

The digital era facilitated political and economic pressure on the media causing further erosion of journalism as a safeguard of democracy.

Over the past decades, the digital revolution triggered a thorough transformation of the media market and industry. Changes in the media environment, structure and power dynamics resulted in changes in the role and place of journalists. In recent years, journalism has been portrayed as a threat to democracy and has suffered an unprecedented credibility crisis. Many no longer see journalists as an independent source of information. Social responsibility to report objectively, accurately and in good faith sounds like a motto long forgotten. Because information is power, political and commercial elites have thrived to influence, manipulate and control information. Mainstream journalism today is often perceived as the business of misinformation and disinformation to influence public opinion and advance political and commercial agendas. To some extent media are seen as an extension of public relations (PR) in the rigged game of power-influence. Journalists are coerced to compromise their values and subject to a number of pressures, threats, sanctions such as subpoenas, job loss, and sometimes jail sentences. A few still resist compromising their integrity and social responsibility, but they are rare enough to hit the news' front page. It is not just our journalists that are at risk, it is the profession as a whole and the essence of democracy, as the voice of the invisible, the unknown, the powerless is not heard. The audience is conditioned to expect scandal driven entertainment news, diverting from the big issues, and unable to distinguish real news from staged news.

This paper explores the transformations of commercial and political influence on the media triggered by the digital era and their impact on the independence, responsibility and credibility of journalism. The lack of democratic safeguards to protect journalism transformed journalism in a threat rather than an enhancer of democracy. Journalism is increasingly heralding the voice of the elites. News is rarely questioned by the masses no longer accustomed to question or doubt the information presented by biased "experts", who often have a hidden agenda. The paper first analyzes the impacts of the digital revolution on the market and the industry which lead to increased economic pressures and media manipulation. The paper then progresses to explore the evolution of political influence on the media, before and after the digital revolution with a focus on conflict coverage. Throughout the paper is highlighted how the economic and political pressure impact on the independence, responsibility and credibility of journalism.

Transformations brought in the media market and industry by the digital revolution enabled private organizations to use journalism to manipulate public opinion to promote their agenda to an unprecedented level. The digital revolution brought in its wake a number of features which contributed to the erosion of journalism. The digitalization of news enabled the reduction of costs for news production. This led to the emergence of free news and mass media.

Being able to access news at no cost allowed the democratization of news, which resulted in a bigger market and more commercial opportunities. But this also shifted the power from a buying audience to private organizations investing in media ownership or advertising to influence public opinion which resulted in a loss of independence of journalists. As media financing shifted from the audience to advertisers and owners, mainstream media increasingly became more accountable to their shareholders than their audience. It became easier for large corporations to manipulate public

opinion and media agenda to promote their commercial interests. They no longer had to influence independent media as the media worked for them. The New York Times and the Washington Post, two of the most respected news sources counts among its board members affiliation with Chevron (which played a key role in the Iraq war), eBay, Xerox, IBM, Ford and others. As a result to a change in media ownership and commercial pressure, media increasingly lost their independence and have been used as PR agencies.¹ Editorial strategies are no longer driven by the interest of the public or public information duties but by commercial interests and promotion. For example, the Iraq or Afghanistan conflicts which involved the interests of large US corporations received extensive media coverage in the US. Other conflicts which have no or limited investment from US corporations, such as Mali and Central African Republic received very little coverage. In 2013, Stephen Hadley, a former national security adviser in the Bush administration, was presented by the media as a national security expert and invited to comment on US possible intervention in Syria. In each interview Hadley gave to CNN, Fox News, the Washington Post, Bloomberg TV and others, he promoted the Tomahawk cruise missiles as a weapon of choice. At no point, any of these media questioned or exposed potential conflicts of interest. Yet, Hadley as a director and shareholder of Raytheon, which manufactures the missiles, axiomatically offered a biased argument.

