

THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM

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An End to Futility: A Modest Proposal

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Introduction

There is a deeply engrained fantasy that technology will always fix things. Any proposal for media reform should not involve the state, it is argued, because this will undermine freedom of expression. There is always a more agreeable alternative that entails no risk: technological liberation. This approach draws on fervent libertarianism. It found an eloquent voice in Silicon Valley prophets who proclaimed that the virtual world of the internet – ‘cyberspace’ – is free, egalitarian, interactive, self-expressive and global. This virtual world, they declared, is superior to the physical world, and will redeem it.¹ All that is needed is for the state to stay out of the way, and allow the internet to save the universe unimpeded. As the Grateful Dead lyricist John Perry Barlow wrote in ‘A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace’: ‘Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather’ (Barlow 1996).

Former members of the Revolutionary Communist Party are the nearest counterpart to this millenarian anti-statist tradition in Britain. They regularly proclaim the power of science to build a better world provided it is unfettered by the capitalist state. This has led them to attack proposals for more regulation of biotechnology (including genetic modification). Some have gone further and disputed climate change ‘orthodoxy’ with its agenda of state intervention. For example, Claire Fox, a former co-publisher of the magazine *Living Marxism* (now defunct), dismisses Extinction Rebellion as ‘anti-progress, anti-development’ (Anderson 2019).

These outriders of libertarianism can be politically mobile. John Perry Barlow was a former Republican (and campaign organiser for the Republican

politician Dick Cheney) who drifted to the hippy left at peace with corporate power. Claire Fox, a former Trotskyist activist, became a UKIP MEP, and is now a baroness. But despite their political wanderings, they have been consistent in believing in the emancipatory power of science and technology, and in opposing an enlargement of the role of the state (at least, as presently constituted).

Their views are merely an extreme version of mainstream thought. The dominant political creed from the 1980s onwards has been neoliberalism: the belief that reducing the influence of the state on the economy – through privatisation and deregulation – will build a more prosperous society. This approach won growing support within the economics profession, think tanks, public bureaucracies, governments and the leadership of opposition parties. Coming from the right, it gained adherents across the political spectrum, even in the Rhineland and Nordic heartlands of social democracy. Although its ascendancy was weakened by the 2008 crash and the 2020 pandemic, it remains a powerful intellectual force.

If anti-statism became more widespread in the later twentieth century, a belief in the role of science and technology as a force for progress has long been with us. Indeed, it is the metanarrative of modernity. Historians like to deride Whig history – and its belief in the advance of reason and science as the midwife of progress – proclaiming it to be a relic of the Victorian age. But like the undead, the Whig historical narrative of progress lingers on. This is for a very good reason; science and technology have in fact contributed to greater prosperity, longer life and better health.

These two traditions – suspicion of the state and reverence for technology – have given rise to repeated bouts of delusion every time a new media technology comes along. On each occasion, it is proclaimed that a new dawn has arrived in which the ills of the media will be remedied. State-sponsored media reform is deemed redundant. Yet, prophecies of technological redemption often prove to be empty.

It is worth recalling five past moments of delusion. They suggest that a more effective approach than ‘techno-olatory’ (to invent a new word) is needed.

Four Moments of Delusion

In the 1980s, a wish-fulfilment fantasy was woven around the camcorder, a portable video camera which incorporated a videocassette recorder. It was relatively

cheap and easy to use. At last, it was proclaimed, ordinary people had the technology to create their own programmes, making possible the creation of an alternative television sector under democratic control. The camcorder would breathe new life into the struggling video movement that had emerged in the later 1960s. It would enable new forms of collaborative work between professionals and amateurs, which would be relevant and true to people's experience. The technology would, in the words of one group, 'bring people together to speak and listen to each other and help build and support strong communities' (Viewpoint Community Media (Swindon) n.d.). The excitement engendered by the new technology was conveyed by the names that groups awarded themselves, such as the 'Camcorder Guerillas', a collective based in Scotland (Coyer et al. 2007, 198).

In the event, some humorous family videos were shown on commercial television. Moving testimonies were recorded, and shown to small audiences in community centres (and are now a rich source for social historians). But the people's television revolution never materialised.

The second delusive moment occurred when new-generation commercial cable TV was launched in Britain in 1983. Wise heads predicted that it would lead to an entertainment-led information revolution. Cable TV would provide not only 'film-on-request' but adult education programmes which, according to the *Times Educational Supplement* (28 October 1983), would have an impact comparable to the advent of the public library. Advanced cable TV would supply numerous channels for minorities including the deaf and elderly. And it would supply innovative off-air services such as home visits by the doctor. None of these developments materialised. Instead cable TV showed mostly tired repeat programmes, and was adopted by just 1% of homes in the UK by 1989 (Goldberg et al. 1998, 10).

