

Trust in Media

Can news outlets regain the public's confidence?

Journalism is facing a credibility crisis. Declining faith in government and other institutions and a decades-long assault by conservatives have hurt mainstream news outlets. And President Trump has called journalists “the enemy of the American people.” Recent incidents involving public figures, including a Montana congressional candidate’s alleged assault on a reporter, have underscored the hostility that journalists face. Some traditional media also have suffered from self-inflicted wounds by blurring the lines between news and commentary and ignoring the interests of rural readers to focus on well-off urbanites. Ad revenue and subscriptions at newspapers have plummeted, in part due to the rise of the internet and changing consumer habits. Meanwhile, social media have fostered “echo chambers” in which people seek out news that affirms their beliefs. Journalists and those studying the news business say mainstream outlets must be more transparent about how they do their jobs and more skillful at explaining events to survive.



Supporters of then-presidential candidate Donald Trump protest alleged bias by CNN at the cable network's offices in Hollywood, Calif., on Oct. 22, 2016. As president, Trump frequently criticizes the media. “If the media’s job is to . . . tell the truth, the media deserves a very, very big fat failing grade,” he said at a rally marking his 100th day in office.

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Trust in Media

BY CHUCK MCCUTCHEON

THE ISSUES

The annual White House Correspondents' Dinner is known for its movie stars and not-so-gentle ribbing of the president. But this year's event was different. For the first time in 36 years, the president didn't attend. And one of journalism's legendary figures offset the glamour and jokes with a sober assertion countering criticism of the mainstream media as biased.

"Journalists should not have a dog in the political fight except to find that best obtainable version of the truth," *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward, whose work uncovering the Watergate scandal in the 1970s helped spur President Richard M. Nixon's resignation, said in a speech at the April gala.¹

That same night, 95 miles away, at a rally in Harrisburg, Pa., to mark his 100th day in office, President Trump delivered a different message about journalists. "Their priorities are not my priorities, and not your priorities," Trump told a cheering, partisan crowd. "If the media's job is to be honest and tell the truth, the media deserves a very, very big fat failing grade."²

Woodward's and Trump's remarks illustrate the conflicting views that confront traditional news outlets as they try to rebuild public trust in the media that polls show has hit bottom. Those outlets — newspapers, magazines, websites and broadcast networks with professional, nonpartisan staffs — are victims of an overall decline of faith in government and nongovernmental institutions, as well as constant assaults from politicians that have put them in the crosshairs of today's polarized po-



Getty Images/Drew Angerer

Fox News proclaims its clout at its New York studios. Attitudes about media outlets, particularly Fox and The New York Times, reflect partisan views. According to a recent poll, 73 percent of Republicans found Fox credible — compared to 45 percent of Democrats. The Times drew a 76 percent credibility rating from Democrats versus 52 percent from Republicans.

litical climate. Trump is the latest leader of the assaults, labeling journalists "the enemy of the American people" and dismissing unfavorable coverage of him as "fake news." *³

The media also have deeply fragmented as the internet has given rise to a cacophony of voices casting doubt on traditional-media staples — notably the use of anonymous sources and the concepts of neutrality and dispassionate reporting. Facebook and other social media have fostered that ca-

* While Trump defines unfavorable coverage as "fake news," the accepted definition is fabricated stories, posted on obscure websites, intended to disparage politicians and generate ad revenue through clicks after readers share them.

cophony by creating "echo chambers" that affirm people's beliefs and enable them to spread information — accurate and inaccurate — faster than ever.

But trust in the media also has been hurt by self-inflicted wounds, including blurred lines between news and commentary; fabricated stories written by rogue reporters; a focus on well-off urbanites while giving less attention to rural Americans; and the post-9/11 failure to aggressively challenge the unfounded claim that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. In addition, competition for readers has led some outlets to focus on "clickbait" — frivolous and incendiary stories, some untrue — at the expense of substantive topics.

Journalists and those studying the news business say mainstream media outlets must rise to the challenge by performing skillfully in the face of greater outside pressure and shrinking resources.

They also must devote more energy to educating readers, listeners and viewers about how they operate.

"Journalism has a trust problem. . . . There's a growing rift between news organizations and the consumers they exist to serve," said Benjamin Mullin, managing editor of Poynter.org, the website for the Poynter Institute, a journalism-training center in St. Petersburg, Fla.⁴

Recent Gallup polls suggest the rift is wide:

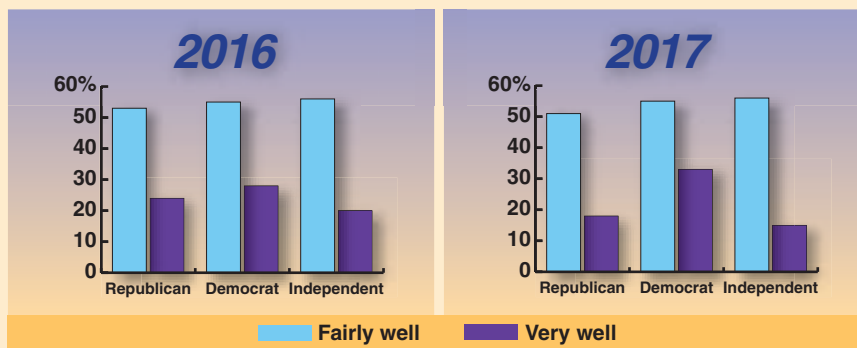
- Just 32 percent of Americans trust the media, the lowest level recorded since Gallup began asking the question in 1972.⁵

- Forty-one percent of the respondents to another survey asking about the honesty and ethical standards of

Views of Media's Performance Show Partisan Divide

Democrats are more likely than Republicans to say the national news media do a very good job of keeping people informed. The percentage of Republicans with that view dropped 6 points over the last year, while the percentage of Democrats who feel that way increased by 5 points.

Percentages of U.S. adults who say national news media do "very well" or "fairly well" at keeping them informed:



Source: Surveys conducted March 13-27, 2017, and Jan. 12-Feb. 8, 2016, "Americans' Attitudes About the News Media Deeply Divided Along Partisan Lines," Pew Research Center, May 10, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/lwvqtsu>

22 professions ranked journalists "low" or "very low." Only members of Congress and car salespeople scored lower.⁶

- Sixty-two percent of Americans said the media favor one political party over the other, compared with 50 percent in past years.⁷

News organizations' failure to engender trust could cause society to splinter even further, warns Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a centrist Washington, D.C., think tank.

"The press needs to rebuild its trust with the public," Rosenstiel says. "We've got to create [news stories] in such a way that people will say, 'I don't like the tone of that, but yeah, I'll accept it, because it's probably true.'"

The two biggest reasons people do not trust news are that they consider it one-sided or inaccurate, according to a 2016 poll by the Press Institute — a nonpartisan media-research organization in Arlington, Va.⁸

Yet the entire notion of "wrong" has become politicized. Trump made so many assertions judged false that the Oxford Dictionaries named "post-truth" its 2016 word of the year.⁹ One of his advisers, Kellyanne Conway, caused an uproar in January when she described a questionable assertion about the size of Trump's inauguration crowd as an "alternative fact."¹⁰ Another aide defended giving Trump a false magazine cover warning of a forthcoming ice age instead of global warming at a briefing by contending the information it contained was "fake but accurate."¹¹

But more than most issues, Gallup and other polls show, media mistrust reflects the country's entrenched political divide.

A Pew Research Center poll in May found a 47 percentage-point gap between Democrats and Republicans over whether criticism from the media helps keep politicians honest — the largest gap since Pew began asking the question in 1985.¹² And according to a Morn-

ing Consult poll in December, 73 percent of Republicans found GOP-leaning Fox News credible — compared to 45 percent of Democrats. *The New York Times* drew a credibility rating of 76 percent from Democrats versus 52 percent from Republicans.¹³

Mistrust of the media is not a strictly partisan issue. African-Americans have accused the media of failing to recognize the Black Lives Matter movement as well as the importance of events fueling its rise.

Media scholars say some outlets have fueled the divide by coarsening discourse and lambasting news organizations whose politics differ from theirs. They also say the growth of watchdog groups, such as Media Matters and the Media Research Center, has added to the divide. Wealthy partisans finance many of those groups, which track inaccurate reporting, media bias and political gaffes.

Journalists of late have had to endure additional abuse. Four incidents occurred in May:

- A Federal Communications Commission (FCC) guard allegedly pinned a reporter for *CQ Roll Call* against a wall as he sought to ask commissioners a question at FCC headquarters in Washington, then forced him to leave a public meeting. An FCC commissioner apologized for the incident.

- In Montana, Republican congressional candidate Greg Gianforte was charged with misdemeanor assault after he allegedly threw a reporter to the ground who asked him a question. After winning the special election for the state's at-large House seat, Gianforte apologized for his conduct.

- Dan Heyman, a Public News Service reporter in West Virginia, was arrested after trying to question Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price in a state Capitol hallway. Heyman said he was holding his phone toward Price to record him; police said he was trying to bypass Price's security detail.

- Reporter Nathaniel Herz of the *Alaska Dispatch News* said state Sen. David

Wilson (R-Wasilla) slapped him across the face after he asked the senator a question. Herz filed a police report, and the case has been turned over to the state's Office of Special Prosecution. ¹⁴

Also in May, several windows were shattered at the offices of Kentucky's *Lexington Herald-Leader*, with investigators attributing the damage to small-caliber bullets, or possibly a BB gun. Newspaper publisher Rufus M. Friday cited a rise in hostile rhetoric toward journalists. ¹⁵

For some media veterans, the media's role in uncovering inaccurate statements by Trump and other politicians while serving as the public's government watchdog is the biggest barometer of the media's future credibility.

