Inquiring Minds topic – 6 January 2017
Riv Swartz, Moderator
Media in the 2016 Election

There has been a good deal of analysis regarding the function of the media during the 2016 presidential election. Many feel that the media played a role in promoting or demoting one candidate over the other as she/he sought to become the next president of the United States of America.

In analyzing the function of media, it would be important to define the role of media in our country. Many have elevated the role of media to such an extent that media is often referred to as the fourth branch of government or the " Fourth Estate." Wikipedia offers the following insight, "The concept of media or press as a fourth branch stems from a belief that the news media's responsibility to inform the populace is essential to the healthy functioning of the democracy. The phrase "Fourth Estate" may be used to emphasize the independence of the press...". This paper does not view "fake news" or social media in the realm of this discussion.

Utilizing the above concepts, it would be interesting to overlay the ideas of "responsibility to inform" and "independence" to the articles provided in this packet. While reading, please address the following questions to be discussed during Inquiring Minds.

1.   Did the media manage to remain Informative and independent during the 2016 election?
2.   If the media failed to remain informative and independent, why didn't it ? If the media were able to function within these guidelines, can you give examples?
3.   Who were the winners and losers in terms of how the media functioned during the election process?
4.   Could the media have functioned in a more responsible/independent manner? If so, what would be your recommendations?
5.   What should the function of media be during the next four years?

Biggest loser of 2016 presidential election? The media

By David Zurawik   19 December 2016

We are still days away from finally knowing the winner of one of the ugliest elections in modern history, but we already have the biggest loser: the media.

From cable news employees sharing questions with Democrat Hillary Clinton in advance of TV town halls and debates, to executives making their airwaves endlessly available to Donald Trump for phone "interviews" that the Republican candidate controlled, the media have never performed less responsibly in a modern-era presidential election.

And that perception is not simply the result of WikiLeaks giving us an unvarnished, drip-drip-drip look at the incestuous groveling and information-sharing that reporters at some of the nation's top news outlets engaged in with Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta the past 18 months. It's the result of my daily reporting on an industry that appears to have largely lost a clear sense of civic direction and purpose, while simultaneously becoming cozier with the powers that be and more dishonest with audiences.

It's a deadly combination that has dark consequences for democracy as the press fails in its primary job of giving citizens accurate, trustworthy information they can use in choosing who they want to lead the nation. Instead, as we have seen in two CNN events in March, candidate Clinton was secretly given information intended to skew the event and, therefore, the vote in her favor. That's the opposite of serving democracy — and it feeds Trump's dangerous rhetoric of the election being "rigged" against him.

The degree of confusion among media outlets as to how they should be covering Campaign 2016 has been staggering from day one. Nor is it limited to cable TV — not by a long shot.

Start with the Huffington Post deciding in July 2015 that Trump did not warrant political coverage.

"Instead, we will cover his campaign as part of our Entertainment section," Ryan Grim, the website's Washington bureau chief, and Danny Shea, its editorial director, wrote. "Our reason is simple: Trump's campaign is a sideshow. We won't take the bait."

Skip ahead to June 2016 and Emmett Rensin, an editor at Vox, inciting his readers to violence should Trump appear in their cities.

"Advice: If Trump comes to your town, start a riot," Rensin wrote on Twitter.

"Let's be clear: It's never a shame to storm the barricades set up around a fascist," he wrote in another tweet.

And then in September, The New York Times decided it was going to use the word "liar" to describe Trump in news stories.

That might seem like small matter and a far more reasonable choice compared with an editor telling readers to start a riot. But it launched a torrent of words and all sorts of conflicting opinions on the use of that word because it involved the "paper of record" departing from a long-held norm associated with fairness in covering news.

"The challenge for the media is in defining what makes a lie," the Columbia Journalism Review wrote. "An expletive that used to be confined to op-eds, blogs and partisan screeds … is now being deployed in the world of straight-down-the-middle, 'mainstream' journalism."

