



The fourth estate speaks out: newspapers endorsements' rebuke of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election

O quarto estado se manifesta: a rejeição dos apoios editoriais a Trump na eleição presidencial de 2016

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Abstract

The article analyzes the newspapers endorsements in the US in the 2016 presidential election and, in particular, the massive rejection of the Republican nominee Donald Trump. It is argued that it was due to Trump's non-belonging to mainstream politics and the press tendency to centrism.

Key words: *newspaper endorsements; 2016 presidential election; Donald Trump.*

Resumo

O artigo analisa os apoios editoriais da imprensa dos Estados Unidos na eleição presidencial de 2016 e, em particular, a rejeição massiva ao então candidato republicano Donald Trump. Argumenta-se que isso se deveu ao não pertencimento de Trump à política comum e à tendência da grande imprensa ao centrismo.

Palavras-chave: *apoios editoriais; eleição presidencial de 2016; Donald Trump.*

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Introduction

The 2016 presidential election in the United States of America sparked heated debates among a variety of political actors regarding not only which party would win the race for the White House. Disputes between the Democratic and the Republican nominees Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, respectively, represented a clash of two considerably divergent and competing set of values prescribing different strategies and targets for the country's domestic and foreign policies. One of the key arenas in which this conflict takes place is the media as it is a fundamental political realm currently. This is particularly true in contemporary democratic societies such as the US. Besides being the most important source of information upon which citizens base themselves in order to take decisions, the called 'fourth estate' is an active player that does not fail to express its own preferences and political values. And it was no different in the 2016 presidential election. The term 'fourth estate' is a reference to the historic European estates of the realm, having being employed by the first time by Burke when thinking about the US, where the press is called the fourth estate for its role as observer of the political processes by guarding democracy and influencing political outcomes (HAMPTON, 2010). Such perception of having a responsibility alongside the nation drives newspapers' willingness to publish their institutional opinions during electoral times.

This paper explores a specific dimension of the American news outlets behavior in this election: the newspapers endorsements. Newspapers have been publishing editorials to support their favorite presidential candidates for many decades but in 2016 a particular distribution of endorsements was observed. The edge between the Republican and the Democrat nominees has never been as large in American recent history. While Donald

Trump received an insignificant support, newspapers endorsements to Democrats have never been so massive. It is reasonable to suggest that Trump's often polemical standings caused this, however this argument must be qualified. This paper asserts that Trump was strongly rejected not simply for his standings but also for the dynamic of a media structure marked by commercialization and strong competition. These are key features of a liberal media system, as defined by Hallin and Mancini (2004), historically developed in the US. This paper aims to launch a hypothesis for the links connecting the media and political systems, which can be improved and tested by further research in this topic.

Newspapers endorsements in 2016

Looking at the presidential elections – as well as politics in general – through the lens of media is relevant because of its role in current contemporary democratic societies. The press is indispensable to let citizens know and follow the governments' acts, which is a fundamental feature in democracies. Media does not just let citizens know about political issues as it could also have the ability to influence which themes will be prioritized and how they will be understood. As mass media is the most relevant and efficient source of information for the regular citizen, it could have an agenda-setting power of shaping what issues people will publicly debate (MCCOMBS; SHAW, 1972). Media can also influence how its audience will interpret issues as they are able to frame them in particular ways by selecting certain aspects of reality and highlighting them to promote certain interpretations, assessments and recommendations (ENTMAN, 1993). There is a solid set of theories and empirical tests debating general media effects, which are concisely mapped by researchers such as Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007).

Newspapers endorsements, particularly, could have the capacity of making readers more likely to support certain candidates (KAHN; KENNEY, 2002). Declaring explicit support to certain candidates has been a historical practice in the US, beginning in the 19th century. It is noteworthy that most important American news outlets preserved the tradition by expressing themselves in relation to the fierce dispute between Clinton and Trump. In fact, the most interesting feature of the 2016 election is a massive rebuke of the latter.