"If the media for whatever reason fails to meet this challenge, then democracy as we have known it will slowly die," longtime television network correspondent Marvin Kalb, a professor emeritus at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and founding director of its Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, said in March. ¹⁶

Those on the political right, however, see the mainstream media — or what they call the "legacy media" — as facing an insurmountable obstacle to rebuilding public trust. Above all, perhaps, they consider the media guilty of hypocrisy for its perceived bias against Republicans while insisting it favors neither party.

"The biggest challenge facing journalists today is a self-inflicted problem: too many activists with bylines posing as neutral observers, and they've been found out," says John Bicknell, executive editor of Watchdog.org, a network of websites covering local and state government funded by the Franklin Center for Government & Public Integrity, a news organization based in Alexandria, Va., with a free-market, limited-government perspective. "Once you've destroyed your own credibility, it's very difficult to get it back — and

Newspapers Slashing Editorial Staffs

Newspapers in the United States cut more than 24,000 newsroom jobs — a decline of 37 percent — between 2004 and 2015, the most recent year data were available. Layoffs and buyouts among reporters and editors are expected to continue as newspapers struggle with falling circulation and ad revenue.



Source: "Newspapers Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, June 1, 2017, p. 8, <https://tinyurl.com/yb8g77ht>

we see that in many, if not most, legacy newsrooms." ¹⁷

Both conservative and liberal journalism observers say generalizing about "the media" is difficult, in large part because it encompasses an ever-growing array of news and information sources, each with its own mission and leanings.

"Lumping these disparate entities under the same single, bland label is like describing the denizens of the ocean as 'the fish,'" wrote *Washington Post* media reporter Paul Farhi. ¹⁸

Despite such media diversity, the public tends to focus on national — not local — outlets when expressing mistrust. Joy Mayer, a consulting fellow at the University of Missouri's Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute, says she noticed this when speaking with readers and viewers around the country for a project she leads on media trust-building.

"I couldn't believe how quickly, in most people's minds, 'the media' jumps to national political coverage," Mayer says. "I tell them, 'The media are people who cover your local school board and high school sports.' "

The notion of "journalist" also is being expanded with the phenomenon of cellphone video capturing news incidents and social media's ability to give members of the general public the power to give direct on-the-scene reports while sharing information among friends.

Social media have created what Rosenstiel calls the "atomization of the news," in which people place more trust in who shared information with them than in the quality of news brands. That phenomenon, he says, helped fuel the "fake news" phenomenon.

As journalists, academics and others debate trust in the news media, here are some of the questions being raised:

Are traditional standards of objective journalism outdated?

One of the bedrock principles of traditional journalism is objectivity, generally defined as not playing favorites despite one's personal views. But the notion of objectivity has come under attack from critics of President Trump, who say his unfitness for the presidency demands the media take up an advo-

cacy role to portray the truth more directly and accurately.

Many veteran journalists say objectivity is essential to developing trust. Media outlets, they say, have an obligation never to identify with any side in a conflict or other issue.

“Journalists in this tradition [of objectivity] have plenty of opinions, but by setting them aside to follow the facts — as a judge in court is supposed to set aside prejudices to follow the law and the evidence — they can often produce results that are more substantial and more credible,” former *Times* executive editor Bill Keller said.¹⁹

In January, Lewis Wallace was fired from his job a reporter for the syndicated business radio show “Marketplace” after publishing an article on the website *Medium*.²⁰ Journalists, Wallace wrote, “need to become more shameless, more raw, more honest with ourselves and our audiences” instead of simply reacting passively to what he predicted would be arrests and other attempts to curtail media freedom of speech under Trump.²¹

Among the most vocal critics of objectivity is American journalist Glenn Greenwald, whose articles in London’s *Guardian* contained classified information on U.S. government surveillance in 2013 released by former national-security contractor Edward Snowden. “This voice that people at NPR and PBS and CNN are required to assume, where they’re supposed to display this kind of non-human neutrality about the world in which they’re reporting, is a deceitful, artificial one,” said Greenwald, editor of the national-security website *The Intercept*.²²

Kerry Lauerman, executive editor of the liberal-leaning news and commentary website *Mic*, which targets Millennials, encourages reporters not to hide their views. “We’re stronger by having people with different points of view approach things with those points of view,” Lauerman said. “It probably does further erode the sort of old-fashioned

notion of objectivity. But I think that’s better for journalism, too.”²³

Some critics of traditional media point to earlier eras to argue that mainstream journalism never has been truly objective — and should stop pretending it is.

Objectivity “has seldom existed in American history, and has especially been scarce since the 1960s, when activist journalism came out of the closet with its ideological coverage of Vietnam and then Watergate, all perfumed with the spurious claim to journalistic integrity and public service,” said Bruce Thornton, a fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution.²⁴

Other critics fault the language of objectivity. *National Review* columnist Jonah Goldberg pointed to The Associated Press stylebook’s barring the use of “illegal immigrants,” though “illegal immigration” is still permitted. Instead, The AP and other outlets have recommended terms such as “unauthorized” and “undocumented” for immigrants.

That usage, Goldberg said, is part of left-wing pro-immigration activists’ agenda “to blur the distinctions between legal and illegal immigration. . . . As a matter of fact and logic, the difference between an ‘unauthorized immigrant’ and an ‘illegal immigrant’ is nonexistent.”²⁵

Many journalists say absolute objectivity is impossible, given the inherent subjective nature of choosing one fact over another in telling a story.

But they say that something close to it can be achieved by doing rigorous reporting offering deep insights. That includes weeding out extremist voices and specious claims in favor of provable facts.

“Objectivity is all about doing your job well as a journalist,” says Ken Paulson, a former editor of *USA Today* who is president of the First Amendment Center, which studies free-expression issues. He also is dean of Middle Tennessee State University’s College of Media and Entertainment. “The question is, can you get up every morning and write what you

find out — accurately write about what you’ve discovered?”

Paulson and many journalists say objectivity is rooted in fairness — conveying the arguments of all sides of an issue. But, they add, fairness does not mean “he said, she said” reporting — the oft-criticized practice of unquestioningly giving both sides equal weight.

“Good journalism doesn’t require perfect balance,” said Michael Kinsley, founding editor of *Slate* magazine. “In fact, perfect balance may be a distortion of reality. But journalism gains credibility when it gives all sides their due.”²⁶

The American Press Institute’s Rosenstiel says one means of bolstering media trust — greater transparency — is enhancing objectivity by borrowing the methods of science and demonstrating to readers and viewers how news outlets arrive at their conclusions.

The Post, in publishing an e-book biography of Trump last year, put online an archive of most of its research materials, including thousands of pages of interview transcripts, court filings, financial reports, immigration records and other material.²⁷

“There’s this discipline of verifying — making sure you have enough sources and describing as much as can about your sources, like showing your math in a school assignment that proves to the teacher that you did the work yourself,” Rosenstiel says. “That’s what the idea of an objective method of journalism is about.”

Are the national news media out of touch with ordinary Americans?

Critics of mainstream journalism question whether staffers at national outlets are disconnected from people in blue-collar jobs who often live outside of the metropolises of the East or West coasts. But journalists at those outlets dispute the charge.

The debate is an old one. In a 1996 article, “Why Americans Hate the Media,” *Atlantic* national correspondent James Fallows said national political

journalists fixate on tactical matters at the expense of issues that the public cares about more deeply.

“When ordinary citizens have a chance to pose questions to political leaders, they rarely ask about the game of politics,” Fallows wrote. “They want to know how the reality of politics will affect them — through taxes, programs, scholarship funds, wars.”²⁸

Those tendencies have only worsened over the last two decades with the explosion of the internet and interest in polls and celebrity at the expense of more time-consuming, deeply reported pieces, media observers say. As the news business has shrunk, it has concentrated in New York, Washington and California.

The result, those observers say, helps explain the traditional media’s failure to anticipate the outcome of 2016’s election, in which Trump defied almost all polls and pundits to win the Electoral College despite losing the popular vote.

“Much of the East Coast-based media establishment is arguably out of touch with the largely rural population that voted for Trump,” said Mathew Ingram, a *Fortune* senior writer covering the media.²⁹

Dean Baquet, the *Times*’ executive editor, said he is proud of his paper’s campaign coverage. But he said after the election: “The New York-based and Washington-based media powerhouses . . . don’t get the role of religion in people’s lives.”³⁰

Veteran reporter and author David Cay Johnston, former board president of the group Investigative Reporters and Editors, said today’s journalists no longer closely share their audience’s concerns.

“There’s been a tendency in the news to focus very much on, ‘What’s going on with the internet? What’s going on with these exciting new gizmos?’ As opposed to, ‘What’s happening to people who work in factories in Iowa and Michigan and their concerns?’ Johnston said.

Johnston attributed the shift to changing demographics. In 1960, nearly one-third of reporters and editors had never attended a single year of college; in 2015, that figure was down to 8 percent — 38 percentage points below the number of adults 25 and older nationwide.³¹

College-educated journalists “began making newspapers move up the income ladder and the wealth ladder in terms of readership and lost sight of this mass audience they used to have,” he said. “And a result, the coverage and what newspapers defined as im-

vised gala of hundreds of journalists and politicians — and the celebrities they invite — often is cited as symbolizing the gulf between the national media and public. *The Times* stopped attending the dinner in 2008, saying it sent a misleading signal that the paper was too chummy with politicians.³³

Criticism of the national media’s aloofness from America extends beyond economic class and politics into race.

African-American talk show host Tavis Smiley cited the Trayvon Martin case as evidence that newsrooms have “the



AP Photo/Sathi Soma

Edgar Maddison Welch surrenders to police in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 4, 2016. Armed with an assault rifle, the Salisbury, N.C., man drove to Washington to try to stop what online conspiracy theories falsely said was a child sex ring being run by Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton out of a local pizza restaurant. Media experts and scholars say many voters were swayed during the presidential campaign by the proliferation of so-called fake news spread by alternative news websites and social media.

portant tended to be the concerns of the upper-middle class.”³²

Too many of the journalists are liberal, putting them further out of touch, says Watchdog.org’s Bicknell. “If mainstream news organizations want to regain credibility with the public, they should begin by hiring young conservative journalists,” he says.

