

From the Ashes: Imagining a Post-Commercial Future for Media

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With Trump-era fascistic tendencies receding into the past (though still ever present), a reckoning of the structural conditions that enabled their ascendance is overdue. Degraded information and communication systems were not the sole factor in escalating what is sometimes euphemistically referred to as “democratic backsliding” (Bermeo, 2016), but media institutions—from Fox News to Facebook—played a contributing role. They amplified election-theft conspiracy theories and whipped up long-standing right-wing prejudices and grievances. At the same time, a devastated local news landscape—combined with an extremely commercialized, ratings-driven national media system fixating on the “Trump Show”—provided fertile ground for dangerous discourses to take root.

While these structural pathologies certainly predated Trump (Pickard, 2017), it is important to recognize how his administration helped accelerate various media-related crises that produced hospitable conditions for fascistic movements. These same conditions—an overly commercialized media system, the collapse of local journalism, monopolistic media firms—are still very much in effect and, in most cases, continuing to worsen. In envisioning a better future, we must acknowledge that our media system needs more than repair and restoration; it requires a structural transformation from the ground up.

My purpose here is to assess the Trump-era wreckage before presenting useful frameworks for understanding the structural nature of ongoing crises. I conclude with a discussion regarding the prerequisites for a post-commercial media system. The analysis is US-focused but has clear implications for democratic societies around the world.

Assessing the damage

Trump’s populist anti-monopoly rhetoric notwithstanding, his administration was quite generous toward large media firms. Under his watch, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) jettisoned media ownership restrictions and broadband protections. By throwing out Title II protections, the Trump-appointed FCC Chairman Ajit Pai killed the immensely popular “net neutrality” rule and rendered the FCC largely powerless in regulating the broadband cartel that provides Americans with over-priced and unreliable internet services (Pickard and Berman, 2019). During his FCC tenure, Pai essentially performed customer service for telecom and media oligopolists, from relaxing media ownership restrictions to ushering in mergers.

Such policy actions were harmful to democracy, but policy *inaction* in the face of ongoing systemic market failures caused even more damage. While debates over platform regulation did gain some bipartisan attention from lawmakers (e.g., Nadler and Cicilline, 2020), other systemic crises were ignored, and policy interventions never enacted. This ongoing policy failure allowed unfettered commercial pressures to destroy more journalism than Trump and his cronies could ever fantasize of doing.

The scope of this damage is difficult to measure, but various data points are illustrative. Over the past two decades, the newspaper industry has lost well over 50% of its work force, tens of billions of dollars, and more than 2,000 papers. This erosion has led to growing news deserts, with around 1,800 communities lacking access to any local news coverage whatsoever (Abernathy, 2000). Even among remaining newspapers, research shows that a shockingly small portion of content is actually local (Napoli et al., 2018).

These growing news divides map onto pre-existing structural inequalities that disproportionately harm lower socio-economic groups. Low-income communities are more likely to lie within news deserts (Stonbely, 2020), and poor people are more vulnerable to informational disparities (Hamilton and Morgan, 2018). Research also suggests that newspaper publishers have long redlined communities of color (Williams, 2018), as have telecommunication networks (Pickard and Berman, 2019). Indeed, history shows that racial inequalities are baked into the commercial news media model itself (Media Reparations, 2020).

A racial capitalist critique of media

To realize age-old democratic ideals for the media, we must denaturalize commercial media's root business model and change the common sense of media governance. This requires an honest appraisal of capitalism's role in our news and information systems. Yet capitalism is often the last culprit to be scrutinized, if at all. Despite the recent tendency to link the word with other formulations—"surveillance capitalism," "platform capitalism," and the like—core capitalist logics are often insufficiently interrogated. Such terms suggest that our real problem lies with a particularly virulent kind of capitalism that emerged only recently with the rise of voracious digital corporations.

One exception to this trend of overlooking capitalism in the broader sense is the critical paradigm referred to as "racial capitalism" (for an overview, see Burden-Stelly, 2020). This potentially productive, and thus far under-explored, framework for bringing key power relationships to light draws from historians who show that capitalism's global hegemony was impossible without overtly racist practices, such as chattel slavery and the African slave trade. Moreover, this analysis demonstrates how racist and classist structures are intertwined and deeply embedded within core infrastructures, including our news and information systems.

Applying this critical framework to communication and media infrastructures exposes their fundamental flaws. In the United States, commercial news media combined with systemic racism to produce four general racist patterns: *ownership* (lack of black, indigenous, and people of color [BIPOC]-owned media); *representation* (omission, grotesque misrepresentation, and algorithmic racism as demonstrated by Cottom, 2020); *access* (various kinds of exclusion, including redlining and advertising-driven censorship); and *participation* (the exclusion of non-white journalists and media makers). Together, these biases in commercial media systems have, over generations,

contributed to various kinds of erasures and violence against communities of color in news coverage, informational access, and media production.

