

US Militia, Wikileaks and the Tea Party: how alternative new media is destroying traditional ideas objectivity (guest blog)

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Polis Summer School

If people feel that mainstream media is ignoring alternative politics, then they can now create their own media. But how should traditional journalism respond? Should it change its ideas of impartiality to reflect the real diversity of contemporary politics? This is Polis Summer School student Steven Linett's course paper that tackles this complex problem, citing media around the rise of US Militia movement.

How impartiality and objectivity in journalism changes in the New Media environment by Steven Linett

The new media environment has helped level the playing field for those outside the mainstream media to publish and disseminate their views to the world. This environment appears to be a godsend for the participatory models of democracy, which “emphasize the importance of ‘real’ citizens’ participation and their more active involvement in democracy (Barber 1984). As such, they criticize the radical separation of citizens from power, the elites and democratic institutions through representation” (Bailey, et al. 2008).

But for all the opportunities it offers, problems arise when outsiders can challenge viewpoints that previously fell within the “preferred view of ‘reality’” (Bailey, et al. 2008). Because these new voices are not held to the deontological codes of impartiality and objectivity to which mainstream journalists subscribe, they have an appeal that the traditional liberal-model journalist does not.

The case of the recent growth of the militia movement in the United States has put the question to journalists as to whether they will adopt a public journalist role that can act either for or against hegemonic forces by adopting more fluid interpretations of impartiality in “its plea for reviving the public debate, for centralizing democracy as a universal value and for a tighter link between community and journalism” (Carpentier 207).

Neutrality and Balance

Westerstahl describes factuality, the relevance and truthfulness, and impartiality, the balance and neutrality, as the two parts of objectivity (Carpentier 205). Objectivity, though accepted as a key component of the journalist's professional identity, has been critiqued for a variety of reasons: “Some say that journalism is not objective, others that journalism cannot be objective, and still others say that journalism should not be objective (Lichtenberg, 1996)” (Carpentier 206).

Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, believes that interests and biases have compromised mainstream journalist's ability to offer a full, transparent picture to the public.^[1] Because of this, journalists have lost some credibility and audiences may turn to alternative sources, which have thrived in the low-cost new media environment (Moss 2010). Alternative sources have the freedom to frame an issue as they wish. A source may have a bias or interest, something which audiences with a specific viewpoint or background may find to be more appealing than an objective approach.

Sacrificing Ideals

The mainstream media may frame the rise of alternative media sources as a zero-sum competition that sees gains for one side resulting in losses for the other. If this were the case, the mainstream media would stand to lose much

more with the amount of money that it requires for production and distribution. Instead of competing, the mainstream media should use the opportunity to adopt a public journalist model that would allow it to coexist with alternative media. While sacrificing the ideal of being as impartial and objective as possible, opening up channels for two-way communication will bring the mainstream media closer in line with the public.

Encouraging participation will rekindle debate and conversation by bringing in new perspectives and ideas. Both sides will act as one another's watchdog and both together will form the "fourth estate," with the goal of keeping the government and others in check. The mainstream media has already rooted itself in new media platforms, and has at times applauded alternative media sources, such as the mass Tweeting and blogging that occurred during the Green Revolution in Iran. Taking the next step and redefining objectivity and impartiality to allow for freer conversation and collaboration between mainstream and alternative media outlets would be a mutually beneficial decision. The case of the rise of the militia movement in the United States challenges the traditional notions of objectivity and impartiality in journalism.

The militia movement's libertarian ideology has allowed it to lay claim to being true patriots with its strict interpretation of the United States' Constitution and Bill of Rights. They believe that an expanding government presence threatens American's individual rights, as the founding fathers intended them. To protect their rights, citizens have formed local, statewide, and regional militias that are often heavily armed and prepared with tactics to defend their homes. Militia's individual identities depart from this point, ranging from white supremacists to conspiracy theorists to those who act as community support groups.