The White House Correspondents’ Dinner, which has evolved from an intimate gathering in 1921 into a tele-

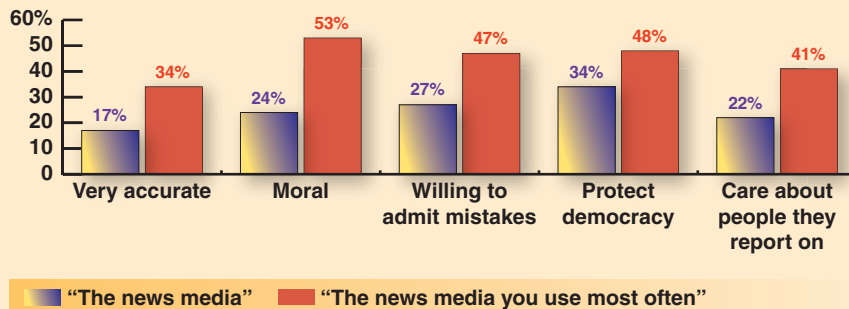
same unconscious bias that exists in police departments” because they lack staffers who understand black America. Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old African-American, was shot and killed in 2012 by neighborhood-watch volunteer George Zimmerman in a gated Florida community. Zimmerman, who is white, pleaded self-defense and was acquitted of second-degree murder.³⁴

“The reality is that that story would never have made it to the front pages

People Most Trust Media They Use

Americans tend to trust the news sources they rely on but distrust “the news media” as an abstract concept. For example, just over half of those surveyed viewed the news sources they consult as moral, but only 24 percent said that about the media in general.

Percent who said the following about each type of media:



Source: “‘My’ media versus ‘the’ media: Trust in news depends on which news media you mean,” *American Press Institute*, May 24, 2017, p. 2, <https://tinyurl.com/ya32z2za>

were it not for black media,” Smiley said. “Oftentimes the mainstream media — particularly where people of color are concerned — is on the late freight.”³⁵

However, a number of academics and journalists say major news outlets are responding to such criticisms.

“That is something that needs a correction, and the correction has begun,” former *Post* executive editor Leonard Downie, now a professor of journalism at Arizona State University, says of the accusation of being out of touch.

Downie and other media observers cite *The Times*’ and other newspapers’ detailed stories explaining the impacts of Trump’s policies. That includes the White House’s proposed budget, which calls for slashing or eliminating federal programs important to small communities and rural areas that backed Trump.

They also note that while the number of minorities at media outlets is still too low, it is on the rise. An American Society of News Editors survey found the minority workforce rose

5.6 percent from 2015 to 2016 among the 433 news organizations that took part in both years’ surveys. Overall, minorities made up 17 percent of workers at daily print newspapers and 23 percent of employees at digital-only publications.³⁶

Media observers are encouraged by journalists’ willingness to “crowd-source” reporting — asking the public directly for help, expanding their networks and building credibility. *Post* reporter David Fahrenthold won a Pulitzer Prize in April for his work investigating Trump’s charitable contributions, in part by soliciting information from readers about whether they belonged to organizations that had been promised or received contributions.

When looking into whether Trump used \$10,000 of charitable money to buy a portrait of himself, Fahrenthold recalled, “I asked my readers and Twitter followers for help, and they amazed me with their ingenuity. They found things that I never would have thought to find on my own.”³⁷

Times domestic-affairs correspondent Sheryl Gay Stolberg also cites

“Anxious in America,” a 2016 series to which she contributed, as another example of reporting about everyday Americans. It explored economic and social concerns in rural Appalachia, among African-Americans at a Philadelphia food pantry and evangelical Christians in small-town Iowa as well as other places.³⁸

While acknowledging that the national media focuses too much on polls and “horse-race” journalism, Stolberg says of her paper, “I disagree that we don’t reflect America.”

Does the use of anonymous sources erode trust in journalism?

Critics of the use of anonymous sources call it a significant contributor to the erosion of trust in the media, while the practice’s defenders say that — when done judiciously — it gets closer to the truth than quoting people only by name.

The use of such sources requires the public to place considerable faith in journalists, said Mary Louise Kelly, who covers intelligence agencies for NPR. “If I am using an anonymous source, I have given my word that I will not reveal their identity,” Kelly said. “But I am asking you, the listener, to trust me that I have done everything in my power to make sure this person is who they say they are, that they have access to the information and also to weigh what’s their motive.”³⁹

A Morning Consult/*Politico* poll in March found that 44 percent of those surveyed said it is likely reporters make up unnamed sources. As with other polls involving media trust, the poll showed a deep partisan split: 65 percent of Republicans said journalists made up sources, while just 24 percent of Democrats agreed.

The poll also showed that half of those surveyed didn’t consider it appropriate for the media to use anonymous sources when reporting on government business. That issue also

broke along partisan lines: 66 percent of Republicans considered it inappropriate compared to only 36 percent of Democrats.⁴⁰

Trump has fed public mistrust about the practice. Reporters “have no sources; they just make them up when there are none,” he said in February.⁴¹

The Times tightened its requirements for the use of unnamed sources in 2016 in response to two erroneous articles. One was based on unnamed officials who said inspectors general asked the Justice Department to open a criminal investigation into whether Hillary Clinton had mishandled sensitive information on a private email account she used as secretary of State. *The Times* later clarified that the referral was not criminal and did not name Clinton as a focus.⁴²

Nevertheless, when *The Times* this year published a string of exclusive stories about Trump, the paper drew a warning from Liz Spayd, the paper's public editor.* She noted the articles relied heavily — some entirely — on unnamed sources. “The descriptions [of sources’ identities] generally tilt far more toward protecting the sources than giving readers confidence in what they said,” Spayd wrote.⁴³

Conservative political commentator Mollie Hemingway, a senior editor at the *Federalist* magazine, responded to a slew of critical articles about Trump in May with a sarcastic tweet: “I didn’t go to journalism school, but should our media really privilege unaccountable, anonymous sources to on-the-record accountable ones?”⁴⁴

However, many in the news business say mainstream media outlets do a largely successful job in drawing a distinction between unnamed sources with a partisan ax to grind and those wanting

* *The Times* announced on May 31 that it was eliminating the public editor position, and Spayd resigned. The paper has recently created the Reader Center, which it described as a way to “build even stronger bonds with our readers.”



Getty Images/NBC/NBCU/Will Heath

Comedian Melissa McCarthy parodies White House press secretary Sean Spicer on “Saturday Night Live” on May 13, 2017. In recent weeks, assistant press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders has been giving press briefings instead of Spicer, who has had a rocky relationship with the press. Spicer faced withering criticism after President Trump pulled out of the Paris climate accord, telling reporters he did not know whether Trump accepted climate change science.

to provide helpful information without risking their jobs.

Of those in the latter camp, “These are not people who pull us aside because they want to screw Donald Trump,” *The Times*’ Baquet said. “These are people who are worried about the direction of government.”⁴⁵

Reporters who make the most frequent use of anonymous sources have accumulated considerable trust with those sources, which should persuade the public to have confidence in those reporters, said Dana Priest, a Pulitzer Prize-winning national security reporter at *The Post*.

Those reporters “are pretty good at judging the character of somebody that they actually quote without their name,” Priest said. “And that’s how we do that business. It would not happen without it, because they’re really not supposed to be talking to us.”⁴⁶

The use of anonymous sources declined in the half-century between 1958 and 2008, reaching its peak in the 1970s, according to a 2011 study.

The study found journalists increasingly described the backgrounds of anonymous sources in some way rather than simply identifying them as “reliable sources.” In 1958, 34 percent of stories with unnamed sources used that type of vague language, but that figure fell below 3 percent in 2008. It also found reporters more frequently explained the reasons why they grant anonymity.⁴⁷

Paulson of the First Amendment Center says procedures to discourage reliance on anonymous sources — including having reporters share the names of sources with senior editors — led to a 70-percent reduction in their usage during his stint as *USA Today*’s editor from 2004 to 2009.

Relying on unnamed sources while sustaining trust is “a balancing act,” he says. “It has to be offset by the importance of the story. We were not going to use anonymous sources to find out the name of the new Taylor Swift album — only to reveal important information about national security.” ■

BACKGROUND

Early Press Coverage

The First Amendment's guarantee of press freedom makes the news media "the only business in America specifically protected by the Constitution," as President John F. Kennedy once observed.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, journalists seldom have been held in high public regard.

