

Three Major Newspapers Abruptly Abandon Presidential Endorsements

By Don Sutherland

With less than two weeks to go to arguably the most consequential U.S. Presidential election since perhaps before the American Civil War, three high-profile newspapers—the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*—announced that they would not be making endorsements in the 2024 Presidential race. The announcements triggered editorial writers to resign and subscribers to cancel their subscriptions—some 200,000 at *The Washington Post*, alone.

In response, *Washington Post* owner Jeff Bezos wrote an op-ed explaining his rationale. In part, he wrote:

Our profession is now the least trusted of all. Something we are doing is clearly not working...

We must be accurate, and we must be believed to be accurate. It's a bitter pill to swallow, but we are failing on the second requirement. Most people believe the media is biased. Anyone who doesn't see this is paying scant attention to reality, and those who fight reality lose. Reality is an undefeated champion...

What presidential endorsements actually do is create a perception of bias. A perception of non-independence. Ending them is a principled decision, and it's the right one.

Setting aside the controversy and accepting Bezos' argument that his decision was principled, the central question concerns Bezos' diagnosis of the causes of the loss of public confidence in the accuracy of the news media. That loss of public confidence was his justification for abandoning political endorsements in a high-stakes election.

The subscriber flight that followed suggested that the newspaper's readers wanted the newspaper to continue to take clear positions on consequential matters, including the Presidential election, in their editorial capacity. The absence of offsetting new subscriptions suggested that the immediate decision did not reposition the newspaper in terms of trust, much less for growth. Additional passage of time will be required for a fuller analysis.

A more rigorous assessment requires looking beyond the three newspapers and the news media. It requires an examination of society itself, namely the tastes and preferences of the general public.

A look at society reveals that it is perhaps more likely than not, that public trust in the news media has eroded due to forces largely beyond the news media's control. The same forces of political polarization are driving an ongoing constitutional retrogression in the United States while draining trust from a broad range of public institutions is likely responsible.

Political polarization rooted in cultural concerns/biases, asymmetric partisan identification (the personal loyalty of the MAGA movement/Republican Party to Donald Trump exceeds

Democratic Party loyalty to any single figure), growing intolerance of disagreement, and increasing zero-sum thinking on issues has skewed public thinking toward political leaders, government, and societal institutions, including the news media. The role Social Media has played in amplifying cognitive biases e.g., confirmation bias, through the expanded capacity for readers to self-select information and the resulting “echo chamber” effect have accelerated the polarization of society.

There is now a distinct possibility that U.S. political polarization has passed a tipping point where it will remain entrenched for an extended period of time no matter the outcome of the 2024 election or national circumstances in the years ahead. Anecdotally, the response of the American public to the COVID-19 pandemic—the kind of event that typically unifies the public against a common threat—hints that American society has tipped into a stable polarized state.

If so, the news media is merely a ship floundering on stormy seas over which it has little influence. In such an environment, accuracy, important as it is, won't be sufficient to replenish public confidence in the news media. Until the underlying factors driving American polarization are sufficiently addressed within broader society, institutional mistrust would persist and perhaps even deepen further. Even more worrisome, the news media itself could be swept by the larger societal hurricane to become increasingly polarized, as has already occurred from the growing influence of Talk Radio, Fox News, and a number of smaller outlets, even as they peddle disinformation spiced by conspiracy theories on a mass scale.

In the contemporary polarized state of American society, the high-profile retreat of three major newspapers won't do much to address the general loss of trust in the news media. If anything, the newspapers will cut off a share of the public from vital information leaving those newspapers with only a loss of subscribers and a continued lack of public trust to show for their decision.

In sum, the three major newspapers responded in an overly simplified tactical fashion to an enormous and deep strategic and structural issue that is largely outside of their control. Their abandoning the Presidential endorsement business from their abrupt self-imposed silence, may actually have the unintended effect of strengthening the forces of polarization that have eroded confidence the news media.