

## Nudging News Producers and Consumers Toward More Thoughtful, Less Polarized Discourse

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**A**t a time of extraordinary domestic and international policy challenges, Americans need high-quality news. Readers and viewers must decipher the policy options that the country faces and the manner in which various decisions affect them personally. It often is not readily apparent how to assess complicated policy choices and what the best steps are for moving forward.

Having poor quality news coverage is especially problematic when the political process is sharply polarized. As has been documented by political scientists Tom Mann and Norman Ornstein, the United States has a Congress today where the most conservative Democrat is to the left of the most moderate Republican.<sup>1</sup> There are many reasons for this spike in polarization, but there is little doubt that the news media amplify and exacerbate social and political divisions.

Too often, journalists follow a “Noah’s Ark” approach to coverage in which a strong liberal is paired with a vocal conservative in an ideological food fight. The result is polarization of discourse and “false equivalence” in reporting. This lack of nuanced analysis confuses viewers and makes it difficult for them to sort out the contrasting facts and opinions. People get the sense that there are only two policy options and that there are few gradations or complexities in the positions that are reported.



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1. Tom Mann and Norman Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*, Basic Books, 2012.

In this paper, we review challenges facing the news media in an age of political polarization. This includes hyper-competitiveness in news coverage, a dramatic decline in local journalism and resulting nationalization of the news, and the personalization of coverage. After discussing these problems and how they harm current reporting, we present several ideas for nudging news producers and consumers towards more thoughtful and less polarizing responses.

Briefly, we make a number of different recommendations:

- 1) **Journalists should go beyond Noah's Ark reporting** to strive for more diversity.
- 2) **They should include a broader range of sources** and add links to outside organizations that provide more in-depth coverage.<sup>2</sup>
- 3) **News consumers should be nudged by web portals and search engines to choose in-depth materials** as opposed to the most popular items being read.
- 4) **Social media need to incorporate broader means of reader reaction** in their platforms.
- 5) **Funders should endow investigative journalists** to protect them from outside pressures.
- 6) **Media organizations should consider partnerships with universities and non-profit organizations** and leverage their expertise.
- 7) **Citizens should utilize multi-channel viewing** as a way to escape a false sense of balance and in order to hear more complete perspectives.

## THREE CHALLENGES

In recent years, the American media have gone through massive changes in technology, operations, and business models. The news media have fragmented into hundreds of television channels and millions of Web sites. Citizen-journalists bypass the establishment press through cellphones with cameras, mobile uplink technologies, and viewer-provided videos.

The impact of these developments on media business models has been dramatic. In 2012, according to Pew's State of the News Media report, for every \$16 in print ad revenue

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2. Darrell West, Grover "Russ" Whitehurst, and E.J. Dionne, "[Re-Imagining Education Journalism](#)," Brookings Policy Report, May 11, 2010.

lost, only \$1 in digital ad revenue was gained.<sup>3</sup> The substitution of nickels for dollars has seriously weakened corporate revenue streams and harmed the ability of reporters to cover news events.

The collapse of print journalism and explosion of mobile and social media platforms represent a classic case of disruptive change. As media commentator Clay Shirky has pointed out, the democratization of information has led to traditional media systems breaking more quickly than they can be replaced.<sup>4</sup> This situation has had dramatic consequences for the quality of American democracy.

### *The 24-Second News Cycle: The Hyper-Competition for Clicks and Eyeballs*

Gone are the days of the twenty-four hour news cycle. In an era of instant communications through Facebook and Twitter, we have morphed into a twenty-four *second* news cycle. Appeasing the consumer's voracious appetite for always-on content is difficult even for companies with the most up-to-date resources.

The super-adrenalized competition generated as news migrates online encourages today's reporters to be hyperactive and over-the-top in the rush to break stories and garner page views. This feeds directly into the polarization of the political culture and the debasing of political dialogue. There is a herd mentality in news production and consumption that creates an echo chamber. This state of affairs encourages extreme reactions, polarized points of view, and intensely-felt opinions.