Thomas Jefferson famously championed free expression: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter," the author of the

For much of the 19th century, journalists stressed sensationalism over accuracy, with papers serving as mouthpieces for political parties. "He lies like a newspaper" became a common criticism.⁵⁰

"Editors ran their own candidates — in fact they ran for office themselves, and often continued in their post at the paper while holding office," historian Garry Wills wrote. "Politicians, knowing this, cultivated their own party's papers, both the owners and the editors, shared staff with them, released news to them early or exclusively to keep them loyal, rewarded them with state or federal appointments when they won."⁵¹

Ulysses S. Grant, the commanding Union general during the Civil War, later served two scandal-filled presidential terms. During his second inaugural address in 1873, Grant railed

came from the comic strip "The Yellow Kid," about a mischievous boy in a yellow nightshirt.⁵³

The splashy reporting of Hearst's and Pulitzer's papers was offset by *The New York Times*. Tennessee publisher Adolph S. Ochs acquired the paper in 1896 and vowed "to give the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of party, sect or interests involved."⁵⁴

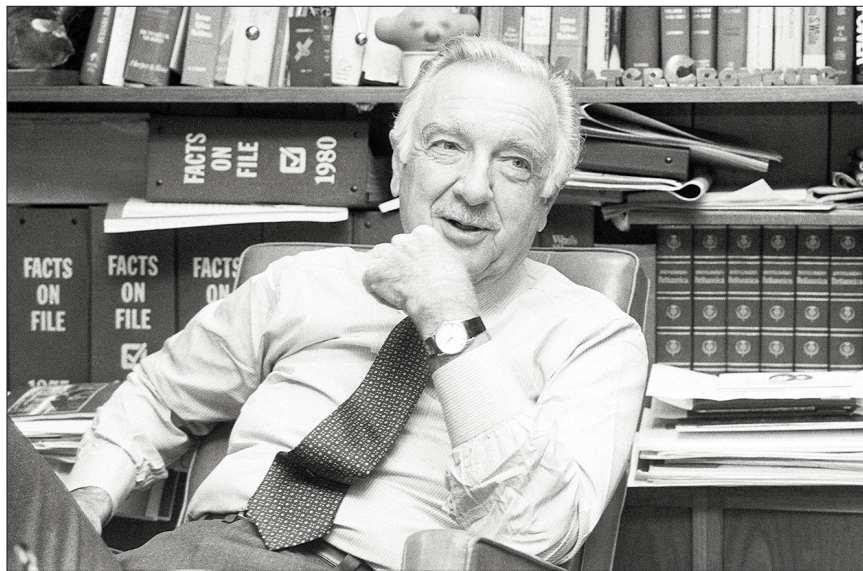
The emergence of investigative journalists — muckrakers — in the early 20th century helped boost trust. The best known was Upton Sinclair, whose 1906 novel *The Jungle* exposed labor and sanitary abuses in the meat-packing industry. Thirteen years later, Sinclair's *The Brass Check*, a work of nonfiction, compared the brass token used by patrons of prostitutes to wealthy newspaper owners' buying off journalists' credibility.⁵⁵ It sold more than 150,000 copies.⁵⁶

Legendary journalist Walter Lippmann helped found *The New Republic* magazine in 1914 and became one of the world's most widely respected columnists.⁵⁷ Lippmann warned in a 1920 book that without a "steady supply of trustworthy and relevant news," then "all that the sharpest critics of democracy have alleged is true."⁵⁸

During the 1920s, radio became common in American households. In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a bill into law stipulating that stations could lose their licenses if their broadcasts were considered too controversial. It required stations to offer equal time for political candidates.⁵⁹

With the advent of television after World War II, the federal government again became involved in regulating journalistic content. Lawmakers became concerned that the three TV networks of the era — NBC, ABC and CBS — could misuse their broadcast licenses to advance a biased agenda. The Federal Communications Commission issued the Fairness Doctrine in 1949 requiring radio and TV stations to devote

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Getty Images/Bettmann

CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite, considered the country's most trusted figure during his long tenure, helped change public perception of the Vietnam War when he declared in a 1968 commentary that it was destined "to end in a stalemate."

Declaration of Independence and the nation's third president once said. Yet he griped about how those papers covered him.

"Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper," Jefferson wrote in 1787. "Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle."⁴⁹

against reporters, saying he had been "the subject of abuse and slander scarcely ever equaled in political history."⁵²

The New York Press in 1897 coined the term "yellow journalism" to describe the fiercely competitive and sensationalistic New York newspapers owned by titans Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. The term

Chronology

1900s-1950s

Newspapers draw competition from radio, television.

1919

Celebrated muckraker Upton Sinclair, known for attacking his era's social and economic institutions, publishes *The Brass Check*, a non-fiction book equating the brass tokens that brothel patrons used to buy prostitutes' services with the money that newspaper owners paid journalists to influence their reporting.

1949

Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issues "Fairness Doctrine" requiring radio and TV stations to devote some programming to controversial issues and the airing of opposing views.

1954

CBS News correspondent Edward R. Murrow wins praise for commentary highly critical of Wisconsin Sen. Joseph McCarthy's "Red Scare" investigation of suspected communists in the United States.

1956

Two-thirds of Americans say in polls that newspapers are fair, more than twice the percentage as those who consider them unfair.

1960s-1980s

Partisan attitudes harden toward media.

1968

CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite helps turn public opinion against the Vietnam War by predicting it will end in a stalemate. . . . Republican Richard M. Nixon is

elected president and attacks the media's credibility.

1969

Conservative media critic Reed Irvine starts Accuracy in Media to provide what he calls a check against liberal media excesses.

1972

After a break-in at Democratic National Committee offices at Washington's Watergate complex, *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein write numerous articles tying Nixon and his aides to the break-in, a subsequent cover-up and other misdeeds, all leading to Nixon's resignation.

1976

Gallup Poll shows public confidence in the media at an all-time peak of 72 percent.

1980

Republican Ronald Reagan is elected president, serving two terms during which his aides sought to aggressively shape media coverage through staged events and other means. . . . Business tycoon Ted Turner launches CNN, the first TV channel providing 24-hour news coverage.

1981

Washington Post reporter Janet Cook wins Pulitzer Prize for "Jimmy's World," an article about an 8-year-old heroin addict that is later exposed as a fabrication.

1987

FCC abolishes "Fairness Doctrine," paving the way for talk radio to become a platform for conservatives and others to regularly attack perceived media bias.

1990s-Present

Internet reshapes public's perception of the media.

1994

Matt Drudge, an unknown political commentator, starts the news-aggregation website *Drudge Report*, among the first of a number of conservative-leaning media outlets.

1996

Fox News launched; within six years it is the most-watched cable network.

2003

Critics of the Iraq War bash news outlets, saying they didn't aggressively challenge President George W. Bush's assertions that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.

2004

Facebook social network launched; it quickly becomes a massively popular alternative to news outlets by taking their content and tailoring it to users' preferences.

2008

Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, the GOP vice presidential nominee, lambastes what she calls "the lamestream media."

2016

During the presidential campaign, conservatives accuse mainstream media of under-covering Hillary Clinton's perceived misdeeds and Democrats accuse them of over-covering Donald Trump's rallies in order to boost ratings and online traffic. Some Democrats also accuse Fox News of pro-Trump bias.

2017

President Trump calls the media "the enemy of the American people" amid constant clashes with reporters.

Catching Politicians With Their ‘Pants on Fire’

Fact-checking sites perform “very important journalism.”

In the media-trust debate, two phrases have become part of the lexicon: “Pants on Fire” and “Pinocchios.” The colorful expressions are used, respectively, on the fact-checking websites PolitiFact and Fact Checker, which evaluate the truth of government officials’ statements. The sites’ popularity has both irked their targets and raised questions about how the administrators of the sites choose which statements to parse.

The two sites are far from alone. U.S. news outlets had 52 separate fact-checking operations in 2016, up by 15 from 2015.¹ The biggest is PolitiFact (www.politifact.com), launched by the *Tampa Bay Times* in 2007, which won a Pulitzer Prize two years later and now has affiliations with news outlets in 18 states, public radio and the Scripps chain of television stations.*²

The Washington Post also started its fact-checking site, Fact Checker (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/>), in 2007. Another well-known site, FactCheck.org, was launched in 2003 by the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Public Policy Center.³ On the political right, the website Conservapedia (www.conservapedia.com) — a conservative version of the online dictionary Wikipedia — aims to debunk what it considers overly liberal claims.⁴

At PolitiFact, claims are rated — as shown on an accompanying “Truth-O-Meter” — on a scale from “True” to “Pants on Fire,” while Fact Checker assesses the degree of truth of a statement on a scale of zero to four “Pinocchios.”

A Fact Checker column on May 18 assigned three Pinocchios to the assertion by House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., that 7 million veterans would definitely lose tax credits under the House Republicans’ bill to repeal former President Obama’s health-care overhaul, the Affordable Care Act. “In reality, it’s not so certain,” Fact Checker said.⁵

On May 12 PolitiFact gave a “Pants on Fire” rating to President Trump’s assertion that allegations that his campaign may have colluded with Russia was a “made-up story” that Democrats used as an excuse for his victory. “Democrats did not create the story, nor do they

control the agenda of the House and Senate committees, which are conducting their own investigations,” the column declared.⁶

Fact-checking has evolved beyond its origins in the 1990s, when news outlets occasionally assessed claims in campaign advertisements, journalism scholars say. Today, TV networks such as CNN also do on-screen fact-checking during debates.

“It is very important journalism, and it’s here to stay,” says former *Post* executive editor Leonard Downie, now a professor of journalism at Arizona State University. (As a young deputy metropolitan editor of *The Post*, Downie supervised much of the paper’s Watergate coverage by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.)

A Pew Research Center survey last fall found 83 percent of voters consider it the media’s responsibility to check the statements of candidates and campaigns. And 77 percent of those who said they planned to vote for Trump saw it as either a major or minor responsibility, compared with 89 percent of Hillary Clinton’s supporters.⁷

Politicians have noticed. In a 2015 interview, then-Gov. Rick Perry, R-Texas, — now U.S. Energy secretary — said his state had reduced nitrogen-oxide emissions levels by 63.5 percent. Then he added, “Say 63 percent — that way, we won’t get PolitiFacted.” (The actual figure was 62.5 percent, the site noted.)⁸

But conservatives have criticized such sites because, they say, no public mechanism exists to show which assertions are fact-checked and which aren’t, opening the selection process to bias. “When you’re only advocating a political agenda, like PolitiFact, I understand, guys, where you’re coming from,” Fox News commentator Sean Hannity said in 2015 while disputing a “Pants on Fire” rating for an earlier assertion about Syrian refugees.⁹

In a 2016 study, political scientists Stephen Farnsworth of the University of Mary Washington and Robert Lichter of George Mason University examined hundreds of PolitiFact and Fact Checker evaluations and found that PolitiFact’s selections were more critical of Republicans than Democrats “to a statistically significant degree.” Fact Checker also was more critical of GOP politicians, they found, but not to as significant a degree.