The third delusive moment occurred in Fleet Street in the mid-1980s. The conventional wisdom was that the introduction of computer-aided print technology would inaugurate a newspaper revolution by enormously reducing costs. Ian Aitken, political editor of *The Guardian*, wrote that it would enable the emergence of 'entirely new newspapers representing all points of view', while *The Observer* journalists Robert Tayler and Steve Vines declared that it would break 'the tyranny of the mass circulation press' (Aitken 1985; Vines and Taylor 1985). A number of new national newspapers were launched in the late 1980s. With one exception, they all failed. *The Independent* (including its Sunday edition) alone survived but ceased to be independent when it became the property of a Russian oligarch. It subsequently became a website-only publication (though a later

offshoot, the *i* newspaper, still exists). The main impact of the 'print revolution' was to enable newspapers to become fatter, and for print workers to be sacked. It also aided for a time the development of alternative community newspapers, although most of these folded by 1990.

The fourth delusive moment began in the mid-1990s, and was the most bizarre of all. It repeated the fables spun around cable TV the decade before but applied them to interactive digital television, called at the time 'iTV'. The same promises were made – video-on-demand, home visits from the doctor, programmes for the elderly, mass adult education – but this time round there was more emphasis on viewer power. Readers of the British press were told that they would be able to vote on key issues, choose the story line for a drama, compile dream schedules of programmes from around the world and instruct their TV sets to scan and select news on topics they were interested in (Curran and Seaton 2018). The key to all this viewer power was the red button.

Most of these much-trumpeted new features of interactive TV sets did not materialise. 'Red button interactivity' was widely judged to be a huge disappointment. Market research carried out in Britain, reported in *New Media Age* (27 April 2006), revealed that the majority of viewers never used any of the modest red button facilities (such as betting on a horse) that were available.

The Grand Delusion

The grand delusion was different because it was played out not at a particular 'moment' but for the best part of two decades. The fantasy was that the internet would bring about a renaissance of journalism.

A legion of citizen journalists and digital-born websites, it was hoped, would sweep away press barons and newspaper chains. The internet would be 'journalism's ultimate liberation,' proclaimed Philip Elmer-Dewitt (1994), because 'anyone with a computer and a modem can be his own reporter, editor and publisher – spreading news and views to millions of readers AROUND the world.' The era of capitalist domination of the press, according to the distinguished media historian John Nerone (2009, 355), was over. 'The biggest thing to lament about the death of the old order,' he declared, 'is that it is not there for us to piss on any more.'

The second claim was that journalism would be reborn in a better form as a collaborative project involving both professionals and amateurs, based on diverse

forms of media ownership. The 'old economic model of journalism,' declared Yochai Benkler (2006), would give way to a 'new social model'.

In fact, the old order of journalism was not swept away. In most countries, large legacy media organisations dominate the most-visited websites. In 2020, they controlled eight out of the ten most-visited news websites in the UK, nine out of ten in Australia and seven out of ten in the United States – a pattern reproduced elsewhere (Reuters Institute 2020).

Large legacy news organisations also extended their reach through social media. Studies show that legacy media content was prominent in political discussion on Twitter in 2017 elections in France and Germany and prominent also on Facebook in the 2019 general election in India (Majó-Vázquez et al. 2019; Majó-Vázquez et al. 2017a, 2017b). In the UK, legacy media also dominate the news followed through the four leading social media – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat – although they did not monopolise all the top spots in 2018 (Ofcom 2018).

The dream of reinventing journalism through civic involvement also turned sour. There were occasional professional-amateur experiments like the South Korean website OhmyNews, which had short-lived success (Kim and Hamilton 2006). But these were few and far between. More typical was the US TV network NBC, which abandoned an attempt to involve citizen journalists in a professional-amateur partnership after six years (Elvestad and Phillips 2018). There were reasons for this failure. To judge from a seven-nation study, most people have no desire to be amateur journalists (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013). This lack of enthusiasm is matched by that of journalists who are already inundated with information, and are under enormous deadline pressure. They are not sure how reliable and independent their would-be amateur partners are. So they have tended to resist time-consuming experiments of working with non-professionals, confining them to the role of sources.

What has been achieved is the worst of all possible worlds. Traditional newspaper chains have not been ousted by exciting web start-ups. These chains still dominate but they have been undermined by the migration of press advertising to Facebook, Google and websites like Craigslist. British newspaper advertising revenue more than halved between 2007 and 2017, as did that of American newspapers between 2003 and 2015 (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2019; Pickard 2020). As a consequence newspapers closed, editorial budgets were slashed and journalists were sacked. US newspaper publishers shrunk their workforces by over half between 2001 and 2016 (Pickard 2020), whereas their

British counterparts reduced the number of journalists they directly employed by 26% (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2019). This has resulted in news deserts where local affairs are no longer properly reported, ghost local newspapers which are run in effect from regional news hubs and, above all, more superficial, PR-dependent journalism.