The immediacy of reporting creates opportunities for smaller outlets and citizen journalists with Internet connections. Many news organizations seek to increase their page views by being the first to break a story. For example, *Mother Jones* propelled its readership during the 2012 election season when it broke the infamous Mitt Romney "47% video," which ultimately helped to shape the debate over the presidency.<sup>5</sup>

Yet many virtuous qualities are lost amidst the polarized rhetoric and accelerated rush to beat the competition. For example, not all reported "facts" turn out to be accurate. On the day of the Boston Marathon bombing in April 2013, users of the online community

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3. <http://stateofthedia.org/2013/overview-5/key-findings/>

4. Clay Shirky, "That is what real revolutions are like. The old stuff gets broken faster than the new stuff is put in its place." <http://www.shirky.com/weblog/2009/03/newspapers-and-thinking-the-unthinkable/>.

5. <http://www.motherjones.com/special-reports/2012/12/47-percent-video-mitt-romney-david-corn>.

Reddit mobilized to create a subreddit, r/findbostonbombers, in which innocent suspects' photographs were mistakenly identified and shared. These photographs were later published by *The New York Post*.<sup>6</sup> This kind of inaccuracy no longer is a rare occurrence, even for major outlets.

In addition to media inaccuracy, there are problems in terms of depth and quality of coverage. In blending new and traditional media, many outlets continue to experiment with subscription versus advertising revenue models. As they adopt new financing mechanisms, news companies have downsized their workforce, closed news bureaus, and reduced their coverage overall. As Pew reports, "estimates for newspaper newsroom cutbacks in 2012 put the industry down 30% since its peak in 2000 and below 40,000 full-time professional employees for the first time since 1978."<sup>7</sup>

Alexis Madrigal of the *Atlantic* aptly describes the vicious cycle of digital journalism: "When the half-life of a post is half a day or less, how much time can media makers put into something? When the time a reader spends on a story is (on the high end) two minutes, how much time *should* media makers put into something?"<sup>8</sup>

*A strong democracy needs good reporting across the board, not just for the few who ingest a lot of news from many different sources.*

Yet we need the type of intricate reporting which can't be digested so quickly. "We are on the brink of living in a world in which the vast majority of news is in such bite-size pieces that serious, nuanced reporting may disappear save for a small elite."<sup>9</sup> A strong democracy needs good reporting across the board, not just for the few who ingest a lot of news from many different sources.

While some competition can be very healthy, the end result of this hyper-competitive environment in the news media has been damaging to political discourse. As content on the web is consumed in a consolidated virtual space, a BuzzFeed listicle of "The Best Of The Internet's Reactions To Beyoncé's New Album"<sup>10</sup> might appear alongside a *New York*

6. <http://mashable.com/2013/04/24/reddit-boston-bombing/>.

7. <http://stateofthedia.org/2013/overview-5/>.

8. <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/12/2013-the-year-the-stream-crested/282202/>.

9. Alex Jones. *Losing the News: The Future of the News that Feeds Democracy*, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 56.

10. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/mattbellasai/the-best-of-the-internets-reaction-to-beyonces-new-album>.

*Times* article reporting a school shooting in Colorado.<sup>11</sup> Blurring the lines between news, opinion and “infotainment” creates an end product which is not terribly informative in terms of public policy coverage.

Playing to the lowest common denominator of popular culture is easy because it is possible to track reader metrics in great detail. In the digital news world, a media company can track exact search keywords or the social media path taken to reach a story. Digital trails from one specific URL to another can be analyzed, a “heat map” displaying a user’s readership among different stories on a web page can be created and time spent on each page can be documented.

The question is whether digital technology enables new models of coverage that present more substantive and in-depth information to readers. The end-goal of the news media should be to educate and inform the citizenry, not just to entertain and grab the all-powerful click of consumers. Sustaining the attention of readers in a world surrounded by the quick-fire nature of online information represents a key challenge in the digital age.<sup>12</sup>

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### *The Decline of Local News and Nationalization of the News*

The dramatic changes in ad revenues and viewership have been especially impactful at the local level. As metropolitan newspapers and television stations have struggled with their revenue streams, they have laid off reporters and devoted fewer resources to investigative journalism and long-form reporting. The Pew study highlights that in local television reporting the “already considerable amount of time devoted to sports, weather and traffic on local newscasts rose even higher in the snapshot of stations studied, from 32% in 2005 to 40% in 2012.”<sup>13</sup> These changes have negatively affected the quantity and quality of information available to readers and viewers.

11. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/14/us/colorado-high-school-shooting.html>.

12. Robert W. McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy*, The New Press, 2013.

13. <http://stateofthemediamedia.org/2013/the-changing-tv-news-landscape/>.

Surveys of reporters who cover state and local news by the *American Journalism Review* have found “a staggering loss of reporting firepower at America’s state capitols.” Overall, the number of full-time newspaper reporters dropped from 513 in 1998 and 468 in 2003 to 355 people in 2009. Nearly every state around the country has witnessed a dramatic decline in local reporting.<sup>14</sup>

Experiments in a network of news sites, such as AOL’s [Patch](#), have failed to provide robust reporting at a local level. Patch was established to have one news person creating a “digital maypole” in their community, yet it is limited in its geographic coverage and profitability remains elusive.<sup>15</sup>

With a decaying local media scene, we have seen the nationalization and even internationalization of news coverage. When shootings happen in particular cities or mayors have scandals, the stories go far beyond local borders. Just witness the tremendous outflowing of news coverage of the travails of Toronto Mayor Rob Ford. Even though his antics had little consequences for people in major American cities, local U.S. outlets treated the story as worthy of extensive coverage. Increasingly, news coverage focuses on crime, scandal, and entertaining videos. Nationalizing the news has become a way for local outlets to report the news on a shoestring. These stories provide ready-made video and compelling storylines, and viewers tune into the reality-show feel of contemporary news.

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From the standpoint of news quality, the sensationalism and political polarization that has unfolded nationally seeps down to the state and local levels. It weakens the quality of that coverage and makes it harder to have nuanced coverage. When politics degenerates into name-calling and news coverage emphasizes shouting matches from polar opposites, it is difficult to have quality coverage.

In this situation, it is no surprise that the audience for particular shows has become quite segmented based on political viewpoints. When one examines the party and ideological

14. Jennifer Dorroh, “Statehouse Exodus,” *American Journalism Review*, April/May, 2009.

15. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/16/business/media/aol-chiefs-white-whale-finally-slips-his-grasp.html>.

composition of prominent news shows, many of them tilt left or right in their viewership. Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Bill O'Reilly skew right, while the *New York Times*, Rachel Maddow, and *Hardball with Chris Matthews* lean left. For example, 78 percent of Hannity's audience is conservative, while 57 percent of Maddow's is liberal.<sup>16</sup> These viewing tendencies make it difficult to address major policy problems as people no longer see the same "facts" or hear a variety of perspectives on news events. Rather, they get news that reinforces their existing views.

### *Filter Bubbles and News Personalization*

Problems of the media further have been accompanied by the personalization of the news. As has been apparent for many years, much of news coverage is highly personal in nature and does not emphasize substance. Citizens cherry pick bits of information from the news sources they favor and there is an echo chamber that reinforces people's existing viewpoints.

Digital technology enables "filter bubbles" that funnel information to consumers based on what they already prefer.<sup>17</sup> Google, for example, personalizes search results to the interests of the searcher. Facebook provides personalized news feeds that tie content delivery to friendship interactions, and recent studies have shown that 78 percent of Facebook consumers get news when they are on the site for other reasons.<sup>18</sup> Combined with RSS feeds and pre-downloaded apps pushing news to mobile devices, it has become harder for people to get information from diverse sources and more likely that they hear skewed material. These tendencies accentuate the problems of political polarization in American democracy.

It used to be that news personalization referred to the individuals being covered. However now, journalists have become a bigger part of the story. Several news outlets have "media stars" who analyze political and policy developments. This was apparent during the 2012 elections when Nate Silver drove considerable traffic to his "FiveThirtyEight" blog hosted on the *New York Times*. Similarly, at the Washington Post, Ezra Klein attracted great attention with his "Wonkblog". These individuals offer the promise of bringing more substance and less divisiveness into political and policy discussions.

16. Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, "Trends in News Consumption, 1991-2012" at <http://www.people-press.org/2012/09/27/section-1-watching-reading-and-listening-to-the-news-3/>.

17. Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding From You*, New York: Penguin Press, 2011.

18. <http://www.journalism.org/2013/10/24/the-role-of-news-on-facebook/>.

## WAYS TO IMPROVE DISCOURSE AND REDUCE POLARIZATION

Although there is much concern regarding the current media environment, there also are promising developments that offer hope of improving discourse and reducing political polarization. In the section below, we review several ideas with the potential to strengthen information flows and the diversity of perspectives represented in the news. We apply a behavioral economics perspective to suggest it is possible to nudge news producers and consumers towards more reasoned and reasonable behavior.

### [Avoid the Politics of Nostalgia](#)

The most important thing to avoid is the politics of nostalgia in which observers yearn for “the good old days” when the mainstream media filtered the news and digested daily events for readers and viewers. Due to changes in digital technology and shifts in business operations, those days are gone and not likely to return.

Instead, it is crucial to figure out how to take advantage of the strengths of the digital era and develop alternative ways to think about news coverage and media operations. It is vital that we improve the quality of news coverage and increase the diversity of news sources that are utilized by viewers.

### [Going Beyond Noah’s Ark Commentary to Interactive Links and Data Visualization](#)

Reporters need to go beyond the “Noah’s ark” approach of paired opposites commenting on the news to more diverse sourcing. Political viewpoints come in many hues, and news coverage should reflect more of these perspectives in the reporting and commentary. Centrist voices need to be heard as well as those from marginalized populations. Relying on extreme viewpoints does not elevate the discourse and it robs people of the nuances necessary in a robust democracy.

In his book, *Republic.com*, Harvard Law School Professor Cass Sunstein recommends that news coverage and Web sites include links to a range of outside organizations.<sup>19</sup> That way, readers will have access to greater diversity in social and political perspectives, dampening the filter bubble and echo chamber effects.

The web enables greater diversity because of its interactive features and because of

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19. Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*, Princeton University Press, 2009.



the ability of news organizations to utilize data visualization and information mapping. These qualities offer the potential of improving diversity in news coverage and providing greater depth in reporting. Digital journalism has aided the explosion of infographics with a great potential to convey a lot of data very quickly, appealing to contemporary audiences. Yet the average reader's ability to critically judge this new presentation of digital data is still developing and is lagging behind the ubiquity of interactives and infographics on the web.<sup>20</sup>

Also, while journalists may have limited space in their articles, they can link to in-depth reports and provide people with ways to get much-needed additional information. Platforms such as the *Washington Post's* [Wonkblog](#) and Andrew Sullivan's "[The Dish](#)" provide daily developments in policy news for those seeking to understand the intricacies of complex issues. Although Wonkblog creator Ezra Klein has decided to leave the *Post* and join Vox Media, his and other platforms continue to provide a portal for rich content such as featured graphs and dive deeper into stories using new types of interactive formats that favor the visual. In so far as they keep their quality at quicker publishing speeds, digital startups will be ideal arenas for experimenting with reporting on nuanced policy choices.

Empirical research demonstrates that focusing on news quality is a winning formula for media outlets. An analysis undertaken by political scientists Todd Belt and Marion Just used data from local television stations in 50 different geographic markets. They studied the content of 33,911 local news stories from 154 TV stations and looked at the Nielson ratings for various kinds of stories. Unlike the conventional wisdom, they found that "solid reporting and a focus on significant issues actually produce better ratings than slapdash or superficial tabloid journalism."<sup>21</sup>

### [Nudging Readers Towards Greater Thoughtfulness Through Web Portals and Search Engines](#)

In their book *Nudge*, writers Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein apply behavioral economics to public policy and suggest that consumers be encouraged towards better health and welfare through structured choices.<sup>22</sup> According to their reasoning, individuals make

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20. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/115644/best-infographics-2013-interview>.

21. Todd Belt and Marion Just, "The Local News Story: Is Quality a Choice?", *Political Communication*, April, 2008, Volume 25, Issue 2, pp. 194-215.

22. Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Welfare, and Happiness*, Penguin Books, 2009.

decisions based on the options that are presented to them. Through default options or direct cuing, they can be encouraged to move in directions that boost their well-being even if they are not entirely conscious about the nudging.

News organizations and portal operators should apply this reasoning to the world of information. Right now, many news organizations have sections compiling their “most read” articles and they encourage readers to click on those links. Popularity is one standard by which consumers can be nudged towards certain content, but media outlets also should have “most thoughtful” sections that encourage readers to look at articles or commentary that editors believe elevate the public discussion or add new ideas to popular debates. This would help redirect the news from an eyeballs game into a quality of discourse enterprise.

It also would strengthen the role of editors in news filtering, which is a traditional virtue of the news media. According to Jill Abramson, the managing director of the *New York Times*, “there is a human craving for trustworthy information about the world we live in—information that is tested, investigated, sorted, checked again, analyzed, and presented in a cogent form. .... They seek judgment from someone they can trust, who can ferret out information, dig behind it, and make sense of it.”<sup>23</sup>

Search engines employ many criteria in their algorithms, but many of them are based on the popularity of particular information sources. Yet these algorithms lack the embedded ethics of human gatekeepers and editors.<sup>24</sup> Articles or sources that generate a lot of eyeballs are thought to be more helpful than others which do not. This biases information prioritizing towards popularity as opposed to thoughtfulness, reasonableness, or diversity of perspectives.

Digital firms should be encouraged to add criteria to their search engines that highlight information quality as opposed to mere popularity. They could do this by adding weight to sites that are known for high-quality coverage or providing diverse points of view. This would allow those information sources to be ranked higher in search results and therefore help news consumers find those materials.

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23. Jill Abramson, “Sustaining Quality Journalism,” *Daedalus*, Spring 2010, Volume 139, number 2, ProQuest Research Library, p. 43.

24. [http://www.ted.com/talks/eli\\_pariser\\_beware\\_online\\_filter\\_bubbles.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles.html).

## Broaden Social Media Reactions

Social media platforms aggravate political polarization by encouraging strong, emotional reactions as opposed to more thoughtful and reasoned responses. Professor Talia Stroud of the University of Texas has proposed the creation of a “respect” button for social media sites that would allow people to indicate respect for statements made. The purpose is to add other forms of expression beyond traditional and oppositional “likes” or “dislikes.” Stroud finds that “when people look at like-minded media, they develop more politically polarized attitudes.”<sup>25</sup> From her standpoint, having more ways to encourage civil discourse would elevate the level of political discussions.

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## Endow Investigative Reporters

One of the big challenges in the contemporary period has been funding investigative journalism. It is hard to find support for this activity and lack of financial resources undermines the ability of investigators to do their jobs.

For this reason, some have proposed “news you can endow.”<sup>26</sup> By raising a sustainable endowment for investigative reporting, major news organizations would have funding that would support investigators and insulate them from advertisers or outside pressures. This kind of endowment would add stability and journalistic independence to newsrooms and strengthen investigative coverage.<sup>27</sup>

We already are seeing individuals with deep pockets invest in news outlets and Internet platforms. For example, Jeff Bezos has purchased the *Washington Post* and is expected to experiment with new forms of news-gathering and presentation. Pierre Omidyar is

25. John Wihbey, “U.T. Austin’s Talia Stroud on How to De-Polarize News Audiences”, *Journalist’s Resource*, October 3, 2013.

26. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/28/opinion/28swensen.html>.

27. <http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2013/10/27/why-bought-globe/QmFHhvRGFajQh1oMcAJ64M/story.html>.

funding *First Look Media* in order to support writers Glenn Greenwald, Laura Poitras, and Jeremy Scahill. Of course, it remains to be seen how these ventures will function and whether they will present more in-depth coverage that reduces political polarization.

### *Form News Partnerships with Universities and Non-Profit Organizations*

News organizations have been formed by universities or non-profit organizations or entities that work in partnership with them. They often provide high-quality information that is non-partisan or independent in nature. For example, the Center for Investigative Reporting at the University of California at Berkeley undertakes investigative articles on important topics.<sup>28</sup> It uses students and faculty members to complete research and expose wrong-doing or misdeeds.

