

CHAPTER

4

WHY HAS TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND MEDIA DECLINED?



FINDINGS

Reasons for the loss of trust in government include:

- ▶ Poor institutional performance
 - ▶ Large-scale global “shocks”
 - ▶ Political polarization
 - ▶ Increasing economic inequality
 - ▶ Decreasing economic mobility
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Reasons for the decline in the public's trust in the media include:

- ▶ Proliferation of news sources
- ▶ Media disintermediation
- ▶ Confusion between news and opinion
- ▶ Spread of misinformation and disinformation
- ▶ Decline of local news
- ▶ Politicized criticism of the media

Before offering its recommendations to help restore trust, the Commission needed to examine the causes of the problem. Here we address the causes, first for the loss of trust in government and its democratic processes and, second, for declining trust in the media that are supposed to inform the public about how government and society operate.

These explanations are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, it is likely that all of these factors play some role in the overall decline in trust. It is also probable that there are cross-impacts among the various factors responsible for the loss of trust in both government and the media.

Why Has Trust in Government Declined?

Scholars have offered at least five explanations for the decline of trust in government. They include three big social/political factors—poor institutional performance, large-scale global “shocks” and growing political polarization—and two specifically economic factors—rising economic inequality and declining economic mobility.

1. Poor institutional performance

Perhaps the most straightforward explanation for falling trust in government is poor performance by those in power. According to political scientists Kenneth Newton and Pippa Norris, when institutions perform poorly, people lose trust in them: “It is primarily governmental performance that determines the level of citizens’ confidence in public institutions.”⁶⁹

One indicator of the public’s lack of faith in the effectiveness of government is its view of the competency of political leadership. A 2015 Pew survey found that a majority (55 percent) of Americans believed that “compared with elected officials, ordinary Americans would do a better job of solving the country’s problems.”⁷⁰ This trend has continued, as reflected in a 2018 Pew survey, which found that 61 percent of Americans believe that the fundamental “design and structure” of American government needs “significant changes” to address the country’s challenges.⁷¹

...WHEN INSTITUTIONS PERFORM POORLY, PEOPLE LOSE TRUST IN THEM.

Starting with the Vietnam War and Watergate, a series of governmental actions served to diminish public trust. Bad behavior by elected officials—including the Clinton impeachment, after the President was accused of lying under oath; the Iraq War, which turned out to have been launched under false assumptions; a failure to defend against foreign interference in elections; and the gridlock that seems to have dominated U.S. political processes in recent years—provided ample grounds for Americans to doubt the effectiveness of their government. And news media that emphasize conflict, scandal and dysfunction could well be contributing to the loss of trust.

2. Large-scale global “shocks”

To account for a decades-long, worsening “crisis in trust,” the Edelman Report⁷² points to a series of social and economic developments that have shaken faith in key institutions in the United States and abroad.

Globalization and automation. The consensus of economists is that globalization and automation are positive forces in terms of overall economic growth. But even as they have created new jobs, these forces have also produced economic volatility that displaced millions of workers, stoking well-founded fears of economic dislocation and job loss.⁷³

The Great Recession of 2008. All recessions have negative consequences, but the impact of the 2008 recession was especially severe, creating “a crisis of confidence in traditional authority figures and institutions while undermining the middle class.”⁷⁴ According to the Pew Charitable Trusts, combined peak loss from declining stock and home values in the United States totaled \$10.8 trillion, or an average of nearly \$100,000 per household, during the period from July 2008 to March 2009. Millions of jobs were lost and many state and local governments were forced to reduce their budgets significantly, resulting in cuts to critical services such as public education.⁷⁵ Although U.S. economic growth since then has made up for many of these losses, the setbacks and emotional scars from this time still linger.

Global migration. The perceived influx of immigrants to the U.S. led many, especially among working-class Americans, to “feel like strangers in their own land.”⁷⁶ Demographic and social shifts have also increased tensions around the politics of race and gender.

The rise of disinformation. False or misleading news stories have competed with, and perhaps crowded out, accurate stories and seeded doubt about the reliability of news in general, resulting in a sort of Gresham's Law for information.⁷⁷ One consequence of this most recent wave is that, for the first time, the news media are now the least trusted of the various global institutions tracked by Edelman.⁷⁸ If citizens believe they cannot rely on media for a truthful account of political activities, doubts about the legitimacy of government and its actions are likely to spread. Disinformation that comes, whether deliberately or not, from political leaders can be particularly corrosive to trust in government.

