

The Role of Media in Today's Basic Income Movement

Remarks by Conrad Shaw, May 26, 2018, at the 2018 North American Basic Income Guarantee (NABIG) Congress, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario

Hello there. My name is Conrad Shaw. I'm honored to be here to discuss the role of media in today's basic income movement.

Full disclosure and sincerest apologies to our lovely Canadian hosts here: I'm American. So, in the spirit of focusing on what I know, I'll mostly be discussing UBI and the media in the United States. I would venture, though, that the situation here in Canada is not as different from the American one as many here would like to imagine. So hopefully my main arguments will still resonate with this audience.

The UBI movement has seen a huge surge of interest in these past few years. Now why is that? After all, it had a day in the sun way back in the 1960s and 70s with Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign prioritizing what he referred to as a guaranteed income, and it enjoyed relative prominence in the political world up until the Nixon administration almost implemented it. It ultimately fizzled out in Congress when Democrats and Republicans couldn't agree on the details, and we ended up with the inefficient, paternalistic, and perverse welfare system that we still struggle with and make excuses for today. For the most part, America then proceeded to forget about the idea for the next four and a half decades, and now UBI is once again having a day in the sun.

So where was it all this time? It hadn't disappeared entirely, of course. A handful of devoted activists and academics have faithfully kept that candle burning all the long years in between. Some of them are in this room, and they know who they are. To them I say, we all owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude. It must have felt like screaming into the wind.

So what brought basic income back into the national conversation this time? We all know the answer, even if it rankles the sensibilities of our heroic human rights activists and philosophers in attendance today. The answer is automation. The fear of robots making us obsolete and thereby incapable of earning a living. A large and growing number of people are sounding the alarm, and many believe that we are headed quickly toward a labor displacement of unprecedented magnitude due to self-driving cars and software that can sort through data, answer phones, read x-rays, replace cashiers, and much more. We're seeing studies predicting a loss of around 50% of our jobs in America over the next 15-20 years. 50%. Also known as half. As a point of reference, the unemployment rate was 25% at the lowest depths of the Great Depression. And many are starting to think that basic income just might be the crucial cornerstone in the solution to this job apocalypse. Many think so because they saw that Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg said so and it sparked their interest. More accurately, perhaps, many think so because Bloomberg and MSNBC and Fox News and the Times informed them that Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg said so.

So it's the media, in large part, that was missing all this time. It's the public awareness and interest that extensive media coverage and celebrity endorsement bring. Without it, I wouldn't have first read an article about UBI a couple years ago and had the course of my life radically diverted into the role of a full time basic income advocate. So far in this basic income renaissance, media has played the role of sensationalist PR man for the oh so sexy tech and celebrity side of the movement.

But basic income is a much more profound idea than we're giving it credit for. This contemporary movement has some real energy and hipness, but it hasn't yet rediscovered its soul or its voice. While acknowledging that automation is a valid concern and serious threat, we must remember that the soul of UBI is basic human rights, not robots and labor market disruptions. And the necessary voice of UBI is not TV pundits, celebrity billionaires, or even the halls of academia. It is and must be The People. Dr. King saw this clearly and expressed it loudly and often before he was assassinated.

Large and rigorous scientific studies like the one here in Ontario, or in Oakland, or Stockton, California, and the invaluable data that will come from them won't be enough. There were extensive trials in the US and Canada in the 60s and 70s, too, and the extremely positive data they resulted in was either misrepresented and incomplete, or it was buried for decades like with the Mincome trial in Canada, lest we *Forget*. That was a little UBI joke about Canadian basic income hero Evelyn Forget, who is here in attendance. Evelyn? If you didn't get it, just ask one of the people who chuckled later. Anyway, the point is that the public was not sufficiently brought along. The movement was too academic then and the part of it now that isn't trendy for lesser, more clickbaity reasons is still too academic. The trials didn't help get UBI passed, because statistics only matter if people know about them.

