

How Journalists Should Really Challenge Trumpism

By [Sam Lebovic](#)

APRIL 30, 2017

IN THE FIRST MONTHS of the Trump presidency, the rolling crises of the American news media continue to intensify. Attacks on the fourth estate are a regular feature of the young administration: on Twitter, the president calls the media the “enemy of the American people”; in press conferences, journalists are treated with performative contempt. As the press scrambles to respond to these challenges, it remains gnawed by doubts about its performance in the election. Journalists, surprised by the result and angered by Trump’s hostility, wring their hands about their role in American politics. Anxiety about “fake news” abounds — Trump’s opponents worry that fake news propelled him to the White House; the administration seeks to discredit any uncomfortable coverage as “fake.” Meanwhile, amid all of the crossfire, much of the public continues to hold the “mainstream” media in contempt.

If the press wants to navigate its way out of this mess, it must be very clear about what we need from it. Traditionally, Americans have expected the press to fulfill three different functions: to provide a platform for the expression of opinion; to filter the impossibly vast range of potential stories each day and provide the consumer with a curated selection (such as the daily paper or the 30-minute evening broadcast); and to produce new information to inform the public and provide a check on power. Changes in the media landscape in recent decades — particularly, but not exclusively, the rise of the internet — have disrupted the news media’s monopoly on all three functions.

So far, however, much of the meta-anxiety swirling in the press about the press has focused on the ways that the news media should perform only the first two functions — expression and filtering. These are the wrong things to focus on, and efforts to improve them risk doing more harm than good.

Calls for the press to return to its “oppositional roots” — that it should hold the administration’s feet to the fire, or speak truth to power — seem primarily focused on the need to criticize the administration. It’s far from clear, however, that more criticism will accomplish much. It’s not, after all, hard to criticize the man, and it’s not as if the perfectly worded op-ed is going to vanquish the beast. If anything, a journalism of denunciation seems to help Trump. It reduces political debate to a chaotic stream of invective; it makes politics a reality show contest. And after a decades-long conservative war on “lamestream” media elites, press criticism of Trump’s character seems to have had little effect other than helping him run as a populist outsider.

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And while Trump is clearly overstating things when he sees the press as an implacable enemy — recall the rush to celebrate his “presidential” not-quite-State-of-the-Union address — there has actually never been a shortage of critical coverage of Trump. The news media expressed plenty of opposition to Trump during the election: major news organizations endorsed Hillary (despite their endless coverage of her emails); they editorialized about Trump’s inadequacies; in the electoral coverage of five leading newspapers and five leading networks, 87 percent of stories about Trump’s fitness for office were negative. John Oliver and Samantha Bee regularly pilloried the candidate; a newly vibrant set of little magazines and websites engages in trenchant critique. Even *Teen Vogue* has gotten in on the act. We simply don’t need *The New York Times* or the *Washington Post* to express our “opposition” to Trump.

Meanwhile, our concern about fake news is a concern about the filtering and curating function of the press, about a desire to ensure that only news of a certain quality reaches the public. Fixating on this issue creates many problems. While there have been occasional suggestions that fake news might fall outside the protection of the First Amendment, any state effort to clear up the problem would be both unconstitutional and undesirable. More importantly, in our hyper-partisan moment, focusing hysterically on “fake news” helps reinforce the sense that we have entered a post-fact politics. The Trump administration has gleefully embraced the accusation as a way to challenge unfavorable stories. And to the extent that it tends to encourage paternalist solutions, focusing on fake news risks slipping into a counterproductively elitist disdain for the public.

At a more fundamental level, moreover, we no longer need the news media to either curate our news or express our opinions. Throughout the 20th century, media critics focused on the fact that a highly consolidated media unfairly limited the range of stories and opinions available to the public. Today, these functions have been democratized and diversified — we all can curate our own news feeds, and the blogosphere and social media provide channels for all sorts of expression. These are, it is worth remembering, positive developments.

