What does the Trump triumph mean for journalism, politics and social media?

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I'm talking here mainly about the reaction of liberal or progressive mainstream media. Supporters of Trump or more radical alternative media have a more simple explanation: 'the best (or most evil) man won!'

First off it was 'we the mainstream media are to blame!'

Then second, 'No, Facebook is to blame!'

Thirdly, 'No, sinister financiers and data-manipulators are to blame!'

Clearly, everyone is itching to get on to Stage Four, but in a democracy it's not usually said:

'The voters are to blame (especially rust-belters, rednecks and racists – and let's throw in the millennials because we usually blame them)"

In fact, it's quite simple. Trump had the better politics. Tactically, strategically, personally, policy-wise. He won partly because the Democrats and Hillary Clinton got most of that wrong, but mainly because he did best what you are supposed to do in an election: convince people to vote for you. They (and he) knew what they were doing.

Let's unpack this because:

1. As a liberal progressive my 'side' got soundly beaten by someone who I believe will be bad for the welfare, security, culture, cohesion and justice of Americans and the wider world. I'm worried.
2. It raises all sorts of questions about the role of journalism (it's my job and my personal passion to care about that)
3. It raises all sorts of questions about democracy – and not just in the US. My little country has just done something that I find similarly disturbing. While America is exceptional, many of the themes of 'populism', fragmentation, the coarsening of political discourse and the disruption of political deliberation resonate with trends internationally. Democracy ain't perfect but I still prefer it to the alternatives currently on offer. It's in trouble.

Blame The News Media?

In the immediate aftermath of last Tuesday many mainstream American journalists reacted with horror. As David Brooks said:

> *"Those emotional reactions were a fitting first-night response to the greatest political shock of our lifetimes. Still, this is probably not the best mentality for the coming era."*

In their personal political pain many liberal journalists turned upon themselves. Quite rightly. Matt Taibi expresses this mood of self-flagellation perfectly:

> *"We journalists made the same mistake the Republicans made, the same mistake the Democrats made. We were too sure of our own influence, too lazy to bother hearing things firsthand, and too in love with ourselves to imagine that so many people could hate and distrust us as much as they apparently do. It's too late for any of us to fix this colossal misread and lapse in professional caution. Now all we can do is wait to see how much this failure of vision will cost the public we supposedly serve. Just like the politicians, our job was to listen, and we talked instead. Now America will do its own talking for a while. The world may never forgive us for not seeing this coming."*

For Kyle Pope, editor of the Columbia Journalism Review, this was a defeat for American journalism itself:

> *"Reporters' eagerness first to ridicule Trump and his supporters, then dismiss them, and finally to actively lobby and argue for their defeat have led us to a moment when the entire journalistic enterprise needs to be rethought and rebuilt. In terms of bellwether moments, this is our anti-Watergate…journalism's fundamental failure in this election, its original sin, is much more basic to who we are and what we are supposed to be. Simply put, it is rooted in a failure of reporting."*

They had failed to predict Trump's victory and the collapse of the Democrat vote both in its scale and nature. The demographics that have emerged from exit polling reveal that huge sections of the electorate had turned to Trump but had been ignored in the campaign coverage. When their rage was noted it had been scorned in the liberal media. Worst of all, American journalism has to face up to the fact that half of the voters appear to hate them, the other half despair of them. Few trust them.

American political journalists have beaten themselves up so badly that many commentators like Brian Beutler fear that they will now lack the confidence to do their job in holding the new administration to account:

> *"In addition to the banal chaos that the Trump administration is likely to unleash, we're facing a moment that threatens equal protection, due process, free expression, democracy—not just press freedom. It's not a drill. The media undersold the threat to many freedoms before election night, and it would be self-dealing, and a disservice, if the only liberty under attack we rose to defend was one that undergirds our industry."*

Former New York Times public editor Margaret Sullivan has led the clarion call for robust oversight and, crucially, putting money into legal protection for those journalists who now have the task of tackling a man who loves to attack the press:

> *"I deeply hope that journalists won't normalize Trump's behavior, as we started to see in the "Well, I guess Americans just wanted change" narrative on cable news networks as the states started to pile up for him. In fact, as it turned out, his followers wanted to throw the entire government and its values onto the bonfire. I hope, too, that owners of news organizations are willing to finance court battles, because that seems very likely to be necessary in the months and years ahead. Trump is nothing if not litigious."*

Ken Doctor acknowledges that there has been a strategic editorial failure by news brands to engage with their communities, but he sees the crisis for mainstream US journalism as mainly one imposed by the business crisis it is

going through and the depletion of resources, especially in local media:

> *"We can directly link the growth of the local news desert expanding rapidly across the U.S. to Trump's win. A point that still misses so many of the national observers as they examine their own navels: Across the United States, in all of the areas that jumped from bluer to redder, from Obama to who-knows-what, we've seen a slowly expanding news desert. That desert is hard to describe of course, because it's a desert."*

Doctor is right to point out the financial stress the news media is under. However, the problem in this election was about a set of editorial choices not about resources per se. Trump was a traffic driver on a scale that made Kim Kardashian seem like a digital shrinking violet. CNN, for example, stand accused of giving him endless coverage 'simply' because it boosted ratings. Commercial logic, so the argument goes, over-rode a proper sense of proportion. One can understand why right-wing Fox gave him so much airspace but surely less partisan brands should have restrained themselves? In the UK our regulated broadcasters would have been legally restricted in letting him dominate the screens but in the US he was box office.

The counter to that is that he was available and it gave journalists the chance to take him to task. Yes, the coverage boosted him on the basis that there is 'no such thing as bad publicity' but this was based on the fact that he was winning popularity through the primary debates and his own tireless speaking tour. He was the story. His Republican rivals and then Clinton failed to match his impact.

The more he was criticised and exposed as loose with the truth, the more his ratings climbed. As the far-right commentator Jared Taylor argues, the more the mainstream liberal media sought to link him to racist and fascist groups, the more many voters warmed to him and became increasingly hostile to the media critics:

> *"The demonization campaign has backfired. By trying to hang racial dissidents around Donald Trump's neck, the media have given American Renaissance and other organizations far more publicity than ever before. At the same time, constant shouts of "racist" and "bigot" don't seem to hurt Mr. Trump: instead they are wrecking what is left of media credibility. The biggest irony, though, is that Donald Trump is probably not one of us at all….Virtually the entire [mainstream media] industry is so consumed with rage at Donald Trump and contempt for his supporters that it cannot control itself. Open, petulant bias is driving more and more Americans to social media and to sites like AmRen.com for their news."*

Blame Facebook?

As Max Read detailed, Facebook (and other Internet platforms and sites) helped Trump by opening up the public sphere to a swathe of more marginal publishers:

> *"It's crowbarred open the window of acceptable political discourse, giving rise to communities and ideological alignments that would have been unable to survive in an era where information and political organization were tightly controlled by corporate publishers and Establishment political parties. Put another way, it's not just that Facebook makes politics worse, it's that it changes politics entirely."*

It also accelerated the impact of fake news websites, some driven by malicious ideology but many by commercial

motives:

> *"Fake-news attacks discourse in structurally similar ways to the DDoS attacks that recently crippled internet infrastructure for a day: Hoaxes overwhelm political conversation (facts, ideas, stories) with junk, aware that the rules of the system (in this case, freedom of speech) prevent it from distinguishing from "legitimate" and "illegitimate," and therefore from stopping the attack. An overwhelming dose of good journalism, rather than addressing or rebutting lies and hoaxes, would simply add to the cacophony; presented identically on Facebook alongside fake journalism, it would merely appear as another opinion in a swarm of them."*

It can't be healthy if one million people share a fake video of the 'Pope endorsing Donald Trump'.