Ultimately, the critical framework of racial capitalism illuminates how an unregulated, extremely commercialized media system allows racist and fascist pathologies to flourish. It also suggests that our best defense against such pathologies is to invest in public media infrastructures that are democratically governed and locally owned. My previous work posited a new “public media center” as an ideal model (2020a). In what follows, I sketch out how we might achieve such a utopian vision.

Toward a post-commercial model

To confront the commercial journalism crisis, democratic societies must strike at the structural roots of the problem and not just surface-level symptoms. It is now glaringly obvious that no purely commercial model can support the journalism we need. But for too long, discursive impediments associated with the four “isms”—corporate libertarianism, first amendment absolutism, market fundamentalism, and techno utopianism (Pickard, 2020b)—have perpetuated policy failure.

While deficiencies of a capitalist-driven media have existed to varying degrees since the dawn of the hyper-commercialized press (Baldastry, 1992; McChesney, 2004), long-standing tensions have metastasized now that the advertising-based revenue model is collapsing (Pickard, 2020a). If we truly believe that democracy requires a functional press system, we must seek out non market means of support. This calls for a two-pronged approach.

First, it is necessary to salvage good assets from bad owners and return local news institutions to the communities they purportedly serve. This requires that failing for-profit outlets be transitioned into community-owned nonprofits. While there has been progressive movement on this front—for example, the *Salt Lake Tribune* converting to a nonprofit, Philadelphia newspapers transitioning to a public benefit corporation (a kind of low-profit, hybrid model), and a nonprofit consortium buying up 24 community newspapers in Colorado—these are still relatively isolated cases. Moreover, such “replanting” (Waldman, 2020) does not ensure service to communities that have already lost their local journalism or were never well-served by a commercial media system in the first place. This unevenness holds true for the many nonprofit experiments taking root across the country—a hopeful and praiseworthy sign, but ultimately insufficient given the scope of the structural journalism crisis.

A second, more systemic approach is to provide *public* alternatives to the failing commercial system. Built upon already-existing public infrastructures ranging from post offices to libraries to public broadcasting stations, a public media model must be guided by a universal service mission and democratic principles of governance. An autonomous fund, which I have detailed previously (Pickard, 2020a), could help transition struggling commercial papers to nonprofits. This would also provide public service journalism to under-served areas, especially communities of color. In short, we should strive to support a “public media center” in every community.

A growing number of historical and international case studies within communication scholarship demonstrate the significant social benefits of traditional public broadcasting systems compared to commercial/private news (Pickard, 2020a). Some countries’ public media systems are increasingly moving into the gaps being left by receding print news media—as is evident in the United Kingdom and New Zealand with their “local democracy reporting” programs (BBC, RNZ). However, other countries often are prevented by norms or laws from competing with legacy

newspaper publishers. Addressing local journalism crises and unmet information needs will require a paradigm shift in how we understand the role of public media in democratic societies.

Reinventing public media for the digital age requires structural reform beyond bolstering already-existing public broadcasting stations associated with the likes of National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service. Rather, this infrastructure could serve as an initial foundation for creating a post-commercial media system that democratizes news production and establishes robust local institutions that can withstand market failure. Most importantly, public media should be federally guaranteed but locally owned and controlled. In other words, *democratized*. This means that significant sectors of the media should be removed from the market entirely. Public goods, after all, were never meant to be treated as simple commodities that rise and fall according to their profitability.

Permanent support for a well-funded network of Public Media Centers could help guarantee universal access to a baseline level of quality news and information for *all* members of society. This “public option” for journalism can address commercial media’s endemic problems, from market failures to elite capture. Furthermore, a well-resourced public media system offers numerous indirect benefits and positive externalities, from encouraging media pluralism to pressuring commercial competitors to act responsibly.

Such proposals for public media subsidies are typically met with pushback from across the ideological spectrum—especially regarding their reliance on government funding. But public media are not synonymous with state media and government support should not automatically translate to government ownership and control. An ironclad rule must be that public media funding remains viewpoint and content neutral, with government censorship strictly forbidden. Fortunately, structural safeguards can preempt such hazards and, to varying degrees, democracies around the world have already created robust and independent public media systems (Pickard and Neff, 2021).

While public media systems are imperfect and the process for reinventing them inherently messy, it is clear by now what happens if we do not build noncommercial alternatives. The market, never a neutral arbiter, will continue to eviscerate local journalism. There is a stark choice here: either we publicly fund media, or we consign entire communities and regions to a future of news deserts and informational redlining. If we are serious about contesting fascism, racism, and other social pathologies in our news and information systems, then we must finally sunder journalism from the market and de-commodify it. Otherwise, we reap what we sow.

Author bio

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