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USA Network's Kay Koplovitz: Time ripe to rebuild trust in media

US cable television veteran Kay Koplovitz calls for a return of 'verified, fact-based media'.

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USA Network founder Kay Koplovitz. Picture: Hollie Adams

A return to trusted media sources is needed to safeguard democracy in an era of fake news, election meddling and vitriolic public debate, says US cable television veteran Kay Koplovitz.

In an interview with *The Australian*, the USA Network founder — who was the world's first woman to serve as president of a cable network — called for a more tempered approach to mend social divisions in the US.

And she shared her views on the #MeToo movement, the need to regulate the tech giants in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica data leak and Donald Trump's record in the White House.

Koplovitz, who founded the USA Network in 1977 after the television industry of the era failed to support her ambitions, believes the US is “edging back towards” the conditions of the Cold War era, when she first explored satellite technology as part of her Masters thesis in communications. USA Network is now owned by NBCUniversal and screens a mix of drama and sport.

“For the first time in my life, we have a president that only speaks to his contingent, which is a minority,” she says.

“He does not speak for the people, the majority, and it's very destructive to have a party that is based on a lot of vitriol, accusations, name calling and division ... This is not what is going to drive our country forward.”

After the influence wielded by Cambridge Analytica over the US election was exposed last month in an explosive Channel 4 investigation — which showed how fake news stories were fed to key voters via targeted Facebook ads — Koplovitz predicted a return to “verified, fact-based media” by a public dislocated by the “cacophony” of information from questionable sources.

“People do want to have grounded sources that have been fact-checked, because it's such a swamp of media out there,” she says. “When it comes to things like your health, your education, things that are fundamental to life, we don't want to be lied to.”

Koplovitz called for regulators to clamp down on the tech giants to ensure that consumers could make informed choices about sharing their data.

“I don't think self regulation is going to be enough; I think Facebook has been very slow in coming to acknowledge what their vulnerabilities are,” Koplovitz says.

“It’s going to have to be something much more proactive, in simplified plain English terms in what you agree to when you sign up for all these different social media platforms.”

Koplovitz was “mortified” when she learned of Mr Trump’s electoral victory and has been dismayed by the changes effected during his first year in office, from tax cuts to pulling back from trade agreements.

“I’ve always felt we need to have a strong middle class, that people should have a living wage and good schools,” she says. “And what’s happening in our country now is not that — it’s dividing us, and creating more inequality ... It’s destroying our democracy.”

As for the #TimesUp movement that has swept the globe since allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein emerged last year, Koplovitz is firmly of the view that women must be listened to — and warned that there would be no turning back the tide.

“There’s backlash to it, there are men who feel this is kind of a witch hunt for them. But I think on the whole it has really made people aware,” she says.

“Women don’t want to be victims. They just want to be respected for what they are doing, and they want to have an equal opportunity to grow in their careers.”

At the same time, she said, women needed to “step up” and demand the promotions and pay rises that their male colleagues were demanding.

“I can tell you, all the years that I ran media businesses, the men always came in — they always wanted more salary, more responsibly, more power,” Koplovitz says. “And the women just put their heads down and did the work. Women have to step up and take some risks.”

Empowering female entrepreneurs is the aim of Koplovitz’s Springboard Enterprises, which helps secure venture capital for women-led businesses.

One of its best-known success stories is Canva, the graphic design company founded by 30-year-old Perth woman Melanie Perkins that is now worth \$1bn.

Koplovitz acknowledged the challenges facing traditional media companies battling to claw back advertising revenue lost to the likes of Facebook and Google.

Media companies must be alert to the evolving needs of their audiences, she said.

“Print media has had a hard time at making that transition, because it’s not just taking the print story and putting it online — it’s the creation of a new product. The same audience needs are being filled a different way.”

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