

The Future of Media

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The Future of Media

Edited by Joanna Zylinska with Goldsmiths Media

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2

Media Reform and the Politics of Hope

Natalie Fenton and Des Freedman

Media Power after Covid-19

This chapter offers a critique of contemporary dynamics of media power and their likely direction of travel given current geo-political realities and uncertainties. It then shifts gear to imagine other possible media futures with new ways of coordinating and producing media as part of a more general ‘politics of hope.’ The chapter includes both critical reflections on media ownership, journalism and content, and empirical research drawn from the authors’ involvement in the Media Reform Coalition, an advocacy network that campaigns for increased accountability and diversity in and independence of the media.

As we write, Covid-19 has, of course, thrown the media – along with virtually every other sector of society – into chaos. It has unsettled its business models as advertising revenue has fallen but increased appetite for its content as the need for information and entertainment has increased; it has dramatised the need for high-quality news and pervasive distraction in the present but also posed some fundamental questions about how our media have responded to the pandemic and what kind of media systems would be best able to offer up the representations and scrutiny that are required in the future. The virus has destabilised neoliberal assumptions – such as the idea that the state should play a minimal role in funding or coordinating the media – because the scale of the advertising crisis has forced public subsidies for newspapers onto the agenda given that the media have been redefined as ‘essential services.’ Huge audiences are turning to traditional broadcast and news services that were widely seen as being in decline while social media, often greeted as the harbinger of a bright, participatory media future, are trusted less than more established sources of content (Ofcom 2020). Whatever view we have about the performance of

our respective media organisations, Covid-19 has served to crystallise debates about who is best served by the existing distribution of media power and how we need to reconceptualise our media systems so that they operate in the public interest.

This chapter argues that media power constitutes a central way in which social norms are proposed and policed by elite interests and that it is a regulatory force committed to upholding a status quo based on private property and the rule of capital. While it is not immune from the contradictions and tensions that are to be found in all societies – indeed, the most effective forms of media power are precisely those that provide limited expressions of discontent within a more general embrace of existing social relations – its loyalty is to a capitalist logic in which it is deeply embedded. Tech owners, newspaper editors, senior broadcasters, advertising executives, regulators and policymakers are all partners – even if, at times, warring ones – in the management of media markets and systems across the globe. Their power is vested in economic and political control of communications landscapes – a dominance that is scarcely comparable to the far more limited opportunities for individuals to deploy their own symbolic resources.

Yet the cry from media moguls and some media theorists is that this is an outdated picture of a consolidated and concerted media power, one that perhaps fitted the monopoly conditions of a former analogue century but certainly not the heterogeneous character of the digital present. Media power is now said to be more fragmented, dispersed, opaque, complex and polycentric in the light of digital transformations, the falling cost of entry to media production and distribution, the decline of traditional media and the more general dissipation of expertise and authority. Media are no longer ‘sticky’ but ‘spreadable’ (Jenkins et al. 2013) and analysis of media power should be liberated from its functionalist and conspiratorial associations with top-down forms of control. According to one influential theorist, media power should be understood ‘in a non-reductive and multifaceted sense, as the use of resources, of varying kinds, that ... enable individuals or collectivities to pursue their values and interests’ (Chadwick 2017, 21).

That media power can now be seen as productive and *not* disabling owes much to the legacy of Michel Foucault and his proposition, developed throughout the 1970s, that power is not always ‘prohibitive’ but resolutely constitutive of human subjectivity. In one very famous expression, he declares the following: ‘We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes”, it “represses”, it “censors”, it “abstracts”, it “masks”, it “conceals”. In fact power produces; it produces realities; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth’ (Foucault 1977, 174). Foucault isn’t arguing that power is simply

a benevolent or equalising force but he is anxious to disentangle power from a single source of domination – such as class or wealth – and instead to paint it as a far more amorphous, if ubiquitous, phenomenon. Power is now to be understood as a ‘machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised’ (1980, 156). In a decisive shift away from power being the tangible property of a specific social group, Foucault encourages us to think in terms of ‘capillary power’, ‘biopower’, ‘pastoral power’ and ‘panoptic power’ – all of which highlight the role of dispersed and self-policing individuals in the production and reproduction of power (Foucault 2002).