ProPublica is an example of a non-profit organization that seeks to fill the need for in-depth investigative journalism.<sup>29</sup> It undertakes articles that compile data or uncovers information relevant for contemporary political or policy issues. Its work has won a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting.

Public Insight Network,<sup>30</sup> by American Public Media, aims to improve the news by allowing people to join either as a journalist or as a source to work in tandem. In this way, the knowledge and insights of a community can more effectively be utilized by trained journalists who can add “context, depth, humanity and relevance” to news stories, as the network’s Web site states.

These and other types of partnerships enable news organizations to leverage the resources of outside groups and take advantage of the talent that is available. In a time of diminished financial resources, these kinds of relationships can improve the quality of coverage and the depth of the investigative reporting. It represents a way to broaden the reach of news organizations by connecting them to high-quality external groups.

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28. <http://cironline.org/>.

29. <http://www.propublica.org/>.

30. <http://www.publicinsightnetwork.org/about/>.

## *The Role of Specialty Outlets*

There has been a flowering of news outlets focused on particular topics. For example, Democracy Now! is a daily, independent program operated by journalists Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez.<sup>31</sup> It runs stories that have “people and perspectives rarely heard in the U.S. corporate-sponsored media.” Among the individuals it features include grassroots leaders, peace activists, academics, and independent analysts. The program regularly hosts substantive debates designed to improve public understanding of major issues.

These and other specialty news organizations add value to public discourse. They diversify the range of sources beyond those typically interviewed by national media outlets. They also add substance by going in much greater depth than often is the case with mainstream outlets.

## *The Value of Citizen-Journalists*

The widespread availability of video cameras, cell phones, and mobile tablets has given ordinary citizens the tools to record events and post footage online. The previous era when professional news organizations filtered the news has given way to ordinary folks who file reports and offer commentary. The expected upswing of wearable devices such as Google Glass and Samsung smartwatches will accelerate the prevalence of citizen-journalists producing information in real-time.

In emergency situations or natural disasters, these people provide valuable information that is helpful to public officials. They identify problems and help to publicize areas of need. And in policy domains, such reporting can be helpful as long as there are diverse sources and crowd-sourcing of the information.

Of course, there are risks to this style of reporting. Citizens without journalistic training may be more likely to report inaccuracies or file misreports. Because they are reporting of their own volition, it is possible that they might have a specific agenda or bias. They may repeat false ideas reported elsewhere and help bad ideas go viral.

But citizen-journalism combined with crowd-sourcing represents a way to employ

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31. <http://www.democracynow.org/>.

the virtues of collective reasoning to questions of news reporting and analysis. The Ben Franklin project is an example of a citizen-journalism site that enables people to comment on and edit web and print articles.<sup>32</sup> It uses the WordPress blog platform to hold journalists accountable for what they write. The project uses an “open-sourced assignment desk” to seek to inform readers and give larger numbers of people a part of media reporting. They are a pioneer in new models of coverage based on crowd-sourcing facts and ideas.

Another experiment in this same vein called [Uncoverage](#) used crowd-funding to raise money to support investigative journalism. According to its organizers, “the aim is for people to back investigative journalism projects, relieving newspapers and magazines’ financial burden and allowing reporters to do their thing.”<sup>33</sup> Yet Uncoverage is still far from its fundraising goal at the time of this writing. A variation on this approach might be to directly edit and fact-check citizen journalists on the web. Time will tell if these or similarly structured digital journalism models will succeed.

### *Citizen Responsibilities in an Age of Polarization*

In an age of polarization, citizens should realize that they have responsibilities as well. The current news ecosystem places extra pressure on discerning citizens and readers. It is therefore vital for news organizations to produce higher quality and more diverse information. But unless citizens understand and become aware that many contemporary news outlets have a point of view and benefit from multi-channel viewing, it will be hard for people to get more complete perspectives.

