

Local Journalism in a Partisan America

In an America where 91% of its citizens feel that politics are highly polarized, the presidential election brings a season of stress, arguments, and most importantly, misinformation (Fredrick). The 2020 presidential election is especially so, as American politics are divided more than ever, and the national media is partisan and biased. With harsh distinctions among Democrats and Republicans, people have also chosen to stick to what they are comfortable with, preferring to avoid conflicts and the general talk of politics. Unfortunately, this trend of growing divisions has also coincided with the decrease in local journalism, with nearly 1,800 newspapers closed since 2004, as national news outlets and online media rose in popularity (Terhaar). As local journalism continues to die off, it is becoming more evident that those lost newspapers are needed more than ever, in order to promote political engagement and unification within communities.

With the loss of local journalism, there has been a decrease in turnout for state/local elections, minimal interest in community news, and a “general disengagement from local democratic life” (Hendrickson). American citizens are especially in the dark about local officials, who influence everyday life, including schools, local taxes, and numerous other services including the police and fire departments. Smart, informed voting would be impossible without information about these candidates, which had been readily provided by the local newspapers before their downfall. In place of accurate local journalism, all people have are “paid political advertising, ...self-promotion on campaign websites” and whispers heard on the streets (Terhaar).

Unfortunately, the fall of local journalism isn't just a small problem – it affects every aspect of American democracy. The 2016 presidential election was a clear example of how this decrease led to flourishing of one-sided information and the lack of fact check. Politico, a media company focused on covering politics in the US and internationally, drew comparisons between election results and newspaper subscription rates and found “a clear correlation between low subscription rates and Trump’s success in the 2016 election” (Musgrave and Nussbaum). President Trump could make bold claims and in areas without local journalism, they would go unchecked. It is also no question that social media is an ever-growing pit of inaccurate information; along with the rise of partisan national outlets such as Fox News, voters with limited access to local journalism were, and still are, subject to biased news. Penny Abernathy, a professor at University of North Carolina, commented that “without having the newspaper as kind of ‘true north’ to point you to issues, you are left to look for other sources...and because of the dramatic rise in social media, that ends up being your Facebook friends.”

As the 2020 presidential election draws near, America desperately needs the revival of local journalism. Partisan media has gotten out of hand, while neighbors are divided, families are fighting, and politics is a hushed topic in fear of conflict. By providing unbiased facts and scrutinizing political figures, local journalism can accurately inform the public, fostering civil discussions without the hate.

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