Despite the ongoing resistance emanating from critical political economists of the media and stubborn Marxists, the idea that power seeps, drains and circulates effortlessly throughout society – that it operates without an overarching class dynamic – remains pervasive (e.g., Zuboff 2019). While this approach has expanded our vocabulary and highlighted experiences perhaps marginalised by more singular perspectives, it has also sidetracked our politics by encouraging us to look away from those sites in which power remains highly concentrated. These include the state, which continues to shape the dynamics of the communications landscape, and capitalist firms which exert an increasingly tight grip over sectoral media markets, as well as influencers (from presidents to commentators to celebrities), whose voices are amplified by gatekeepers hungry for traffic. In this situation, the most effective metaphor for media power is no longer Foucault’s panopticon but the watch tower, not the network but the hierarchy, not entrepreneurial pebbles but industrial boulders, not the long tail but the blockbuster.

This points to a context in which we face the challenge of a renewed *executive power* where elite groups deploy their resources – their access to capital, their political influence and their ideological congruence – to dominate contemporary media systems. Here we find tax-avoiding corporations and offshore billionaires; data brokers and infrastructure empires; market-friendly politicians and captive regulators; complacent commentators and establishment editors. These are the neoliberal vanguards who preside over media and communications in defence of a status quo that suits their material interests.

Executive Media Power on Trial

The hope that patterns of concentrated power in legacy press and broadcasting markets would not be replicated in digital conditions has long since evaporated.

Now there are regular warnings about the dangers of an oligopolistic tech sector that, thanks to lax (or non-existent) regulation and an avaricious DNA, is accruing massive amounts of power and undermining the conditions for a deliberative democracy. Facebook, as Siva Vaidhyanathan (2018) argues, is both a ‘pleasure machine’ and a ‘surveillance machine’, a ‘protest machine’ and a ‘disinformation machine’, that is structurally fixated on hovering up personal data and circulating content no matter its accuracy or consequence. Together with Google, it is expected to account for just under 65% of all digital advertising in the UK and 59% in the USA by 2021. Google alone earns more from advertising than the ad revenue of China and the UK combined; indeed, Google’s ad revenue is larger than that of any ad market in the world with the exception of the USA (Richter 2019). We are truly in an age of ‘digital dominance’ manifested by growing public concern with ‘user autonomy, user agency and the power of platforms to impact the decision-making of consumers and citizens through profiling, information control, and behavioural nudges’ (Moore and Tambini 2018, 398).

Yet the size and impact of these digital behemoths should not distract us from the continuing presence and impact of legacy media that are reconsolidating precisely in order to face up to digital challenges and that, as we have already argued, played a particularly crucial role during the coronavirus pandemic. Today’s global media giants include not only the FAANG (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Alphabet/Google) companies (together with their Chinese counterparts Alibaba and Tencent) but household names from across the world including Sony, Disney, Comcast, Bertelsmann, Televisa and Prisa. In the USA, where Disney controls more than 40% of the Hollywood box office and accounts for some 30% of all primetime scripted broadcast programmes, a wave of mergers is taking place to better allow ‘traditional’ media to compete in digital media markets (Nicolaou 2019). In Brazil, Grupo Globo is dominant across all media sectors and boasts that it reaches over 100 million Brazilians, some 50% of the population, every day. In Argentina, just four conglomerates have nearly half of total audience share across television, radio, print and online with the Clarin Group alone accounting for 25% of consumption. Media markets across the globe are characterised by oligopolistic structures and cartel-like behaviour.

