

Can Democracy Work Without Journalism? With the US Election Upon Us, We May Be About to Find Out

By Margaret Simons, *The Guardian*, November 3rd, 2024

More than ever before, the people who decide the election will be those who are least engaged with professional news media. Forty-three per cent of US citizens avoid the news, according to the latest Digital News Report. Most of these people nevertheless encounter some news, coming at them, either partisanly motivated, or funded by advertising – which means heavy with sensationalism and clickbait. It is these low news consumers on which the campaigning candidates are concentrating, and on which the result of the election depends.

Traditionally, the journalistic mission has included making the important understandable, seeking to engage the disengaged. But while this still forms part of the rhetoric of the profession, the truth is that most serious news organisations publishing political news are not serving the politically disengaged.

All this challenges our conventional ideas about the connections between democracy and journalism, which are not as indivisible as the journalism profession suggests. Ancient Greece had democracy but no journalism. Al Jazeera provides journalism, but has its headquarters in non-democratic Qatar.

And, in today's western democracies, we now have political journalism that risks no longer being mass media, but elite media. And then on top of that, playing to the mass, we have all kinds of content, much of it partisan, distorted and sometimes straight-out lies.

In the last US election in 2020, we worried about misinformation and conspiracy theories spread through social media. Facebook and Twitter, for all their faults, did carry content from mainstream media outlets to new audiences. But now, increasingly, it is podcasters and vodcasters and influencers who reach new audiences on social media.

Traditional news media outlets tend to blame social media for the spread of misinformation and the undermining of quality journalism. But that is only partly right.

Surveys in Australia and the USA have shown that mainstream news media was in a crisis of trust from at least the 1970s, long before the internet. It was therefore in rotten shape to respond to the challenges of the means of publication being in many more hands.

Meanwhile, a recent research paper published in *Nature* suggests, based on a survey, that fake news and misinformation is not as influential as we may think.

The survey showed that most people have low exposure to false and inflammatory content, and they tend to distrust it. However a narrow, partisan fringe seeks it out, believing content that confirms already hard-set views.

This suggests that political partisanship drives consumption of misinformation at least as much as the other way round.

The Reuters Digital News Media survey shows that countries that have strong investment in public service media – such as the public broadcasters of the BBC in Britain and the ABC in Australia - have much higher rates of engagement with news and more political engagement. But that doesn't apply to the USA, where public broadcasting is tiny.

With the sands shifting beneath us, if we want voters to be well informed, we have to find a way of financially supporting and reinvigorating the journalistic mission – beyond internal chatter among an elite.