In short, legacy news media have not been dethroned. But newspapers have haemorrhaged revenue, depleting their quality and coverage. As a consequence, the recent period has marked the decline rather than renaissance of journalism.

Causes of Delusion

There are multiple causes of these repeated bouts of delusion. It is not just that some progressives have sought a technological solution to media shortcomings, conditioned by their libertarianism and awe of new technology. It is not even that they have clutched at straws because they did not want state involvement. The explanation is more complicated than this, and has something to do with the difficult-to-predict nature of technological innovation. Interactive TV eventually brought a version of 'video-on-demand' through Netflix, Amazon Prime and other subscription on-demand services (SVODs). But this happened decades later than predicted, partly in a different form, delivered not through a red button but a handset.

Similarly, the future of journalism has turned out to be, in a sense, non-journalism. There has been an efflorescence of self-expression about our common social processes in the form of tweets, posts and social media sharing. But while this has been profoundly democratising, there is still a need for good traditional journalism.

There are other explanations too, of which perhaps the most important is a frequent lack of understanding of business. Most national papers that were launched full of hope in the later 1980s ran out of money – in the case of *Today* and *News on Sunday* within weeks (Goodhart and Wintour 1986; Chippendale and Horrie 1990). The community video movement was doomed from the outset because it lacked access to adequate distribution and to the capital needed to mount professionally processed, compelling documentaries. The anticipated rise of digital-born news websites did not happen on the scale that was anticipated due to their undercapitalisation and the power of oligopoly.

It is worth taking a closer look at this last phenomenon because it illustrates how important money – not just technology – is in media creation. Legacy media largely saw off the digital start-up challenge by adopting a classic anti-competitive

strategy. They mostly gave away their online content free, cross-subsidised by their print or programme operations. This put digital-born rivals in a double bind. If they matched this free offer, their run-in costs would soar. They would have to build up, over an extended, loss-making period, a user base large enough to break even from advertising alone – something that most failed to do. But if they charged a subscription fee, they would deter would-be users who are used to getting their online news free. No alternative commercial model – including micro-payments and crowdsourcing – emerged that worked.

This is why digital-born news websites have made only limited headway. A small number have managed to break through and become commercially viable. This includes, notably, BuzzFeed (though it is now in financial difficulties) and HuffPost, which was swallowed by a media conglomerate. There is a second stratum of sites (such as Yahoo News and MSN) which are parasitic content aggregators, though some originate a small amount of their own news. The third stratum consists of sites with rich patrons: like Breitbart News, established with right-wing millionaire support, and openDemocracy, endowed by progressive foundations. The fourth stratum consists of sites confined to marginalised, low-cost ghettos. A successful example is the Canary, which had more monthly visitors in 2018 than any other digital-born political website in the UK. Yet it operates on a shoestring, and has less than 1% of the combined online and offline audience of the *Sun*, which embodies everything that it opposes (Media Reform Coalition 2019, 7 and 12, tables 4 and 8).

The fifth category consists of failures. Some start-ups died within months. Others briefly soared, generating much academic excitement, only to disappoint. An example of the latter is the Independent Media Center (usually known as Indymedia) which was widely viewed as inspirational (e.g., Platon and Deuze 2003). It was launched in 1999 on the eve of the anti-globalisation protests in Seattle and had built by 2006 a network of around 150 publishing collectives in six continents. Yet by 2014, only 22 functioning centres were left and its audience had drastically shrunk (Bunz 2015). Like other projects of its kind, its trajectory followed the rise and decline of the social movement to which it was linked – in this case, the social justice movement.

What Money Can Buy

Just as the European aristocracy subsidised the arts (notably music) in the eighteenth century, so the American plutocracy subsidise some contemporary media

with a public purpose. This is one of the ways they pay less tax, and it also avoids the hazard, as they see it, of state involvement in the media. It is worth registering what additional funding – whatever the source – can achieve.

The Sandlers, a rich banking family, have bankrolled ProPublica, an online newsroom in New York. Other charitable trusts such as Carnegie and Atlantic Philanthropies have also backed the project. ProPublica draws on the rich tradition of investigative reporting in the USA. It is led by veteran journalists but also employs young talent. It is an impressive organisation which has won three Pulitzer Prizes for news reporting. It has secured a large audience by working with leading media organisations on specific projects.

