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Give me the press barons any day

By Tim Luckhurst

When Twitter was new and Snapchat hadn't been invented, optimism abounded concerning journalism's future in the internet age. Among the modish pearls of wisdom cast before us by seers were Stephen Moss and Loris Luyendijk's vision of a world of multiple online 'agoras' (an agora was a place for assembly and debate in ancient Greece); Seth Lewis, an American academic, imagined 'vast new opportunities for the formerly atomized audience to participate on their terms, connect and communicate horizontally with each other, and do so in a way that creates value through collective intelligence and contributions.'

Such good folk did not imagine torrents of banal selfies, cat videos and emojis. Their talk of 'citizen journalists' and the 'wisdom of crowds' revealed that their real ambition was for political and cultural transformation. They hoped the internet would liberate citizens to destroy big, professional media organisations. Messrs Murdoch, Rothermere, Lebedev and Barclay would fade away. In their place would come public-spirited, not-for-profit journalism that, somehow, would be sufficiently well funded to speak truth to power. Freed from the shackles imposed by editorial direction and professional ethics,

amateur reporters would spontaneously combine to conjure a new world of impeccable virtue.

I feared it was nonsense before colossi such as Facebook demonstrated their reluctance to accept any responsibility for reporting the world accurately. Citizen journalism sounded as absurd as citizen dentistry. Who, I wondered, would attend courts or council meetings and provide accurate, balanced accounts free of charge? Who would travel to foreign wars at their own expense and offer calm, diligent eyewitness testimony? As for the ‘wisdom of crowds’, I was reminded of George Orwell’s warning that ‘political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.’

And so it has proved. We know now that ‘citizen journalists’ who will work to a professional standard without demanding pay and expenses are as rare as J.K. Rowling’s fantastic beasts; and, she has not provided a guide to finding them. A few ideological obsessives may attend council meetings to rant about those with whom they disagree. Zealous partisans will always provide self-serving propaganda from war zones. But diligent fact-based reporting? Well, that requires dedication and skill. You may need shorthand too.

As the death of well-funded professional reporting begins to destroy the evidence base on which informed debate must depend, lies swarm in to replace it.

Newspaper closures and reduced staffing in broadcast newsrooms do nothing to liberate us. On the contrary, they threaten our democracy by leaving us vulnerable to deliberate misinformation. Already, some local court cases and important political decisions are taken with no journalists present to report, challenge and inform. The delusion that such reporters have been replaced by volunteers does not survive the barest scrutiny.

My colleague Rob Bailey, Lecturer in Reporting at the University of Kent, explored the coverage of local politics by volunteers in his essay *Citizen journalist or citizen agitator? Establishing Twitter in Medway's public sphere* (Ethical Space, 2015). Through study of an experiment with a bloggers' bench to supplement professional news reporting, Rob showed that so-called 'citizen journalists' did not even think of themselves as reporters. They felt no compulsion to attend council meetings and, on the rare occasion when they did turn up, did not attempt a balanced account of proceedings. Citizens relying on their reports would have remained entirely ignorant about key decisions and important facts.

On a broader stage, we have seen the myth of citizen journalism collapse in chaos. American voters convinced by Donald Trump's adoption of a traditionally socialist critique of corporate media could not turn instead to honest, accurate amateur reporting. They listened only to the echo of like-minded prejudices on Twitter and

Facebook. This suited Trump's reactionary agenda perfectly. The replacement of professional, capitalist media works equally well for Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin. Granted, the Turkish President and his Russian counterpart reinforce their hostility to professional scrutiny with ruthless suppression of dissent, but Mr Trump has shown that such old-fashioned thuggery is unnecessary. In the social media age, a few choice insults directed at journalists during White House press conferences and rallies will suffice: there is no need to repeal the first amendment. His supporters will believe utter nonsense simply because their friends share it. They want it to be true.

A new generation of twenty-first century leaders demonstrates daily the ease with which big lies may flourish in the absence of independent editorial scrutiny. Some readers may share my concern that our Brexit referendum was conducted in a similarly distorted atmosphere. At very least we must question the assumption that crowds are automatically wise. They are equally prone to displaying what Tennyson called 'the red fool fury of the Seine': his description of mob violence in revolutionary France.

Note, please, that my criticism is not of technology. The internet is not intrinsically immoral. It can help journalists to do important, socially responsible work. My concern is that human reaction to its use as a medium for communication threatens vast damage to journalism

as a profession. This in turn threatens to destroy many of the professionally edited, mass media outlets which, throughout the era of democracy, have provided citizens with the information they need to make informed choices. British voters have not experienced democracy without a plural and diverse professional media capable of playing the role of a fourth estate. Astonishingly, too many ostensibly well-intentioned opponents of everything Messrs Trump, Putin and Le Pen believe, appear to think they should.

Part of my concern about journalism's future has been aroused by my experience of the teaching of students at British universities. In recent decades, thousands of young people have been encouraged to believe that the internet will liberate them from the ideological bias of capitalist media companies. As early as the 1960s, their predecessors were taught a version of this theory which focused on media ownership and the alleged power of large-scale professional news organisations to promote the interests of the privileged at the expense of the majority.