Increased diversity in expression and distribution, however, are not sufficient to produce a viable democratic media culture. There also needs to be information to comment upon and distribute and share. It is in this third area that the press is meaningfully failing to fulfill its last and most important function: *providing new information to the public*. In fact, the diversification and democratization of expression and curation have actually undermined the press’s ability to produce new information. When consumers turned to blogs and social media and websites, newspapers lost their monopoly on reader’s eyeballs. Advertising dollars went elsewhere, newspaper revenues slumped, costs had to be cut. Between 2000 and 2014, the number of journalists employed in the nation’s newsrooms fell an astounding 40 percent.

This produced the press’s real failure during the election. There was remarkably little serious investigative reporting about the candidates or their programs, or about the state of the electorate or the country. Policy analysis was almost entirely absent from the reams of press commentary. Overall, only 11 percent of news stories in the election focused on policy.

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It was much cheaper to focus on the endless streams of polls and to debate who was winning the horse race. It was even easier to opine about scandal and controversy and character (through October, the three network evening news shows had devoted three times the amount of airtime to Hillary's email scandal as they had to all policy issues).

There were, to be fair, some instances in which careful reporting produced new information, such as David Fahrenthold's Pulitzer-winning *Washington Post* stories on Trump's charities (though even this, tellingly, fixated on the question of character, not policy). But by and large, the media settled for the cheap and profitable role of covering the controversy, ceding control of the news cycle to Trump. (The bait and switch of his "birther-cum-hotel-launch" press conference was only the most extreme example of a general trend.) With an impulsive president communicating via a trigger-happy Twitter account, the problem is only worse. A few seconds of ungrammatical typing, another baseless allegation, and the press and blogosphere follow each other down the rabbit hole of the latest outrage. Much less time is spent digging for ongoing conflicts of interest, exploring policy proposals, whatever those might be, and covering the history of Trump's cabinet. While the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* do run stories about the consequences of some of Trump's policies for rural or remote communities, the big papers' regional bureaus, as well as other local news outlets, have been closing at a rapid clip in recent decades. Hot takes are faster and cheaper.

This is not a question of making the American press great again; the American press has never actually produced all that much investigative journalism. According to a recent quantitative study by communication scholars Katherine Fink and Michael Schudson, investigative reports made up precisely zero percent of front page stories in three major newspapers in 1955. In 1979, amid the post-Watergate "boom" in investigatory reporting, such stories made up a whopping one percent of front page stories. In 1991, they were up to three percent, but by 2003 they were back down to one percent. If the election is anything to go by, the problem is only getting worse.

Why the American press produces so few of these stories is the subject of James T. Hamilton's terrific new book, *Democracy's Detectives: The Economics of Investigative Journalism*. Hamilton, a professor of Communication at Stanford University and an economist by training, approaches a potentially nebulous subject by looking for the numbers. The number of submissions to a leading investigative journalism award are falling. In 2010, newspapers made 25 percent less Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for government information than they did five years earlier. FOIA requests from smaller papers *halved* in those years, as these organizations seemed to abandon investigative reporting to a handful of larger, national media organizations like *The New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. In 1990, the top five papers claimed 30 percent of the prize citations; in the 2000s, the top five outlets claimed 41 percent. At the same time, more and more investigative reporting is focused on comparatively easy stories about individual corruption rather than systemic failures.

All of this is the result of simple economics. As Hamilton puts it, "the economics of investigative reporting appear (appropriately enough) dismal." Investigative journalism is,

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compared to other forms of journalism, expensive. It takes time — on average Hamilton shows, it takes six months to report on prize-nominated stories. *The Boston Globe* spent eight months and over a million dollars on its investigations into sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Rewriting handouts, or interviewing two experts about a Twitter controversy, is a much cheaper and faster way to produce copy.