Farnsworth and Lichter said the sites should better explain how they choose claims to evaluate. “The lack of transparency from the organizations regarding their selection procedures, and the practical difficulties of content analyzing every controversial statement by every lawmaker, make it difficult to untangle the central question

* PolitiFact won the Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting for its coverage of the 2008 election, including its use of “probing reporters and the power of the World Wide Web to examine more than 750 political claims, separating rhetoric from truth to enlighten voters.”

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some of their programming to controversial issues and allow the airing of opposing views.⁶⁰

During the 1930s and ’40s, polls showed “at best only modest levels of trust in the news media,” according to

Georgetown University public policy professor Jonathan M. Ladd.⁶¹

But around midcentury, competition from television led newspapers to expand coverage and offer more deeply sourced and interpretative reporting. Papers also developed, along with magazines, a com-

mercial model that led many of them to be hugely profitable through classified and display advertising.

It was during this period that a few newspapers, including the *Milwaukee Journal* and *Washington Post*, questioned accusations by Wisconsin GOP

of whether partisan differences in fact-checking reflect the values of the fact-checkers or the behavior of their targets," they said.¹⁰

PolitiFact creator Bill Adair, now a journalism professor at Duke University who remains a contributing editor at the site, says PolitiFact vigorously tries to avoid bias by examining the most significant or newsworthy statements, regardless of political affiliation.

The Fact Checker's Glenn Kessler responded to complaints about Trump getting more fact-checks in 2016 than Clinton by saying the GOP nominee talked more. "We would have liked to publish a lot more fact-checks of Hillary than we did, but she didn't give many interviews, her speeches were rigidly vetted and didn't vary that much," Kessler said. "Meanwhile, Trump would call in to four to five TV shows and go off the script in rallies."¹¹

Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute, a nonpartisan media-research organization, encourages fact-checking that goes beyond cataloguing assertions. "We've heard fact-checking is more effective if it's viewed as 'Help me understand this issue' rather than just right and wrong," Rosenstiel says. "The idea we have is, let's fact-check a broader issue rather than a specific claim. You would pick issues based on how important they are. Like transportation — what are the key facts? Or water — how clean is the water?"

Several efforts are underway to incorporate new technologies into fact-checking and to present the results in various formats. Studies show that charts and other graphical information can make information stick better in readers' minds, Adair says.

"We need to develop different ways of presenting accurate information," he says.

— Chuck McCutcheon

¹ Bill Adair, "Keep on Fact-Checking!" *The New York Times*, Nov. 8, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/l9kwxqj>.

² Mark Stencel, "The facts about fact-checking across America," ReportersLab.org, Aug. 3, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/ya6fqb4n>.

³ Brooks Jackson, "Is This a Great Job or What?" FactCheck.org, Dec. 5, 2003, <http://tinyurl.com/ya4w9btX>; Glenn Kessler, "About the Fact Checker," *The Washington Post*, Sept. 11, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/ybsf4v9t>; The PolitiFact Staff, PolitiFact.com, <http://tinyurl.com/yck9q3pw>.

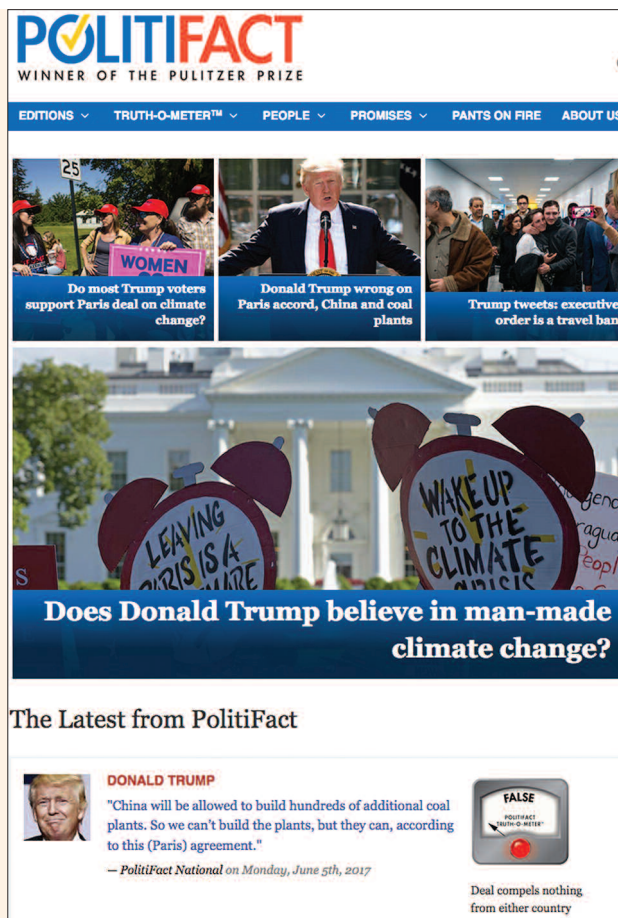
⁴ "Conservapedia.com," undated, <http://tinyurl.com/2ppol7>.

⁵ Michele Ye Hee Lee, "Nancy Pelosi's claim that 'seven million veterans will lose their tax credit' under the GOP health bill," *The Washington Post* Fact Checker, May 18, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/ybqrlm2z>.

⁶ Jon Greenberg, "Donald Trump's Pants on Fire claim Russia story 'made-

up' by Democrats," PolitiFact.com, May 12, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/yaktmejd>.

exploited it, and rather successfully."⁶²
By 1956, two-thirds of Americans said in polls that newspapers were fair. Of those charging unfairness, most thought they were too favorable toward President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-61) and other Republicans.⁶³



The online fact-checking site PolitiFact has made "Pants on Fire" part of the media-trust lexicon. Fact Checker, with its "Pinocchio" rating, is another popular site that evaluates the truth of government officials' statements.

⁷ Michael Barthel, Jeffrey Gottfried and Kristine Lu, "Trump, Clinton Supporters Differ on How Media Should Cover Controversial Statements," Pew Research Center, Oct. 17, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/ybhhyf3f>.

⁸ W. Gardner Selby, "Rick Perry gets a laugh out of 'Texas Truth-O-Meter,'" PolitiFact Texas, Jan. 15, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/y7stbhgi>.

⁹ Alex Griswold, "Hannity Blasts 'Left-Wing Website' PolitiFact For Giving Him 'Pants on Fire' Rating," *Mediaite*, Oct. 28, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/oncqu6g>.

¹⁰ Stephen J. Farnsworth and S. Robert Lichter, "A Comparative Analysis of the Partisan Targets of Media Fact-checking: Examining President Obama and the 113th Congress," paper presented at the American Political Science Association convention, September 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/yabwrxd2>.

¹¹ Alexios Mantzarlis, "Fact-checking under President Trump," Poynter.org, Nov. 10, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/jmbg4sn>.

Screenshot/CQ Researcher Staff

Vietnam and Watergate

The Vietnam War hardened partisan attitudes toward the media. Reporters found struggles on the battlefield at odds with the upbeat assessments of military

leaders, while TV news broadcast vivid combat images directly into American homes. CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite, considered the country's most trusted figure, changed the public perception of the war when he declared in a 1968 commentary that the war was destined "to end in a stalemate."⁶⁴

Republican Nixon (1969-74) and his first vice president, Spiro T. Agnew, often accused reporters of untrustworthiness. On Vietnam, Nixon said "our worst enemy seems to be the press," while Agnew blasted "the tiny, enclosed fraternity of privileged men elected by no one."⁶⁵

Reed Irvine, a Republican journalist and press critic, in 1969 founded the conservative watchdog group Accuracy in Media to provide what he saw as a check against the media's liberal excesses. It grew within two decades into a 30,000-member organization with a \$1.5 million annual budget, drawing praise from GOP lawmakers for its work exposing alleged biases, errors and distortion.⁶⁶

Journalists played the central role in the era's other most significant controversy — the 1972 break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington's Watergate office building and subsequent events that culminated in Nixon's resignation in 1974.

Relying on anonymous sources, *Post* reporters Woodward and Carl Bernstein uncovered many of the developments tying Nixon and top aides to the break-in, a cover-up and other misdeeds. A 1976 movie portrayed the pair as dogged investigators, and a Gallup poll that year showed public confidence in the media at an all-time peak of 72 percent.⁶⁷

But Republican Ronald Reagan's presidency (1981-89) ushered in greater public skepticism. Some Democrats accused reporters of being reluctant to criticize him out of fear of being cut off from the flow of White House information. They also said reporters were too willing to take part in stage-managed events crafted by Reagan aides with an eye toward enhancing the president's popularity.⁶⁸

In 1987, during Reagan's second term, the FCC abolished the Fairness Doctrine, paving the way for talk radio.⁶⁹ Rush Limbaugh, a conservative political commentator and host of a talk show in Sacramento, Calif., made perceived liberal bias one of his signature issues and saw his program become nationally syndicated in 1988 and the nation's most popular radio show.⁷⁰

The Reagan era also saw competitive constraints and government regulation of cable channels relaxed by the Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984. The industry boomed, as all-news "24/7" cable channels such as CNN changed the face of television journalism by reaching a wide audience and offering coverage for longer periods than the TV networks.⁷¹

Media Scandals

Cable increased pressure on print media, which in the post-Watergate era had boosted in-depth reporting. *The Post's* Janet Cooke won a Pulitzer Prize in 1981 for "Jimmy's World," a lengthy article about an 8-year-old heroin addict that the paper retracted when she admitted the boy was fictitious.⁷²

The Cooke controversy was followed by scandals involving other journalists found to have fabricated or embellished their work:

- *The New Republic's* Stephen Glass, who wrote articles in the 1990s about young conservatives, Wall Street traders and Silicon Valley technology entrepreneurs that were found to be entirely or partially false.⁷³

- *USA Today's* Jack Kelley, who wrote dispatches from Serbia and other war-torn countries in the 1990s and early 2000s that the newspaper found were substantially inaccurate. Editor Karen Jurgensen resigned in 2004 over her failure to detect the fabrications.⁷⁴

- *The Times'* Jayson Blair, who was found in 2003 to have copied material from other publications as well as devising fake quotations, then lying about

it. The paper's two top editors subsequently stepped down.⁷⁵

- NBC News anchor Brian Williams, who was suspended without pay for six months in 2015 — and eventually lost his anchor post — following a segment in which he exaggerated details of his travels in a military helicopter during the Iraq War. The story opened a controversy involving other instances in which Williams exaggerated or invented dangers he faced.⁷⁶

- Sabrina Rubin Erdely, a journalist for *Rolling Stone*, the magazine and its parent company were found guilty of defamation of a former University of Virginia administrator in a 2014 magazine article about sexual assault on campus that included a debunked account of a fraternity gang rape.⁷⁷

Media trust levels, as measured by Gallup, fell to just over 50 percent of Americans polled through the late 1990s and into the early 2000s. Media credibility has consistently been below 50 percent since 2007.⁷⁸

Democratic President Bill Clinton was a polarizing figure, especially after his sexual relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky led to his impeachment and subsequent acquittal. "The Drudge Report," a conservative news-aggregation website launched in 1994, led the charge against Clinton and other Democrats.

Other right-wing outlets that followed in its wake, such as Breitbart News, were aggressively skeptical of President Barack Obama. The outlets gave voice to the "alt-right," a loose coalition of white nationalists, white supremacists, anti-Semites and others seeking to preserve what they consider traditional Western civilization.⁷⁹

Such outlets "were preaching this is the only place you can get news — this is the only place you can trust," said Ted Newton, president of a Washington political communications firm and an adviser to Republican Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign. "All other media outlets are lying to you

[they said], so you need to come to us. And so in an attempt to capture an audience, they almost made them slaves to those news outlets.”⁸⁰

Cable news discovered that many viewers were hungry for partisanship. Fox News launched in 1996 with a motto to be “fair and balanced,” combining straight news reporting with pro-Republican commentary.

Though critics labeled Fox a GOP soapbox for bigotry and propaganda, it struck a chord with viewers who believed the rest of media displayed an overly liberal tilt to become the most-watched cable channel in 2002.⁸¹ Rival cable channel MSNBC, created in 1996 as a partnership between NBC and Microsoft, sought starting in 2007 to become Fox’s liberal counterweight.⁸²

Critics of the Iraq War blasted Fox and the rest of the media for not more aggressively investigating GOP President George W. Bush’s justification of the 2003 invasion — that Iraq possessed nuclear, chemical or other so-called weapons of mass destruction. One *Times* reporter, Judith Miller, came under criticism for writing articles giving credence to Iraqi and U.S. officials who made that claim.⁸³

Some journalists said deep public support for Bush after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks influenced how aggressively they challenged his claims.

In the run-up to the war, “There wasn’t any reporting in the rest of the press corps, there was stenography,” recalled John Walcott, Washington bureau chief for McClatchy Newspapers, which published some of the most skeptical coverage about the decision to invade. “The administration would make an assertion, people would make an assertion, people would write it down as if it were true, and put it in the newspaper or on television.”⁸⁴

Social Media

Facebook, Twitter and other social-media sites further lessened the need

for Americans to rely on newspapers, TV or other news outlets. Facebook’s algorithms assessed what people clicked on and then fed them similar content, a development that many experts say further lessened trust in mainstream outlets.

Politicians began recognizing the power of social media in appealing directly to a mass audience. Alaska

tional media came under attack from all sides. Hillary Clinton’s campaign castigated journalists for lavishing too much uncritical attention on Trump, whose colorful candidacy drew far more coverage than any of his Republican primary rivals.⁸⁸ Supporters of Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, Clinton’s main primary opponent, accused the



Getty Images/Justin Sullivan

Craigslist founder Craig Newmark, whose website has attracted millions of dollars’ worth of ads away from local newspaper classified advertising, has joined several private and nonprofit groups and media organizations in supporting projects aimed at developing faith in the media. “As a news consumer, like most folks, I want news we can trust,” Newmark said. “That means standing up for trustworthy news media and learning how to spot clickbait and deceptive news.”

Gov. Sarah Palin, the 2008 GOP vice-presidential nominee, inveighed against “the lamestream media.”⁸⁵

At the same time, media watchdog groups formed across the ideological spectrum. On the political right, hedge fund executive Robert Mercer and his daughter Rebecca gave \$13.5 million between 2008 and 2014 to the Media Research Center, whose projects include a website (CNSNews.com) that publishes stories it says the mainstream media overlooks.⁸⁶ On the left, liberal business magnate George Soros gave at least \$1 million to Media Matters for America, which also has obtained funding from or formed partnerships with several groups that Soros funds or has funded.⁸⁷

In the 2016 presidential race, tradi-

media of not taking him seriously and undermining his campaign.⁸⁹

Neither Trump nor Sanders, however, made media criticism as central to their races as Trump. Three months before the election, Trump named Steve Bannon, a founding member of the board of Breitbart, as head of his campaign. He later tapped the controversial Bannon as his chief strategist in the White House.

Trump made, and continues to make, near-daily use of Twitter as a weapon to bypass and attack traditional media.⁹⁰ House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., a Trump supporter, said the president’s deployment of Twitter is “like owning newspapers.”⁹¹

Facebook came under heavy criticism during the campaign for tailoring stories

Falling Newsroom Employment Erodes Trust

Reporters are “stretched thinner. That hurts trust.”

Journalists are having a tough time building trust, in part because there are fewer of them and those who remain are stretched thin.

Declining circulation and falling advertising revenue have led to dramatic downsizing at print, broadcast and digital outfits. Newspapers, for instance, shed more than 24,000 reporting and editing jobs — a 37 percent drop — between 2004 and 2015, the latest year for which figures exist.¹ And the remaining reporters must not only gather the news and write stories but also shoot videos and constantly update their stories in real time using Twitter, Facebook and other social media.

“As newsrooms shrink, there’s less time to do stories and they’re doing shorter, more incomplete stories,” says Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute, a nonpartisan media research group in Arlington, Va. “As a consumer, you say, ‘This is paper is thinner,’ ” he says, while journalists are having to “write a tweet and do a video [so] they’re stretched thinner. That hurts trust. You don’t have as much time to do everything.”

Facing plummeting ad income, Gannett Co., the country’s largest newspaper chain and owner of *USA Today* and more than 100 other dailies, reduced its workforce about 2 percent last October.² The company also cut staff at its Tennessee and New Jersey papers this year, but has refused to publicize recent cuts, according to the *Columbia Journalism Review*.³ BH Media Group, a subsidiary of Berkshire Hathaway, the conglomerate headed by Nebraska investor Warren Buffett, announced in April it was cutting 289 jobs at its 31 dailies and nearly 50 weeklies.⁴

And the future economic climate for newspapers could get even worse, said Nicco Mele, former *Los Angeles Times* senior vice president. “If the next three years look like the last three years,” he predicted in 2016, “somewhere between a third to a half” of the 50 largest metropolitan papers in the country could go out of business. Mele is now director of the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University.⁵

Staff cuts have decimated coverage of state legislative news. Between 2005 and 2014, investigative and in-depth reporting on state government declined 30 percent at six major papers,

according to a 2016 study by a George Washington University graduate student.⁶

Downsizing local and state government coverage means greater secrecy — and potentially increased corruption — because fewer media outlets are holding state and local institutions accountable, several watchdog groups have warned. “The traditional media, particularly newspapers, have always led the open-government charges if the school board is closing a meeting illegally or the city is denying records or a judge is kicking a reporter out,” said Jeffrey Hunt, a media lawyer in Salt Lake City. He sees the media “leaving the field in terms of fighting these battles.”⁷

Not all of the economic news is bad — especially for the big media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and cable network MSNBC that have devoted substantial resources to the unfolding controversy over Russia’s alleged involvement in the U.S. presidential election and ties to President Trump’s administration.

In January *The Post* generated more new subscriptions than in any other month, beating what had been a record-setting November.⁸ The paper has hired hundreds of reporters and editors since Amazon’s Jeff Bezos bought the paper a few years ago, and Jed Hartman, chief revenue officer, predicted that 2017 would be its third year of double-digit revenue growth.⁹ And during the first three months of this year *The Times* added 308,000 net digital-only news subscriptions — more than in any quarter in its history.¹⁰ First-quarter revenues increased 5.1 percent over the first quarter of 2016, and circulation revenues jumped 11.2 percent.¹¹

Stephen Farnsworth, a professor of political science and international affairs at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Va., said the two papers are benefiting from a jump in the number of serious news consumers because of Trump. Those people “are appreciating the media more than they did last year at this time,” says Farnsworth, who directs Mary Washington’s Center for Leadership and Media Studies.¹²

Despite those numbers, *The Times* in late May announced a round of newsroom buyouts aimed primarily at editors. The

in users’ online feeds to what those users had previously read. That included a substantial amount of fake news, which made the network “a sewer of misinformation,” according to Joshua Benton, director of Harvard’s Nieman Journalism Lab.⁹²

As polls showed trust in the media plummeting, news organizations and outside groups ramped up efforts to rebuild it.