Newspapers endorsements in presidential elections have been supporting Democratic and Republican nominees almost alternately in the

last three decades. Cohen (2011) shows that while the majority of endorsements favored the Republicans in 1988, 1996 and 2000, Democrats had most support in 1992, 2004 and 2008. Although Democrats have been prevailing in the 2000s, the newspapers' behavior does not lead to any conclusion that the press has been consistently endorsing a particular political stream in the US (COHEN, 2011). This is meaningful for the argument that is going to be put forward in the next section, but before one must attentively examine what motivated this article, which is the newspapers attitude in 2016. The 100 largest US newspapers in terms of circulation are considered, which are:

TABLE 1 - List of newspapers endorsements (the top 100 in terms of circulation)

Rank	Newspaper	2016 endorsee	2012 endorsee
1	USA Today	NOT Trump	did not endorse
2	The Wall Street Journal	Does not endorse candidates	
3	The New York Times	Clinton	Obama
4	Los Angeles Times	Clinton	Obama
5	New York Post	Did not endorse	Romney
6	San Jose Mercury News	Clinton	Obama
7	Daily News	Clinton	Romney
8	Chicago Tribune	Johnson	Obama
9	Newsday	Clinton	Romney
10	The Washington Post	Clinton	Obama
11	Chicago Sun-Times	Clinton	did not endorse
12	The Dallas Morning News	Clinton	Romney
13	The Denver Post	Clinton	Obama
14	Daily News	Did not endorse	Romney
15	The Orange County Register	NONE	NONE
16	Houston Chronicle	Clinton	Romney
17	The Philadelphia Inquirer	Clinton	Obama
18	Star Tribune	Clinton	Obama
19	Tampa Bay Times	Clinton	Obama
20	The Star-Ledger	Clinton	Obama
21	Honolulu Star-Advertiser	Clinton	Obama
22	The Boston Globe	Clinton	Obama
23	The Atlanta Journal-Constitution	Does not endorse candidates	
24	The Arizona Republic	Clinton	Romney
25	The Seattle Times	Clinton	Obama
26	Las Vegas Review-Journal	Trump	Romney
27	The Oregonian	Does not endorse candidates	

Rank	Newspaper	2016 endorsee	2012 endorsee
28	The San Diego Union-Tribune	Clinton	Romney
29	The Plain Dealer	Clinton	Obama
30	San Francisco Chronicle	Clinton	Obama
31	Pittsburgh Tribune-Review	Did not endorse	Romney
32	Pioneer Press	Does not endorse candidates	
33	Detroit Free Press	Clinton	Obama
34	Journal Sentinel	NOT Trump	NONE
35	The Sacramento Bee	Clinton	Obama
36	The Tampa Tribune	Ceased operations	Romney
37	Star-Telegram	NOT Trump	Romney
38	Kansas City Star	Clinton	Obama
39	El Nuevo Dia	Does not endorse candidates	
40	St. Louis Post-Dispatch	Clinton	Obama
41	The Salt Lake Tribune	Clinton	Obama
42	Investor's Business Daily	Did not endorse	Romney
43	The Baltimore Sun	Clinton	Obama
44	Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	NONE	Obama
45	Orlando Sentinel	Clinton	Romney
46	Sun-Sentinel	Clinton	Romney
47	The Record	Clinton	Obama
48	The Indianapolis Star	Did not endorse	NONE
49	Arkansas Democrat-Gazette	Did not endorse	Romney
50	The Buffalo News	Clinton	Obama
51	The Columbus Dispatch	Clinton	Romney
52	Austin American-Statesman	NONE	NONE
53	San Antonio Express-News	Clinton	Obama
54	The Miami Herald	Clinton	Obama
55	Charlotte Observer	Clinton	Obama
56	Omaha World-Herald	Clinton	Romney
57	The Courier-Journal	Clinton	Obama
58	The Virginian-Pilot	Does not endorse candidates	
59	The Hartford Courant	Clinton	Obama
60	The Press-Enterprise	NONE	Romney
61	La Opinión	Clinton	Obama
62	The Cincinnati Enquirer	Clinton	Romney
63	News & Observer	Clinton	Obama
64	The Oklahoman	NONE	Romney
65	The Detroit News	Johnson	Romney
66	The Providence Journal	Clinton	Obama
67	Deseret News	Does not endorse candidates	
68	Baton Rouge Advocate	Does not endorse candidates	
69	Richmond Times-Dispatch	Johnson	Romney
70	Democrat and Chronicle	Clinton	Obama
71	The Fresno Bee	Clinton	Obama
72	The Blade	Did not endorse	Obama

