

Chapter 2

The News Market



2.1 The King of the Agenda

At a conference in San Francisco in February 2016, CBS Chairman and CEO Leslie Moonves conveyed the following pertaining to the US Presidential Election and Donald Trump's candidacy:

It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS ...
Man, who would have expected the ride we are all on now? The
money keeps rolling in, and this is fun!¹

This comment from the CEO of one of the "Big Three" TV networks in the US created quite a stir and received criticism from Trump's opponent in the primaries, Republican Marco Rubio, who ran an advertising campaign featuring this comment to prove the media actively backed Trump. Moonves later defended his comment, claiming it was a joke misunderstood taken out of context.² Whether it was said in jest or not is not to say, but it sounds like an honest disclosure judging

¹Bond, P (2016): "Leslie Moonves on Donald Trump: "It May Not Be Good for America, but It's Damn Good for CBS," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 29, 2016, verified May 20, 2017: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/leslie-moonves-donald-trump-may-871464>

²Werpin, A. (2016). "CBS CEO Les Moonves clarifies Donald Trump 'good for CBS' comment," *Politico*, October 19, 2016, verified May 26, 2017: <http://www.politico.com/blogs/on-media/2016/10/cbs-ceo-les-moonves-clarifies-donald-trump-good-for-cbs-comment-229996>

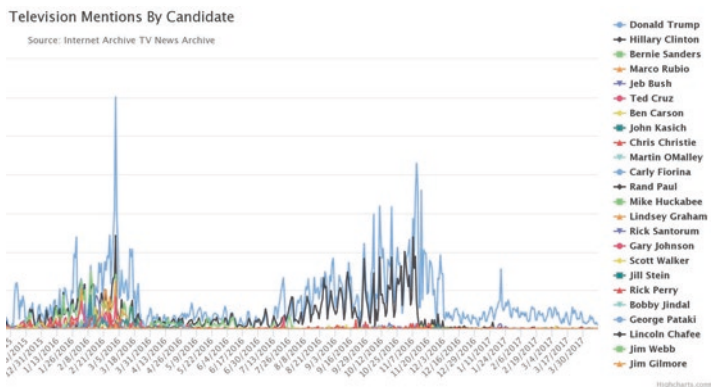


FIG. 2.1. Graph of the CBS television coverage of the US Presidential Election 2016 measured by the amount of times the candidate's name was mentioned. (*Presidential Campaign 2016: Candidate Television Tracker*, verified May 26, 2017: http://television.gdeltproject.org/cgi-bin/iatv_campaign2016/iatv_campaign2016?filter_candidate=&filter_network=AFFNET_CBS&filter_timespan=ALL&filter_displayas=RAW).

from CBS' coverage of the presidential election. Either way, the comment is spot on: CBS gave Trump much more coverage than his opponents throughout election season (Fig. 2.1).

And it wasn't just CBS. Donald Trump received the bulk of the news media's exposure and campaign coverage. He obtained a disproportionate amount of attention compared to the other candidates. As Trump himself said in a TV interview on the Fox News program *Your World with Neil Cavuto* on October 13, 2015, during the primary election cycle:

I've spent zero on advertising because you and Fox and all of the others, I won't mention names, but every other network, I mean they cover me a lot, to put it mildly.³

³Donald Trump: "I've Spent Nothing on Ads Because of Fox News' and Other Networks' Constant Coverage," *Media Matters for America*, October 13, 2015, verified May 26, 2017: <https://www.mediamatters.org/video/2015/10/13/donald-trump-ive-spent-nothing-on-ads-because-o/206115>

Making it to the spotlight of mass media's news agenda provides precious media attention for free. Media attention is key to political success. Ever since the 1970s, a number of empirical media studies have confirmed the strong influence of the news media on public opinion. There is a clear tendency for people, events, and stories featuring prominently on the front cover or in TV and radio broadcasts to be perceived as the most important by the audience and, thus, the general public (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Dearing and Rogers 1996; McCombs and Reynolds 2002) (Fig. 2.2).

Without visibility on the news media scene, it is very difficult for politicians to influence the general public. News coverage and the visibility and exposure it leads to are vital resources for candidates in, or running for, political office. However, news coverage is also a *limited* resource. There is only so much paper in a newspaper, only so much time in a news broadcast or radio program. This naturally limits how much information and how many sources or candidates the media may devote its attention to. The people and stories that get news coverage are picked from a plenitude of potential options *at the cost* of the rest. The struggle to set the agenda of the mass media and get a share of this vital political resource is a zero-sum game where lots of attention given to one candidate means the others lose whatever the one gains.



