

The media is changing - and that threatens democracy

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I noted over this summer that we appeared to be having a traffic downturn on this blog and elsewhere. I discussed this with other people I know who publish online, and also with some people in the mainstream media, and was told that the trend was universal. An increasing alienation between the media and what people wanted to read, or even be aware of, appeared to exist.

Amongst the many publications to which I subscribe [is one on Substack](#) which deals with issues around what is happening in the press. Its author, Jez Walters, has now noted data on this trend, admittedly from the USA. As they had to say:

U.S. web traffic to 100 of the top news sites fell to 48m visits in July, down from 70m in 2024. Direct traffic, one of publishers' largest funnels, has sunk 25%. User behaviour is changing, with a huge drop-off in scrolling on publisher websites - 40% of desktop visitors no longer scroll.

This trend is undoubtedly serious for the mainstream media. As we all know, newspaper sales have fallen dramatically in recent years, and the publishers of papers did, as a consequence, have to adapt with varying degrees of success to the creation of an online presence. The result has been that much of the media has survived, albeit with many fewer staff, and even lower levels of trust than they had before, as more and more news stories become simple regurgitations of press releases and stereotypical repetitions of political messaging, without questions being asked of those about whom reporting is being made.

As we now know, another trend has emerged, which I've also noted. The same source says:

At a time of ubiquitous content, there is a poverty of attention. Exhibit A: The Times cut its daily output from 200+ stories to 160, yet has seen four months of record traffic growth. Its sports desk cut output by 30% and traffic rose nearly 50%, while Hearst UK has also reduced article volumes and doubled traffic YoY.

I have particularly noticed this in reporting from the FT as well. The number of news stories referred to in the morning emails has reduced significantly over the summer, and they have developed an annoying habit of dragging in stories from previous days to add padding on occasion. The key issue is that content is changing and there is a rejection of information overload.

I am noting this, and as this autumn has begun, traffic is recovering. Traffic here is now running at around 20,000 a day, which is slightly down from a year ago, but it's more than compensated for by growing traffic on Substack, at nearly 5,000 a day, LinkedIn, at an average of 14,000 a day last week, and Facebook, where it seems the traffic is only a little lower than LinkedIn. Meanwhile, YouTube averages around 80,000 a day, with more than 50% of those viewing almost all of any video that we have to offer. I'm beginning to suspect that some mainstream media platforms might be jealous of these numbers.

What matters to me, though, is just what this downturn in viewing might mean, when I strongly suspect that it will be matched by declining viewing and listening figures for television and radio.

Firstly, at a time when AI is facilitating ever greater information overload, it appears that people are making it quite clear that they do not want this.

Secondly, if scrolling is becoming rarer, as anecdotal data also suggests to me, then much of social media is going to struggle right now.

Thirdly, there is an obvious risk that misinformation might increase as a consequence of this trend. I am not saying that the mainstream media is full of virtue because, as a matter of fact, it is misleading, but the risk is that the alternatives that people are now using are even more so.

Fourthly, and this is the most significant point, when an independent free press fails a country, its democracy is imperilled, and that is the risk that we are seeing here. People have now not only lost faith in their politicians, but they are losing faith in the media too, and the consequence is very dangerous. In such an environment, anything can happen, and that is the risk that we face.

Three questions follow.

First, will the mainstream media rise to the challenge and now present us with what people believe is reliable?

Second, would people believe it if it did?

Third, will those corrupt influences that have debased our media permit this?

I could, of course, add a final observation, which is that the organisation we should be

able to rely on to rise above this is the BBC. The problem is that it has been as toxic as any organisation in its support for toxic racists, its prejudicial double-siding, which is anything but objective, and its total failure to hold politicians to account, which has been a significant contributor to the failure of its own reputation and that of politicians themselves.

So a fourth question might be, is a renewed BBC possible?

At present, I have no optimistic answer to any of these questions. That is what really worries me.