Public policy, however, is increasingly gripped by the threat of digital disinformation (or ‘fake news’ about, for example, the origins of Covid-19 or unproven ways to treat the virus) and the need, above all, to regulate and to ‘rein in’ out-of-control tech platforms; it is far less absorbed by concentrated media power inside newspaper and broadcast markets. Indeed, the conception appears to

be that, particularly in relation to news given its importance to the democratic process, legacy media need *additional* protections from digital intermediaries in the shape of new subsidies and tax breaks. This ignores the fact that the online dominance of a handful of established news organisations is reproducing and intensifying existing patterns of agenda-setting power that continue to exert a substantial influence over media and political culture. Given the roles of Fox in mobilising support for Donald Trump, of Globo in amplifying the insurgent voice of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and the UK's tabloid newspapers in constantly urging their readers to 'BeLeave in Britain' ahead of the referendum on EU membership, it is premature to write off the impact of legacy media. As Tony Gallagher, former editor of the *Sun* (a UK tabloid newspaper), noted immediately after the referendum result: 'So much for the waning power of print media' (Martinson 2016). Traditional news outlets are leveraging their influence into the online world so that we now have 'a *shared* dominance of digital agendas by a relatively small number of institutional megaphones, be they platform monopolies, aggregators, or major conventional news organizations' (Schlosberg 2018, 209).

In the UK, levels of concentration of press power are actually increasing. In 2015, three companies controlled 71% of national newspaper readership; by the end of 2018, the same three companies - Rupert Murdoch's News UK, DMG Media (publisher of the *Mail* titles) and Reach (publisher of the *Mirror* titles) - accounted for 83% of the national audience. By themselves, News UK and DMG, strong supporters of the Conservative Party and purveyors of anti-immigrant and anti-welfarist agendas, dominate over 60% of the market share of national newspapers. Despite drops in circulation of their leading daily titles of approximately 25% since 2015, they continue to have a prominent presence in online spaces where the *Sun* and *Daily Mail* alone account for nearly 40% of total daily offline and online UK newsbrand reach (Media Reform Coalition 2019b). This also guarantees them continuing attention from politicians and, evidence suggests, from broadcasters. For example, one study of intermedia agenda-setting during the 2015 UK general election found that television news, while bound by impartiality regulations, nevertheless 'pursued a similar agenda to UK newspapers during the election campaign and followed their lead on some of the major stories'. More than half of all BBC stories on election policy issues had previously been published in newspapers, a figure that rose to nearly two-thirds of stories on Sky News, controlled at the time by Rupert Murdoch's 21st Century Fox (Cushion et al. 2018, 178).

As previously noted, digital markets were initially conceptualised as representing the death knell of the blockbuster economy and its replacement by a 'long tail' where *niche* replaces *hit* as its overarching logic. The problem is that the evidence, at least in relation to news and information markets, does not bear out this optimism; niche products may have far more of an edge than they used to but they remain overshadowed by the size and influence of dominant sources and mainstream media. For example, after examining some 7.5 million tweets about the 2015 refugee crisis, researchers concluded that 'power, understood as visibility and ability to set the agenda through hashtags mentions and RTs, is concentrated in some accounts and hashtags that include well-established actors who already enjoy power and visibility both on and off Twitter' (Siapera 2018, n.p.). The power to frame the issue of migration – as with so many other issues – still remains in the hands of elite politicians, mainstream media and well-resourced lobbyists.

We can see this unequal share of voice inside the UK news landscape. While the left-wing digital native news site the Canary attracted a very creditable 817,000 UK visits in January 2019, this is less than 1% of the traffic to *The Guardian*, with nearly 104 million visits. During the 2017 UK general election campaign period, the Canary outperformed the *Daily Mail* online when it came to Facebook shares of articles on the two main party leaders. Yet its actual reach was, over the same period, a tiny fraction of the *Mail's* (1% versus 36%). And in the month the election was called, page views of the *Daily Mail* website outnumbered those of the Canary by a factor of more than 700. Similarly, the right-wing outlet Westmonster saw 614,000 visits to its site in January 2019, approximately 0.6% of that of the *Daily Mail*, with 102 million visits. Indeed, none of the top ten news websites in the UK (measured by reach) are new start-ups; all of them are legacy newspapers or broadcasters, with the BBC, *Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* occupying the top five positions (Ofcom 2018).

