

## **The American News Media in an Increasingly Unequal Society**

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For the last third of a century, America's economy and politics have been changing drastically, but the news media that are aimed at the so-called popular or mass audience have not taken very much notice, which, in turn, has impaired what journalists and the news media can do for democracy. This article describes some of the reasons why the news media must also change and proposes several innovations in the content and formatting of the news.

As economists, other social scientists, and journalists have pointed out, much of the economic and political change has been in a downward direction. Economic inequality has been rising steadily and drastically (Noah, 2012; Stiglitz, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Partly as a result, the nation's politics and government are currently heading in an increasingly oligarchic direction.

At the same time, an increasingly globalized and capital-intensive economy— computerized and now robotizing—has reduced the number of secure and decent-paying jobs going to employees, all while increasing the monies going to the owners of capital (Piketty, 2014). The result is declining job security and pay for all but those workers with the highest skills and scarcest talents (Standing, 2011).

American politics is changing in tandem with the economy. Billionaires, multi-millionaires, and the corporate business community now spend more on lobbying and campaign donations to advance their own interests than ever before.

Although the managerial, technical, and professional upper middle class is doing well, the changed economy and the emasculation of unions has reduced the political muscle of the middle- and moderate-income populations. In addition, these populations are split politically. There are the people who favor the maintenance or expansion of welfare state protections; those, many voting for Tea Party politicians, who want to shrink these protections and much of the rest of government, as well; and as always, those in an indecisive or distanced middle (Edsall, 2012; Skocpol & Williamson, 2012).

The country's political climate will likely reflect these and other popular differences of interest, resulting (at least at times) in a polarized politics, paralyzed government, and turbulent nation.

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### The News Media Today

So far, the changes in the economy, the polarization of politics, and the paralysis of government do not seem to have resulted in any significant change in the news supplied by the *mass* news media. This is especially true of the legacy media serving the large popular audiences, particularly the three national U.S. broadcast network television news programs. They are still the country's primary source of national news, attracting more than 20 million viewers daily.

Although the content of the news depends on what is happening nationally and internationally, the types and formatting of stories and the role of the anchor person remain much the same as when these programs first appeared on U.S. television screens in the early 1960s (Gans, 1979).

To be sure, some cable news stations, the monthly and other so-called general magazines, certain journals of opinion, and the ever-larger number of digital news websites offer detail and analysis of the country's economic and political difficulties, but virtually all are *class* media catering to an audience that is both more interested in the news and better-educated.

As before, today's mass news media emphasize the new events of the day. They report on government and politics with top-down reports of what public officials and others in the political elite (and more recently, also some of the economic elite) have done and said in the pursuit of their duties.<sup>2</sup>

Most of these stories have been too limited in number and length to enable audiences in their citizen roles to understand very much of what has been happening in government, much less participate in it in some way.

For example, although the news audience's primary political responsibility is voting in presidential and midterm elections, even stories about these elections are not helpful. With coverage emphasizing the horse race, prospective voters obtain insufficient clues to the candidates' character, knowledge of major issues and decision-making ability.

In addition, the mass news media have largely avoided—and still avoid—most economic news relevant to the mass audience. The Dow Jones Industrial Average, by which small investors and other economic amateurs measure the health of the economy, appear every day, though more broadly useful statistics and analysis do not. Similarly, although most of the news audience consists of employees, labor market conditions are reported only when the government issues its monthly reports, and even then the stories tell only about the jobless rate and perhaps another statistic or two.

Businesses and their executives who get in trouble with the law or the government have been judged more newsworthy since the Great Recession, but despite its growing role in the national economy, the financial industry itself is still not considered very newsworthy. Corporate campaign support for, and

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<sup>2</sup> Usually, government, politics, and the economy are secondary to more dramatic events, notably natural and human-made disasters, as well as unusual accidents and scandals.

other connections to, Washington politicians are now mentioned a little more often, but lobbying organizations and their activities still rarely make the news.

Given its focus on top-down news, the national news media have paid much less attention to the rank and file citizenry. They are most often represented indirectly in national statistics, and then individually, as victims or characters in human interest and inspirational stories.