So what about Hillary Clinton's claim that FBI Director James Comey said her statements on the emails were "truthful"?

The Washington Post gave her four Pinocchios for that. Should the Times now be calling her a "liar" as well?

Not that all the bad choices went against Trump. Besides unlimited cable TV time for the GOP candidate with show hosts largely letting him go unchecked, CNN hired Trump's former campaign director, Corey Lewandowski, as a featured analyst. And even as Lewandowski was being paid by CNN to essentially serve as a Trump surrogate, he was still on the candidate's payroll.

I thought CNN analyst Paul Begala, who serves as senior adviser to the pro-Clinton super PAC Priorities USA, defined conflict of interest. But the hiring of Lewandowski raised CNN's game to a new level in this realm of media muck.

How did so many in the media get to such questionable journalistic places during this tumultuous and troubling election?

One answer involves the widespread acceptance by many top media professionals of a highly questionable argument and conclusion about covering Trump.

The argument rests on the premise that Trump is a presidential candidate unlike any we have ever seen.

He's remarkable in some respects, no doubt about that. I wrote several times during this election cycle about Trump being a watershed media candidate — better in his use of media than even Ronald Reagan or John F. Kennedy.

I based that claim on this 70-year-old businessman finding a sweet spot in this time of media transition that combined skilled use of free TV with the creation of a credible voice in social media. Win or lose Tuesday night, Trump has rewritten the book on media use in primaries, during which he spent almost nothing and vanquished more than a dozen opponents through the mix of free TV and social media platforms with 23 million followers.

But many took the exceptionalism premise as fact and then argued that since he is a candidate without precedent, we must find new ways to cover him. Old rules no longer apply.

Once you accepted the need for new ways to cover Trump and bought into the logic of abandoning legacy standards, anything was possible — from calling him a liar on the front page of The New York Times to telling readers it's never a shame to storm the barricades set up around a fascist.

Make no mistake: Trump is a vile character. The claims of sexual assault he made in the "Access Hollywood" video are dangerous and disgusting — and they are just one of many things he's said that warrant those adjectives, particularly when it comes to women.

But George Wallace, who ran in the 1964, '72 and '76 primaries as a Democrat and in the 1968 general election as the candidate of the American Independent Party, was also a vile character. As governor, he stood in a schoolhouse door at the University of Alabama to protest integration. In his inaugural speech as governor, he vowed "segregation forever."

And is Trump a bigger liar and more dangerous to democracy than Richard Nixon? Has he committed the crimes Nixon did with the full powers of the presidency?

And how was Nixon forced to resign if not through the old-school, legacy standards of dogged investigative journalism?

In times of crisis, most tribes turn to their elders for advice. One of the journalistic elders who brought Nixon down, Carl Bernstein, has consistently advocated old-school investigative reporting and deep biography to show voters how dangerous he thinks Trump is.

And some did heed his advice. David A. Fahrenthold of The Washington Post was textbook in his investigative reporting on the Trump Foundation, while Times reporters Jonathan Mahler and Matt Flegenheimer were clinical in cataloging the influence Roy Cohn, of Joe McCarthy infamy, had on Trump.

But too many in the media bought into the argument offered by Vox editor Ezra Klein in a July piece headlined: "This election isn't just Democrat vs. Republican. It's normal vs. abnormal."

Once you define Trump and the entire Republican Party as "abnormal" the way Klein did, all old-school legacy bets about fairness and balance are off.

I totally disagree with the license given to ditch bedrock values. But I can understand how so many of my colleagues got there, given how many boundaries of acceptable behavior Trump transgressed.

And though they disgust me, I can even live with the accounts of media folk like CNBC chief Washington correspondent and New York Times contributor John Harwood and Politico reporter Glenn Thrush shamelessly seeking approval and sharing information with Podesta in emails published by WikiLeaks.

But the tipping point for me were the Wiki-revelations of Clinton getting questions in advance on two events that aired on CNN in March. One was a town hall co-presented by CNN and TV One, the other a debate. Leaked emails show Donna Brazile, who was then a CNN contributor and is now interim chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee, tipping Team Clinton off to questions the candidate would be asked.