What does the media's concentrated power mean for journalism's analysis of pressing societal problems and for the public's right to be informed about the full range of approaches that is required to address these problems? It means that there is a disincentive to ask tough questions about power when media organisations are intertwined in multiple ways with the networks of privilege and influence they are supposed to hold to account. So, for example, despite some impressive examples of critical reporting on the UK government's handling of the coronavirus in relation to testing and tracing and the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), there was a failure immediately and systematically to

interrogate government responses and instead a propensity to amplify the official statements in government press briefings. Of course, even a global pandemic does not magically transcend pre-existing political loyalties, so there was far more criticism in liberal US cable news networks of Donald Trump's leadership than there was of the UK government's attempt to manage the crisis.

It means that frameworks and solutions that run counter to established positions are likely to be discredited or marginalised. Consider the impact of economics coverage that 'began from the 1980s to prioritise sources from the financial sector and business community as well as "pro-business" officials, to the detriment of voices from labour and other sections of society' (Basu 2018, 24). It was not so much that the media 'failed' to predict the 2008 banking crisis but that, as we have already suggested, they helped celebrate the financial instruments and deregulatory landscapes that ultimately paved the way for the crisis. Coverage in the British media in the aftermath of the crisis didn't just fail to consider possible alternatives but instead repeatedly highlighted the dangers of a growing deficit with a specific focus on the need for cuts in public spending. Berry, who has carried out detailed research in this area, argues that 'pro-growth policies or levying wealth, property or transaction taxes were invisible as public policy options' while the press, in particular, was crucial in 'establishing key strands of audience belief that helped justify the implementation of austerity policies' (Berry 2019, 277).

It means that major media outlets are complicit in fostering trivial narratives about the environment that undermine the possibility of urgent debate that can lead to decisive action. All too often news bulletins show pictures of revellers enjoying the hot weather in parks and on beaches when, in reality, the underlying story ought to be about the fact that 18 of the 19 warmest years on record have all been in this millennium. A study by Media Matters found that of 127 stories on network news covering the 2017 heatwave in the USA, only one referred to climate change; the same organisation researched TV coverage of Hurricane Harvey the same year and found that two of the main US news networks, ABC and NBC, failed to mention climate change at all in their reports (Al Jazeera 2018). When the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change produced a report in 2019 showing how greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation and intensive farming are jeopardising the future of agricultural land, Media Matters revealed that only 7 out of 20 newspapers in the main agricultural states mentioned the report on their front page while none of the main Sunday TV news programmes referred to it at all (Media Matters 2019).

It means that where radical political alternatives are proposed, they are likely to be shot down by the mainstream media. When Jeremy Corbyn was elected as leader of the Labour Party in the UK in 2015 on a radical, anti-austerity and anti-imperialist platform, the media's reaction was immediately to go on the offensive; 60% of all coverage in his first week as leader was overtly negative, with only 13% of stories containing positive messages. Subsequent studies of press coverage tended to confirm this initial judgement. In July 2016, researchers at the London School of Economics assessed over 800 articles in eight leading newspapers. They found that the majority of coverage was either 'critical' or overtly 'antagonistic' and argued that the press had moved from a 'watchdog' to an 'attack dog' role that was aimed at delegitimising the Labour leader because of his willingness to challenge the political establishment. Broadcasters, expected to respect 'due impartiality', were less obviously partisan but they nevertheless happily reproduced memes about Corbyn's 'unelectability', his alleged links to terrorists and his reluctance to send millions of people to their death by pressing the nuclear button. This combination of vilification and misrepresentation was intensified in the 2019 general election and contributed to Labour's defeat and to Corbyn's resignation as Labour leader (Jackson et al. 2019).

Part of the problem is that the restricted scope of mainstream coverage is due to the media's own lack of diversity. For example, research by the Sutton Trust found that the news media is one of the most elitist sectors of British society, with a substantial overrepresentation of people with a privileged educational background. While just 7% of the UK population is schooled privately, 44% of newspaper columnists, 43% of the top 100 senior journalists, editors and presenters and 29% of BBC executives went to 'independent' schools; 44% of columnists, 36% of the 'News Media 100' and 31% of BBC executives attended either Oxford or Cambridge, hardly proportionate to the less than 1% of the UK population who studied there. The researchers identified a 'disconnect' between journalists and publics which leads to an agenda-setting that reflects the news media's own priorities and class situation, and diminishes those experiences with which they are less familiar (Sutton Trust 2019).