More recently, these news media have added to citizen newsworthiness by reporting polling results in tandem with reports on especially controversial Beltway decision-making. Most of the time, the polls are presented as stories about how the public feels, but sometimes, the presentations implicitly accuse elected officials of being undemocratic. An example of this occurred when Congress rejected gun control laws in 2013, even though 90% of poll respondents favored them (Gans, 2013). However, citizen political activity is rarely news, unless "trouble" takes place between marchers or demonstrators and the police.

A perhaps even more important limitation of the mass news media, though one that may not be apparent to much of the audience, is false equivalence, which is now providing an increasingly inaccurate picture of the political process.

The mass news media have long sought to provide balanced news, which requires what one might call "both sides" analysis. Its basic premise is that any political, ideological, or other deviation from acceptable political action can be reported only if the journalists can find a similar deviation on the other side. The two sides are usually the major parties, or conservatives and liberals.

In the past, when the two political parties could usually reach eventual compromise, the journalists devoted more time to the finally struck deals than to the disagreements between the parties. However, today, when the polarization is intense, the politicians constituting the two sides cannot even recognize the same facts, and compromise is often unachievable. Even so, journalists try always to report two sides so that they cannot be accused of bias.

This allows the mass news media, but also others, to describe the current Congress as being in gridlock or dysfunctional, without focusing on the Republican refusal to consider legislation and nominations favored by President Obama and other Democrats. And although the split between the Tea Party and establishment Republicans is sometimes mentioned, it is balanced by describing the split between liberal and centrist Democrats without noting the difference between the two splits.

Consequently, many people in the news audience see the conflict as squabbling between the two parties and a joint refusal to find solutions to the country's problems. One result is a pervasive distrust of Congress as a whole, and high disapproval ratings for the White House when it cannot overcome Congressional inaction.

In addition, the mass news media try to avoid bringing up matters which are defined as factual by the mainstream audience, but are viewed as hostile opinion by guardians of influential political

ideologies. Thus, these news media almost never report that an American public official has lied.<sup>3</sup>

Stephen Colbert once pointed out that reality has a liberal bias, and since the news media are supposed to report what goes wrong in the reality they cover, doing so makes them vulnerable to charges of liberal bias. Displaying too much interest in poverty, inequality, or, for that matter, global warming can subject the news media to the kind of criticism that they prefer to prevent.

The country's increasing economic and political inequalities have received little coverage in part for this reason, but also because of the discomfort with numbers that appears to be shared by journalists and their audiences. Stories about the troubles of individual victims of the economy are offered instead, as are stories of those who have overcome their troubles.

Actually, since the public school system does not teach people how everyday politics works, even people who keep up with the news regularly may not understand all of the news they get. Unfortunately, American media researchers have never conducted comprehension studies to find out.

How much of the mass news audience understands what the news media leave out is unclear. According to the principal polls, the news media have long been distrusted as well, but so far, all the other major American institutions embroiled in or dealing with controversy and conflict have evoked similar popular distrust.

Whether such reactions have political impact can be questioned. Most of the news audience, especially that of the mass news media, are only spectators, both of the news and of politics.

As citizens, their only political role is to vote periodically. They may occasionally be asked to provide a crowd for a public meeting, but in many places, politicians make it clear that they do not favor independent political activity. Thus, much of the audience has little incentive to keep abreast of political news between elections.

As a result, many in that audience may not even see the news media as relevant to democratic politics and their participation in it. They seem to use the news primarily for other purposes. They keep up with the news to remain attached to, and to monitor those parts of society they cannot monitor personally or through their social networks. Such "keeping up" usually requires little more than knowing the current headlines and story leads.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A number of fact-checking organizations now exist and report their conclusions on websites (Lucas, 2013). However, their work is not seen by or reported to the news audience, and the mass media prefer euphemisms to words like lie and lying.

<sup>4</sup> Many in the audience also look for news that is directly or indirectly personally relevant. News that directly affects their everyday lives, such as news of war, economic crises, or epidemics, is rare, but disaster and human interest stories seem to touch people emotionally, making such stories indirectly relevant.