The emails leaked Monday about a debate question led to CNN announcing that it had severed ties with Brazile two weeks ago.

Questions being fed to Clinton are well beyond the pale of simply poor press performance. And neither CNN nor TV One has treated the matter with the transparency and seriousness it demands.

This is a snapshot of how bad journalism harms democracy, and we should all be outraged.

Earlier this month, when I heard conservative radio host [Rush Limbaugh](#) comparing what happened on CNN and TV One to the TV quiz show scandals of the 1950s, I dismissed it as ideologically driven Limbaugh overkill. After all, I thought, the practice of quiz show producers giving answers in advance to favored contestants had gone on for years and was institutionalized at NBC.

But then I thought about the goals and ultimate impact of the quiz show rigging: Candidates who were likely to draw larger audiences got longer runs and won more money. The producers and the networks were trying to load the dice in favor of better ratings for their shows.

In 2016 on CNN and TV One, the dice were loaded in favor of a preferred presidential candidate. And nothing less than who would lead the country the next four years was at stake.

You tell me which is more serious and disturbing.

Media Malpractice? Media Bias And The 2016 Election

[IBD] **www.investors.com**/politics/commentary/media-malpractice-media-bias-and-2016-election/

As Election Day demonstrated, the contentious 2016 presidential campaign witnessed a stunning uprising of the people against the Washington establishment and political elite. This was not the only revolt that transpired Nov. 8, however. Election Day also represented a victory of the American people over the establishment news media, as they repudiated its liberal bias and attempt at influencing the election.

Throughout the election cycle, Donald Trump and his supporters were derided for claiming that the mainstream media was "rigged" against the Republican candidate in favor of his opponent. But given the way Election Day unfolded, with Trump pulling off an upset victory despite being written off by much of the media, the allegations of media bias may not have been so far-fetched.

Evidence Of Media Bias

Even before Election Day, many asserted that Trump faced an unfair amount of negative press, as the media published story after story painting him as a racist, xenophobe and just about every other horrible name in the book. Case in point, throughout the campaign, the Huffington Post published the following editor's note at the end of stories about Mr. Trump:

Editor's note: Donald Trump regularly [incites political violence](#) and is a [serial liar](#), [rampant xenophobe](#), [racist](#), [misogynist](#) and [birther](#) who has repeatedly pledged to ban all Muslims — 1.6 billion members of an entire religion — from entering the U.S.

Further, following Hillary Clinton's health incident at a 9/11 commemoration ceremony, the venerable Washington Post published an article, entitled "[The man who discovered CTE thinks Hillary Clinton may have been poisoned](#)," which centered around a theory that Clinton may have been poisoned by Trump or Russian leader Vladimir Putin. The claim was made by Bennet Omalu, a forensic pathologist who had found that a number of NFL football players suffered from brain damage due to repeated blows to the head. Instead of dismissing the poisoning claim as a conspiracy theory, the author appears to defend Omalu, as she wishes to remind readers that his "[credentials and tenacity are well known](#)." She also wants us to know that Putin was "implicated by a British inquiry" over the death of a former KGB operative, and that Trump "has expressed admiration for Putin."

Also, back in October, Fox News anchor Bill O'Reilly reported that at least three media organizations had "ordered their employees to destroy Donald Trump."

Lack Of Confidence

It is not surprising, therefore, that most American voters lack confidence in the news media's ability to report accurately on the presidential candidates. According to an [Investor's Business Daily/TIPP Poll](#) conducted in September, more than two-thirds of registered voters (67%) reported that the media's reports on the candidates are often inaccurate, while only one-quarter trusted in the accuracy of its news stories. Further, as news outlets devoted much of their attention to analyzing the various moves and statements made by Donald Trump during his campaign, nearly half of voters felt that the media was being too easy in its [coverage of Hillary Clinton](#), with only 16% saying that the media had been too tough on her.

