

The New York Times

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Trump Hacked the Media Right Before Our Eyes

We never stopped watching. Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg

By Ross Douthat (<https://www.nytimes.com/by/ross-douthat>)

March 21, 2018

Let's get one thing straight: I am not a fan of Facebook. I'm confident that social media is a cancer on our private lives and a source of derangement in our politics. I take it for granted that the tech barons are acquiring the power to tilt elections, and that they'll be happy to play handmaidens to tyrants soft and hard so long as they can monetize our data. I take a certain mordant pleasure in watching Mark Zuckerberg and his minions scapegoated for the political failures of late-Obama-era liberalism.

But the liberal establishment's fixation on Facebook's 2016 sins — first the transmission of fake news and now the exploitation of its data by the Trump campaign or its appendages — still feels like a classic example of blaming something new because it's new when it's the old thing that mattered more. Or of blaming something new because you thought that "new" meant "good," that the use of social-media data by campaigns would always help tech-savvy liberals

and not their troglodytic rivals — and the shock of discovering otherwise obscures the more important role that older forms of media played in making the Trump era a reality.

No doubt all the activity on Facebook and the apparent use of Facebook's data had some impact, somewhere, on Trump's surprise victory. But the media format that really made him president, the one whose weaknesses and perversities and polarizing tendencies he brilliantly exploited, wasn't Zuckerberg's unreal kingdom; it wasn't even the Twitter platform where Trump struts and frets and rages daily. It was that old pre-internet standby, broadcast and cable television, and especially TV news.

Start with the fake news that laid the foundation for Trump's presidential campaign — not the sort that circulates under clickbait headlines in your Facebook feed, but the sort broadcast in prime time by NBC, under the label of reality TV. Yes, as media sophisticates we're all supposed to know that "reality" means "fake," but in the beginning nobody marketed "The Apprentice" that way; across most of its run you saw a much-bankrupted real estate tycoon portrayed, week after week and season after season, as a titan of industry, the for-serious greatest businessman in the world.

Where did so many people originally get the idea that Trump was the right guy to fix our manifestly broken government? Not from Russian bots or targeted social media ad buys, but from a prime-time show that sold itself as real, and sold him as a business genius. Forget unhappy blue collar heartlanders; forget white nationalists and birthers: The core Trump demographic (<https://www.cnn.com/2015/09/27/opinions/axelrod-trump-the-apprentice/index.html>) might just have been Republicans who watched "The Apprentice," who bought the fake news that his television program and its network sponsors gladly sold them.

That was step one in the Trump hack of television media. Step two was the use of his celebrity to turn news channels into infomercials for his campaign. Yes, his fame also boosted him on social media, but there you can partially blame algorithms and the unwisdom of crowds; with television news there were actual human beings, charged with exercising news judgment and inclined to posture as civic-minded actors when it suits them, making the decision to hand day after day of free coverage to Donald Trump's rallies, outrages, feuds and personal attacks.

Nothing that Cambridge Analytica did to help the Trump campaign target swing voters (and there's reason to think (<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/cambridge-analyticas-self-own/556016/>) it didn't do as much as it claimed) had anything remotely like the impact of this #alwaysTrump tsunami, which probably added up to

more than \$2 billion

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/16/upshot/measuring-donald-trumps-mammoth-advantage-in-free-media.html>) in effective advertising for his campaign during the primary season, a flood that drowned all of his rivals' pathetic tens of millions. And as cynical as I believe the lords of Silicon Valley to be, the more important cynicism in 2016 belonged to those television execs who were fine with enabling the wild Trumpian takeover of the G.O.P., because after all Republicans deserved it and Hillary was sure to beat him in the end.

Except that she didn't beat him, in part because he also exploited the polarization that cable news, in particular, is designed to feed. In 2016 this polarization didn't just mean that Fox became steadily more pro-Trump as he dispatched his G.O.P. rivals; it also meant that a network like CNN, which thrives on Team Red vs. Team Blue conflict, felt compelled to turn airtime over to Trump surrogates like Jeffrey Lord and Corey Lewandowski and Kayleigh McEnany because their regular stable of conservative commentators (I was one of them) simply wasn't pro-Trump enough.

The depth and breadth of Trump skepticism among right-wing pundits was a pretty solid indicator of his unfitness for high office. But especially once he won the nomination this skepticism was often filtered out of cable coverage, because the important thing was to maintain the partisan shouting-match model. This in turn encouraged a sense that this was just a typical right-versus-left election, in which you should vote for Trump if you usually voted for Republicans ... and in the end that's what most G.O.P. voters did.

My own CNN experiences were positive; I admire the many fine journalists who work in television news. But it was clear enough being in that orbit in 2016, as it should be clear to anyone who watched Trump's larger relationship to his television coverage, that the business model of our news channels both assumes and heightens polarization, and that it was ripe for exploitation by a demagogue who was also a celebrity.

It's also clear — as the economists Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro wrote in these pages

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/opinion/is-media-driving-americans-apart.html?mtrref=www.google.com&assetType=opinion>) late last year — that among older white Americans, the core demographic where first the primaries and then the general election were decided, television still far outstrips the internet as the most important source of news. And indeed, the three economists noted, for all the talk about Breitbart's influence and Russian meddling and dark web advertising, Trump only improved on Mitt Romney's showing among Americans who don't use the internet, and he "actually lost support among internet-using voters." In a sense, you could argue, all those tweets mattered mainly because they kept being quoted on TV.

Which is not to say that the current freakout over Facebook doesn't make a certain kind of sense. Beyond the psychological satisfaction of weaving the often-genuinely-sinister side of Silicon Valley into stolen-election theories, there's a strategic wisdom to the center-left establishment's focus on the internet.

What Trump did will be hard for a future demagogue to imitate: The generations who get their information from newscasts are dying out, the web is taking over at an accelerating pace and in the long run there is more to be gained in going after Mark Zuckerberg than in pillorying [Jeff Zucker](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/jeff-zuckers-singular-role-in-promoting-donald-trumps-rise/2016/10/02/7c3d4366-865b-11e6-a3ef-f35afb41797f_story.html) (https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/jeff-zuckers-singular-role-in-promoting-donald-trumps-rise/2016/10/02/7c3d4366-865b-11e6-a3ef-f35afb41797f_story.html). And pillorying Fox's hosts only helps their brand: the big tech companies regard themselves as part of the liberal cultural complex, so they're vulnerable to progressive bullying and shaming; not so Sean Hannity, whose stalwart support for Trump was and remains vastly more important than any online stratagem.

In the end, as Michael Brendan Dougherty [wrote recently](https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/03/cambridge-analytica-social-media-panic/) (<https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/03/cambridge-analytica-social-media-panic/>) for National Review, one implicit goal of the Facebook freakout is to ensure that "conservatives and populists will not be allowed to use the same tools as Democrats and liberals again, or at least not use them effectively." If the trauma of Trump's victory turns social-media gatekeepers into more aggressive and self-conscious stewards of the liberal consensus, the current freakout will have more than served its political purpose.

But like the television channels whose programming choices did far more than Facebook to make Donald Trump president, it won't have served the truth.


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