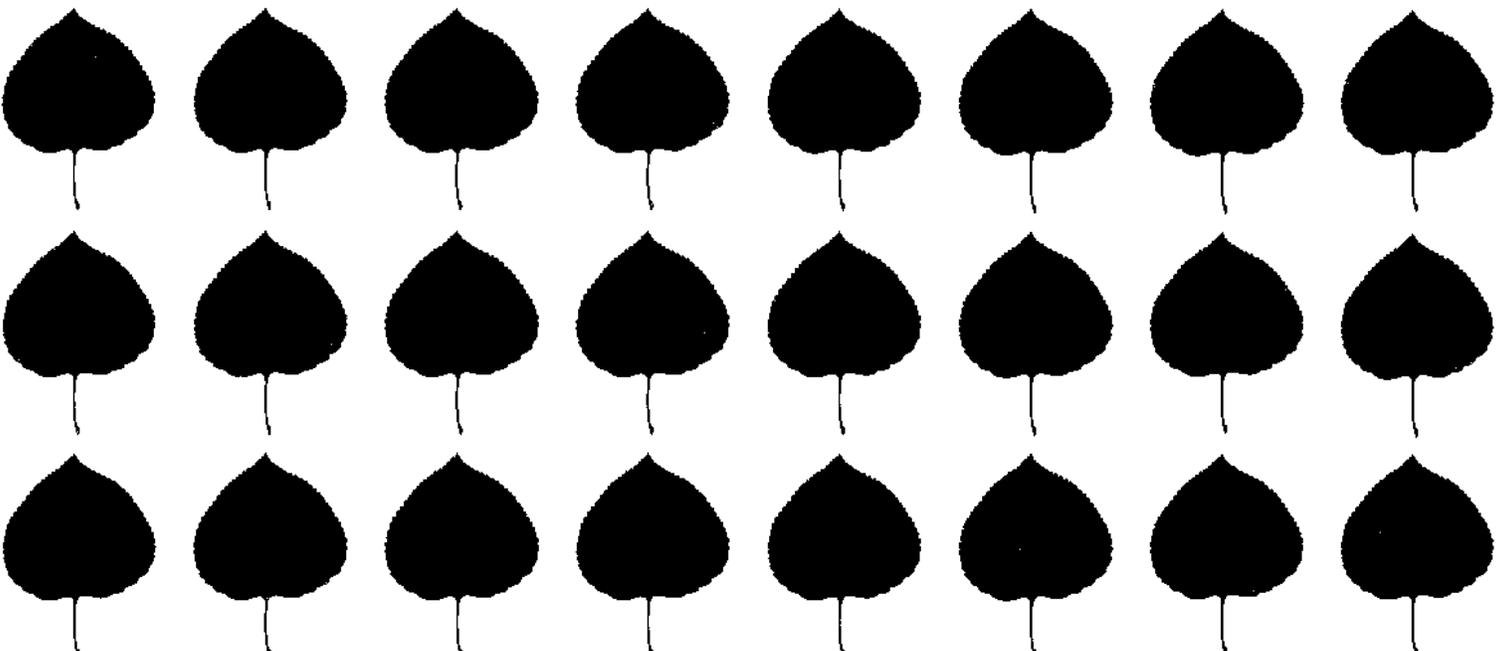


COMMUNICATIONS AND SOCIETY PROGRAM

# BACKGROUND MATERIALS

## *The Knight Commission Workshop on Trust, Media and American Democracy*

August 9-11, 2017  
The Aspen Meadows Conference Center  
Aspen, Colorado





THE ASPEN INSTITUTE  
*Communications and Society Program*

Charles M. Firestone  
Executive Director

**The Knight Commission**  
**Workshop on Trust, Media and American Democracy**

# **Background Materials**

The Aspen Meadows Conference Center  
Aspen, Colorado  
August 9-11, 2017

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## **Tentative Agenda**

*(as of July 25, 2017)*

The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program, in partnership with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, have established the Knight Commission on Trust, Media and American Democracy. Currently, trust in the major institutions of American democracy has fallen to troubling lows amid a rapidly changing information ecosystem. Without trust, democracy cannot function. It is, therefore, the Commission's charge 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. In addition, the Commission seeks to identify the perennial and emerging values and social obligations that should guide those who produce, distribute and consume news and information to ensure a functioning democracy. To accomplish this, the August 2017 workshop will provide Commissioners and participants an opportunity for thoughtful discussion guided by a set of issue-driven white papers and readings.

### **Wednesday, August 9, 2017**

*4:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m.*

*Check in at Aspen Meadows*

**6:00 p.m. – 9:30 p.m.**

**Opening Cocktail Reception, Group dinner and Introductions**

*Located on the Merrill Patio at the Aspen Meadows Reception Center*

### **Thursday, August 10, 2017**

*7:00 a.m. – 8:30 a.m.*

*Breakfast at the Aspen Meadows Restaurant*

**8:45 a.m. – 10:15 a.m.**

**Session I. Democracy and Trust**

*All workshop sessions will be held in the Lauder Seminar Room*

This opening session explores these questions: What is the role of trust in democratic institutions? Why has trust in democratic institutions declined over the years, and why is it worrying?

*10:15 a.m. – 10:45 a.m.*

*Break & Group Photo*

**10:45 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.**

**Session II. Science, Technologies and Institutions of Trust**

This session builds first from a scientific understanding of trust, and moves on to its implications. Participants will discuss features of trust ranging from the physiological to the psychological. Then, how do digital technologies relate to the growing mistrust of democratic institutions?

*12:15 p.m. – 1:30 p.m.*

*Lunch*

**1:30 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.                      Session III. Media and Trust**

The tradition of journalism has long served the public by providing citizens with information necessary to sustain a self-governing democratic society. Now, journalism faces a reckoning. Over the past decade, the “fourth estate” has been decimated by economic and technological changes. More pressing, journalism suffers from a growing distrust by readers across the ideological spectrum. This session will discuss the current media landscape, explore issues related the deterioration of trust in the industry and respond to the question: *What would bring trust to the American media?*

3:00 p.m.    *Participant Free Time*

5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.                      *Optional: McCloskey Speaker Series, “Becoming an Ally to the President,” featuring Thomas J. Barrack, Jr., Executive Chairman, Colony NorthStar and Chairman, Presidential Inaugural Committee; and Walter Isaacson, President and CEO, The Aspen Institute*  
**For complimentary tickets, please email Kristine Gloria at [Kristine.Gloria@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:Kristine.Gloria@aspeninstitute.org)**

**6:30 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.                      Cocktail Reception and Group Dinner**

*Vans will depart from the Aspen Meadows reception building at 6:15 p.m.*

*Aspen Kitchen  
515 E Hopkins Avenue #200  
Aspen, CO 81611  
(970) 300-4525*

**Friday, August 11, 2017**

7:00 a.m. – 8:30 a.m.                      *Breakfast at the Aspen Meadows Restaurant*

**8:45 a.m. – 10:15 a.m.                      Session IV. Moving Forward I**

The final two sessions will look at the future direction for the Knight Commission on Trust, Media and American Democracy. What questions loom largest as the Commission undertakes its work ahead? How should it chart its course ahead?

10:15 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.                      *Break*

**10:30 a.m. – 11:45 a.m.                      Session V. Moving Forward II**

12:00 p.m.    *Lunch and Adjourn*

**COMMISSIONERS**

*As of July 25, 2017*

***Co-Chairs:***

**Tony Marx**

President

The New York Public Library

**Jamie Woodson**

Executive Chair & Chief Executive Officer  
State Collaborative On Reforming Education

***Ex-Officio:***

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John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

**Walter Isaacson**

President & Chief Executive Officer

The Aspen Institute

***Commissioners:***

**Raney Arsonson-Rath**

Executive Producer

FRONTLINE PBS

**Meredith Artley**

Senior Vice President & Editor in Chief

CNN.com Worldwide

**Perry Chen**

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**Anthea Watson Strong**  
Project Manager for News  
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**Jonathan Zittrain**  
Faculty Director  
Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society  
Harvard Law School

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*(as of July 25, 2017)*

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Professor of Law and Government  
University of Texas at Austin

**Richard Adler**

Distinguished Fellow  
Institute of the Future

**Raney Aronson-Rath**

Executive Producer  
FRONTLINE PBS

**Meredith Artley**

Senior Vice President & Editor in Chief  
CNN.com Worldwide

**John Bracken**

Vice President, Technology Innovation  
Program  
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

**Perry Chen**

Founder  
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Founder & Chief Executive Officer  
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**Charlie Firestone**

Executive Director  
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**Sam Gill**

Vice President of Communities & Impact,  
Senior Advisor to the President  
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**Richard Gingras**

Vice President, News  
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**Sean Gourley**

Chief Executive Officer  
Primer.ai

**Amy Gutmann**

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## 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?*

## **Acknowledgements**

On behalf of the Aspen Institute, I want to thank the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for their generous support and leadership on the Knight Commission on Trust, Media and American Democracy. I also want to thank Dr. Kristine Gloria, Project Manager, and Sarah Eppehimer, Project Director, for editing these materials and organizing and managing the Workshop.

Charles M. Firestone  
Executive Director  
Communications and Society Program  
The Aspen Institute  
July 2017

**Section I. Democracy and Trust**

Jeffrey Abramson, “Trust and Democracy,” ..... 9

# **Trust and Democracy**

Knight Commission on Trust, Media, and American Democracy  
The Aspen Institute

*Prepared by:*  
Jeffrey Abramson

Professor of Law and Government  
The University of Texas at Austin

Ha, Ha, what a fool honestie is! And trust (his sworne brother) a very simple gentleman.  
*Shakespeare, Winter's Tale, Act Four, Scene Four, line 607*

Public offices are public trusts, created for the benefit of the whole people, and not for the benefit of those who may fill them.

*G. N. Briggs, in Massachusetts Acts 363 (1644)*

July 2017



# Trust and Democracy

## I. Introduction

In ordinary English usage, trust is a matter of having confidence in the word, loyalty, promises, and honesty of others.<sup>1</sup> To trust a person is to make oneself vulnerable to the power of that person.<sup>2</sup>

This vulnerability of trust creates a paradox for democratic theory. On the one hand, self-governing citizens are rightly vigilant about the potential abuses and corruptions of power. Government is not a blind trust. We adopt a healthy posture of suspicion. In the words of a colonial rallying cry, “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.”<sup>3</sup>

In *The Federalist Papers*, James Madison made the case for creating a national government, and yet warned against trusting that creation too much: “It is in vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust . . .clashing interests and render them all subservient to the public good. Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm.”<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, governments can hardly act, much less act boldly, unless they can tap into a considerable reservoir of trust. Here it may be helpful to distinguish between *particular* trust in any one incumbent, candidate, party, or policy and a *general* trust that the basic institutions and rule of law in American democracy can be relied upon to maintain a shared public good, to legitimate political opposition, smooth transitions of power and extend the protections of the rule of the law equally to all.<sup>5</sup>

Since we are talking about politics, we should not fear popular mistrust of a particular administration as if it were a threat to democracy (“throw the bums out”). However, loss of general trust in the rules of the game, the good faith of the other side, or the fairness and competence of government is a more serious matter. When the legitimacy of particular instances of distrust hardens into a continuous, generalized distrust that causes citizens “to reflexively

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, vol. 10, p. 624.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Levi, “Political Trust and Trustworthiness,” *Annual Review of Political Science* (2000) 3: 476. “Trust is a rational gamble that cooperation with others will ultimately pay off. . . . But it is still a wager.” Eric M. Uslander, “Democracy and Social Capital,” in Mark E. Warren, ed., *Democracy and Trust* (1999), p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> The remark is typically but wrongly attributed to Thomas Jefferson. Its author remains unknown.

<sup>4</sup> *The Federalist Papers*, No. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Yann Allard-Tremblay, “Trust and Distrust in the Achievement of Popular Control,” in Patti Tamara Lenard, ed., *The Political Philosophy of Trust and Distrust in Democracies and Beyond*, *The Monist* (2015) 98 (4): 375-390.

respond to politics with distrust even when it is not justified,” then the ability of government to function well is harmed.<sup>6</sup> This is the malaise that American democracy faces today.

Of course, there is a chicken and egg problem. Or to put the point in scholarly language, it is difficult to determine whether levels of general trust are an independent or dependent variable. Poor performance by incumbents leads to decline in voter trust but low-levels of trust make it that much harder for incumbents to perform well.<sup>7</sup>

Loss of general trust has been steadily mounting for the past half century. “Administrations have come and gone, and polling charts have bounced up and down in response to this leader or that policy, yet public trust has tumbled ever downward, regardless of which party is in power.”<sup>8</sup> I defer considering the causes of this loss of trust until first laying out the general reasons trust is important in a democracy.

Among the benefits that high general trust in government bring are: law-abidingness and voluntary compliance with programs calling for public cooperation;<sup>9</sup> willingness to vote and to participate in politics; promotion of public legitimacy; support for bipartisan compromises and coalitions; check on extremes of polarization attributable to general mistrust of *any* candidate from the opposing party; support for decisive government action in times of crisis and emergency; support for programs, for instance social welfare programs, when the public trusts that such programs serve long range common interests even though they do not immediately benefit everyone.<sup>10</sup>

General trust does not mean the disappearance of particular moments of distrust. After all, it is possible, even common, “to deeply mistrust politicians and yet to continue to have confidence in . . . the institutional structures” that guard against rotten actors.<sup>11</sup> Nor does general trust obliterate the normal divides of politics. It coexists, without supplanting, partisanship. *Horizontally*, generalized trust is an “attitudinal glue”<sup>12</sup> that in a democracy uniquely requires citizens to accept one’s fellow citizens as equal participants in the political process. Compare

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<sup>6</sup> Marc J. Hetherington, *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism* (2006), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> “Lower levels of the trust cause people to approve of the president less. Since distrust causes disapproval and disapproval makes it more difficult for leaders to marshal resources to solve problems, government will, on average, solve fewer problems when political trust is low. This, in turn, will cause more distrust and more disapproval, which . . . will continue the cycle.” *Id.* at 15.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen M. Griffin, *Broken Trust: Dysfunctional Government and Constitutional Reform* (2015), p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> Yann, *supra*.

<sup>10</sup> Hetherington, *supra*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Pippa Norris, *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Griffin, *supra*, p. 34.

this attitude of political trust with our sense of who is competent to practice medicine or to play in an orchestra. Virtually no one trusts each and every person to be a surgeon or first violinist. The trick in a democracy is to fight, often vehemently, against the views of others, while accepting that partisans of the other side are to be trusted as equally competent to weigh in on what policies *they* think are for the good of the country. Precisely because we do not agree on the *substance* of the common good, we put our trust in shared *procedures* for resolving our differences democratically.

Representative democracies, as opposed to direct democracies, also require *vertical* trust between the elected and the electorate. We must have confidence that our elected representatives can be trusted to act in our best interests, rather than their own. This trust can be *thin* or *thick*. It is thin if what we have confidence in is not the moral character or virtue of our representatives but only that their interests (for instance, in re-election) overlap with our own. Political scientists call this the “encapsulated interest” component of trust.<sup>13</sup> Marc Hetherington refers to trust “as a pragmatic running tally of how people think the government is doing at any given point in time,” as measured against their personal expectations.<sup>14</sup>

By contrast, trust is thick when our confidence stems from faith in the moral character of representatives. In ancient political philosophy, only few persons—philosopher kings or Platonic guardians—had the virtue it takes to be trustworthy rulers. In defending democracy, the founders of the American Republic rejected the connection between political trust and moral character. Madison accepted that it was human nature to abuse power and thus citizens were entitled to a great deal of legitimate mistrust of any government run by men. However, if institutions were properly designed to disaggregate power and to check the power of some with the power of others, the worst human ambitions could be curbed without men becoming angels.

As Robert Dahl, known as the dean of American political scientists, put the case for trusting Madison’s institutional strategies, “It would be folly” to construct democracies “on the assumption that civic virtue will steadily prevail.”<sup>15</sup> Instead, the paradox of trust in democracy is

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<sup>13</sup> See Russell Hardin, “Do we want trust in government,” in Warren, *supra*, p. 26: “To say that I trust you with respect to some matter means that I have reason to expect you to act in my interest because you have good reasons to do so.”

<sup>14</sup> Hetherington, *supra*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Robert A. Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy* (1982), p. 150.

that we best achieve it by “implement[ing] institutions that suggest a deep distrust of what our legislators will do when offered an opportunity to control the levers of power.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus, political trust grows when democratic institutions are arranged to secure two major imperatives. The first is the anti-corruption imperative: that government officials serve the people’s interests, not their own. For the 19<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the best practical solution to the danger of corruption was to subject government officials to *publicity*, both through coverage by the press and by requiring government meetings to be publicly held and recorded for inspection by an imaginary “Public Opinion Tribunal.”<sup>17</sup> Openness and publicity have “grand antiseptic effect” that activates in officials “the dread of shame,” as well as the more practical fear of losing the next election.<sup>18</sup> In this way, Bentham concluded, we start in a posture of distrust but learn to give *warranted* trust to those who have earned it. In a democracy, trust and distrust turn out to be complementary rather than opposites.<sup>19</sup>

The second major trust imperative is to guard against arbitrary rule. Democracy itself is no solution to the problem of tyranny, since as Madison noted, it is still a “government administered by men.”<sup>20</sup> To define a democracy as “the rule of the people” suggests that the people, or more accurately their elected representatives, may act as they wish. To guard against such arbitrary rule was the point of constitutionalizing a separation of powers system. But the larger need is to develop a political culture that respects and trusts the impartial rule of law and places even the most powerful of officeholders under the rule of law.

In regard to developing a political culture around trust in the rule of law, it is significant that most polls show that Americans have more faith in the Supreme Court than they do in the Presidency or Congress.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the title of two classic defenses of judicial review echo the public’s trust in the judiciary born of its mistrust of the political branches.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Patti Tamara Lenard, *Trust, Democracy, and Multicultural Challenges* (2012), pp. 67-8.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Jonathan R. Bruno, “Vigilance and Confidence: Jeremy Bentham, Publicity, and the Dialectic of Political Trust and Distrust,” *American Political Science Review* (2017) 111:295.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 299.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> Federalist 51.

<sup>21</sup> 61 percent of Americans have confidence in the national judiciary. Lydia Saad, “Americans’ Confidence in Government Takes Positive Turn,” Gallup (2016).

<sup>22</sup> John Ely, *Democracy and Distrust: A Theory of Judicial Review* (1981); Alexander Bickel, *The Least Dangerous Branch: The Supreme Court at the Bar of Politics* (1962).

## II. Political Trust and Social Trust

It is important to distinguish the specifically *political* trust that the democratic state requires from the *social* trust that forms the basis of a civil society. The literature typically refers to social trust as “social capital.” From Alexis de Tocqueville’s classic work, *Democracy in America*, to Robert Putnam’s contemporary classic, *Bowling Alone*, writers have studied how social capital is created when individuals freely associate in sustained cooperative relationships. Such interpersonal trust, beyond face-to-face family ties, is necessary for persons to learn the skills necessary for resolving group problems. A vibrant civil society is producing social trust continuously “through schools, churches, community groups, sporting clubs,” as well as through economic associations.<sup>23</sup>

For Putnam, social trust is a moral resource that comes first and “makes democracy work.” The moral resource is learning through group cooperation the habit of reciprocity: “I help you in the expectation that you will help me in the future.”<sup>24</sup> Only if norms of reciprocity emerge in civil society first can democracy possibly work.

However, there are limits to social trust that distinguish it from the more specifically political trust democracy will require. Putnam is fond of examples such as choral societies and sporting clubs. But, as one critic argues, “Why does the willingness to act for mutual benefit in a small group such as a choral society translate into willingness to act for the common good or to become politically engaged at all?”<sup>25</sup> The associations of civil society tend to be fairly homogeneous, by interest, religion, culture, geography, income, educational background and so on.<sup>26</sup> Democratic government requires the broader political trust that crosses such fault lines. Instead of “attaching loyalty to a monolithic, homogeneous ethnic or religious group, citizens maintain a shared attachment to the political role of a citizen and to general political institutions that fairly treat diverse groups.”<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, Tocqueville thought that political trust *causes* social trust to grow, rather than the other way around. “I do not say that there can be no civil association in a country where political association is prohibited, for men can never live in society without embarking in some common

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<sup>23</sup> John Braithwaite, “Institutionalizing Distrust, Enculturating Trust,” in Valerie Braithwaite and Margaret Levi, eds., *Trust and Governance* (2003), p. 348.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Cohen, “Trust, voluntary associations and workable democracy: the contemporary American discourse of civil society,” in Warren, *supra*, p. 219.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 220.

<sup>26</sup> Charles F. Andrain and James T. Smith, *Political Democracy, Trust, and Social Justice* (2006), p. 78.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

undertakings; but I maintain that in such a country civil associations will always be few in number, feebly planned, [and] unskillfully managed. . . .”<sup>28</sup>

Whichever comes first, empirical studies confirm “democratic government is more responsive and effective when it faces a vigorous civil society.”<sup>29</sup> In a survey of world democratic regimes, a minimum of 35 percent of the public in each state thought “most people can be trusted.” By contrast, in all nondemocratic regimes, the level of interpersonal trust fails to match that figure.<sup>30</sup>

In the face of intense conflict over what the public good requires, political trust can be hard to maintain. To see why, let us consider more carefully the meaning of terms such “democracy” and the “public good.”

### III. Competing Conceptions of Democracy

Different norms of trust correspond to different concepts of democracy. In this section, I will argue that the more emphasis a democratic theory places on fostering a strong sense of community, the deeper must be the ties of trust.

Any theory of democracy must confront tensions between individual and group interests, on the one hand, and the common good or public good on the other. At one extreme are theories of pure majority interest democracy that reduce the common good to nothing other than the unintended consequence of individuals and groups seeking their own interests. What is good for the people is simply what the majority decide is good for them. Almost no one holds to this extreme view, since it would give minorities no reason to trust the majority at all.

At the other extreme are theories of democracy dating back to Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau famously taught that the common good—what he called the “general will” —is qualitatively different than the sum of individual interests. In fact, Rousseau called on individuals to stifle self-interests, abstain from joining any political parties, and simply directly vote what is good for the whole. Almost no one subscribes to this ascetic view of the common good either.

In between are various theories of democracy that live with, rather than trying to dissolve, the tensions between private and public goods. Since these theories accept the legitimacy of

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<sup>28</sup> *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, ch. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Jean Cohen, *supra*, p. 217.