FIG. 2.2. Information diet: the mass media's agenda becomes their audience's agenda.




Scorecard				"NOT TRUMP"	NONE OF THE ABOVE	DID NOT ENDORSE
	Hillary Clinton Democratic	Donald Trump Republican	Gary Johnson Libertarian			
Total Endorsements	57	2	4	3	5	26
Total Circulation	13,095,067	315,666	738,750	3,243,140	440,976	6,102,180
Endorsed Obama in 2012	40	0	1	0	0	3
Endorsed Romney in 2012	14	2	3	1	4	7
Endorsed Johnson in 2012	0	0	0	0	1	0
Did not endorse in 2012	2	0	0	2	0	15
SPLIT in 2012	1	0	0	0	0	0

FIG. 2.3. Overview of American newspapers' recommendations for the US Presidential Election in 2016. ("2016 General Election Editorial Endorsements by Major Newspapers," *The American Presidency Project*, verified May 26, 2017: http://www.presidency.ucs.edu/data/2016_newspaper_endorsements.php).

Perhaps this was a conscious campaign strategy for Trump. As early as 2013 at a meeting in New York with a number of important Republicans who wanted him to run for governor, Donald Trump is supposed to have formulated a strategy not just for winning that office but the White House simpliciter:

I'm going to suck all the oxygen out of the room. I know how to work the media so they never take the spotlights off me.⁴

Sucking all the oxygen out of the room is a well-known metaphor in American politics. It refers to attracting all the attention, leaving none of that vital reserve to others. The reality TV star Trump claimed that he could get the news media to dance to his tune and without charge score the attention other candidates had to pay great sums to get. He was right. But the media did not grant him their attention because they liked him and wanted him for President; almost all large, established mass media outlets were politically against Trump or turned on him during the campaign.

⁴Stokols, E. & Schreckinger, B. (2016). "How Trump Did It," *Politico*, February 1, 2016, verified May 26, 2017: <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/02/how-donald-trump-did-it-213581>

2.2 The Unwanted Candidate

The established news media did not support Trump for President. A lot of the airing was negative, and most established media recommended his opponent, Hillary Clinton. It's striking how massively the printed press supported Clinton over Trump (Fig. 2.3).

Even die-hard Republican newspapers such as *The Arizona Republic* and *The San Diego Union-Tribune* recommended a Democratic candidate for the first time ever; and *USA Today*—which had never before recommended any candidate—recommended *not* voting for Trump.⁵

The same negative view of Trump may be found all around the American TV landscape. Since CNN went on air in 1980, a variety of TV stations and news channels large and small have arisen on cable TV. The cable channels do not compete for the same broad audience as the original three large TV networks in the USA (CBS, NBC, and ABC). Rather, they direct themselves at different viewer segments and deliver programs catering to specific interests: sports, music videos, animal programs, sci-fi, and history. If there is an audience with special television needs, you can be sure there is a cable channel to cater to that need: The market will provide. The same goes for biased news coverage.

The cable news channel with the largest TV audience in 2016 was Fox News.⁶ The station has obtained a monumental commercial success by producing and offering biased news coverage for a large audience of right-wing conservatives. It is not hard to argue and demonstrate that Fox News does not quite live up to its slogan of being “fair and balanced.” An

⁵ *USA TODAY*, Editorial, September 29, 2016, “USA TODAY’s Editorial Board: Trump is ‘unfit for the presidency,’” verified May 26, 2017: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2016/09/29/dont-vote-for-donald-trump-editorial-board-editorials-debates/91295020/>

⁶ Schneider, M. (2016). “Most-Watched Television Networks: Ranking 2016’s Winners and Losers,” *Indiewire*, December 27, 2017, verified June 24, 2017: <http://www.indiewire.com/2016/12/cnn-fox-news-msnbc-nbc-ratings-2016-winners-losers-1201762864/>

example of this bias is the coverage of the party conventions in 2004, when the channel was completely uncritical of the Republican candidates. They procured more speech time and visibility than the Democrats who were routinely criticized by the hosts (Morris and Francia 2009).

