and despite the fact that I'm *actively* looking to hear what they are saying.

This echo-chamber problem is now SO severe and SO chronic that I can only beg any friends I have who actually work for Facebook and other major social media and technology to urgently tell their leaders that to not act on this problem

now is tantamount to actively supporting and funding the tearing apart of the fabric of our societies ... We're getting countries where one half just doesn't know anything at all about the other.

But asking technology companies to "do something" about the filter bubble presumes that this is a problem that can be easily fixed – rather than one baked into the very idea of social networks that are designed to give you what you and your friends want to see.

Facebook, which launched only in 2004, now has 1.6bn users worldwide. It has become the dominant way for people to find news on the internet – and in fact it is dominant in ways that would have been impossible to imagine in the newspaper era. As Emily Bell has written: "Social media hasn't just swallowed journalism, it has swallowed everything. It has swallowed political campaigns, banking systems, personal histories, the leisure industry, retail, even government and security."

Bell, the director of the Tow Centre for Digital Journalism at Columbia University – and a board member of the Scott Trust, which owns the Guardian – has outlined the seismic impact of social media for journalism. "Our news ecosystem has changed more dramatically in the past five years," she wrote in March, "than perhaps at any time in the past 500." The future of publishing is being put into the "hands of the few, who now control the destiny of the many". News publishers have lost control over the distribution of their journalism, which for many readers is now "filtered through algorithms and platforms which are opaque and unpredictable". This means that social media companies have become overwhelmingly powerful in determining what we read – and enormously profitable from the monetisation of other people's work. As Bell notes: "There is a far greater concentration of power in this respect than there has ever been in the past."

Publications curated by editors have in many cases been replaced by a stream of information chosen by friends, contacts and family, processed by secret algorithms. The old idea of a wide-open web – where hyperlinks from site to site created a non-hierarchical and decentralised network of information – has been largely supplanted by platforms designed to maximise your time within their walls, some of which (such as Instagram and Snapchat) do not allow outward links at all.

Many people, in fact, especially teenagers, now spend more and more of their time on closed chat apps, which allow users to create groups to share messages privately – perhaps because young people, who are most likely to have faced harassment online, are seeking more carefully protected social spaces. But the closed space of a chat app is an even more restrictive silo than the walled garden of Facebook or other social networks.

As the pioneering Iranian blogger Hossein Derakhshan, who was imprisoned in Tehran for six years for his online activity, wrote in the Guardian earlier this year, the "diversity that the world wide web had originally envisioned" has given way to "the centralisation of information" inside a select few social networks – and the end result is "making us all less powerful in relation to government and corporations".

Of course, Facebook does not decide what you read – at least not in the traditional sense of making decisions – and nor does it dictate what news organisations produce. But when one platform becomes the dominant source for accessing information, news organisations will often tailor their own work to the demands of this new medium. (The most visible evidence of Facebook's influence on journalism is the panic that accompanies any change in the news feed algorithm that threatens to reduce the page views sent to publishers.)

In the last few years, many news organisations have steered themselves away from public-interest journalism and toward junk-food news, chasing page views in the vain hope of attracting clicks and advertising (or investment) – but like junk food, you hate yourself when you've gorged on it. The most extreme manifestation of this phenomenon has been the creation of fake news farms, which attract traffic with false reports that are designed to look like real news, and are therefore widely shared on social networks. But the same principle applies to news that is misleading or sensationally dishonest, even if it wasn't created to deceive: the new measure of value for too many news organisations is virality rather than truth or quality.

Of course, journalists have got things wrong in the past – either by mistake or prejudice or sometimes by intent. (Freddie Starr probably didn't eat a hamster.) So it would be a mistake to think this is a new phenomenon of the digital age. But what is new and significant is that today, rumours and lies are read just as widely as copper-bottomed facts – and often more widely, because they are wilder than reality and more exciting to share. The cynicism of this approach was expressed most nakedly by Neetzan Zimmerman, formerly employed by Gawker as a specialist in high-traffic viral stories. "Nowadays it's not important if a story's real," he said in 2014. "The only thing that really matters is whether

people click on it." Facts, he suggested, are over; they are a relic from the age of the printing press, when readers had no choice. He continued: "If a person is not sharing a news story, it is, at its core, not news."

The increasing prevalence of this approach suggests that we are in the midst of a fundamental change in the values of journalism – a consumerist shift. Instead of strengthening social bonds, or creating an informed public, or the idea of news as a civic good, a democratic necessity, it creates gangs, which spread instant falsehoods that fit their views, reinforcing each other's beliefs, driving each other deeper into shared opinions, rather than established facts.

But the trouble is that the business model of most digital news organisations is based around clicks. News media around the world has reached a fever-pitch of frenzied binge-publishing, in order to scrape up digital advertising's pennies and cents. (And there's not much advertising to be got: in the first quarter of 2016, 85 cents of every new dollar spent in the US on online advertising went to Google and Facebook. That used to go to news publishers.)