One effort was the Reynolds Institute’s Trusting News project, launched in January 2016 to look at how news outlets could rebuild trust through social media. The project found successful social-media posts shared several traits: They were about familiar topics that people were inclined to interact with; they gave people something specific to react to; and they used informal language to be relatable.⁹³

A participant, the *Standard-Examiner* in Ogden, Utah, developed a video for Facebook and its website in which local African-Americans and law enforcement officials met to discuss Black Lives Matter.⁹⁴ The project “was a new way for us to see the importance of having a conversation with the readers and being transparent,” says Ann Elise Taylor, the paper’s news editor.

paper also announced it was abolishing the “public editor,” or ombudsman, position held by Liz Spayd. Publisher Arthur Sulzberger said the paper would create a “Reader Center” to interact with the public.¹³

Meanwhile, the left-leaning MSNBC was the second-most-watched cable network during prime time during the week of May 15 — behind TNT, which carried several NBA playoff games. MSNBC’s weekday prime-time shows averaged 2.44 million, eclipsing Fox News’ 2.40 million for the first time ever.¹⁴ Fox has devoted less coverage to the Russia controversy, and its commentary has been solidly pro-Trump. Some industry analysts wonder if its approach will hurt both its credibility and financial situation.¹⁵

Numerous advertisers backed away from Fox after commentator Bill O’Reilly was forced out in April amid allegations of sexual harassment and popular Fox commentator Sean Hannity had to apologize for advancing a discredited rumor that a murdered Democratic National Committee staffer was targeted for death by Hillary Clinton and liberal philanthropist George Soros.¹⁶

No one in the industry, however, has an easy solution for how news organizations can boost revenues while maintaining trust. Some foundations are financing investigative reporting, and some wealthy donors are providing millions of dollars to fight fake news and support in-depth reporting.

Another experiment is emulating the Netherlands’ *De Correspondent* (*The Correspondent*), which recently announced a U.S. prototype. The online news site is funded by 56,000 members, who each pay about \$63 a year for work done by its 21 full-time staff and 75 freelancers. The site aims to do in-depth, unique articles without competing against other media for breaking news, said Jay Rosen, a New York University professor of journalism who is helping with the U.S. version’s launch.¹⁷

At journalism conferences, Rosen wrote, he has heard “a very good question: What if news organizations optimized every part of the operation for trust? Not for speed, traffic, profits, headlines or prizes . . . but for trust. What would that even look like? My

answer: It would look a lot like *De Correspondent*.”¹⁸

— **Chuck McCutcheon**

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¹⁰ Sydney Ember, “New York Times Co. Reports Rising Digital Profit as Print Advertising Falls,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/m72ezf5>.

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¹³ Tali Arbel, “Among the job cuts at The New York Times, the public editor,” *Boston.com* (The Associated Press), May 31, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/y88zmdz8>.

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¹⁶ Simon Dumenco, “Is the Sean Hannity Advertiser Revolt Bill O’Reilly All Over Again?” *Advertising Age*, May 25, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/ybpayo4k>.

¹⁷ Jay Rosen, “Jay Rosen: This is what a news organization built on reader trust looks like,” NiemanLab, March 28, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/ktkmpgb>.

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The Coloradoan newspaper in Fort Collins, Colo., used a hit-and-run bicycle accident as a way to explain how — contrary to some readers’ beliefs — journalists regret having to cover bad news. The Facebook post generated more than 3,500 link clicks — far more than expected.⁹⁵

The Cincinnati television station WCPO-TV also took part, using Facebook to explain its commitment to

covering child poverty while acknowledging the challenges in exploring the topic because it cannot show children’s faces or use their voices on camera.⁹⁶

“With the state of media and the way people think about media, it’s crazy not to get involved with a project like this to win their trust,” says Mike Canan, WCPO.com’s editor. ■

CURRENT SITUATION

Trump and the Media

The early months of Trump’s presidency have been marked by ag-

gressive news coverage — led by *The Times* and *Post* — about whether Russia’s government worked behind the scenes to help his campaign and influence his new administration.

A Quinnipiac University poll in early May indicates the media covering Trump may have gained some ground in winning the public’s confidence. But it also showed skepticism of journalists remains entrenched.

When asked whom people trusted more to tell the truth about important

Times reporter and founder of the fact-checking site *PolitiFact* who is now a professor of journalism at Duke University.

“Clearly there’s been a hunger for accurate, objective news lately — that’s been encouraging,” Adair says. “But Trump has said some incredibly damaging things about the media.”

Both *The New York Times* and *Post* have seen financial gains that media analysts say reflect increased trust. (See sidebar, p. 494.)⁹⁹

media’s importance. They note that when the initial attempt to overturn Obama’s Affordable Care Act could not win enough GOP supporters to be brought up for a House vote in March, the first reporters Trump notified were not from a conservative outlet, but *The Times* and *Post*.¹⁰¹

Commentators at Fox News, like other GOP-leaning outlets, have remained supportive of Trump, devoting less airtime to the ongoing investigation’s into the Trump campaign’s possible collusion with Russia than other outlets. Fox’s opinion-givers and other conservatives have echoed the president in arguing that the leaking of classified information to the media is far more serious than speculation of any administration wrongdoing.¹⁰²

William Kristol, a conservative pundit and former Fox commentator, criticized the conservative media, particularly Fox News, for “rationalizing everything” Trump does.¹⁰³

The nonprofit investigative website *ProPublica*, founded in 2008, recently has expanded on its collaborations with other outlets, pairing with *The Times* and The Associated Press in March to rapidly collect White House staffers’ financial-disclosure forms.¹⁰⁴ *ProPublica* opened a bureau in Chicago this spring, its first outside Washington and New York.¹⁰⁵

In the Midwest, Cleveland’s *Plain Dealer* and *Cleveland.com* launched the reporting collaboration “Ohio Matters,” which has sent reporters to six rural, suburban and urban parts of the crucial swing state to hear concerns. Trump carried Ohio by 8 percentage points in 2016, far above most polls’ earlier projections.¹⁰⁶

To try to show its commitment to watchdog journalism, *The Post* in February put the motto “Democracy Dies in Darkness” below its front-page nameplate. The move led the conservative *Washington Times* to launch its own slogan — “Real News for Real Americans.”¹⁰⁷

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Getty Images/MSNBC/NBCU/Heidi Gutman

Rachel Maddow, host of the “Rachel Maddow Show” on MSNBC, is celebrated by liberals – and reviled by conservatives – for her partisan commentary. In today’s highly polarized political and media climate, 62 percent of Americans say the media favor one political party over the other, compared with 50 percent in past years.

issues, 31 percent picked Trump and 57 percent cited the media, a rise of 5 percentage points from mid-February, when the president denounced the media as “the enemy of the American people” in a tweet.⁹⁷

However, the poll also showed that voters disapproved, 58 percent to 37 percent, of the way the media cover the president.⁹⁸

Such a split in attitudes reflects the harm inflicted from Trump’s attacks, says Bill Adair, a former *Tampa Bay*

Barton Swaim, a conservative *Post* columnist, said he expected the mainstream media to aggressively cover Trump’s presidency after being demonized during the election. “Even so, the sheer visceral animosity from the media, together with the aggressively insurgent opposition by [Democratic] holdovers from within the government, has shocked me as much as the election itself,” Swaim said.¹⁰⁰

Media scholars and journalists say Trump tacitly understands traditional

At Issue:

Should journalists try to be objective?



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WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, JUNE 2017

not every journalist needs to be objective. But if sources of objective journalism disappear, society will suffer a tragic loss.

Some claim it's impossible for journalists to be objective; no one, they say, can report the news without a shade of personal opinion.

This might be true if a journalist's job were simply to provide one version of reality. That would open the way for journalists to impose their views on others. But the real goal of objectivity isn't so much about controlling the information available as about making sure readers get all the facts and interpretations they need to make up their own minds.

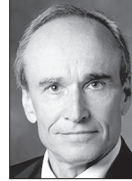
Smart journalists draw these facts and interpretations not only from their own investigations but also from reporting and reasonable opinions on social networks — making a well-done objective news story deeply democratic, reflecting input from many places. Objectivity demands only that journalists keep their personal views out of their stories. Personal opinions should be saved for opinion columns, where people expect writers to advocate for their points of view.

Critics sometimes claim objective journalism is a robotic, mindless craft of simply writing down what everyone says. It is nothing of the sort. So-called fake news and fantasy narratives have no place in an objective news article. Some things happened; others didn't. A newsmaker spoke in one context; to put his or her words in another is a lie. Journalists remain responsible for the truth of what they publish.

Some critics also accuse objective journalists of scrubbing humanity and emotion out of stories in a bid to avoid any opinion. But objectivity doesn't mean rejection of human feeling. The slaying of children by a gunman at a school can be fairly referred to as horrific; there is no need for a paragraph saying "on the other hand." A photographer covering a war or disaster can put aside his camera when he has a chance to save a life.

The world will be far poorer if journalism is allowed to become nothing but a stream of opinion pieces, which by their nature shortchange some points of view in order to advance the author's argument.

Society must have a place where thoughtful readers without the time to do extensive personal research can find fair, accurate accounts of events as well as a variety of responsible opinion to put them into context. Objective journalism fills this need.



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So-called objective journalism is another progressive idea based on scientism, the notion that human behavior and action can be as predictable and reliable as science. In earlier times, media reported obvious facts, but the political interpretation of those facts reflected what James Madison called the "passions and interests" of the competing political factions in a diverse country. The numerous newspapers across the country reflected this diversity, which is why they often had the word "Democrat" or "Republican" in their titles.

After World War II, journalism was professionalized and training happened in "J schools" at liberal universities, which biased much reporting toward liberal and urban sensibilities. The advent of television reduced the number of newspapers that once provided diversity, allowing the liberal interpretation to dominate far beyond the media centers in New York, Washington, Chicago and Los Angeles.

In the 1960s journalism became an activist and advocacy business. Coverage of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal interpreted events from a partisan and left-wing perspective that saw U.S. intervention as neocolonial adventurism and President Richard Nixon as a budding tyrant out to destroy the Constitution. As a consequence, South Vietnam was abandoned to the communist North, and Nixon was forced to resign, paving the way for Jimmy Carter's disastrous foreign policy of retreat and appeasement.