Considering the Alternatives

We need, therefore, to promote a different kind of media as a fundamental feature of a different kind of social system (Fenton et al. 2020). Fortunately, the rising

tide of racism and authoritarianism coincides and clashes with an appetite for collectivist approaches and an embrace of social justice. Despair and defeatism about current trends of polarisation and illiberalism are matched by a growing enthusiasm for more radical and progressive solutions. Genuine alternatives, however, need to be located in newly imagined political strategies such as those put forward by the UK Labour Party prior to the 2019 general election, based on a series of policies aimed at democratising ownership of the British economy (Labour Party 2018). These ranged from nationalisation, to worker ownership funds, to boosting support for the cooperative sector. They are useful starting points with some significant repercussions for the media and tech sectors. But if we are to reimagine our media futures, this will require not just alternative strategies and policies but also an alternative politics. Such a critique begins from a concern with the problems a capitalist economy has left us with: burgeoning inequality and poverty, global warming, the biospheric damage from a dominant economic system powered by fossil fuels and predicated on endless consumption and growth that concentrates economic and political power in the hands of oligarchs and autocrats. To change this direction of travel requires political and economic alternatives to this system that are just and inclusive, ecologically wise and socially regenerative, shifting economic and political power back to communities and democratic institutions.

Conceiving of a media that supports a newly imagined democratic political economy means conceiving of a world not simply post-Covid but also post-capitalism. It means breaking away from a market economy to something that looks more like a citizen's economy or a solidarity economy. Taking account of the key elements of democracy and ownership, what might this look like in terms of the media? We can point to three key normative criteria that are required if we are to begin to articulate an alternative politics and apply it to the media (adapted from Fraser 2018). To be truly transformational, all three criteria must be met.

Wholesale Egalitarianism

Egalitarianism refers to both external structural factors relating to the broader environment that media organisations function within and to internal structural factors relating to the workforce and working practices of the organisations themselves. The principle of egalitarianism clearly runs counter

to the concentration of media ownership endemic across the globe, with the tech giants now the largest oligopolies the world has ever seen. Limiting concentration of media ownership is vital but only takes us so far. It may relax the stranglehold of power that certain media corporations exert but it does not necessarily alter the neoliberal nature of the system they operate within. So it is also crucial to enable, support and sustain forms of media ownership that are *not for profit* and are fully independent of commercial pressures and government preferences, are organised cooperatively and democratically, and are responsive to the needs of the communities they serve rather than at the behest of the market. The principle here is for new models of ownership that redistribute and circulate wealth rather than extract it.

In a context in which mainstream media industries are largely bastions of privilege for political and economic elites, and operate with fierce hierarchies resistant to change, publicly owned media organisations may appear to be a viable solution. For example, public service media such as the BBC are often seen as the best redress for a contemporary journalism marked by hyperpartisanship and hypercommercialism, with the ability to offer journalism independent of the state or market, inclusive of diverse voices and with space for more critical coverage. But, as Freedman (2018, 206) argues, the BBC 'is a compromised version of a potentially noble ideal: far too implicated in and attached to existing elite networks of power to be able to offer an effective challenge to them.' As noted above, despite its claims of impartiality and independence, the BBC has always sided with the elite and been in thrall to those in power. Over the last three decades, the BBC's independence has been steadily eroded and its programme-making increasingly commercialised.

Broadcasting in the UK was originally regulated according to public service principles. That model has been increasingly marginalised as the BBC has become more and more subject to a market-based regulation. Currently, BBC activities have to be balanced with consideration for competition through 'public value' tests. They are also subjected to 'market impact assessments' by Ofcom, the UK's communications regulator, which has been criticised for privileging consumer interests over those of citizens. Severe funding cuts, particularly in recent years, have also caused the BBC's editorial culture to become more conservative and risk-averse. Mills (2016) and the Media Reform Coalition (2019a) argue that adequate, secure public funding that is independent of governmental control is the pathway to real political independence and insulation from the market-based approach that has eroded the BBC's public service ethos. Rather

than returning to the top-down, statist model on which the BBC was founded, to fulfil its public service promise the BBC must become a modern, democratised public platform and network, fully representative of its audiences and completely independent.