What makes the extra expense of investigative reporting particularly intolerable is the fact that there is no obvious way to profit from it. All news, but particularly investigative reporting, is a public good in two senses. First, in a technical economic sense, news is a public good because its consumption is non-rivalrous — if I eat an apple, you can't eat it; but if I know something about Trump, that doesn't interfere with your ability to know it. So if I want an apple, I need to buy it. If I want information, I can rely on someone else telling me, or I can read about it on Facebook, or on an online aggregator, or a myriad of other places. From the point of view of the news organization paying to produce new information, I'm a freeloader, but there is little that can be done to stop me. Second, investigative reporting is also a public good in the broader, colloquial sense — it is good for all of us to have information about our polity, and to have a check on governmental abuse. But these are benefits that are so diffuse and general that one can't capture them as profits.

So the economic incentives to invest in serious, investigative journalism were never good, and many papers simply never went in for it. But for those publishers and editors who valued such reporting for political and cultural reasons, there were, historically, two ways that the economics of the news industry could justify and support the production of at least some level of investigative journalism. First, news producers made their money by selling reader eyeballs to advertisers. Achieving a reputation for award-winning investigative journalism was thought to be one way of building brand awareness and brand loyalty among readers, and hence a way of driving up subscriptions, and thus a way to bring in more advertising revenue. You can see how convoluted and tenuous that chain of assumptions was.

The second reason that newspapers historically produced any investigative journalism was more straightforward, though it was no less tenuous. For a brief period in the late 20th century, newspapers were flush with cash — they were either owned by wealthy individuals as vanity projects (like NBA teams today) or they enjoyed excessive profits from their monopoly position in the advertising economy. Either way, for a time there was surplus profit around to be plowed into noble causes like investigative journalism. Soon, however, the always precarious financing of investigative journalism collapsed as chain newspapers displaced family owners. And then the bottom fell out of the advertising market in the wake of the internet.

That said, if investigative journalism is expensive compared to other forms of journalism, it's not all that expensive. Hamilton argues that spending thousands of dollars on investigative journalism can produce millions of dollars in benefits to society as laws are changed, and problems resolved. Ordinarily, the economic impulse to quantify public goods contributes to the moral emaciation of our age — it encourages the assumption that market efficiency is the only measure of worth, neglecting the variety of non-economic rationales we might

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deploy to evaluate public goods like journalism. But in this case, it seems, Hamilton's cost-benefit analysis affirms the rationality of spending on investigative journalism. The ethical heart of Hamilton's account is a detailed study of the career of North Carolina investigate reporter Pat Stith. Stith spent 42 years producing investigative reports, earning an average salary of \$83,800 (in constant 2013 dollars). His reporting changed 31 laws, and shifted the allocation of \$4.7 million in public spending. Such investigative reporting, Hamilton shows, is a cost-effective, rational use of resources. (Still, it might have been nice if Hamilton could have assumed that the \$341,000 the *Washington Post* spent to investigate police shootings, which produced reforms that saved eight lives the following year, was a worthwhile cost, without doing the calculations based on the Statistical Value of Life.)

Of course, the economic crisis of the newspaper industry is undermining the hiring of journalists. (The number of journalists employed in Pat Stith's newsroom in North Carolina fell from 250 in 2004 to 86 in 2014.) But there are reasons to think that it could be cheaper than ever to fund investigative journalism. Hamilton emphasizes particularly the economic efficiencies that come from algorithmic journalism — with open data sets, it is easier than ever before to see large-scale patterns in policy and in social problems. Read with a sufficiently critical eye, and with sufficient time to follow leads, such apparently dry sources can produce incredible stories.

Hamilton recounts a fantastic example from the early 1960s, when journalist Phil Meyer cross-referenced publicly available details of the investments of Senate heavyweight Estes Kefauver, recently deceased, with Kefauver's speeches in Congress. He found that Kefauver, who had been head of the Antitrust and Monopoly Subcommittee, had been threatening companies with investigation, only to snap up their stock when their share prices dropped. Meyer dubbed this "precision journalism" and he developed it when he realized that he would never have the clout to get inside tips because he worked for the small *Akron Beacon Herald*. It's a nice reminder that journalists need not rely on insider sources and currying favor with politicians to get information; stories are lying in the data if journalists have the time to look. I. F. Stone, famously, pored over public documents to produce his journalism; Victor Navasky called him an "investigative reader." We need this sort of reporting at both the federal and the local levels.