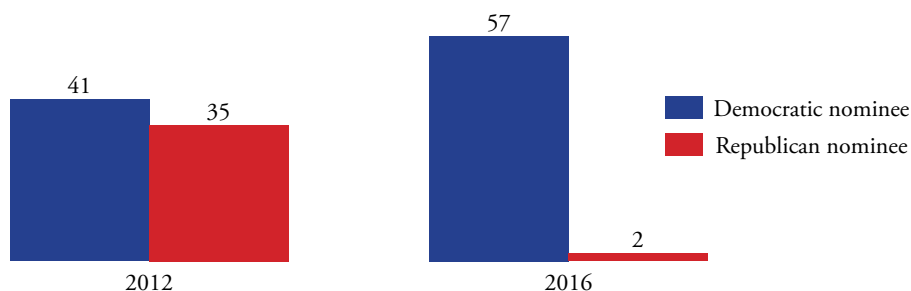
Rank	Newspaper	2016 endorsee	2012 endorsee
73	Dayton Daily News	Does not endorse candidates	
74	The Tennessean	NONE	Romney
75	Tulsa World	NONE	Romney
76	Daily Herald	Clinton	Romney
77	Asbury Park Press	Clinton	Obama
78	The Des Moines Register	Clinton	Romney
79	The Commercial Appeal	Clinton	NONE
80	Boston Herald	NONE	Romney
81	The Palm Beach Post	NONE	NONE
82	Northwest Indiana Times	NONE	Romney
83	Albuquerque Journal	NONE	Romney
84	The Florida Times-Union	Trump	Romney
85	Wisconsin State Journal	Clinton	Romney
86	Greater Philadelphia Newspaper	Does not endorse candidates	
87	Arizona Daily Star	Clinton	Obama
88	The Post and Courier	Johnson	Romney
89	The News Journal	Clinton	Obama
90	The Akron Beacon Journal	Clinton	Obama
91	LNP News	Clinton	SPLIT
92	Telegram and Gazette	Did not endorse	Romney
93	Lexington Herald Leader	Clinton	Obama
94	El Paso Times	Clinton	Obama
95	Knoxville News Sentinel	Does not endorse candidates	
96	The Morning Call	Does not endorse candidates	
97	Rockford Register Times	Clinton	Obama
98	New Haven Register	NONE	Obama
99	The News Tribune	Clinton	Obama
100	Times Free Press	NONE	Johnson

Source: adapted from PETERS and WOOLLEY (2017).

What calls one's attention is the striking difference between Clinton and Trump in number of endorsements. A Republican nominee had never

been as rejected as Trump was in 2016. Chart 1 illustrates his bad performance by comparing him with the 2012 Republican nominee Mitt Romney.

CHART 1 - Newspapers endorsements for the main parties in 2012 and 2016



Source: prepared by the author based on PETERS and WOOLLEY (2017). The chart considers endorsements to either Democratic or Republican nominees among the top 100 US newspapers (based on daily circulation).

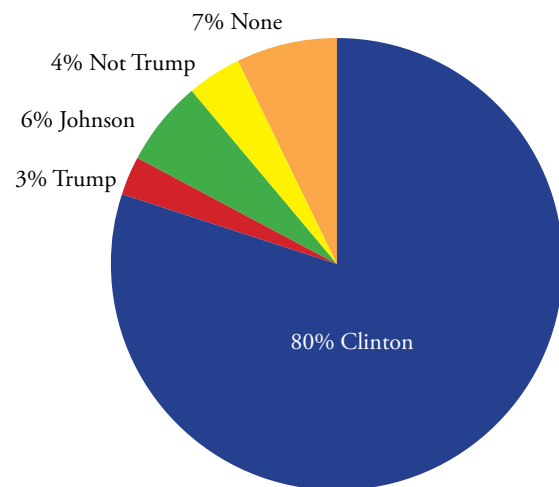
Chart 1 shows that the newspapers behavior changed drastically in just one presidential election cycle. According to data collected by Peters and Woolley (2017) from the America Presidency Project (APP), among the top 100 newspapers (daily circulation) that endorsed one of the two main parties, 46% declared to support the Republican nominee in 2012. However this share of support dropped to only 3.4% four years later (2 endorsements). In addition to that decrease, 14 of the 57 newspapers endorsing the Democratic nominee in 2016 had previously endorsed Romney in 2012. It means that a quarter of all Clinton endorsements migrated from a previous Republican endorsement. The comparison of the 2012 and 2016 press support to Republicans is evidence that newspapers endorsement do not necessarily favor the Democratic Party. Actually, the press rebuked Trump in particular. His poor media performance can also be assessed through the observation of the 2016 endorsements separately.

