

The Case for Digital Public Infrastructure | Knight First Amendment Institute

By Ethan Zuckerman

January 21, 2020

The introduction of new media technologies invariably brings about potent social and economic shifts. We are well into one of those shifts as the advent of the consumer internet has destabilized existing models of news production and distribution and enabled new hegemons to establish massive and powerful businesses. Two decades into this shift, societies are asking difficult questions about whether internet technologies and the business models that accompany them are dangerous for our citizens and our democracies.

At these moments of technological shift, it's easy to assume that the business models adopted by technological innovators are inevitable and singular. They are not. As Paul Starr established in his magisterial *The Creation of the Media*,¹ 1. *Paul Starr, The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communication* (2005). the paths taken by different nations in their adoption of new communication technologies (movable type, postal mail, telegraph, radio) depend on the politics and economics of the nation as a whole and vary widely from country to country.

This variance continues with the internet, even though the dominance of the United States – and Silicon Valley in particular – creates the illusion that a single economic and legal system governs our online spaces. This illusion obscures possible solutions to the challenges arising around the socially corrosive effects of new media technologies. Because we see the dominance of the internet by Google, Facebook, and others as inevitable, the solution space we consider for combatting mis-/disinformation, polarization, and promotion of extremism is overly constrained. Our solutions cannot be limited to asking these platforms to do a better job of meeting their civic obligations – we need to consider what technologies we want and need for digital media to have a productive role in democratic societies.

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