News production for a specific audience so biased that it is possible to document may all the same be a very good business indeed. Others have taken note of that, and at the other end of the spectrum, left-wing channel MSNBC tries to imitate the concept. MSNBC likewise has an issue with balance and fairness at the other end of the ideological spectrum.

Cable TV has added to the polarization of the media supply and consumption. Political groups now watch different, biased news channels and programs. Nonetheless, Trump managed to fall out of favor with everyone. Even Fox News turned on him when he launched a misogynist attack on one of their hosts, Megyn Kelly, in which Trump was strongly insinuating that Kelly was driven by female hormones (to put it mildly). Ironically, his attack was a response to her critical questioning pertaining to his view of women.

No matter how critical TV channels ranging from Fox to MSNBC were of Trump's candidacy, this did not make them cover him any *less* up to the elections. He got the mass of attention all the same.⁷ Whether they liked him or not, the *story* was simply too good to miss out on. Trump's spectacular campaign attracted too many viewers to turn off the cameras and the Trump talk. Even though the established mass news media were generally opposed to Trump's politics, he had stronger forces on his side. The market forces of commercial news and the resulting media logic.

⁷ *Presidential Campaign 2016: Candidate Television Tracker*, verified May 26, 2017: http://television.gdeltproject.org/cgi-bin/iatv_campaign2016/iatv_campaign2016?filter_candidate=&filter_network=AFNET_CBS&filter_timespan=ALL&filter_displayas=RAW

2.3 Media Logic

When news media select, leave out, or produce news stories, it happens according to criteria defining “the good story.” Those criteria are constitutive of media logic (Esser and Matthes 2013). Media logic is a set of rules and norms for behavior and action in the media: an institutionalized way of doing things, a *modus operandi*, or a set of guidelines for media professionals that consciously or unconsciously instruct them while selecting and producing the stories put on their agenda.

Media logic runs along three axes weighted differently by different media institutions and environments: journalistic ideals, commercial interests, and technological conditions.

1. Journalistic ideals

A news story should be true, meet the criteria of news value and anchored in journalism’s role and self-perception as one of the central pillars in democracy, the free press. The media has a duty and a social obligation to inform citizens about important matters. The press must shed light on societal problems and adopt the role as gatekeeper of the public debate, guarding its quality by screening out lies, falsehoods, and nonsense installing checks and balances on the information finding its way to the public. Simultaneously the media has to act as watchdog of the powers that be, holding them accountable to the public while revealing possible abuses of power. The media’s key role in democracy demands that journalistic values be upheld, such as independence, balanced reporting, transparency, integrity, truthfulness, and accuracy.

2. Commercial interests

From a commercial perspective, a news story is a good one if it attracts a large audience of readers, listeners, or viewers— if it attracts attention. To focus on the spectacular and dramatize the news may be an efficient way to achieve the commercial aim of a reaching a big audience. This makes the news coverage converge on entertainment. Joseph Pulitzer, who had a prestigious journalistic prize named after him,

pointed out as far back as 1904 that there is a conflict between journalistic information ideals and commercial interests. He noted that they pull in opposite directions: one toward the responsibility to inform the public and the other toward the responsibility to create profit for the stockholders (Siebert et al. 1956). What works well in the market is not necessarily identical to what is good for democracy. A rephrasing of Leslie Moonves's previous comment up front amounts to: What is good for CBS stockholders is bad for American democracy.

3. Technological conditions

Media technology institutes the material framework for what works in specific media formats. A news story on TV requires good images. Political messages should preferably be expressed in short sound bites. The very type and format of a medium influence which messages reach the public and how they do it. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan puts it suc-



FIG. 2.4. The first-ever televised presidential debate: Nixon and Kennedy 1960.

cinctly in a famous petition: the medium *is* the message (McLuhan and Flore 1967). A case in point is the first TV-transmitted election debate in America, the debate between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960 (Fig. 2.4).

After the debate, a poll showed that the majority of radio listeners pointed to Nixon as the winner of the debate. TV viewers on the other hand named Kennedy the winner. This poll has since been criticized for resting on a statistical base to meager (Campell 2016). Nevertheless, later experiments have shown that radio listeners tend to value agreement with the candidate over political content when assessing debates, while TV viewers focus more on personality (Druckman 2003). Looks and charm in politics simply count for more on TV. Kennedy chimed in himself after winning the election:

It was TV more than anything else that turned things around.⁸

On commercial TV, personality, image, and fast retorts may dexterously replace political substance. All these aspects fit into the medium's image-based format and attract more viewers. News *and* politics run the risk of a reduction to pure entertainment.

