



**Dollars or Democracy?
Interview with Prof. Victor Pickard**

**For podcast release
Monday, April 24, 2023**

KENNEALLY: When National Public Radio recently announced cancellation of several broadcast and podcast programs, as well as the layoffs of 10% of its national staff, the network's CEO blamed a budget deficit of \$30 million. NPR is not alone among US news organizations in moving to cut back on costs and content.

Welcome to CCC's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

The 2022 American Journalist study from Syracuse University's Newhouse School reports that the number of working reporters in the US fell over two decades from 116,000 in 2002 to 85,000. Over the same time, of course, the number of news outlets exploded online. Industry analysts have connected the downturn of professional newsrooms with the expansion of misinformation and growing threats to public peace.

Victor Pickard is a professor and co-director of the Media, Inequality and Change Center at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Democracy Without Journalism?: Confronting the Misinformation Society*, published in 2020. He says the traditional reliance of media on advertising revenue is a broken business model and that leaving journalism to its fate in the marketplace irresponsibly puts dollars before democracy. Professor Pickard joins me now from his Philadelphia office. Welcome back to Velocity of Content.

PICKARD: Thank you, Chris. Good to see you again.

KENNEALLY: Well, sadly, we have yet another occasion to chat with you about the fate of journalism in our age. The NPR cuts that came in late March were the deepest the network has made since the Great Recession in 2008. Executives said they were seeking to protect core services, and they pointed a finger at declines in corporate underwriting. Just as American viewers take for granted advertising on commercial TV, American news consumers are unfazed by hearing that programming on NPR and other nonprofit public media is made possible by for-profit businesses. You want them to take a closer look, though. Why?



PICKARD: That's right. I think these current problems at NPR, public media, and indeed our entire media system is facing at the moment gives us an opportunity to really think about what our media should be doing in a democratic society. As you noted, we've become somewhat desensitized. We've become desensitized to these constant cuts across media sectors, whether we're talking about the newspaper industry or cable television and now our public media. But we've also become desensitized to what you just mentioned in passing – this idea that our public media are being cut because they've lost advertising revenue and corporate underwriting. That really should give us pause. That's not what a non-commercial media system is supposed to be doing. It's not supposed to be so dependent on the market. And especially given these cuts in other places, we really should be looking to our public media to serve as a kind of safety net. So all of this is to say this is a moment for deep reflection, or at least it should be.

KENNEALLY: That reliance on advertising revenue has interesting effects elsewhere in the news ecosystem. In the US, redlining is a way for banks and businesses to avoid doing business in certain communities by drawing a red line around neighborhoods and refusing to invest there or operate there. How does informational redlining work with news organizations?

PICKARD: Well, it works in many similar ways, in that quite predictably, we can assume it's going to underserve poor communities, communities of color. And this happens in several ways. One is that advertisers tend to seek out wealthy and often whiter audiences. So in many cases, these communities are not being well served by, for example, newspapers. Or internet services is another stark example, where you see digital redlining. But it also produces a kind of market censorship, we might call it, which is certain issues are not going to get as much coverage, because it does not attract eyeballs in the same way. It's not getting people glued to their various screens. So a commercially driven media system can lead to these various omissions and news gaps, again in very predictable ways, and it often cuts along racial and class-based lines.

KENNEALLY: With public media, the same is true. The underwriters on my local stations here in Boston – they're obviously targeting residents in what I'll call the leafy suburbs.

PICKARD: That's right. And again, there are structural reasons for that. If we have a public media system that's so dependent on not just corporate underwriting and advertising, but also the individual donations from preferably wealthy listeners, which is where the money's coming from, then they're going to cater to those audiences.

Another example where redlining sometimes takes place is when you have paywalls set up, as increasingly many news organizations do. Study after study shows the people who are likely to pay for their news online are, again, wealthier households. So we are



disenfranchising entire communities and groups of people. For any democracy, this is not an optimal way to have our news set up.

KENNEALLY: As news brands have suffered in the digital environment, Victor Pickard, social media brands, especially Facebook and other online service providers like Google, have thrived. The Journalism Competition and Preservation Act of 2022 in Congress sought to remedy the imbalance between platforms and publishers. And while it drew bipartisan support, the bill ultimately failed. How do you view the JCPA and similar efforts?

PICKARD: Well, on one hand, I think it's a good sign that finally, at long dear last, our policymakers are seeing the journalism crisis as a problem for public policy. So that's the good news. The bad news is that unfortunately, this JCPA act is imperfect at best, in my view. Although it is allowing publishers to essentially collude – and not just publishers, but broadcasters as well, which is kind of an odd thing to have in this bill, since the broadcasters are not the ones that are suffering the most – but it's basically simply hoping that this money will trickle down from the big publishers to the actual journalists themselves. There's very little to ensure that any money that's coming from the platforms will actually go to journalism. So I just think there are many other ways, many other policy interventions that we could try, that do a better job of making sure that it's not just preserving the current journalists that are out there, but also creating new outlets, penetrating the so-called news deserts, really addressing some of these core structural problems, which unfortunately the JCPA does not do.

