


The new titans of media and FAKE DNC NEWS

By Jeff McCall

 Google, Facebook and Drudge: What the new titans of media mean for America

© Getty

Just a few decades ago, citizens who wanted to stay on top of the daily news had a narrow range of options. They could read a newspaper, watch an evening network newscast, or maybe just have a conversation with a trusted neighbor or co-worker. Today, the digital world today has created a Wild West of information resources. One could question, however, whether we're really more informed compared to pre-digital news consumers.

Much depends on the quality of the gatekeepers who determine what news topics get traction in the public mindset. Those media agenda setters used to be grizzled, professional journalists who understood news and public dialogue. Sure, power was centralized in the hands and heads of powerful news editors of the big television networks, wire service and major dailies. But, at least, they were journalists who had some conception of their civic duties as public surrogates and had the noses to sniff out news of substance.

Today, the gatekeeping role of establishing the national news conversation falls increasingly on social media sites, search engines and news aggregator web sites. The backgrounds and

motivations of the technical whiz kids should give the nation pause to consider the broader implications of this newfound influence.

A handful of [elite websites](#) — the top four, respectively, Google, Facebook, Twitter and the Drudge Report — are transforming the public sphere. They wield tremendous power as the leading “referrers” of news content on the web. News narratives in the broader sphere now rely heavily on the traction that evolves from these titans of industry as more and more Americans say they rely on social media for getting their “news” of the day.

There's some cause for concern about this dynamic. According to Pew Research Center, [45 percent of Americans](#) indicate they now get some of their news from Facebook. That means these news consumers are increasingly influenced by digital behemoths whose methods for news referrals are mysterious and for which there is little accountability. One must wonder if news consumers are better informed on matters of substance or if their heads are filling up with mush.

As they become increasingly influential gatekeepers, we should question whether these digital powers can be trusted to exercise their role in a balanced manner. Trust in the “news media” has been dropping for 15 years, coinciding with the growth of the digital world. That relationship is worth pondering.

President Trump criticized Facebook this fall, tweeting, “Facebook was always anti-Trump.” Facebook chairman Mark Zuckerberg punched back by saying, “Both sides are upset about ideas and content they don’t like.”

Yet, despite Zuckerberg's claim, Facebook has generally been suspected of pushing left-leaning content. Several former Facebook workers said in a published interview in 2016 that they suppressed news of conservative political leaders. Evidence suggests that Facebook and Twitter both suppressed dissemination of WikiLeaks' 2016 DNC documents. Twitter blocked a campaign ad earlier this fall by Republican Rep. [Marsha Blackburn](#) (R-Tenn.) before later backing down. And a study conducted by Robert Epstein of the American Institute for Behavioral Research found that Google searches on the 2016 presidential election routinely ranked pro-Clinton articles ahead of pro-Trump articles.

Digital executives explain that search results and referrals are generated by computer algorithms that are not designed to promote any particular political cause. That might well be true, but the algorithms are designed by people and managed by people. At the least, the public needs to be told more by these tech giants about how their content systems work.

Where the left is able to rely on tech giants, the right has just one place to look for news: the Drudge Report, which gets about thirty million visitors each day. That's a fraction of the more than [one billion](#) who visit Facebook, but it's still been enough to draw the ire of the mainstream media. A Washington Post [story](#) published in November accused Drudge of "regularly" linking to "Russian propaganda," by which it meant sites such as Russia Today and InfoWars. (Drudge ironically received no thanks for the hundreds or perhaps thousands of times the site has linked to stories from the Washington Post.)

Outside of Drudge, can anything be done to stem the tide of potentially "fake news" bombarding Americans on social media every day?

One effort to that end is an initiative from the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University called "The Trust Project." Its objective is to create a system by which news articles circulated online will have icons attached that consumers can click to find out the background of the news source. Clicking on the icon will provide readers with "Trust Indicators" to help consumers assess the professional standards of those news organizations.

The bad news? Search engines and social media platforms will be partnering in the effort. It's a noble undertaking, to be sure, but having the digital power brokers referee the process could be like having baseball players call their own balls and strikes.

The news world has changed one set of gatekeepers (legacy media) for another set (digital search engines and social media). Whatever else can be said of that change, it's safe to say times were simpler when consumers only relied on Walter Cronkite.

Jeffrey McCall ([@Prof_McCall](#)) is a professor of communication at DePauw University.