In the news feed on your phone, all stories look the same – whether they come from a credible source or not. And, increasingly, otherwise-credible sources are also publishing false, misleading, or deliberately outrageous stories. "Clickbait is king, so newsrooms will uncritically print some of the worst stuff out there, which lends legitimacy to bullshit," said Brooke Binkowski, an editor at the debunking website Snopes, in an interview with the Guardian in April. "Not all newsrooms are like this, but a lot of them are."

We should be careful not to dismiss anything with an appealing digital headline as clickbait – appealing headlines are a good thing, if they lead the reader to quality journalism, both serious and not. My belief is that what distinguishes good journalism from poor journalism is labour: the journalism that people value the most is that for which they can tell someone has put in a lot of work – where they can feel the effort that has been expended on their behalf, over tasks big or small, important or entertaining. It is the reverse of so-called "churnalism", the endless recycling of other people's stories for clicks.

The digital advertising model doesn't currently discriminate between true or not true, just big or small. As the American political reporter Dave Weigel wrote in the wake of a hoax story that became a viral hit all the way back in 2013: "'Too good to check' used to be a warning to newspaper editors not to jump on bullshit stories. Now it's a business model."

A news-publishing industry desperately chasing down every cheap click doesn't sound like an industry in a position of strength, and indeed, news publishing as a business is in trouble. The shift to digital publishing has been a thrilling development for journalism – as I said in my 2013 AN Smith lecture at the University of Melbourne, "The Rise of the Reader", it has induced "a fundamental redrawing of journalists' relationship with our audience, how we think about our readers, our perception of our role in society, our status". It has meant we have found new ways to get stories – from our audience, from data, from social media. It has given us new ways to tell stories – with interactive technologies and now with virtual reality. It has given us new ways to distribute our journalism, to find new readers in surprising places; and it has given us new ways to engage with our audiences, opening ourselves up to challenge and debate.

But while the possibilities for journalism have been strengthened by the digital developments of the last few years, the business model is under grave threat, because no matter how many clicks you get, it will never be enough. And if you charge readers to access your journalism you have a big challenge to persuade the digital consumer who is used to getting information for free to part with their cash.

News publishers everywhere are seeing profits and revenue drop dramatically. If you want a stark illustration of the new realities of digital media, consider the first-quarter financial results announced by the New York Times and Facebook within a week of one another earlier this year. The New York Times announced that its operating profits had fallen by 13%, to $51.5m – healthier than most of the rest of the publishing industry, but quite a drop. Facebook, meanwhile, revealed that its net income had tripled in the same period – to a quite staggering $1.51bn.

Many journalists have lost their jobs in the past decade. The number of journalists in the UK shrank by up to one-third between 2001 and 2010; US newsrooms declined by a similar amount between 2006 and 2013. In Australia, there was a 20% cut in the journalistic workforce between 2012 and 2014 alone. Earlier this year, at the Guardian we announced that we would need to lose 100 journalistic positions. In March, the Independent ceased existing as a print newspaper. Since 2005, according to research by Press Gazette, the number of local newspapers in the UK has fallen by 181 – again, not because of a problem with journalism, but because of a problem with funding it.

But journalists losing their jobs is not simply a problem for journalists: it has a damaging impact on the entire culture. As the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas warned, back in 2007: "When reorganisation and cost-cutting in this core area jeopardise accustomed journalistic standards, it hits at the very heart of the political public sphere. Because, without the flow of information gained through extensive research, and without the stimulation of arguments based on an expertise that doesn't come cheap, public communication loses its discursive vitality. The public media would then cease to resist populist tendencies, and could no longer fulfil the function it should in the context of a democratic constitutional state."

Perhaps, then, the focus of the news industry needs to turn to commercial innovation: how to rescue the funding of journalism, which is what is under threat. Journalism has seen dramatic innovation in the last two digital decades, but business models have not. In the words of my colleague Mary Hamilton, the Guardian's executive editor for audience: "We've transformed everything about our journalism and not enough about our businesses."

The impact on journalism of the crisis in the business model is that, in chasing down cheap clicks at the expense of accuracy and veracity, news organisations undermine the very reason they exist: to find things out and tell readers the truth – to report, report, report.

Many newsrooms are in danger of losing what matters most about journalism: the valuable, civic, pounding-the-streets, sifting-the-database, asking-challenging-questions hard graft of uncovering things that someone doesn't want you to know. Serious, public-interest journalism is demanding, and there is more of a need for it than ever. It helps keep the powerful honest; it helps people make sense of the world and their place in it. Facts and reliable information are essential for the functioning of democracy – and the digital era has made that even more obvious.

