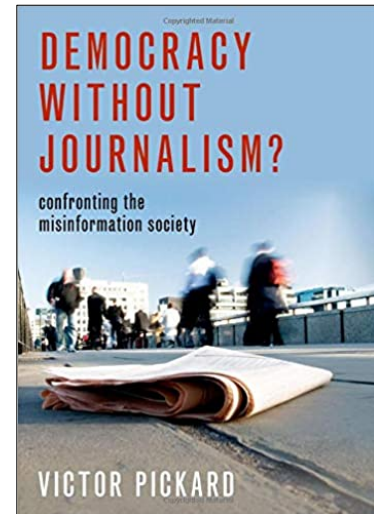


Victor Pickard, **Democracy Without Journalism? Confronting the Misinformation Society**, New York, NY: Oxford, 2020, 264 pp., \$27.95 (paperback).

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A great deal of recent journalism studies research focuses on the practices involved in the production of news. This is understandable considering how much the production and dissemination of journalism has changed over the past few decades, as news organizations have shifted to a media environment that is increasingly digital and saturated with seemingly endless competition. Contemporary journalism studies research builds on scholarship that previously explored journalists' routines (Gans, 1979; Kaniss, 1991) by focusing, for example, on how journalists use (or ignore) audience analytic data (Belair-Gagnon, Zamith, & Holton, 2020; Tandoc & Thomas, 2015; Zamith, 2018), as well as on the way they have similarly embraced (or spurned) digital tools such as artificial intelligence, automation, and augmented reality in their daily work (Diakopoulos, 2019; Pavlik, 2020). As journalism's public trust crisis becomes more and more pressing in an era of misinformation and polarization, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to understanding journalists' efforts to improve their relationships with and approaches to the people they hope to reach (Batsell, 2015; Wenzel, 2020), especially with regard to communities of color (Crittenden & Haywood, 2020; Robinson & Culver, 2019).



These strands of research are vital to understanding how journalism practice is—and is not—changing, as well as what those changes mean for the profession and the public. Yet an equally important question that does not get enough attention in our field is this: What is the relationship between how journalism looks and how it is funded? Also, considering journalism's currently dismal economic outlook, there's an even larger question that remains conspicuously uninterrogated within the field: How *should* journalism be funded in the first place?

These two questions are front and center in University of Pennsylvania Professor Victor Pickard's **Democracy Without Journalism? Confronting the Misinformation Society**. The result is an invaluable contribution to journalism studies, for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it makes explicit the connection between how journalism is paid for and what it ultimately looks like. It also makes a compelling case that journalism researchers and practitioners must solve the profession's "supply-side problems" (e.g., journalism's reliance on commercialism for financial stability) in order to overcome the industry's "demand-side challenges," such as the public's growing lack of trust in and consumption of credible news (p. 5).

Pickard's focus on the economics of journalism is welcome and necessary at a moment when the financial stability of the journalism industry is more precarious than ever before. As the author points out, the number of working journalists has declined precipitously since 2000, as organizations have cut back

their staff or shuttered altogether. This has been especially detrimental to local news, as Pickard makes clear by acknowledging the rise of “news deserts”—communities or regions that lack access to reliable information. The news industry, in other words, is in a desperate and unstable state, and Pickard argues that this has led to a situation in which news organizations are compelled to give into commercial demands no matter how at odds they are with what he calls their “democratic imperatives” (p. 1).

Pickard uses the 2016 presidential election as an especially egregious display of the news media’s “toxic commercialism” (p. 1), during which news organizations—especially television news outlets—privileged the need to sell advertising over the need to provide the public with accurate, credible information. The result was a situation in which Donald Trump benefitted from a huge disparity between the amount of attention he received and the amount of attention his opponent Hillary Clinton received, because Trump proved to be a more incendiary, and therefore more profitable, news subject. Pickard draws on the quote from the now-disgraced former CBS chairman and CEO Les Moonves, who said that Trump’s candidacy “may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS” (p. 3). As Pickard writes later in the book, “commercial logics and, specifically, the need to maximize profits via advertising revenue over all other concerns, drives contemporary digital journalism” (p. 134).

To be clear, Pickard’s argument is not that this toxic commercialism within journalism is the sole problem the industry faces but that it is one of several structural flaws in the U.S. news media system. In making this distinction, Pickard embraces a *structural* approach to his conceptualization of journalism, its crises, and its possible solutions. This approach draws upon the theoretical framework of political economy, which, as he explains, “focuses on how media institutions are organized, owned, and controlled, and how media figure within larger power relationships” (p. 9). As Pickard writes, “Narratives about news organizations’ incompetence often miss the bigger picture: this is a systemic crisis. . . . In other words, the crisis is not about the future of newspapers—it is about the viability of public service journalism” (p. 60). The value of this approach is not only that it allows Pickard to draw a clear line between our understanding of the journalism industry’s financial crisis and the threat that crisis poses to democracy, but also that it allows him to consider solutions to this crisis that, as he puts it, “reimagine what journalism could be” (p. 10). In other words, although the book focuses on some of journalism’s most devastating problems, it’s actually quite refreshing in its optimism when it comes to overcoming them.

That optimism comes through in the solution Pickard offers to these supply-side issues. Pickard’s overarching argument is that in order for journalism to overcome its current crises in economics and quality, journalism within the United States should become publicly funded and embrace a public media model. To be sure, when I first picked this book up, I assumed a publicly funded model in the United States, while alluring, was next to impossible in terms of execution. It’s a credit to Pickard’s understanding of the topic and his skill as a writer that he is able to build a case throughout this book so that by the end of it even the most skeptical readers will see publicly funded journalism as not just a realistic solution to the industry’s problems but perhaps the only one that might actually work.

Pickard knows his readers are likely to share my initial skepticism when it comes to implementing government-funded journalism, especially within the United States. That explains why he devotes much of the book to dismantling the assumptions inherent in that skepticism. “Our goal,” he concludes, “should be

to create a robust and well-funded media system that is truly public, designed for our digital age, and democracy-driven, not market-driven" (p. 173).

In short, *Democracy Without Journalism* offers a detailed takedown of the relationship between journalism and commercialism that is both remarkably convincing and refreshingly optimistic. Pickard's central argument is that if industry stakeholders look beyond the structural constraints that are often perceived as a given to news production and consumption, they might begin to consider pathways out of this current crisis that, though daunting, are perhaps the profession's best chance at realigning its goals so that the journalism that best serves democracy can become the most valuable sort of news—in more ways than one.

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