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The News Media Is Killing Itself Through Extreme Polarization

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Journalism is suffering in the face of increased mistrust due to extreme polarization.

At least for the past decade people around the world have been increasingly less interested in consuming news. This is a troubling fact for its makers of course, but also for society in general as a greater number of people feel that “the news” either has no impact on their lives, is irrelevant, or too hard to understand. While an easy trouble-free conclusion could suggest society is to blame, becoming less interested in “important” things, that assertion would paint an absolutely incomplete picture. To a growing portion of consumers, the news has become repetitive, boring, polarized, inaccessible, off-putting, and misleading. This has happened just as the world has climbed several steps in the ladder of uncertainty, which generally increases news consumption (as we saw during the global Covid-19 pandemic).

These findings are part of a broader study put together by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford in its yearly *Digital News Report* and go hand-in-hand with anecdotal evidence that suggests that the global news ecosystem is slowly imploding as it becomes more disconnected with the audience in a digital world, while polarization and the spectre of “fake news” – which we should correctly dub “misinformation” – continues to wreak havoc. In Argentina, only 35 percent of the population trusts the news media while 85 percent believe news outlets are tainted by political influence. These figures are part of broader trends that have been in place for at least the past 10 years and suggest a difficult course for the media industry, especially for those who seek to play outside the traditional ideological divide.

We live in a post-modern world where trust for traditional institutions has been receding for quite some time. When it comes to journalism there are no doubts that we are in the midst of a crisis that goes beyond the economic situation of news publishers, broadcasters, and radio stations. The fall in traditional media consumption has been steep over the past 10 years, while the growth in those avoiding news altogether is alarming. According to the Reuters report, the number of people that do not consume news on any platform weekly has grown from three percent to 15 percent in a decade, while those with a high interest in news have fallen from 67 percent of the sample to 47 percent in the same time period. Among those who remain engaged with the news, the amount of them that have decided to reduce or limit their exposure to some or all news sources has grown dramatically, rising from 29 percent in 2019 to 38 percent last year. The reasons: too much about politics and Covid-19 (43 percent), a negative impact on readers’ mood (36 percent), a feeling that the news is untrustworthy and biased (29 percent), a feeling of being worn out by it (29 percent), news leading to arguments that they’d rather avoid (17 percent), and a feeling that there’s nothing that can be done with that information (16 percent). When this is broken down by age and educational level, the notion that news has no impact on one’s life and that it is too difficult to follow appear as important factors.

These types of figures suggest something needs to change dramatically and immediately to save the news industry (if it deserves saving, of course), but this process has been happening at least for the decade in which the Reuters Institute study has been around, if not for longer. Digital transformation is a big part of the issue, where news publishers and global technological platforms are both responsible for the fragmentation of the information ecosystem. I've mentioned several times before how the oligopoly in digital advertising led by Google GOOG-2.2% and Facebook parent companies Alphabet and Meta have concentrated advertising revenue and gatekeeping power to subjugate news publishers, while these have been incapable of adapting their business models to the "new" era of the Internet. Journalism, like the film and music industries, has been forced to transform in the face of new distribution channels and changing consumer habits. Yet these changes have found an industry that is substantially weaker economically than it was in the recent past, and much less in control of distribution, severely weakening its relative positioning. This is an integral part of why the "quality" of the news has fallen – newsroom populations have decreased consistently and resources have been shifted from in-depth coverage to optimizing service-based content for digital distribution (i.e. SEO or search-engine optimization). This, along with the logic of digital distribution has also contributed to the surge of disinformation and misinformation, particularly as societies have become more politically polarized. This has created feedback loops that ultimately erode trust in the media, as the study demonstrates.

In Argentina, interest in the news has tanked from 77 percent in 2017 (the second year of Mauricio Macri's presidency) to 48 percent in 2022 (midway through Alberto Fernández's term). The figures are similar to the biggest declines in the data set, found in Brazil (82 to 57 percent), Spain (85 to 55 percent), the United Kingdom (70 to 43 percent), and the United States (67 to 47 percent). The authors of the study find a clear correlation between polarization and trust, along with the interference of politicians and the private sector in the news ecosystem. Throughout the report the data suggests that what we call "*la grieta*" in Argentina (or the "rift") that illustrates polarization, is one of the main elements feeding this breakdown in trust and interest in the news.

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I’ve had a longstanding debate with the authors of the Argentine portion of the study, Eugenia Mitchelstein and Pablo Boczkowski (both of whom are esteemed academics) regarding their “brand trust scores” which place *Perfil* as the least trusted in the data set, with 30 percent of the sample group viewing it positively. Another 31 percent distrust it, and 39 percent take no position, the highest level behind regional paper *La Voz* and *Minuto Uno*, a sensationalist outlet owned by Kirchnerite-leaning Grupo Indalo. *Perfil*’s results in the “neither trust nor distrust” category are the lowest by far of any national outlet that touches on political news, with only 26 and 28 percent not taking a position on *Clarín* and *La Nación* respectively, and 22 and 31 percent with regards to C5N and *Página/12* respectively. While I suggested that a methodological issue might be

misreading distrust with lack of exposure, another interpretation could suggest that trying to escape the *grieta* rift could cause high ‘mistrust’ figures on both sides of the aisle, while the high figures for a neutral position may suggest an acknowledgement that we attempt to not take sides.

All of these issues paint a scene of clear problems for the information ecosystem, which goes beyond news publishers and other journalistic content creators. The business model is key, as investment is needed in new ways to create journalistic content that is attractive on all platforms, therefore the battle with Big Tech must not recede into the background. The striving for a position beyond the ideological divide is key, given a marked decrease in general interest. What generates ratings in the short-term will destroy the industry in the long-term. If journalism doesn’t progress along with the content creation tools and business models of the day, society will continue to suffer.

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