



FOURTH ESTATE

## The Media Bubble Is Worse Than You Think

JACK SHAFER

These bubbles represent the 150 counties with the most newspaper and internet publishing jobs. | Illustration by DataPoint



**HOW DID BIG MEDIA MISS THE DONALD TRUMP SWELL?** News organizations old and new, large and small, print and online, broadcast and cable assigned phalanxes of reporters armed with the most sophisticated polling data and analysis to cover the presidential campaign. The overwhelming assumption was that the race was Hillary Clinton's for the taking, and the real question wasn't how sweeping her November victory would be, but how far out to sea her wave would send political parvenu Trump. Today, it's Trump who occupies the White House and Clinton who's drifting out to sea—an outcome that arrived not just as an embarrassment for the press but as an indictment. In some profound way, the election made clear, the national media just doesn't get the nation it purportedly covers.

What went so wrong? What's *still* wrong? To some conservatives, Trump's surprise win on November 8 simply bore out what they had suspected, that the Democrat-infested press was knowingly in the tank for Clinton all along. The media, in this view, was guilty not just of confirmation bias but of complicity. But the knowing-bias charge never added up: No news organization ignored the Clinton emails story, and everybody feasted on the damaging John Podesta email cache that WikiLeaks served up buffet-style. Practically speaking, you're not pushing Clinton to victory if you're pantsing her and her party to voters almost daily.

The answer to the press' myopia lies elsewhere, and nobody has produced a better argument for how the national media missed the Trump story than FiveThirtyEight's Nate Silver, who pointed out that the ideological clustering in top newsrooms led to groupthink. "As of 2013, only 7 percent of [journalists] identified as Republicans," Silver wrote in March, chiding the press for its political homogeneity. Just after the election, presidential strategist Steve Bannon savaged the press on the same point but with a heartier vocabulary. "The media bubble is the ultimate symbol of what's wrong with this country," Bannon said. "It's just a circle of people talking to themselves who have no fucking idea what's going on."

But journalistic groupthink is a symptom, not a cause. And when it comes to the cause, there's another, blunter way to think about the question than screaming "bias" and "conspiracy," or counting D's and R's. That's to ask a simple question about the map. Where do journalists work, and how much has that changed in recent years? To determine this, my colleague Tucker Doherty excavated labor statistics and cross-referenced them against voting patterns and Census data to figure out just what the American media landscape looks like, and how much it has changed.

The results read like a revelation. The national media really does work in a bubble, something that wasn't true as recently as 2008. And the bubble is growing more extreme. Concentrated heavily along the coasts, the bubble is both geographic and political. If you're a working journalist, odds aren't just that you work in a pro-Clinton county—odds are that you reside in one of the nation's *most* pro-Clinton counties. And you've got company: If you're a typical reader of POLITICO, chances are you're a citizen of bubbleville, too.

The "media bubble" trope might feel overused by critics of journalism who want to sneer at reporters who live in Brooklyn or California and don't get the "real America" of southern Ohio or rural Kansas. But these numbers suggest it's no exaggeration: Not only is the bubble real, but it's more extreme than you might realize. And it's driven by deep industry trends.

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Parts of the media have always had their own bubbles. The national magazine industry has been concentrated in New York for generations, and the copy produced reflects an Eastern sensibility. Radio and TV networks based in New York and Los Angeles likewise have shared that dominant sensibility. But they were more than balanced out by the number of newspaper jobs in big cities, midsized cities and smaller towns throughout the country, spreading journalists everywhere.

No longer. The newspaper industry has jettisoned hundreds of thousands of jobs, due to falling advertising revenues. Dailies have shrunk sections, pages and features; some have retreated from daily publication; hundreds have closed. Daily and weekly newspaper publishers employed about 455,000 reporters, clerks, salespeople, designers and the like in 1990, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. By January 2017, that workforce had more than halved to 173,900. Those losses were felt in almost every region of the country.

As newspapers have dwindled, internet publishers have added employees at a bracing clip. According to BLS data, a startling boom in "internet publishing and broadcasting" jobs has taken place. Since January 2008, internet publishing has grown from 77,900 jobs to 206,700 in January 2017. In late 2015, during Barack Obama's second term, these two trend lines—jobs in newspapers, and jobs in internet publishing—finally crossed. For the first time, the number of workers in internet publishing exceeded the number of their newspaper brethren. Internet publishers are now adding workers at nearly twice the rate newspaper publishers are losing them.

