Can Social Media Seize Control of Our Elections?

by The Daily Take Team via jason - Truthout *Monday, Apr 18 2016, 9:47pm*
international / prose / post

> *America and Australia face federal elections in the near future and so the same dilemma affects both populations.*

Americans don't trust the media. In fact, studies show that we like, really, really, really don't trust the media.

A new survey from the Media Insight Project, for examples, shows that just 6 percent of Americans "say they have great confidence in the press."

Six percent! Just for some perspective, that's about the same number of Americans who say they have trust in Congress, which is about 4 percent.

It's up for debate whether that reflects worse on Congress or the media, but one thing is clear: The US public's almost total distrust of the press isn't going away anytime soon.

Public approval of the media has been declining for decades, and, according to some polls, has now reached record lows.

This shouldn't be that surprising to anyone who's been paying attention.

Thanks to the death of the Fairness Doctrine, the people who are supposed to report the news no longer have any obligation whatsoever to, you know, report the news. As a result, corporate media, especially corporate television media, has become almost completely indistinguishable from "infotainment."

In many cases, it actually is infotainment.

Combine that with the fact that the press has gotten it very, very wrong on the biggest issues of our time -- the Iraq War, for example -- and it's amazing that anyone trusts them to get any story straight.

So, if Americans don't trust the traditional media, where are they getting their news?

Well, many of them, especially younger Americans, are getting it from the internet and social media.

This is having a big, game-changing effect on our democracy.

Because of social media, politicians and activists now don't have to worry as much about getting their message across through corporate-controlled media.

They can now actually work around traditional corporate media altogether by using sites like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to reach out to supporters and rally the public to their cause.

This dynamic has played a huge role in the rise of Bernie Sanders. There was a "Bernie blackout" in traditional corporate media for the first six months of Bernie's campaign, and, at least initially, Sanders supporters could only find news about their candidate on Facebook and Twitter.

This has changed recently, but there is still an obvious anti-Bernie bias out there in the corporate press, even at supposedly "liberal" networks like MSNBC. As a result, social media has continued to play a big role in the campaign, acting as a corrective of sorts to mainstream media.

Because of its ability to "disrupt" establishment memes and establishment narratives, it's tempting to see social media as the antidote to America's media trust deficit.

But we should be careful.

Social media isn't the white knight of open source information that it appears to be. It's often just as biased as traditional media, and to make matters worse, doesn't have the same firebreaks that make traditional media at least somewhat accountable to the public.

Take, for example, Facebook. That company is now having an internal debate about whether it has an ethical obligation to stop Donald Trump from getting elected president.

This is obviously legal and protected by the First Amendment, but it raises serious questions about how much we can rely on social media as an unbiased or at least transparent news source.

If The New York Times, for example, wanted to stop Trump from getting elected president, it would do what newspapers are supposed to do when they decide to take a side in a political campaign: It would endorse Trump's opponent and publish editorials explaining why.

Facebook doesn't have to do any such thing.

In fact, if it wanted to, the corporation could just start blocking any and all articles that its users post about Trump.

Again, this would all be perfectly legal.

But because Facebook doesn't publish its internals, we would never know for sure if the sudden disappearance of Trump articles on its network was the result of a censorship campaign or just a sign that fewer people were interested in reading about Trump.

That's really the real danger here.

People turn to social media to get news they think isn't covered on traditional media, which is why they're more likely to believe what they see on Facebook and Twitter is true or probably true.

But, again, this isn't really the case. And that's not just because there's more information out there, and thus, a greater possibility that that information could be wrong.

No, it's because the corporations that control social media are corporations just like the corporations that control traditional media, and they're even less accountable to the public.

Social media is changing the way that people get their news, but it's not a silver bullet.

We must stay vigilant.

http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/35689-can-social-media-seize-control-of-our-elections

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Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-2205.html