

From the editor: it's time to step up, free press needs allies

Written by Misha Ketchell, Editor, The Conversation

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We live in a time when the bullying of journalists has become a casual pastime for the president of the U.S. When journalists around the world are increasingly being stripped of rights and persecuted by governments that ought to know better. When a man like Jamal Khashoggi can be brutally assassinated for his writing. When all over the world, the businesses that supported journalism have been diminished by behemoths like Facebook and Google.

For anyone who, like me, is old-fashioned enough to have grown up intoxicated by the idea of fearless journalists holding power to account, we have come a long way from All the President's Men. From the U.S president on down, the forces now arrayed against public interest journalism are pervasive and insidious. It needs champions like never before.

The value of journalism

Discussion of public interest journalism tends to focus on the role of journalists in holding power to account. Big investigations like Watergate most readily spring to mind. This high-profile work is vital, but there is another role for quality journalism that is even more fundamental: Journalists provide quality information that helps people understand the world around them and make informed decisions. Reliable information is essential for healthy democracy, but it does so much more than help us take part in public debate or decide how to vote. It also helps decide what to eat to stay healthy, or how to keep your children safe online, or how to avoid the risks of problem gambling. Public interest journalism can provide essential context to help people make sense of a complex and confusing barrage of information. Quality information makes markets more efficient. It provides essential insights that help us understand our environment, our culture, our history. It underpins the health and well-being of society.

For example, when it first became clear tobacco was a lethal product, it was public interest media that reported the dangers. Simultaneously, tobacco companies redirected massive budgets to spread doubt so people would keep smoking. Vested interests set out to present the clear science as subject to debate. They were able to delay policy responses and stop people from quitting.

In the digital age, in which social media supports dissemination of content without any regard to its accuracy, the task of muddying the waters on matters of great public importance is simpler and cheaper than ever before. There is a deluge of information, but it is increasingly difficult for audiences to know what to trust. The destruction of the business model that supports quality journalism has created a digital public sphere where there are more voices than ever before, but it is infected with disinformation.

This is why preserving and protecting the role of public interest journalism is vital. And to achieve this, we need to define public interest journalism in a way that reflects the breadth of what public interest journalism really is: the independent dissemination of trustworthy information.

The outrage cycle

The media plays a vital role in providing this trustworthy information. But the modern media is also limited in significant ways: While journalists are very good at holding power to account, many journalists believe it is not their role to provide solutions to complex problems. Increasingly, journalists are swimming upstream against powerful forces that discourage this type of work.

As a consequence, in much of the media we consume today, solutions-based reporting on complex challenges like climate change is crowded out by a cycle of outrage. The business model demands this. For media companies, success or failure is measured in audience: More people spending more time with your journalism means more revenue. This type of engagement is highest for the type of journalism that provokes strong feelings, either negative or positive, not the type that requires thought. Hence the stunning success of the Fox News business model of perpetual outrage. Forget the political worldview for a minute—the key reason Fox News is successful is that it provides its audiences an utterly reliable emotional experience.

This type of preaching to the choir has always been part of the media landscape, but the growing sophistication of audience data made possible by the digital revolution has transformed the unreliable gut-instinct guesses of editors into a dismal science.

New media challenges

Not so long ago, newspaper editors used to run campaigns on topics they considered in the public interest, such as reducing the road toll or fixing hospital waiting lists. But this type of

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journalism is expensive and time-consuming, and better data has shown us that while we all say we care about these issues, when you measure what people actually click on, the public appetite for these types of stories is hard to predict.

It's not easy to justify pursuing this type of work when the fleeting scandals of the daily news cycle will provide a more predictable audience. These trends have been amplified by the ways in which digital platforms like Facebook and Google have created powerful near-monopolies in the attention economy, and now exert huge power over audiences.

All media companies now rely on Facebook and Google to direct audiences to them, but they also have to compete with the deluge of content produced by these digital giants. And they do it with one hand tied behind their backs. Google and Facebook don't purport to provide journalism, and so they have no obligation to serve the public interest. Unlike journalists, they are free to do whatever it takes to win an audience.

All this means that media companies are trapped in a negative spiral. They face an existential commercial threat from digital platforms. To compete, they need to be ruthless in their pursuit of audience. In many cases, this means spending less time reporting on complex problems and more time seeking attention at any cost. And this makes their work harder to distinguish as journalism, which corrodes their very reason to exist.

New models

If we want to continue to have journalism that can provide transparency and help us address complex problems, we all need to defend it and support it. Gestures like Time magazine's decision in 2018 to name four journalists and one newspaper as its Person of the Year are laudable and necessary. The success of newspapers like The Washington Post and the New York Times under Donald Trump is also encouraging.

And there are new models emerging, such as The Conversation, a global editorial network that works with academic experts to provide reliable information to inform the public. As editor of The Conversation and part of the team that founded it, I am committed to producing journalism that grapples with complex problems and focuses on solutions. It's a gap in the market and it is vital that whoever does this work does it to serve the public interest, not vested interests.

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At the end of the day, journalism is an ecosystem. It requires a range of voices and perspectives and missions to serve the public. Some of the journalism will be provided by commercial operators in the market. Some will be provided by public broadcasters and funded by governments.

It all needs financial support, through subscriptions or donations, but it needs moral support too. Please stand up for journalism when you can, and support it with your attention, subscriptions and donations. But even more important is to understand the true value of what all journalists do—most especially those in our profession who accept grave risks—and act accordingly to protect their rights and support their work.

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