

Books — New Media Landscape for A Stronger Democracy

By Jim Tarbell and Andy Lee Roth

The media plays a huge role in how functional our democracy is at electing politicians who implement the best public policies for the common good. That has become difficult as our media landscape moves through a huge structural transition, and some media producers bombard media consumers with propaganda and misinformation. This requires everyone to be critically media literate so they can wade through all the hype and find their own truth. These books will help you on that journey.

Brant Houston's *Changing Models for Journalism: Reinventing the Newsroom* is a good overview best described in the title to his introduction, "The fall of traditional media, the rise of nonprofit newsrooms, and the fight to save local news." He does a great job describing the emergence of the nonprofit newsroom, how nonprofit newsrooms came about and what financial models were developed to make nonprofit newsrooms sustainable. His first chapter asks "What happened to traditional media?"

And he wraps the book up with a chapter on "Advocacy, Activists and Solutions," where he describes cutting edge collaborations between traditional media and the Yanomami in Brazil fighting illegal mining operations on their territory.

Back in this country, *News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?* by Penny Abernathy and the UNC Hussman School of

Journalism and the Media is the most recent volume of their State of the Media reports. It supplies the numbers, demographics and financial data on the collapse of traditional media between 2004 and 2019. They focus on the areas of the country that lost dailies and weeklies over that time period and left a virtual news desert in their wake. They note that counties in the South suffered a loss of local news publications three times worse than other parts of the country, leaving people there to depend on network TV for their news.

Margot Susca's 2024 book *Hedged: How Private Investment Funds Helped Destroy American Newspapers and Undermine Democracy* illuminates the role of Wall Street vultures in the demise of local media. She points out that giant private equity and hedge funds used highly leveraged buy outs, burdensome advisory fees, and cost-cutting policies that drained newsrooms of reporters to con-

solidate dailies and weeklies under one management framework. They then combined or closed the under-performing publications and left the rest as ghost publications with almost no staff.

Into this weakened media landscape, the bombastic and irreverent Trump campaign sought to destroy any trust Americans still had for their news system. Nolan Higdon and Mickey Huff pick up the story in their book *United States of Distraction: Media Manipulation in Post-Truth America (And What You Can Do About It)*. They start out with a prescient historical analysis that reaches back to Lewis Powell's memo to the US Chamber of Commerce pushing corporate America to take over our media, educational, political and legal systems to ensure that corporate monopoly capitalism should reign forever. Then they describe how Trumpism worked to destroy the truth while we were not watching. Their solution to this problem is to train people to be critically media literate, so they can detect propaganda and false news that the Trump campaign spreads across the country.

Project Censored's *The Media and Me: A Guide to Critical Media Literacy* begins this campaign by educating youth and young adults to be critically media literate. But it also has important information for all of us on how the media can mess with our mind and self-image. They remind us to take a step back from a news story and consider the biases of who wrote it and what corporate or non-corporate entity had editorial control over the article.

Following this up, *The Propagandists' Playbook: How Conservative Elites Manipulate, Search and Threaten Democracy*, by Francesca Bolla Tripodi explores how people use media to find trustworthy information. Sociologist Tripodi interviewed conservative media users and immersed herself in right-wing media. Treating conservatism as a way of seeing the world and a set of media practices, she explains how conservative media are "so effective at exploiting" their audiences' world views and media practices.

Finally, Samuel Spitalé's *How to Win the War on Truth: An Illustrated Guide to How Mistruths Are Sold, Why They Stick, and How to Reclaim Reality*, illustrated by Allan Whincup, shows how our brains process information, and reviews the history of propaganda. *How To Win the War on Truth* uses vivid illustrations and clear, jargon-free text to promote media literacy. Noting that "no one pays to publicize programs that serve the public," media critic Samuel Spitalé exposes the logic and motivations of corporate PR and government propaganda. Each chapter is filled with clear examples and catchy infographics.