3. Political polarization

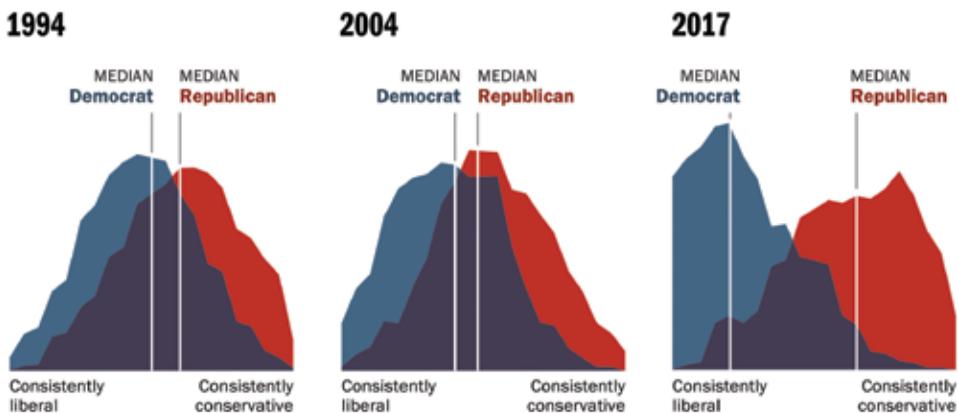
A third factor in declining trust is the steady increase in political polarization in the U.S. This has produced political camps whose views on a wide range of issues have drifted farther and farther apart, increasing hostility across party lines.

Party divides. Data from more than 20 years of polling by the Pew Research Center show a widening ideological gulf between Democrats and Republicans (see Figure 4.1). While in 1994 there was a large overlap in political values between members of the two parties, by 2017 the amount of common ground between the two had shrunk considerably.⁷⁹

FIGURE 4.1 GROWTH OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION, 1994–2017

Democrats and Republicans more ideologically divided than in the past

Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values



Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see methodology). The blue area in this chart represents the ideological distribution of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents; the red area of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents. The overlap of these two distributions is shaded purple.

Source: www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/section-1-growing-ideological-consistency/pp-2014-06-12-polarization-1-01/

As the gap has grown, so has anxiety about the other party.⁸⁰ It is logical that the “out” faction, whose views and values bear little in common with the party in power, would feel less comfortable and confident, and therefore less trusting, generally, in the way that the “in” party operates the government.

Echo chambers and filter bubbles. A potential contributor to growing polarization is the impact of so-called “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles.” Echo chambers refer to people’s tendency to seek information that confirms their existing perspectives and assumptions, including their political views. Filter bubbles refer more specifically to the mechanisms within online social networks that provide users with content that is appealing to them, which often is content that is consistent with their current views. The rise of cable channels and web sites with partisan perspectives and with commercial interests to promote strong ideological viewpoints make it possible for individuals to stay with a source that reinforces their existing perspective. On the internet, social media platforms generate advertising dollars by tailoring and targeting information to users that cater to their interests and viewpoints. Algorithms designed to shape each user’s newsfeed tend to favor information from “people like them.” As these algorithms improve, it becomes easier for people to inhabit online worlds that are almost hermetically sealed off from others with different perspectives. The irony is that the internet, which originally promised to be a tool for enlightenment and liberation by providing everyone with access to all human knowledge, has, according to some critics, ended up isolating each user in a “unique, personal universe of information created just for you by an array of [invisible] personalizing filters.”⁸¹

In the realm of politics, this phenomenon results in polarization and fragmentation in which the body politic has shattered into myriad separate “echo chambers” of groups—some small, some considerably larger—that share similar viewpoints. In a white paper for the Commission, Jeffrey Abramson, a professor of law at the University of Texas and a political theorist, describes this process as “the balkanization of the public into separate news-consuming spheres.” He warns that it is “difficult for trust to spread among partisans when the news they receive does not offer a shared baseline of common information.”⁸²

Spatial polarization. Another form of polarization is the split in values and perspectives between rural residents and urban dwellers even in the same state, sometimes described as “spatial polarization.” In addition, the United States today consists of liberal “blue states” clustered mainly along the country’s east and west coasts, and conservative “red states” filling the vast but more sparsely populated heartland of the country.⁸³