Costs reduction resulting from the digital revolution also allowed a proliferation of players in the news industry. As the competition became fiercer, costs cuttings strategies were implemented to keep afloat. But many media outlets closed down weakening the job market in the media industry and reducing the leverage of many journalists. Standing up for their values to preserve their independence means they could lose their job and the competition is such that there is no guarantee they would get another one. It became easier for media outlets to manipulate journalists in a way or another. Edward sees that every day. In the 1980s, as he was covering the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, he wrote that a helicopter had fired over an ambulance. The editor asked Edward to change his article and to clarify that the helicopter 'unintentionally' fired over the ambulance. This was clearly not the truth as the helicopter had a clear view of the ambulance and the ambulance was easily identifiable with a red cross and a red crescent on it. There was no error possible according to Edward. But despite raising the issue with the editor, the piece was altered. The American news agency bias in favor of the US' Israeli ally, by compromising the truth, compromised the independence, responsibility and credibility of the journalist. Over the incident, Edward quit. When asked whether in today's environment's he would do the same, Edward said "*well probably not because I could not find another job as there are not many employers today and fewer positions available.*" This is an issue many journalists face today. But without the necessary legal protection, even high profile journalists have little chance to preserve their independence and can no longer fulfill their public information function which is core to democracies. Those who still have the courage to quit over abuse of the freedom of the press are rare enough to hit the front page of the news. This was the case recently when an anchor for Russia Today quit on air over facts distortion from the network or when one of Japan top TV journalists resigned after his channel censored his report on nuclear power. Developing a legal framework to protect the independence of journalists is a step in the right direction, but which requires political will and sufficient influence and power to pass laws and ensure they are enforced. The resistance faced by US President Barack Obama in his recent attempt to extend media shield laws revealed that political will is sometimes not enough to build robust laws to protect democratic values. This exposed that even in the US, journalists do not benefit from the necessary legal protection to ensure the implementation of the first Amendment of the American Constitution about the freedom of the press.

¹<http://www.globalresearch.ca/truth-propaganda-and-media-manipulation/23868>

The emergence of mass media which contributed to the decentralization of the news production also resulted in a loss of control over journalistic values, ethic and responsibility, and in a globalization of the news. Media outlets outreach was no longer regional or national but global. The power of the media in the digital era reached an unprecedented level. Influencing and controlling the news now means influencing audience anywhere. This increased power of the media resulted in increased interests from large corporations. Media became a key tool the elite could use to promote their agenda and influence international markets. The industry was no longer reserved to the professional but was suddenly flooded with large corporations PR skilled and eager to increase the profits and influence. To influence public opinion, large corporations invested both in traditional media such as the New York Times, but also in new media such as the prize winner blog The Huffington Post, acquired by AOL in 2011. It then became increasingly difficult for the audience to distinguish PR news from real news. The distinction became all the more difficult as in a digital environment, new aggregators such as Google News relayed news from any sources without distinction.

Commercial pressure to keep costs down and ensure maximum return to media outlets' shareholders resulted in less investment in the news gathering process. Gradually, investigative journalism lost ground to gossip news. Inspired from the entertainment industry, who now owns many mainstream media, scandal-and-spectacle-minded news became a norm the audience has been conditioned to expect. News has become a diversion, where thinking or education is no longer required. By being accessible to a wider audience, marketing wise, means that it can reach larger market shares. News agenda have become profit-driven. Costly investigative journalism has been left in the hands of a few. There was a case recently of a young journalist, who tweeted that a woman had been assaulted in an Egyptian airport. The news was sensationalistic enough to be picked up by a number of media and redistributed in a number of countries. Despite the gravity of the accusation and potential social and political repercussions, the news had never been verified. This reflects an increasingly common trend of the erosion of journalism where journalists, especially from the younger generation used to new norms, fail to act responsibly and consider the implication of news publication. Journalists are locked into the "race" for being first, being the fastest, getting the unusual angle, and creating the most sensational stories that, in turn, might produce the largest audiences.² News is dramatized in a Greek-style fashion and media outlet use journalists and war coverage to entertain in a reality-like show.

