

What would bring trust to the American media?

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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 2015.¹

A [Pew survey](#)² 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

¹ 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>

² 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/

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.