

Power, Lies and Media

by Robert B. Reich via stacey - RR blog *Sunday, Nov 10 2019, 7:41pm*
international / prose / post

Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook says he'll run political ads even if they are false. Jack Dorsey of Twitter says he'll stop running political ads altogether. Dorsey has the correct approach but the debate skirts the bigger question: Who is responsible for protecting democracy from big, dangerous lies?

Donald Trump lies like most people breathe. As he's been cornered, his lies have grown more vicious and dangerous. He conjures up conspiracies, spews hate and says established facts are lies and lies are truths.

This would be hard enough for a democracy to handle without Facebook sending Trump's unfiltered lies to the 45 percent of Americans who look to it for news. Twitter sends them to 68 million users every day.

A major characteristic of the internet goes by the fancy term "disintermediation". Put simply, it means sellers are linked directly to customers with no need for middlemen.

Amazon eliminates the need for retailers. Online investing eliminates the need for stock brokers. Travel agents and real estate brokers are obsolete. At a keystroke, consumers get all the information they need.

But democracy can't be disintermediated. We're not just buyers and sellers. We're citizens who need to know what's happening around us in order to exercise our right to self-government, and responsibility for it.

If a president and his enablers are peddling vicious and dangerous lies, we need reliable intermediaries that help us see them.

Intermediating between the powerful and the people was once mainly the job of publishers and journalists - hence the term "media".

This role was understood to be so critical to democracy that the constitution enshrined it in the first amendment, guaranteeing freedom of the press.

With that freedom came public responsibility, to be a bulwark against powerful lies. The media haven't always lived up to it. We had yellow journalism in the 19th century and today endure shock radio, the National Enquirer and Fox News.

But most publishers and journalists have recognized that duty. Think of the Pentagon Papers, Watergate and, just weeks ago, the exposure of Trump's withholding \$400 million in security aid to Ukraine until it investigated his major political rival, Joe Biden.

Zuckerberg and Dorsey insist they aren't publishers or journalists. They say Facebook and Twitter are just "platforms" that convey everything and anything - facts, lies, conspiracies, vendettas - with

none of the public responsibilities that come with being part of the press.

Rubbish. They can't be the major carriers of the news on which most Americans rely while taking no responsibility for its content.

Advertising isn't the issue. It doesn't matter whether Trump pays Facebook or Twitter to post dishonest ads about Joe Biden and his son, or Trump and his enablers post the same lies on Facebook and Twitter. Or even if Russia and Iran repeat the lies in their own subversive posts.

The problem is we have a president who will say anything to preserve his power, and two giant entities that spread his lies uncritically, like global-sized bullhorns.

We can't do anything about Trump until election day or until he's convicted of an impeachable offense. But we can and should take action against the power of these two super-enablers. If they're unwilling to protect the public against powerful lies, they shouldn't have as much power to spread them.

The reason 45 percent of Americans rely on Facebook for news and Trump's tweets reach 68 million is because these platforms are near monopolies, dominating the information marketplace. No TV network, cable giant or newspaper even comes close. Fox News' viewership rarely exceeds 3 million. The New York Times has 4.7 million subscribers.

Facebook and Twitter aren't just participants in the information marketplace. They're quickly becoming the information marketplace.

Antitrust law was designed to check the power of giant commercial entities. Its purpose wasn't just to hold down consumer prices but also to protect democracy. Antitrust should be used against Facebook and Twitter. They should be broken up.

So instead of two mammoth megaphones trumpeting Trump's lies, or those of any similarly truth-challenged successor, the public will have more diverse sources of information, some of which will expose the lies.

Of course, a diverse information marketplace is no guarantee against tyranny. But we now have a president who lies through his teeth and two giant uncritical conveyors of those lies. It is a system that invites it.

Author retains copyright.

[Wishful thinking, Mr Reich, as today the media has become a propaganda apparatus that shapes via omissions, misrepresentations and overt lies (Iraq) what the people read, hence tend to believe. So any appeal to that privately owned apparatus, which lost all integrity decades past, is futile.]

<https://robertreich.org/post/188869740325>

Inverse Times Open Publishing. <http://inversetimes.lingama.net/news/story-892.html>