<sup>30</sup> Inglehart, “Trust, well-being and democracy,” in Warren, *supra*, p. 103.

plural or different conceptions of the common good, they are generally known as theories of pluralist democracy. As opposed to Rousseau's notion that properly habituated citizens would arrive at the same understanding of the common good, pluralist democracies celebrate the richness of living in a democratic state that is like a big tent with room enough to house competing communities with competing conceptions of the common good. In this big tent, what we share is the overarching value of living together with persons with whom we do not in fact share the same values on particular political issues. There is room in the big tent for us all. This is the democratic philosophy expressed in the American national motto, "*e pluribus Unum.*"

Theories of pluralist democracy can tilt toward the majority interest pole or the Rousseauist end. Those that occupy the interest group end stress the legitimacy of organizing into parties, factions, or associations in order to fight for one's policy preferences. So long as the basic rights of freedom of speech and of the press, of the right to vote and hold office, belong equally to all, the result of group competition should be considered democratic. There will be winners and losers on policy issues, but the losers should trust that they had and will continue to have a fair opportunity to win. In *Federalist 10*, Madison added that a large nation would inevitably divide into so many competing factions that no one static majority would hold power on issue after issue. Group competition would give all incentives to engage in a democratic politics of compromise and coalition building, with shifting majorities emerging on different issues.

By contrast, theories of "deliberative democracy" place an additional constraint on interest group politics. While citizens should be free to organize in pursuit of their own preferences, expressions of those preferences should pass a test: can one's views be defended in public with reasons that are general, rather than parochial and specific to only some groups of society. For example, citizens are free to disagree on abortion policy, but a democratic argument should not be based on religious fiats that are asserted as true beyond reasoned debate. Likewise, an argument that "I favor abortion because I am a woman" fails the test of offering general public reasons that is the ideal of democratic debate.

If citizens are to participate in genuine acts of back and forth dialogue, there must be sufficient trust in others to enter into that dialogue in the first place. Once started, the very act of engaging in reasoned and reciprocal conversation ideally generates further trust. By modeling participation in reasoned public debate as the key behavior expected of democratic citizens, as

opposed to merely outvoting opponents, deliberative democracies place a premium on community and the trust that makes sharing a common good possible.

#### IV. The Contemporary Problem

Since 1958, the American National Election Survey (ANES) has asked voters to rate their level of trust in the federal government. The key question is, “How much of the time do you think that you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, probably some of the time?” As expected, trust declines in the face of scandals (Nixon and Watergate; Carter and the Iran hostage crisis; Reagan and Iran-Contra), losses in war (Vietnam), poor economic performance (second half of Reagan years) and rises with good economic news (first term of Reagan and second term of Clinton, despite impeachment proceedings). But above these ups and downs, the unmistakable trend has been steady deterioration in trust of the federal government, until the record lows of today.<sup>31</sup>

In 1958, the inaugural year of the ANES, 73% of adults said they put their faith in government “just about always” or “most” of the time. That percentage reached its high watermark of 77% in 1964. Starting then, a steady and precipitous decline set in. By 1974, the trust percentage had dropped by half to 36%. In the latest survey of 2015, only 19% of Americans said they could trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” (3%) or “most of the time.” (16%).<sup>32</sup>

Not surprisingly, trust in the federal government is higher among respondents when the incumbent president is from their own party. This inverse relationship between partisanship and trust has been true throughout the life of the survey. It holds for members of both major parties, though Republican responses bounce about more with loss of the White House.<sup>33</sup>

However, these expected effects of partisanship on trust have become significantly, even remarkably, worse in recent years.<sup>34</sup> In 2011, a survey asked voters to place the Republican and Democratic parties on a “feeling thermometer, from 0 (really hate the group) to 100 (really love

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<sup>31</sup> Emily Badger and Niraj Chokshi, “Partisan Relations Sink from Cold to Deep Freeze,” *New York Times*, June 16, 2017, page A1.

<sup>32</sup> Pew Research Center, “Trust in government: 1958-2015,” in *Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government* (Nov. 23, 2015), pp. 1-8.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>34</sup> See Badger and Chokshi, *supra*. See also Marc Hetherington and Thomas Rudolph, “Why don’t Americans trust the government? Because the other party is in power,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 30, 2014.

the group).<sup>35</sup> The average Republican put the Democratic Party at 18 degrees. Democrats did exactly the same for the Republican Party.<sup>36</sup> By contrast, dating back to the Nixon Administration, a fairly steady 30 to 40 percent of Democrats once gave trusting responses even when the other party was in power. Republicans gave trusting responses in the 40 percent range when Jimmy Carter was president. They even still gave trusting responses in the high 30's while Bill Clinton underwent impeachment proceedings.<sup>37</sup>

By the last term of George W. Bush, Democrats' trusting responses fell to historically low levels below 20 percent, thus giving their representatives little incentive to participate in government by compromise. During the Obama years, Republicans returned the favor with a vengeance. Only 2 percent trusted the government "just about always" or "most of the time." When given the new choice of "never trusted the government to do what is right," over 50 percent of Republicans surveyed chose that response.<sup>38</sup>

In 2016, a Pew study found that 55% of Democrats say the Republican Party makes them "afraid," while 49% of Republicans say the same about the Democrats. Among regular voters and persons actively engaged in politics, those figures skyrocket to 70% and 62%, respectively.<sup>39</sup> One can hardly expect political trust to cross party lines with these levels of animosity.

Although increasing numbers of Americans describe themselves as independents,<sup>40</sup> most independents lean Republican or Democratic. "These partisan 'leaners' tend to have attitudes and behaviors that are very similar to those of partisans."<sup>41</sup> Thus, most studies distribute these leaners to one party or the other.<sup>42</sup>

While some of the animosity between partisans is attributable to rational differences on key issues separating liberals from conservatives, the raw and widening distrust among

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<sup>35</sup> Hetherington and Rudolph, *supra*.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

<sup>39</sup> Pew Research Center, "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016," p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> On the eve of the 2016 election, 34% Americans identified as independents, 33% as Democrats and 29% as Republicans. Pew Research Center, *The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Farther Apart*, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Pew Research Center, *supra*, *Beyond Distrust of Government*, Appendix A. "When the partisan leanings of independents are taken into account, 48% either identify as Democrats or lean Democratic; 44% identify as Republicans." Pew Research Center, *supra*, *The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election*, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

politically involved partisans and their representatives has disturbingly outstripped any expansion of traditional ideological divides in the public at large.<sup>43</sup>

Interestingly, trust in local and state governments remains consistently higher than does trust in Washington. In the latest (2016) Gallup Poll, 71% had “a great deal” or “fair” amount of trust in their local governments and 62% in state governments.<sup>44</sup> Survey respondents rate local governments as more competent to deal with problems close to home, more responsive to constituents, and quicker to act. While beyond the scope of this paper, these high levels of trust in municipal government suggest promising avenues for democratic reform.

## V. Causes of Distrust

In the preceding section, we saw that the influence of discrete events on political trust proves temporary; after each bump, up or down, the trajectory downwards reappears, unrelated to any obvious contemporary episodes. Political observers disagree about the causes of this deeper and continuing historical trend. Among factors suggested are the following:

### (i) *Atomization*

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam pointed to the disintegration of American civil society in the post-television era.<sup>45</sup> Instead of learning the associational and cooperative habits that support democratic governance, Americans retreated into private entertainments and individual pursuits. This retreat from participatory and public activity led to declining levels of trust, which shows up in a nastier tone to public discourse and less willingness to cooperate and to compromise with others. As Putnam notes, this decline of a participatory civic culture is all around us—fewer people attend houses of worship, belong to labor unions, attend parent-teacher associations, volunteer, or belong to fraternal organizations such as the Elks or Shriners.

In singling out television as the enemy of civic culture, Putnam reasoned as follows. First, starting in the 1960s, television watching became the single biggest change in the way Americans spent their leisure time. Second, during the same period, Americans began to withdraw from participating in the voluntary associations that used to occupy their leisure.

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<sup>43</sup> Hetherington and Rudolph, *supra* (“60 years of research suggests that most Americans do not think about politics ideologically.”). See also Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel Abrams, “Americans Aren’t Polarized, Just Better Sorted,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 21, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Jason McCarthy, “Americans Still Trust Local Government More than State,” Gallup (2014).

<sup>45</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000).

Putting these two trends together, Putnam concluded that people who watch a great deal of television lack both time for, and interest, in the public square.

Putnam completed most of his research before the advent of interactive computer services, virtual networks, and constant contact via smart phones. If one considers the sheer amount of information available to us; the elimination of time and distance to communication; the interactive, back and forth nature of communications; and the emergence of virtual communities, then much of Putnam's lament against television no longer applies to the current media environment.<sup>46</sup>

The question of whether online connectedness can restore trust is one that intrigued Putnam. On the one hand, he noted the rise of "virtual neighborhoods" based on "shared avocations rather than shared space."<sup>47</sup> To the extent that participation in electronic communities becomes widespread, durable, and egalitarian, we might in fact witness a restoration of the social trust lost when face-to-face associations declined.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, Putnam warned that "the transmission of information among physically distant people is itself [insufficient] to foster social capital and genuine community."<sup>49</sup> The low cost and high speed of sharing information can help mobilize persons who already share a "connectedness" to an issue or interest, but it cannot create that sense of connectedness in the first place.

A decade after *Bowling Alone's* appearance, the Aspen Institute Forum for Communications and Society (FOCAS) convened to consider whether new media were providing opportunities for building trust among "networked citizens." The group heard remarkable success stories from international groups that used crowdsourcing to monitor elections in Kenya, facilitate earthquake relief in Haiti, hold budget referenda in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, or mobilize rallies during the Arab spring.

At the other end of the geographical spectrum, the FOCAS forum found information technologies well fitted to build trust at the local level. Residents tend to be motivated to deal with neighborhood problems and many issues are "citizen manageable," if only citizens had a way to pool their skills and knowledge. Various "neighborhood apps" in Minneapolis (e-

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<sup>46</sup> Even in regard to the decades Putnam studied, most studies showed little or no correlation between hours spent watching television and hours invested in joining associations. What mattered was not hours watched but the content of the programming. See, e.g., Cohen, *supra*, p. 227; Uslander, *supra*, p. 137.

<sup>47</sup> *Bowling Alone*, p. 171.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

<sup>49</sup> *Id.*

democracy.org), Amherst, MA (localocracy.com), or Ft. Wayne’s “wired and inspired city” showed that sharing information can start a process leading to more active involvement in local government. Moreover, these virtual forms of citizenship can call upon the high levels of trust that citizens already have in local government.

In between the local and international levels, online communications have obviously become a main part of national campaigns and fundraising. Nonetheless, as reviewed in the previous section, levels of distrust of the national government continue to rise. There is not yet evidence that those who virtually participate in national politics are any more trusting of Washington than those who do not.

(ii) *Loss of Optimism*

Another theory traces declining levels of political trust to a broad, across-the-board waning of optimism for the future. What makes democracy work is not necessarily that citizens have a high opinion of government institutions themselves so much as that they have high levels of satisfaction with one’s life taken as a whole.<sup>50</sup>

From the end of the Great Depression into the early 1960s, Americans expressed consistently high levels of trust that their children would have a better life than they did.<sup>51</sup> By contrast, in a 1995 Kaiser Foundation survey, only ten percent of Americans were “very confident” that life for their children would be better. More than half—54 percent—were “not confident at all.”<sup>52</sup> In a 2017 Pew survey, Americans were more dissatisfied than satisfied with the direction of the country by a margin of 66 to 33 percent.<sup>53</sup> Just in the period since 2015, those expressing little or no confidence rose from 15% to 28%—a far greater shift than took place after the 2000 or 2008 elections.

Optimism in the future constitutes a world-view that makes it rational to wager on government. Key components of this world view, as summarized by one scholar, are: (1) a belief that it is safe to bring children into the world; (2) confidence in science as a force for a better future; (3) confidence in one’s own capacity to shape the world; (4) belief that other people are likely to be helpful; and (5) confidence that public officials are listening to the

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<sup>50</sup> Inglehart, *supra*, p. 105.

<sup>51</sup> *Id.* at 140.

<sup>52</sup> “Why Don’t Americans Trust the Government?” Kaiser Family Foundation (1996).

<sup>53</sup> Pew Research Center, *Public Trust in Government Remains Near Record Lows as Partisan Attitudes Shift*, p. 7-9.

average man.<sup>54</sup> A world-view shaped by such broad optimism correlates strongly with political trust, and political trust correlates strongly with the achievement of stable democracies.

Ultimately, optimism rests on a subjective sense of overall well-being. What counts is not necessarily government's *actual* record of performance but rather people's *perceptions*. One of the problems today is a tendency for Americans to pessimistically misperceive governmental programs. Hetherington attributes at least part of the decline in political trust to just such misperceptions of political reality. For example, even though foreign aid and social welfare programs combine to make up less than 10% of the federal budget, the public believes that one or the other is the biggest item in the budget. A correct perception would identify social security as the costliest federal program.<sup>55</sup>

(iii) *Balkanization*

A balkanized public lives in different neighborhoods, commutes via separate vehicles (and sometimes on separate toll roads), and gets news from different sources.<sup>56</sup> In short, public space and common channels of transportation and communication give way to a broad opting-out of having to live with people of different circumstances.

For our purposes, the balkanization of the public into separate news-consuming spheres has special importance. In essence, Americans separate into so many echo chambers, where the news reinforces their political predispositions. It is difficult for trust to spread among partisans when the news they receive does not offer a shared, baseline of common information. Whatever the faults of the broadcast television era, at least the networks delivered a consensus nightly news to mass audiences.

(iv) *Political Polarization*

In the prior section, we saw evidence of increasing polarization of the electorate. It is not so much that voters today demonstrate increasing ideological solidarity with their own party (or that to which they lean). The primary factor driving polarization is fear of the other party in power. 70 percent of politically engaged Democrats and 62 percent of similar Republicans regard the opposite party's policies as "so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Uslander, *supra*, p. 140.

<sup>55</sup> Hetherington, *supra*, pp. 139-40. Hetherington thought that "trust in government would increase markedly if the news media, in conjunction with political leaders, made a concerted effort to educate the public about what the government actually spends its money on."

<sup>56</sup> Inglehart, *supra*, p. 105.

<sup>57</sup>Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in the American Public" (2014), p. 11.

Political polarization, together with the decline in political trust, began its modern run when the federal government took on primary responsibility for dealing with problems of race, poverty, health and welfare. As Hetherington points out, these are precisely the kind of redistributive programs that require the greatest public trust. As opposed to the universality of popular programs such as social security, redistributive programs maintain support only to the extent that citizens have confidence that making some sacrifices in the short run will make the country, and their place in it, stronger in the end. It also requires trust that, however admirable the goals, government has competence to realize them.

The contrary seems to have happened. The changing portfolio of federal responsibilities reset the criteria the public used to judge their satisfaction with the direction of the country. Political scientists refer to this as “issue salience.”<sup>58</sup> Welfare, poverty, health and racial affirmative action programs proved unpopular among segments of the population who felt that the direction of the country was leaving them behind, that the salient programs served the interests only of others served by the other party. Resentment of Washington drove out trust of programs that could be labeled “liberal.” Those that favored these policies practiced the same politics of resentment toward their opponents.

In the absence of trust, politics becomes personal. As one writer laments, “We don’t see those on the other side as well-meaning people who happen to hold different opinions.... We see them as unintelligent and selfish, with views so perverse that they can be explained only by ulterior motives.”<sup>59</sup>

(v) *Media coverage*

Many commentators reflect on the rise of media power since the 1960s and the simultaneous fall in public trust of government. Prior to the flourishing of the Internet, the standard criticisms of the media were the relentless negativity and banality of political coverage. Scandals sell the news and thus the media had incentives to concentrate on the worst aspects of politics. Reporting became a game of “got cha,” and the difference between news and entertainment evaporated.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Marc J. Hetherington and Jason A. Husser, “How Trust Matters: The Changing Political Relevance of Political Trust,” *Am. J. of Polit. Sci.* 56: 2 (2012): 312-325.

<sup>59</sup> Matthew Gentzkow, “Polarization in 2016,” p. 17, available at <https://web.stanford.edu/~gentzkow/research/PolarizationIn2016.pdf>.

<sup>60</sup> See Matt Bai, *All the Truth is Out: The Week the News Went Tabloid* (2014) (recounting media coverage of Sen. Gary Hart’s sexual affairs that forced him to drop out of the 1988 Democratic Party presidential primary). See also

Even when not negative in content, critics faulted the news for reducing discussion of serious political issues to sound bites and photo “ops.” Campaigns in turn catered to the media, thus perpetuating a cycle that favored the banal and the sensational over sustained and substantive presentation of ideas. In particular, those who depended on television as the primary source of news (more than two-thirds of Americans since 1972) expressed “videomalaise”—a greater degree of cynicism and distrust of politics than those with alternative news sources.<sup>61</sup>

These criticisms often ignored numerous examples of informative political coverage available through the broadcast media.<sup>62</sup> And as mentioned above, the emergence of the Internet means the end of any time or space constraints that may once have favored “sound-bite” journalism.

(vi) *Loss of Trust in the Media*

In 2015, the Gallup poll reported that public trust in the media had dropped to its lowest level since Gallup started asking the question in 1972. From a high of 72 percent in 1976, only 32% now say they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media. This is down eight percentage points in one year. For Republicans, trust plummeted 18 percent in one year.<sup>63</sup> 2007 was the last year a majority trusted the media.<sup>64</sup>

The Gallup poll asked about trust in the media generally. When another organization asked individuals about their attitudes toward the *specific* media they used, levels of trust doubled, and more so for Republicans than Democrats.<sup>65</sup> Thus what we have is a polarized news environment that corresponds to a polarized electorate.<sup>66</sup> Each side distrusts the news reporting on the other side.

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Jeffrey Abramson, “Four Criticisms of Press Ethics,” in Judith Lichtenberg, ed., *Democracy and the Mass Media* (1990), p. 242.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Robinson, “Public Affairs Television and the Growth of Political Malaise: The case of ‘The Selling of the President,’” *Am Polit. Sci. Rev.* 70(3): 409-425 (1976).

<sup>62</sup> “Given the diversity of channels, programs, and choices—from Nightline, 60 minutes, CNN . . . , NPR, Meet the Press, and C-Span—. . . it might even be the case that Americans as a whole are better informed . . . than ever before.” Jean Cohen, *supra*, p. 227n. See also Pippa Norris, *A Virtuous Circle: The News Media and Democracy* (2000), pp. 7-8.

<sup>63</sup> As candidate and as President, Donald Trump has expressed withering criticisms of certain news media. He has called the press “the enemy of the American people,” mentioning specifically *The New York Times*, NBC, ABC, CBS and CNN.

<sup>64</sup> Art Swift, “Americans’ Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low” (Sept. 14, 2016).

<sup>65</sup> Media Insight Project, “‘My’ Media versus ‘the’ Media: Trust in News Depends on Which News Media You Mean,” May 24, 2017.

<sup>66</sup> “Those who trust the press are more accepting of new messages.... Those who distrust the press are more likely to resist new information that they attribute to the institutional media and seek additional information from more

The term “fake news” has come into vogue as a way to describe dissatisfaction with media accuracy.<sup>67</sup> From the point of view of the First Amendment, the very idea of “fake news” is problematic, insofar as it suggests some objective standard for what constitutes the news. However, as a cultural meme, fake news exemplifies our contemporary democratic predicament. A public that cannot agree on the facts is not a people who can know where to place its trust.<sup>68</sup>

As of 2016, slightly more than half of Americans get their news through some social network, with Facebook being named four times more than any other platform.<sup>69</sup> And yet, only 12 percent of Facebook users have a “great deal of trust” in the news they get there.<sup>70</sup> On the one hand, social networks work assiduously to gain trust in the accuracy of their news posts by becoming more transparent in their sources. On the other hand, trust is hard to gain when the nature of the network is one that permits uncensored self-publication; anonymity; and passing on of information.<sup>71</sup>

Going back to Bentham’s point about publicity, democracy relies on the press to play a crucial watchdog role. This is why President Trump’s avoidance of journalists in favor of communicating directly to the people via Twitter is controversial. Some welcome his tweets as providing direct and unfiltered access to what the President is thinking. Others reject the directness as pseudo-democratic. If tweeting replaces reporting through the organized press, then it may eliminate the independent examination and investigation of government information that is necessary to justify political trust.

## VI. Conclusion

Trust and distrust ideally play complementary roles in a democracy. Citizens properly ask their representatives to earn and to keep their trust. They look to the news and other sources of sound information to know when trust is warranted. At the same time, democratic citizens need to maintain a general faith in the good will of one another and in the capacity of our

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partisan news sources.... As a result, their beliefs tend to be less accurate....” Jonathan McDonald Ladd, *Why Americans Hate the News Media and How it Matters* (2010), p. 190.

<sup>67</sup> “[Social networks] spread vitriol and fake news at a speed and breadth we have never seen before.” Thomas L. Friedman, “Where Did ‘We the People’ Go?” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2017, p. A21.

<sup>68</sup> “[W]e’re experiencing an assault on the very foundations of . . . democracy—the twin pillars of truth and trust.” *Id.*, quoting the author Dov Seidman.

<sup>69</sup> American Press Institute, *How people decide what news to trust on digital platforms and social media* (2016).

<sup>70</sup> *Id.*

<sup>71</sup> Brett Stephens, “How Twitter Pornified Politics,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 2017, p. A19.

institutions and laws to curb the dangers of corruption and arbitrary rule to which any government administered by persons is subject.

The reality is far from these ideals. Particular instances of mistrust have accumulated and hardened into a generalized mistrust of the federal government as such. This mistrust is greatest when the most news-covered policies involve domestic issues of welfare, race and poverty. It is least when foreign issues and national emergencies displace these issues in the news cycle.

The single biggest factor contributing to loss of political trust is the remarkable growth in cross party hostility. Within reason, partisanship contributes to democracy, by motivating persons to vote and to engage actively in politics. The problem today is that disdain for the other side goes beyond expected ideological differences on the issues. Distrust of opponents no longer needs facts to sustain it.