2.4 Entertainment as Ideology

Neither political bias against Trump nor journalistic social responsibility outweighed the commercial motives prioritized in the media logic of the American news market. Whatever is the case for marketing also goes for news production: When the point is predominantly to reap attention, entertainment is a most efficient method to catch it and keep it. The entertainment value of a story or a program often enough beats all other criteria. Entertainment attracts a hefty audience. In a purely commercial media market, it trumps the news media's and journalists' political views, biases, and ideological

⁸Webley, K. (2010). "How the Nixon-Kennedy Debate Changed the World," *Time*, October 23, 2010, verified May 26, 2017:<http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2021078,00.html>

positions. Media theorist and critic Neil Postman puts it like this in his classic book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*:

Entertainment is the overlying ideology of all discourses on TV.⁹

Ideology works in a structural manner and operates largely independent of a person's conscious decisions. A lot depend on habits and routines. Ad that, if CBS did not spotlight Trump, then other TV stations that did would make off with the viewers and, hence, the revenues from advertising. In a commercial media environment where news is already driven by its entertainment value, coverage and visibility may be obtained by providing just that: entertainment. Being sufficiently scandalous, rude, and politically extreme may keep all eyeballs on you with no attention left for your opponents. Trump succeeded in keeping the cameras pointing in his direction, and the audience enthralled. He tended to be spectacular, polemic, and dramatic, a recipe for good television.

Not only in the traditional media did Trump have the media logic on his side. It was so the case even more online and on social media.

2.5 The Free Online Market for News

The Internet has opened up a new market for news and broken the near monopoly of the mass media as producers and distributors of news and information. It is a consequence of the development of both information technology and digitization together with the decentralized information infrastructure the Internet offers. The digitization of text, audio, video, and graphics has changed the production conditions for media and news products: what used to be the former media *consumers* are turned into potential content *producers*. Everyone with a smartphone and appropriate software for the treatment or manipulation of images, sounds, and video may create media products that used to require a large and costly production apparatus the likes of which only the mass

⁹Postman (1985: p. 25).

media could afford. The Internet and social media have provided an infrastructure that makes it easy and cheap to publish and spread a message or a news story. This has turned citizens into potential civic journalists and made the genesis of online news, debate, and special interest platforms possible. The decentralized network structure has the consequence that users do not need to pass any journalistic gatekeepers in order to publish and distribute material. With work, effort and somewhat savvy of the tools of the digital trade, users may spread material virally and even anonymously if platforms are used permitting anonymity or else users may create fake profiles on platforms that do not.

In spite of the new conditions for news production, presentation and proliferation that have expanded the news market, the news *diversity* does not seem to have changed all that much. A study on the Twitter agenda (Bryan et al. 2014) concludes that there is a limited sum of stories and news that gets all the attention on the online news scene, just like in the mass media. Traditional news media, journalists, Internet media, and Twitter users copy or share each other's stories and news; the same few news stories are circulated again and again with small changes, alterations, and comments. Another empirical study of local Twitter environments in six different countries (Humprecht and Esser 2017) concludes that the stronger a country's public service media is, the more diversity the online agenda becomes. A completely liberalized and commercial news market does not necessarily display a greater diversity of news stories. The same goes for the diversity of the news sources that attract attention and get the ear. These conditions exist because online attention does not follow a normal distribution, but rather a power law distribution: A few players get the bulk of the attention (Hindman 2009; Webster 2014), while everyone else has to fight over the very limited attention at the tail of distribution. Much like the world economy: 1% has 50% of the world's wealth, and the other 99% have to fight over the remaining 50% (Fig. 2.5).

