

# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**T**here is a crisis of trust in American democracy. By virtually every measure, Americans' trust in most of their democratic institutions, and particularly in the media, has declined dramatically over the past half century. A country that provides universal education, proclaims press freedom and enjoys the legacy of one of the oldest representative governments in the world is nevertheless having great difficulty understanding and supporting its democracy.

Why are Americans losing faith in democratic institutions? Government appears gridlocked and unresponsive amid large-scale global shocks and serious domestic challenges. American politics are sharply polarized. The gap between the wealthy and the poor continues to grow, with declining prospects for upward mobility. And racial tensions persist.

Although a vibrant free press is an essential element of a healthy democracy, much of the public lacks faith that the news media are accurate and unbiased. While most people find some content source that they like, they show declining trust in news media as a category.

Advances in technology have given citizens unparalleled access to the world's great pool of knowledge and people. Yet that same technology is overwhelming individuals' ability to find news they consider trustworthy. Because the internet allows anybody to create content and share it widely, there are fewer controls over accuracy. Misinformation and disinformation are spreading virally, sometimes by innocent sharing, sometimes with malice.

Meanwhile, the line between news and opinion has become blurred, as news reporting is increasingly intermixed with commentary. Declining revenues have forced many local news organizations to cut back substantially or shut their doors entirely, creating local "news deserts." And attacks by politicians on the media are further shaking people's trust in the press.

Layered on top of these challenges is perhaps an even more fundamental development—an inability to agree on facts. In 2018, unwelcome facts are labeled as "fake," false information is regularly sent out over the internet and increasingly sophisticated "deepfake" video technologies can manipulate images and voices to realistically portray something that never happened. "Filter bubbles" make it possible for people to live in "echo chambers," exposed primarily to the information and opinions that are in accord with their own.

So, accompanying and amplifying concerns over the future of American democracy is a crisis of trust in news and basic information. But a “post-truth” politics is incompatible with a functioning democracy, and an assault on the notion of truth is a fundamental attack on our ability to self-govern.

The Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy, 27 diverse citizens organized by the Aspen Institute in partnership with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, hopes for an American future that promotes knowledge of the country’s democratic heritage, encourages a willingness to engage in local civic activities and supports an array of inclusive institutions in government, media, business and civil society. It sees vibrant and responsible journalism serving the goal of self-government and holding the powerful accountable, and a world where new forms of communication enhance rather than diminish a healthy democracy.

This Commission wants 21st century American democracy to work at all levels, and strongly believes it can. This report aims to articulate the reasons for the growing distrust in American institutions, to re-envision news media that will be fair, truthful and responsible, and to catalyze citizens to participate in civic life.

The Commission recommends specific actions to restore trust in media and democracy. It identifies what journalists can do; what the media distributors such as social media and other digital networks can do; what government and business leaders can do; and, perhaps most important, what each American can and should do to assume responsibility for democratic governance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

# JOURNALISM

**VALUES:** The Commission calls for all news media to rededicate themselves to the ideals of the profession: to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing, to hold the powerful accountable, and to pursue the truth.

- 1. Practice radical transparency.** The media should develop industrywide, voluntary standards on how to disclose the ways they collect, report and disseminate the news. The Commission calls for a convening of news leaders across competitive boundaries to work together to develop and adopt common standards and best practices that promote transparency. These include: labeling news, opinion and fact-based commentary; best practices on corrections, fact-checking, anonymous sources and tracking disinformation; and avoiding advertising formats that blur the line between content and commerce. They should also develop strategies to better engage with the public and reflect the interests of their communities.
- 2. Expand financial support for news.** There are some promising new models for funding for-profit journalism. But market solutions alone are insufficient to provide the quality of journalism that citizens need and deserve, especially news about local communities. Philanthropy should increase its support for journalism in the public interest. The Commission focuses on the development of new nonprofit models to achieve sustainability and to serve journalistic missions. It calls for the creation of one or more national venture-philanthropy entities dedicated to funding new and existing nonprofit organizations across the country.
- 3. Use technology to combat disinformation.** To remain relevant, the media must learn to use advanced technology in all aspects of their businesses. Some of the larger entities are leading this effort, but many more need to catch up. In particular, the Commission urges media and technology companies to improve technologies to determine and then address disinformation. The media should also expose their audiences to diverse viewpoints, understanding the tendency of new media environments to create and amplify “filter bubbles” in which people tend to view only material that already supports their opinions.
- 4. Diversify news organizations.** News organizations should adopt recruitment, hiring and retention practices that increase diversity of staff, and even of owners. Newsrooms should develop mentoring and training programs that can help enlist, retain and promote more women and journalists of color at all levels. And they need to include other underrepresented groups, such as underrepresented geographical and political groups, so that the reporting they produce reflects the entire community. The Commission also challenges all news organizations to develop and publish metrics for hiring and employment in newsrooms.

# TECHNOLOGY

**VALUES:** The internet has vastly expanded the ability to access information and communicate with others around the world. Yet this new technology has also made people vulnerable to abuse of personal data, disinformation, hate speech, harassment, trolling, foreign manipulation and more. The Commission affirms the importance of free expression, an open internet and inclusion, understanding that there are no quick solutions, or single-shot inoculations against future threats to American democracy. But leaders and new media entities must act responsibly and serve democratic principles.