**Section II. Science, Technologies and Institutions of Trust**

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## **The Science of Trust**

Knight Commission on Trust, Media, and American Democracy  
The Aspen Institute

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## The Science of Trust

The foundation of modern society is built upon our ability to successfully conduct cooperative social exchanges. This capability has facilitated the emergence of strategic coalitions, markets, and systems of governance. A core feature of social exchange is our capacity for trust, which has been described as the “lubricant of a social system” (Arrow, 1974) as a consequence of its ability to reduce transaction costs and increase information sharing (Dyer & Chu, 2003). Trusting that a partner will honor their agreement is critical for ensuring successful interpersonal, business, and political transactions. Trust law dates back to around the 13th century and is considered one of the most innovative contributions of the English legal system. Crusaders would leave their land to a colleague (“trustee”) to protect and continue to pay feudal taxes. However, upon their return there was no formal law requiring the trustee to return the land to the crusader. The dispute would be settled by the King’s Lord Chancellor, often a clergyman, who would side with the crusader arguing under the principle of “equity” that it would be unconscionable for the trustee to renege on the prior agreement. The trustee, who was the legal owner under common law, would then be compelled to return the land to the “beneficiary” crusader when requested (Avini, 1995). Consequently, countries with formal institutions that protect property and contract rights have stronger internal perceptions of trust and civic cooperation, which are associated with decreased rates of violent crime in neighborhoods (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997) and increased national economic growth (Knack & Keefer, 1997). Thus, trust is intimately tied to broader indicators of societal success such as crime rates, economic growth, and governance.

This paper will focus more narrowly on interactions between individuals and will review the scientific evidence supporting the psychological and neurobiological foundations for how our minds have developed the capacity to trust. This review begins with a brief discussion of how trust has been conceptualized and studied in the laboratory and then reviews the psychological and neurobiological research on trust with a particular focus on expectations and psychological value. Though this review focuses on interpersonal trust, the general conceptual framework applies more broadly to institutional trust.

### ***What is trust?***

Our mental capacity for social life has been a longstanding feature of the human mind dating back at least 5-10 million years. It has been theorized that there were likely strong selection pressures to adapt cognitive abilities to successfully navigate social exchanges. This includes cognitive abilities such as theory of mind—the ability to represent another’s mental state, beliefs, or intentions; the ability to store exchange histories; and the ability to detect and remember cheaters (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). However, the importance of social exchange extends beyond simply attaining self-interested goals, and includes fostering successful interpersonal relationships, as well as developing a positive reputation that will impact future exchanges and relationships. Relationships not only help to fulfill a basic social need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), but are also critical to our survival through their ability to assist in reproduction, protection, and resource sharing, as well as facilitate positive physical and mental health outcomes (Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996).

Though trust has been studied for a number of decades in a variety of disciplines, it has been difficult to agree on a comprehensive definition. Early work in psychology examined trust from the perspective of an individual and characterized trust as the general belief about the degree to which other people or groups are likely to be reliable, cooperative, or helpful in situations (Deutsch, 1973; Rotter, 1971). This work importantly established two key aspects of trust—expectations about another’s behavior, and perceptions of another’s benevolent motivations. However, this work was limited in that it was mostly focused on identifying individual differences in general *perceptions* of trustworthiness rather than studying *behavioral* displays of trust. Future work extended the study of trust to interpersonal interactions. Rather than being a general belief about a partner’s reliability, trust required two partners and an action—I trust *you* to do X (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985; Simpson, 2007). This importantly allowed trust to vary across dyadic interactions rather than just subjective perceptions. Other theorists have additionally emphasized the importance of the trustor’s willingness to be vulnerable (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998; Scanzoni, 1979) and the trustee’s ability to overcome self-interested temptations. In this paper, we will define trust as *the psychological state of assuming mutual risk with a relationship partner to attain an interdependent goal in the face of competing temptations*.

Trust is a dynamic state and evolves over the course of a relationship. Early stages of a relationship are focused on assessing a partner's trustworthiness level. Trustors must be willing to display vulnerability and endure a risk. Initial motivations to trust might include altruism (Andreoni & Miller, 2002), efficiency gains to the both parties (Charness & Rabin, 2002), concerns about disparities in outcomes (Bolton & Ockenfels, 2000; Fehr & Schmidt, 1999), or simply to gain additional information to assess their partner's trustworthiness (Bohnet & Zeckhauser, 2004). The trustee can demonstrate their level of trustworthiness by their willingness to overcome their own self-interest and take an action that fulfills an interdependent goal. As the relationship progresses, both parties become more confident in their ability to predict the other's behavior and develop a sense of security in the relationship. The relationship might be periodically tested in order to provide a continual assessment of trust levels (Simpson, 2007). At some point in the relationship, one person might end up betraying their partner, which eventually will lead to a dissolution of the relationship (King-Casas et al., 2008).

### ***How is trust studied?***

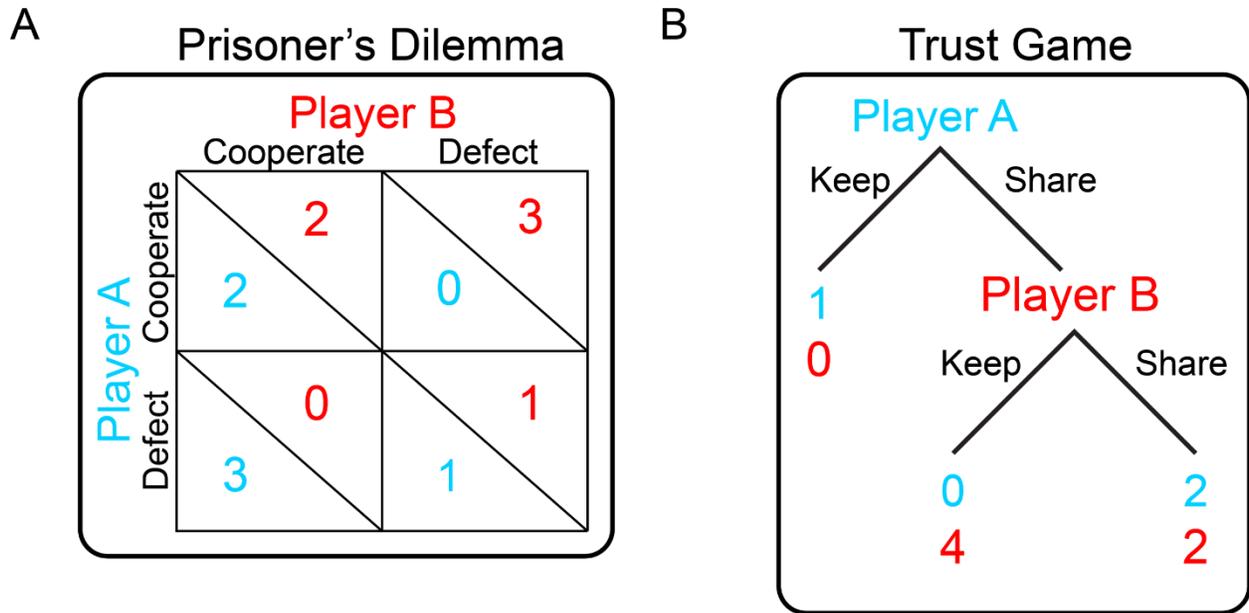
Research investigating trust has primarily utilized two different types of experimental methodologies. The oldest method relies on subjective self-report and is primarily used to assess individual differences in dispositions to trust via surveys such as the Interpersonal Trust Scale (Rotter, 1967) or the dyadic trust scale (Larzelere & Huston, 1980). The more popular approach uses economic games to study trust behavior in the context of a simple social interaction.

Economic games are mathematical descriptions of a social interaction that includes a set of actions available to multiple players and the payoffs resulting from those actions. Games specify the sequence of play, the information available to each player, and the actions available to each player at each stage of the game. Games can be repeated or single-shot. Repeated games are more akin to real life social interactions, in which individuals might have multiple repeated interactions. However, this can introduce additional psychological factors such as learning and reputation, which can be difficult to separate from trust. In economics, single-shot games have been thought to provide a more pure model of trust as they remove any long-term strategic thinking resulting from repeated interactions. To further control for additional social factors, these games are traditionally played double-blind, i.e., anonymously. Because this tradition of anonymous single-shot games has a consequence of removing many of the social motivations that might contribute

to trust, it provides a model of “pure” trust behavior and a benchmark for which other social factors can be introduced and compared (Camerer, 2003).

Games can also take a simultaneous or sequential form. Simultaneous games require each player to make their decisions at the same time. For example, imagine a team of two criminals that are arrested, imprisoned, and interrogated independently with no means of communication between them. The prosecutor hopes to get both prisoners sentenced, but lacks sufficient evidence. Thus, they offer each prisoner an opportunity for a lesser sentence if they are willing to betray their partner. If both prisoners choose to trust each other and cooperate with each other, they will both serve a short sentence. If one chooses to defect and betray their partner’s trust, then they will receive a lesser sentence and their partner will be forced to endure the longest sentence. However, if both prisoners choose to defect, then they will both receive a longer sentence than had they both cooperated. This vignette describes the classic Prisoner’s Dilemma Game, which has a payoff structure of  $DC > CC > DD > CD$  where C is cooperate and D is defect (Figure 1A). A rational and self-interested player should choose the outcome associated with the highest overall payoff, thus one potential solution to the game is for both players to defect. However, in real life players tend to converge on mutual cooperation indicating they are frequently willing to trust a relationship partner even when they don’t know who they are and will never see them again.

Sequential games, in contrast, allow players to take turns during which they make a decision conditional on the actions of the other player. The investment game, commonly referred to as the Trust Game, was designed to model pure trust similar to the crusader land trust example described above (Berg, Dickhaut, & McCabe, 1995).



**Figure 1.** Example payoffs for decisions in two games involving trust. Player A's Payoffs are in Blue and Player B's Payoffs are in Red. Panel A depicts a classic Prisoner's Dilemma game. Panel B depicts a subgame of a classic investment game to emphasize the actions taken by each player in the game. The investment amount is multiplied by a factor of 4.

In this game, Player A is endowed with a sum of money (e.g., \$1) and can choose to invest any amount of this endowment in their partner. The investment amount is multiplied by a factor predetermined by the experimenter (typically 3 or 4), and Player B then decides how much, if any, of this multiplied investment amount to return. A simplified version of the game is depicted in Figure 1B indicating two choices for each player to share or keep. This game is a particularly clean example of trust because only Player A endures any risk. By choosing to invest, Player A demonstrates a willingness to be vulnerable and expose their assets. Player B ultimately decides whether to honor or betray Player A's trust. This aspect of the game models Player B's willingness to forgo self-interested motivations by returning some amount of the multiplied investment back to Player A. Another interesting aspect of this game is that Player A can implicitly signal how much they expect Player B to return by the size of their investment (McCabe, Smith, & LePore, 2000). Investing all of the endowment (e.g., \$10) sends a strong signal that Player A expects Player B to return about half of the multiplied endowment back, whereas investing a small portion of the endowment (e.g. \$2) sends a signal that Player A does not expect Player B to return any money.

### ***Why do players trust?***

Most research on trust has used variants of the Prisoner's Dilemma and the Trust Game. An interesting question of course is *why would Player A choose to invest?* From a decision theoretic perspective, players should make decisions that maximize their expected gains minimize anticipated losses (von Neumann & Morgenstern, 2007). This allows for at least two possible theoretical explanations why Player A might trust Player B. The first is because Player A *expects* Player B to share (Chang, Doll, van't Wout, Frank, & Sanfey, 2010; Fareri, Chang, & Delgado, 2012). Using the example in Figure 1B, the expected value of choosing to invest can be formulated as the probability of sharing multiplied by the value of sharing plus the probability of not sharing multiplied by the value of not sharing, or  $\Phi * 2 + (1-\Phi) * 0$ , where  $\Phi$  is Player A's belief about the probability of Player B choosing to share. Player A should invest if they have strong expectations of reciprocation and believe that the probability of Player B choosing share is greater than 50% (i.e.,  $\Phi > .5$ ). A second potential explanation is that Player A might receive some sort of additional *psychological value* if Player B chooses to share. Player A's psychological value might reflect an "other-regarding preference," i.e., their concern for Player B's payoff, or alternatively, the value they might receive from mutual cooperation. Here, the expected value can be formulated as  $\Phi * (2 + \varphi) + (1-\Phi) * 0$ , where  $\varphi$  is the psychological value Player A receives from Player B choosing share. Thus, Player A should invest if  $\Phi \geq .5$  and  $\varphi > 0$  (Fareri, Chang, & Delgado, 2015). Both of these accounts of trust behavior are purely theoretical, which means this behavior can be predicted given a set of assumptions without running any experiments.

### ***Developing expectations about trustworthiness***

This theoretical analysis of the Trust Game indicates that expectations and psychological value are the primary variables that will impact trust. The next section of the paper examines how players develop beliefs about a relationship partner's trustworthiness and focuses on three primary mechanisms through which a player can learn about a partner's level of trustworthiness. First, they can learn by directly interacting with the partner and discovering the probability that the player will choose to reciprocate. This process involves reinforcement learning, the process by which a belief is incrementally updated after each interaction. Second, players might use some prior information as an indicator of trust. For example, do they look like they are a good person? Do they seem trustworthy? These types of judgments can be made very quickly and often outside conscious awareness. Third, players might learn about a partner's trustworthiness secondhand via

conversing with another person who may have had direct experience interacting with the partner. This type of information is often conveyed through gossip.

### *Learning trustworthiness through reinforcement learning*

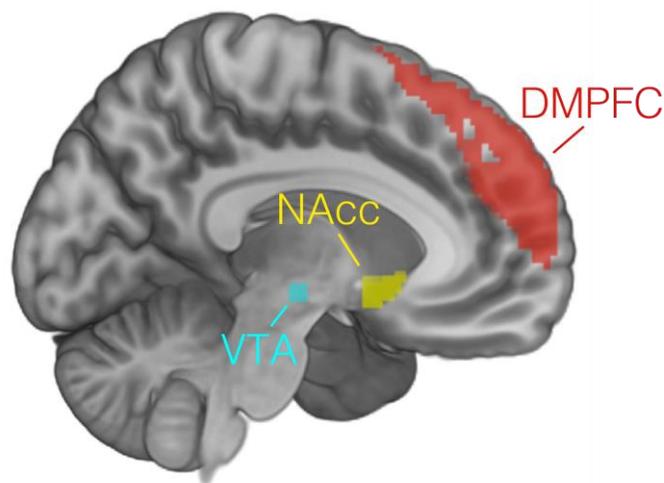
Trust reflects our belief about the likelihood of a partner taking a specific action (Rotter, 1954, 1980). This generalized expectation enables us to infer whether another individual can be relied upon (Rotter, 1980). This inference enables us to predict their future behavior, thereby reducing our uncertainty about a potential relationship partner (Rempel et al., 1985). Most often, utilizing information about an individual's previous reciprocity is the best predictor of their future trustworthiness (King-Casas et al., 2005). In this way, trustworthiness reflects a dynamic belief about the likelihood of a relationship partner reciprocating (Chang et al., 2010).

The process of forming and updating these beliefs appears to recruit the basic learning architecture of the brain. According to reinforcement learning theory, we start with some expectations about the likelihood of a cue predicting a specific outcome (Rescorla, 1972). When an observed outcome is greater than we predicted, it produces a positive prediction error signal incrementally increasing our expectation for the subsequent learning event. In contrast, when an observed outcome is less than we predicted, a negative prediction error signal is produced incrementally decreasing our future predictions. This prediction error signal is the central mechanism through which any control theory system adapts (e.g., thermostat, cruise control, elevators, etc).

A seminal finding in computational neuroscience is that dopamine neurons located in the ventral tegmental area (VTA) of the brain in non-human primates, appear to fire in response to reward prediction errors (Montague, Dayan, & Sejnowski, 1996; Schultz, Dayan, & Montague, 1997). The frequency of firing increases when a larger reward is received than expected (positive prediction error signal), and decreases when a smaller reward is received than expected (negative prediction error signal). Importantly, as an animal learns how much reward to expect, these same neurons start to *predict* the amount of expected reward by firing in response to the reward cue that precedes the actual reward outcome. Outcomes that are correctly predicted result in no firing of dopamine neurons upon receipt of the reward. In humans, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies have found that prediction error signals correlate with activity in the nucleus

accumbens (NAcc) a region in the ventral portion of the striatum that receives direct projections from the VTA. The anatomical locations of each of these regions can be seen in Figure 2.

Learning to trust a relationship partner in a repeated trust game appears to leverage this dopamine mediated learning system. Beliefs about the likelihood of a partner reciprocating are updated after receiving feedback about a partner's actions via prediction error driven reinforcement learning (Chang et al., 2010). A reinforcement learning model that utilizes prediction error can accurately predict subjective self-reported expectations after multiple interactions. In addition, NAcc activation at the time of outcome has been shown to correlate directly with model derived prediction error learning signals (Fareri et al., 2012; Rilling et al., 2002) and appears to propagate backwards to the earliest predictor of trust after repeated reciprocation (King-Casas et al., 2005; Kishida & Montague, 2012).



**Figure 2.** Neural basis of trust. Areas of the brain frequently associated with trust. VTA: ventral tegmental area, NAcc: nucleus accumbens also referred to as ventral striatum, DMPFC: dorsomedial prefrontal cortex.

### *Contextual information can impact trust learning*

Both beliefs about trustworthiness and the process of learning whether to trust can be influenced by information outside of the specific trust context. First, external information can bias prior beliefs about an individual's trustworthiness. For example, facial expressions are processed very quickly (100-200 milliseconds) (Pizzagalli et al., 2002; Todorov, Pakrashi, & Oosterhof, 2009; Willis & Todorov, 2006) and often outside conscious awareness (Winston, Strange, O'Doherty, & Dolan, 2002) convey rich social information. Individuals who are attractive or who appear happy

are more likely to be viewed as more trustworthy (Scharlemann, Eckel, Kacelnik, & Wilson, 2001). These initial trustworthiness judgments can predict the amount of financial risk a person is willing to take in a Trust Game (van't Wout & Sanfey, 2008). Another source of prior information is an individual's group membership. For example, prior information about a partner's race can impact perceptions of trustworthiness and also the amount of trust one is willing to endure in a trust game. Participants with strong automatic implicit attitudes that white is associated with good and black is associated with bad invest substantially more money in Caucasian partners compared to African-American partners in a Trust Game (Stanley, Sokol-Hessner, Banaji, & Phelps, 2011) irrespective of the participant's explicit racial attitudes. Beyond simply viewing a face, brief social interactions can also convey information about an individual's trustworthiness. When Player B is allowed to send a short message to Player A prior to making their investment decision, Player A is much more likely to trust Player B and Player B is more likely to reciprocate trust in return (Charness & Dufwenberg, 2006). Similarly, the ability to have a 30-minute social interaction prior to a repeated Prisoner's Dilemma Game can increase a participant's ability to accurately predict their partner's decision and thus the overall amount of cooperation (Frank, Gilovich, & Regan, 1993).

Second, prior information can change the way in which people learn and update beliefs about a relationship partner's trustworthiness. When given informational vignettes about a relationship partner's moral character, participants are more likely to invest money in partners that have previous evidence of "good" moral character compared to "bad" moral character (Delgado, Frank, & Phelps, 2005). Interestingly, this information can change how trustworthiness beliefs are updated after repeated interactions such that participants fail to update their beliefs that a "good" person is untrustworthy when the partner does not reciprocate trust. This finding is consistent with the notion of confirmation bias. Confirmation bias describes the psychological phenomenon of selectively shaping or identifying evidence that is consistent with a prior hypothesis and discounting information that is inconsistent with a prior belief (Nickerson, 1998). For example, imagine there is a political candidate that you like and support. According to confirmation bias, you will be less critical of any evidence that supports your beliefs about the candidate and might even attempt selectively seek out evidence that specifically supports your views (Jonas, Schulz-Hardt, Frey, & Thelen, 2001). In addition, you will likely be more critical of any evidence that counters your beliefs and may choose to avoid situations where your beliefs will be challenged, for example by clicking on a link to a story that might contain negative information about your

avored candidate (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). This is a very problematic reasoning bias as it often results in self-fulfilling prophecies. Confirmation bias also appears to impact decisions to trust. In one study, participants interacted with each other in a virtual ball tossing task known as “cyberball” (Fareri et al., 2012). One of the partners frequently included the participant in the ball passing game, and the another frequently excluded the participant. In a subsequent trust game, the researchers found that participants used this prior information in their trust decisions even though it was in a completely new type of context (i.e., trust game vs cyberball). Interestingly, this information also impacted *how* participants learned to trust their partners. Participants were more likely to update their beliefs that their partner was trustworthy when they reciprocated if the partner frequently shared in the cyberball task. Alternatively, participants were more likely to update their beliefs that the partner was untrustworthy when they did not reciprocate trust if they also did not share in the cyberball game. A subsequent study found evidence that prior information about a partner in a repeated trust game was stored in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (DMPFC) and appeared to override reinforcement-based learning signals in the striatum consistent with the notion that they were using a model of the player to interpret behavior rather than trial-to-trial feedback (Fouragnan et al., 2013). This region has previously been associated with mentalizing operations such as representing another person’s psychological state (Amodio & Frith, 2006).

#### *Gossip can spread reputational information*

The third way a player might learn about a partner’s trustworthiness is from a third party via gossip. An agent’s reputation is a belief about their overall dispositional trustworthiness shared among multiple other agents. Building a reliable and accurate belief about an individual’s disposition requires many observations across multiple contexts. As discussed above, behavior in other contexts can lead to building a reputation, which can impact subsequent interactions in different contexts (Milinski, Semmann, & Krambeck, 2002). This information can be observed by many different agents and transmitted to each via communication in the form of gossip. Gossip can be defined as private evaluative comments about an absent third party. It provides a mechanism to vicariously learn about another agent’s actions and reputation from secondhand information (Jolly & Chang, Under Review), though it does not appear to supplant direct first-hand experience (Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann, & Milinski, 2007). Gossip is more likely to impact trust decisions, when multiple gossip sources are aggregated and the information is consistent (Sommerfeld, Krambeck, & Milinski, 2008). In laboratory experiments involving multiple agents

playing trust games or the multi-person variant of the game known as the Public Goods Game, gossip has been shown to reflect accurate descriptions of the other player's behavior (Jolly & Chang, Under Review; Sommerfeld et al., 2008, 2007) and increase overall levels of cooperation in the game (Feinberg, Willer, & Schultz, 2014; Jolly & Chang, Under Review; Sommerfeld et al., 2008; Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2016). The sharing of gossip can take the form of a trust game in itself. Revealing one's source for private gossip is generally viewed as a betrayal of trust. Cultivating trusting relationships will ultimately lead to greater access to reputational information from a broader social network.

### *Psychological value of trust*

In addition to expectations, psychological value is another mechanism that can impact decisions to trust in the Trust Game. The next section of the paper examines different factors that can impact the psychological value of trust. First, mutual cooperation can be rewarding. Second, betrayal of trust can result in negative psychological value and make it less likely to trust even if there is an expectation of reciprocation. Third, we are often able to infer a relationship partner's motivations and receive value from reciprocating a relationship partner's good intentions.