But we must not allow the chaos of the present to cast the past in a rosy light – as can be seen from the recent resolution to a tragedy that became one of the darkest moments in the history of British journalism. At the end of April, a two-year-long inquest ruled that the 96 people who died in the Hillsborough disaster in 1989 had been unlawfully killed and had not contributed to the dangerous situation at the football ground. The verdict was the culmination of an indefatigable 27-year-campaign by the victims' families, whose case was reported for two decades with great detail and sensitivity by Guardian journalist David Conn. His journalism helped uncover the real truth about what happened at Hillsborough, and the subsequent cover-up by the police – a classic example of a reporter holding the powerful to account on behalf of the less powerful.

What the families had been campaigning against for nearly three decades was a lie put into circulation by the Sun. The tabloid's aggressive rightwing editor, Kelvin MacKenzie, blamed the fans for the disaster, suggesting they had forced their way into the ground without tickets – a claim later revealed to be false. According to Horrie and Chippindale's history of The Sun, MacKenzie overruled his own reporter and put the words "THE TRUTH" on the front page, alleging that Liverpool fans were drunk, that they picked the pockets of victims, that they punched, kicked and urinated on police officers, that they shouted that they wanted sex with a dead female victim. The fans, said a "high-ranking police officer", were "acting like animals". The story, as Chippindale and Horrie write, is a "classic smear", free of any attributable evidence and "precisely fitting MacKenzie's formula by publicising the half-baked ignorant prejudice being voiced all over the country".

It is hard to imagine that Hillsborough could happen now: if 96 people were crushed to death in front of 53,000 smartphones, with photographs and eyewitness accounts all posted to social media, would it have taken so long for the truth to come out? Today, the police – or Kelvin MacKenzie – would not have been able to lie so blatantly and for so long.

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he truth is a struggle. It takes hard graft. But the struggle is worth it: traditional news values are important and they matter and they are worth defending. The digital revolution has meant that journalists – rightly, in my view – are more accountable to their audience. And as the Hillsborough story shows, the old media were certainly capable of perpetrating appalling falsehoods, which could take years to unravel. Some of the old hierarchies have been decisively undermined, which has led to a more open debate and a more substantial challenge to the old elites whose interests often dominated the media. But the age of relentless and instant information – and uncertain truths – can be overwhelming. We career from outrage to outrage, but forget each one very quickly: it's doomsday every afternoon.

The challenge for journalism today is to establish what role journalistic organisations still play in public discourse

At the same time, the levelling of the information landscape has unleashed new torrents of racism and sexism and new means of shaming and harassment, suggesting a world in which the loudest and crudest arguments will prevail. It is an atmosphere that has proved particularly hostile to women and people of colour, revealing that the inequalities of the physical world are reproduced all too easily in online spaces. The Guardian is not immune – which is why one of my first initiatives as editor-in-chief was to launch the Web We Want project, in order to combat a general culture of online abuse and ask how we as an institution can foster better and more civil conversations on the web.

Above all, the challenge for journalism today is not simply technological innovation or the creation of new business models. It is to establish what role journalistic organisations still play in a public discourse that has become impossibly fragmented and radically destabilised. The stunning political developments of the past year – including the vote for Brexit and the emergence of Donald Trump as the Republican candidate for the US presidency – are not simply the byproducts of a resurgent populism or the revolt of those left behind by global capitalism.

As the academic Zeynep Tufekci argued in an essay earlier this year, the rise of Trump "is actually a symptom of the mass media's growing weakness, especially in controlling the limits of what it is acceptable to say". (A similar case could be made for the Brexit campaign.) "For decades, journalists at major media organisations acted as gatekeepers who passed judgment on what ideas could be publicly discussed, and what was considered too radical," Tufekci wrote. The weakening of these gatekeepers is both positive and negative; there are opportunities and there are dangers.

As we can see from the past, the old gatekeepers were also capable of great harm, and they were often imperious in refusing space to arguments they deemed outside the mainstream political consensus. But without some form of consensus, it is hard for any truth to take hold. The decline of the gatekeepers has given Trump space to raise formerly taboo subjects, such as the cost of a global free-trade regime that benefits corporations rather than workers, an issue that American elites and much of the media had long dismissed – as well as, more obviously, allowing his outrageous lies to flourish.

When the prevailing mood is anti-elite and anti-authority, trust in big institutions, including the media, begins to crumble.

I believe that a strong journalistic culture is worth fighting for. So is a business model that serves and rewards media organisations that put the search for truth at the heart of everything – building an informed, active public that scrutinises the powerful, not an ill-informed, reactionary gang that attacks the vulnerable. Traditional news values must be embraced and celebrated: reporting, verifying, gathering together eyewitness statements, making a serious attempt to discover what really happened.

We are privileged to live in an era when we can use many new technologies – and the help of our audience – to do that. But we must also grapple with the issues underpinning digital culture, and realise that the shift from print to digital media was never just about technology. We must also address the new power dynamics that these changes have created. Technology and media do not exist in isolation – they help shape society, just as they are shaped by it in turn. That means engaging with people as civic actors, citizens, equals. It is about holding power to account, fighting for a public space, and taking responsibility for creating the kind of world we want to live in.