Further, keeping up enables people to find out what is going wrong in that environment, which then allows them to infer what is not going wrong. Every airplane crash story also tells people that all the other planes arrived safely. The news media themselves back up this reassurance function by including whatever information they have about the restoration of the status quo.<sup>5</sup> In a sense, the news media tell their audiences what the Sun gods told our long-ago ancestors: that today's world will still be there tomorrow.

This message may be the most important one the news media can transmit, because otherwise, uncertainty, suspicion, fear, and panic could follow. If people do not know what public officials and others on whom they depend are doing, rumors will fill up the news vacuum. In effect, for the mass news audience, and perhaps the elite one as well, the major function, or covert purpose of the news is to maintain confidence in the continuation of the status quo, to be informed of threats to that status quo, and to ward off panic.<sup>6</sup>

So far, the arrival of the digital news websites has not altered this picture, even though they may be producing a greater number of news stories per capita than the legacy news media. They are also beginning to do more and more of the investigative reporting.

However, at present, many of these websites resemble class news media; they attract a larger number of better-educated people. This is likely to continue as website journalists invent new analytic, explanatory, data-driven, and other news formats to expand their audiences.

Meanwhile, the news media serving the mass audience are also adapting to the Web, with search engine and social media news sites joining newspaper and network television websites. Those obtaining large national audiences will become the mass news media of the future.

Once the television set becomes obsolete, digital versions of the network television news programs will undoubtedly move over to the Web, and with a format that enables them to hold on to their audiences. Meanwhile, the huge corporations that now dominate TV will seek to dominate the Web as well, a process that has already begun.

Although media critics tend to blame the shortcomings of mass news media coverage of politics and the economy on journalists and their employers, the major causes of these shortcomings are built into the structure of America's politics. As long as the members of the news audience have such infrequent political duties and also learn little from political news that is personally relevant, they will have little

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<sup>5</sup> The network television news programs often try to end their nightly shows with inspiring or cheerful human interest stories. Perhaps audiences thereby retain some faith in the status quo, although the networks hope that such stories keep viewers in a good mood at the show's end so that they will tune in again the next day.

<sup>6</sup> Journalists make an unintended contribution here as agents of accountability. In order to report the news, they must stay close enough to their political sources to reduce the chance that these will behave incompetently, immorally, corruptly, or criminally.

incentive to pay attention to political and related news.

False equivalence practices are equally structural. Any mass medium that reaches a huge audience must be careful not to upset it. If that audience is also politically and ideologically diverse, any perceived or imagined deviation from neutrality risks upsetting one or another part of that audience. Commercial news firms cannot afford to make either audiences or advertisers unhappy, and nonprofits obtain most of their funds from foundations, rich individuals, and audiences who cannot be seriously upset, either. Consequently, false equivalence is practiced in public news media, as well.

All of these processes become more serious when the news media and the firms are being watched by influential guardians of ideological correctness, currently particularly on the Right. Until these news media discover sources of economic support and profit that do not become unhappy with the news or do not make their unhappiness known, false equivalence in one form or another is likely to survive.

Just about the only news media exempt from false equivalence requirements are the two major ideological cable channels, Fox News and MSNBC. Because they are consistently conservative and liberal, respectively, and thus attract mostly like-minded audiences, they can say what they want as long as they stay in their ideological niches and do not upset the like-minded. The fact that they attract comparatively small audiences and spend a good deal of time attacking each other adds to their freedom. As a result, they, but particularly Fox, have far more political influence than their audience size would predict.

### **Future Hard Times?**

The future is not predictable, but many empirically guided economists seem to think that the country's economy may not return to the era of constant growth and rising wages that lasted from World War II to the 1970s. As a result, the current economy, with its high unemployment, underemployment, and job insecurity, could continue into the foreseeable future. So will unstable, declining incomes and sub-minimal incomes for many. Only the very rich and rich—highly skilled professionals, managers, and speculators—can count on income security. Insecure and hard times for too many may be here to stay (Faux, 2012).

The same guess about the future holds for the country's level of economic inequality, although many observers believe it could get worse, and Piketty (2014) projects such a trend for the rest of the century.

