

Our Media Landscape Needs Structural Transformation

By Victor Pickard

Truly democratic and engaged journalism requires that people own and control their own media. It also requires that journalism serves not just profit imperatives, but also addresses people's needs, tells their stories, and goes where the silences are. While providing critical information is always a key mission for good journalism, local media is about much more than informing citizens, keeping a watchful eye on the powerful, and ringing alarm bells about social problems. As important as these essential services are, good journalism — especially participatory journalism — is also about building community and solidarity among diverse publics.

In the US — a multiracial, class-riven democracy, with a history of deep structural inequities — this requires a kind of adversarial journalism that identifies systemic problems, treats its readers as engaged participants of society, and proposes solutions as to how we should confront problems.

For this process to succeed, we need a media system that does not just provide news about or even for these communities; it must also empower news production by the people themselves.

Boundaries between journalists and the communities they serve should be removed for us to democratize our media. Taking a page from the Indymedia movement of the late 90s/early 2000s, it's not enough to simply hate the media: we must *become* the media!

But this also necessitates treating the media as a public good and a public service. It must not be a commodity market whose sole aim is to enrich a small group of investors, owners, and advertisers — typically wealthy White men.

To make this happen, journalists and publishers need to imagine long-term objectives and struggles while responding to immediate challenges. This new media framework seeks to utterly transform — restructure, democratize — our entire media system



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over time, rather than shoring up the existing media system and always leaving the fundamental capitalist political economy in place.

This approach acknowledges that we cannot simply smash the current system overnight. But it also acknowledges that the current status quo is unsustainable, and we therefore must aim for structural reforms that may currently seem unimaginable. It behooves us to embrace a not-so-distant political horizon that envisions an entirely different media system, one that is publicly owned, democratically controlled, and serves us all, not simply the privileged, wealthy few.

None of this means that we should give up on pressuring mainstream news media to do a better job. After all, the stakes are too high. Nor does it mean that we no longer need institutions for professional norms to ensure good journalism. But it does mean that we remain clear-eyed about the constraints to any strategy that expects capitalist media to become more democratic.

Instead, we should aim to transform media over the long term by radically shifting the underlying political economy and the incentives and logics that bend it towards bad media practices, from clickbait to stenographic reporting.

I propose the creation of “[Public Media Centers](#)” in every community that are federally guaranteed but locally governed. Another plan, the “[Local Journalism Initiative](#),” would enable people to vote on public funds being allocated to their preferred local nonprofit news organizations. Such ambitious projects would require a [Marshall Plan-style](#) program to recreate our entire media system from the ground up along participatory democratic lines.

Regardless of our precise plan for radical change, as media critics and media activists, our focus shouldn't be simply to shame professional journalists in the commercial sector to do a better job. The aim should be to transform the current system. And the only way to achieve such a goal is to take journalism out of the market.

Hyperlinks for this article at <https://bit.ly/47cSMA0t>

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