

GRENOBLE ECOLE DE MANAGEMENT

CONCOURS HEC SESSION 2017

EPREUVE ORALE D'ANGLAIS

Script n°11

The Problem With Our Media Is Extreme Commercialism

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thenation.com, January 30, 2017

Donald Trump's victory revealed fundamental flaws in America's core institutions, especially its media system. While television news, professional journalists, and social-media platforms are all under scrutiny, too much of this criticism focuses on symptoms rather than deeper pathologies. Instead, we should seize this opportunity to draw attention to systemic problems in our media and push for structural alternatives.

But first, we must be clear about the central problem. Much of what ails our media system stems from its extreme commercialism. The always-controversial Trump was irresistible for ratings-driven news outlets, and their endless profit-seeking helped legitimize a dangerous politics. While it is tempting to blame audiences for lapping this up, this coverage did not just reflect popular demand. Media are beholden to their owners and to the advertisers who pay them.

Trump's screen-to-screen exposure during the campaign provided bait to capture advertisers' most coveted product: our attention. To keep our attention, media must entertain us. And Trump delivered—especially for media's bottom line. As CBS CEO Leslie Moonves infamously stated: “[Trump's candidacy] may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS.”

Such brazen venality is endemic throughout the news industry. With its impoverished public broadcasting, the US media system stands out among democracies for its commercial excesses. Many sectors are dominated by corporate oligopolies, producing content with few public interest protections. To keep our attention, media must entertain us. And Trump delivered—especially for media's bottom line.

History suggests otherwise. As my book *America's Battle for Media Democracy* documents, the US media system did not emerge solely according to democratic criteria and public consensus. It arose instead from policy battles between activists, industries, and regulators over the media system's fundamental design. Ultimately, commercial interests, shielded by what I call “corporate libertarianism,” prevailed over a social democratic vision that privileged educational fare, public service news, and other types of media not supported by the market. We must reclaim this road not taken and de-commercialize our news media.

For over a century, the United States has conducted an experiment in commercialized journalism by treating news as both a commodity and a public service. Periodic reform movements and constant criticism forced the news industry to develop ethical codes that sought to prevent commercial imperatives from overwhelming democratic principles. This experiment has failed. Trump's ascendance revealed that any vestige of that always-porous divide between

journalism's business and public service missions is dissolving. This erosion is most blatant in television news media, but digital journalism's increasing reliance on exposing readers to invasive and deceptive advertising is also part of the problem. As revenues for hard news vanish, the growing emphasis on clickbait and sensationalism continues to degrade journalism and squander the public's trust.

America's commercial media system might be great for business, but it is terrible for democracy. Uncoupling journalism from commercialism requires a structural overhaul. Alternative models from the American past and from other countries demonstrate that different systems are indeed viable. But they require policy interventions that establish safeguards and incentives for responsible and informative media. Ultimately, these policies must remove profit motives from the news.

Like the rest of the democratic world, the United States could fund a strong public media system—as opposed to privatizing it, which the Trump administration intends to do. A number of creative means could generate public media subsidies, including revenues from spectrum sales. The media-reform organization Free Press (of which I am a board member) is advocating that public-television stations devote proceeds from spectrum auctions toward supporting local journalism.

These modest proposals are not utopian. They are founded on social-democratic models from our own history and from other industrialized nations. Taken together, these reforms may provide seeds for an alternative media system dedicated to democracy instead of profit. Trump's manipulations of our news media unmasked a virulent commercialism that seeks to merely entertain, not inform. This was not inevitable—a very different media system was, and still is, possible. But we must fight for it.