A majority of voters in the poll also felt that the news media tends to exert too much influence on U.S. elections. Overall, more than two-thirds of Americans (69%) believe that the news media wields too much of an influence on elections in the country.

The Myth Of The October Surprises

The media attempted to exercise their influence in various ways during the last few weeks of the campaign. When an 11-year-old "Access Hollywood" hot mic tape was released in early October, many in the news media ran with the narrative that this was the "October Surprise" bombshell that could doom Trump's campaign. The cable news networks devoted ample coverage to this story, showing the footage repeatedly. An article in Politico, entitled "[Trump caught on tape making crude, sexually aggressive comments about women,](#)" stated that the hot mic revelation "could damage irrevocably Trump's attempts to win over female voters." Some also saw the media's extensive coverage of unproven sexual assault allegations against Trump as an attempt to depress turnout among his supporters.

These controversies proved to have minimal impact on voting decisions, indicating that the American people have rejected the media's attempts to influence the election. In an IBD/TIPP survey of 779 likely voters, conducted Oct. 14-19, about three-quarters of likely voters reported that the negative stories surrounding Donald Trump either had no impact on their voting decision or made them more likely to vote for the candidate.

The People's Repudiation Of Media Influence

Thus, despite the media's best efforts to defeat Trump through a barrage of negative news stories, most Americans appeared not to be swayed by media coverage.

Election Day provided the most definitive proof of both the media's bias against Trump and the people's repudiation of its attempts to influence the election narrative.

Heading into the day of the vote, most news outlets were confident that Clinton would become the 45th president of the United States, as they pointed to poll after poll showing the former secretary of state comfortably leading Trump. This coverage seemed to impact voters' sentiment regarding whom they expected to win the presidency. In the final installment of our [daily IBD/TIPP Presidential Election Tracking Poll](), released on the day of the election, nearly half of likely voters (46%) felt that Clinton would win the presidency, while only 24% reported that Trump would likely become president.

Yet the media's negative coverage could not stifle Trump's supporters. As predicted in our final poll, which showed the Republican nominee with a 1.6-point lead over his rival, Trump stunned the media establishment and easily won the presidency.

New York Times' Soul Searching

After an election cycle that saw the news media so clearly bent on belittling and defeating a candidacy, media outlets must now conduct their own soul searching as they come to terms with an election result that caught them by surprise.

The New York Times appears to be making an attempt at such a postmortem. It published a [letter to Times readers]() that some regard as a "mea culpa" for its election coverage. In the letter, Times publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. wonders whether his paper underestimated President-elect Trump's support.

In his recent article titled "[A 'Dewey Defeats Truman' Lesson for the Digital Age]()," Times journalist Jim Rutenberg also admits that the media failed to "capture the boiling anger of a large portion of the American electorate that feels left behind by a selective recovery." He expresses his amazement at how frequently "the news media has missed the populist movements that have been rocking national politics since at least 2008."

Although Sulzberger and Rutenberg are admirable in their admission that the paper's election coverage got it wrong, they fail to acknowledge the fact that much of this coverage *intentionally* aimed to undermine Donald Trump's campaign by painting him as an unacceptable demagogue. Throughout the election cycle, even the hard news section of the New York Times went negative on candidate Trump. For instance, a Nov. 6 piece on the closing days of the campaign claimed that "Mr. Trump still privately muses about all the ways he will punish his enemies after Election Day."

A question also needs to be asked regarding whether or not the Times would have delivered these "mea culpas" had Donald Trump lost the election.

But Rutenberg's point about the news media overlooking the growing populist sentiment among Americans comes close to identifying what, in our opinion, is the root cause of the media's underestimation of Trump's support, and media bias in general. As many media outlets are headquartered in major cities, journalists and pundits are sheltered in the bubble of a shared elite liberal mentality. Maybe if members of the elite media had stepped outside their comfort zone and investigated the problems facing the working class in the Midwest, they would not have been so wrong regarding the election.

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