Such ideologically predisposed teaching is not always balanced by a competing account of professional journalism. It should be accompanied by explanation of the liberal belief that a diverse range of privately-owned news organisations operating in a free market will produce a rich supply of high-quality reporting. The

history of British democracy suggests that such reporting has helped Britons to hold power to account throughout the era of universal suffrage. Where it was offered, the radical critique was often ahistorical. In the age of social media, it has become preposterous.

To assert that any newspaper proprietor could irreversibly distort the news agenda is always hyperbolic. In a market in which the *Daily Telegraph* has rarely agreed with *The Guardian* or the *Daily Mail* with the *Daily Mirror*, the sentient reader has long been free to find an alternative account. And British broadcasters have been ideologically neutral for almost as long as our newspapers have been ideologically committed. To find facts, a reader who suspects their newspaper of bias need only check its account against those offered by the BBC, Sky News or ITN. My own research suggests that British citizens knew their newspapers were partisan long before media studies was invented. They knew how to compare versions of stories. They understood that broadcasters would give them bare facts while newspapers would offer an interpretation.

My certainty that readers are less gullible than radical critiques of the mainstream media allow has grown stronger throughout my second career as an academic. My respect for professional reporters has grown too. Unfortunately, consumption of professional reporting has fallen off a cliff. Before the Second World War, virtually every British family took one of the popular

national dailies and broadsheet sales were buoyant. Circulations continued to rise during the war and did not peak until the 1950s. Throughout the last century, journalists consistently informed their readers, challenged authority and tested the grounds for consensus. Crimes such as phone hacking and invasion of privacy are grave exceptions, not every day fare.

But our modern world is complex to an unprecedented extent and dangerously unstable. More than ever, citizens now need ethical professional journalists to provide an explanatory narrative and expose wrongdoing. Instead they have vast social media companies which, in the wise words of Emily Bell of Columbia University, have ‘swallowed journalism’, and put ‘the future of our publishing ecosystem into the hands of a few, who now control the destiny of many.’ And for the avoidance of doubt, Professor Bell is not referring to Paul Dacre or Rupert Murdoch. She is talking about companies such as Facebook, Google and Twitter. These pose a truly existential threat to journalism and its ability to serve democracy in a way private media owners do not and never could.

Granted, we still have professional news organisations. But the print editions of our great newspapers have suffered precipitate circulation declines. At the same time, the advertising revenue they hoped to acquire through the launch of online editions is being stolen ruthlessly by social media giants. These behemoths,

which profit greatly by linking to the work of professional journalists, are ruthlessly undermining the economics of professional journalism while blithely claiming to enhance our access to it. Rather than encouraging users to think about public affairs, they facilitate an entirely solipsistic lifestyle.

This, not the unreal and outdated agenda raised by the Leveson Inquiry and Hacked Off, is the real crisis facing journalism. It has surfaced in the surge of noise and fury surrounding fake news. But old delusions die hard. There has been too little effort to understand why deliberate falsehoods now pose such a grave threat to electoral processes and democratic institutions.

Fake news is not new. The Zinoviev Letter which was splashed across the front page of the *Daily Mail* on 25 October 1924 was a classic example published sixty years before anyone had heard of the internet. Forged, probably by British intelligence officers, it was leaked to the Conservative Party. It purported to prove that the Labour Party was subject to direct control by the USSR and under orders to provoke a bloody civil war. Four days later, Labour lost the general election by a landslide. The Hitler Dairies, published by the *Sunday Times* in 1983, were an even more elaborate forgery.

Such fakery has always had the potential to deceive journalists, but it used to take immense efforts and it could only mislead readers if it also fooled an editor and

a proprietor. Today, less elaborate inventions calculated to serve dishonest purposes whether political or commercial can reach the citizen unmediated. And, because so few citizens read newspapers or consume factual news in any form, they have an increased chance of succeeding.

What can be done? Telling social media users that they are idiots to mistake the freedom to bleat in an echo chamber for the ability to hold power to account is not enough. And, while serious criticism of the social media giants' irresponsible attitude towards journalism and freedom of speech is necessary, it is not sufficient. Democratic governments must work together to devise means by which these companies can be regulated in the public interest. If broadcasting, unlike newspapers, can sensibly be regulated in a democracy, the same logic must apply to the dominant forces in social media.

Beyond these steps, a plea to my colleagues in British universities. Our students deserve to understand the ways in which bad journalism can harm blameless individuals and corrupt public debate. They urgently need to understand the many ways in which journalism has served the public interest and continues to serve it. The time has come to celebrate professional journalism's achievements and to acknowledge the commitment and expertise of privately-owned media companies. We must recognise that there is no plausible alternative to well-funded professional reporting. To rely on

volunteers would destroy the evidence on which informed debate depends. Perhaps we might also admit that such reporting is done extremely well in newspapers of left and right and by popular titles as well as those written predominantly for graduates. It would be nice to see colleagues reading the *Daily Mail* as well as *The Guardian*. I encourage my students to enjoy both.

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