Radical Voices

Unlike in the early 1990s when the movement started to gain strength, the new media environment has made it easier for militias to disseminate their ideas and materials to a wide audience. The media has a civic responsibility to step in to expose radical voices in the militia movement for what they truly represent, rather than continue to allow them to espouse their rhetoric on a free platform. The Southern Poverty Law Center estimates that the movement has grown from 149 to 512 groups since Obama's election (Guarino 2010).

As was the case in the 1990s, few media outlets even gave coverage to militias before a serious incident. Then it was Timothy McVeigh's Oklahoma City bombing and this time, in March, the Hutarees were raided before they acted on their plan to assassinate law enforcement officers in Michigan and incite a revolution. The Hutarees have a strong web presence based at www.hutaree.com, complete with their Christian Patriot mission statement, a blog, training videos, group photos of members, and a forum with subsections that include the "Evil Jew Forum" and "Weapons: the things you kill with."

Despite the incendiary language that the Hutaree and other militias with similar views use on the Internet, press coverage has been minimal. The Washington Post and Newsweek (owned by The Post) are the only national print media to have mentioned the Hutaree in a report since the beginning of June. Eugene Robinson's March 30 column suggested, "the danger of political violence in this country comes overwhelmingly from one direction—the right, not the left. The vitriolic, anti-government hate speech that is spewed on talk radio every day—and, quite regularly, at Tea Party rallies—is calibrated not to inform but to incite" (Robinson 2010).

White Terror?

Courtland Milloy's June 23 op-ed piece considered the racial double standard, "On Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, in effect, that you can go to prison for trying to hold a peace talk with groups deemed to be foreign terrorist organizations. But if the group is a home-grown white terrorist organization, it's apparently okay not just to associate with them but also to offer them military training as they plot against the country" (Milloy 2010).

In both cases, comments on The Post's website were overwhelmingly critical of the writer's opinions. Without the support of other mainstream media sources, reason is losing out to extremist viewpoints that have entered the

discourse of national politics. Those like Republican Congresswoman Michele Bachmann argue that citizens should be “armed and dangerous because we need to fight back...if we’re not going to lose our country” (Somaiya 2010). When people who incite hatred and violence move into the mainstream discourse, it does not seem reasonable for journalists to stand down without fighting back.

Following the Oklahoma City bombing, the mainstream media took a strong interest in the militias when it was revealed that Timothy McVeigh had loose ties to the movement. The media framed the issue by including voices from the mainstream community and from the deviant community, the militias. “Celebrities” of the militia movement regularly appeared in the media, promoting rhetoric and conspiracies that helped to delegitimize and “other” the movement. Reports often framed the militia members as racists, conspiracy theorists, extreme gun activists, or religious fanatics. They also connected them to the terrorist image by presenting them as a significant threat operating with a loose network of cells.

Do Not Believe

Though people do not believe everything the media tells them, “if people have little prior experience with an issue, the media’s influence is likely to be strong” (Chermak 2002). By using a militia’s own new media productions in reports, a journalist could claim objectivity and impartiality, while also pushing an agenda in defense of democratic institutions. The new media environment has given militias the opportunity to connect with like-minded people, but it also has the detrimental effect of being equally available to the general public. If audiences are empowered by the media to learn more about the movement from the source, militias will more likely than not end up othering themselves out of existence.

The new media environment presents a number of opportunities and challenges for the journalistic values of impartiality and objectivity. Alternative media sources have become readily accessible, but they are not held to the same deontological codes as mainstream journalists. To combat this problem, the mainstream must use new media to its advantage by increasing community participation and encouraging a public journalism model. Especially in cases where extremist views begin to enter the mainstream discourse, journalists have a civic responsibility to sacrifice some objectivity and impartiality to protect liberal-democratic institutions and values. If they seriously consider themselves to be the “fourth estate,” journalists must use the means available to them to challenge militias and others who incite hatred and violence.

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[1] *"Journalists...let other people take the risks and then take the credit. They have been letting the state, big business, vested interests get away with it for too long, and a network of hackers and whistleblowers hunched over computers, making sense of complex data and with a mission to make it freely available, is now ready to do a better job"* (Moss 2010).

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