Another relevant model of democratic ownership is the cooperative: an autonomous association of people who have come together voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise. Cooperatives are based on values of self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. As such, they aim to eschew gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination and pursue equity through things like education and training. Cooperatives work for sustainable community development through policies approved by members. They are concerned with the nurturing of people and communities and democratic self-rule. Cooperative ownership has been argued to increase employment stability and increase productivity levels by discouraging an approach based on short-termism for shareholder return and the use of low-wage labour (Davies et al. 2014). As cooperatives are collectively owned and controlled, they are also more democratic and responsive to internal demands for more egalitarian employment and working practices. There is no employer and employee but a membership of worker-owners that are no longer solely answerable to capital; rather, the idea is that capital serves the cooperative that is democratically organised and governed.

Egalitarianism means getting rid of inequalities and so is also related to the internal plurality of media organisations. An egalitarian media will recognise ways in which media have held certain people back – Black people, old people, disabled people, working-class people – and will seek to counter those forms of discrimination by taking special measures to compensate for the social and economic inequalities of unjust social structures in full recognition of the different yet connected structural conditions of class, racial and hetero-patriarchal domination. The majority of mainstream media organisations are alarmingly lacking in diversity in output and in the workforce. An increasingly casualised workforce also impacts disproportionately on those from lower-income families, women, minority groups and those with disabilities. Egalitarianism would require a major power shift in the general media landscape away from capital-hungry commercial media organisations and also in how power is shared within media organisations themselves – a shift that recognises egalitarianism not just as an economic concern but a social and political one too.

Substantively Meaningful Democracy

Just as a strong egalitarianism in the media goes beyond plurality of media ownership, so a substantively meaningful democracy goes beyond liberal versions of democracy with their emphasis on individual rights and jurisprudence to reconnect with a democratic tradition premised on equality, participation and popular sovereignty. In practice this will also involve a strong sense of localism and community-managed resources (including local media), run sustainably with mechanisms to progress equality and to prevent anyone taking unfair advantage. This fits most comfortably with the notion of ‘subversive commoning’ proposed by Birkinbine (2018). If we see the media as part of a shared public information and communications resource necessary for a healthy functioning democracy – and a form of public utility – then we have to shift from viewing them as primarily competitive corporate entities to seeing them as shared resources that can be co-owned and/or co-governed by the users and media workers according to their own rules and norms as part of the commons. This relates to physical spaces that are shared or pooled; the co-production of the resource; the means of maintaining that resource; as well as the mode of governance – how decisions are made collaboratively through collective problem-solving to distribute and use the resource (Fenton et al. 2010).

Cooperatives, as discussed above, are democratic organisations controlled by members who jointly participate in setting policies and making decisions. Media coops are on the rise. The global newsletter published by Cooperatives Active in Industry Services (CICOPA) reported that in 2017 there had been a 27% increase in coops in the field of information and communications around the world, with many emerging in response to the need to preserve pluralism, escape commercial and state pressures and ensure independent journalism. Most of these are worker cooperatives with democratic governance at their core and the majority operate in Europe. Many face issues of lack of finance, regulatory complexity, tax and administrative burdens but, nonetheless, they are increasing in number. Part of the growth is due to the emergence of platform cooperatives where users and/or workers ultimately own and control the platforms based on principles of economic fairness, training and democratic participation in the running of online businesses (Scholz and Schneider 2016).

