My media diet in Trump's era

My informants are better equipped to analyze Trumpland than so-called experts.

Carolyn Moxley Rouse

Wednesday November 9, 2016 was the date when I stopped watching or listening to news. For me, that meant I stopped looking at the "liberal" news broadcasts on MSNBC and the "liberal" radio programs on National Public Radio (NPR). In the years before this I had been intensely concerned about these broadcasts. I'm not a state scientist, but an anthropologist, so I was reliant on these broadcasts to keep me updated on news, legislation, and opinion polls. On November 8, I had been convinced by experts that Hillary Clinton would win the presidential election. After Trump was chosen instead, I understood that I had been given an overdose of bad food. So I decided to start a media diet.

I should have known that Trump was going to win. Just months before the election, I had studied falling life expectations in the California countryside, and my poor working class informants had told me that Trump was going to win the election. My anthropological research was more accurate about what was happening in the United States than the media-appointed experts I had learned to trust.

Initially, the diet was demanding. The NPR had been my companion on the way to work every day, and I was dependent on MSNBC regarding supplementary news analysis. Quitting this was very difficult. But within two weeks, I discovered an alternative universe of information. I discovered podcasts like the Slow Burn about the Watergate scandal, Reveal produced by the Center For Investigative Reporting, and S-Town, where a figure that was not different from my main informant in the white countryside of California also appeared. And I continued to read the New York Times and New Yorker. After all, my goal with the diet was not to be knowledgeless. What I wanted to get away from was TV and radio personalities who wanted to make me feel in a certain way about news. Reading made it easier for me to form my own opinions and to choose stories that mattered to me.

I also read about Alexis de Tocqueville's classic "Democracy in America" in two volumes, Hannah Arendt's "Totalitarianism's Origin" and Sindre Bangstad's "Anders Breivik And The Rise of Islamophobia". Texts like these, combined with other texts that I teach, have been far more informative about this new authoritarian era than what I learned to call "quick news." Quick news is for me reporting on significant, ongoing news before it comes clarity. Reporting day in and day out about Trump's alleged cooperation with the Russians was quick news. Read
Arendt and you will understand that Trump was ineffective. A "good" authoritarian leader is dependent on state-of-the-art violence, often administered in a bureaucratic manner. Trump's incompetence means he needs replacements for this, but he doesn't seem to be able to find compensation because he's so full of mistakes.

Good and long-standing investigative journalism is what I call "slow news." What annoyed me with liberal news was not that they were "fake news," as Trump repeatedly repeats. What worried me was that liberal-oriented journalists did not seem to have noticed that all kinds of news, and not just chronicles and comments, have a political framework. Even the choice of what one covers and does not cover lays down guidelines for what consumers find important. So in the run-up to the presidential elections in 2020, I see that the New York Times commits some of the same mistakes as in 2016.

1. To mistakenly compare candidates by comparing conditions that cannot be compared in the nickname to a "fair and balanced" coverage. From the presidential election in 2016, I remember that NPR wrote page up and down about the problems associated with the Trump Foundation (now disbanded as a result of a legal injunction) and the Clinton Foundation (which has saved countless lives). In the listeners' heads, they both appeared as equally corrupt.

2. Reporting people's views on candidates as representing a truth, without questioning how a source's one-sidedness creates these so-called "truths." Because gender and complexion affect opinions, responsible news organizations should try to stay away from polls and exercise caution when reporting on a source's opinions as if they were facts.

Finally, 3. The fact that news organizations refuse to adhere to the extent to which advertising dollars affect both content and framing.

I realize that journalists and journalism are at risk worldwide, and that the threat can be physical or economic. That's why I continue to subscribe to New Yorker and the New York Times. I really appreciate the news, and consider an educated population necessary for democracy to work.

When I committed myself to this media service nearly two and a half years ago, I thought I'd return to my old media habits after Trump had left the White House. But here and now I have come to like my media diet. I do not always know how to pronounce the names of the foreign heads of state I read about in the newspaper. What has changed is that I now stand back with more time to read old and new texts that can teach me more about what is going on than the daily news cycle. And I've started to take my informants more seriously. Because it turns out that they are better equipped to analyze Trumpland than the so-called experts.

_The chronicle has been translated and adapted by Sindre Bangstad, researcher I, KIFO, Oslo._