KENNEALLY: Professor Pickard, you say that to protect journalism for the future, we need to shield it from the marketplace. Isn't that a tough argument to make in the United States, where free speech is equated with free enterprise?

PICKARD: It is a tough argument to make. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't be making these kinds of arguments. Even here in the US – that, you're right, tends to be very libertarian and market fundamentalist on these issues – I think increasingly we're seeing that with the utter implosion of local journalism – as you noted earlier, I think we're now up to about 60% of newsroom employees have lost their jobs since the early 2000s. This is a national crisis, and clearly the market is not addressing it. There's no commercial future for many forms of local journalism. So regardless of what our ideological comfort zones might be, I think we're going to have to look to public and nonprofit support for the journalism that democracy requires. It's just a question of how bad will things need to get first?

KENNEALLY: And you have suggested that we start thinking about our news media in a very different way, like we think of the military or the education system in this country, as a public good.



PICKARD: It's true. Really, if you look at the history of the United States, media subsidies are as American as apple pie, going back to the early postal system, which was essentially a newspaper delivery infrastructure which was heavily subsidized, ensuring that all far-flung communities had access to a certain level of news and information. We treat public education that way. We do have this notion – public libraries, for example. People get warm, fuzzy feelings about the public goods that we do already protect.

What we need to do is start thinking of our local journalism in the same kind of category, where we don't leave it entirely up to the market. We don't assume that if it's not profitable, it will simply have to wither away. And I do think there are some data points to suggest that Americans are ready to embrace that framing. But we still have more work to do. Again, things are probably going to have to get much worse before we actually move in this direction.

KENNEALLY: And if democracy and journalism are linked, Professor Pickard, what place should journalism have in political activism? Do activists sufficiently recognize and value the central role of journalism to their efforts?

PICKARD: It's an interesting disconnect, because even though, again, history shows us that any sort of social movement across the political spectrum must rely on a functional press system to make sure that people get news and information about their political issues, yet there's often this kind of knee-jerk reaction against the media without acknowledging that we need the media for whatever our issue is. If we want to confront the climate crisis, if we want to confront mass incarceration – every social movement, whether we're talking about the abolitionists, the suffragists, the labor movement – they all realized that they must have a viable media system at their disposal, or their movement would not get very far. So I think that's something that we need to work on. We need to raise consciousness on that. It's not just something that maybe certain people should be concerned about. We all have a stake in this.

KENNEALLY: The Black Lives Matter movement has in fact led to creation of innovative media outlets serving communities of color. They started by challenging the established news environment, and they've since moved to challenge and disrupt the metrics that usually define success for journalism. Are business metrics for news inherently discriminatory?

PICKARD: I think arguably the short answer is yes. I think you could make that case. However, I think you're also right to point out that these metrics aren't fixed in stone. They can be adjusted. Activists can push journalists to be more sensitive about particular issues. So we should never give up on trying to encourage and pressure or push



mainstream journalists, whoever they might be, towards covering stories in a better way, a more equitable way.

At the same time, I think we have to realize that there might be decreasing or diminishing returns on that strategy and that we can only shame news organizations into being good so far. I think we're going to have to restructure our entire system. It's much easier said than done. It's not going to happen tomorrow or even in the next few years. But I think we have to have that on our political horizon as something that we're working towards.

KENNEALLY: It seems unlikely that Congress would dramatically increase public funding for news media any time soon, Professor Pickard. Does that mean American democracy is doomed?

PICKARD: That's a great question, Chris. I don't think I would ever say that it's doomed simply because we're not funding our public media adequately. But certainly our research and other scholars have shown that there is this positive correlation between having strong public broadcasting systems and strong democracies. So I do think that's one of the things we must do in a broader pro-democracy, re-democratization movement is to ensure that we have a strong public media system, a system that's committed to this universal service mission, to make sure that all members of society have access to a baseline level of news and information. I do think that must be a normative goal of ours.

KENNEALLY: Professor Victor Pickard, co-director of the Media, Inequality and Change Center at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Democracy Without Journalism?: Confronting the Misinformation Society*, thank you very much for joining me on Velocity of Content.

PICKARD: Thanks so much for having me, Chris. Great talking to you.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts, and please do follow us on Twitter and on Facebook. You can also find Velocity of Content on YouTube as part of the CCC channel. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Goodbye.

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