The likely result is that the current income and wealth gaps between and even within economic strata will remain or grow; those between the very richest and the rich, between the upper middle class and the rest of the middle class, and between it and the moderate-income population. However, the poor and very poor are expected to suffer most, and the gap between them and the rest of society will increase further.

Possible political consequences can also be guessed. More distrust is likely between socioeconomic strata and the racial, religious, ideological, and other sectors into which the population is

divided. Similar distrust should therefore be expected among the political forces and agents that represent these sectors. Unless one party obtains total control of the government for several elections and can implement its political goals and ideological values, conflict that hampers or incapacitates legislative decision making is apt to continue or increase.

The current pattern, in which those fearful of downward mobility in what they believe to be a zero sum economy try to restrict access to more public funds and programs by those already downwardly mobile is apt to continue. It is even possible that the self-described "makers" will coalesce into a single organized sociopolitical movement, increasing the deprivation of the "takers," the less privileged parts of the population.

### **Future Hard Times and the News Media**

Journalists might want to ask whether a continuation or worsening of the current economic and political situation will increase the demand for news about it. One would think that a static economy, a paralyzed government, and the yet-unrecognized class wars between some of the country's several classes would produce greater interest in the news.

Still, it is also possible that, when people see or read bad news about the economy and the polity, they might want to avoid the news media as much as possible. Indeed, ever since the Great Depression, the conventional wisdom has had the general public choosing diverting entertainment featuring the rich to distract itself when the economic news is bad.

This notion has never been tested, and in an industry which has rarely studied its customers except to measure their attentiveness to commercials, it is unlikely to be tested. However, audiences for the mass news media did not increase in size during the years of the Great Recession, nor did they decline at a higher rate than before.

One of the best sources of news audience interest is the News Interest Index, conducted and reported weekly by the Pew Research Center since the late 1980s. It asks a national sample what stories people have followed very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, and not closely at all.

Given the over-reporting when people are asked to evaluate their own behavior, it seems best to rely only on data about stories that have been followed very closely by more than half the sample. Although, on average, a quarter of the sample says it follows the news very closely, the number of stories followed by half the sample or more has been small. So have the types of stories; they have almost always been about disasters, rising gas prices, and other bad news about the economy.

A review of the news interest data for economic news indicates that, from 1991 to the present, stories about the state of the economy have usually been followed very closely by a percentage of the population between the high thirties and the low forties.

The only exception has been a short period at the start of the Great Recession: between

September 17–20, 2008 and April 17–20, 2009, when the percentage topped 50% for 17 out of the 23 four-day periods under study. It hit 70% between September 26–29, 2008, and stayed close to 60% until November 21–24, 2008, returning to the normal high 30s-low 40s level in May 2009 (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2013a).

Political news evokes even less interest. Fifty percent of the news audience follows political news very closely only during the week of presidential elections, although 60% did so for both Obama elections and when the Beltway was debating the bailout in late September 2008. Fifty-one percent followed the debate over Obamacare very closely in mid-March 2010, and as did 49% when the government shutdown ended and the debt limit was increased in 2013 (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2013b).

Additional people probably obtained their news, especially localized labor market and related economic news and local political news indirectly from word of mouth, other nonmedia sources, and increasingly, digital search engines, social media, and other websites. Still, the supply of economic and political news always exceeds the demand, and even continuing hard times may not change this imbalance.

Perhaps the mass audience's attention to the news would increase if sharp economic downturns or intense political conflict were to affect its immediate well-being. Maybe that attention would increase if people needed the news to determine their daily routine, or to solve pressing problems or make important decisions.

### **Experimenting with the News**

Whether the country's changing economic and political conditions justified changes in the news that could attract a larger audience could be tested by some news experiments—not the kinds conducted in a laboratory, but through some content and other innovations that could be tried out on a small scale among actual news audiences.

The most badly needed experiment should try out news stories about the economy and the polity that affect or will shortly affect a significant number in the mass audience. Although one could argue that the citizens of a democracy should have been required to start learning in high school how both work and with what effects, the news media now have to fill the omission, particularly if hard times continue.