Meaningful, progressive policy change has no fuel without the energized voice of the public firmly behind it. In the 70s, the US House of Representatives actually passed the UBI bill, but the Senate wanted something larger, and after some debate they pretty quickly just gave up and gave us welfare like the programs we know as TANF and food stamps instead, because there was no fire under their asses. No politician will stick their neck out for something new until that fire is there. Trump certainly won't, Hillary wouldn't have, and no, not even Bernie Sanders dares to go there and risk his progress on healthcare and other issues without a clear public mandate.

Now, very disappointingly to me, Bernie's joining the growing group of politicians jumping on board this myopic, misguided, and unconscionable new clamoring for a Federal Job Guarantee as an alternative to UBI. It's up to The People to inform and consistently remind Bernie and all of our elected leaders that universal basic income is what is required and what we demand.

By the way, if this last bit is coming as a surprise to you, and the Job Guarantee has been sounding appealing lately, because it really can sound nice at first blush and many influential and persuasive people are currently promoting it, please bring it up in the Q&A or the break out sessions or ask me later, and I'm happy to discuss it further. It's important that we come to a healthy understanding on this. These are the discussions that we need to be having, and vigorously. These are the fundamental issues that we need to get clear in the minds of the great majority of our citizens, because that's the only way we will have a chance of proactively passing legislation in the near-er future, before major catastrophic suffering absolutely necessitates it. We need The People to understand basic income for its universal, humanist message, so that it can transcend our usual party line bickering.

This, then, is where media comes into the picture and plays a too often overlooked and absolutely vital role. Mind you, I'm not talking about the bought and sold mainstream organizations that will only discuss Russia, tweets, porn stars, and whatever bumps their ratings. The fact that I used the phrase "job apocalypse" earlier and nobody batted an eye is a testament to just how much mainstream media has warped and degraded our expectations of honest, productive discourse. Don't hold your breath for CNN to do the right thing. There's another kind of media on which we will need to rely.

I'm talking about independent media, the arts, social media. I'm talking about you and me and other regular folk everywhere communicating on a massive scale with all of our fellow citizens in all of the corners of our nations, reaching out to the everyday people whom most establishment politicians find less important to court than big donors in big cities. I'm talking about public spectacle that can't be ignored. I'm talking about creative campaigns and projects. We must perform and inspire, we must bare our hearts, and dammit, we'll probably have to get good at memes.

I'm talking about combining forces with other movements like climate, indigenous rights, healthcare, combating racism, hell, I dunno, decriminalizing marijuana, because if you think about it, having a UBI in place to protect the activists would fortify every movement, and there are many opportunities for directly generating UBI funding by addressing these other issues. Where better to put revenues from pollution fees and pot taxes than back into the pockets of every citizen?

I'm talking about organizing from all angles to build a massive grassroots movement founded in a deep understanding that UBI is about fundamentally empowering every human being. I'm talking about a viral upswell grounded in a spirit of respect and empathy for our fellow citizens.

We can't just compile data. We need to share stories. We can't just raise money. We have to cultivate *human* capital. And we can't just lean on a few celebrity spokespeople. We must build an army.

It's so lovely to see this conference grow every year. There are something like 300 attendees this year, I understand. It's a nicely crowded hall today. I look forward to when we're packing stadiums.

We won't have UBI until The People rise up and insist upon it, and they cannot do that in this distracting modern age without an honest, large scale, and diverse media effort to awaken them to what is possible. But if we just politely present our scientific findings in this great war for attention, cat videos will win the day.

We as a movement need to include far more creative, popular media efforts in our strategy in order to bring the rest of our countries up to speed. Only then will we all rise up and demand our human right to security and dignity through a universal basic income.

Thank you.

Now I'd like to share a little more of our specific media effort to help bring UBI to the American public. The project I'm working on is called Bootstraps. Essentially, we are partnering with a nonprofit foundation to administer a UBI experiment of our own, providing a basic income of \$1000/month/adult and \$333/month/child to 21 Americans across 10 states. We're not doing this to produce a white paper or a statistical analysis. Instead, we're running it as more of a qualitative experiment, documenting on film the experiences of our participants over the course of their two years with basic income. In early 2020, just in time for the American presidential primaries, we will release a documentary series sharing the simple and honest truths within these American stories.

Conrad Shaw

303-709-7085

conradshaw1@gmail.com