Apart from the sharp disadvantage in comparison with Clinton endorsements, Peters and Woolley (2017) reveal a couple of other facts interesting to be highlighted. First, Trump had less support (2 endorsements) than the relatively unknown Libertarian nominee Gary Johnson (4 endorsements). Second, even the newspapers unwilling to clearly support Clinton also rejected Trump by publishing editorials claiming for a 'not Trump' vote (3 endorsements), which were also higher in number than endorsements directly favoring him. The distribution of 2016 newspapers endorsements can be summarized in chart 2 as follows.

The chart considers endorsements among the top 100 US newspapers (based on daily circulation).

In terms of content, editorials generally focused on moral aspects. They emphasized Clinton's experience in government by resuming her successes as First Lady, Senator and Secretary of State. *The New*

CHART 2 - Newspapers endorsements in 2016



Source: prepared by the author based on PETERS and WOOLLEY (2017).

York Times, for instance, clarifies that its endorsement in favor of Clinton 'is rooted in respect for her intellect, experience, toughness and courage over a career of almost continuous public service, often as the first or only woman in the arena' (THE EDITORIAL BOARD OF THE NYT, 2016). Even the *USA Today*, which did not supported the Democratic nominee, highlights Clinton as having higher moral standards than her opponent. In contrast to Clinton, Trump was very often portrayed as someone unfit for the White House. The *USA Today* adopted a non-Trump position by arguing that the Republican nominee was erratic, prejudiced and a liar. Ultimately, the newspaper's editorial board calls him 'unfit for the presidency' (THE EDITORIAL BOARD OF USA TODAY, 2016), likewise *The Wall Street Journal* recognizing Trump's manifest moral flaws (THE GAMBLE..., 2016), while *The New York Times* goes further by qualifying him 'the worst nominee put forward by a major party in modern American history' (THE EDITORIAL BOARD THE NYT, 2016). Even though news outlets' editorial discourses pick moral arguments to rebuke Trump, the framework in which such criticism takes place.

Media is a key political actor in contemporary democracies and the examination of the distribution of the newspapers endorsements in the 2016 presidential election made clear that the press behaved in an unusual way. After years of most endorsements alternately favoring Democratic and Republican nominees and a tight Romney's disadvantage in 2012, Trump was very strongly rejected by the American press. It is clearly a deviant case in terms of the patterns observed in the last decades and this is the reason why such phenomenon deserves to be explored. The next section of the paper is going to argue that it is due to the structure of the American media system as well as the resulting political preferences that Trump was strikingly disapproved.

Trump and the centrist press

This section argues that the press strongly rejected the Republican nominee Donald Trump because of the interaction of his politically extreme standings with a kind of media system whose political economy is characterized by strong competition among private news outlets and tends to political centrism. This section begins by commenting on some traditional arguments dealing with alleged liberal and conservative bias of the American media. Having problematized these perspectives, the main argument here is going to be put forward. Firstly, Trump's political standings are going to be discussed to clarify that his positions and personal behavior are not part of the mainstream politics. Then, his positions are going to be contextualized in light of the characteristics of the American media system, particularly the incentives of competitive privately-owned media to centrist political orientations, which is the main determinant of the media's political conduct. Finally, the paper presents its conclusions.

American media outlets are frequently accused of reporting biased news in order to support or

not certain political issues. It is interesting to note that these claims originate from a variety of ideologically distinct political groups. By one side, Alterman (2010) labels media as a conservative force by affirming that its political discourse was moved purposefully towards right-wing positions, while Brock (2004) argues that media organizations benefited from conservative groups and then operate as their supporters. If it is correct, however, how can the striking Trump's disadvantage in terms of newspapers endorsements be explained? The last section demonstrated how unusual it was. Asserting that media is inherently conservative is not a proper explanation for the phenomenon explored in this paper.