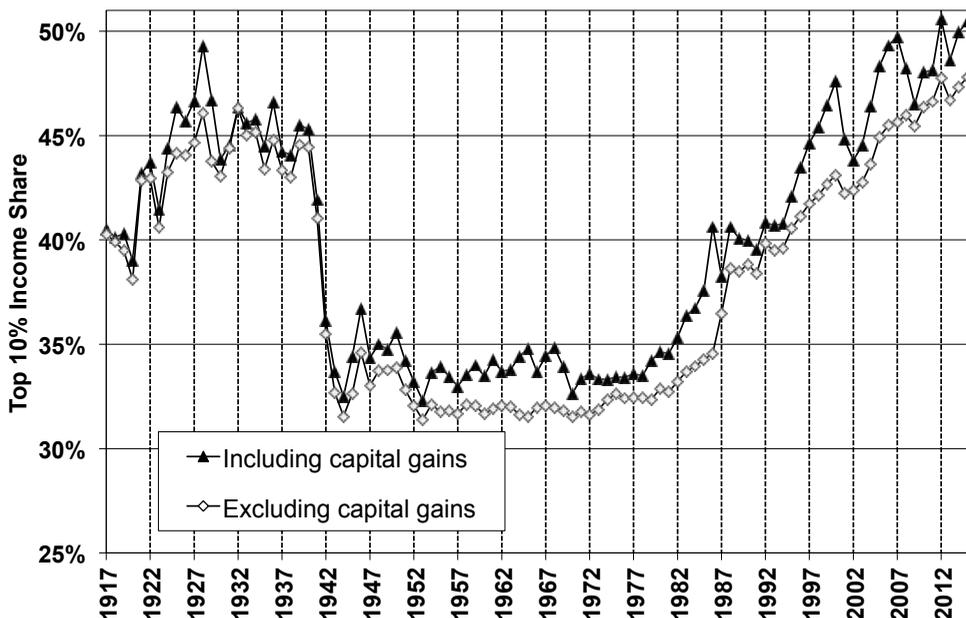
Institutionalists vs. insurrectionists. As polarization increases, the notion of government as a joint enterprise that tolerates disagreement but ultimately works toward compromise in order to get things done seems increasingly quaint. In his 2012 book, *Twilight of the Elites*, Christopher Hayes argues that the country’s political divide has evolved past the traditional distinction between “left” and “right” or between Republicans and Democrats. The country, he suggests, is now divided into two camps that he describes as institutionalists and insurrectionists.

Institutionalists continue to believe in the fundamental legitimacy and necessity of a “central repository of authority.” They are therefore committed to defending the current system of government, despite its flaws. Insurrectionists, on the other hand, are convinced that “there is something fundamentally broken about our current institutions . . . and believe that the only way to hold our present elites accountable is to force them to forfeit their authority.” Even when in power, they work to remake or eliminate many existing government institutions, regulations and policies. They see political opponents not as legitimate counterparts in governing but as “enemies” needing to be defeated, even destroyed. While institutionalists see the erosion of trust as “terrifying,” insurrectionists “see the plummeting of trust in public institutions as a good thing.”⁸⁴ Finding a path forward to restore trust in democracy that will be acceptable to both factions will be challenging.

4. Increasing economic inequality

The decrease in trust in American institutions, including government and the media, generally correlates with an increase in economic inequality. As charted by the French economist Thomas Piketty and others, after a period of declining inequality from the 1930s through the mid-1940s (from the end of the Depression through World War II) followed by several decades of relative stability, inequality began rising sharply in the mid-1970s. It is now at levels not seen for nearly a century and is still increasing (see Figure 4.2).⁸⁵

FIGURE 4.2 INCOME INEQUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES TOP DECILE INCOME SHARE, 1917–2012



Source: <https://eml.berkeley.edu/~saez/saez-USStopincomes-2015.pdf>

Several studies have found links between high levels of inequality and a lack of institutional trust. Political scientists Mitchell Brown and Eric M. Uslaner from the University of Maryland find that, in fact, “economic inequality is the strongest determinant of trust.” They also suggest that “where inequality is higher, the poor may feel powerless. They will perceive that their views are not represented in the political system and may opt out” of participation. However, Brown and Uslaner’s research finds that the erosion of trust based on increasing inequality appears to have a stronger impact on “communal participation” (volunteering or giving to charity) than on political participation (voting, signing petitions).⁸⁶ A 2016 working paper for the International Monetary Fund found “robust evidence that overall inequality lowers an individual’s sense of trust in others in the United States as well as in other advanced economies.”⁸⁷

