

The Pathfinder – December 2024
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Title: Is there a new media?

There were an array of reactions to Donald Trump's win on Nov. 5, including those that cast Trump's win as a victory over the oft-named "foe" of politicians everywhere: the media.

But unlike the ritual following athletic events, where the two sides shake hands and exchange the obligatory "good game," there was no hint of sportsmanship to be found in some circles. As CNN's Brian Stelter [wrote](#):

"The media is dead," Fox News comedian Greg Gutfeld declared. "It's dead," his primetime colleague Sean Hannity echoed. "You are the media now," Elon Musk posted repeatedly on X.

Gutfeld, though, went further than exulting in the media's defeat. He pointed to the new power in political media—[podcasts](#)—as the "way forward." He's right as far as he goes. Millions of people get their news about politics and policy [from digital sources](#). While those sources include mobile apps, podcasts, and email newsletters from legacy media outlets, the primacy and perceived value of those sources have diminished.

Legacy media outlets know this; some took action before the election to show they took their customers' changing views and concerns seriously. The [Los Angeles Times](#), [Washington Post](#), [Minnesota Star Tribune](#), and [Gannet](#) newspaper chain decided to stop making presidential endorsements. The Star Tribune editor Phil Morris said, "We are confident in the ability of informed citizens to decide whom they wish to vote for based on what they see, hear and research." Gannett said, "Readers don't want us to tell them what to think." [This year, the New York Times](#) was alone amongst national newspapers in endorsing a presidential candidate.

In response, thousands of readers canceled their subscriptions, many vowing never to return. Along with the pushback came criticisms of how the press does its job, what its role in civil society ought to be, and even whether the press still matters.

Does it still matter? Of course. We cannot preserve democracy without an independent and robust media culture.

But it's also true that a growing number of people are no longer interested in supporting or paying attention to the media as we've long understood it. And they are using their mobile devices to explore a staggering array of media alternatives.

People are finding the media that suits them – podcasts, Substack newsletters, or posts from pundits on TikTok. These sources feel more personal, and with curated content, they can be sampled anywhere at any time. Naturally, there are pitfalls to this approach. As Financial Times columnist Jemima Kelly [wrote](#):

Unfortunately, whether or not what you find is wrong, fake, or lacking in context is beside the point. Self-directed discovery can be more persuasive and compelling than a carefully edited TV news segment or newspaper article.

Democratic attorney Marc Elias was [more pointed](#) in his views of how partisans should approach this new media landscape:

We need to identify and promote our best messengers and pair them with the most influential platforms, period. This means ending our reliance on credential-based legacy media. These high-prestige outlets command very small audiences, and that audience is shrinking. They speak to almost no persuadable audience. The goal should be to reach voters, period.

That's always been the goal of partisans seeking to win elections. And without question, there's an audience for it. Somewhere. On some platform. But only when it's convenient or necessary for them.

The same challenges apply to those of us who are in the business of informing—not persuading—voters. The people who come to Ballotpedia trust us to provide facts without bias and to report on issues and elections without favor.

Traditional newsrooms will say the same thing – they, too, are only interested in reporting facts. But for whatever reason, growing segments of the public no longer trust that truth, accuracy, and accountability exist in those same newsrooms. Instead, they look for those qualities in bespoke newsletters, podcasts, and social media posts far removed from an editor's gaze.

As I said before, we cannot preserve democracy without an independent and robust media culture.

The real question – the one that keeps newspaper owners, cable TV producers, and radio hosts awake at night – is what form media culture will take. More than ever before, it looks digital, diverse, and, yes, highly democratic.