In contrast to these views, others suggest that media is clearly liberal. Domke *et al* (1999) state that conservatives often have been labeling media as liberal as part of their political strategy. Trump himself and his supporters accused the press of campaigning against him. Besides, other group of scholars has been trying to demonstrate that news outlets are indeed biased against conservatives by framing them in pejorative ways (GOLDBERG, 2014). It could be argued that such argument provides a reasonable explanation for the newspapers' disapproval of Trump in 2016. However, the last section showed that newspapers endorsements also favored Republicans in the last decades (COHEN, 2011) and that Romney had a very tight disadvantage in 2012 (APP). Thus, it is inaccurate to state that media is definitely liberal if this evidence is taken into consideration. In addition to that, there are a few right-wing media outlets that historically supported Republicans and failed to do so only in 2016. The clearest examples are the *Arizona Republic*, which endorsed a Democrat for the first time in 126 years (BORCHERS, 2016). That is evidence that Trump is the new element driving an unusual behavior of the press in 2016 and that the liberal-bias theory is just not accurate enough.

As argued, labeling the American media as a persistently biased political actor – be it against liberals or conservatives – does not help to properly understand the newspapers endorsements in the 2016 presidential election. The point of this paper is that competition among private news outlets, which prevail in the American media system, lead them to promote mainstream political standings that combined with Trump's radical political proposals resulted in his fierce and abnormal rejection in 2016. Before detailing the media system in the US, it is relevant to discuss the assumption that Trump is indeed an exceptionally radical political leader.

The 2016 presidential election was especially interesting because of the differences among candidates running for the main parties nominations and then for the White House (THOMPSON, 2016). During all the campaign the candidate that received most attention for his polemical and often extreme propositions and statements was Donald Trump (HEER, 2017). He stood out for his very nationalist and isolationist proposals like the construction of a wall in the Mexican border, the consideration of humanitarian calls and the support of controversial methods of interrogation for suspects of terrorism. Although drug trafficking and terrorism are shared concerns of all American political leaders, it is unusual to observe candidates openly advocating for highly controversial measures to deal with them. In addition to his public declarations, he also faced fierce criticism for leaked audios regarding his conduct with women, which put his moral standards at stake. Trump has been even accused of fostering a kind of right-wing populism (CHERKAOUI, 2016).

Apart from the debates about how Trump could be labeled, it is essential to note he is not part of mainstream politics. This is true even if only conservative forces are considered in the analysis.

Trump's singularity – or extremism – can be detected in comparison with other Republican leaders who had run for the party nomination, for example. Trump broke with traditional proposals of previous Republican presidents in favor of a more extremist and nationalist political platform (ROTHWELL, 2016). Most of his opponents in the primaries did not share his views on sensitive issues. Immigration is an illustrative example. Trump's proposal of banning the entry of Muslims into the US was very criticized by his Republican opponents: Lindsey Graham qualified it as 'frankly dangerous' while Marco Rubio declared that 'his habit of making offensive and outlandish statements will not bring Americans together'. He received strong criticism also from other candidates such as Ted Cruz, John Kasich and Jeb Bush (CHERKAOUI, 2016). The point here is that Trump is not a regular conservative politician; he is located further right in the political spectrum than regular Republicans (BARTLETT, 2017; LINKER, 2016).

Being demonstrated that Trump is not a mainstream politician, it is time to discuss why it implies in its rejection by the newspapers. The argument begins by taking into consideration the structural characteristics of the American media system. The US is the purer example of what has been called by the literature the North Atlantic or Liberal Model of media system (HALLIN; MANCINI, 2004). Many other scholars refer to it simply as the American Model. It is traditionally marked by deregulation, developed journalistic professionalism, marginalization of noncommercial news outlets and, most important, the early development of commercial news outlets as well as their strong market-oriented behavior. The US has one of the most commercially based news system and this is the main variable determining its political actions and coverage (HALLIN; MANCINI, 2004; PATTERSON, 2000).