### *Reciprocation of Trust is Rewarding*

In general, we value fairness and appreciate when our relationship partners reciprocate our trust. Multiple studies have reported evidence of a reward signal in the ventral striatum when a relationship partner exhibits fairness (Tabibnia, Satpute, & Lieberman, 2008) and chooses to honor an investment in the trust game (Fareri et al., 2015; Phan, Sripada, Angstadt, & McCabe, 2010). Dopamine is complicated as it is not only involved in prediction-error driven learning as previously described, but also encodes the desire (Berridge & Robinson, 1998) and expectation of both reward (Fiorillo, Tobler, & Schultz, 2003) and hedonic pleasure (Sharot, Shiner, Brown, Fan, & Dolan, 2009). Moreover, the dopamine system is also intimately connected to the opioid system, which is involved in processing the feeling of 'liking' associated with hedonic rewards (Berridge & Robinson, 1998; Leknes & Tracey, 2008). Interestingly, strong expectations of reciprocity in the trust game are associated with increased activation in the ventral striatum when learning that a relationship partner reciprocated. This is the opposite prediction of the learning account of trust described above, as predictions are matched rather than violated. One recent study attempted to integrate these two seemingly competing accounts of trust using a computational model and a

repeated trust game where participants played with a close friend or a stranger (Fareri et al., 2015). This study found evidence supporting both accounts—that neural activity in the ventral striatum was involved in both learning to predict a partner’s trustworthiness and also the feeling of reward when a relationship partner reciprocated. The degree of reward was stronger the closer the participants described they were to their friend. This suggests that the process of entrusting and fulfilling obligations is a rewarding endeavor and critical in building and maintaining social relationships.

### *Betrayal of trust damages relationships*

In contrast, we dislike having our trust betrayed and feeling like we have been taken advantage of by a relationship partner. This aversion to betrayal can make it difficult to trust and appears to be a negative value signal beyond simple risk (Bohnet & Zeckhauser, 2004). Thus, betrayal aversion serves as a negative psychological value, which decreases the likelihood of choosing to trust. In general, once there has been a breach in a relationship, trust will quickly decay. In a repeated Trust Game, following a ruptured alliance, skilled Player Bs will attempt to “coax” Player A to resume their trust by returning a larger proportion a low investment than they normally would (King-Casas et al., 2008). This action can effectively repair a relationship and typically results in increased trust in future rounds. Patients with Borderline Personality Disorder with significant impairment in their ability to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships do not exhibit such a behavior and typically result in a dissolution of trust by the end of the game (King-Casas et al., 2008). In addition, dissolution of trust decays proportional to the degree to which an expectation of trust was violated. In one repeated trust game, participants who were perceived to be the most trustworthy by an implicit facial judgement, but acted untrustworthy by only reciprocating 20% of the time were given the least amount of money at the end of the game (Chang et al., 2010). Interestingly, these types of partners were given less money than a different partner that also only reciprocated 20% of the time but looked untrustworthy. This provides additional support that betrayal can result in a negative psychological value which ultimately subtracts from a financial payoff received from choosing to trust.

### *Benevolent Intentions*

As an agent learns about the types of actions that their partner will take in a variety of contexts, they will eventually begin to develop a model of their partner’s motivational tendencies. For

example, over many repeated interactions Player A might learn that Player B will consistently keep any money invested in Player B and conclude that Player B is only motivated by their own self-interests. Alternatively, Player B might only reciprocate when other people are watching and keep the money in more private contexts. This suggests that Player B might be self-interested, but is also motivated to maintain a positive reputation. As the relationship develops after many interactions, a trustworthy Player B might begin to develop a motivation to maintain the relationship and will be willing to protect Player A's interests even at the expense of Player B's own financial outcome. These types of actions will dramatically increase trust and are essential for a positive relationship that might ultimately be mutually beneficial over a longer amount of time (King-Casas et al., 2008).

Several studies have sought to demonstrate evidence of this behavior. 'Tit-for-tat' is a classic strategy that capitalizes on this motivation and has been shown to be a highly effective algorithm in repeated prisoner's dilemma games. This strategy of conditional cooperation will reciprocate whatever action their partner took on the previous 1-2 trials. If Player A cooperates, then Player B will cooperate. If Player A chooses to defect, then Player B will defect. This strategy has been shown to be highly stable and successful, beating out several competing computer algorithms in a large tournament (Axelrod, 2006). In more complicated contexts, participants seem to track their partner's intentions and will reciprocate good intentions and punish bad intentions (Dufwenberg & Kirchsteiger, 2004; Rabin, 1993). Interestingly, this behavior does not appear to emerge developmentally until late adolescence (Sutter & Kocher, 2007) and its emergence parallels developmental changes in cortical thickness in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (DMPFC), a region known to be associated with mentalizing or representing another's state of mind (Sul, Guroglu, Crone, & Chang, In Press). This suggests that inferring a relationship partner's intentions requires a psychological process distinct from simply learning about their behavior in each context.

### ***The dubious link between oxytocin and trust***

The final section of this review briefly discusses some of the research investigating the biological foundation of trust. The bulk of this work has focused on hormones such as oxytocin and several of these studies have received considerable attention from popular media that has resulted in a broad popular consensus that oxytocin is a "moral molecule." However, this interpretation may be premature given the extant scientific evidence and should be interpreted with caution.

Oxytocin has received considerable attention as a potential biological mechanism for trust. It is a neuropeptide that is produced in the hypothalamus and released into the bloodstream at the pituitary gland and associated with many different types of species-specific social behavior (Donaldson & Young, 2008; Insel, 2010). For example, oxytocin is released during childbirth and signals several maternal behaviors such as lactation and maternal bonding. Oxytocin has also been demonstrated to be instrumental in monogamous pair-bonding in prairie voles (Young & Wang, 2004). A preference for a specific partner can be manipulated in female prairie voles by administering oxytocin and inhibited by blocking an oxytocin receptor. In humans, there has been intense interest in investigating the role of oxytocin in social behavior such as trust, empathy, and even as a treatment for social disorders such as autism and social anxiety, though the results from early randomized clinical trials have been disappointing (Anagnostou et al., 2012; Guastella, Howard, Dadds, Mitchell, & Carson, 2009). However, this work has been challenging as it is currently not possible to reliably validate oxytocin administration techniques and determine how well they can deliver oxytocin to the brain (Christensen, Shiyanov, Estep, & Schlager, 2014; Kagerbauer et al., 2013; Striepens et al., 2013).

One highly-cited study found that intranasal oxytocin administration significantly increased the amount of money that male players invested in the trust game compared to placebo, but did not impact the amount of money returned by the trustee or players' behavior in a nonsocial version of the task (Kosfeld, Heinrichs, Zak, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2005). This suggests that oxytocin appears to increase trust, but not general preferences for altruism or risk.

While a causal effect of oxytocin on trust is intriguing, it is important for this finding to be replicated by multiple research groups before it can be considered scientific evidence. Unfortunately, after six attempts at replication using slightly different experimental designs, the results have largely been inconclusive (Barraza, McCullough, Ahmadi, & Zak, 2011; Baumgartner, Heinrichs, Vonlanthen, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2008; Ebert et al., 2013; Klackl, Pfundmair, Agroskin, & Jonas, 2013; Mikolajczak et al., 2010; Yao et al., 2014). One technique for quantifying the overall evidence for oxytocin's effect on trust is to aggregate the effect size across all of these studies using a statistical meta-analysis. This analysis pooled the results from 481 participants and yielded an effect size of 0.077, which is very small and not statistically

significant (Nave, Camerer, & McCullough, 2015). Thus, considering the methodological uncertainty of whether oxytocin administration can actually enter the brain along with the null treatment effect in the meta-analysis, there does not appear to be a robust link between oxytocin and trust at this time, but future research is certainly warranted.

### *Summary*

This paper provides a broad overview of the scientific research investigating trust published in the fields of psychology, economics, neuroscience, and biology. To summarize, trust can be defined as the psychological state of assuming mutual risk with a relationship partner to attain an interdependent goal in the face of competing temptations. Trust behavior can be studied in the context of interpersonal transactions using economic games designed as “pure” measurements of trust such as the Trust Game and Prisoner’s Dilemma. In these contexts, the two main mechanisms impacting trust are expectations and psychological value. The brain systems supporting establishing trustworthiness extend core neural circuits responsible for reward-based learning via prediction error. More generally, learning to trust can be influenced by other social cues such facial expressions, as well as prior beliefs and reputational information. Finally, the psychological value of trust is a key component of why we trust at all and why trust can be so fragile: because of the positive rewards that it brings, and the pain betrayals impart.

While this paper has focused on trust from an interpersonal perspective, these ideas extend to broader institutions such as news, business, and government. There are three different types of relationships that can impact trust in institutions: the product, the point of contact, and the organization. For example, we might decide to trust an individual piece of news based on (a) the apparent veracity of the informational content, (b) the specific person delivering the news (e.g., a colleague, writer, anchorperson), or (c) where the news came from (e.g., a specific news station, media conglomerate, or government) (Williams, 2012). Our ability to trust the person delivering the news and in the broader organization are based on all of the same concepts discussed in the context of interpersonal trust. What is the overall reputation of the person or organization? What is the context? What are the motivations for delivering the news and what type of risk is being endured to deliver it? We are likely to trust people and organizations if we feel like they are reliable, and care about our interests. Organizations that are solely concerned with maximizing their own profit and self-interests will likely be perceived as less trustworthy than organizations

that prioritize consumer satisfaction. In general, news organizations that have a specific agenda and are motivated to portray news that furthers their agenda will likely be viewed as less trustworthy than organizations that are solely motivated to present news accurately and free of bias. However, specific individuals who share the same agenda might develop a stronger perception of trust with this particular organization. This can be problematic when a trustworthy source provides inaccurate information, as the individual will be less critical and more likely to believe the information. Finally, our trust in a representative from the organization (news anchor, salesperson, customer service, CEO, etc.) can also strongly impact our trust in the broader organization. These individuals represent the broader interests, motivations and reputation of the company.

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**Mistrust, efficacy and the new civics:**  
**Understanding the deep roots of the crisis of faith in journalism**

Knight Commission on Trust, Media, and American Democracy  
The Aspen Institute

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## **Mistrust, efficacy and the new civics: Understanding the deep roots of the crisis of faith in journalism**

### **Executive summary**

Current fears over mistrust in journalism have deep roots. Not only has trust in news media been declining since a high point just after Watergate, but American trust in institutions of all sorts is at historic lows. This phenomenon is present to differing degrees in many advanced nations, suggesting that mistrust in institutions is a phenomenon we need to consider as a new reality, not a momentary disruption of existing patterns. Furthermore, it suggests that mistrust in media is less a product of recent technological and political developments, but part of a decades-long pattern that many advanced democracies are experiencing.

Addressing mistrust in media requires that we examine why mistrust in institutions, as a whole, is rising. One possible explanation is that our existing institutions aren't working well for many citizens. Citizens who feel they can't influence the governments that represent them are less likely to participate in civics. Some evidence exists that civic participation in the U.S. is changing shape, with young people more focused on influencing institutions through markets (boycotts, buycotts and socially responsible businesses), code (technologies that make new behaviors possible, like solar panels or electric cars) and norms (influencing public attitudes) than through law. By understanding and reporting on this new, emergent civics, journalists may be able to increase their relevance to contemporary audiences alienated from traditional civics.

One critical shift that social media has helped accelerate, though not cause, is the fragmentation of a single, coherent public sphere. While scholars have been aware of this problem for decades, we seem to have shifted to a more dramatic divide, in which people who read different media outlets may have entirely different agendas of what's worth paying attention to. It is unlikely that a single, authoritative entity—whether it is mainstream media or the presidency—will emerge to fill this agenda-setting function. Instead, we face the personal challenge of understanding what issues are important for people from different backgrounds or ideologies.

Addressing the current state of mistrust in journalism will require addressing the broader crisis of trust in institutions. Given the timeline of this crisis, which is unfolding over decades, it is unlikely that digital technologies are the primary actor responsible for the surprises of the past year. While digital technologies may help us address issues like a disappearing sense of common ground, the underlying

issues of mistrust likely require close examination of the changing nature of civics and public attitudes to democracy.

## **Introduction**

The presidency of Donald Trump is a confusing time for journalists and those who see journalism as an integral component of a democratic and open society.

Consider a recent development in the ongoing feud between the President and CNN. On July 2nd, Donald Trump posted a 28 second video clip to his personal Twitter account for the benefit of his 33.4 million followers.<sup>1</sup> The video, a clip from professional wrestling event *Wrestlemania 23*<sup>2</sup> ("The Battle of the Billionaires"), shows Trump knocking wrestling executive Vince McMahon to the ground and punching him in the face. In the video, McMahon's face is replaced with the CNN logo, and the clip ends with an altered logo reading "FNN: Fraud News Network." It was, by far, Trump's most popular tweet in the past month, receiving 587,000 favorites and 350,000 retweets, including a retweet from the official presidential account.

CNN responded to the presidential tweet, expressing disappointment that the president would encourage violence against journalists.<sup>3</sup> Then CNN political reporter Andrew Kaczynski tracked down Reddit user "HanAssholeSolo," who posted the video on the popular Reddit forum, *The\_Donald*. Noting that the Reddit user had apologized for the wrestling video, as well as for a long history of racist and islamophobic posts, and agreed not to post this type of content again, Kaczynski declined to identify the person behind the account. Ominously, he left the door open: "CNN reserves the right to publish his identity should any of that change." The possibility that the video creator might be identified enraged a group of online Trump supporters, who began a campaign of anti-CNN videos organized under the hashtag #CNNBlackmail,<sup>4</sup> supported by Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, who took to Twitter to

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<sup>1</sup> Donald J. Trump (realDonaldTrump), "#FraudNewsCNN #FNN <https://t.co/WYUnHjjUjg>," 02 Jul. 2017, 13:21 UTC. Tweet.

<sup>2</sup> WWE, "The Battle of the Billionaires takes place at *Wrestlemania*," Online video clip, [Youtube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NsrwH9I9vE&feature=youtu.be&t=55s) 19 Jul. 2011, 27 Jul. 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NsrwH9I9vE&feature=youtu.be&t=55s>>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Grynbaum, "Trump Tweets a Video of Him Wrestling 'CNN' to the Ground," [The New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/02/business/media/trump-wrestling-video-cnn-twitter.html) 2 Jul. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/02/business/media/trump-wrestling-video-cnn-twitter.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> Mike Snider "CNN-Trump wrestling video leads to Twitter claims of blackmail," [USA Today](https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2017/07/05/cnnblackmail-cnn-trump-wrestling-video-leads-claims-blackmail/451824001/) 5 Jul. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2017/07/05/cnnblackmail-cnn-trump-wrestling-video-leads-claims-blackmail/451824001/>>.

speculate on the crimes CNN might have committed in their reportage.<sup>5</sup> By July 6th, Alex Jones's Infowars.com was offering a \$20,000 prize in "The Great CNN Meme War," a competition to find the best meme in which the President attacked and defeated CNN.<sup>6</sup>

It's not hard to encounter a story like this one and wonder **what precisely has happened** to the relationship between the press, the government and the American people. What does it mean for democracy when a sitting president refers to the press as "the opposition party?"<sup>7</sup> How did trust in media drop so low that attacks on a cable news network serve some of a politician's most popular stances? How did "fake news" become the preferred epithet for reporting one political party or another disagrees with? Where are all these strange internet memes coming from, and do they represent a groundswell of political power? Or just teenagers playing a game of one-upsmanship? And is this really what we want major news outlets, including the Washington Post, the New York Times and CBS, to be covering?<sup>8,9,10</sup>

These are worthwhile questions, and public policy experts, journalists and academics are justified in spending significant time understanding these topics. But given the fascinating and disconcerting details of this wildly shifting media landscape, it is easy to miss the larger social changes that are redefining the civic role of journalism. I believe that three shifts underlie and help explain the confusing and challenging landscape we currently face and may offer direction for those who seek to strengthen the importance of reliable information to an engaged citizenry:

1. The decline of trust in journalism is part of a larger collapse of trust in institutions of all kinds.

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<sup>5</sup> Ronn Blitzer, "Assange accuses CNN of Committing Crime With Trump Wrestling Story (He Might Be Right)," Law Newz 5 Jul. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://lawnewz.com/high-profile/assange-accuses-cnn-of-committing-crime-with-trump-wrestling-story-he-might-be-right/>>.

<sup>6</sup> "20k Prize: Infowars 'Great CNN Meme War' Contest Announced," Infowars 5 Jul. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<https://www.infowars.com/20k-prize-infowars-great-cnn-meme-war-contest-announced/>>.

<sup>7</sup> Jordan Fabian, "Trump blasts media as 'opposition party,'" The Hill 27 Jan. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/316578-trump-blasts-media-as-opposition-party>>.

<sup>8</sup> Abby Ohiheiser, "The Reddit user behind Trump's CNN meme apologized. But #CNNBlackmail is the story taking hold," The Washington Post 5 Jul. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/07/05/the-reddit-user-behind-trumps-cnn-meme-apologized-but-cnnblackmail-is-the-story-taking-hold/>>.

<sup>9</sup> "How CNN wound up in a "blackmail" boondoggle," CBS News 6 Jul. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-cnn-wound-up-in-a-blackmail-boondoggle>>.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Grynbaum, "The Network Against the Leader of the Free World," The New York Times 5 Jul. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/05/business/media/jeffrey-zucker-cnn-trump.html>>.

2. Low trust in institutions creates a crisis for civics, leaving citizens looking for new ways to be effective in influencing political and social processes.
3. The search for efficacy is leading citizens into polarized media spaces that have so little overlap that shared consensus on basic civic facts is difficult to achieve.

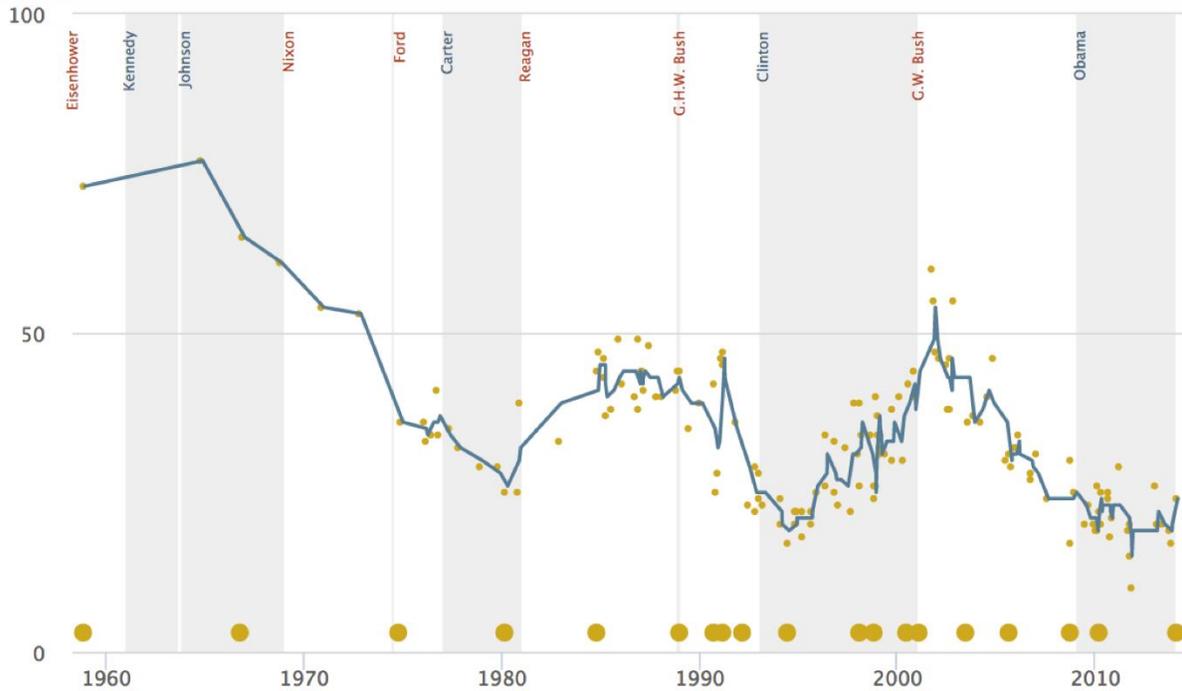
I will unpack these three shifts in turn, arguing that each has a much deeper set of roots than the current political moment. These factors lead me to a set of questions for anyone seeking to strengthen the importance of reliable information in our civic culture. Because these shifts are deeper than the introduction of a single new technology or the rise of a specific political figure, these questions focus less on mitigating the impact of recent technological shifts and more on either reversing these larger trends, or creating a healthier civic culture that responds to these changes.

### **What happened to trust?**

Since 1958, Gallup has asked a sample of Americans the following question: "Do you trust the government in Washington to do the right thing all or most of the time?" Trust peaked during the Johnson administration in 1964, at 77%. It declined precipitously under Nixon, Ford and Carter, recovered somewhat under Reagan, and nose-dived under George H.W. Bush. Trust rose through Clinton's presidency and peaked just after George W. Bush led the country into war in Iraq and Afghanistan, collapsing throughout his presidency to the sub-25% levels that characterized Obama's years in office. Between Johnson and Obama, American attitudes towards Washington reversed themselves. In the mid-1960s, it was as difficult to find someone with low trust in the federal government as it is difficult today to find someone who deeply trusts the government.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2014," Pew Research Center 13 Nov. 2014, 27 Jul. 2017  
<http://www.people-press.org/2014/11/13/public-trust-in-government/>.