In Cairo the online news cooperative Mada was born out of the crisis in 2013 (when mass protests across Egypt demanding the resignation of the president ended in a coup d’état) and formed by a group of journalists who had lost their

jobs and were worried about the future for independent journalism in Egypt. They describe their journalism as the kind that constantly challenges, raises questions and proposes different possibilities. They operate an open and ongoing editorial conversation on the ethics of their journalism, especially with regard to protecting the rights of the oppressed and the vulnerable, and preserving the privacy of sources. In the UK, *The Bristol Cable* is changing the face of local journalism as a grassroots community-led media cooperative. It prints a free quarterly magazine with a circulation of 30,000 copies and publishes investigative and community-led journalism regularly online. It also delivers free media training equipping local people with the skills to report on issues that are important to them. It is funded by over 2,000 members, each paying a small monthly fee (who all have a say and own an equal share in the coop), by foundation support and crowdfunding. Income is also generated from advertising in the print edition regulated by an ethical advertising charter determined by members. Each year its members vote on the annual budget, the overall focus for content and who sits on the board of directors. They insist on democratic decision-making throughout the organisation. Media coops like *The Bristol Cable* are trying to figure out what workplace democracy could be in the media industry – from who gets to do what jobs, to who makes decisions on content and resource distribution.

Financial and Environmental Sustainability

Media institutions across the globe are facing multiple crises: of funding, trust, representation, accountability and legitimacy. In many of the countries that make up capitalism's core, the newspaper and magazine industry is in serious decline as large digital intermediaries gobble up the majority of advertising revenue. Much of the debate about the sustainability of the news industry circulates around debates relating to this 'broken business model'. Local news in particular is increasingly under threat. In the UK, the majority of the population (57.9%) is no longer served by a local daily newspaper (Media Reform Coalition 2017). To retain high levels of profitability, media corporations have closed or merged titles and cut jobs, often moving journalists long distances away from the communities they serve and no longer being able to provide content of relevance to them. In short, a profit-driven response means media become ever more unsustainable.

However, if we shift our perspective from one of media as a source of profit to media as a resource for the public good, then the question of financial

sustainability becomes a rather different one: a means to pay journalists a decent living wage in good working conditions to deliver journalism in the public interest rather than maximise shareholder profitability. *The Bristol Cable* most closely fits the description of a multi-stakeholder cooperative (MSC) whose membership includes both the workers and readers. MSCs offer a means of financial sustainability through membership payments. *The New Internationalist*, a magazine dedicated to human rights, politics and social justice, describes itself as one of the largest media cooperatives in the world. Founded in 1973, it became a workers coop in 1992 and then an MSC in 2017. By 2019, it had over 3,600 investor members who have a say in how the magazine develops. Becoming an MSC has given it long-term financial sustainability and enabled it to do more investigative and long-form journalism. *The Ferret*, based in Scotland, is also a cooperative run by its members and funded by subscriptions, donations, paid-for stories or material and grants and gains its following from being democratic and having a clear public purpose.

Infrastructural support for media plurality needs to go further than simply recognising the necessity of guaranteeing citizens' access to a wide range of diverse information and debate for a flourishing democracy. To be fully sustainable we need to put citizens at the centre of democratic media governance too. An approach based on the commons is aimed at strengthening the collective solidarity of workers and offering mutual life support to all inhabitants. A media *commons* is by definition sustainable.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to make the case for structural changes to the media by reflecting on extensive academic research into the multiple ways in which our media and communications systems fall short of providing citizens with accurate, diverse and representative media that is capable of informing and nourishing the kind of inclusive public debate that is the lifeblood of functioning democracies. But this book is concerned with addressing media futures and so we are also concerned with social change. We have outlined some key principles on which change should be premised: wholesale egalitarianism, meaningful democracy and financial and environmental sustainability that situates media futures in a broader, visionary and emancipatory politics for social, political and economic transformation. Without reforms that can realise these principles, our media

will become ever more concentrated in fewer hands, more susceptible to market pressures and distorted by commercial priorities, less diverse and less able to fulfil the potential of digital platforms for public purposes.

Critically, we need to imagine media systems that prioritise the value of the public over profit and collaboration over competitiveness – and to develop economies that go beyond capital. Operationally, this means that we have to formulate mechanisms of inclusive citizen participation and democratic control of the spaces we inhabit. Rethinking and rebuilding our media worlds according to these principles will require enormous energy and enthusiasm. We will have to learn from other social struggles and solidarity movements that sought to advance economic equality, civil rights and social justice but we do so on the basis that there can be no meaningful democracy without media reform.

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