

## Addressing the Roots of Distrust

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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>1</sup> and the [financialization of the news industry](#)<sup>2</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>3</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>4</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>5</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>6</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>1</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>2</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>3</sup> Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in the American Public," June 12, 2014. <http://www.pewresearch.org/packages/political-polarization/>

<sup>4</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>5</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>6</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>7</sup> [Teenagers](#),<sup>8</sup> social media marketers and [advocates](#)<sup>9</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>10</sup> news [companies](#)<sup>11</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>12</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>7</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>8</sup> danah boyd, *It's complicated: the social lives of networked teens*, 2014.

<http://www.danah.org/books/ItsComplicated.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Kony 2012, Invisible Children, Inc., 2012. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kony\\_2012](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kony_2012)

<sup>10</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>11</sup> See BuzzFeed, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/?utm\\_term=.bb8lQPeZ7#.bp1qR213Z](https://www.buzzfeed.com/?utm_term=.bb8lQPeZ7#.bp1qR213Z)

<sup>12</sup> Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American*, (2008). <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674027428>

[fraught](#)<sup>13</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>14</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>13</sup> Margo J. Anderson, *The American Census*, (2015). <http://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300195422/american-census>

<sup>14</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>15</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>16</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>15</sup> See the work of Banaji, M.R.

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

<sup>16</sup> See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AmeriCorps>