

ROME CONFERENCE News speech

I come to you as a stranger from a strange land.

I have recently returned from a term at Harvard University where I was a Fellow at the Shorenstein Centre for Media, Politics and Public Policy examining the challenge of unbiased reporting. There may be lessons for us from the USA as we navigate our way through the challenging new media landscape in Europe.

Firstly , it is hard to over state how much most Americans believe in the free market and the First Amendment to deliver good outcomes for their democracy.

There is no public service media of any scale in the US. Public service television is under huge pressure and NPR, National Public Radio, is doing very well with certain audiences but gets only 2% of its funding from government which is likely to be cut.

NPR sticks solidly to PSB impartiality. It's an exception.

Since Ronald Reagan abolished the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, there is no regulations to ensure impartiality, fairness, balance or right of reply on American media though they can still be sued.

Theoretically, deregulation and expanded distribution in radio and television was meant to

usher in a market place of shared and debated ideas.

The reality was rather different. Hundreds of new FM talk radio stations went on air. Many of them were right leaning politically and their success persuaded Rupert Murdoch that he could outflank CNN - the new cable television service, with his right of centre Fox News which swiftly became the leading cable news brand.

Today in the US, broadcasters nod in the direction of traditional journalistic values but often in diluted or distorted forms.

The UK's broadcasting values of impartiality and balance are reflected in America by its serious press which holds the flame of the traditional, independent journalistic values.

But unlike UK broadcasters like the BBC, that reporting sits within a partisan context. They actively take sides in their editorials

A hundred of America's top newspapers, including some of its most conservative, endorsed Hillary Clinton to be President in 2016.

Fairness and balance within a partisan context is not the same as public service impartiality.

Even at Election time, the US does not have the kinds of rules which in Europe try to ensure fairness in amounts of coverage between candidates.

So despite endorsing Clinton and predicting her triumph, the media saturated Donald Trump with airtime and coverage. Fairness and Balance flew out of the window.

CNN took the initiative, live streaming most of his rallies in the Primaries, largely without comment of challenge. His Republican rivals barely got a look in. Trump served up conflict, outrage, headlines and great ratings. The rest of the media, including the serious press, piled in.

From the moment Trump announced his candidacy until he received his presidential nomination, he received 63% of the media's coverage compared to 37% for his nearest rival. In the general election period, he received 15% more coverage than Hillary Clinton. Put simply, Donald Trump made the media a lot of money.

And it's not hard to see why the commercial imperative was so strong. Newspapers are undergoing massive structural decline in the States as they are in much of the developed world.

The Washington Post and the New York Times may be thriving. But across the country, there's a long, painful collapse of the newspaper industry as their revenue model, based on advertising, is destroyed by the digital Platforms.

Google, Facebook, Verizon and Yahoo took more than 65 per cent of all digital advertising revenues in 2015.

In rural America and in many urban areas, there's a hollowing out of independent, accountable, first hand journalism based on objectivity, fairness and balance.

There's a void in old fashioned, unbiased reporting which is just ripe for the rise of Fake News.

I want to touch on fake news to show how mainstream media, if it forgets its commitment to

testing facts and impartiality, can inadvertently reinforce it.

Propaganda or political disinformation, is the most sophisticated form of Fake News.

It sounds like a problem from history but it's not.

We shouldn't forget that journalism began in propaganda and partisanship. The idea of journalism being accurate and unbiased is relatively new. The man credited with inventing the web, Tim Berners-Lee, has warned of the digital world: "The medium can be perverted, giving you what seems to be the world but is in fact, a tilted and twisted version".

That "twisted version" disorients reporters and plays to the conspiracy theorist in all of us.

Psychologists and other social scientists have repeatedly shown that when confronted with diverse information choices, people rarely act like rational, civic-minded automatons. Instead we gorge on information that confirms our ideas, and we shun what does not.

This is called confirmation bias.

And what is true of audiences is also true of journalists.

The American media's failure to spot the importance of Donald Trump's swing voters may come down to their own confirmation bias.

92% of American journalists have a degree. Surveys show they tend to be liberal and urban. They're a world away from Trump's white, working class,

angry, non graduate, swing voters. Reporters covered them but failed to hear them. That's the nature of confirmation bias.

Social science delivers some very uncomfortable evidence about how we process news.

It tells us that people naturally remember shocking or negative stories much better than positive ones, especially if they are in headlines ,and even if they are flagged as factually dubious.

It's shown that people tend to forget where or how they found out about a news story. When they encounter it again, it is familiar from their first exposure and so they are more

likely to accept it as true. It doesn't matter if it was labelled fake or unreliable from the start.

Familiarity is what matters.

And Social Science shows that when we repeat a false allegation to correct it, we have the opposite effect. Over time, the false information is remembered and reinforced.

Professor Yokai Benkler and researchers at Harvard and MIT, studied how people shared 1.25 million stories online during the 2016 US presidential election. It revealed a fascinating map of deliberate disinformation.

