Is Mainstream Media Promoting American Democracy?

[Name of the Writer]

[Name of the Institution]

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Thomas Jefferson is said to have proclaimed that if he had to choose between a government without newspapers and newspapers without a government, he would choose the latter without any hesitation. Today we live in a society where media play a key role in shaping our understanding of the world. Media is the means of connecting the common man with the government. It makes and breaks the opinions of the people. Acting as a watchdog, the media plays a crucial role in shaping a healthy democracy. The essence of democracy is freedom, and the essence of elementary freedoms such as freedom of speech and thought lies in free networks of communication and information. Therefore the various media of information such as newspapers, online publications, and electronic media, must maintain high standards of ethics and objectivity (as the theories go). However, despite such theories, ideals, and proclamations, U.S media does more disservice to democracy than it does service.

After Trump’s ascendence to the presidency, a debate has evolved over the role of the Fourth Estate in a robust democracy. Most Americans believe that it is now harder than ever to remain informed and know which news is true and which is fake (Gallup, 2017). People are increasingly becoming skeptical about the role of media and have begun to perceive it as partisan and biased. Although they believe that media continues to play a critical role in the democracy of the U.S., they see the role as rather negative.

The public of the United States is divided over the question of responsibility to ensure that the masses have a balanced understanding of the new and information they receive. 48% of Americans believe the news media have this responsibility whereas nearly 48% say individuals themselves are responsible (Gallup, 2017). People are more skeptical about social media than they are about mainstream media. TV and Newspapers are the most trusted.

Opinion control is a pre-requisite for the consolidation of power and maintaining a position of power (Chomsky, 1988). Thought control becomes all the more important in freer societies such as the U.S, where the power elite cannot simply employ the tools of violence. The first casualty in this power game is the people and the second one is a democracy. Democracy aims at promoting free thinking and informed decision-making. Free media requires a robust democracy and democracy itself is strengthened by free media. But employing media to control people’s thoughts damages the democratic values of American society.

In order to push a particular narrative, fake news is generated. The Guardian defines fake news as a piece of information written with the intention to mislead the public, thereby gaining political or financial benefits. The tools employed to this end include sensationalism, exaggeration, false, attractive and attention-grabbing headlines and so on. It is a part of their drive to increase ratings. Since, in such scenarios, headlines become more important than fact-checking, the ultimate result is a heap of fake news. One pertinent example in this context is the New York Times running a fake news story which accused Vice President Mike Pence of a shadow campaign for 2020. Misinformation is the norm of the day. Day in and day out, articles such as “The case against climate change” are published despite all the scientific evidence to further a certain political narrative and serve vested interests. Even public healthcare has been criticized many a time by several journalists in their publications. Whoever is powerful holds sway and defines reality.

One democratically problematic aspect of contemporary fake news is algo-journalism. Algo-journalism aims at using data and algorithms to produce personally and emotionally targeted news. It is also called empathic media. The Cambridge Analytica Scandal revealed that the likes and dislikes of people were exploited to design such an election manifesto that appealed to the public. The empathically optimized news is not only used for furthering political agendas, but it is also employed to create an effective advertisement, thereby giving rise to insane consumerism.

Fact checking is eschewed in favor of sensationalism. There are dozens of examples of factual mistakes in the news stories disseminated by the mainstream media in the past several years. Mistake-ridden news is most often related to conspiracies and sensational scandals. For example, CNN issued several corrections when it reported Trump-Russia collusion. Another pertinent example is the suspension of ABC's Brian Ross over fake reporting that Trump orders his security advisor to contact Russian counterparts.

Today's mainstream media is driven by ratings. This trend began with CNN when it was the sole newsgroup reporting live on the ground in the Cold War. Every other newsgroup followed suit. The whole competition now has been reduced to "Nielson ratings". Unfortunately, serious journalism doesn't attract people's attention anymore.

It is a failure of media that despite the information explosion, so many Americans are in the dark. They are not accurately aware of their rights. Democracy aims at fulfilling the rights of people, creating an active civil society that is not only aware of its rights but is also capable of holding its government accountable. With the media's major focus on promoting consumerism, specific political narratives, and increasing rating, the real objective, and function of media have suffered.

The American media has failed to perform its primary function of civilizing as well. Very recently there was a discussion about the Atlantic hiring a person as a columnist who thinks women getting abortions should be hanged. The functioning norms of the media have indeed deteriorated over the years.