There are other indicators of a link between economic inequality and trust. One example is attitudes in rural communities in places like the Rust Belt of the Midwest and Northeast and sparsely populated areas of the Western states, compared with those in urban areas, a manifestation of the “spatial polarization” cited above. Research by Katherine Cramer, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, suggests that “the rural consciousness revealed [in her study] shows people attributing rural deprivation to the decision making of (urban) political elites, who disregard and disrespect rural residents and rural lifestyles. Thus, these rural residents favor limited government, even though such a stance might seem contradictory to their economic self-interests.”⁸⁸

Perception of fairness. Another perspective on inequality and trust comes from Angus Deaton, Nobel Prize-winning economist from Princeton University. He suggests that the key variable in shaping attitudes toward society and politics is not inequality per se but rather the perception of the fairness of the economic system. Deaton argues that people generally accept some forms of inequality—for example, the success of innovators and inventors who reap rewards for their creativity—as fair and therefore unobjectionable. But they perceive other forms of inequality—such as unequal access to health care and quality education, the elimination of pension benefits for workers, anticompetitive practices of large corporations, or government policies favoring businesses over individuals—as the result of unfair economic or political processes.⁸⁹

Support for this hypothesis comes from the Pew Research Center survey data that “trust in government” and “perceptions of the fairness of government” track each other very closely, following almost identical paths over the past half-century. As of 2015, “just 19 percent say the government is run for the benefit of all—and an identical percentage say they can trust the federal government just about always or most of the time.”⁹⁰

5. Declining economic mobility

A final factor, related to economic inequality, is the degree of economic mobility. A 2017 study titled “The Fading American Dream” by a group of economists from Harvard and Stanford found that mobility, as measured by the percentage of children who go on to achieve an income higher than that of their parents, has declined dramatically. Mobility has fallen from approximately 90 percent for the cohort of children born in the 1940s, to 50 percent for those born in the 1980s, with the largest declines occurring in middle-class families.⁹¹ The study attributes most of the decline in mobility to the uneven distribution of national economic gains, with most going to the top earners and much less to the rest of the population.

According to a 2017 paper by Christian Houle, a political scientist at Michigan State University, “Inequality and social mobility, although related, are fundamentally distinct, and immobility is likely to be perceived as even more unfair than inequality, meaning that it may generate at least as much grievances.... I argue that social immobility fuels political instability.”⁹² If, in fact, the key variable in the loss of faith in government is the perception of unfairness, then it would follow that low social mobility is likely to be a significant causal factor.

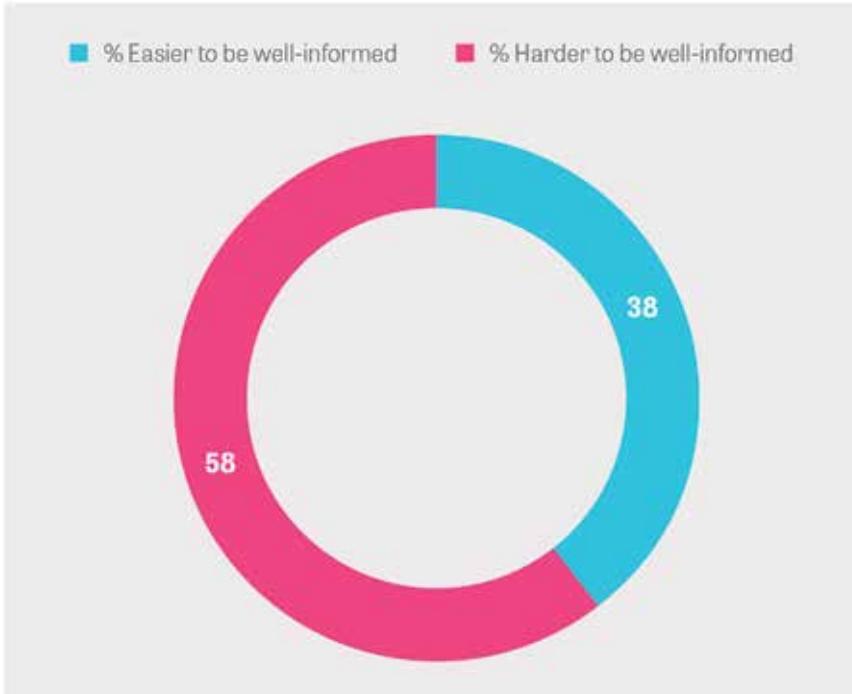
Why Has Trust in Media Declined?