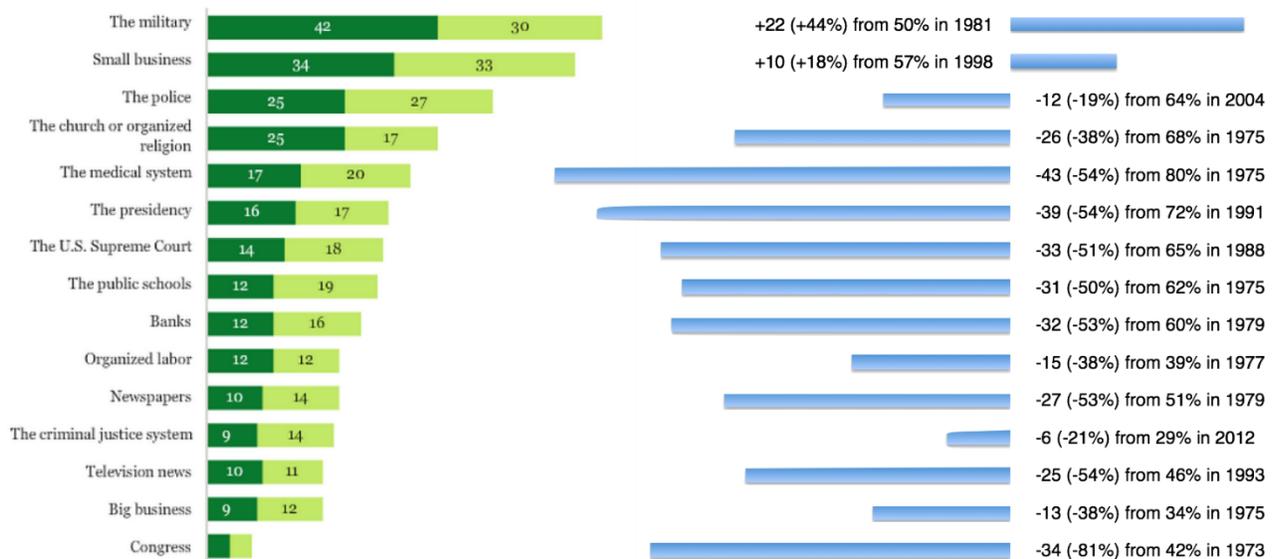
Declining trust in government, especially in Congress—the least trusted branch of our tripartite system—is an old story, and generations of politicians have run against Washington, taking advantage of the tendency for Americans to re-elect their representatives while condemning Congress as a whole. What's more surprising is the slide in confidence in institutions of all sorts. Trust in public schools has dropped from 62% in 1975 to 31% now, while confidence in the medical system has fallen from 80% to 37% in the same time period. We see significant decreases in confidence in organized religion, banks, organized labor, the criminal justice system and in big business. The only institutions that have increased in trust in Gallup's surveys are the military, which faced Vietnam-era skepticism when Gallup began its questioning, and small business, which is less a conventional institution than the invitation to imagine an individual businessperson. With the exception of the military, Americans show themselves to be increasingly skeptical of large or bureaucratic institutions, from courts to churches.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Data and leftmost chart is from Gallup, initially published at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>. Data on the right is from the author, derived from data sets published at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>.

I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one -- a great deal, quite a lot, some or very little?

June 2-7, 2015

■ % Great deal ■ % Quite a lot



GALLUP

American media institutions have experienced the same decades-long fall in trust. Newspapers were trusted by 51% of American survey respondents in 1979, compared to 20% in 2016. Trust in broadcast television peaked at 46% in 1993 and now sits at 21%. Trust in mass media peaked at 72% in 1976 in the wake of the press's role in exposing the Watergate scandal. Four decades later, that figure is now 32%, less than half of its peak. And while Republicans now show a very sharp drop in trust in mainstream media—from 32% in 2015 to 14% in 2016—trust in mass media has dropped steadily for Democrats and independents as well.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, the internet and social media has not destroyed trust in media—trust was dropping even before cable TV became popular. Nor is the internet becoming a more trusted medium than newspapers or television—in 2014, 19% of survey respondents said they put a great deal of trust in internet news. Instead, trust in media has fallen steadily since the 1980s and 1990s, now resting at roughly half the level it enjoyed 30 years ago, much like other indicators of American trust in institutions.

It's not only Americans who are skeptical of institutions, and of media in particular. Edelman, a U.S.-based PR firm, conducts an annual, global survey of trust called Eurobarometer, which compares levels of

<sup>13</sup> Art Swift, "Americans' Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low," *Gallup* 14 Sept. 2016, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>>.

trust in institutions similar to those Gallup asks about.<sup>14</sup> The 2017 Eurobarometer survey identifies the U.S. as "neutral," between a small number of high trust countries and a large set of mistrustful countries. (Only one of the five countries Eurobarometer lists as highly trusting are open societies, rated as "free" by Freedom House: India. The other four—China, Indonesia, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates—are partly free or not free.)<sup>15</sup> Depressingly, there is a discernable, if weak, correlation between more open societies and low scores on Edelman's trust metric.)<sup>16</sup> As in the U.S., trust in media plumbed new depths in Eurobarometer countries, reaching all-time lows in 17 of the 28 countries surveyed and leaving media contending with government as the least trusted set of institutions (business and NGOs rate significantly higher, though trust in all institutions is dropping year on year).

So, what happened to trust?

By recognizing that the decrease in trust in media is part of a larger trend of reduced trust in institutions, and understanding that shift as a trend that's unfolded over at least 4 decades, we can dismiss some overly simplistic explanations for the current moment. The decline of trust in journalism precedes Donald Trump. While it's likely that trust in media will fall farther under a government that presents journalists as the opposition party, Trump's choice of the press as enemy is shrewd recognition of a trend already underway. Similarly, we can reject the facile argument that the internet has destroyed trust in media and other institutions. Even if we date broad public influence of the internet to 2000, when only 52% of the U.S. population was online,<sup>17</sup> the decline in trust in journalism began at least 20 years earlier. If we accept the current moment as part of a larger trend, we need a more systemic explanation for the collapse of trust.

Scholars have studied interpersonal trust—the question of how much you can trust other individuals in society—for decades, finding robust evidence of a correlation between interpersonal trust at a societal level and economic success.<sup>18</sup> The relationship between interpersonal trust and trust in institutions is less clear: Sweden, for instance, is one of the world leaders in interpersonal trust, but one of the most

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<sup>14</sup> "Global Results" Edelman 17 Jan. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://www.edelman.com/global-results/>>.

<sup>15</sup> Ellen Aghekyan, Jennifer Dunham, Shannon O'Toole, Sarah Repucci, and Vanessa Tucker, "Freedom in the World 2017," Freedom House 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017>>.

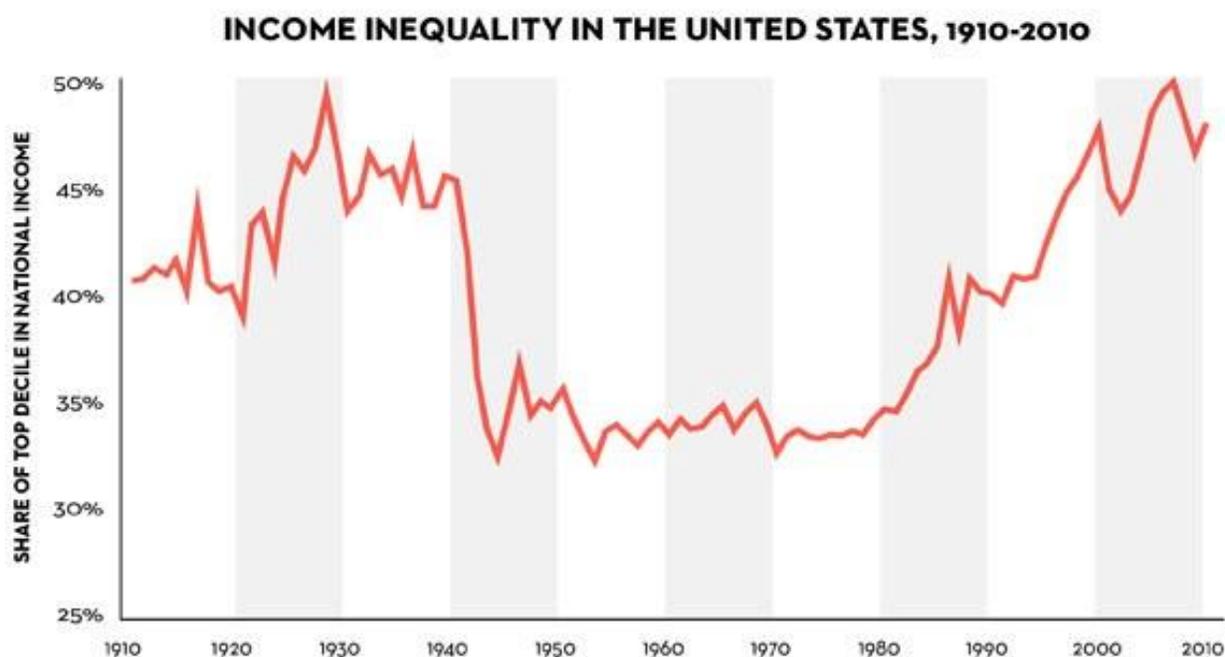
<sup>16</sup>  $R^2=0.162$ , unpublished research by the author, correlating 2017 Eurobarometer results and 2017 Freedom in the World study results for all overlapping countries.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Perrin and Maeve Duggan, "Americans' Internet Access: 2000-2015," Pew Research Center 26 Jun. 2015, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/06/26/americans-internet-access-2000-2015/>>.

<sup>18</sup> Manz, Charles C., Paola Sapienza, and Luigi Zingales, "Does culture affect economic outcomes?," The Journal of Economic Perspectives 20.2 (2006): 23-48.

mistrustful of governments and other institutions. Comparing the 2014 World Values Survey measure of interpersonal trust to the 2017 Eurobarometer survey of institutional trust shows no correlation.<sup>19</sup> So, while interpersonal trust has dropped sharply in the U.S. (from 48% in 1984 to 31% in 2014 using data from the General Social Survey), the broader world shows fairly stable interpersonal trust. Yet a decrease of trust in institutions is widespread globally, as seen both in the Eurobarometer data and in Gallup OECD data.<sup>20</sup> It's not just that we trust each other less—people around the world appear to trust institutions less.

It's also possible that reduced confidence in institutions could relate to economic stress. As numerous scholars, notably Thomas Piketty, have observed, economic inequality is reaching heights in the U.S. not seen since the Gilded Age. The decrease of confidence in institutions roughly correlates with the increase Piketty sees in inequality, which is stable through the 50's, 60's and mid-70's, rising sharply from there.<sup>21</sup>



We might think of an explanation in which citizens, frustrated by their decreasing share of the pie, punish the societal institutions responsible for their plight. But with this explanation, we would expect to see

<sup>19</sup>  $R^2=0.032$ , unpublished research by the author, correlating 2017 Eurobarometer results and results from waves 5 and 6 from the World Values Survey.

<sup>20</sup> Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser, "Trust," *Our World in Data* 2016, 27 Jul. 2017 <<https://ourworldindata.org/trust>>.

<sup>21</sup> John Cassidy, "Piketty's Inequality Story in Six Charts," *The New Yorker* 26 Mar. 2014, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/piketlys-inequality-story-in-six-charts>>.

rising inequality accompanied by a steady drop in consumer confidence; however, we do not. Consumer confidence in the U.S. and in the OECD more broadly is roughly as high now as it was in the 1960s, despite sharp drops during moments of economic stress and a rise during the "long boom" of the 1990s and 2000s. It's possible that citizens should be punishing governments, banks and businesses for rising inequality, but consumer behavior and confidence doesn't corroborate the story.<sup>22</sup>

I favor a third theory, put forward by Kenneth Newton and Pippa Norris, called the institutional performance model. Simply put, when institutions perform poorly, people lose trust in them: "It is primarily governmental performance that determines the level of citizens' confidence in public institutions."<sup>23</sup> That trust in institutions, easily lost, takes a long time to regain. We might understand the collapse of confidence in U.S. institutions as a set of high visibility crises: Vietnam and Watergate as eroding confidence in the federal government, the Catholic Church sex scandal destroying trust in that institution, the 2007 financial collapse damaging faith in banks and big business.

Newton and Norris developed their theories in the mid-1990s, noting that confidence in public institutions was plumbing new depths. In retrospect, their concerns seem well-founded, as the trends they observed have simply increased over time. In the mid-1990s, Newton and Norris were comfortable positing a relationship between society-wide interpersonal trust and trust in institutions. That relationship is less clear now because interpersonal trust has remained fairly constant while trust in institutions has decreased. One explanation for the decrease in institutional trust is that institutions have performed poorly, and that citizens are increasingly aware of their shortcomings.

Cultural and technological shifts may have made it easier for institutions to lose trust and harder to regain it. Watergate returned the U.S. press to its progressive-era muckraking roots and ended a period of deference in which indiscretions by figures of authority were sometimes ignored. (It's interesting to imagine the Clinton-era press covering JFK's personal life.) An explosion in news availability, through cable television's 24-hour news cycle and the internet, has ensured a steady stream of negative news, which engages audiences through fear and outrage. The rise of social media fuels the fire, allowing individuals to report institutional failures (police shootings, for example) and spread their dismay to friends and broader audiences. Accompanying the evolution of media technologies is education: in 1971,

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<sup>22</sup> "Consumer confidence index," OECD 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<https://data.oecd.org/leadind/consumer-confidence-index-cci.htm#indicator-chart>>.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Newton and Pippa Norris, "Confidence in Public institutions: Faith, Culture or Performance?," Harvard Kennedy School Sep. 1999, 27 Jul. 2017 <<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/NEWTON.PDF>>.

12% of Americans had graduated from college, and 57% from high school. By 2012, 31% had college degrees, and 88% had high school diplomas. The citizens of 2017 are better positioned to be critical of institutions than those of 1964.<sup>24</sup>

If we accept any of these explanations for a decrease in trust in institutions, the obvious question emerges: How do we reverse this trend? How do we restore public trust?

It's worth noting that those most concerned with restoring public trust tend to be elites, those for whom existing institutions are often working quite well. Eurobarometer's 2017 report focuses on a widening trust gap between a well-informed 15% of the population and a less informed 85%. The well-informed minority scores 60 on Edelman's trust index, while the less-informed majority is 15 points lower, at 45. The gap between elites and the majority is largest in the U.S.—22 points separate the groups.<sup>25</sup>

One approach to institutional mistrust is to try and educate this disenchanted majority, helping them understand why our institutions are not as broken as we sometimes imagine. Any approach is unlikely to reach all citizens—some will remain frustrated and alienated, due to disinterest, misinformation, a healthy distaste for being told what to think, or due to the fact that their mistrust may be justified.

TV commentator Chris Hayes encourages us to recognize that those frustrated with institutions constitute a large and powerful segment of society.<sup>26</sup> He suggests that dividing Americans into institutionalists, who want to strengthen and preserve our existing social institutions, and insurrectionists, who see a need to overhaul, overthrow, replace or abandon existing institutions, is at least as useful as dividing the population into liberals and conservatives. Insurrectionists include progressives (Bernie Sanders), libertarians (Rand Paul) and nationalists (Donald Trump), while both Republicans and Democrats are well represented within the institutionalist camp.

The defeat of a consummate institutionalist—Hillary Clinton—by an insurrectionist outsider suggests a need to take rising insurrectionism seriously. What if our citizens now include a large plurality unlikely to be persuaded to regain trust in our central civic institutions?

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<sup>24</sup> "American Adults Better Educated Than Ever Before," The Pew Research Center 10 Jan. 2013, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/01/10/american-adults-better-educated-than-ever-before/>>.

<sup>25</sup> Edelman, op cit.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Hayes, Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy, New York: Crown Publishers, 2012.

## How mistrust reshapes civics

Assume for the moment that a large group of citizens is mistrustful of existing institutions. How do these citizens participate in civic life?

Low participation in congressional elections is often offered as evidence of the decline in American civic life. But in 2012, only 35 of 435 congressional seats were considered "swing" districts, where voting margins were within 5% of the national popular vote margin. The remaining 92% of districts strongly favored either a sitting Democrat or Republican.<sup>27</sup> The safety of these districts leads to an extremely high rate of incumbent re-election, 95.9%.<sup>28</sup> Combine the very low chance of making a difference in a Congressional election with extremely low trust in Congress (9% in 2016<sup>29</sup>) and it's easy to understand why many citizens—including some institutionalists—would sit an election out.

When we teach young people how to have a civic voice, we tend to emphasize the importance of voting as a baseline civic responsibility. As the bumper sticker says, "If you don't vote, you can't complain." But at high levels of mistrust, voting does not work very well. If we see Congress, the Senate or the presidency as dysfunctional institutions, either unlikely to accomplish much<sup>30</sup> or to represent our interests, voting for representatives or encouraging them to advance or support legislation does not feel like a powerful way to influence civic processes.

High levels of mistrust present a challenge for protest as well. Unless the goal of a protest—a march, a sit-in, an occupation—is the fall of a regime (as it was with the protests of the Arab Spring), then a protest is designed to show widespread support for a political position and influence leaders. The March on Washington, likely the most remembered event of the civil rights movement as it culminated in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, was, after all, a march on Washington. It sought to pressure President Kennedy and Congress to take action on civil rights legislation and is credited with creating the momentum for LBJ to act quickly on civil rights after Kennedy's assassination.

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<sup>27</sup> Nate Silver, "As Swing Districts Dwindle, Can a Divided House Stand?," *The New York Times* 27 Dec. 2012, 27 Jul. 2017 <[https://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/27/as-swing-districts-dwindle-can-a-divided-house-stand/?\\_r=0](https://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/27/as-swing-districts-dwindle-can-a-divided-house-stand/?_r=0)>.

<sup>28</sup> Louis Jacobson, "Congress has 11% approval ratings but 96% incumbent reelection rate, meme says," 11 Nov. 2014, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2014/nov/11/facebook-posts/congress-has-11-approval-ratings-96-incumbent-re-e/>>.

<sup>29</sup> "Confidence in Institutions," 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>>.

<sup>30</sup> Drew Desilver, "In late spurt of activity, Congress avoids 'least productive' title," 29 Dec. 2014 <<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/29/in-late-spurt-of-activity-congress-avoids-least-productive-title/>>.

What happens when protesters no longer trust that institutions they might influence can make necessary social changes? The Occupy movement was widely criticized for failing to put forward a legislative agenda that representatives could choose to pass.<sup>31</sup> Occupiers, in part, were expressing their lack of confidence in the federal government and didn't put forth these proposals because their goal was to demonstrate other forms of community decision-making. Whether or not Occupy succeeded in demonstrating the viability of consensus-based governance, the resistance of Occupiers to turning into a political party or advocacy organization shows a deep insurrectionist distrust of existing institutions and an unwillingness to operate within them.

The danger is that insurrectionists will drop out of civic life altogether, or be manipulated by demagogues who promise to obviate the complexities of mistrusted institutions through the force of their personal character and will. The hope is that insurrectionists can become powerful, engaged citizens who participate in civic life despite their skepticism of existing institutions. To make this possible, we need to broaden our understanding of what it means to be a good citizen.

There is a tendency to assume that the actions that constitute good citizenship are stable over time. Good citizens inform themselves about issues, vote in elections, contact representatives about issues they care about and, if they fail to be heard, protest peacefully and non-violently. Michael Schudson argues that this model of citizenship is only one of several that has held sway in the U.S. at different moments in our nation's history. Early in the American republic, "good citizens" would be expected to send the most prominent and wealthy member of their community to Washington to represent them, independent of agreement with his ideology. Later, good citizens supported a political party they affiliated with based on geography, ethnicity or occupation. The expectation that voters would inform themselves on issues before voting, vote on split tickets making decisions about individual candidates or vote directly on legislation in a referendum, was the result of a set of progressive era reforms that ushered in what Schudson calls "the informed citizen."<sup>32</sup>

We tend to see the informed citizen as the correct and admirable model for citizenship a hundred years after its introduction, but we miss some of the weaknesses of the paradigm. Informed citizenship places very high demands on citizens, expecting knowledge about all the candidates and issues at stake in an

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<sup>31</sup> Dan Schnur, "What should Occupy Wall Street's agenda be?," *The Washington Post* 21 Oct. 2011, 27 Jul. 2017 <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/what-should-occupy-wall-streets-agenda-be/2011/10/21/gIQA5iTk4L\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.ed4a9c67d3f7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/what-should-occupy-wall-streets-agenda-be/2011/10/21/gIQA5iTk4L_story.html?utm_term=.ed4a9c67d3f7)>.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

election. It is a paradigm deeply favored by journalists, as it places the role of the news as informing and empowering citizens at the center of the political process. Unfortunately, it's also a model plagued with very low participation rates. Schudson observes that the voting was cut nearly in half once progressive political reforms came into effect. And while we often discuss civics and participation in terms of the informed citizen mode, he argues that America has moved on to other dominant models of citizenship, the rights-based citizenship model that centers on the courts, as during the civil rights movement, and monitorial citizenship, where citizens realize they cannot follow all the details of all political processes and monitor media for a few, specific issues where they are especially passionate and feel well-positioned to take action.

Young people, in particular, are looking for ways they can be most effective in making change around issues they care about. Effective citizenship, in which individuals make rational, self-interested decisions about how they most effectively participate in civic life, can look very different from the informed citizenship we've come to expect. Joe Kahne and Cathy Cohen surveyed thousands of youth in California and discovered that while participation in "institutional" politics (rallies, traditional political organizing, volunteering to work with a candidate) is low, there is strong engagement with "participatory politics," sharing civic information online, discussing social issues in online fora, making and sharing civic media.<sup>33</sup> And while young people may not be volunteering for political campaigns, they are volunteering at a much higher rate than previous generations, looking for direct, tangible ways they can participate in their communities.<sup>34</sup>

We are beginning to see new forms of civic participation that appeal to those alienated from traditional political processes. One way to understand these methods is as levers of change. When people feel like they are unlikely to move formal, institutional levers of change through voting or influencing representatives, they look for other levers to make movement on the issues they care about.

In his 1999 book, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*,<sup>35</sup> Lawrence Lessig argues that there are four primary ways societies regulate themselves. We use laws to make behaviors legal or illegal. We use markets to make desirable behaviors cheap and dangerous ones expensive. We use social norms to sanction undesirable behaviors and reward exemplary ones. And code and other technical architectures make undesirable actions difficult to do and encourage other actions. Each of the regulatory forces Lessig

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<sup>33</sup> Cathy Cohen and Joseph Kahne, "New Media and Youth Political Action," *dmlcentral* Jun. 2012, 27 Jul. 2017 <[https://ypp.dmlcentral.net/sites/all/files/publications/YPP\\_Survey\\_Report\\_FULL.pdf](https://ypp.dmlcentral.net/sites/all/files/publications/YPP_Survey_Report_FULL.pdf)>.

<sup>34</sup> <http://civicyouth.org/youth-volunteering-rate-much-higher-than-in-the-1970s-and-80s/>

<sup>35</sup> Lessig, Lawrence. *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

identifies can be turned into a lever of change, and in an age of high mistrust in institutions, engaged citizens are getting deeply creative in using the three non-legal levers.

In the wake of Edward Snowden's revelations of widespread NSA surveillance of communications, many citizens expressed fear and frustration. The Obama administration's review of the NSA's programs made few significant changes to domestic spying policies.<sup>36</sup> Unable to make change through formal government processes, digital activists have been hard at work building powerful, user-friendly tools to encrypt digital communications like Signal, whose powerful encryption has now been incorporated into the widely used WhatsApp platform.<sup>38</sup> Code-based theories of change allow programmers and engineers to become powerful social change actors, making new behaviors possible, whether they increase personal privacy or reduce dependency on fossil fuels.

