Information is fundamental to democracy. Our Founding Fathers believed that when citizens lacked the information necessary to give their informed consent, democracy failed.

Are our media helping or hurting democracy?

Earlier this month, Hillary Clinton criticized our news media while comparing them to Al-Jazeera. "You may not agree with it, but you feel like you're getting real news around the clock instead of a million commercials and, you know, arguments between talking heads." The response was predictable. Shoot the messenger and ignore the message. Try as we might to pretend otherwise, our media are failing democracy.

Since the 1980s, Wall Street has expected media corporations to increase their earnings by about 20 percent a year. So these corporations cut costs by buying out local newspapers, laying off reporters and centralizing the news.

These days, political news focuses mostly on the debates framed by special interests in Washington. With increasingly syndicated and franchised content, local media are less relevant to readers and viewers. As media consumers, we are flooded with commercial content designed to entertain us and deprived of the information necessary to remedy the problems we face.

Defenders say the market has decided what kind of media are worthwhile to produce. Americans don't seem to particularly want critical information. We tune in to what we like or already believe and ignore or defame what we don't.

Political media train us to identify ourselves as either liberal or conservative by modeling two-sided arguments, as if there are always only two positions on any issue. It's easier that way. In turn, we support our preferred political team by aping their talking points and slogans.

It's good for business. Mass-media politics has become an immensely profitable spectacle for media corporations. The more outrageous and combative the pundit, the better the ratings. While this may benefit the corporate bottom line, we need deeper and more productive dialogue to achieve our democracy.

Our Founding Fathers knew that powerful people and groups would use media to promote their own special interests. They were wise enough to create a check on media power in the form of independent community-based journalism, dissenting local weeklies dedicated to searching for the common good. They feared the market would not ensure such journalism, so they supported it with postal subsidies.

To promote true freedom of the press today, to make good on the idea of a government of, by and for the people, we need to restore their vision of a subsidized nonprofit independent media system dedicated to checking corporate power and promoting the general welfare.

We the people must demand critical journalism that limits commercial content, gets beyond the two-sides-to-every-issue approach that divides us, and provides us with the information a democracy needs. Media that fail to reach this bar of public responsibility should pay full freight. Let the market decide what it wants for
entertainment.

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