Most journalists seem to have succumbed to a psychological phenomenon called group-think. In group-think, most reporters in think the same. They aim at evolving a common narrative. Thinking that others also think similar results in the belief that they are all right. Moreover, individuality is discouraged. Media's groupthink results in another bias that is called confirmation bias. Those incidents which promote their agenda are highlighted and exploited. For example, only such incidents will be picked in which a white person shoots a black person in order to promote the view that racism is rampant in America.

Over the years social media has emerged as a great power and has resulted in unprecedented challenges human rights and democracy. Various forms of misinformation and propaganda have existed for decades if not centuries. But it is a point of concern that so much power resides in one platform: Facebook. Two big political campaigns of 2016 i.e. Brexit in the Uk and election of Donald Trump were expected to lose. However, Facebook completely reversed the situation. It uses algorithms to know the likes and dislikes of people, what is important to them. The constantly lingering threat to privacy is another point of concern. Comparing mainstream with social media, those supporting mainstream media argue that it has been working far better than social media when it comes to media ethics and responsibility. However, it must not be forgotten that websites such as Facebook are not news platforms and in fact are exploited by the same revenue-driven news corporations. It is to be noted that Facebook lacks a competitor. This situation has given rise to a myriad of the social problem. Mark Zuckerberg does not recognize facebook anything more than a technology company (Ingram, 2016).

Trump calls the mainstream media “fake news” but he himself is the beneficiary of media. CBS CEO Leslie Moonves said about Trump, “His candidacy might not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS." Throughout his campaign, trump manipulated media in several ways. He would abuse those reporters in his campaigns who were his bitter critics and provided easy access to those who were compliant. He even threatened to change libel laws. Cable news organizations made a record-breaking $2.5 billion during election season (Pickard, 2017). Media coverage to President Trump during elections resulted in normalization of populist politics. Trump received 327 minutes of broadcast at night, Hilary 121 minutes and Bernie Sanders 20 minutes (Tyndal Report, 2016). Since most of the media outlets are rating driven, President Trump became their all-time favorite since he is a controversial person.

Private ownership of major media companies has resulted in making the American media industry an avenue for income generation. All the big media corporations exist primarily to increase profits. In 2012, more than 90% of all media companies were privately owned. It was the Telecommunications Act of 1983 that resulted in the flourishing of private media channels. The other side favoring private corporation argues that since media acts as a watchdog over the government, only a private and independent media can perform these functions of accountability properly. However, the practice of media suggests that they also collude with the government. Hence the existence of an independent regulatory body is of utmost importance.

Another media failure is the journalism crisis in America (Pickard, 2017). The newspaper industry has lost more than one-third of its employees since 2006 because of revenue decline. The decline in revenues can be attributed to a shift from paper circulation towards online dissemination. This economic pressure has further intensified the efforts for revenue generation through sensationalism.

The failure of American mainstream media on several counts demands structural reforms to avert the threats to democracy. There is a need to develop a long term policy. Profit should be taken out of the news. New methods to reduce commercialism in the news industry must be introduced. Some steps to be taken towards this end include the building of public funds for the broadcasting industry, dismantling media monopolies, preventing market concentration. (Pickard, 2017). Facebook has recently introduced its own fake-news checking mechanism which is a step in the right direction. Indeed educating people as to how to identify accurate news and reliable sources is the need of the hour. New watchdog institutions made of experts should be introduced. Some experts have also recommended external oversight of facebook.

The role of media in promoting democracy cannot be denied. A free, fair and non-partisan media is the 4th pillar of any democratic nation. But, unfortunately, the present landscape of mainstream media in the U.S. presents a dismal picture in this regard. Today, public trust in media is at all time low. Instead of serving public interests, the media seeks to divert attention from the critical issues (Quinn, 2018). Half of the Americans do not believe global warming can harm them in their lifetime (Gallup, 2017). Since democracy works best when people make informed decisions, the media has only harmed democracy by engineering public opinions. Mainstream media may still be better than social media when it comes to accurate reporting, it is important to note that even social media is used by news media to promote their own news stories. Today, America needs a media which serves as a watchdog over the government, informs people of their rights and helps them make informed decisions, and promotes the democratic values of pluralism and tolerance.

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