Market-based theories of change use capitalism's capacity for scaling to change the behavior of large groups of people. We usually think of Elon Musk as an inventive entrepreneur and engineer, but it's also possible to think of him as one of the most effective activists working to halt climate change. By building a highly desirable electric car and the infrastructure to charge it at home and on the road, Musk may ultimately reduce carbon emissions as much as legislating global carbon markets. Market-based activists use boycotts, buycotts and social ventures to encourage consumers to make change using their wallets, a technique used since American colonists eschewed heavily taxed British goods, now organized and accelerated through communications networks.

If code-based theories of change are most open to engineers and market levers to entrepreneurs, norms-based theories of change have been embraced by those who make and disseminate media, which in the age of social networks includes the majority of Americans and the vast majority of young Americans. The Black Lives Matter movement is less focused on specific legislative change than on changing social norms that cause many people to see black males, especially young black males, as a threat. Laws are already on the books that should protect black males from police violence. But when a policeman perceives 12-year old Tamir Rice as a threat because he is a young black man playing with a toy,

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<sup>36</sup> Ackerman, Spencer, "NSA review to leave spying programs largely unchanged, reports say", *The Guardian*, 13 December 2013. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/13/nsa-review-to-leave-spying-programs-largely-unchanged-reports-say>>

<sup>37</sup> Bamford, James, "Every Move You Make", *Foreign Policy*, September 7, 2016. <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/07/every-move-you-make-obama-nsa-security-surveillance-spying-intelligence-snowden/>>

<sup>38</sup> Greenberg, Andy, "Meet Moxie Marlinspike, the Anarchist bringing Encryption to All of Us", *Wired*, July 31, 2016. <<https://www.wired.com/2016/07/meet-moxie-marlinspike-anarchist-bringing-encryption-us/>>

changing the norms of how African Americans are seen by police—and by society as a whole—is a high priority. Online, BLM protesters have focused on making unarmed deaths at the hands of the police highly visible, leading to a surge of media coverage in the wake of Michael Brown's death, making these incidents at least 10 times as visible as they were before the Ferguson protests.<sup>39</sup>

Effective citizenship means that people look for the methods of social change they see as most effective. Young people often look for norms-based theories of change, taking advantage of their skills in building and disseminating media. Insurrectionists frustrated with legal institutions or with the behaviors of corporate America look for change through new technology and new ventures.

This shift in citizenship is still emerging. Media often hasn't caught up with the idea that effective civic engagement happens outside the courts, the voting booth and Congress. This understandable over focus on law-based theories of change leaves those frustrated with institutions frustrated with media as well. For insurrectionists who see Washington institutions as ineffective and untrustworthy, a strong media focus on these institutions can look like an attempt to maintain their legitimacy and centrality.

One of journalism's key roles in an open society is to help citizens participate effectively. From close scrutiny of those in elected office to analysis of legislative proposals to editorial endorsements of candidates for office, news outlets help their customers make civic decisions. If mistrust in institutions is changing how people participate in civics, news organizations may need to change as well. We can recommit ourselves to explaining the importance and centrality of our institutions, but we run the risk of being insufficiently skeptical and critical, and the danger that we lose even more trust from our alienated and insurrectionist readers. Or we could rethink our role as journalists as helping people navigate this emergent civic landscape and find the places where they, individually and collectively, can be the most effective and powerful.

### **Dueling spheres of consensus**

Shortly after the 2016 elections, a friend asked me to lunch. A Trump supporter, he knew we had voted differently in the election, and we both wanted to talk about the future of the country under the new

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<sup>39</sup> Unpublished research from this author, presented at MIT in Fall 2016.

administration. But he invited me specifically because he was angered by an article I'd written that grouped Breitbart founder Steve Bannon with alt-right leader Richard Spencer.<sup>40</sup>

My friend explained that he read Breitbart religiously, not because he supports white supremacy, but because he supports net-zero immigration to the U.S. as a strategy for raising the incomes of white and non-white Americans. Breitbart was the only major media outlet he found seriously discussing that policy stance. "If Bannon is beyond the pale, and Breitbart's beyond the pale, does it mean that my views on immigration are beyond the pale? And what about the millions of Americans who agree with me?"<sup>41</sup>

Research I conducted with Yochai Benkler and our team confirmed my friend's assertion that Breitbart covered matters of immigration much more closely than other media outlets leading up to the 2016 election, focusing on the issue more than 3x as often as right-leaning outlets Fox News and the Wall Street Journal.<sup>42</sup> Thanks to the strong influence of Breitbart, we speculate, immigration became the most-reported on policy issue in the 2016 election, despite GOP efforts to soften the party's stance on immigration to reach Latino voters.<sup>43</sup>

The move of immigration from the fringe of the news agenda to a central topic is a phenomenon addressed by media scholar Daniel Hallin in his 1986 book, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*.<sup>44</sup> Hallin argues that we should think of potential news stories as fitting into one of three spheres. In the sphere of consensus, there is widespread agreement on an issue or a position (democracy is the best form of government; capitalism is a good way to build an economy) and therefore it's not worth our time to discuss. In the sphere of deviance, there is widespread agreement that a stance is beyond the pale (sexual relationships between adults and minors are natural and should be legal; collective ownership of

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<sup>40</sup> Ethan Zuckerman, "What happens when you normalize the abnormal," CNN 23 Nov. 2016, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/23/opinions/bannon-spencer-white-supremacy-trump-zuckerman/index.html>>.

<sup>41</sup> Ethan Zuckerman, "Lunch with my friend, the Trump supporter," Ethanzuckerman 9 Dec. 2016, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2016/12/09/lunch-with-my-friend-the-trump-supporter/>>.

<sup>42</sup> Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, Hal Roberts, and Ethan Zuckerman, "Study: Breitbart-led right-wing media ecosystem altered broader media agenda," Columbia Journalism Review 3 Mar. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<https://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php>>.

<sup>43</sup> Jane C. Timm, "Latinos force GOP to negotiate on immigration," 14 Nov. 2012, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://www.msnbc.com/morning-joe/latinos-force-gop-negotiate-immigration>>.

<sup>44</sup> Daniel Hallin, The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) pp. 116–118.

all goods is the best way to end economic inequality) and also not worthy of discussion. The (sometimes very narrow) sphere of legitimate controversy includes the standard political debates within a society, and journalists are expected to show themselves as neutral on those topics legitimate to debate (tax cuts for the wealthy will lead to economic growth; for-profit insurers will only survive with federally mandated medical insurance).

Lobbyists, activists and PR professionals have used Hallin's spheres to shape what's at stake in public policy debates. Health insurance companies have worked hard to push the idea of single payer healthcare into the sphere of deviance, rebranding the idea as socialized medicine to associate it with a disfavored economic idea.<sup>45</sup> By citing the small number of scientists who do not see evidence that humans are contributing to climate change, advocates have kept the phenomenon of global warming within the sphere of legitimate debate.

While Hallin's Spheres are related to the Overton window—the idea that certain policy prescriptions are so radical that a politician could not embrace them without compromising her own electability<sup>46</sup>—being consigned to Hallin's sphere of deviance has psychological implications that falling outside the Overton window lacks. Advance a policy suggestion that is outside the Overton window and you suffer the disappointment that your idea is discarded as impractical. Stray outside the sphere of legitimate debate into the sphere of deviance, and your position becomes invisible to mainstream media dialog. Journalism scholar Jay Rosen observes, "Anyone whose views lie within the sphere of deviance — as defined by journalists — will experience the press as an opponent in the struggle for recognition. If you don't think separation of church and state is such a good idea; if you do think a single payer system is the way to go; chances are you will never find your views reflected in the news. It's not that there's a one-sided debate; there's no debate."<sup>47</sup>

The growth in media diversity brought about by the rise of the internet and social media means that if your ideas are outside the sphere of legitimate debate, you can simply find a media sphere where you're

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<sup>45</sup> Wendell Potter, [Deadly Spin: An Insurance Company Insider Speaks Out on How Corporate Pr Is Killing Health Care and Deceiving Americans](#), (New York: Bloomsbury 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Nathan Russell, "An Introduction to the Overton Window of Political Possibilities," [Mackinac Center for Public Policy](#) 4 Jan. 2006, 27 Jul. 2017 <<https://www.mackinac.org/7504>>.

<sup>47</sup> Jay Rosen, "Audience Atomization Overcome: Why the Net Erodes the Authority of the Press," [Huffington Post](#) 14 Apr. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jay-rosen/audience-atomization-over\\_b\\_157807.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jay-rosen/audience-atomization-over_b_157807.html)>.

no longer in the sphere of deviance. My friend, frustrated that he could not find media debating his ideas on immigration, began reading Breitbart, where his deviant ideas are within the sphere of consensus, and the legitimate debate is about the specific mechanisms that should be used to limit immigration. He is not alone. While less popular than during the 2016 election, Breitbart is the 61st most popular website in the U.S.,<sup>48</sup> close in popularity to the Washington Post. In our data set, which examines how websites are shared on Twitter or Facebook, Breitbart is the fourth-most influential media outlet, behind CNN, The New York Times and politics site The Hill.

The ability to find a set of media outlets compatible with your political views is not new. Even in the days of political pamphlets and early newspapers, it was possible to experience a Federalist or Anti-Federalist echo chamber. The rise of large-circulation newspapers and broadcast media, which needed to avoid alienating large swaths of the population to maintain fiscal viability, led us into a long age where partisan journalism was less common.<sup>49</sup> Even as cable news made partisan news viable again, broadcast news networks and major newspapers maintained aspirations of fairness and balance, attempting to serve the broader public.

Those economic models make little sense in a digital age. As purveyors of wholly manufactured fake news (like the Macedonian teens who targeted content at Trump supporters)<sup>50</sup> know, there is a near-insatiable appetite for news that supports our ideological preconceptions. But it's important to consider that people seek out ideological compatible media not just out of intellectual laziness, but out of a sense of efficacy. If you are a committed Black Lives Matter supporter working on strategies for citizen review of the police, it's exhausting to be caught in endless debates over whether racism in America is over. If you're working on counseling women away from abortion towards adoption, understanding how to be effective in your own movement is likely to be a higher priority for you than dialog with pro-choice activists.

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<sup>48</sup> "breitbart.com Traffic Statistics," 26 Jul. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017  
<<http://www.alex.com/siteinfo/breitbart.com>>.

<sup>49</sup> "breitbart.com Traffic Statistics," 26 Jul. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017  
<<http://www.alex.com/siteinfo/breitbart.com>>.

<sup>50</sup> Craig Silverman and Lawrence Alexander, "How Teens In The Balkans Are Duping Trump Supporters With Fake News," *Buzzfeed News* 3 Nov. 2016, <[https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo?utm\\_term=.fb2l4v0vm#.wpjO3LKLr](https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo?utm_term=.fb2l4v0vm#.wpjO3LKLr)>.

Partisan isolationism is not just purely a function of homophily. The structure of internet media platforms contributes to ideological isolation. While Pariser<sup>51</sup> and others trace these structural effects to Facebook and other highly targeted social media, I argued in *Rewire*<sup>52</sup> that three different generations of internet media have made it possible to self-select the topics and points of views we are most interested in. The pre-Google web allowed us to self-select points of view much as a magazine rack does: we choose the National Review over the Nation, or their respective websites. Unlike broadcast media, which lends itself towards centrist points of view to attract a wide range of ad dollars, narrowcast media like websites and magazines allow more stark, partisan divisions. With the rise of search, interest-based navigation often led us to ideological segregation, either through the topics we select or the language we choose to pursue them. For example, the vegan cooking website is unlikely place to meet conservatives, much as searching for progressive voices on a hunting site can be frustrating. And the language we use to describe an issue—climate change, global warming or scientific fraud—can be thoroughly ideologically isolating in terms of the information we retrieve.

What's different about social media is not that we can choose the points of view we encounter, but that we are often unaware that we are making these choices. Many people joined Facebook expecting the service would help them remain connected with family and friends, not that it would become a primary source of news. As of 2016, 62% of American adults reported getting some news via social media, and 18% reported often getting news through platforms like Facebook.<sup>53</sup> These numbers are more dramatic for young adults, and likely increased during the 2016 presidential election. Because Facebook's newsfeed algorithm presents content to you based on content you've liked and clicked on in the past, it has a tendency to reinforce your existing preconceptions, both because your friends are likely to share those points of view, and because your behavior online indicates to Facebook what content you are most interested in. Eli Pariser calls this problem "the filter bubble," building on earlier work done by Cass Sunstein,<sup>54</sup> which recognized the tendency to create "echo chambers" online by selecting media that fits our politics. Pariser argues (controversially) that algorithms used by Facebook and others increase this tendency.

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<sup>51</sup> Pariser, Eli. *The filter bubble: How the new personalized web is changing what we read and how we think*. Penguin, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Zuckerman, Ethan. *Digital cosmopolitans: Why we think the internet connects us, why it doesn't, and how to rewire it*. WW Norton & Company, 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Jeffrey Gottfried and Elisa Shearer, "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2016," 26 May 2016, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/>>.

<sup>54</sup> Cass Sunstein, Republic.com, possibly 1999?

It's worth noting that the filter bubble problem isn't inherent to social media. Twitter has pointedly not filtered their timeline, which avoids the filter bubble, but leaves responsibility for escaping echo chambers to the user. While you can decide to follow a different group of people on Twitter, research from Nathan Matias suggests that even highly motivated people are unlikely to make major changes in their online behavior in order to combat biases and prejudices.<sup>55</sup>

Our team at the MIT Media Lab is working on Gobo, a new tool that allows you to filter your Facebook and Twitter feeds differently, using natural language processing and machine learning to build filters that can increase or decrease the political content of your news feed, give you more or fewer female authors, or consciously choose to encounter more news outside of your echo chamber. One of the key questions we seek to answer in building the tool is whether people will actually choose to use these filters. One hypothesis we hope to disprove is that, despite complaining about filter bubbles, many people seem to enjoy ideological isolation and may choose settings similar to what they encounter online now.

General interest media, like broadcast television and national newspapers, traditionally saw themselves as having a responsibility to provide ideological balance, global perspectives and diversity in their coverage. (Whether they succeeded is another question—I have heard many reports from people of color that they felt invisible in those “good old days” and far more visible in contemporary, fragmented media.) As that business model becomes less viable, because readers gravitate towards ideologically compatible material, it's worth asking whether platforms like Facebook have an appetite for this work.

Thus far, the answer seems to be no. Facebook has assiduously avoided being labeled a publisher, trying to ensure both an escape from legal liability for content it hosts under the Safe Harbor provisions of U.S. internet law, and to prevent itself from being criticized about exercising poor editorial judgement. The problems Facebook is confronted with are serious. Demands that the platform block “fake news” are challenging, given that most of what is called “fake news” is not obviously fraudulent. If Facebook begins blocking platforms like Breitbart, it will be accused of censorship of political content, and rightly so.

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<sup>55</sup> J. N. Matias, S. Szalavitz, E. Zuckerman, “FollowBias: Supporting Behavior Change toward Gender Equality by Networked Gatekeepers on Social Media,” *In Proceedings of the 20th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*, ACM Press, 2017.

One possible escape for Facebook is to eliminate algorithmic curation of newsfeeds, moving back to a Twitter-like world in which social media is a spray of information from anyone you've chosen to pay attention to. Another is to adopt a solution like the one we are proposing with Gobo, and put control of filters into the user's hands. It's an open question whether Facebook would choose a path forward that gives its users more control over their experience of the service.

In considering how platforms enable online discourse, we need to consider the idea that sharing content is a form of civic participation. Part of our emergent civics is the practice of making and disseminating media designed to strengthen ties within an identity group and to distinguish that group from groups that oppose it. Consider the meme-makers competing for \$20,000 from Infowars. Many involved don't believe that CNN is ISIS, as one popular meme alleges.<sup>56</sup> As Judith Donath explains, "News is shared not just to inform or even to persuade. It is used as a marker of identity, a way to proclaim your affinity with a particular community."<sup>57</sup>

Donath's insight helps explain why fact-checking, blocking fake news or urging people to support diverse, fact-based news is unlikely to check the spread of highly partisan news. Not only is partisan news comfortable and enjoyable (I find it reassuring to watch Trevor Noah or Samantha Bee and assume that friends on the right feel the same watching Fox News commentators), spreading this information has powerful social rewards and gives a sense of shared efficacy, the feeling (real or imagined) that you are making norms-based social change by shaping the information environment.

The research Benkler, I and our team conducted shows how rapidly these partisan ecosystems can come into being. Examining 1.25 million media stories and 25,000 media sources, we gave each media source a partisanship score based on whether people who shared tweets from the Democratic or Republican candidates also shared a story from a source. Stories from The New York Times were more often shared by people who'd retweeted Hillary Clinton than those who'd retweeted Donald Trump, but the effect was much more pronounced with Breitbart: Breitbart was amplified almost exclusively by Trump supporters. Our research shows a tightly clustered set of sites read only by the nationalist right. The vast majority of these sites are very new, most founded during the Obama administration. This community of interest has

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<sup>56</sup> Hrand Tookman, "'CNN is ISIS' Trends On Twitter As Trump Supporters Heckle Network," 3 Jun. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<http://dailycaller.com/2017/06/03/cnn-is-isis-trends-on-twitter-as-trump-supporters-heckle-network/>>.

<sup>57</sup> Judith Donath, "Why fake news stories thrive online," 20 Nov. 2016 <<http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/20/opinions/fake-news-stories-thrive-donath/index.html>>.

very little overlap with traditional conservative sources like the Wall Street Journal or the National Review. In our study, those publications are both low in influence and linked to by both the left and right, while the Breitbart-centered cluster functions as an echo chamber.

The emergence of echo chambers like the one around Breitbart further complicates fact-checking. danah boyd explains that in teaching students not to rely on Wikipedia, we've encouraged them to triangulate their way to truth from Google search results.<sup>58</sup> On topics covered heavily in the Breitbartsphere but not addressed in the broader media universe, this leads to a perverse effect. Search for information on Pizzagate as the story was being developed on sites like Infowars and you would likely find links to other far-right sites promoting the story. By the time sites like The New York Times became aware of the story and began debunking it, many interested in the faux-scandal had persuaded themselves of its truth through repetition within a subset of closely related websites, to the point where an unstable individual took up arms to "self-investigate" the controversy.<sup>59</sup>

Hallin's spheres suggests we question whether we are encouraged to discuss a wide enough range of topics within the sphere of legitimate controversy. The problem we face now is one in which dialog is challenging, if not impossible, because one party's sphere of consensus is the other's sphere of deviance and vice versa. Our debates are complicated not only because we cannot agree on a set of shared facts, but because we cannot agree what's worth talking about in the first place. When one camp sees Hillary Clinton's controversial email server as evidence of her lawbreaking and deviance (sphere of consensus for many on the right) or as a needless distraction from more relevant issues (sphere of deviance for many on the left), we cannot agree to disagree, as we cannot agree that the conversation is worth having in the first place.

Much as there is no obvious, easy solution to countering mistrust in institutions, I have no panaceas for polarization and echo chambers. Still, it's worth identifying these phenomena—and acknowledging their deep roots—as we seek solutions to these pressing problems. It is worth noting that the research Benkler's and my team carried out suggests the phenomenon of asymmetric polarization. In our analysis, those on the far right are more isolated in terms of viewpoints they encounter than those on the far left. There's nothing in our research that suggests the right is inherently more prone to ideological isolation. By

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<sup>58</sup> danah boyd, "Did Media Literacy Backfire," 5 Jan. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <<https://points.datasociety.net/did-media-literacy-backfire-7418c084d88d>>.

<sup>59</sup> Matthew Haag and Maya Salam, "Gunman in 'Pizzagate' Shooting Is Sentence to 4 Years in Prison," 22 Jun. 2017, 27 Jul. 2017 <[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/22/us/pizzagate-attack-sentence.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/22/us/pizzagate-attack-sentence.html?_r=0)>.

understanding how extreme polarization has developed recently, it might be possible to stop the left from developing a similar echo chamber. Our research also suggests that the center right has a productive role to play in building media that appeals to an insurrectionist and alienated right-leading audience, which keeps those important viewpoints in dialog with existing communities in the left, center and right.

Fundamentally, I believe that the polarization of dialog in the media is a result both of new media technologies and of the deeper changes of trust in institutions and in how civics is practiced. The Breitbartosphere is possible not just because it's easier than ever to create a media outlet and share viewpoints with the like-minded. It's possible because low trust in government leads people to seek new ways of being engaged and effective, and low trust in media leads people to seek out different sources. Making and disseminating media feels like one of the most effective ways to engage in civics in a low-trust world, and the 2016 elections suggest that this civic media is a powerful force we are only now starting to understand.

### **Closing questions**

I want to acknowledge that this paper may stray far from the immediate challenges that face us around issues of information quality, in the service of seeking for their deeper roots. My questions follow in the same spirit. For the most part, these are questions to which I do not have a good answer. Some are active research questions for my lab. My fear is that we may have to address some of these underlying questions before tackling tactical questions of how we should best respond to immediate challenges to faith in journalism.

### **Trust:**

- How long does it take to recover trust in an institution that has failed? What are examples of a mistrusted institution regaining public trust?
- Is the fall in institutional trust an independent or a joint phenomenon—i.e., does losing trust in Congress lessen our trust in the Supreme Court or the medical system?
- Is trust in news media higher or lower in countries with strong public/taxpayer supported media? Does trust correlate positively or negatively to ad support? Privacy-invading tracking and targeting?
- If people don't trust institutions, who or what do they trust? How do those patterns differ for more trusting elites and for the broader population?

### **Participation:**

- What forms of participation (from the traditional, like voting, to the non-traditional, like making CNN-bashing memes) are indicators of future civic engagement? Should we be encouraging and celebrating a broader range of civic participation amongst youth? Amongst groups that see themselves alienated from conventional politics?
- Should media attempt to explain and engage audiences more deeply in institutional politics? Will acknowledging the limits of existing institutional politics restore trust in journalism, or damage trust in government?
- Should media celebrate and promote new forms of civic engagement? Will this further decrease trust in institutions? Increase a sense of citizen efficacy?
- What would media designed for increased public participation look like? Are there models in the advocacy journalism space, or in solutions journalism, constructive journalism or other movements?

