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# Fang Kecheng: Social Media Use, Problems and Transformations in the Western Media Industry in the Post-Print Era: A Perspective from 2016 US Election Coverage

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## Abstract

This article presents Dr. Fang Kecheng's analysis of Western mainstream media's "collective failure" in predicting the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Drawing on his observations during his time in the United States, Fang examines the underlying problems in Western journalism and its commercial nature, while proposing directions for future media transformation. He refutes the notion of "Trump governing via Twitter" and dismisses the idea of "big data omnipotence" in Western media as mere hype. ...

## Full Text

## Introduction

This article presents Dr. Fang Kecheng's analysis of Western mainstream media's "collective failure" in predicting the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Drawing on his observations during his time in the United States, Fang examines the underlying problems in Western journalism and its commercial nature, while proposing directions for future media transformation. He refutes the notion of "Trump governing via Twitter" and dismisses the idea of "big data omnipotence" in Western media as mere hype. Fang argues that the failure to predict the election outcome stemmed from factors including excessive pursuit of sensationalism, over-commercialization, and journalists' detachment from grassroots communities. This analysis offers valuable insights for media professionals seeking to deepen their understanding of journalistic principles, strengthen political resolve in newspaper operations, develop news judgment, and advance media convergence innovation.

## 1. On Technology Issues

The intersection of technology and political campaigns dates back to 2004, when Democratic candidate Howard Dean pioneered the use of internet fundraising and community organizing. Although Dean ultimately failed to secure the nomination, his approach represented a revolutionary breakthrough at the time. By leveraging the platform [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com/), Dean became the first candidate to systematically operate online communities, coordinating supporters across states, cities, and counties to organize offline meetings and campaign activities. His small-donation fundraising model directly connected him with ordinary citizens rather than relying on wealthy donors, and the total contributions he received surpassed even Bill Clinton's previous records—a remarkable achievement in 2004.

Barack Obama later perfected this model during his successful campaigns, harnessing social media to mobilize young voters and raise unprecedented funds. As Arianna Huffington once noted, Obama could not have become president without the internet. However, the role of technology proved to be double-edged. While it empowered marginalized candidates to challenge the establishment, it also enabled new forms of voter manipulation. Joe Trippi, who managed Dean's 2004 campaign, predicted a year before the 2016 election that the race would become the most negative in history, with victory going to whoever could most effectively use technology to excavate and amplify negative information about their opponent. This forecast proved remarkably prescient.

Regarding Donald Trump's use of social media, domestic commentators have characterized it as “Trump governing via Twitter,” suggesting a sophisticated application of digital tools. However, this interpretation is misguided. Trump did not employ any dazzling big data techniques or sophisticated social media operations; he simply posted on Twitter and made controversial statements at rallies. His approach was fundamentally different from the systematic, data-driven strategies of Dean and Obama. The notion that Trump masterfully deployed social media technology is largely a myth—his success came not from technological prowess but from his ability to generate constant media attention through provocative rhetoric.

## 2. On Business Model Issues

The commercial logic of American media created perverse incentives during the 2016 election cycle. CBS Corporation's chairman famously stated that while Trump might not be good for America, he was “damn good for CBS.” This candid admission revealed how Trump's controversial statements drove ratings and advertising revenue. The 24-hour news cycle, pioneered by CNN, created a profitable model where more airtime meant more advertising slots without proportionally increasing production costs. This dynamic led to disproportionate coverage: during the Republican primaries, despite over a dozen candidates, media outlets focused almost exclusively on Trump, anticipating his next out-

geous remark.

This attention economy manifested in stark financial terms. According to March 2016 advertising data, Jeb Bush—the establishment favorite—spent the most on paid advertising among all candidates. Trump, despite his personal wealth, spent relatively little on ads yet received vastly more media coverage. Media monitoring organizations calculated that Trump received approximately \$2 billion worth of “free advertising”—coverage that he did not pay for but that promoted his candidacy. This represented a profound failure of the media’s business model: in chasing sensationalism and ratings, news organizations inadvertently provided Trump with unprecedented free publicity, becoming unwitting accomplices in his primary victory.

The crisis in Western media’s business model extends beyond election coverage. As advertising revenues decline globally, many news organizations face closure. This structural crisis may, however, present an opportunity to diversify revenue streams and reduce dependence on advertising. The post-election surge in donations to nonprofit investigative outlets like ProPublica—mentioned on *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*—demonstrated public willingness to support quality journalism financially. Similarly, subscriptions to serious publications like *The New York Times* spiked, indicating that audiences still value professionally curated content. These developments suggest that alternative funding models could help media escape the tyranny of clickbait and sensationalism.

### 3. On the Multiple Causes Behind the Absence of Truth

The failure to accurately predict the election outcome stemmed from multiple interconnected factors. At the most basic level, polling data was fundamentally flawed—some Trump supporters either refused to participate in surveys or were not reached by traditional polling methods. However, the problem ran deeper than methodology. Mainstream media exhibited systematic biases, as journalists worldwide tend toward liberal perspectives. This ideological tilt led to amplification of pro-Hillary narratives while downplaying Trump’s support. Although not intentionally fabricating facts, this selective emphasis failed to present a comprehensive picture of the political landscape.

The “post-truth” phenomenon became the defining characteristic of 2016, with Oxford Dictionaries naming “post-truth” as the word of the year. In this environment, emotional appeal trumped factual accuracy. The proliferation of fake news reached absurd levels—one viral story claimed Hillary Clinton had adopted an alien baby. While fact-checking gained prominence as a response, it often focused on trivialities. For instance, media outlets spent considerable energy verifying Trump’s claim that Clinton “acid-washed” her email servers, which was clearly metaphorical. Such pedantic fact-checking alienated audiences who saw it as missing the forest for the trees.

Structural problems in news organizations compounded these issues. Western journalism’s crisis has hit local media hardest, with newsrooms increasingly

concentrated in coastal cities like New York, Washington, and San Francisco. Fewer journalists are willing to embed themselves in Midwestern, Southern, or rural communities to understand working-class perspectives. This geographical and cultural disconnect created blind spots that polling data alone could not remedy. The limitations of both quantitative surveys and qualitative reporting meant that journalists failed to grasp the depth of populist sentiment.

Moving forward, addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reform. Improving polling methodologies through technological and design innovations is necessary but insufficient. Newsrooms must also commit to professional practices that prioritize depth over speed, invest in grassroots reporting to overcome elite bias, and enhance media literacy education to help audiences discern credible information. The election of 2016 revealed that technology, business models, and professional practices in Western media had converged to create a system ill-equipped to serve democratic discourse. Only through fundamental changes in how journalism is funded, produced, and consumed can media rebuild public trust and fulfill its essential democratic function.

**Author Bio:** Fang Kecheng is a PhD candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, former political correspondent for *Southern Weekly*, founder of the CNPolitics team, and founder of News Lab. He has long tracked cutting-edge trends in the media industry, with particular focus on technological transformations in journalism.

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