The decline of trust in media may be part of a larger decline of trust in a range of social institutions. Yet there are at least six factors that are uniquely responsible for the decline of trust in media and its role as a consistent, reliable source of news and information. These are proliferation of news sources, media disintermediation, confusion between news and opinion, the spread of mis- and disinformation, the decline of local news reporting and politicized criticism of the media.

1. Proliferation of news sources

The proliferation of media sources, first through cable and more recently through the internet, has increased the challenge of finding trustworthy sources of news and being well-informed. A 2018 Gallup survey commissioned by the Knight Foundation found that almost 6 out of 10 (58 percent) adult Americans said the increase in information available today makes it harder for them to be well-informed. This compared with 38 percent who believed that more information makes it easier to be well-informed (see Figure 4.3). The same survey found that just 41 percent of Americans were confident in their ability to navigate the news environment to remain knowledgeable on current events and determine what is factually true.⁹³

FIGURE 4.3 DOES INCREASE IN INFORMATION AVAILABLE TODAY MAKE BEING WELL-INFORMED EASIER OR HARDER?



Source: Knight/Gallup *American Views*, p. 17.

2. Media disintermediation

The role of the internet as a source of news has altered the way in which news moves from creators to consumers. As of 2018, according to a Pew survey, 68 percent of adult Americans were getting “at least some” of their news from social media platforms and 42 percent reported that they “often get their news online.”⁹⁴ This was just short of the 50 percent who cited television as a frequent source, and well above the portion who rely on radio or print newspapers.

News moves online. In the first wave of online news, many traditional publications established online presences and attempted to attract readers to their sites. Initially, most just put the print version of the newspaper online and did not take advantage of technology to engage users and advertisers in new ways or respond to the changing ways people were consuming news and information. Some of these publications have been successful in attracting regular readers and even paid subscribers. As of mid-2018, 2.9 million of *The New York Times* total of 3.8 million subscribers were digital-only,⁹⁵ and as of early 2017, more than half of *The Wall Street Journal's* 2.1 million total subscribers were online-only.⁹⁶

Readers who subscribe to a specific publication typically understand and trust that publication's perspective and practices. As platforms have become intermediaries between news sources and their readers, many news organizations are increasingly dependent on these platforms to generate traffic to their sites.⁹⁷ In the process, the identities of individual publications can become obscured, diminishing the distinction between major publications that have invested substantial resources in professional reporters and editors, and less substantial sources whose commitment to quality journalism can vary widely.

Reader distrust. The result of disintermediation is to dilute readers' loyalty and diminish their trust in the news they receive. According to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, 63 percent of respondents agree that “the average person does not know how to tell good journalism from rumor or falsehoods,” while 59 percent say “it is becoming harder to tell if a piece of news was produced by a respected media organization.”⁹⁸

American teens and young adults have also found that navigating the rapidly shifting boundaries of online news is challenging. Many young people express low levels of trust and suspicions of bias in the news they encounter online. Youth also report relying more on direct messaging with friends and consulting multiple sources to verify stories found online.⁹⁹

That said, there are recent hopeful signs that the news media can regain the public's trust. In a recent Gallup survey, among those who have lost trust, 69% of adults believe the news media can restore that trust with more accuracy, transparency and reduction of bias.¹⁰⁰ And a new Edelman Trust Barometer survey indicates that the public is engaging more with mainstream media, increasing overall engagement by 22 percentage points globally, and 14 percentage points in the U.S. Engagement increased the most among those who also share and post the news, rising 14 points globally and 7 points in the U.S. among those amplifiers.¹⁰¹

Moderation. A related issue is the role of “moderation” by social media platforms—the process of making decisions about the content that users do and do not see. Tarleton Gillespie, a principal researcher at Microsoft Research, noted that this function is a “surprisingly large” part of what platform operators do on a day-to-day basis:

Content moderation is part of how platforms shape user participation into a deliverable experience. Platforms moderate (removal, filtering, suspension), they recommend (news feeds, trending lists, personalized suggestions), and they curate (featured content, front page offerings). Platforms use these three levers together to, actively and dynamically, tune the participation of users in order to produce the “right” feed for each user, the “right” social exchanges, the “right” kind of community.¹⁰²

