

## Foreword

Trust in American democratic institutions is at an unsettling low. For some, the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election exposed a jarring reality into the gravity of this distrust. Yet, polls and surveys have astutely highlighted a steady decline in trust by U.S. citizens towards the government and mass media over the past 30 years. This begs the question: *Why has trust in democratic institutions declined over the years, and why is it worrying?*

We posit that without trust, democracy cannot function. It is, therefore, the mission of the Knight Commission on Trust, Media and American Democracy to examine the causes and consequences of a collapse in trust in democratic institutions, with a focus on trust in the media, journalism and the information ecosystem. This calls for an exploration into the values and social obligations as well as norms that guide the production, distribution and consumption of information to ensure a functioning democracy.

As in the Aspen tradition, the following readings provide a background for each workshop session. The intent is to provide a common starting point for discussion by defining terms, highlighting trends and emerging issues, and providing contrasting viewpoints for how to approach the topic. For this workshop, the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program commissioned three white papers and five short essays to enhance and challenge participants' understanding of "trust" from its science to its application. These readings serve as informational building blocks from which the Commission may approach its future work.

### **Democracy and Trust**

The workshop begins with a piece written by Dr. Jeffrey Abramson entitled *Trust and Democracy*. It serves as the cornerstone for our discussion by providing a comprehensive survey on the concept of trust within political democratic theory. Abramson writes: "In ordinary English usage, trust is a matter of having confidence in the word, loyalty, promises, and honesty of others. To trust a person is to make oneself vulnerable to the power of that person. This vulnerability of trust creates a paradox for democratic theory." Abramson then explores the complexities of trust and mistrust as means toward effective governance. He then hypothesizes why "cross party hostility" and growing disdain for the "other" may be the greatest threats to our democracy.

### **Science, Technologies and Institutions of Trust**

Section II features two white papers. The first, written by Dr. Luke Chang and titled *The Science of Trust*, grounds itself in the scientific understanding of trust. From the physiological to the psychological, Chang's paper speaks to the development of interpersonal trust and its implications for individual trust towards institutions. The second paper, written by Dr. Ethan Zuckerman, is titled *Mistrust, Efficacy and the New Civics: Understanding the Deep Roots of the Crisis of Faith in Journalism*. In this piece, Zuckerman explores three shifts that underlie and help explain today's challenging information landscape.

## **Media and Trust**

The tradition of journalism now faces one of its biggest challenges as distrust by readers across the ideological spectrum grows. To address this, this final section showcases five short essays from leading media critics from across the nation and political spectrum. Authors include danah boyd, Jeff Jarvis, Mark Meckler, Susan Robinson and Charlie Sykes. In each essay, the author critically examines the state of today's media landscape, explores issues related the deterioration of trust in the industry and responds to the question: *What would bring trust to the American media?*

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Charles M. Firestone  
Executive Director  
Communications and Society Program  
The Aspen Institute  
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