

BOOK REVIEW

Democracy without Journalism: Confronting the Misinformation Society, by Victor Pickard. Oxford University Press, 2019. \$35.99., paper. ISBN: 978-0-19094-676-0. Pages: 1-264.

Reviewed by Shreyashi Ganguly¹

In June 2023, Canada passed the Bill C-18 which mandated the big tech companies such as Google and Meta to compensate online media organizations if they wished to continue displaying Canadian news content on their platforms. Aimed to enhance an economically fair relationship between the tech conglomerates and online news portals, the enforcement of the Act, however, saw Google and Meta blocking Canadian news content instead (Jones & Aiello, 2023). This is inconvenient for a large section of the populace that derives its information from news links on Facebook and Google. But the tech giants would rather have their users denied information than pay the news organizations.

This is but one of the many developments that point to the ways in which the global capitalist framework determines the nature of exchange of information and communication around the world. Victor Pickard's book, *Democracy without Journalism: Confronting the Misinformation Society* (2019) recognizes this important interplay between media and capitalist reckonings and comes at this important juncture in history where capitalist considerations dictate the message on the medium but, more importantly, who gets to read said message.

The book essentially explores the crisis in journalism that is affecting the media in the United States today. This is an ambitious project, undoubtedly, but Pickard succinctly traces the historical arc of the press in the US, pointing to the different events in press freedom in the country's history, its long-drawn engagement with commercialization and the many political and social developments that have culminated in the present crisis.

Pickard etches out some structural fallacies behind this such as media monopoly, the collapse of professional journalism, the disparate coverage of news, the precarious nature of journalistic labour. These and many more such factors have led to the creation of what he calls "misinformation society", an electorate characterized by increasingly poor levels of journalistic standards. The arguments are specific to the US, although the broad patterns examined in the book can be used to understand key developments in press freedom and the media industry in countries across the world — adjusted for political contexts, of course.

The book, however, is not limited to a description of the systemic failures of the US press alone. It also examines the role journalism plays in sustaining democratic ideals. It takes as its starting point the idea of journalism as the Fourth Estate and delineates the consequences that endemic failures of media might have on democracy. Manuel Castells argues (2007) that shaping people's minds is a fundamental source of power that is more effective than fear or coercion. The media's importance for democracy is amplified when one considers the impact they have on shaping people's minds. It is in this aspect that Pickard's arguments are nuanced. By pointing to the fact that the degradation of media is dangerous to society, the author underscores the importance of a free, public press in times increasingly characterized by

¹ Shreyashi Ganguly is a PhD student in Sociology at York University, Toronto. Email address: shreyag4@yorku.ca

commercialization, censorship and sensationalism. Thus, freeing media from commercial considerations is an important political project.

Pickard points to the onslaught of the digital media and the ways in which it has upended conventional modes of journalism. Although this is not a novel argument, the author does carefully analyse the different avenues through which digital technologies have negatively impacted print media. Craigslist is such an example that has taken over classified advertising, an otherwise important source of revenue for newspapers. The book focuses primarily on the structural deficits of the US media, but it does take under its ambit a discussion on the agency within the media industry. It would be too simplistic to think of media houses as readily giving in to the pressures of commercialization. Pickard's analysis is balanced in this sense since it accords importance to the multiple ways in which, historically, journalists and news workers have challenged the commercial logic of the media industry.

The book stems from Pickard's prolonged engagement with media reform organizations. The analysis, thus, recurrently draws from personal experiences which lends it a certain sense of authenticity. But the methodology is not clearly defined. Pickard mentions the use of historical data and policy documents, and participant observation for over more than a decade. But references to his sample or the nature of the documents he is alluding to are sparse. The author also highlights the spectre of market censorship, where the market controls what can and cannot be said. This is an important argument given that the media oligopolies control much of what can be published in the public domain. But the analysis does not talk about state censorship enough. Surely this is important given the collusion between the market and state. Perhaps a little more attention to the effects of state censorship on media especially when it aligns with the market logic would have been beneficial.

Pickard's analysis, however, is not limited to a mere description of the shortcomings of the media in the US. He goes a step further to offer some concrete measures that can be adopted in order to conceive an alternative. This futuristic rumination aids in achieving a rounded understanding of the problem and contributes positively to the overall reading experience. Pickard repeatedly underscores the importance of public service journalism and stresses the importance of well-funded public media institutions, regulation of news outlets and promotion of media ownership diversity as some of the steps that can be taken to strengthen American journalism and, by extension, social democracy in the country. His arguments are well founded in policy analysis and are thus based on evidence.

Democracy without Journalism is timely since capitalist concerns are increasingly becoming determinant of every aspect of democracy, let alone journalism. The book will be of interest to not only people interested in media studies but also to those that are interested in learning about global capitalist framework and its implications for society. Its appeal lies in its nuanced arguments which demonstrate careful analysis without veering towards overly complicated deliberations. Particularly, the discussion on the way forward elevates the analysis by introducing the element of hope, a rarity in academic scholarship. It shows that in spite of the shortcomings, there are some practical ways to overcome the crisis in journalism. The broad motif explored in the book is not limited to academic discussions alone.

The media crisis in the US has serious implications for the functioning of society and given the primacy of the country on the global map, the deplorable condition of journalism in the US adversely impacts journalistic quality across the world. Thus, the many suggestions

offered by the book to resurrect the free press can be carefully appropriated to devise strategies that could potentially be applied to a non-US context.

References

Castells, M. (2007). Communication, power and counter-power in the network society. *International journal of communication*, 1(1), 29.

Jones, A. M., & Aiello, R. (2023, July 21). *Understanding Bill C-18: Canada's online news act and its proposed rules, explained*. CTVNews.
<https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/understanding-bill-c-18-canada-s-online-news-act-and-its-proposed-rules-explained-1.6488532>