Its output is, broadly speaking, centrist but it includes some progressive journalism. One notable example of its output is ‘Machine Bias,’ an analysis of the software supplied by a private company which is used by judges across America when passing sentence. The software results in black people being incarcerated more often than white people for committing similar crimes on the basis of flawed risk assessments. This is because its algorithm (informed by responses to a lengthy questionnaire) predicts future criminality in ways that are racially biased and demonstrably false. Of those who were labelled high-risk but did not reoffend, 50% were African American and 23% were white. In the case of those who were assessed as lower-risk but did reoffend, 48% were white and 28% Black. ProPublica’s statistical analysis, backed up by other evidence, was given a dramatic focus through reports about particular individuals (Angwin et al. 2016). This investigation was carried out by a team of four people with a background in computer science as well as journalism. In the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, it provides a timely insight into how institutional racism actually works.

To produce journalism of this quality requires not just skill and intelligence but also time and money. It is a reminder of what is increasingly lacking in our financially strapped press.

British Digital Corporation

In Europe we have stopped relying on the rich to do good works through private philanthropy. It seems preferable for the democratic state – rather than the aristocracy – to determine the public good. This is why it was decided in Britain that Parliament should define the shape of broadcasting in the 1920s. It adopted the

then-innovative idea that radio should be organised as a public service, with its own source of funding but with objectives defined in a public charter.

It is time that we consider how the gains of digitisation can be harvested for the public good. Digitisation enables media interoperability and lowers costs. James Harding, the former editor of *The Times*, has suggested the idea of a British Digital Corporation (BDC). Jeremy Corbyn, then leader of the Labour Party, endorsed this proposal in a public lecture (Corbyn 2018). Yet, the form which this new body should take remains elusive. Essentially, we have a good name but little more. Below I set out some ideas about how the concept could be developed.

The key to any realistic proposal is its funding. The idea of the licence fee – in effect a hypothecated tax – has been central to the success and longevity of the BBC. The obvious source of new finance are the immensely profitable tech giants which are parasitic oligopolies sucking revenue from the media industries. A tax should be levied on revenue from online advertising, appearing in the UK, of companies (like Facebook, YouTube and Google) with more than a 20% share of online search and social networking markets.

A recurrent defect of past media subsidy schemes is lack of access to distribution. This can be addressed by requiring all UK public service broadcasters – that is, both publicly owned and fully regulated commercial broadcasters (BBC, ITV, Channels 4 and 5) – to commission a set proportion of their qualifying content from programmes funded by the BDC. This will prevent its marginalisation.

The role of the BDC would be to create and fund an *independent media sector* producing output with a public purpose. This would include anything from film, TV programmes, websites and print publications to videogames. This independent sector should operate alongside the commercial and public service media sectors.

The projects eligible for funding could include the following. Each category serves a public purpose:

- a newsroom of skilled investigative journalists (like ProPublica)
- ‘state of the nation’ drama, both of the left and the right
- community journalism, especially in areas where there are ‘news deserts’
- children’s programmes and documentaries – two categories of programming that have experienced a sharp drop of public funding sustained over a number of years despite the important part they play in the life of the community
- national news websites that extend the political diversity of the media

- media job creation in de-industrialised areas, such as in videogame production, a sector in which the UK is increasingly successful
- television programmes that are innovative, distinctive or enable different groups in society to engage in a collective dialogue
- media companies which give their workers a say in decision-making
- media enterprises that extend the diversity of employment in the creative industries
- the development of innovative digital media technology

The directors of the British Digital Corporation would be selected by an independent appointments panel. They would be appointed on the basis of relevant experience and expertise, taking account of the diverse political, regional and demographic make-up of the nation. In addition, a specified number of directors would be elected by workers in the creative industries.

The great advantage of the BBC (which should be defended through reform) is that it achieves economies of scale, has accumulated expertise, a clearly defined public purpose, a large following and is the main reason why the UK is a leading international producer of TV programmes. But given its anchorage to the political class, and its increasingly centralised and market-oriented corporate culture, the BBC needs to be shaken up by competition from a more innovative and autonomous rival better reflecting the diversity of British society. The BDC resembles in this respect the original conception of Channel 4 but extends this concept to all digital media.

The creation of a British Digital Corporation will not be easy in the context of Brexit Britain. It will be strongly opposed by the US government in bilateral trade negotiations. It will mean taxing large US communications corporations on their UK operations in a form that is difficult to evade. And it will generate a subsidy for the UK creative media industry that will be judged unfair competition – the same reason why a trade lobby in the USA has in the past pressed for the abolition of the BBC's licence fee. The BDC is something that a future UK government will have to fight for. This means that the concept needs to be debated, refined and to win support from a broad spectrum of opinion. The fact that it originates from a Conservative (Harding) backed by a socialist (Corbyn) is a good start.

Sometimes it takes time for an idea to pick up impetus, be refined and win support. It took years for the conception of Channel 4 (originally conceived as the Open Broadcasting Authority) to bubble up, be reworked and win favour. But in the end, it was proposed by a Labour government and adopted by a

right-wing Conservative government. A similar process is needed for us to determine how best to reform the media without relying on the magical elixir of new technology.²

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