Gillespie also points out that moderation is quite challenging: “It is resource intensive and relentless; it requires making difficult and often untenable distinctions; it is wholly unclear what the standards should be, especially on a global scale; and one failure can incur enough public outrage to overshadow a million quiet successes.”¹⁰³

This critical function takes place largely behind the scenes (in part to prevent bad actors from gaming the moderation process for the purposes of social, financial or political engineering). But this opacity means that people who increasingly depend on social media as a primary source of news have scant ability to understand or influence the choices made by these platforms that significantly shape their views of the world. As the platforms become ever more dependent on algorithms and artificial intelligence to aid in moderating billions of inputs, critics have called for more visibility and accountability in how those algorithms operate.

3. Confusion between news and opinion

A fundamental rationale for the First Amendment is to protect the critical role of the press in keeping citizens informed about what their government is doing.

During the 20th century, newspapers separated reporting from editorial comment, which usually appeared in a specific, clearly defined place in the paper. Broadcast news (particularly during the time the Fairness Doctrine was in force, 1949–87) focused on straight reporting and largely avoided the expression of opinions about the news. During this time, journalists professionalized and strengthened their standards for objectivity, aiming to provide accurate and unbiased reporting.

By the mid-20th century, there was a broad consensus on what constituted news and what should be labeled as opinion. This meant there was relatively little disagreement about what constituted “facts,” even if their meaning was open to debate.

Rise of commentary. But the arrival of talk radio and 24-hour cable news channels led to a new emphasis on commentary. As partisanship grew, and the volume of commentary expanded, the consensus on what constitutes “the news” began to erode. The growth of the relatively unregulated internet further expanded the spectrum of voices offering both news and political commentary.

One novel development empowered by the openness of the internet has been the emergence online of “citizen journalists,” nonprofessionals who produce and distribute news and information and, in some cases, commentary. In the absence of professional journalists on the ground in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, for example, local citizens in New Jersey used Facebook to share important information about disaster recovery.

There are scores of other examples of ordinary people sharing photos and videos about important news events on social media from the Tahir Square uprising to the Boston Marathon bombing. While they provide valuable new voices and perspectives, and often serve as the first source of news on breaking stories, they often do not abide by the tenets of professional journalism. These contributors, intentionally or not, can erode the distinction between fact and opinion. More troublesome are political operatives impersonating “citizen journalists,” flooding streams with false content and deploying manipulative tactics to influence users for their partisan interests.

Perception of bias. More recently, conservative media critics have argued that the traditional press—the “mainstream media”—is not truly objective, but rather reflects a generally liberal political perspective that purports to be unbiased. For example, a study by the American Enterprise Institute found “the mainstream media was strikingly more skeptical of Republican education proposals than of Democratic proposals while the education-specific media maintained greater impartiality.”¹⁰⁴

Speaking to the Knight Commission, former presidential press secretary Ari Fleischer argued that some news media have compromised their commitment to objectivity by blurring the line between reporting and opinion in their news articles and broadcasts. Even the choice of what stories get covered and how much emphasis they receive is sometimes characterized as a political decision.¹⁰⁵

In a presentation to the Knight Commission, Wisconsin State Assembly Speaker Robin Vos criticized the tendency of many reporters to ignore what is working in government in favor of stories about dysfunction, conflict and scandals. “Good news isn’t news anymore,” he said. “When good things happen, they are rarely reported, while what is reported is often sensationalized.”¹⁰⁶ Defenders of the press respond that this is not new or even problematic. When things go as they are supposed to, they rarely make news.

Still, the perception of bias continues and pertains to all types of media: newspapers, broadcast, cable and online. The confusion between fact and opinion is reflected in the skeptical attitudes of Americans about news. The Knight/Gallup survey reported that more than 60 percent of the respondents see “too much bias in the reporting of news stories that are supposed to be objective,” while less than half (44 percent) can identify any news source that they believe reports the news objectively.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, the survey results suggest that perceptions of media bias are strongly related to one’s political leanings, with “26 percent of Democrats versus 67 percent of Republicans perceiving a great deal of political bias in news coverage.”¹⁰⁸ Finally, of the 69 percent of Americans who reported that their trust in news media declined over the past decade, 89 percent cited “inaccurate or misleading reporting, lies, alternative facts or fake news” or “biased, slanted or unfair reporting” as the reason for the decline.¹⁰⁹