Professor Benkler has described disinformation as “decontextualised truths, repeated falsehoods and leaps of logic to create a fundamentally misleading view of the world”

It works through endless repetition, variation and confirmation through a variety of familiar and trusted sources.

The Benkler study shows in detail how the ultra partisan alt.right news website, Breitbart, and its echo chambers in Fox News and other ultra -partisan sites, created disinformation on a grand scale and how it influenced the mainstream media.

Remember - in early 2016, Fox News did not back Donald Trump. Brietbart wanted to change that.

First it began disinformation against Fox.

The five most widely shared stories on-line in which Breitbart refers to Fox, repeatedly and negatively linked it to immigration, terrorism, Muslims and corruption.

So there were headlines like:

“The Anti-Trump Network; Fox News’ Money Flows into Open Borders Group”

These anti Fox stories were a blend of truth, half truth and falsehood. They aimed to delegitimised Fox’s anti Trump position. And they worked. Fox shifted its position and backed Trump.

Then Brietbart turned its attention to America’s institutional media, both attacking it but also using it. That worked too.

Professor Benkler shows how mainstream media, including the serious American press with its brand values of factual accuracy, fairness and balance, began to repeat the same themes and conspiracy theories found on Breitbart.

Trump's substantive agenda, which focussed on immigration and Hillary Clinton's alleged corruption, came to dominate all public discussions

When consumers of Breitbart's news left them to check out their headlines on mainstream media sites - and there is plenty of evidence that audiences did that, they found exactly the same themes as on Breitbart. In this way, the Breitbart stories were validated.

Why were the institutional media so susceptible to the themes and conspiracies launched by Breitbart ?

Once again because they were great copy and great copy attracts audiences and revenue.

With some honourable exceptions, the serious papers did not, or could not, verify and test claims and counterclaims independently. This did not stop them referencing or repeating them. They indulged in what Americans called a "he said" "she said" ping pong which leaves readers unsure of what is accurate and what is not.

Now public service journalism is far from perfect. I ran BBC News for eight years so I know a lot about its frailties. But it is incentivised through public funding to be accurate and impartial. It is not driven by commercial imperatives. Of course it tries to be sensitive to audience responses but it is not driven by them. For me, the lack of a large scale, widely

trusted public service broadcaster, an impartial provider of news to all kinds of audiences, was a significant gap in the media choices available to audiences during the US Presidential candidates.

There's some recent evidence from Oxford University which suggests Americans shared more fake or dubious stories during their Presidential elections than voters in Germany, France and the UK during their recent elections. Just why that may be is a highly complex matter and it's unwise to leap to conclusions.

Certainly you cannot underestimate the deep mistrust in mainstream media from great swathes of Americans which in turn reflects years of intensely bitter cultural, racial and political division.

But I would suggest that it might also be connected to the lack of shared, trusted spaces for news and information based on values of accuracy, objectivity and balance.

This gap was recognised in a report from the highly regarded Tow Institute at Columbia School of Journalism.

Lamenting the collapse of newspapers across the country, the report suggested that the only way to protect well-funded, independent, civic journalism would be a major market intervention - like the BBC in 1922.

I cannot see that ever happening in America.

But it's an important reminder that as Public Service Broadcasting is attacked by both Left and

Right wing governments across Europe, it is vital that it sticks up for itself and points out to politicians and the public the benefits of journalism free from naked commercial or political interests.

Commercially funded news has a natural place in the media ecology. But so does publicly funded news, free from state or political intervention or interference.

We should remember that Public Service broadcasting in much of Europe emerged after the Second World War to underpin fledgling new democracies.

PSBs were created to uphold impartial journalism , the values of civic society and to ensure the public was exposed to a plurality of voices and opinions. At its simplest, they were there to hold the ring so that

people could resolve ideological or political differences peacefully.

Commercial news often does a very good job but if the news which underpins our liberal democracies is left exclusively to market forces, the loudest voices are likely to be the ones given the most air time.

The loudest and the most divisive. History tells us that there can be dire consequences when populism and propaganda triumph over shared democratic debate, where a genuine diversity of opinion is encouraged.

So public service broadcasters need to be big, bold and confident. They need to use old and new technologies to deliver independent, impartial and above all, trusted, journalism which is accessible for a wide range of audiences.

Their biggest challenge may be to challenge their own confirmation bias and recognise that genuine plurality of voice and opinion is often uncomfortable and difficult journalism. But it is essential.

John Reith, the visionary Scot who invented the BBC and was its first Director General, wanted his baby broadcaster to be funded publicly and to enjoy a monopoly. He believed that Radio, then the mass medium, would be used for venal or propagandist purposes if it was driven exclusively by commercialism or politics. He had little faith that either of those forces could be contained once they were given their head.

Times have moved on a lot since then; personalised digital technology, consumer expectations of choice and the nature of global capitalism make even the

idea of a broadcasting monopoly absurd, except in autocratic regimes.

But at heart Reith was onto something very important about the dangers of allowing commerce and politics alone to determine the extraordinarily powerful media which shapes all our lives.

Thank you for listening.

