

Alec J Ross – My Media World Today And What I Would Like To Change About It

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Alec J Ross was Hillary Clinton's digital advisor when she was US Secretary of State. He advised on the 21st Century Statecraft programme that saw the US diplomatic service take to social media and millions of dollars go to media democracy activists around the world. He was also in the State Department when WikiLeaks made its major revelations about US foreign policy.



The podcast for his November 25th talk at LSE will be [here](#) soon, but here is an interview he did for Polis intern Clare Sheehan before the lecture.

What is your favourite social media platform?

That could get me in a lot of trouble, because I have various friends who are CEOs of various social media platforms, so what I will say is that the two that I prefer are Facebook and Twitter. I like Facebook in particular because I have a very highly engaged base of about 115,000 subscribers who are very global. They're all over the world and it is a more demographically diverse group than I think my Twitter followers are. I think I'm more likely to talk to the man or woman on the street on Facebook than I am on Twitter.

The other one I prefer is Twitter, because I know that whatever I communicate there will reach heads of state, foreign ministers, and loads of journalists. It allows me to stay relevant and continue to influence policy spheres on a day-to-day basis. I think of Facebook and Twitter as being very different from one another and I think that they started off, interestingly, in somewhat similar places, but I think that they've grown to be very different platforms. I use them differently, but they're the two that I prefer.

Where do you get your news?

I get my news principally through my Twitter stream. I still like buying a good old-fashioned newspaper. I occasionally read the Washington Post, or I read the Baltimore Sun the day after a Baltimore Ravens football game, which means that I buy about 10 copies a year. But honestly, my Twitter stream does a great job of curating the content that I'm interested in. So whether it's the New York Times, the Washington Post, an obscure literary journal or something else, my friends and my trusted curators tend to identify the content that I would most want.

What's one thing you wish you could change about the media industry?

I wish that the media industry was financially rewarded more for doing thoughtful, balanced pieces than for sensationalism and ideological doctrine. At least in the United States, the business models for media reward outrageous content and they reward people who spout ideological doctrine. Longform balanced journalism requires a philanthropist as media owner, so if I could change one thing it would be that.

Do you think social media is making us smarter or dumbing us down?

I think that it's making some people smarter and it's making other people dumber. I think on the one hand that it's a great way of distributing very thoughtful content. So the readership of literary and technical journals that would have once been exceedingly small – if there's a great article written there, it's far more widely read today because of the circulation that it's given over social media.

I think back to an article written by a friend of mine – my principle fellow partner when I was at the state department named Anne-Marie Slaughter – who wrote an article in a magazine called the Atlantic called “Why Women Can’t Have It All.” Instead of it just being read by tens of thousands of east coast upper middle class women and men in the United States, because of social media, millions, if not tens of millions, of people read it and it became the most important piece of feminist literature written in the past 15 years. That was entirely because of social media and it was a 14,000-word piece.

On the other hand, I think that social media has limited attention spans and I think that it has contributed to what I would call “chronic short termism.” And so I think that it has made people more dumb in that the way they think about things has grown in far shorter and shorter time cycles – when what I think is really needed to solve some of the chronic social economic and political problems that we have is people thinking about the long term.

What news stories are you currently following?

I am following the Edward Snowden/NSA revelations. I am following the Baltimore Ravens attempt to get into the NFL playoffs, because after all, football is incredibly important. If you look at the browsers that I keep open – in addition to all the political and economic significance – there’s a lot of American football.

The third news item I’m following right now P5+1 agreement with Iran. I was very involved in what were sort of nasty interactions and engagements with the Iranian government and it’s remarkable to me to see a glimmer of hope, given the very bellicose nature of where things were merely a year ago. I don’t know yet whether this is real or whether this is the Iranian government buying a little bit of time, but I’m following it closely because I think that whether things go north, south, east or west there, it is going to matter in all of our lives.

This interview by Polis Intern @Clare_Sheehan

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