**Polarization:**

- Is it reasonable to expect Americans to rely on a single, or small set, of professional media sources that report a relatively value-neutral set of stories? Or is this goal of journalistic non-partisanship no longer a realistic ideal?
- Could taxpayer-sponsored media serve a function of anchoring discourse around a single set of facts? Or will public media be inherently untrustworthy to some portion of American voters? Why does public media seem to work well in other low-trust nations but not in the U.S.?
- Is there a role for high-quality, factual but partisan media that might reach audiences alienated from mainstream media?
- Should media outlets learn from what's consensus, debatable and deviant in other media spheres and modify coverage to intersect with reader's spheres? Is shifting the boundaries of these spheres part of how civics is conducted today?

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## Addressing the Roots of Distrust

*danah boyd*

*Microsoft Research and Data & Society*

Public trust in institutions is never wholly about the institution. Context, cultural attitudes, and social dynamics matter. Trust in news media isn't at an all-time low solely because of something that news entities have or have not done. Surely, the collapse of local news producers, the role of social media in news distribution, [the increase of metrics in the newsroom](#)<sup>60</sup> and the [financialization of the news industry](#)<sup>61</sup> all play a role in affecting people's attitudes towards the practice of journalism as a whole. But we also need to recognize that rising perceptions and experiences of inequality, increases in [political polarization](#),<sup>62</sup> and shifts in the structure of social life affect people's trust in institutions generally, and news media specifically.

The rise of 24/7 news meant that the public was flooded with information, but that didn't mean that what was being covered was necessarily what people wanted to hear about. Although communities of color have long known that their [interests are often not part of the major news cycle](#),<sup>63</sup> a new generation of liberal Americans has grown up frustrated by the lack of coverage of events like Ferguson and Standing Rock. Likewise, just as conservative commentators spent the 1980s railing against the liberal bent of mainstream media, resulting in the rise of Fox News, a new generation of far-right conservatives have given up on more traditional media outlets, preferring to help usher in a new wave of blogs, talk radio and internet-only sites dedicated to alt-right agendas.

The role of the internet should also not be discounted. In the last 15 years, we've seen the rise of blogging and social media. While news media industry actors are quick to blame the internet for reconfiguring the economic conditions of news, for most people, the internet allowed them to feel like they were more in control of what information they can access. People of all political persuasions and all ages now [turn to social media](#)<sup>64</sup> to make sure their voices and perspectives are heard and to access the perspectives of both friends and people whose viewpoints align with their own. Rather than turning to one "trusted" service, [they triangulate](#)<sup>65</sup> across many different sources. At the same time, they encounter a barrage of information from friends, family, advertisers and other stakeholders interested in shaping their opinions. Much of it is

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<sup>60</sup> Angele Christin, "When it comes to chasing clicks, journalists say one thing but feel pressure to do another," NiemanLab, Aug. 28, 2014. <http://www.niemanlab.org/2014/08/when-it-comes-to-chasing-clicks-journalists-say-one-thing-but-feel-pressure-to-do-another/>

<sup>61</sup> Matthew Crain, "The Rise of Private Equity Media Ownership in the United States: A Public Interest Perspective," *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 3, (2009). <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/381/0>

<sup>62</sup> Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in the American Public," June 12, 2014. <http://www.pewresearch.org/packages/political-polarization/>

<sup>63</sup> Juan González and Joseph Torres, *News For All the People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media*, (2011). <https://www.versobooks.com/books/1185-news-for-all-the-people>

<sup>64</sup> Jeffrey Gottfried and Elisa Shearer, "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2016," Pew Research Center, May 26, 2016. <http://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/>

<sup>65</sup> Mary Madden, Amanda Lenhart and Claire Fontaine, "How Youth Navigate the News Landscape," Knight Foundation, February 2017. [https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/publications/pdfs/000/000/230/original/Youth\\_News.pdf](https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/publications/pdfs/000/000/230/original/Youth_News.pdf)

“personalized” by algorithmic systems which are trained based on feedback from users to provide cotton candy rather than vegetables.

Furthermore, the internet also opened the door for the widespread [manipulation of information](#).<sup>66</sup> [Teenagers](#),<sup>67</sup> social media marketers and [advocates](#)<sup>68</sup> quickly learned that messing with Facebook and Twitter algorithms could help them spread messages far and wide. Whether they are trying to advertise a product, spread a meme, or raise public interest in an issue, creating clickable, up-voteable content is key. The content that spreads is inevitably that which is emotionally provocative or extreme. It didn't take long for the news media industry to replicate these practices. Journalists are now [evaluated based on metrics](#),<sup>69</sup> news [companies](#)<sup>70</sup> now produce dozens of listicles a day and yellow journalism practices of eye-catching headlines have come back with a vengeance. Meanwhile, those who understand the socio-technical systems quickly realize that it doesn't take much to ensnare a journalist who is under pressure to produce significant quantities of content per day. Working media up the chain has become a form of art by marketers, religious ideologues and political campaigns. Along the way, everyday people performing the perfect life on Instagram have realized that what you see online isn't always real. When everyday people believe that news can be gamed, trust is hard to secure.

Given a complex news and information ecosystem that extends far beyond the purview of formal news organizations, what can be done to increase trust in information intermediaries and news? The stark reality is that the “fix” requires addressing key structures of American society. After all, the reason that we're even asking about the role of news in America is because there is widespread existential angst about the current state of American democracy. Although there are important conversations to be had about restructuring many aspects of the economic, social, and political project that is the United States, I want to use the limited space of this essay to focus on addressing two factors: 1) the collective perception of the American project; and 2) the fragmented and segregated network of Americans.

## Who Are We?

Many people have written volumes about what it means for members of a relatively new and diverse country like the United States to believe themselves to be part of a coherent social project that is required by a democracy, but I want to focus on one perspective. In [“The Averaged American,”](#)<sup>71</sup> Sarah Igo argues that the reason that Americans joyously contributed to surveys and polls in the 20th century in the U.S. was because Americans were interested in knowing who they were as a collective body. This is particularly interesting given that the United States' democracy rests on a decennial census of the American public. Yet, just as [the Census was](#)

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<sup>66</sup> Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online,” Data & Society Research Institute. [https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety\\_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf](https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf)

<sup>67</sup> danah boyd, *It's complicated: the social lives of networked teens*, 2014. <http://www.danah.org/books/ItsComplicated.pdf>

<sup>68</sup> Kony 2012, Invisible Children, Inc., 2012. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kony\\_2012](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kony_2012)

<sup>69</sup> Angèle Christin, “Algorithms in practice: Comparing web journalism and criminal justice,” Big Data & Society, July-December 2017, 1-14. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2053951717718855>

<sup>70</sup> See BuzzFeed, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/?utm\\_term=.bb8lQPeZ7#.bp1qR213Z](https://www.buzzfeed.com/?utm_term=.bb8lQPeZ7#.bp1qR213Z)

<sup>71</sup> Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American*, (2008). <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674027428>

[fraught](#)<sup>72</sup> during the era leading up to the Civil War, so too is polling a mess today. If people don't believe themselves to be a part of a collective body, they are unwilling to contribute to the production of knowledge intended to measure and understand them. Worse, in some cases, they are happy to undermine data projects as acts of resistance.

One of the most important and challenging projects for the United States in 2017 is to redevelop a belief that we are collectively a part of a unified body working towards a sustainable governance project. This comes undone when there is political will to tear the country in shreds. Journalism is uniquely positioned to magnify the polarization or to help remedy it. Right now, some of the basic architectures of the news media industry set it up to increase polarization. From the financial incentives of click-bait headlines to the need to tell “both sides” of a story, journalists and news organizations operating in a competitive business climate profit from promoting polarization, both individually as journalists and organizationally as businesses.

Addressing this requires building the structures of collaboration in every facet of business and society, a tenet that runs counter to the contemporary manifestation of financialized capitalism. (Note: capitalism historically was about making a profit; contemporary capitalism is about return on investment.) We cannot expect our elected officials to work together to produce policy when our news organizations can't collaborate to help collectively tell the nuanced story of what's happening today. Resisting financialization and working towards a collaborative project of informing the public will be one of the hardest but most important things for the news industry to do. It will require transforming the very structures of the news business and questioning every tenet currently held dear.

## **Who Do We Know?**

News is no longer disseminated through mass distribution by a handful of anointed media outlets. It spreads through networks of people—both through word-of-mouth and through social media. The more that the public is fragmented and segregated, the more information is used to reinforce distinction and difference.

Segregation is by no means new in the United States; this country is built on an original sin with its so-called “3/5 compromise” that is rooted in segregation. Yet, many institutions and social structures that have been created to help remedy this moral failing have come undone in contemporary times. From the reduction in the numbers of people participating in the military to the way people use technology to only pay attention to like-minded others to shifts in unions and religious institutions, there are [more opportunities for people to self-segregate](#)<sup>73</sup> and opt-out of engaging with others whose values, backgrounds and political views contradict their own, ironically at a time when the raw ability to connect across difference is at its greatest.

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<sup>72</sup> Margo J. Anderson, *The American Census*, (2015). <http://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300195422/american-census>

<sup>73</sup> danah boyd, “Why America is Self-Segregating,” *Data & Society: Points*, Jan 5, 2017. <https://points.datasociety.net/why-america-is-self-segregating-d881a39273ab>

Technology will not magically bridge disconnected social networks. Given the opportunity, most people will [seek out those who are like them](#).<sup>74</sup> Given this, we must actively and intentionally design projects that can help knit together the American polis through the creation of opportunities and structures where opting into engaging with different people is personally beneficial. It's not simply about exposure, but about wanting to work together towards shared goals. One pathway is to reimagine and grow [AmeriCorps](#)<sup>75</sup> with an eye towards the role that the private sector and philanthropy can play in amplifying such a program so that people develop skills and take risks in collaboration with people who are different than them, all with an eye of restructuring the social networks of America. But given the unique mandate of the new media to inform the public, there should also be an onus on the industry to develop innovative strategies for connecting people through knowledge.

The networks underpinning the production and dissemination of news by news media organizations are just as flawed and, increasingly, getting worse. So long as news is produced in urban centers by highly educated individuals, many people will feel as though their stories and perspectives aren't being heard. Sending people "to the field" will never work in the same way as building the networks to learn from diverse contexts will. If news media companies want to rebuild trust in their products, they should try to create a grand challenge for themselves: how can their networks of reporting have the same diverse social graph as the people they wish to serve?

### **Trust Doesn't Come Easy**

Trust in news media will continue to decline. Even if we take the mandate to address systemic challenges, fixing the collapse in trust will take a generation. It will require concerted strategic effort on the part of news media actors to interrogate their practices and reimagine how the field of journalism should inform the polis in a networked age. More importantly, it will require the news media industry to work with and support broader efforts to restructure American society. The collapse of trust in the news enterprise is a bellwether of broader cultural challenges; fixing it will require many different stakeholders to choose to engage in a project of reconstruction. Who will lead the way?

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<sup>74</sup> See the work of Banaji, M.R.

<http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~banaji/research/publications/Publications.html>

<sup>75</sup> See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AmeriCorps>

## Before trust in media: Trust in facts, institutions and each other

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Asking how to bring trust to American media may be the wrong question and perhaps only a collateral outcome of the real tasks at hand. To protect democracy and society, we must first restore citizens' trust in facts, diminishing the influence of those who would manipulate information and emotions. We must restore trust and respect among communities so citizens might conduct civil, credible, and productive public conversation. We also need to restore trust in certain challenged institutions — from science to education, government to democracy. Then, rather than changing citizens' attitudes toward the institution of media, isn't it media that should change to earn back public trust?

It is a mistake to view “fake news” and “hate speech” as commodities — like content — that can be controlled by media, technology platforms, or government. Our problem is human behavior. Data & Society's excellent report, “[Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online](#),”<sup>1</sup> catalogues the manipulators: trolls, the alt-right, gamergaters, the so-called men's rights movement. Their methods have much in common with Russian manipulation as laid out in NATO's “[Handbook of Russian Information Warfare](#).”<sup>2</sup> Their motives are also similar: “Our media, our tools, and our politics are being leveraged to help breed polarization,” [says](#)<sup>3</sup> Data & Society founder danah boyd. “Sometimes, it's for the lulz. Sometimes, the goals are much more disturbing.” Sometimes, it is to bring down institutions, even nations.

At the highest level, these manipulators attack truth. “Multiple untruths, not necessarily consistent, are in part *designed to undermine trust in the existence of objective truth*, whether from media or from official sources,” says NATO [with my emphasis]. “This contributes to eroding the comparative advantages of liberal democratic societies when seeking to counter disinformation.”

How do we fight a war for truth? Fact-checking is necessary but insufficient. As Data & Society cautions, the bad guys feed on the fight. When we debunk them, we play into their hands by simultaneously spreading their message. This is the insidious paradox of fake news. As the RAND Corporation points out in “[The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model](#),”<sup>4</sup> the forces of fake have the advantage of speed (it takes no time to make up lies) and volume (it costs nothing to spread them). Thus, they set the public agenda and we are stuck playing catch up in their game.

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online,” Data & Society Research Institute. [https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety\\_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf](https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Keir Giles, “Handbook of Russian Information Warfare,” Nato Defense College, November 2016. <http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=506>

<sup>3</sup> danah boyd, “Google and Facebook Can't Just Make Fake News Disappear,” *Wired*, March 27, 2017. <https://www.wired.com/2017/03/google-and-facebook-cant-just-make-fake-news-disappear/>

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Paul and Miriam Mathews, “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model,” RAND, 2016. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>

News literacy is another weapon often called upon today, but I will argue that it, too, is inadequate. News literacy is media-centric and often self-serving. It does not grapple with the harsh truth that vast swaths of America — for various reasons — do not trust news or its purveyors.

So where do we turn? What do can citizens, platforms, and media do?

With citizens, I am coming to believe that our ultimate goal is to promote civility. Can we, in Dan Gillmor's [words](#),<sup>5</sup> make spreading lies uncool? Can we promote responsible sharing? The internet is yet young and society is just beginning to renegotiate social norms around it. Will people come to understand the impact of their twisted ways before it is too late? (Witness courtroom [photos](#)<sup>6</sup> of sobbing Americans caught spewing racist hate; it is as if they are transported back to a land of decency from a nation hypnotized by manipulation of fear.) Such a civil impulse is a necessary precondition to the exercise of critical judgment fed by fact and journalism.

What can technology platforms do? They can no more fix the problem with magic algorithms than they caused it. The internet has been a conduit for the release of perhaps centuries of frustration with institutions that did not listen to, represent, and serve communities whose members have been lumped together as a faceless, voiceless mass. The mass, let us confess, is media's creation.

As we make demands of the technologists, we need to keep in mind all the good the net unleashes: connections, creativity, empowerment, a magnificent symphony of diverse voices that only some see as a fearsome challenge to their dwindling power. We must not descend into a moral technopanic, blaming technology for revealing society's ills and attempting to limit its opportunities before we even know what they could be.

That said, there is much the platforms can and should do, and they are beginning to do it. Google's head of search engineering, Ben Gomes, recently [said](#)<sup>7</sup> that search's ranking algorithm will now take into account the reliability, authority, and quality of sources. That is, in responding to the query, "is climate change real?" the search engine now favors the institution of science over the speculations of conspiracy theorists. Mark Zuckerberg has said that he [wants](#)<sup>8</sup> Facebook to favor good over bad as it now turns its attention to helping build communities. Both companies — along with brands, agencies, and ad networks — promise to help cut off the economic air supply to hate and fraud. We can support this flight to quality.

I also want to see all the platforms transparently map the manipulation aimed at them — thus us — by sharing data with researchers and media so that we can all compensate for and deflect its impact on the news. I want to see Facebook and especially Twitter wipe out the ability to create the fake accounts and bots manipulators enlist to spread their bile. Though no one — least of all

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<sup>5</sup> Dan Gillmor, "News Literacy Working Group; Initial Thoughts," March 9, 2017.

<http://dangillmor.com/2017/03/09/news-literacy-working-group-initial-thoughts/>

<sup>6</sup> See <https://twitter.com/briskwalk/status/885576468822151170>

<sup>7</sup> Ben Gomes, "Our latest quality improvements for Search," Google blog, April 25, 2017.

<https://www.blog.google/products/search/our-latest-quality-improvements-search/>

<sup>8</sup> Mark Zuckerberg, "Building Global Community," Facebook, February 16, 2017.

<https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634>

the platforms — wants technologists to become the editors and censors of the world, I do want them to recognize their public responsibility in the rules they make, favoring civility when possible. Finally, I dream that Facebook could create a safe space in which people of every background and worldview could tell their stories so we could meet each other, making the stranger less strange and robbing the manipulators of their most lethal weapon: fear of the Other.

As for media, we have the most work to do.

Like the platforms, we need to better understand the manipulation aimed at us so we avoid supporting it.

We must learn to listen to the great diversity of communities that have not been reflected and heard through our pages and screens, understanding, empathizing with, and serving their needs and goals. That is the path to trust.

I believe we should concentrate on building diversity not just in newsrooms but in the larger news ecosystem, investing in and supporting new news outlets that serve many communities: African-American youth, Latino workers, LGBTQ families, and, yes, the conservatives who lost their trust in news media starting in the '70s, whom liberal media (let us please concede our worldview) abandoned to a vacuum filled by talk radio, Fox News, Breitbart, Drudge, InfoWars, and worse.

We need to share power with the people — to borrow Jay Rosen's [phrase](#)<sup>9</sup> — formerly known as the audience, recognizing that journalism is a service to them that begins with their needs. (See, for example, [Hearken](#),<sup>10</sup> a platform that allows the public to assign journalists to answer their information needs.)

We should learn new skills in convening communities in conflict into civil and informed conversation. (See Spaceship Media's [experiment](#)<sup>11</sup> with AL.com, using Facebook to convene Trump voters and Clinton voters to conversation. They still disagreed, but they came to ask journalists for facts to inform their conversation; they *trusted* journalism.)

We need to learn how to take journalism to the public conversation where it occurs, no longer depending on the notion that we control media as destinations. Through this, we will learn how to share journalism in many new forms: as tools, data bases, classes, convenings, and fact-filled memes.

Rather than playing catch up to the manipulators, RAND suggests we must get ahead of them, making it our mission to educate and inform the public so well that we inoculate them against lies. (See, for example, how the manipulators are starting to attack the Census.)

We must leave the presumptions of mass media behind, abandoning the moral corruption of clickbait as we seek new forms that serve people as individuals and members of communities

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<sup>9</sup> Jay Rosen, "The People Formerly Known as the Audience," Pressthink, June 27, 2006.

[http://archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl\\_frmr\\_p.html](http://archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr_p.html)

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.wearehearken.com/>

<sup>11</sup> See <http://spaceshipmedia.org/projects/>

and new business models that reward relevance, value, and quality, without building walls around journalism to serve only the privileged elite.

Finally, we in media will never regain trust until we recognize our responsibility in losing it, separating ourselves from the public we serve. The question, then, is not how to bring trust to American media but how to teach American media to trust the public again.

## **The Tea Party, Born of a Media Moment, Revealed the Limitations and Lies of the Media**

*Mark Meckler*  
*Citizens for Self-Governance*

“Must see video!” read the subject line of an email from a friend. I was sitting in my home office in Nevada County, California and was feeling a little depressed about our nation. It was 2009. Just a few months prior, President George Bush had said, “I’ve abandoned free-market principles to save the free market system.” Was this the end of American free markets and exceptionalism? Then, when Barack Obama was elected, the government became even more bloated and corrupt. The President gave seven hundred million dollars to the Troubled Asset Relief Program. He gave billions to bail out the banks, to take over the world’s biggest insurance company, to buy out Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, then to buy out Chrysler and General Motors, then hundreds of more banks. Was this even America anymore?

I clicked on the video and saw CNBC’s Rick Santelli, standing on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. The anchors back in New York asked Santelli a few innocent questions, not realizing his response would change the course of this nation.

“The government is promoting bad behavior! I’ll tell you what. I have an idea.... We’re thinking of having a Chicago tea party in July,” he said. The guys on the floor of the stock exchange piped up with cheers and encouragement. “All you capitalists that want to show up to Lake Michigan, I’m gonna start organizing! I’ll tell you what, if you read our founding fathers, people like Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson, what we’re doing in this country now is making them roll over in their graves!”

The 5-minute video caught the attention of conservative radio personality Rush Limbaugh, who broadcast it to his 10 million listeners. “This is the pulse of the revolution, starting today! When the pulse of the revolution starts, it just takes an action like this to inspire confidence in others who want to show up!”

Instead of waiting until July, thirty-five people took his idea and ran with it, organizing “tea party protests” on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009. My wife and I held one of them, in Sacramento, California. Over thirty thousand people showed up in cities across America, and the Tea Party was born.

Though I wasn’t an activist, I ultimately helped found the largest tea party group in America, “Tea Party Patriots.” In many ways, the Tea Party was truly a modern political movement (born of a media moment) and a historical one (reminiscent of our Founders’ fighting spirit). Once I stumbled into political activism, I was shocked at how the media reported on our very peaceful movement.

Though Tea Party members were generally patriotic, law-abiding folk, the media portrayed us as racist and violent. To this day, I’ve never heard of one actual instance of Tea Party-caused violence anywhere in the nation, but the media incessantly reinforced the false narrative... even to the point of reporting on fake signs held by liberals. (Here’s a dead giveaway: “Poor people

suck” is not an authentic talking point amongst the frequently blue-collar Tea Party members.) We were regularly referred to as Nazis, which—as a Jew—I found to be particularly ironic. Being constantly maligned and called a racist was frustrating then. But with the hindsight of several years’ perspective, it’s downright infuriating.

When Republican President Donald Trump emerged on the political scene eight years later, the media doubled down on accusing conservatives of racist violence. But when a Bernie Sanders supporter tried to kill as many Republicans as possible at the Congressional baseball game, the press could barely bring themselves to mention the shooter’s political persuasion. As a person who saw the Tea Party maligned and mistreated, I will never trust the media again. Ever. My decision has been reinforced every day since Trump was elected.

For example, I was thrilled when President Trump, in his first ever presser, refused to call on CNN’s Jim Acosta. "Your organization is terrible. Don't be rude," he said. "No, I'm not going to give you a question. You are fake news." CNN and others have been proving him right for a long time before that moment, and ever since. The media has been pearl clutching ever since. Though I’ll never trust the media again, there are three concrete ways they could try to win back at least a little respect.

