

Journalism, Media, and the Troubling State of the Deweyan Solution

When philosopher and social critic John Dewey needed a solution capable of reviving flagging democracy, he turned to journalism. Tasked with determining fact and educating the populace with the information necessary to navigate a changing world, the news media offered a way to engage citizenry in an expansive, inclusive way. It both spoke truth to power and empowered the people. This seemed a perfect tool to foster greater democratic participation, and for most of the last century the news media did just what Dewey suggested it could: It found facts, informed and educated citizens, and bolstered and strengthened democratic processes.

Today, however, journalism is faltering. Economic changes have left it weakened, divided, and stripped of trust among the citizens it serves. Where once the news media held a promise of true democratic empowerment, today it struggles to be relevant. The Fourth Estate stands on crumbling foundations, and foundations are critical to the underpinnings of democracy itself. Nearly 100 years ago, when Dewey first cited journalism as a solution, he and Walter Lippmann were engaged in their own debate about the concerning state of democracy. The two began at a point of agreement — that democracy as originally constructed was broken, and to survive it needed changes — but each prescribed different remedies. Lippmann believed the common person might be capable of governing a local municipality, but when it came to the national and international arenas citizens lacked necessary expertise. To keep democracy vibrant, Lippman insisted, required a governing elite trained for the task. Complicated governance should be left to experts, he said. Democracy would be better off.

Dewey, in contrast, believed the common person must hold a central role in the democratic process. To him, policymaking involved citizenry, and to exclude them would be counter to foundational American ideals. Public participation might be complicated, he said, but the heart of democracy lives in the people themselves, and is therefore necessary.

For citizens to fulfill that responsibility, however, they require current information of high quality. An educated populace could deliberate policy and make sound decisions, Dewey believed, but only if the discourse was rooted in relevant facts. Journalists and journalism were central to this vision of functional democracy.

And not just any journalism. For Dewey's ideas to work, news media would have to be thoughtful, trustworthy, and capable of capturing the interest of readers and viewers. For Dewey's informed populace to come to full fruition would require journalism outlets strike a careful balance between engaging work without becoming lascivious, and an authoritative voice without growing boring. It had to be true, but it also had to be interesting. It was a tight line to walk.

But for decades journalism did it: For much of the 20th century, first print, then broadcast and eventually online media spread facts with sufficient force to change policy, bring down presidents, end wars and launch widespread social change. The U.S. Constitution carved out special protections for the press, but it wasn't until after the era where Dewey wrote his words, with the internationalization of politics impacting the common person, the mechanization of transportation, the standardization of time, the rise of cities, etc., that the Fourth Estate came into its own. News suddenly no longer took days or weeks to travel from one community to another — advances in communication technology transformed that time into hours or minutes for an incident to go global, and eventually to instantaneous. Events in any corner could carry international impact, and everyone could read about them the next day. Dewey's vision of an independent, authoritative, fair press actively informing citizens came just as the technology necessary to do so created a world where critical coverage could exist in real time.

Dewey wanted facts, and newspapers were ready for the task. Television and radio played parts too, but newspapers led the journalism field, providing a depth of quality coverage that changed the world. The news stories of the era have become legend, as did those who reported them: Walter Cronkite broadcasting the bombing of London, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's investigation of the Watergate Hotel break-in that brought down Richard Nixon, coverage of the Vietnam War that eroded public support even as coverage of the Civil Rights Movement solidified opposition to segregation. 20th century journalism found itself living up to its democratic promise, providing citizens with information necessary to make democratic choices. News fed the reshaping of policy decisions. It was just as Dewey had hoped: engaged citizens supported by fact-based media led a democratic expansion.

Over time, however, the promise faded, mostly due to economics.

For most of the 20th century, journalism was lucrative business. Newspapers made their owners rich. Publishers hired reporters not out of civic duty, but because it was good business. Democracy and capitalism were working in concert: Newspapers earned so much money through local classified, department store inserts, and the ads that surrounding the stories that

publishers needed more reporters. Every newspaper was a virtual monopoly, as there were no alternative advertising mediums for small, medium, and even national businesses. As the age of consumption exploded, newspapers reaped the benefits. They were the place where ad dollars landed, and there were so many ads. In such a context, it made sense to hire reporters — more reporters meant more stories, and more stories meant more pages to put ads on. The challenge was not paying reporter salaries, but getting enough stories to keep readers reading and to fill pages that had ads around their edges. Publishers, in an effort to meet ad demand, put a reporter at every town meeting, school board meeting and water district meeting. And still they had more ads than pages.

All this cash supported great journalism. Those ads paid for more reporters, who did more stories, and pried their way into more places. Democracy reaped the benefits. It was a case of citizen needs aligning with the needs of business, both newspaper owner and the myriad advertisers. Everyone's interests aligned — from government to business to civic leaders, everyone wanted people reading newspapers.

This was journalism's Golden Era. Stories of significant merit would have several reporters assigned to them, with different aspects examined by different writers. Each would contribute different perspectives. There might even be several different papers covering the same issue. In the end, all this coverage led to something close to complete, diverse, expansive coverage. And all of it survived through advertising.