As Read notes, Facebook also allowed Trump and his supporters to maintain a constant barrage at the mainstream media when it attacked their man:

> *"Facebook allowed Trump to directly combat the hugely negative media coverage directed at him, simply by giving his campaign and its supporters another host of channels to distribute counter-programming. This, precisely, is why more good journalism would have been unlikely to change anyone's mind: The Post and the Times no longer have a monopoly on information about a candidate. Endless reports of corruption, venality, misogyny, and incompetence merely settle in a Facebook feed next to a hundred other articles from pro-Trump sources (if they settle into a Trump supporter's feed at all) disputing or ignoring the deeply reported claims, or, as is often the case, just making up new and different stories."*

But all this is not the same as saying that social media won the election for Trump or destroyed healthy political discourse. Firstly, it's always difficult to measure but television, newspapers, radio are still more influential on voters than online. Secondly, Clinton and her supporters had the same access to the Internet. Facebook and social media change the dynamics and the power relations of political communications, but challenging mainstream media's gatekeeper role is surely a positive in any democracy that wants to base its politics on openness and plurality?

Mark Zuckerberg is understandably defensive. He admits they have a problem with misinformation and the algorithms that filter news but rightly resists the idea that this swung the election:

> *"Personally I think the idea that fake news on Facebook, of which it's a very small amount of the content, influenced the election in any way is a pretty crazy idea. You know voters make decisions based on their lived experience. We really believe in people. You don't generally go wrong when you trust that people understand what they care about and what's important to them and you build systems that reflect that. Part of what I think is going on here is people are trying to understand the result of the election, but I do think that there is a certain profound lack of empathy in asserting that the only reason someone could have voted the way they did is because they saw some fake news. If you believe that then, I don't think you have internalized the message that Trump supporters are trying to send in this election."*

We need the platforms to clean up their act but do we really want them to become the editors of our political conversations? Yes, they are already interfering and shaping the flow of information and comment, but judging by their incompetence at handling this so far, I would worry if they had a more active role. As Mike Masnick warns, be

careful what you wish for when you invite Facebook to police political discourse:

> *"Just imagine what would happen if Facebook now decided that it was only going to let people share "true" news. Whoever gets to decide that kind of thing has tremendous power — and there will be immediately claims of bias and hiding "important" stories — even if they're bullshit. It will lead many of the people who are already angry about things to argue that their views are being suppressed and hidden and that they are being "censored." That's not a good recipe. And it's an especially terrible recipe if people really want to understand why so many people are so angry at the status quo."*

As Jonathan Albright has argued, people may be missing the real story of how Trump benefited from social media. It wasn't just his use brilliantly authentic and effective of Twitter. It was in hiring an analytics company to use data-mining from social networks to profile voters and target messaging at them:

> *"The #Election2016 result wasn't the fault of the Facebook algorithm, the filter bubble, or professional journalism being completely "out of touch" with the majority of the country. Nor was it the fault of pollsters and statistics geeks who were working with enormous — yet unreliable — sources of data. As the the Trump electoral win clearly demonstrates, the topics people discuss with their closest connections and the viewpoints they share in confidential circles trump even the biggest data sets. Especially when the result involves a clear outcome: an election win from a single behavioural tactic: finding people who can be influenced enoughto actually go out and vote."*

Blame the politicians: Hillary Clinton lost because of bad politics, not bad media

This does not absolve the media of blame. It followed the same group-think. But with the benefit of hindsight it is clear that people chose Trump because they thought he spoke for them and their problems. They did not think that Hillary Clinton would do what they wanted. This is NOT to say that Trump is simply an expression of economic anxiety. He exploited that basic factor with a range of racist and reactionary rhetoric. But as Jeff Spross explains, the exit poll numbers describe a different narrative to the one that the Democrats based their campaign upon, a narrative that much of the more liberal media chose as its frame:

> *"Many liberals tried to write off the class-driven aspect of Trump's appeal. There's data that suggests Trump's support comes from people who are (relatively) well-off, but there's a lot wrong with that analysis. It ignores how costs of living have spiked for median households, much less for poor ones; it ignores how high up the income ladder wage stagnation has risen; it ignores how the same income can mean very different things in different places and life circumstances. Most of all, it ignored the raw human experience of living in communities that are dying, while distant cities with alien cultures grow fat and powerful and self-righteous. Meanwhile, media and political commentators obsessed over the xenophobia of Trumpism. They attributed the candidate's rise to racist backlash against immigrants and the first black president, or to Trump giving racist Americans permission to cut loose. Others lamented that the country hates women so much it refused to elect a female president. And there is hard truth in all of that. But it's also true that most of the people doing that obsessing — along with the movers and shakers in the Democratic Party, its well-educated urban voters, and its supporting lobbies and think tanks — enjoy the commanding heights of class privilege. They may not all be white, male or straight, but they share that one overwhelming blind spot."*