Trial and error will have to determine what platforms, formats, kinds of storytelling, and above all, what news content would inform the audience about how its lives are affected by economic and political forces and decisions. For example, what if the news offered relevant job and job-related policy news, perhaps through a website that provided such news nationally and locally for local and nearby labor markets?

Another experiment might find out whether people would be more interested in the political news if it reported more about how decisions that affect large parts of the citizenry are made in the several

branches of government. Suppose the news media reported what considerations impelled national and local legislators to reach decisions on legislation and other issues most relevant to the mass news audience. Or what if political news about proposed legislation told audiences who will reap the benefits and who pays what costs if the legislation is passed?

Many other experiments involving the content of the news could be undertaken. For example, would news audiences be interested in learning occasionally about public services, facilities, and other government benefits, as well as commercial products and services that are available to citizens in other countries, but not here.

Format experiments should be carried out as well. One should be devoted to making the news more user-friendly to the mass audience, by experimentation with other formats, kinds of storytelling, and possibly even alterations in the language of news.

These experiments should be preceded by some studies of how audience members tell news to each other, both in social media and in face-to-face encounters. Studies of how well people comprehend news on various mass news media platforms and subsequent experiments to improve comprehension would also be relevant.

Another set of experiments, designed for the large majority of the mass audience that does not regularly keep up with the news, would try out periodic formats. These programs or website posts, or even printed papers, could appear once a fortnight or even just once a month.

Leaving the day's events and breaking stories to the daily news, they would provide overviews of what are now considered running stories.

A very different and more complicated experiment would test the possibility of reviving partisan—political and ideological—news platforms, using lessons from the currently available combination of commentary and analysis-by-panel on cable television and partisan news websites.

Partisan news frees the journalists from overly narrow objectivity, balance, and false equivalence. It would also enable them to deal with topics now too partisan to consider, and to offer some opinions when the relevant and available facts have been presented.

Partisan news might also help revitalize the economic base of the news media by attracting new sources of funding. As today's election and issue-oriented and other political advertising ventures suggest, a lot of ideological and other political money is available.

Admittedly, now, a majority of that money is supplied by rich and powerful donors, many supporting only conservative ideas. Thus, ways to correct the resulting political and ideological imbalance would have to be found. Journalistic decision-making freedom and editorial autonomy would have to be guaranteed, as well.

Another ambitious experiment would bring back the docudrama, a semi-fictional narrative about past events that have implications for the present—or better still, about present issues and controversies.

In fact, given the success of *The West Wing*, *House of Cards*, and *Veep*, what might be called news fiction could be an additional way of informing audiences about their society. Whether the mass audience would hold still for fictional programming not emphasizing melodrama or romance would have to be tested.

Once audiences knew that news fiction was a news source and commentary of sorts on the real economic, political, and social world, they might be interested in it for that reason alone.

Similar experimenting could determine whether political comedy, perhaps modeled on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, could attract a mass audience.

### **Conducting the Experiments**

Neither the commercial nor the public news media have displayed much enthusiasm for R&D or innovation, even though the continuing decline in the mass news audience suggests that some of today's journalistic methods and formats may have to be updated.

Perhaps news organizations would be able and willing to undertake some of the experiments. If not, maybe some of the country's journalism schools would conduct at least some, particularly if financial help were available from interested foundations and think tanks.

Adding some experimental journalism to the J-School curriculum could teach prospective journalists to try new ideas and move beyond the ways of the past.

Since the experiments will need to be tested on audiences, they will also provide student journalists with research experience that will be relevant in other ways, as journalism itself becomes more evidence-based, data-driven, and analytic.

### **Conclusion**

Needless to say, no one can now be certain that the country will continue to be economically and politically more unequal, that the job market will be fragile, that consumer demand will remain limited, and that government will still be too polarized politically to do much about it. Other possible futures must also be explored.

In addition, no one can tell whether the mass news media can overcome their economic troubles, or whether they are able to adapt criteria of newsworthiness and ways of reporting to deal with a changing America. Nor can one predict whether mass audience news appetites will increase.

Even so, both the news media and journalism need to keep track of the directions in which it is thought a future America might be headed. Intelligent news judgment suggests some awareness of possible alternative futures before one of them becomes the present.

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