New alternative voices may indeed enrich journalism and public debate, but only if the new media respect and operate according to journalistic ideals and virtues. If not, they rather contribute to further division, polarization, and circulation of

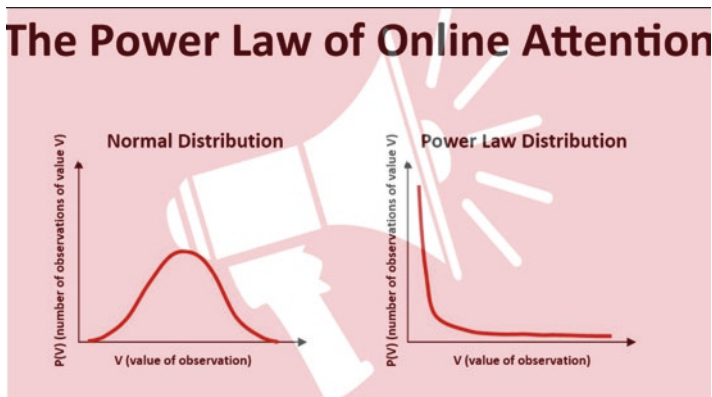


FIG. 2.5. The winner takes all, or, at the least, a very small number of players get the bulk of the attention on the Internet. A power law reins the attention distribution rather than a normal distribution.

misinformation. This was the case in the USA leading up to the 2016 election. The right-wing news platform Breitbart that became the voice of the extreme alternative right hit the jackpot of attention but disregarded journalistic ideals completely and continues today (Fig. 2.6).

The alt-right movement and platforms such as Breitbart managed to dominate the bulk of the online agenda. The stories circulated and were harvesting most attention on social media and were mainly in Trump’s favor. A common denominator of the stories winning the battle for online attention is the lack of journalistic criteria for truthfulness and documentation:

- “Pope Francis shocks world, endorses Donald Trump for president”
- “Donald Trump sent his own plane to transport 200 stranded marines”
- #Pizzagate
- “Ireland is now officially accepting Trump refugees from America”
- “WikiLeaks confirms Hillary sold weapons to ISIS ... Then drops another bombshell”¹⁰

¹⁰ Ritchie, H. (2016). “Read all about it: The biggest fake news stories of 2016,” *CNBC*, December 30, 2016, verified April 5, 2017: <http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/30/read-all-about-it-the-biggest-fake-news-stories-of-2016.html>

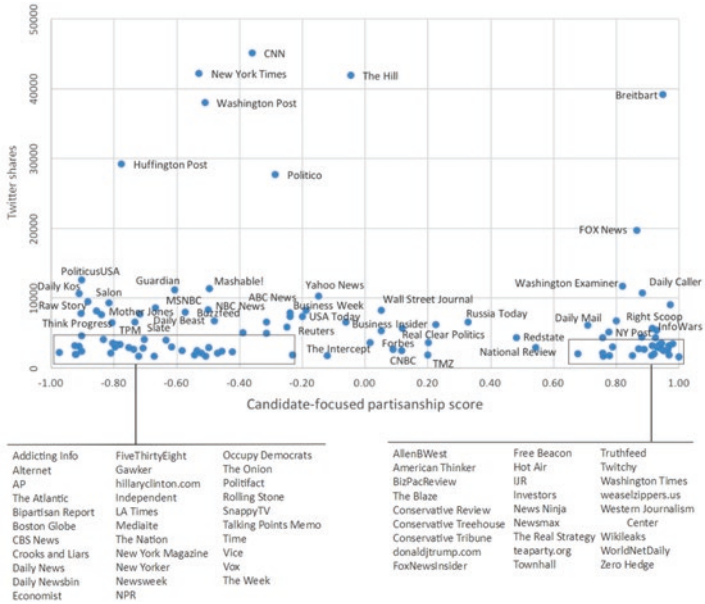


FIG. 2.6. The sources for the news stories that Clinton and Trump followers, respectively, shared on Twitter leading up to the 2016 election. (Benckler, Y., Faris, R. Roberts, H. & Zuckerman, E. (2017). “Study: Breitbart-led right-wing media ecosystem altered broader media agenda,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 3, 2017, verified May 26, 2017: <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php>).

Such misleading stories are not informing anybody of anything. Neither do they contribute to enrich the democratic deliberation. They undermine it.

Social media are better at spreading outrage than sound information and documented news stories. This is partly a result of the media logic of social media. Meeting the journalistic ideals is not an intrinsic part of the fabric online and on social media. The *ideal* is rather sharing of personal information with minute-to-minute posts and updates on whereabouts, opinions, thoughts, and feelings (Klinger and Svensson

2015). It is about connecting with others while expressing oneself. The *commercial imperative* for social network platforms aligns with this ideal of sharing and self-expression. When engaging and interacting online—in contrast to the passive consumption of mass media—both attention and user data are delivered to the companies to monetize and turn into profits. The digital *technology* makes all this possible by providing an informational infrastructure and designing for engagement, interaction, updates, and rapid peer-to-peer communication. In this environment, expressing and sharing one's outrage is king: To secure virality, create engagement driven by outrage via loud, spectacular, and angering information. This is not only a viable tactic for angry citizens or alternative extremist media outlets. Political leaders and candidates may also employ the strategy of outrage effectively. With social media, not only the citizens but also the elite has a new tool of communication that may be used to set the agenda and divert attention from criticism.