**First, they should start reporting down the middle.** In 1990, the *Washington City Paper* discovered the only registered Republican among their 49 top editors, reporters and columnists was a sports writer who later said his GOP affiliation was a “mistake.” Though that’s a pretty narrow sampling, the trend continues across the board. [Studies demonstrate](#)<sup>1</sup> what [economists Tim Groseclose and Jeff Milyo wrote](#):<sup>2</sup> “An almost overwhelming fraction of journalists are liberal.” To earn back our trust, journalists need to remove their own perspective and return to neutral reporting. Advocates and opinion writers can spill gallons of digital ink on their pet causes, but journalists should simply report the facts.

**Second, they should stop the hysterical attacking, demonizing and dehumanizing of conservatives.** Bad, outrageous, offensive people exist on the fringes of both political parties. Adults know this. But the media has categorized all conservatives as racists, bigots, homophobes, Islamophobes and xenophobes for so long, that we became “mediaphobes.” After reporters called Mitt Romney a sexist for ineloquently describing how he hired female board members (hence, the unfortunate “binders full of women” phrase), we just didn’t give a damn how they described Donald Trump just four years later. Surprise! Their long term, and biased hyperbole had caused them to lose all credibility. (And, boy, were they surprised.)

**Lastly, they should source their stories and refuse to publish until absolutely certain.** After Trump was elected, the mainstream media produced all kinds of dramatic stories about such topics as the new President compulsively watching the news in his bathrobe, about staffers trying to make policy based on Trump’s tweets, and so forth. Chris Cillizza said these anonymous sources made Trump look like a “clueless child.” But these stories turned out to be so misleading that the gullible reporters who pass on false information were the ones left looking

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen J. Dubner, “How Biased Is Your Media?” Freakonomics Radio Podcast, February 16, 2012. <http://freakonomics.com/podcast/how-biased-is-your-media/>

<sup>2</sup> Tim Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo, “A Measure of Media Bias,” *Q J Econ* 2005; 120 (4): 1191-1237. <https://academic.oup.com/qje/article-abstract/120/4/1191/1926642/A-Measure-of-Media-Bias>

clueless. These anonymously sourced stories have helped to erode belief in the credibility of the press. The rush for the scoop is destroying media credibility, because of the multiplicative effect of what passes as journalism these days. Reporters write stories based on someone else's bad reporting, which are tweeted to millions within mere minutes. These anonymous sources are making Americans not only skeptical of the media, but angry at its bias. Not only are we not tuning in to hear what the media and their secret friends have to say anymore, we actively root for their demise.

I'm okay with the media trying desperately to re-win our trust. *The New York Times*, after they really missed the mark in November, said they'd try to do better. "Did Donald Trump's sheer unconventionality lead us and other news outlets to underestimate his support among American voters? ... As we reflect on the momentous result, and the months of reporting and polling that preceded it, we aim to rededicate ourselves to the fundamental mission of Times journalism." Believe it or not, this letter was even edited after the fact and became a Twitter argument between the Gray Lady and the President about whether this constituted an apology. Yes, *really*.

Enough with the drama. Most Americans just want the facts and will believe the media is fair and honest when they *become* fair and honest. In the meantime, it's up to citizens to be well-informed, logical thinkers and to reject the biased and misleading stories flowing from newsrooms every day. We have to find and support trustworthy journalists who put aside their own politics and report truth. In short, we have to be better consumers of news.

As someone who distrusts the corrupt federal bureaucracy, it's a shame that the so-called 4<sup>th</sup> estate is now as dirty and inept as the politicians. Thankfully, I believe in Americans' ability to see through the lies, even if I don't have faith that America's newsrooms will stop delivering them to us under click-bait headlines. Come to think of it, that's a lesson the Tea Party taught me, to believe in the power of hard-working, patriotic Americans.

Thankfully, no amount of deceptive reporting can change that.



## **Journalism, Democracy & Trust: A Look Back and A Way Forward**

*Susan Robinson  
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In 2015, Rev. Everett Mitchell sent out emails and made some phone calls to reporters in Madison, WI, excited to announce the first-ever gay wedding to take place between two African American women at a local Black church. None of the reporters showed up for the celebration, with editors explaining that the reporters were unavailable on weekends. A few months later, Rev. Mitchell was inundated with calls from some of these very same reporters eager to hear about the latest controversy happening in a Black community of the city. He declined to answer those calls, saying in an interview: “*Trust is not just handed over. Trust is earned.*” This example gives way to the complex concepts and demands associated with trust, particularly as it relates to the practice of journalism. A successful trusting relationship will tend to have a number of personally experienced characteristics, such as being consistently engaged and respecting difference. It will also include more abstract dynamics born from entrenched institutional authority over time. Any solution to the problem of debilitating distrust for our mainstream information sources must appreciate not only the economic crisis of the newsrooms today, but also the historic disdain for media among some groups of citizens. Moreover, it needs to also recognize the political/social polarization being spurred on by powerful actors in a digitally networked society.

Journalism today, however, practices as if it were still under the industrial model of an institutional press with a one-to-mass audience relationship. It often neglects the networked information society that has emerged where citizens hold more power over what, how and when they consume news. Not surprisingly, we see this manifest in research where views of the news media find 66 percent of survey respondents believe “stories are often inaccurate”<sup>1</sup> and, that Americans hold a “pervasive public suspicion that journalists are on the inside of ... ‘a charmed circle of knowledge and power,’”<sup>2</sup> destroying any feelings of belonging to a community. Coleman et. al (2009) elaborate, noting: “(T)he trends we have identified are undermining cultural integration, corroding public trust and sapping political efficacy. The pressing challenge is to reverse them.”<sup>3</sup>

Simply telling reporters to show up at events such as Rev. Mitchell’s gay wedding discounts the reasons why no reporter came in the first place. Tied up in what happened are implicit issues of power and privilege; fiscally constrained newsrooms; social changes and other factors that determine not only the production of news—such as whose voices are included in publication—

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. “Press Widely Criticized, But Trusted More than Other Information Sources.” 22 Sept. 2011. Accessed 4 July 2017 from: <http://www.people-press.org/2011/09/22/press-widely-criticized-but-trusted-more-than-other-institutions>

<sup>2</sup> Coleman, Stephen, Scott Anthony, and David E. Morrison. *Public Trust in The News: A Constructivist Study of the Social Life of the News*. Oxford, UK: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2009, p. 40

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 43

but also the consumption of news. This essay explores the nature of the “problem” further from three viewpoints.

- First, *it is the fault of the journalist*. This is a combination of resource issues coupled with long-standing newsroom routines and norms about what (and who) is news worthy. By 2016, newsrooms had lost 20,000 newsroom editorial jobs since 2000 and more than 100 daily newspapers had closed since 2004, with the hemorrhaging showing no sign of stopping.<sup>4</sup> This has led to fewer hard-hitting stories, more “filler” content and an obsession with “click-bait,” which further undermines trust among audiences. Coverage of “others” has tended to be riddled with stereotypes, overly focused on binaries such as “good” versus “bad” and “poor” versus “rich,” or completely absent.<sup>5</sup> Much of this has to do with both an inability to access diverse voices (a result of both homogenous newsrooms and dwindling resources) as well as misconceptions of people of color, rural people and working-class citizens.
- Second, *it is the fault of the citizens*. Again, this is a combination of complex issues around increased political, economic and cultural insularity; availability of distributed information streams; de-emphasis in public-affairs news and the disappearance of social rituals around news consumption. Paired with statistics that about two-thirds of Americans report getting news from family and friends, the press’ authority to inform citizens is in jeopardy.<sup>6</sup> Other statistics show citizens are increasingly turning to more partisan and niche-focused outlets for news that they feel personally connected to.<sup>7</sup>
- Lastly, *it is the fault of politics*. Identity politics—enflamed by politicians—encourage polarization and inhibit trusting relationships with the press. Insular politics yield polemic schisms that keep people in their political bubbles and influences media habits. Moreover, from as far back as Roosevelt, through Obama and especially now Donald Trump, we can find evidence of presidents’ expressed suspicion and distrust of the press with limited press conferences and attempts to curtail transparency that have most likely

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<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, Amy, Gottfried, Jeffrey, Barthel, Michael & Shearer, Elisa. *Pathways to News*. Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2016

<sup>5</sup> Reid-Brinkley, Shanara Rose. “Ghetto Kids Gone Good: Race, Representation, and Authority in the Scripting of Inner-City Youths in the Urban Debate League.” *Argumentation & Advocacy* 49.2 (2012): 77–99; See also: Squires, Catherine R., and Sarah J. Jackson. “Reducing Race: News Themes in the 2008 Primaries.” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 15.4 (2010): 375–400; Martindale, Carolyn. “Coverage of Black Americans in Four Major Newspapers, 1950-1989.” *Newspaper Research Journal* 11.3 (1990): 96–112.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, Amy, and Jesse Holcomb. “State of the News Media 2016.” Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project. 15 June 2016; See also: Mitchell, Amy, Gottfried, Jeffrey, Barthel, Michael & Shearer, Elisa. *Pathways to News*. Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2016; Carlson, Matt. *Journalistic Authority: A Relational Approach*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Mindich, David T. Z. *Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don’t Follow the News*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004; See also: Mitchell, Amy, Jeffrey Gottfried, Jocelyn Kiley, et al. “Political Polarization & Media Habits.” Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project. 21 Oct. 2014.; Poindexter, Paula M. *Millennials, News, and Social Media: Is News Engagement a Thing of the Past?* New York: Peter Lang Inc., 2012.

exacerbated citizens' perceptions that the media are not to be trusted.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in his unprecedented aggressive, personal attacks on journalists and what he calls "fake news," Trump has imposed full blackouts on information to the press, denied admittance to mainstream reporters to White House press briefings<sup>9</sup> and even released a video of himself pretending to pummel CNN in July 2017. This politically-infused stalemate in the free flow of public affairs information impedes cross-collaboration as well as, ultimately, democracy.

We know the "problem" to be an amalgamation of all of this. Any solution must be multivariate and strive toward those pre-conditions of any trusting relationship including: flexibility, forthrightness, engagement, heedfulness, respect, competence, personal regard for others, integrity, benevolence, a history of good deeds and risk-taking. Solutions must be considerate of existing power dynamics as well as the tripartite macro-meso-micro levels of relationships at work: institutional, organizational and individual. Ultimately, we must remember that trust is innately a *relational* concept and to center responses on relationships between those producing content and those reading content as well as our relationships with our communities and with concrete information itself. For example, a Pew Center report found that Americans feel that *news brands they use* are more trustworthy than news media in general and in May 2017 Nieman Lab similarly reported: "Just 24 percent of Americans said they regard 'the news media' as 'moral,' but that number jumps to 53 percent for the media they consume often."<sup>10</sup> This is further complicated with the understanding that different groups of people hold different historic relationships with the press and that these perceptions of mainstream media need to be accounted for. As danah boyd (2017) recently wrote in a brilliant essay: "The short version of it all is that we have a cultural problem, one that is shaped by disconnects in values, relationships and social fabric."<sup>11</sup>

But, not all is lost. The profession is experimenting with trust-building projects. In 2017, a Reynolds-Institute project worked with 30 newsrooms around the country to experiment with a series of trust-building exercises and found that the most effective strategies included: being present on social platforms for conversations, detailing why specific reporters hold the necessary credibility to tell the story at hand, explaining the processes behind high-interest newsroom decisions or projects, following up with any reaction or impact of big stories, giving behind-the-scenes reporting glimpses, using the collective "we" to situate the journalists within the community and using language that highlighted shared values and common ground for the community.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kramer, Melody. "Is media bias really rampant? Ask the man who studies it for a living." Poynter. October 24, 2016. Accessed 4 July 2017 from: <https://www.poynter.org/2016/is-media-bias-really-rampant-ask-the-man-who-studies-it-for-a-living/435840/>

<sup>9</sup> Media Matters Staff. "The Trump Administration's War on The Press." Media Matters for America. 1 Feb. 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Mitchell, Amy, Gottfried, Jeffrey, Barthel, Michael & Shearer, Elisa. Pathways to News. Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2016; See also: Wang, Shan. *Americans Don't Really like the Media Much — Unless It's Their Go-to News Outlets You're Asking about*. Nieman Reports, 2017. NiemanLab

<sup>11</sup> boyd, danah. "Google and Facebook Can't Just Make Fake News Disappear." Backchannel. 27 Mar. 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Moyer, Jan. *Trusting News Final Report*. Columbia, MO: Reynolds Institute, 2017. The Trusting Project.

Monica Guzmán wrote a series for the American Press Institute looking at how newsrooms commit to real engagement with citizens, reporting from within community, collaborating with readers and focusing on solutions. Her opening paragraph stated:

People don't just consume news today. They participate in it. People have access to vast and varied information. They pursue news on their own time, and on their own terms, connecting with others who share and help satisfy their curiosity about their world. This presents an opportunity for news publishers strained by shrinking resources and growing competition: Now more than ever, journalists can engage their audiences as contributors, advisors, advocates, collaborators and partners.<sup>13</sup>

Turning back to another example in Madison, WI, a news editor invited members of the community to write first-person pieces that ran on the front page on issues of race, helping to take the very white, very progressive community through its own racial journey. One participant said in an interview about that news organization:

The key thing that [the editor] did was he let me write my story myself. He didn't interview me. There was no ghostwriter.... They let me to tell my story without censoring me, and that was huge. I will not forget the *CapTimes* for that. That was risky.

The important thing about these trust-building activities is the *product* of news becomes *community*. For any solution to be effective, journalists *and* citizens must jointly undertake trust-building tasks. Remembering that *individuals* trump *institutions* when it comes to trust, our answers to the question of how to restore trust must privilege the one-to-one relationship throughout the news ecosystem. In this pursuit, we are left with a litany of outstanding questions to consider:

- How do we convince citizens to put aside their feelings of cynicism and vulnerability given long histories of past injustices?
- How do we encourage the creation of content that will be consumed by all citizens, regardless of political identity, in order to build a foundation of common knowledge to help govern?
- At what levels of community must these restorations take place? In other words, is it enough for a grassroots realigning of the journalist-citizen relationship to happen or do organizations, institutions, structures and systems must also make sea changes for any improvement to happen?

Bringing a critical mass of people to the table at the beginning of some news initiative and visiting them where they live can start a trust-building process. One technique is to recommit to an engagement- or connective-oriented mission, while following through with citizen-based

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<sup>13</sup> Guzmán, Mónica. "How to Build Audiences by Engaging Your Community." *American Press Institute*. 2 May 2016.

collaborations.<sup>14</sup> Content producers should refocus away from superficial products and toward processes of community building through risk-taking, collaborating and networking. Lastly, journalists must be trained to connect with all kinds of citizens, and citizens must be taught media literacy that includes learning the importance of amplifying their own voices through a wide variety of methods as well as how to connect with journalists. boyd and others<sup>15</sup> (Anderson; Broersma and Peters) note that the solutions are within us as well as within the infrastructure we have built, the companies we fund, the institutions that we follow and the social circles that we trust. *These solutions must grow organically from the roots of diminished distrust.* At the core of revitalization must be a reconceptualization of both the structures of newswork and journalism (as it is practiced) itself. Any solutions must incorporate significant changes in our growing hesitancy to engage with those who are different—as producers of content, as news consumers, as funders of media, and as citizens in a democracy.

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<sup>14</sup> Robinson, Sue. *Networked News, Racial Divides: How Power & Privilege Shape Public Discourse in Progressive Cities*. Malden, MA: Cambridge University Press. 2018

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, C.W. “What an Academic Hoax Can Teach Us about Journalism in the Age of Trump.” *Nieman Lab*. 23 May 2017; See also: Broersma, Marcel, and Chris Peters. “Introduction: Rethinking Journalism: The Structural Transformation of the Public Good” in *Rethinking Journalism: Trust and Participation in a Transformed News Landscape*. New York: Routledge, 2013. 1–12



## What would bring trust to the American media?

*Charles Sykes*  
*MSNBC Contributor*

The president of the United States tweets out a short video depicting himself body slamming CNN. It was moment beyond parody, but its cartoonishness shouldn't obscure the real threats that the media now face.

Some of this isn't new. Years before Donald Trump derided the media as "fake news," Vice President Spiro Agnew famously labeled journalists "nattering nabobs of negativism." But that was a very different era and the media need to understand that the challenges they now face are broader, deeper, and likely to get more complicated. In many ways, the assault on the media is unprecedented, at least in this country, because they are part of a larger attempt to delegitimize independent checks on the Administration, attacks that extend not merely to journalists, but to the judiciary and intelligence community as well. And that effort has already been remarkably successful.

As a longtime conservative talk show host, I had a front row seat to this. For years, conservatives have complained about media bias. But as I learned this year, we had succeeded in convincing our audiences to ignore and discount any information whatsoever from the mainstream media. The cumulative effect of the attacks was essentially destroying much of the Right's immunity to false information.

The poll numbers for the media are stark: Most Americans no longer have a lot of trust in the media. According to [Gallup](#), only 14 percent of Republicans say they trust the media, down from 32 percent as recently as 2015.<sup>1</sup>

A [Pew survey](#)<sup>2</sup> found that views of the media role as "watchdog" break down sharply along partisan lines:

Today, in the early days of the Trump administration, roughly nine-in-ten Democrats (89%) say news media criticism keeps leaders in line (sometimes called the news media's "watchdog role"), while only about four-in-ten Republicans (42%) say the same. That is a 47-percentage-point gap...

Pew Research Center has asked this question since 1985. While Republicans have been more likely to support a watchdog role during Democratic

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<sup>1</sup> Art Swift, "Americans' Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low," Gallup, September 14, 2016. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, "Americans' Attitudes About the news Media Deeply Divided Along Partisan Lines," May 9, 2017. [http://www.journalism.org/2017/05/10/americans-attitudes-about-the-news-media-deeply-divided-along-partisan-lines/pj\\_2017-05-10\\_media-attitudes\\_a-05/](http://www.journalism.org/2017/05/10/americans-attitudes-about-the-news-media-deeply-divided-along-partisan-lines/pj_2017-05-10_media-attitudes_a-05/)

presidencies and vice versa, *the distance between the parties has never approached the 47-point gap that exists today.* [Emphasis added]

But this distrust does not merely run along partisan lines: only 26 percent of Americans age 18 to 49 have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media. This reflects the depth of partisan divisions, but also a more general loss of faith in institutions and authority. It also reflects the radically new media environment in which legacy media often find themselves elbowed aside by newcomers.

Trump now enjoys a media environment that Richard Nixon could hardly imagine; an alternative reality media that provides him reliable air cover and that effectively insulates him not merely from criticism, but from fact-checking, and investigative journalism.

This is the harsh reality check: no matter how good American journalism is, much of the electorate has been conditioned to reject it as “fake.” The last campaign saw an explosion of hoaxes, fabrications that often seemed to overwhelm legitimate news on social media. As I’ve written about elsewhere, I tried to push back on many of the more outrageous falsehoods, but found that listeners were increasingly reluctant to give credence to any information outside of their own bubbles. If anything, this has gotten worse.

Trump and his supporters now routinely conflate journalistic errors or lapses with intentional distortions; and many voters seem willing to accept the President’s chronic falsehoods or are indifferent to the deceptions. Russian dissident and chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov drew upon long familiarity with the process when he tweeted: “The point of modern propaganda isn’t only to misinform or push an agenda. It is to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth.”

So, what can be done?

**First, recognize that restoring trust won’t be easy.** What the media has learned (one hopes) is that if you ignore much of your audience for long enough, they will find other sources of information and entertainment. Credibility squandered through bias is not easily restored.

**Second, acknowledge the role of ratings driven info-tainment media in laying the groundwork for the rise of a reality TV star to the presidency.** As its coverage of the last campaign demonstrated, the mainstream media is complicit in dumbing down the electorate. As recently as 2008, the nightly news programs on the three major networks devoted a grand total of less than four hours of air time over an entire year to reporting on actual issues (as opposed to candidate speeches or political horse race coverage). By 2016, the Tyndall Report estimated issue coverage for the year had fallen to just 36 minutes. The media chose entertainment, and the result was a campaign that was seldom about substance or ideas, or even policies.

The problem here is obvious: an ignorant electorate is not likely to hold ignorant politicians to account. If voters don’t know what they don’t know, they will also be unlikely to recognize or care very much about what politicians don’t know. So, ignorance begets ignorance and the tolerance of it in high places.

**Third, recognize that it's not about you.** The public has remarkably little sympathy for journalists, so it's a mistake to frame the issue around the complaints of reporters. Instead, the media should emphasize the threat to democracy by attacks on an independent press.

**Fourth, get it right.** This has always been important, but now that errors are weaponized by partisans to discredit the “fake” media, the pressure to avoid self-inflicted wounds has intensified. Even routine mistakes are seized upon to discredit the entire enterprise of journalism.

**Fifth, fix the fact-checkers, specifically Politifact.** While Factcheck.org and the *Washington Post* continue to do excellent work, some fact-checkers (Politifact) undermined the effort with their penchant for editorializing, cherry-picking quotes, and engaging in tendentious logic. The result is that many conservatives began to question fact-checking at the moment when it was most needed. For the media to be regarded as a legitimate referee of truth, stick to the facts, document, be fair.

**Sixth, avoid gratuitous offense.** By all means, be offensive when warranted, but understand the sensibilities of your audience. This means recognizing that newsrooms can become their own bubbles and that political journalism can morph into a self-reinforcing groupthink (see 2016 campaign). Unfortunately, despite all the talk about the need for more diversity, the concept is seldom invoked to argue for more ideological diversity in newsrooms.

**Seventh, de-emphasize talking shills.** Cable television needs to rethink the value of having contributors whose role is simply to raise the volume and recite partisan points.

**Eighth, speak truth to power.** If there is one bright spot in the current environment, it is the recommitment of many journalists to their role as watchdogs, who take their adversarial role seriously. While it is true that many voters will ignore even the best reporting, reporters should commit flagrant acts of journalism anyway. Even in an era of “fake news,” truth and facts are still trump cards.

**Ninth, restore local journalism.** While many of the major media (*The New York Times*, *Washington Post*) are flourishing in the Age of Trump (and doing some of their best work in a generation), the picture is starkly different at the local and state level, where newsrooms and news coverage have been shrinking. Surveys suggest that audiences continue to trust local outlets more than the elite national media, but the hollowing out of local news coverage seems to be accelerating.

**Tenth, explain.** We live in an age of complexity and confusion. The media has a unique role as analyst, laying out facts and insight without the filter of partisan spin.

**Finally, tell stories.** This is what journalists do best; step out of the Washington bubble to talk to real people. The best reporting is not necessarily the tick-tock of political maneuvering, but rather the stories of how we live today, and the impact of policies on daily lives of Americans.

As the volume of shrill tribal rhetoric intensifies, the media should strive to be the honest broker of truth, without fear or favor. Who knows, that may actually come back into fashion someday.