Today, however, things are different. Opportunities to advertise now exist in myriad other places, from television and cable and elsewhere. But it was the launch of the internet that really turned the lucrative newspaper business model on its head. Now any business can create a website to reach customers. There is no reason to pay for an ad, which decoupled business interests from their alignment with democratic interests.

But that was just one hit to newspapers. Classified, meanwhile, also moved. Now individuals selling a used car or furniture go on Craigslist, Ebay, or Facebook Marketplace, representing another cut to the media company business model. Even department stores eventually began marketing differently, cutting out the inserts that had once represented daily revenue for newspaper publishers. The flush times were over. Subscriptions, which had never been enough to pay for good journalism, were all that was left, and as the quality of journalism declined (and alternative media grew thanks to technology), so did subscriptions. The Deweyan democratic contributions journalism was capable of offering started growing thin.

This situation was compounded by another unfortunate accident of capitalism: Newspapers had long been immensely profitable, so investors for years had been borrowing money to buy papers as investments. As revenues slowed, however, debts came due. With advertising falling off, it became impossible to pay the loans investors had taken out to make the initial purchase. Suddenly these “investments” were money losers. In past eras local owners were rooted in the community, so they had incentive to stomach losses in lean times in order to keep the paper solvent. But these new owners were looking for returns only, and when the returns evaporated, the investors closed the papers. Suddenly not only were there fewer reporters at every paper, but there were fewer papers.

What was the democratic impact of all this economic upheaval? In simple terms, where once there had been a team of reporters at every meeting gathering facts for dissemination, suddenly there was only one (or none). Where there had once been multiple newspapers covering a community, now there was one (or none). Where once there were a diversity of writers giving a range of perspectives and covering all aspects of any topic or issue, now there would be one story, written from one perspective. And where at one time readers had all turned their eyes to their local papers as a critical source of both commerce and news, now they were looking elsewhere. Dewey’s vision of journalism as a space for facts and information crucial to the practice of democratic ideals was fading.

Democracy needs to allow a wide swath of perspectives to find voice in order to engage the vast array of constituencies, particularly in a nation as complex and diverse as the United States. Media can either exemplify that diversity, or it can illustrate its lacking. For decades the economic viability of journalism allowed newspapers to do the former. But today newspapers in particular are plagued by the latter — a simplicity of story and perspective that leaves citizens feeling alienated or distant.

And on the local level, there is no replacement for a newspaper. Local television news covers broad regions, and its reporters often only swoop in when a developing story already exists. There are no local television news reporters pouring through municipal budgets or town voting records, checking the details and verifying the facts. This represents one loss for democratic governance — a core finding of “fact” on which to make policy. But there are others. Local debate and discourse, Dewey knew, is a practice ground, a microcosm for national and even international discourse. According to Dewey citizens must be taught to be good policymakers. Good journalism supports that learning. Communities need to practice civic engagement, and the best place to learn is locally. Quality news stories not only provide facts and information,

they also convince people to attend public meetings. They inform them of local goings on, giving the details of things that need to be decided and how they connect to a community, analyzing alternative policy choices through interviews with advocates and more. News stories convince people to care enough to engage, to show up, to fulfill their role as citizens rather than remain bystanders. Such direct personal engagement is a chance to practice democratic decision-making, the honing of civic skills, and without a newspaper story, for many people that practice would never happen. Local reports and reporters lead people to the voting booth, town meeting chambers, even protests and marches. It is in these places that citizens hammer out a shared vision among divergent values and perspectives. This is the practice of policymaking to which Dewey referred, happening locally. Good, solid, well-researched journalism supports this engagement, which builds civic skills like negotiation and compromise that are necessary on every level. The shifting economics of modern journalism, however, have left much of America with little to offer local civic training grounds. Not only does a shuttered newspaper represent a loss of diversity of voice in media, it is also a misplaced invitation to practice democracy in a local, low-consequence setting.

All this comes from shifting economics. Capitalism and democracy once ran a shared course with journalism, but no longer.

But this isn't the only way the market challenges Dewey's vision of democratic support. Among the remaining news media companies there has been a trend towards more partisanship in coverage, the decision made to pick a team and stick with it rather than reporting fairly on it. This strategy represents a bid for viewers, an attempt to secure dollars in the otherwise challenging market. But while such partisanship has become commonplace, it leaves viewers without a shared understanding of "fact," undermining the very foundations of democracy as Dewey envisioned it.

It might seem this choice could be political — executives picking a political party that aligns with their values and then running stories that support that party — but this is also a business decision. Brand loyalty, after all, works for sneakers and cereal, and it works for political parties. Why not for news as well? Journalism, in trying to find new ways to fill its coffers following the fall of full budgets, has wandered into punditry. Where at one time journalists offered analysis, more and more their opinions takes precedent.

Journalists were always part of the political game, but in the previous era they served the role of referee, not as players. They pointed out fouls and noted contest winners, but also their best to stay above the fray. Today, however, when political leaders need a scapegoat or an enemy, the

press is as likely a target as the opposition. The news media has become the news, rather than just the reporters of it.