This isn't just a shift in medium. It's also a shift in sociopolitics, and a radical one. Where newspaper jobs are spread nationwide, internet jobs are not: Today, 73 percent of all internet publishing jobs are concentrated in either the Boston-New York-Washington-Richmond corridor or the West Coast crescent that runs from Seattle to San Diego and on to Phoenix. The Chicagoland area, a traditional media center, captures 5 percent of the jobs, with a paltry 22 percent going to the rest of the country. And almost all the real growth of internet publishing is happening outside the heartland, in just a few urban counties, all places that voted for Clinton. So when your conservative friends use "media" as a synonym for "coastal" and "liberal," they're not far off the mark.

What caused the majority of national media jobs to concentrate on the coasts? An alignment of the stars? A flocking of like-minded humans? The answer is far more structural, and far more difficult to alter: It was economics that done the deed.

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**The magic of the internet** was going to shake up the old certainties of the job market, prevent the coagulation of jobs in the big metro areas, or so the Web utopians promised us in the mid-1990s. The technology would free

internet employees to work from wherever they could find a broadband connection. That remains true in theory, with thousands of Web developers, writers and producers working remotely from lesser metropolises.



1600 PENN

## Trump's Fake War on the Fake News

By BEN SCHRECKINGER and HADAS GOLD

But economists know something the internet evangelists have ignored: All else being equal, specialized industries like to cluster. Car companies didn't arise in remote regions that needed cars—they arose in Detroit, which already had heavy industry, was near natural resources, boasted a skilled workforce and was home to a network of suppliers that could help car companies thrive. As industries grow, they bud and create spinoffs, the best example being the way Silicon Valley blossomed from just a handful of pioneering electronics firms in the 1960s. Seattle's rise as a tech powerhouse was seeded by Microsoft, which moved to the area in 1979 and helped create the ecosystem that gave rise to companies like Amazon.

As Enrico Moretti, a University of California, Berkeley, economist who has studied the geography of job creation, points out, the tech entrepreneurs who drive internet publishing could locate their companies in low-rent, low-cost-of-living places like Cleveland, but they don't. They need the most talented workers, who tend to move to the clusters, where demand drives wages higher. And it's the clusters that host all the subsidiary industries a tech start-up craves—lawyers specializing in intellectual property and incorporation; hardware and software vendors; angel investors; and so on.

The old newspaper business model almost *prevented* this kind of clustering. Except for the national broadsheets—the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and increasingly the *Washington Post*—newspapers must locate, cheek by jowl, next to their customers, the people who consume local news, and whom local advertisers need to reach. The Sioux Falls *Argus Leader* is stuck in South Dakota just as the owners of hydroelectric plants in the Rockies are stuck where they are. As much as they might want to move their dams to coastal markets where they could charge more for electricity, fate has fixed them geographically. Economists call these “non-tradable goods”—goods that must be consumed in the same community in which they're made. The business of a newspaper can't really be separated from the place where it's published. It is, or was, driven by ads for things that don't travel, like real estate, jobs, home decor and cars. And as that advertising has gotten harder and harder to come by, local newsrooms have become thinner and thinner.

The online media, liberated from printing presses and local ad bases, has been free to form clusters, piggyback-style, on the industries and government that it covers. New York is home to most business coverage because of the size of the business and banking community there. Likewise, national political reporting has concentrated in Washington and grown apace with the federal government. Entertainment and cultural reporting has bunched in New York and Los Angeles, where those businesses are strong.

The result? If you look at the maps on the next page, you don't need to be a Republican campaign strategist to grasp just how far the “media bubble” has drifted from the average American experience. Newspaper jobs are far more evenly scattered across the country, including the deep red parts. But as those vanish, it's internet jobs that are driving whatever growth there is in media—and those fall almost entirely in places that are dense, blue and right in the bubble.

