Revamping the fourth estate for an era of populism

By: Vaidhiswaran Ramesh, Imperial College London, PhD in Chemical Engineering Candidate

Introduction

The current trend in increasing polarization is the greatest threat faced by democracy since the cold war era. Unchecked, decades of growing inequality and class warfare have led to a rapid fragmentation of society. Under normal circumstances, differences in perspectives amidst a society helps bolster democracy, by providing suitable platforms for discourse. A contributing factor to this effect is the presence of a reputable and equitable fourth estate that is capable of ensuring that members on both sides of the aisle are well informed and the discourse is meaningful and geared towards progress. Currently however, the press is on the defensive across the globe. In the western world and more specifically the USA, this polarization has affected the press and sullied its integrity. This mistrust has only been exasperated by the advent of new media which has struggled to tackle fake news and rein in misuse by rogue actors. Under such a compromised and charged climate, polarization is a recipe for disaster, one that leads to increased entrenchment of existing political thought. Thus the revival of the fourth estate as an equitable institution in the eyes of the public is of vital importance.

In this essay I build on how the press is under critical scrutiny and how foundational aspects of its functioning have been called into question. While arguing for the merit of the press and its independence, I propose strategies to mend public trust in the institution and ensure that it is best equipped to face 21st century challenges to democracy.

Challenges faced by the press

The rising wave of populism and majoritarianism has resulted in the vilification of various democratic institutions including the fourth estate. The struggles that the press faces today are multi-faceted. The advent of the digital revolution has led to a redefinition of the press to include online social platforms and publications. A 2019 report by Reuters finds that social messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook are increasingly becoming the primary source of news across many countries (Nic Newman, 2019). These social platforms have long been facing the public’s ire for promoting fake news and being indifferent to the misuse of their platforms. This indifference coupled with the lack of any accountability has led to a sharp decline in peoples’ trust in the media as a whole. In the USA the media has been starkly divided on partisan lines and
peoples’ consumption of the news is heavily influenced by political ideologies. It is worrisome to note that the average trust in the media has been decreasing year on year and is currently at a mere 42% globally (Nic Newman, 2019).

The freedom of the press, erstwhile sacrosanct, is constantly under strong attack, sometimes from even within the highest chambers of office (Michael M. Grynbaum, 2019). This dangerous rhetoric over the years has led to demonization of journalists who harbour alternative opinions and the dismissal of facts contrary to ones beliefs. Intimidation tactics are often employed by those in power to influence reporting (Ingram, 2019; Time Staff, 2019). It is easy to connect the dots between such constant onslaught on journalist’s reporting and violence against them. The assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi Agents in Turkey (BBC, 2019) and the Capital Gazette mass murder of journalists in the USA (Lynh Bui, 2019) are stark reminders that this constant vilification has led to climate of insecurity for journalists even in western democracies.

The reasons for this mistrust and vilification go far beyond the rise of populism and underscore several fault lines in the system that have been tapped into by these forces. Years of partisan reporting and non-inclusivity in coverage has led to a charged climate with suppressed opinions. The repeated abuse of current publishing laws (particularly by online social platforms) and a lack of socially responsible reporting has contributed to the general apathy exhibited by the public to these attacks on the press. Thus, any attempt to revive the fourth estate and its’ repute should involve honest engagement, seeking to address rather than dismiss concerns. The following strategies involving legislative and institutional reforms are geared towards addressing the main concerns of the public that have led to this current polarized climate. These strategies will also enable the press to redefine itself better for the 21st century.

**Strategies to revamp the fourth estate**

**a) Digital regulation:**

Cheaper access to technology and the advent of the internet has changed many aspects of our lives including the way in which we consume information. The fourth estate has been remarkably quick to adapt to this technological revolution. Traditional media houses such as the ‘The New York Times’ have been recording increasing revenues from digital subscriptions year on year moving consumers along with them from print to online (Tracy, 2019). Online only publication houses (such as Vox Media) have also joined the fore, pioneering new approaches to newscasting and have started playing an increasing role in shaping public discourse. The technological revolution has also enabled social networking platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube to emerge as key players allowing for an unprecedented scale of information transfer.

However, studies show that the public trust more in print and traditional media than online news platforms (Nic Newman, 2019). This imbalance in trust is partly due to how susceptible these platforms have been in the past to misinformation tactics. People with populist attitudes are more likely to obtain news from social media platforms (Nic Newman, 2019), making them more susceptible to polarizing rhetoric and fake news. If we wish to break this cycle of misinformation and polarization, it is necessary to bring accountability to these social platforms. Legislation and regulation of online media and press is yet nascent and lawmakers around the globe have not yet caught up on how to effectively restrain these online platforms. The legislators’ quandary to define social platforms by the same standards as traditional press houses, has been leveraged by greedy corporations and fringe actors in targeting susceptible demographics with false and dangerous rhetoric, all the while with no accountability.
Recent flash-points involving foreign interference in the 2016 USA election, and the Cambridge Analytica scandal have indeed thrown the spotlight on this very issue and brought it into public discourse. The EU has made some progress in this regard and is currently working on legislation to this effect (Mehreen Khan, 2019). In the USA, there is a strong call to revisit section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which has so far safeguarded online publishers from liability for content hosted by them from third party users (Reuters, 2020). These changes in legislation are a welcome first step towards curbing misinformation, but there is a long way to go before these incremental laws translate into public trust. Regulating online media using the same rules as traditional media is unlikely to work and there is a strong case for tighter legislation.