For journalists, it has become increasingly difficult given their reduced negotiating power in a highly competitive environment to preserve their ethical values and act responsibly. It is no longer uncommon for news and sources not to be checked. This core responsibility of journalists to report reliable news seems to fade away in an environment where news is tweeted as the events unfold. This has considerably impacted on the perception of journalism as a trustworthy source of information and caused credibility issues. Journalists have been coerced to sideline their educative function to inform and explain public policy to the audience. The intellectual rigor and expertise of journalists, once key for practitioners, has been replaced by the Internet virtual library. Gavin Hewitt, a British journalist and presenter, remembers: *"when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan [in 1980]... I can remember writing down on a piece of paper what I knew about Afghanistan, and it was not a long list. I simply did not know very much about Afghanistan, and there was no Internet at the time*

²[Peace Journalism in Pakistan: Perspective on Taliban Conflict](#), TMS PEACE JOURNALISM, 11 April 2011
by Shabbir Hussain – TRANSCEND Media Service

where you could tap in the word “Afghanistan” and become an expert.”³ Journalists are now able to have unlimited and ubiquitous access to background information and become experts in seconds. As journalists’ expertise is less needed in the digital era, this has further weakened the position of journalists and contributed to many job losses and the deconstruction of journalism.

Political pressure is another area which is responsible for a great part of the erosion of journalism. Traditionally, media have been the safeguard of democracies ensuring that governments are open, transparent and accountable through investigation and constant watch. Political elites have traditionally tried to influence and manipulate media to gain support for their public policy and political programs. Richard Nixon reminded us in his memoirs that presidents “must try to master the art of manipulating the media ».⁴ Yet, while media manipulation is not a new issue, the digital era facilitated the means of pressure on the media and reduced the leverage of journalists to resist such pressure. This increasingly prevents journalists from continuing their work to safeguard democracy.

Traditionally, governments have wrapped unpopular policies or activities in the thread of secrecy, under the confidential seal or by denying access to journalists. Another well-known technique has been to regulate media’s behavior. Until the 19th century, in most countries, media were required to obtain approval for public release from the government. In the 20th century, the emergence of human right laws, protecting the freedom of the press and the right to know, freed the media from some of these constraints. In the US, the Founding Father understood the central part of the media as a safeguard to democracy and provided media with constitutional protection in the First Amendment of the US Constitution. Today, dynamics have changed. Governments offer access and information in exchange for positive coverage. Political elites organize briefings of media heads to influence public opinion to support public policies.

Parties involved in conflicts use or try to use the media to influence opinion and legitimize their policy or military campaigns. Political influence on journalism gave birth to a sub-type of journalism: war journalism, which climaxed during WW2 and again during the War on Terror. War journalism is characterized by biased, patriotic and propagandistic report, depicting a bipolar, nuance-free vision of conflicts and issues. War journalism to some extent becomes an extension of the political and military power. For example, during WW2, journalists were embedded with the army, wearing military uniforms and openly voiced their partisanship. As war journalism was the norm, partisan journalists were perceived with honor and respect. The growth of human right rhetoric following the creation of the UN and the UN Human Right Declaration in 1948, casted some doubts on the validity of war journalism and allowed from 1970s onward the emergence of a new trend of journalism: Peace Journalism. Peace journalism is a non-partisan alternative, offering multiple perspectives on the issues to be able to grasp their complexity. Peace journalism became all the more effective at describing the complexity of the 1990s intrastate wars, as it was better equipped to analyze multilevel conflicts. Yet, despite human right rhetoric and a strengthening of peace journalism, since the War of Terror, journalists have returned to war journalism to describe conflicts. Over the past decade or so, war journalists’ partisanship has been more disguised, with the exception of the War on Terror which portrayed a Hollywood type mystical crusade of the Good vs Evil. Those who dared

³Howard Tumber, Frank Webster, *Journalists Under Fire: Information War and Journalistic Practices*, 2006, Sage Publications.

⁴Richard W. Waterman, Gilbert K. St. Clair, Robert Lee Wright, *The Image-is-everything Presidency: Dilemmas in American Leadership*, WestviewPress, 1999

criticizing the official political discourse trumpeted by the mainstream partisan media were accused of anti-patriotic behavior, discredited, forced to apologize publicly, some lost their jobs, others were suspended. The degree of pressure on the media depends on the political climate, the degree of involvement of a country in a particular conflict and the need to legitimize the spending of public fund. The consequences for dissenters increase proportionally to the country's degree of involvement. Governing with the news is certainly not new but what is new is the level of involvement of the government in influencing the media and the lack of independence of journalists. After a few decades of increased freedom of the press, we are now moving backwards towards controlling governments limiting the power of the journalism as a safeguard of democracy. Rare are those who dare resisting this deliberate distortion of media.

