

Back to Basics: Internet Crisis and a Golden Opportunity for Journalism

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Aidan White, Founder & President of the Ethical Journalism Network

Facebook appears to have finally had enough of journalism. The decision in January 2018 to downgrade its news profile and to strengthen its first-love – helping families and friends to stay in touch – means a retreat from its frontline role as the world’s leading publisher of news.

For publishers who staked their financial future on the Facebook model of publishing it could be very bad news, but for others who have been increasingly sceptical about the platform it may provide an opportunity for fresh-thinking about the future of news.

On all sides Facebook and other big technology companies have come under fire: from rebellious employees and whistle blowing former executives; from governments increasingly worried about unscrupulous use of the platform to interfere in democratic elections; from restless advertisers fed up with being joined up with anti-social and sometimes racist opinions; and increasing opposition from within its core community over privacy and abuse issues.

And into 2018, the blows kept coming with revelations in The Observer in London in March of a massive data breach in which the personal information from around 50 million Facebook users was taken without authorisation to build a system for profiling United States voters. A whistle-blower revealed how a company linked to former Donald Trump adviser Steve Bannon, Cambridge Analytica, had gathered the data to target voters with personalised political advertisements during the US election in 2016.

For years now many commentators have been warning that Facebook and other social networks use of technology are key driver of today’s polarised, often chaotic information environment.

Zeynep Tufekci, a Turkish writer on technology now based at the University of

North Carolina recently carried out an experiment that showed how YouTube (owned by Google) constantly promote and recommends more extreme material. Whether it’s the food, fitness or politics, the tendency is to algorithmic recommendations for ever-more extreme options. “Given its billion or so users,” she told The Observer, “YouTube must be one of the powerful radicalising instruments of the 21st century.”

The unintended consequences of this use of technology and the business model behind it were highlighted more than a year ago by the Ethical Journalism Network which joined other news leaders in a global protest over the Facebook deletion of the Napalm Girl photograph from the Norwegian daily Aftenposten.

This incident illustrated precisely why encoding and machine intelligence cannot guarantee informed, nuanced and ethical communications. Media leaders around the world argue that we need less robotic, automated editing and more informed, skilled and well-trained journalists and editors.

It is a message that Facebook appeared to accept with a decision last year to recruit more real live editors to monitor and delete abusive content. But maintaining and moderating a newsfeed means Facebook will have to hire thousands of editors and journalists to counter disinformation and that could hit profits in years to come.

That prospect as well as a growing realisation that publishing news is not easily compatible with the Facebook model of quick-fire sharing may be behind the decision to downgrade news media on the platform.

Certainly, it is a setback for Facebook’s vision of creating a global public forum in which its 2 billion users would have easy access to all the information that’s important in their lives.



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Unfortunately, it is fresh evidence that social networks, and the business models around them, are not designed to promote or to give prominence to streams of reliable, trustworthy information like journalism. What counts in this world are clicks and attention-grabbing content to attract advertising, not the public purpose of information.

The shift has left news industry leaders scratching their heads over how to respond. Those who argue it's time for the industry to break with Facebook will have to find convincing alternatives, not least because many news leaders only signed up to the Facebook model because its advertising monopoly gave them little other choice and many publishers have grown addicted to the promise of clicks offered by a platform which now boasts two billion users, but the change of direction by the company will cause them pain.

Just how much pain is difficult to judge, but there were warning signs of the looming crisis in late 2017 when Facebook carried out an experiment by removing professional news feeds from users' news feeds in six random countries – Sri Lanka, Guatemala, Slovakia, Serbia, Bolivia and Cambodia.

The impact was swift and devastating. Dina Fernandez, a Guatemalan journalist for the news site *Soy502*, told *The Guardian*: “Facebook killed 66 percent of our traffic. Just destroyed it. One company has a gigantic control on the flow of information worldwide...It's downright Orwellian.” The Slovakian journalist Filip Struharik, a critic of the experiment, said it was hurting professional media more than reducing fake news consumption.