4. Spread of misinformation and disinformation

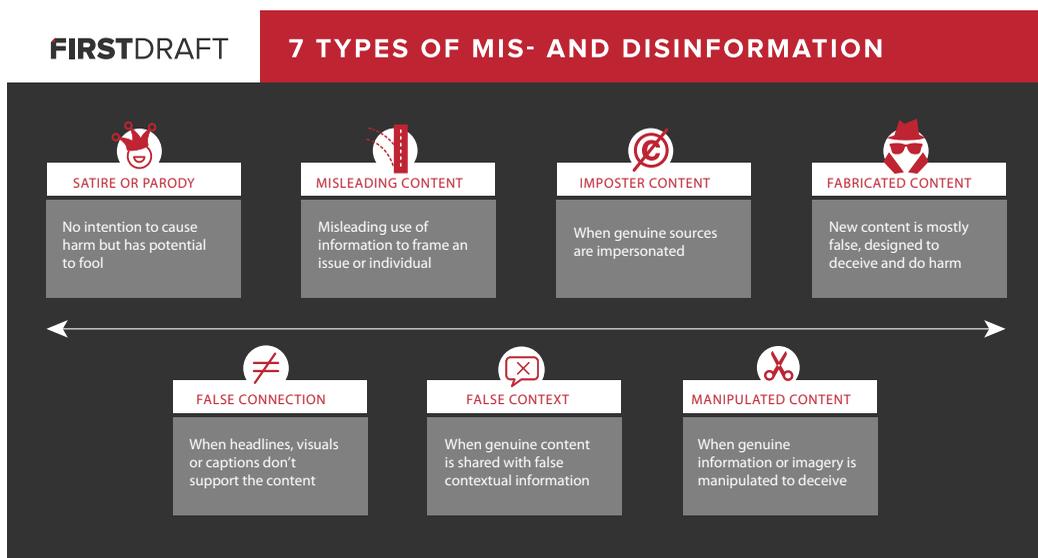
The widespread emergence of information that is false or misleading, that is intended to persuade or confuse rather than inform, is another likely contributor to the decline of trust in media. The problem is not entirely new. Propaganda, usually distortions manufactured by a government or a powerful political interest group to influence the attitudes and opinions of its own citizens or the citizens of another country, has a long history.¹¹⁰

Nearly 100 years ago, Walter Lippmann expressed his concern about the potential of broadcast media to spread propaganda and amplify its power. But traditional media had gatekeepers who were responsible for the quality and reliability of the information they provided. The internet, with its radical openness, has introduced new forms of problematic content.

In recent years, researchers have been studying how false information arises and spreads online. In a 2017 report prepared for the European Council,¹¹¹ Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan of First Draft News identified seven different types of mis- and disinformation, ranging from relatively harmless satire to more serious imposter content and fabricated content. They divide problematic information into two categories:

- Misinformation, when false information is shared, but no harm is meant
- Disinformation, when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm

FIGURE 4.4 TYPES OF MIS- AND DISINFORMATION



Source: First Draft, Executive Director Claire Wardle, PhD, <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>

They identified a third category as well: malinformation, when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere, but the Commission's primary concern is with disinformation.

The presidential election of 2016 brought into sharp focus the opportunities for exploitation offered by the internet, particularly the major social media platforms. During and after the campaign, evidence began to accumulate about how a variety of actors used social media to spread false disparaging information, including multiple baseless conspiracy theories.

The result is what entrepreneur and author Nova Spivack has described as “memetic warfare.”¹¹² Here, a small group of people, perhaps even a lone individual, concoct a false, sensational narrative or image that is specifically designed to be picked up and spread by others who are attracted to the messages but have little idea of their origin. Nor do they have the means (or motivation) to determine the meme's veracity even as they pass it on: “If it's outrageous, it's contagious.”