The contemporary period is not the first time in American history where the country has experienced polarization and hyper-partisanship. The 1790s and 1890s represented similar periods when news reporting was sensationalistic, personal, and highly partisan. Indeed, early in American history, news outlets were sponsored by party organizations and reflected the viewpoint of the individual or group sponsoring the paper.<sup>34</sup>

Yet the country prospered and thrived during these time periods because consumers understood news outlets had points of view and it was important to read more than

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32. <http://jrcbenfranklinproject.wordpress.com/about/>.

33. <http://techcrunch.com/2013/12/17/uncoverage-hopes-to-crowdfund-investigative-journalism-because-newspapers/>.

34. Darrell West, *The Rise and Fall of the Media Establishment*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

one newspaper in order to get a range of perspectives. We may see a return to this in the digital era. We have already seen the meteoric rise of voices with a stated bias (see Andrew Sullivan's *The Dish* with the tagline "biased and balanced").<sup>35</sup> And Jay Rosen, part of the new journalistic experiment launched by Omidyar, has long been a critic of the fact that journalists come without prior commitments to their work.<sup>36</sup>

It is possible that being "objective" in Internet age reporting may be a thing of the past and there are arguments that transparency may count for more than claiming objectivity.<sup>37</sup> Regardless of whether organizations, or even our friends on social media, are transparent about their viewpoints, we need to raise our awareness about the content we consume on a daily basis. Multi-channel viewing is a way for citizens to protect themselves against polarized reporting and break out of the news media echo chamber.

## CONCLUSION

In short, there are promising experiments taking place with the potential to improve vital features of contemporary discourse. Digital technology enables greater diversity and more in-depth coverage of the issues and it highlights important reforms needed to promote democracy. Making progress on those features strengthens democratic processes and improves the level of information available to people. Even if "one-sided news exposure [is] largely confined to a small, but highly involved and influential segment of the population," as political scientist Markus Prior argues, that is a serious issue for American democracy.<sup>38</sup>

Having more nuanced coverage and using article links to connect readers to a greater variety of perspectives would help with political polarization as well. If people rely on multiple news sources and have access to less polarized information, that will inform their perspectives and help them make sense of the policy choices we face. In that way, the digital era offers some hope for improving the way our political system functions. We need to accentuate the positive aspects of a fragmented news world and develop remedies for its deleterious features.

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35. <http://dish.andrewsullivan.com/>.

36. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/12/a-news-organization-that-rejects-the-view-from-nowhere/281979/>.

37. <http://www.economist.com/node/1890412>.

38. Markus Prior, "Media and Political Polarization," *Annual Reviews of Political Science*, Volume 16, pp. 101-127, 2013.

We need additional research on several aspects of media production and consumption. We require a better understanding of how citizens use digital tools and the range of outlets and Web sites they visit on a regular basis. If citizens read widely, having a polarized news system is much less problematic than if they rely on sole-source news sites.

We also should determine whether digital tools such as data visualization, mapping, “respect” buttons, and interactive features change consumer behavior and bring greater depth and diversity into the manner in which people receive information. Having better data on usage would help reformers target their efforts more clearly.

*We need to examine how to increase participation and promote less polarized forms of representation in an increasingly digitized world.*

It is important to develop a better sense of citizen engagement and what encourages people to get more involved and better informed about the political process. We need to examine how to increase participation and promote less polarized forms of representation in an increasingly digitized world.

Empirical work suggests that there has been “an aggregate shift away from a focus on locally-based news to nationally-based news in the United States” over the past couple of decades and that awareness of local political representatives has dropped as a result. Using survey data on news exposure and local awareness, political scientist Bryan Gervais concludes that “the likely continued demise of the newspaper industry suggests that local political awareness levels will continue to decline if the coverage provided by newspapers is not adopted by another form of media.”<sup>39</sup>

Media reform clearly plays a key role in those linkages, and we must analyze the forces that drive engagement and information utilization. It is possible for web portals and/or search engines to play a constructive role in boosting the quality and diversity of political news stories. Since they sit at key junctures in the current news ecosystem, it is valuable for them to “nudge” readers and viewers to higher quality and less polarized information.

39. Bryan Gervais, “Can’t Read All About It: How the Decline of Newspaper Readership Affects Local Political Awareness”, paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, 2010. P. 1.



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