This is not only the fault of politicians, however. Journalism created its own vulnerability when it embraced partisanship in the age of declining budgets. Many “news stations” spend more broadcasting hours giving opinions than digging into facts, particularly in cable news. This shift has created an opening politicians are simply exploiting.

From Dewey’s perspective, this twisting of the journalistic ideal is deeply problematic. Where he prescribed journalism as a way to collect public facts to generate a shared understanding, these opinion-focused outlets do the opposite. They not only lack facts, their vocal partisanship often go so far as to ignore or reject facts. These news organizations support a political team, not democracy, and in such instances facts get lost. Facts are, after all, expensive to uncover. Much easier (and less costly) is personality-driven opinion.

This change has occurred most prominently on FOX News and MSNBC, but its influence extends beyond. Reporters like Anderson Cooper and Jake Tapper have become “personalities” akin to celebrities, and their opinions carry value. This is a break from the past, when news reporters maintained a certain level of gravitas and detachment. That gravitas may have been founded on illusory concepts of objectivity and fair-mindedness, things no human can fully achieve, but those narratives supported something Dewey recognized democracy needed — a trusted arbiter, a solemn truth-teller capable of weaving shared narratives. Today, no such version of truth exists, and every storyteller is now less trustworthy.

As a result, it is today possible for powerful people to shield misdeeds made public through accusations of “fake news” and “alternative facts.” Inconvenient truths can be managed, offering a smokescreen to elected officials. In such circumstances, democracy suffers.

The constant turning of the news cycle adds to the disinformation narrative. New business models built around 24-hour news prioritize speed of reporting over clarity, and airtime is often filled with partisan back and forth. In this environment it grows harder to argue any single fact among an onslaught of information. This new format makes “news organizations” financially viable, but they remain short on support of the public interest. The market supports best that journalism that hurts democracy.

The implications of this breed of journalism impacts every reporter. For decades there was a tacit understanding that reporters strove for balance, and as a result attacks on their credibility were limited. This trend towards partisanship outlets, however, has eroded trust in the fairmindedness and objectivity of all reporters. Objectivity is now open to questioning. Many of

these news agencies strive for excellence as they did in past years, but the change in atmosphere has fed calls of partisanship and bias after any unflattering story. “Media bias” has become a common accusation. News, opinion and political opposition have become so intertwined and muddled in the minds of citizens an accusation of “fake news” can stick anywhere.

Democracy needs shared vision and shared facts. It requires people building to shared understandings. In this environment, such alignment has become impossible. Political news agencies are not new — the partisan press has a long and storied history — but in the modern era it has become possible for a poorly reported or slanted news story to spread like never before. One misrepresentation can reach millions in a matter of hours. Never before could disinformation spread so broadly so quickly. Dewey would decry today’s news landscape as corrosive to democracy.

Again, this is a case of the market and journalism formerly running in the same direction, in a direction that fed democracy, but no longer. In the age of Dewey the finding of facts made good money. Today, it is maligning facts that makes good money, whether clickbait on the internet or partisan reporting on cable news. There is little financial motivation for facts. And those news agencies still dedicated to old ideas about facts do their searching with fewer and dwindling resources.

This atmosphere leaves citizens guessing: What’s true? What’s real? What’s made up? These questions have been quite real of late: What is collusion? What is obstruction of justice? What is an impeachable offense? What happened with Russia? What happened in Ukraine? What is a quid pro quo? What are the consequences?

The media was once critical for explaining these issues to citizens. It informed them with the tools necessary to decide how to govern. This was Dewey’s vision of a democratic world. But today the basic facts Dewey noted as central to citizen-led democracy are in question. There are no longer shared rules. Markets incentivise division and disinformation over shared narrative. This has left democracy tenuous. The public’s wholesale loss in faith in news media marks an erosion of democratic processes that is occurring worldwide: Nations with democratic pasts are electing strongmen, and a weakened news media has proven unable to hold them accountable.

In light of this democratic drift, is it time to revisit the Dewey-Lippmann debate, to declare democracy in crisis once more and consider alternative approaches? Have Dewey’s ideals fallen short? Is it time to turn to governing elites, or some other way?

If democracy is to survive in something akin to its current fashion, the interests of journalists must be realigned to work with capitalism rather than against it. Democracy is powerful, but it grows overshadowed by markets. When, for nearly a century, wealth could be made through support of the Fourth Estate, the Fourth Estate had the resources to hold power accountable. Shifts in economic viability brought about by technology have changed that equation, and neither journalism nor democracy have figured out how to adjust to the new reality. New models — nonprofit news companies and internet news — have emerged, but none have the weight of a well-funded newspaper. None has the resources to pay a modern day Woodward or Bernstein to sift through documents looking for that one fact on which to construct a whole story.

Without financial solvency to support a focus on serving as a check on political power rather than an ally to it, journalism will fall short in empowering citizens. Voters will be left without the information necessary to make sound decisions. Markets have shifted, and the news media must find a way to realign itself if it is to continue to serve as the crucial support to democracy it once was.

Otherwise, the Washington Post's new slogan perhaps puts it best: "Democracy Dies in Darkness."