A remarkably partisan press dominated the US just in the early beginnings of its independent history. By that time newspapers were mostly connected with some kind of party press or other particular social group. Partisanship ruled the news content because it was aimed at partisan subscribers only. Sales to the mass public and profit were not the priority as the majority of Americans could neither read nor write (PATTERSON, 2000). This scenario began to quickly change in the 19th century alongside the country's socio-economic evolution such as the technological advances and rising literacy rates. Newspapers experienced an expansion of their circulation in 1830s and by 1890s the US already reached the point of having a large-scale newspaper industry, which made of it one of pioneer nations in developing a significant commercial press (HALLIN; MANCINI, 2004). Subscriptions increased twelvefold between 1870 and 1920, from 2.6 to 33 million (GENTZKOW *et al*, 2006).

This is important for the argument because this transformational moment established the bedrock of the American Model. The logic of marketplace changed not only the finances but also the incentives for the newspapers political engagements. By targeting a much larger fraction of the society and trying to satisfy their increasingly vital advertisers, whose revenues currently comprise between 60% to 80% of the total revenues for American newspapers (STROMBERG, 2002). Media businesspeople made their political opinions less central in newspapers coverage (GENTZKOW *et al*, 2006; HALLIN; MANCINI, 2004; PATTERSON, 2000). In other words, a fundamental characteristic of the American Model is the replacement of a partisanship orientation for a market-oriented strategy. It has been guiding the development of the country's media system since then as the media market in the US is essentially composed

of commercial media groups that harshly compete among themselves (HALLIN; MANCINI, 2004).

The major consequence of this is that American newspapers suffered from a similar transformation of that experienced by political parties in the 20th century: in order to maximize their supporters – readers and voters – they put aside ideological preferences to become catch-all organizations. It means that media groups realized that strongly adopting a particular point of view limits their reach. Thus, rather than aiming particular groups it is more rational to target the median citizen. And the best way to accomplish it is not relinquishing any political preference, but adopting centrist orientations toward mainstream politics. Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 210) state that media cuts across 'the principal lines of division between the established political forces in society'. Getzkow *et al* (2006) analyze the emergence of the informative press by showing that indicators of politically biased reporting persistently decreased during the 20th century. Recent empirical studies have been testing the media centrism. Groseclose and Milyo (2005) and Gasper (2011) analyze news articles and conclude that news outlets are relatively more politically centrist than lawmakers, for example, while Ho and Quinn (2008) analyze editorials reaching conclusions that such kind of publication is just modestly less centrist than news articles.

What does it say about Donald Trump campaign in 2016? As previously argued, Trump is not a mainstream politician for breaking with traditional center-right standings of the Republicans and openly supporting radical measures that could be labeled extreme. His attitudes are not consistent with the newspapers' general centrist orientations, which transformed the media into a very hostile environment for Trump. Applauding him was not the best strategy to maximize readers' satisfaction according to the perceived preferences of the me-

dian citizen². Republicans had never launched such a radical nominee in recent history and the unusual distribution of newspapers endorsements in 2016 is the result of the interaction between Trump's extremism and the centrist political values fostered by a market-oriented media system. The set of newspapers endorsements do not seem to follow trends of a clear partisanship and the astonishing drop of support for Republicans between 2012 and 2016 are not properly explained by traditional conservative and liberal-bias theories.

Final remarks

“A newspaper can only subsist on the condition of publishing sentiments or principles common to a large number of men”, wrote Alexis de Tocqueville (2003, p. 588) in his masterpiece *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville's words are good to illustrate the argument this paper put forward. American media outlets have roots in a strong commercially based and competitive news system, which led them to adequate their strategies accordingly. It currently results in support to mainstream centrist political orientations that does not accept extreme propositions such as those supported by Donald Trump, who consequently had an exceptional bad performance in terms of newspapers endorsements in 2016. In this sense, media can be interpreted as a stabilizing political actor whose action consolidates mainstream politics. American media often introduces itself as a defender of the democratic institutions and of the public voice, which is a narrative that will likely be reinforced in the next four years given that Trump's disturbed relationship with media is just beginning. In addition, this paper aims to provoke additional empirical researches

2. Despite Trump's victory, polls used to indicate his clear disadvantage in relation to Clinton. Also, newspapers markets are concentrated in the cities, where Trump was particularly unpopular (BADGER; BUI; PEARCE 2016).

in this field in order to improve the causal mechanisms connecting the media and political systems.

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