- 5. Online services must take responsibility for protecting their users.** In other areas of American life, professionals and businesses such as doctors and accountants that have access to personal data about customers commonly have a “fiduciary duty” to protect their interests. To complement privacy legislation and enforcement, the Commission supports proposals that technology companies and online services become “information fiduciaries.” As fiduciaries they must act in a trustworthy manner by ensuring security of user data, keeping it confidential and not using it for their own benefit in ways that compromise the interests of the user.
- 6. Online services should track and disclose sources of information.** Online platforms should develop technology and standards to disclose to their users where the information they see comes from—identifying the author and publisher of articles, for example. In addition, the Commission encourages the development of an automated tracking system that would enable analysis on the original source of a story, as well as how it spread to the public. The Commission also recommends that the sponsors of all digital advertising be clearly identified. This requirement should apply particularly to “native advertising,” which looks similar to independently produced editorial content but is paid for by a third party. Finally, the Commission recommends disclosure of information regarding the targeting of political ads intended to affect attitudes toward a political issue.
- 7. Empower people to make technology work for them.** The Commission recommends that researchers develop ways to measure healthy dialogue online. These include creating metrics to help analyze balanced, democratic discourse. It recommends that internet platforms provide people with information about how algorithms work that determine which information they see, as well as opportunities to customize them. It also recommends enabling people to move their data from one social network to another. And it proposes a multi-stakeholder forum for technology, journalism and consumer interests to work out solutions to a variety of issues that arise in this space.

# CITIZENSHIP

**VALUES:** Citizens need knowledge as well as the opportunity and a sense of responsibility to participate fully in public debate and other democratic activities. Yet many lack the basic skills to do so. Every citizen should have a basic understanding of the Constitution and our system of government. Citizens also need opportunities to engage in productive dialogue about local civic matters with others who hold opposing political viewpoints.

- 8. Provide students of all ages with basic civic education and the skills to navigate online safely and responsibly.** Too many Americans lack an understanding of basic elements of their government and governing principles. Before they graduate from high school, all students should be able to pass the U.S. citizenship exam or a civic knowledge test.

Furthermore, individuals who lack digital literacy skills are less able to assess the reliability of information sources in order to tell fact from fiction. They are easier to harass, mislead or defraud online. They can find it harder to gain knowledge, pursue education or careers, stay healthy, protect their rights and help their communities improve.

State and local educational authorities need a plan to provide their citizens with the skills to access, analyze, evaluate, create and act on digital information based on new standards for civic and 21st century literacies. Prior to participating in social media, every child should have a basic understanding of digital media and how to use them safely. Before reaching the legal voting age of 18, individuals should be digitally as well as civically literate, able to find and use information necessary to be knowledgeable voters. These goals should apply to everyone, no matter their income, where they live or what their background.

- 9. Reach across political divides.** The Commission recommends that communities develop programs hosted by trusted local institutions to convene dialogue among citizens. These exchanges should address important questions ranging from local issues to relevant constitutional questions. Public libraries are one obvious place for such discussions. The Commission also recommends the development of public awareness campaigns to encourage people to participate in civic institutions.
- 10. Encourage a commitment to a year of national service.** As politics has become increasingly tribalized, citizens have lost a shared American narrative and a sense of citizenship. To address this, the time has come to revitalize efforts to encourage a year of voluntary national service. The Commission identifies four primary areas in which national service could help renew trust in our democratic institutions and particularly in the press: general civic service; teaching traditional and digital literacy; engaging in public service journalism, particularly at the local level; and serving in libraries. Efforts can be inspired by existing programs, such as the Service Year Alliance, AmeriCorps and Report for America.



**This report begins and ends with the current national crisis in trust. Americans need to take measures now to sustain the democracy that has developed for almost two and a half centuries, to maintain the free and open press that undergirds that democracy, and inspire the citizenry to find areas of common ground that outweigh their political and cultural differences.**

**Like democracy at its best, this will be a process. This report is only a beginning point—a compass, not a map.**

**We are citizen-sovereigns. We must act as sovereigns, take responsibility and move forward.**

Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy

## RECOMMENDATIONS

---

### Restoring Trust in Journalism

**Recommendation 1. *Transparency*:** Encourage radical transparency and community engagement from news organizations.

**Recommendation 2. *Journalism*:** Increase support for quality journalism at all levels, with a focus on rebuilding local journalism.

**Recommendation 3. *Innovation*:** Use technology to enhance journalism's roles in fostering democracy.

**Recommendation 4. *Diversity and Inclusion*:** Build a news and information ecosystem that reflects the diversity of individual communities and our nation.

---

### Strengthening Democracy Through Technology

**Recommendation 5. *Responsibility*:** Technology companies and online services that collect user data should become information fiduciaries with duties to the user.

**Recommendation 6. *Transparency*:** Technology companies and online services should embrace transparency by providing more information about the impact of their advertising tools, the source and sponsorship of content online and the role that algorithms play in the flow of news and information.

**Recommendation 7. *Innovation*:** Invest in new structures and technology-based solutions to address emerging problems.

---

### Revitalizing Citizenship in the Digital Age

**Recommendation 8. *Literacy*:** Revitalize education in civics and 21st century literacies for all citizens in order to better align the democratic process with America's modern, highly connected culture.

**Recommendation 9. *Engagement*:** Create local spaces for constructive civic dialogue bridging various communities, and encourage broader civic engagement.

**Recommendation 10. *Commitment*:** Encourage widespread commitment to a year of voluntary national service.

DEMOCRACY AND THE NEWS  
MEDIA ARE INEXTRICABLY  
INTERTWINED, AND IT IS CLEAR  
THAT **BOTH ARE IN CRISIS.**