This experiment was abandoned in March 2018, but it is separate from changes to the global news feed that are aimed at “promoting meaningful social interactions,” says Facebook.

It is this part of the Facebook experience that is loved and cherished by hundreds of millions of users who remain loyal. Despite the fallout from the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the launching of #MeToo style campaigns to leave the social network, they will stay put.

But for journalists and media a new reality is emerging which as Frederic Filloux, a French media commentator based in the US [has noted](#), provides an opportunity to reinvest time and resources in the things that actually make for good journalism. “Once the acute pain is gone, the industry will realize that this is not such bad news after all,” he writes. “It is time to regroup and refocus on the basics.”

This message will resonate within media circles where our love affair with the mighty communications revolution has long-since cooled with the deeply negative effects of disinformation, malicious propaganda and online abuse and the destruction of sustainable models of journalism in recent years.

Anyone close to the news media business knows that newspapers and traditional news reporting increasingly rely on philanthropy, public funding or supportive foundations to maintain quality content and investigative journalism.

The traditional market models that kept general news media in profit and robust competition are obsolete and only niche markets – such as specialist information sectors like financial journalism – are making progress through the headwinds of market restructuring.

The fact that journalism no longer provides a living for people who work in the industry or who invest in it has reinforced corruption and conflicts of interest with more “brown envelope” bribery at editorial level and a new generation of owners who buy up media not



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as sound business investments, but as trophy possessions to promote their wider political and business interests.

Working conditions in newsrooms are equally poor whether online or offline. Jobs are precarious and scarce. A generation of young people in the journalism schools around the world have few quality jobs to look forward to. Some will survive as freelancers, but many, if not most, are destined for advertising, corporate communications or public and political information jobs.

At the same time public trust in journalism is weakened as tech giants and advertising companies remain reluctant to promote reliable public information.

All of this points towards an opportunity for journalism but only if policymakers and citizens' groups recognise that there is an urgent need for public programmes to support a fresh agenda for change in journalism. For the Ethical Journalism Network the priorities in any back to basics strategy will be

- **Ethics:** Strengthening attachment inside journalism to core values – accuracy, independence, impartiality, humanity, transparency and accountability – and eliminating hate-speech, building respect for pluralism, holding power to account and challenging abuse of human rights;
- **Digital Knowledge:** Helping a new generation of journalists and editors to understand the digital age, to acquire the technical skills they need, and to put data journalism at the heart of editorial work at all levels;
- **Sustainability:** Building public support for new and creative ways of funding public interest journalism while preserving the editorial independence that ensures public trust in ethical media;

- **Engagement:** Ensuring journalism has a positive edge and is working with its audience to increase understanding of journalism's role in the new information landscape while building respect for democracy and human rights;
- **Responsibility:** Media and journalism must be trustworthy, intolerant of conflicts of interest, transparent about its work and always ready to listen to the complaints and views of others.

These issues should be the centrepiece of any strategy for reviving the fortunes of journalism. Building public trust requires a new vision from policymakers that goes beyond political self-interest and public relations.

Whether it is countering the information wars being fought in conflict zones or creating a pluralist information space for elections, citizens need access to information they can trust, from people they can identify.

The question of sustainability is crucial. There is an explosion of new initiatives within journalism and a capacity for innovation that is giving fresh wind to the notion of a brighter future ahead. Already investigative journalism is one area of reporting that is thriving on the back of non-traditional funding.

It may well be that journalism is no longer a money-spinner for hard-headed investors, but there are signs that a cleaner, more transparent world of news media will generate direct support from readers, listeners, viewers or followers.

New online initiatives and traditional players are successfully reinventing themselves on the web with support from donors, foundations, the audience and public sources. The future of journalism will not be determined by attachment to a single income



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flow, but will be based upon creative solutions to the funding crisis and may include a mix of civic, market and public resources.

Even in regions where democracy is under pressure, journalists are looking for innovative ways to secure the future of news. No-one predicts a smooth transition to the new information age, but equally no-one doubts that success can be achieved if there is a commitment to ethical values.

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