Trump successfully portrayed Clinton as an out of touch, elitist, machine politician who could not be trusted to share their world-view. This worked because it was not untrue. When she stressed her long history of public service she was, in effect, handing him the 'change' candidate robes. She was completely right to describe his offensive misogyny as disgusting, but even for voters that shared her distain, it signalled that she cared more about that than jobs. Obama showed that it is possible to over-come racism if you have a character and a programme that appeals beyond prejudice. Her political failing was not to be a feminist, but to allow that to be her defining position. In this campaign her problem was not the glass ceiling that she kept talking about, but the neglected communities of all genders. That reflects upon her party as much as her personally, but it was a strategic blunder compounded by the over-confidence of the Democrats in conventional campaign strategies such as TV advertising. Extraordinarily, for someone from a political dynasty famous for triangulation she forgot that to win the presidency you have to appeal beyond your base.

New Politics, New Media?

A new political landscape is emerging in the US and elsewhere that reflects changing global and local socio-economic structures. The lines of battle, as David Brooks has suggested will be drawn up differently and so the current parties probably have to be reinvented or even new ones formed:

> *"The job for the rest of us is to rebind the fabric of society, community by community, and to construct a political movement for the post-Trump era. I suspect the coming political movements will be identified on two axes: open and closed and individual and social."*

In the US the Republicans have a President that many in that party did not want, while the Democrats realise that they are no longer aligned with vast swathes of their traditional supporters, let alone swing voters. In the UK Jeremy Corbyn is recreating the Labour Party as a socialist rump while the ruling Conservative party is led by someone who did not agree with its most important policy position. Gaps and contradictions are appearing in the edifices of many western democracies and inevitably these are being exploited by what are too easily dismissed as 'populist' parties.

News media also needs to adapt to this historic series of shifts. It must also be more diverse. It must get out more into those communities. Partly by the paths of social networks but also by being physically present. Many parts of our countries are seeing local press denuded by the economic crisis for local newspapers and so other media must work even harder to connect beyond the metropolitan liberal ghettos. These are intellectual and cultural enclaves where people can spend their lives in comfortable internal exile. They leave Ivy League or Oxbridge Colleges and head into multi-national newsrooms without ever walking down Main or High Street USA/UK. They inhabit liberal (in the broadest sense, including neo-liberal) enclosures where they personally, directly benefit from the same globalisation that hurts and confuses people living in the Real World.

As Neil Cardillo has put it, there are 'those inside The Process and those on the outside" :

> *"Then along came Donald Trump with this idea so foreign, so ridiculous, and so horrifying to those inside The Process that they couldn't even take him seriously. He actually listened to the American people, and based his policies on what they wanted, not what The Process demanded. Those inside The Process did all they could to destroy Trump, but the American voter simply wasn't having it. They finally had someone speaking for them, and decades of frustration came pouring out in record breaking support for Donald Trump, and a general election victory that saw political and media elites inside The Process visibly shaken. They will analyze this election for years trying to figure out how they were so wrong. Many will use convoluted models detailing fractional shifts in voter sentiment based on race, gender, age, and region. Basically, they will do all they can to prove to themselves that they and their paradigm are not irrelevant. But they are. It is a new dawn. And the path to victory*

> *was always in front of them. All they had to do was listen to, and not have contempt for, the American people."*

MSM has been here before. It did not do a great job of resisting the post-9/11 'War on Terror' hysteria. It didn't spot the financial fantasy that led to the unpredicted 2007 crash. And in the UK it misreported a whole election in 2015 and an historic EU referendum. Sure, the pollsters were not too bright either. And as I have written elsewhere, these were all failures primarily of the political class. Journalism has been understandably obsessed with its own struggle for economic survival and the daily fight to keep public attention in the age of digital distraction. But any journalist who thinks there are no structural editorial problems with the news media really is living on another planet. This is a crisis that challenges the fundamentals of the news media's culture and what it produces as well as its values and its democratic role. It needs to change the way it works and what it does.