Luckily, funding investigative journalism could actually be much more cost-effective today than it was in the days of the mass-market newspaper. Traditionally, newspapers only ever spent between 10 and 20 percent of their operating budgets on news gathering. And only a tiny portion of that went to investigative reporting. The bulk of the money always went to printing and distribution costs, which were prohibitively expensive unless they were so large that they could benefit from efficiencies of scale. Today, as ProPublica shows, small groups of journalists can exist on their own, selectively partnering with larger organizations to assist with distribution.

Such units could be funded in various ways, though the most obvious options are consumer subscriptions or charitable contributions. Many members of the public, including many wealthy liberals, are looking for ways to revitalize American politics — funding such

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reporting organizations would be an easy and non-controversial contribution to that effort. The important point is that the money should be directed exclusively to investigative projects. While there are reasons to place these investigative units in legacy newspapers — they can benefit from legal advice, institutional knowledge, and so forth — we don't need increased donations and subscriptions to *The New York Times* as a whole, where some of the money can be siphoned off to support the coverage of press conferences and op-eds and lifestyle pieces. If legacy newspapers are serious about committing themselves to investigative journalism they should create discrete, self-funded investigative units, and subscriptions and donations should be earmarked for these units.

Such targeted spending on investigative journalism could produce real changes in the media and in political culture. Between 1903 and 1912, about 24 magazine journalists produced some 2,000 articles exposing corruption and malpractice. Today we know them as muckrakers, and remember their era for its Progressive politics.

A century later, the other side of the political spectrum provides a similarly instructive example. In 2012, Steve Bannon established a Government Accountability Institute in Tallahassee, Florida, to produce new stories about the corruption of the Clintons and to help shift the media culture to the right. As Bannon understood all too clearly, the mainstream media hungered to publish investigative news, but it wasn't producing it. "The modern economics of the newsroom don't support big investigative reporting staffs," Bannon explained: "You wouldn't get a Watergate, a Pentagon Papers today, because nobody can afford to let a reporter spend seven months on a story. We can. We're working as a support function." We've just seen how successful that project was.

The only way to create a more vibrant American political culture, and to begin to tackle the serious problems that confront the American polity, is to reaffirm our faith in public debate and deliberation. But that can only happen if public debate moves beyond its reality-show phase, and if the press gets economically rewarded for producing the sorts of factual, carefully reported information that the American public truly needs. To create a more informed electorate, it is more important to produce real news than to seek to eliminate false news. To challenge the excesses of the Trump administration, it is more important to know how his policies are being implemented than to opine about his personal shortcomings.

One can already see some signs that this realization is spreading, and that Americans are making renewed efforts to support the production of journalism. Donations to Propublica have mushroomed since the election — it took in \$600,000 in the first month of 2017, and recently announced it will use the funds to hire more journalists. Subscriptions to *The New York Times* are up, and its new advertising campaign emphasizes the role that its large newsroom could play in the discovery of Truth. Even Mark Zuckerberg, responding to criticisms of Facebook's role in spreading fake news, has argued that there is a new need to support the news industry. Promising as such developments are, shifts in sentiment and subscriptions can only do so much. Journalism's greatest need is financial investment, and given the inequalities of the American economy, the elite have much more money to spare than everyday news consumers. The press, in short, needs Zuckerberg's cash much more

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than it needs his praise. If large foundations and wealthy philanthropists want to fix the United States's broken political culture, they need to invest in organizations producing original, carefully reported news. A little of their money could easily produce the sort of journalism American democracy will need to survive the Trump administration, and whatever comes next.

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