If for the political sphere, war journalism is a tool of legitimation which impacts on voting preferences. For the media it is a commercial opportunity to attract a sensationalism-driven audience. Chris Hedges, a Pulitzer Prize veteran war correspondent, tried to explain why war brought so much fascination and found that war could be exhilarating and even addictive, it "gives us purpose, meaning and a reason for living".⁵ War brings emotions that are so intense that they make you feel alive by giving you a moral and honorific sense of purpose. For wars to be legitimate the purpose needs to be right in the mind of the soldiers on the ground and of the people at home. Journalists then become crucial legitimizing agents of wars. Peace journalism has raised, in recent years, against the traditional trend of war journalism, to encourage peacebuilding rather than foster conflict, anger and alienation. Peace journalism exposes issues and conflicts from different perspectives to grasp their complexity. Mainstream, war journalism offers simple vision advancing public policy objectives and commercial interests are presented to an audience increasingly conditioned to shallow one-sided news. This impact on the responsibility of journalists and when truth is uncover lead to scandals which lead to credibility crisis and issues of confidence.

A more disguised approached of political pressure on the media is the proliferation of fake news website, designed by intelligence agencies to influence public opinion. There was a case last year of the Russian intelligence publishing information about a gas attack in Damascus. The agency used to name of a real journalist to cover the masquerade. It has become common for intelligence agencies to build up fake news website to misinform and desinform. The Russian intelligence is not alone in this game. Top secret documents from the Joint Threat Research Intelligence Group (JTRIG), the British GCHQ's secret unit, revealed how the agency used online media to influence public opinion and disrupt online activist groups as part of the "online covert action". Intelligence agencies flood the Internet with false information and material to discredit opponents. They also "infiltrate, manipulate and warp online discourse".⁶ There is little doubt that the US also use similar techniques. President Obama recently appointed Cass Sunstein, a Harvard Law Professor and close advisor to the president and the White House's former head of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, as a member of the NSA (National Security Agency) review panel. Sunstein has been advocating sending covert agents into "chat rooms and online social networks" to infiltrate activist groups.⁷ There is no doubt that most governments use digital media to run misinformation campaign to discredit opponents or gain support for policies. This type of manipulation is not uncovered by journalists may be a threat to democracy. But the erosion of journalism is increasingly an impediment for journalists to bring light over the truth.

⁵Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, 2002, Public Affairs

⁶Glenn Greenwald, How Covert Agents Infiltrate the Internet to Manipulate, Deceive, and Destroy Reputations, *The Intercept*, 24 February 2014

⁷The Art of Deception: Training for a New Generation of Online Covert Operations, *The Intercept*, 24 February 2014

While political and economic pressures have traditionally influenced and manipulated media, the digitalization and globalization of news has made it easier to manipulate information, harder to verify information and weakened the ability of journalists to resist influence. A vast array of misleading and misinforming news has populated our media environment from blogs, social media to newspapers resulting in an erosion of journalistic values of independence, responsibility and credibility. News is molded to suit the elite. Journalists along with their audience are losing faith in the creed of the profession and increasingly questioning its relevance and place in the current environment giving stand to claims that journalism negatively impacts on democracy. James Fallows' *Breaking the News*⁸ cast the light on the perversions of the current media system, but the Times' executive director, Howell Raines' response showed how political and economic pressure encourage even high level figures to defend a system which has clearly abandoned the value embedded in the First Amendment of the American Constitution.

Most media have adopted buzz/entertainment news which fails to address the big issues in depth and provide insightful reports. The emerging credibility crisis also results from a series of scandals related to news manipulation. As information is power, it is essential to ensure that this power is not misused and does not impede on democracy. National governments should develop and enforce regulations to protect the media and journalists in their home countries. Some degree of financial independence should be provided to the media and journalists to remove commercial pressure. Education providers should free themselves from cultural bias and thrive to objectively educate future journalists. By helping us making sense of the world, journalists have a tremendous responsibility in the way our societies are shaped through public policy and on the preservation of democracy. If we lose our objective window on the world, if we are no longer able to distinguish truth from bias and decipher the world, we'll find ourselves in a world of illusion driven by personal interests, unable to make rational decisions, votes and opening the way to the fall of democracies.

⁸[Breaking the News](#)