So what's to be done?

As the former BBC executive Richard Sambrook has set out, there are a range of quite practical but difficult things that can be done. Journalists need to get out more. I would argue that this can be done by exploring the online world more imaginatively and using it to discover more diverse views but above all it does mean physically getting out of the office and into communities more. It means addressing the chronic lack of diversity within newsrooms. Not just racial but of class, geography and professional or educational backgrounds. And as I argued years ago in that most filtered of bubbles, the World Economic Forum, we need a new kind of 'media citizenship' that combines media literacy with better systems of transparency and engagement between voters, information and politics.

But perhaps the first and most important step is to listen. As Ian Leslie says, this includes liberals paying attention to those that are ideologically opposed and even offensive:

> *"I think it's essential to make the effort –and it is an effort—of listening to those we consider beyond the pale, of trying to bring them closer to us, of persuading without preaching. Otherwise, we will be in unwitting collusion with those who will happily throw democracy overboard if it means the triumph of their tribe."*

The political fact is that Donald Trump did listen.

Zuckerberg is right to say that the real problem is not the diversity of information on platforms like Facebook. The problem is how people receive and respond to it:

> *"Presenting people with a diversity of information is an important problem in the world, and one I hope we can make more progress on. But right now, the problem isn't that the diverse information isn't there, it's actually, by any study, more there than traditional media in the last generation, but we haven't gotten people to engage with it in higher proportions."*

One of the triumphs of recent news media innovation has been data journalism that mines information for stories or sifts the figures to give accessible and useful visualisations. Yet overall, the obsession with data – especially polling data – may have distracted from the affective, emotional nature of politics as it is experienced in the real world. As data analyst Ian Warren observes:

> *"The key learning of the last year or so has been that the communication of effective emotional*

> *messages is currently beating data alone. I've long viewed data to be extremely useful and necessary. All political campaigns should employ the best analysts available. However in the last year I've started to supplement my work with analysis of additional components: emotion and personality. I believe all of the above campaigns were successful because they employed emotional messaging aimed at particular personality types. In effect they were much less about what people are (demographics, data) and more about what they feel (anger, disillusion, etc). The latter are at least, if not more, important influencers in determining how people vote in my opinion."*

This is something that traditional journalism used to understood intuitively. But as horse-race political coverage and polling has become dominant the news media have ignored the people and focused on the political celebrities and the stats. I have set out in great detail elsewhere why journalism in general must become more 'emotional':

> *"Emotion drives people's increasingly intimate relationships with technology, fuels engagement with news and information, and inspires professionals to pursue careers in an industry that offers anything but reliable rewards for work well done. It inspires connection. As journalism and society change, emotion is becoming a much more important dynamic in how news is produced and consumed. Emphasizing emotion as the key redefines the classic idea of journalistic objectivity—indeed, it is reshaping the idea of news itself. That matters because journalism has an increasingly significant role in our lives as information, data, and social media become more ubiquitous and more influential."*

It's not a choice between emotions and facts. We need both. But a shift away from the obsession with data that characterises much election campaign coverage might mean that mainstream media may have to abandon its aspiration towards being a lofty arbiter of truth. It may have to become more subjective. The problem of 'false balance' was something that emerged powerfully during the UK's EU referendum campaign where the BBC struggled to combine impartiality with the need for critical, robust journalism that tackled mistruths and evasion. In this presidential campaign mainstream media realised, perhaps too late, that it was playing to different rules from Trump, as *The Atlantic*'s Peter Beinart explains:

> *"A certain etiquette has long governed the relationship between presidential candidates and the elite media. Candidates stretch the truth, but try not to be too blatant about it. Candidates appeal to bigotry, but subtly. In turn, journalists respond with a delicacy of their own. They quote partisans rather than saying things in their own words. They use euphemisms like "polarizing" and "incendiary," instead of "racist" and "demagogic." Previous politicians have exploited this system. But Trump has done something unprecedented. He has so brazenly lied, so nakedly appealed to bigotry, and so frontally challenged the rule of law that he has made the elite media's decorum absurd. He's turned highbrow journalists into referees in a World Wrestling Entertainment match."*