The repeal of the Federal Communications Commission's Fairness Doctrine in 1987 was followed by the advent of talk radio, which began to erode the monopoly of the big-three television networks and dominant newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Then came cable news with shows like Fox News, and the internet. Now thousands of outlets reflect the diversity of opinion that the First Amendment was written to protect. Where once maybe 50 opinion makers dominated political discourse, now there are hundreds of thousands. Their impact became clear when in 2004 CBS icon Dan Rather was brought down by internet sleuths for reporting "fake news" about George W. Bush's National Guard service.

Today we've returned to a true "marketplace of ideas" in which diverse political perspectives can compete, and ideological biases pretending to be "objective" can be exposed within hours. Once more it is up to the citizens to be informed and use their critical judgment rather than taking on faith the reporting of a handful of media outlets. If they misuse that freedom, that's the price always to be paid when people are free.

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Trust-Related Projects

Several private and nonprofit groups have joined media organizations on projects aimed at developing trust.

A global coalition of technology leaders, academic institutions and others announced a \$14 million undertaking in April, The News Integrity Initiative, to combat declining trust in media and advance news literacy. Supporters include Craig Newmark, founder of the online classified-ad site Craigslist, which,

The philanthropic investment firm Omidyar Network, the brainchild of eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, in April launched a \$100 million project over the next three years aimed at restoring trust in the media and other institutions globally. The funding will focus on strengthening independent media and investigative journalism, tackling misinformation and hate speech, and enabling citizens to better engage with government.¹¹⁰

The Reynolds Institute recently wrapped up the second phase of its “Trusting News” project with 30 media outlets around the country. That phase

the media,’ but it was really, ‘I don’t when comes to politics.’ Or they don’t trust the national media.”

Canan says he has started collaborating with the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, a journalistic competitor, on ways to build trust. Peter Bhatia, the newspaper’s editor and vice president for audience development, said he and other editors have been trying to “demystify our process” by explaining how the newsroom operates in talks to tea party as well as progressive groups and when publishing investigative projects or deeply reported work.

Transparency “becomes more of an imperative as we work hard to restore trust lost in the last election cycle, regardless of how fair the charges against us may be,” Bhatia said.¹¹¹

The *Standard-Examiner’s* Taylor, who also took part in the Reynolds Institute project, agrees on the need for increased transparency. She says a surprising number of readers do not make the distinction between news and commentary, with separate staffs handling each as at most outlets.

“That’s knowledge a lot of journalists take for granted,” she says. “One thing I’d like to address in being more transparent is explain what is an editorial, what is an opinion piece, how do they differ from a news story and how are all these things connected? That would be a valuable tool people could use as they consume news for the rest of their lives.”



Getty Images/Bloomberg/Andrew Harrer

Pierre Omidyar, founder of eBay, launched a \$100 million global project in April aimed at restoring trust in the media and other institutions. The focus will be on strengthening independent media and investigative journalism, confronting misinformation and hate speech and enabling citizens to better engage with government.

ironically, has severely crippled newspapers’ classified revenues.

“As a news consumer, like most folks, I want news we can trust,” Newmark said. “That means standing up for trustworthy news media and learning how to spot clickbait and deceptive news.”¹⁰⁸

The program will be administered by the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism. It will focus in part on helping readers better spot fake news and frivolous “clickbait” disguised as news articles.¹⁰⁹

— which will conclude with a report this fall — invited local readers and viewers to describe how news outlets can win their confidence, Mayer says.

In Cincinnati, WCPO.com’s invitation for readers to take part drew 463 responses in less than a day — a sign Canan says people care about the issue.

“One of the biggest takeaways is, there’s a lot of guilt by association,” he says. “As I delved into conversations with people, they said, ‘I don’t trust

Facebook and Google

The twin colossi of the information world are trying to bolster confidence in the media in the face of criticism that they have enabled the spread of fake news and profited from sharing journalism content without paying its producers for it.

Facebook has put out new tools to stem the spread of fake news. If users click on a news story, they now have

the option of reporting it as being false. If enough users flag such stories, Facebook will send the article to a fact-checking organization such as Snopes.com or PolitiFact — and if those outlets agree, the article will appear on Facebook with a red banner that says “Disputed by third-party fact checkers” and include a link to the explanation.

In addition, Facebook has promised to employ software to help identify fake news stories and has its engineers working on finding websites that impersonate actual news sites.¹¹²

Founder Mark Zuckerberg published a manifesto in February outlining how the social-media giant can contribute to restoring trust in news and information. One of his aims is to encourage the growth of local news and improve the range of business models on which news organizations rely.¹¹³

Google’s News Lab, launched in 2015, seeks to connect journalists with programs, data and other resources to use in their reporting. It started the First Draft coalition to create standards and best practices for verifying eyewitness media content and combating fake news. The coalition expanded last year to include 80 partners, including Facebook and Twitter, and is working with universities and other organizations around the world.¹¹⁴

Critics of Google’s and Facebook’s efforts, however, say their continued dependence on incorporating news articles in their content compels them to do far more to help the media regain trust.

Steven Waldman, founder of Life-Posts.com, where people share personal stories online, said Facebook and Google should devote 1 percent of their profits for five years to create a \$4.4 billion permanent endowment to transform local journalism.

“These companies are among the biggest beneficiaries of the digital disruption that has, among other things, caused the crisis in American journalism,” Waldman said. “It’s time for the disrupters to solve the problems.”¹¹⁵ ■

OUTLOOK

Unpleasant Truths

With political polarization deeply rooted in society, journalism scholars and those in the news media predict mistrust of journalists will continue — the question is to what degree.

“The media will never be all that popular; it’s in the business of telling unpleasant truths,” says Stephen Farnsworth, a professor of political science and international affairs at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Va., who directs its Center for Leadership and Media Studies.

The American Press Institute’s Rosenstiel says trust levels “are going to continue to slip, because we’re in a more polarized world, and I don’t see a solution to that on the horizon.” Part of the problem, he adds, is the inability of the Democratic and Republican parties to produce leaders who are considered trustworthy to a broad bipartisan audience.

“It’s ironic that when he left office, Barack Obama had much higher approval ratings than Trump or any politician has now,” he says. “I think there’s a sort of nostalgia — we can, in retrospect, appreciate people, but when we’re on the field of battle, we retreat to our team.”

More conservatives need to have their voices heard in traditional media, said former Wisconsin right-wing talk-radio host Charlie Sykes. If that does not happen, he said, those conservatives will continue putting their faith in outlets that mirror their preconceived views.

“You can do the best reporting in the world, but unless you can find a way to restore that credibility . . . it won’t even register,” said Sykes, now a contributing *New York Times* columnist.¹¹⁶

Benton, of Harvard’s Nieman Lab, is particularly interested in seeing whether online outlets such as BuzzFeed and

Mic that have marketed themselves to younger, urban readers will start courting conservative readers.

“Do they double down on identity-driven stories embracing the values of diversity and multiculturalism?” he asked. “Or — at a time when many are under their own revenue strains . . . do any of them see a market opportunity in the Trump voter?”¹¹⁷

Finding ways to finance quality journalism at larger-scale mainstream outlets will be critical, says Arizona State’s Downie, the former *Post* editor.

“I’m pleased to see that audiences are beginning to find ways to pay more for digital subscriptions to the *Times*, support events produced by other news organizations and increase membership in public radio,” he says. “Foundations are stepping up and philanthropists are stepping up. But whether that’s sufficient five or 10 years from now, I can’t say.”

The Reynolds Institute’s Mayer, who leads the Trusting News project, predicts a split between news organizations catering to polarization and those willing to earn more trust. Of the latter group, she expects an increased effort to listen more closely to readers.

“There’s no room in journalism any more for people who don’t see customer service and understanding the audience as part of the job,” she says. “People in journalism have to have an entrepreneurial mindset and a customer-service mindset with a focus on, ‘Here’s what we do.’ ”

Duke University’s Adair, the PolitiFact creator, estimates that if trust levels do pick up, it will take 10 or 15 years. The media “will do better at labeling types of articles and being more transparent,” he says. “There’s likely to be a renewed effort to invest in news literacy so that people, particularly young people, have a better understanding of the news ecosystem.”

Until then, said *Post* media columnist Margaret Sullivan, a former *Times* public editor, young people going into journalism must accept being mistrusted.

“You have to understand there’s a mission attached to our job and that we need to do it well,” Sullivan told a student audience at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, “and put on our big-boy and big-girl pants and not worry that we’re under attack — because it’s going to continue.”¹¹⁸ ■

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About the Author



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American Press Institute, 401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22203; 571-366-1200; www.americanpressinstitute.org. A nonprofit group that researches journalism trends.

American Society of News Editors, 209 Reynolds Journalism Institute, Missouri School of Journalism, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211; 573-884-2430; www.asne.org. Promotes ethical journalism, supports First Amendment rights and defends freedom of information and open government.

Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, 124 W. 30th St., Suite 201, New York, NY 10001; 212-633-6700; www.fair.org. Liberal media watchdog organization that monitors bias and censorship in news reporting.

Media Matters for America, P.O. Box 52155, Washington, DC 20091; 202-756-4100; www.mediamatters.org. Liberal media watchdog group that looks for potential conservative bias in news reporting.

Media Research Center, 325 S. Patrick St., Alexandria, VA 22314; 703-683-9733; www.mrc.org. Conservative media watchdog group that searches for potential liberal bias in news reporting.

Nieman Journalism Lab, Harvard University, 1 Francis Ave., Cambridge, MA 02138; 617-495-2237; www.niemanlab.org. Analyzes the news media’s future in the internet age.

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