**b) Subjective reporting as the status quo:**
It has long been dictum in reporting to hold objectivity sacred. However, objectivity for the sake of it can lead to echo chambers of political thought. It has become common for people to pick and choose the facts they need rather than be open to discourse and new information. This phenomenon is even more pronounced under the current climate of distrust and polarization in the media. We are thus facing an untenable situation where objective reporting can add a false sense of merit to detrimental and false narratives. Confirmation bias and selective facts thus isolate us from alternative views while fostering echo chambers; Factual realities such as climate change often fall victim to such practises. The only solution to this beyond strategies seeking long term increase in trust and changes in consumption practice by the public is to define a new standard for responsible reporting and to de-incentivise cherry picking of facts. Subjective reporting that considers factual realities such as climate change, sustainability, social responsibility and impact needs to be the new status quo, rather than proportionate coverage based on objectivity. Providing airtime to non-truths and lies should no longer be encouraged on guise of objective reporting.

**c) Re-Introducing arms-length reporting:**
The previous strategy should however not be misused by institutions – evidence-based coverage on misinformation should not serve partisan priorities. Currently however this is not the case. Editorial stance often spills over and results in disproportionate and biased reporting at times, further driving polarisation in the society as well as feeding from it. A buffer should thus be in place isolating a media houses’ ideologies and factual reporting. Institutional overhaul revamping the existing hierarchy within media houses is needed to facilitate freedom of thought. The concentrated ownership of the press under few individuals has often resulted in preferential coverage aligned with the owners’ interest or is perceived to result in preferential coverage in the publics view. While the former is mostly true, even the latter is detrimental as the perception of an equitable press is as important as its functioning. The current election campaign of former New York city Mayor Michael Bloomberg drew the publics’ ire for similar reasons, were Bloomberg editorial staff were advised against running investigative stories on the owner leading up to the election (Guardian Staff, 2019). Media houses in most countries fall victim to this practice and this often feeds to the public narrative that the press is co-opted by the rich. The best way to combat this is to ensure transparent insulation between management and reporting. This arms-length reporting needs institutional reform by first amending traditional hierarchies within the agency. Transparent structural amendments should be made such that accountability of journalists conforms to the ethical duty of the press rather than to the management.

**d) Invested engagement in Public funded broadcasters (PFB):**
One of the main reasons for the public’s lack of faith in the press is the blatant misuse of PFBs for partisan purposes by many ‘democratic’
governments. Such partisan reporting results more commonly in PFBs as funding for the broadcasting network is directly contingent on goodwill of the government. The Damocles sword situation easily incentives PFBs to engage in biased reporting so as to secure their funding. While this is a recognised pattern in many countries, the cause for reform is not championed vehemently by the people either because of easily accessible alternative neutral broadcasting services or because of an indifference stemming from a lack of recognised investment and involvement in the apparatus. The situation is even more dire in developing countries where neutral alternatives do not exist, and people thus fall victim to ideological entrenchment.

One way to mitigate this indifference is to establish an easily recognisable distinct source of taxation to fund PFBs rather than through general taxation which dilutes individual contribution (drop in the ocean). Such taxation in not entirely new and exists for other government policies (insurance contributions through FICA in the USA). UK utilises a similar taxation system to fund BBC using a compulsory television licence charged to each household owning an equipment capable of receiving BBC programming. This has resulted in an increased public engagement in the BBC and where each citizen feels the need to hold executives accountable for sub-standard reporting and programming. Such direct taxation also resolves uncertainty in funding on the short term and removes leverage that legislators have on broadcasters currently, allowing for an unbiased PFB.

These strategies will help revive public trust in the press, provide much needed reform for the fourth estate and over time will help ease the current wave of polarization.

**Conclusion**

The hallmark of modern democracy is that institutions are subject to the will of the people and amenable to reform. However, it is equally important to differentiate between meaningful reform and giving into populism. As Montesquieu articulates in his seminal text ‘The Spirit of the Laws’ (Montesquieu, 2001), democracy relies heavily on a love for virtue and recognition of collective good. Polarisation of thought and ideologies without discourse, is thus antithetical to democracy and undermines its very foundations. A free press is the vanguard of modern democracy, charged with holding legislators accountable and ensuring citizens have access to information to make informed decisions. The press has indeed been facing a turbulent time adapting with the rest of the world to the constraints of the digital age and at instances has fallen victim to partisanship and shown a lack of social responsibility. However, it yet remains our best hope against the forces threatening democracy and it is our duty to reform it rather undermine it.
Bibliography

1. BBC. (2019, June 19). Jamal Khashoggi: All you need to know about Saudi journalist's death. BBC.
6. Columbia Journalism Review.