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**As the votes streamed in on election night**, evidence that the country had further cleaved into two Americas became palpable. With few exceptions, Clinton ran the table in urban America, while Trump ran it in the ruralities. And as you might suspect, Clinton dominated where internet publishing jobs abound. Nearly 90 percent of all internet publishing employees work in a county where Clinton won, and 75 percent of them work in a county that she won by more than 30 percentage points. When you add in the shrinking number of newspaper jobs, 72 percent of all internet publishing or newspaper employees work in a county that Clinton won. By this measure, of course, Clinton was the national media's candidate.



MEDIA

## How Trump Blew Up the Conservative Media

By ELIANA JOHNSON

Resist—if you can—the conservative reflex to absorb this data and conclude that the media deliberately twists the news in favor of Democrats. Instead, take it the way a social scientist would take it: The people who report, edit, produce and publish news can't help being affected—deeply affected—by the environment around them. Former

*New York Times* public editor Daniel Okrent got at this when he analyzed the decidedly liberal bent of his newspaper's staff in a 2004 column that rewards rereading today. The "heart, mind, and habits" of the *Times*, he wrote, cannot be divorced from the ethos of the cosmopolitan city where it is produced. On such subjects as abortion, gay rights, gun control and environmental regulation, the *Times'* news reporting is a pretty good reflection of its region's dominant predisposition. And yes, a *Times*-ian ethos flourishes in all of internet publishing's major cities—Los Angeles, New York, Boston, Seattle, San Francisco and Washington. The *Times* thinks of itself as a centrist national newspaper, but it's more accurate to say its politics are perfectly centered on the slices of America that look and think the most like Manhattan.

Something akin to the *Times* ethos thrives in most major national newsrooms found on the Clinton coasts—CNN, CBS, the *Washington Post*, BuzzFeed, POLITICO and the rest. Their reporters, an admirable lot, can parachute into Appalachia or the rural Midwest on a monthly basis and still not shake their provincial sensibilities: Reporters tote their bubbles with them.

In a sense, the media bubble reflects an established truth about America: The places with money get served better than the places without. People in big media cities aren't just more liberal, they're also richer: Half of all newspaper and internet publishing employees work in counties where the median household income is greater than \$61,000—\$7,000 more than the national median. Commercial media tend to cluster where most of the GDP is created, and that's the coasts. Perhaps this is what Bannon is hollering about when he denounces the "corporatist, global media," as he did in February at the Conservative Political Action Conference. If current trends continue—and it's safe to predict they will—national media will continue to expand and concentrate on the coasts, while local and regional media contract.

Can media myopia be cured? Unlike other industries, the national media has a directive beyond just staying in business: Many newsrooms really do feel a commitment to reflecting America fairly. Sometimes, correcting for liberal bias can be smart business as well. For instance, by rightly guessing that there was a big national broadcast audience that didn't see their worldviews represented in the mainstream networks, the Fox News Channel came to dominate cable TV ratings. Adopting Fox's anti-mainstream media message to his political needs, Trump ended up running on a Foxesque platform, making a vote for him into a vote against the elite media—his trash talk was always directed at the national press, not the local. Similarly, Breitbart has seen huge success sticking it to liberals, implicitly taking the side of the "real America" against the coastal bubbles. Breitbart now attracts more than 15 million visitors a month, according to comScore, which isn't far behind more established outlets like the *Hill's* 24 million and POLITICO's 25 million.

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But is this really America, either? It's worth mentioning that Fox and Breitbart—and indeed most of the big conservative media players—also happen to be located in the same bubble. Like the "MSM" they rail against, they're a product of New York, Washington and Los Angeles. It's an argument against the bubble, being waged almost entirely by people who work inside it.

Is America trapped? Certainly, the media seems to be. It's hard to imagine an industry willingly accommodating the places with less money, fewer people and less expertise, especially if they sense that niche has already been filled to capacity by Fox. Yet everyone acknowledges that Trump's election really was a bad miss, and if the media doesn't figure it out, it will miss the next one, too.

Journalism tends toward the autobiographical unless reporters and editors make a determined effort to separate themselves from the frame of their own experiences. The best medicine for journalistic myopia isn't reeducation camps or a splurge of diversity hiring, though tiny doses of those two remedies wouldn't hurt. Journalists respond to their failings best when their vanity is punctured with proof that they blew a story that was right in front of them. If the burning humiliation of missing the biggest political story in a generation won't change newsrooms, nothing will. More than anything, journalists hate getting beat.

