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Publish and be damned

The media role in populism: a case study of the 2016 US presidential election

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Abstract

The election of Donald Trump, an openly xenophobic populist, who had never held elected office confounded many in the media and prompted a degree of soul searching. Many journalists and commentators pointed to socio-economic factors and the rise of “fake news” as contributing to Trump’s election victory. What went largely ignored was the complicity of the elite news media in the populist victory. The dire financial situation in which most elite news organisations found themselves prompted a convergence of editorial and commercial interests. This resulted in a cycle of tabloidization, clickbait, fragmentation and thus declining standards and credibility. This decline in credibility hampered the effectiveness of news media’s watchdog role in democracy. Furthermore, the increased focus on sensational news stories and use of tabloid strategies caused a media-populist complex, whereby the media relied on sensationalist and shocking news stories from populists to engage readers and drive advertisement revenue. Populists also relied on the news media to disseminate their message and increase their profile in the political arena. Nowhere is this complex more evident than in the media coverage of the 2016 US presidential election. Throughout the election Trump received favourable treatment from the news media. He was continually afforded more news coverage than his opponents and this coverage was largely positive. The reason was that Donald Trump provided financially struggling news media with sensationalist and shocking content more than his competitors. The 2016 election was a stark example of the convergence of goals between news media organisations and populist politicians.