Perhaps too late, but the New York Times did change tactics and it's worth quoting Beinart's description in full because it shows how mainstream media can adapt without abandoning its remit:

> *"The Times, once a champion practitioner of the "he said, she said" campaign story…responded to Trump's press conference by running a "News Analysis," a genre that gives reporters more freedom to explain a story's significance. But "News Analysis" pieces generally supplement traditional news stories. On Saturday, by contrast, the Times ran its "News Analysis" atop Page One while relegating its news story on Trump's press conference to page A10. Moreover, "News Analysis" stories generally*

> *offer context. They don't offer thundering condemnation. Yet thundering condemnation is exactly what the Times story provided. Its headline read, "Trump Gives Up a Lie But Refuses to Repent." Not "falsehood," which leaves open the possibility that Trump was merely mistaken, but "lie," which suggests, accurately, that Trump had every reason to know that what he was saying about Obama's citizenship was false. The article's text was even more striking. It read like an opinion column. It began by reciting the history of Trump's campaign to discredit Obama's citizenship. "It was not true in 2011," began the first paragraph. "It was not true in 2012," began the second paragraph. "It was not true in 2014," began the third paragraph. Then, in the fourth paragraph: "It was not true, any of it." The article called Trump's claim that he had put to rest rumors about Obama's citizenship "a bizarre new deception" and his allegation that Clinton had fomented them "another falsehood." Then, in summation, it declared that while Trump has "exhausted an army of fact-checkers with his mischaracterizations, exaggerations, and fabrications," the birther lie was particularly "insidious" because it "sought to undo the embrace of an African American president by the 69 million voters who elected him."*

It might be that mainstream media has to go further. As John Herrman has explored, that could mean being more like the partisan online brands such as Breibart.

> *"For legacy news media operations to behave as outsiders could be invigorating. Treating access as strictly transactional, rather than as some sort of norm, could reduce, or make transparent, its role in the reporting process. To focus solely on holding power to account is as concise a definition of journalism as I can think of."*

But as Herrman acknowledges that raises more than ethical issues. Breibart is essentially a niche platform – highly effective and influential – but not big:

> *"These hopes butt up against commercial interests and an instinct for self-preservation. A purely aggressive CNN, for instance, would be a very different operation, less lucrative and probably much smaller. And the self-identified alternative media of this election was, on the other hand, unembarrassed by its ideology, aggressive not merely in the pursuit of stories but in the election of one candidate and the destruction of another. It was willing to submit to new distribution systems to benefit from them, and openly prioritized this, along with its animating political cause, above all else."*

We are not in a post-truth world. So often this just means that there are truths out there that we don't agree with. Europhiles like me simply did not comprehend that many Brits really don't like being in the EU. When given a choice they opted out of it. Many liberals in the US simply could not comprehend that their fellow Americans would vote for a sexist xenophobe. But they did.

There is more information out there than ever before. But in a complex world statistics can say many different things. To be human is not just to err, but also to think and act imaginatively, emotionally, idealistically, personally as well as 'rationally'. Journalism has always been about accuracy and evidence. That must continue and be much cleverer online. That is happening. Newsrooms and the platforms are getting better at filtering out the bad information and engaging with their audiences. But in our race to establish narratives we have too often chosen pre-ordained frames and not asked enough questions about the selection and prioritisation of facts, opinions and voices. We need what I called in my book *SuperMedia*, 'editorial diversity'. I thought that the Internet would bring that. It certainly has. We have a super-abundance of diverse sources. But mainstream journalism is still struggling to find

the tools and the editorial processes to cope and to network the public into the information they need. Above all it needs to rethink its role in the public sphere with some imagination and humility:

> *"It could be the task of journalism to create not just the content and the voice but also the relationship, the space, that allows us to listen better. Not just so we pay attention but to listen with all the wonderful creativity, vulnerability and perplexity that our digital human condition allows."*

I am still optimistic because I do see some outstanding innovation in engagement and editorial creativity. But the technological adaption must be combined with an editorial reformation.

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Note: This article originally appeared at POLIS – Journalism and society at the LSE. It gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image by Gage Skidmore.

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