2.6 A Channel for the Elite

Even though the Internet and social media's open news market free of much gatekeeping have afforded a bullhorn to new voices and granted some of the politically incorrect and extremists a spot in the public debate, media research does not indicate that social media has generally shifted the power game between the political elite and the citizens in favor of the latter.

Facebook and Twitter have made it possible for citizens to debate politics independently of mass media and have created new possibilities for organizing and engaging online in democratic debate. This is not the same as actually having a say and confronting the powers that be or exerting much, if any, influence over the political agenda. Not only citizens may now surpass the journalistic gatekeepers; so, too, may the politicians. The social media that made it possible to speak directly to the politicians simultaneously gave the politicians a direct channel to their supporters and the general public.

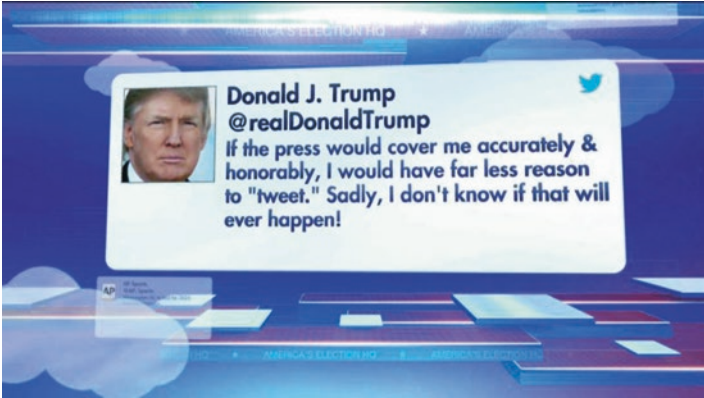


FIG. 2.7. The news story on Fox News about a tweet from Trump in which he cites the media's purported dishonesty and lack of accuracy as the reason why he tweets so much. (Should Trump Keep Tweeting to Counter 'Biased' Media Coverage?"; *Fox News Insider*, December 6, 2016, verified June 14, 2017: <http://insider.foxnews.com/2016/12/06/writer-says-donald-trump-tweets-because-media-covers-him-unfairly>).

Therefore, social media may also act in favor of the powers that be. An empirical study on the use of Twitter as a news source in four Dutch and four British newspapers from 2007 to 2011 concluded the following:

Elite sources may obtain more control with the public debate due to Twitter. News are no longer the product of a negotiation, but merely a result of one-way communication. Not being available to journalists [...] in the middle of a media storm, but simply throwing them a tweet instead, as the Dutch right-wing politician Geert Wilders does, is an efficient strategy to controlling and framing the news discourse.¹¹

Social media has become a news source for journalists. The resulting news coverage is often based on the tweets from the political elite (Skogerbø et al. 2016) (Fig. 2.7).

¹¹Broersma and Graham (2013: p. 463).

This creates a short-circuited media where you may tweet (in a biased manner) about news you watch on television, and then your tweet is taken up by the mass media publishing it as a news story. With a Twitter account, you may troll the media and the public and suck all the oxygen out of the room. Trump exemplifies being a master of that craft, and he knows it.

Without tweets, I wouldn't be [in the White House].¹²

This situation puts the American news media in a dilemma. Since Trump is President, his tweets are almost per definition newsworthy. This makes his Twitter account an efficient instrument in the attention economy. With a limited agenda and attention, extreme and spectacular tweets may serve to distract the news media and the general public. The tweets take up both the news media's and the general public's limited attention that could otherwise have been spent on stories with more substance. It is often worth asking what is *not* receiving attention, while everybody stares at the spectacle.

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¹²Barber, L., Sevaspulo, D. & Tett, G. (2017):“Donald Trump: Without Twitter I would not be here—FT Interview,” *Financial Times*, April 2, 2017, verified May 26, 2017: <https://www.ft.com/content/943e322a-178a-11e7-9c35-0dd2cb31823a>