Perhaps most alarming is the recognition that foreign powers, and most notoriously Russia and its Internet Research Agency, have systematically used social media platforms to attempt to disrupt the electoral process in the U.S. and other countries.¹¹³ Researchers and the U.S. intelligence agencies have found that during the 2016 election, Russian actors created large numbers of fake accounts on social media to spread disinformation. According to a U.S. criminal indictment, this effort continued into the 2018 midterm election campaign.¹¹⁴

As Wardle and Derakhshan note, the Russian interference in democratic elections is intended not just to favor one candidate or another. Rather, its goal is “to sow mistrust and confusion about what sources of information are authentic.”¹¹⁵

Concern about disinformation is not simply an American problem. A 2017 survey conducted for the BBC World Service found that 79 percent of respondents in 18 countries were “worried about what was fake and what was real on the internet.”¹¹⁶

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Recent revelations of efforts to disrupt the electoral process, sow discord and foster doubts about democratic political processes have created grave concerns. For example, *The New York Times* called Facebook’s ecosystem “ripe for manipulation” when its business model “capitalizes on personal information to influence the behavior of its users, and then sells that influence to advertisers for a profit.”¹¹⁷

Facebook was not alone as a conduit. Comprehensive studies released by the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee documented that Russian manipulation extended to many online media entities in the 2016 election.¹¹⁸ As one of the lead researchers explained, “it was a cross-platform attack that made use of numerous features on each social network and that spanned the social media ecosystem.”¹¹⁹

Facebook, Twitter and Google’s YouTube have been criticized as too slow to respond.¹²⁰ They have made some changes designed to strengthen mechanisms to detect and remove illegitimate content. For example, Facebook now insists on more transparency around political content that is promoted with its advertising platform. These changes have been occurring so frequently (and properly so) during the Commission’s deliberations that we believe attempting to provide a snapshot of developments at one particular time is not useful.

5. Decline of local news

A number of studies have shown that Americans trust local news sources more than national news media. For example, the 2018 Media Trust Survey from the Poynter Center found higher levels of trust in local newspaper and television news compared with national media. This result was particularly pronounced among Republicans: 71 percent said they trusted local TV news, compared with just 28 percent who trusted national network television news. Similarly, 62 percent said they trust their local newspapers, compared with 29 percent who expressed confidence in national papers.

Commenting on a similar discrepancy in the United Kingdom, journalist Jo Allison pointed to several factors responsible for this phenomenon:

One of the primary reasons local news stands apart is that it’s often perceived as having higher levels of relatability and accountability. Proximity also plays a part. A local paper can have a tangible presence in people’s daily lives. Readers, especially those that take an active role in local issues, are likely to have met a reporter, they’re likely to have walked past the newspaper’s office on occasion and as a result they’re likely to have made a different sort of connection to the medium. It’s also often easier for readers to engage with [local] writers, which is important in the social media world of today.¹²¹

Unfortunately, local news organizations have undergone a dramatic financial decline over the past several decades, leaving many communities without local news sources. As people find themselves at a greater distance from those who create the media they consume, their level of distrust in those media is likely to grow.

6. Politicized criticism of media

Americans tend to be more critical of “the media” than of “my media.” What they seem to mean is that although they are able to find news sources they trust, they are distrustful of media generally, including media that they may not have personal experience with.¹²²

There seems to be an ideological component to this general distrust, particularly among more conservative-leaning voters, as a result of continuing attacks on “mainstream media” by pundits and politicians. According to Georgetown professor Jonathan Ladd in a white paper for the Knight Foundation:

Changes in media technology led to the creation of cable news channels and later, internet news sources. The major sources of political news developed different partisan reputations, and these were liked by some parts of the political spectrum and disliked by others. Ideological news sources also had an ideological and professional incentive to use their platforms to attack the mainstream news media, and they did. Politicians and pundits in this polarized party system and fragmented media landscape had an incentive to also criticize the mainstream media and partisan outlets affiliated with their ideological opponents, and they did.¹²³

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This Commission's charge is to ascertain the causes of the decline in trust in democratic institutions, particularly the media, and to recommend solutions. We have seen that democratic societies need trust in the legitimacy of their political processes and in the ability of their representatives to run the government properly. They also need a healthy distrust in order to hold those in power accountable, which, in a democratic society, depends on news media to report on what those in power are doing.

It is time for bold thinking on how to revive the healthy combination of a distrust of power with a broader trust in the democratic institutions that have served the United States so well for hundreds of years.

The Knight Commission is not in a position to recommend changes to the democratic workings of American society, e.g., issues of gerrymandering, money in politics or specifics relating to political parties. Nor does the Commission contemplate turning back the clock to a time when media choices were more limited or individual voices less prominent. But it can make recommendations that aim to place media in a more trusted and trusting place, to address the role of technology and online media entities, to instill more responsible actions from our leaders, and to foster better-informed, more engaged Americans. In the next three chapters, the Commission offers its recommendations for actions that citizens, leaders, governments and business enterprises (including media and technology companies) can take to advance these goals.