



A REPUBLIC, If We Can Keep It

The News Media and the Public: Any Bright Spots?

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The News Media and the Public: Any Bright Spots?

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Americans have a love-hate relationship with the mass media. Few institutions inspire as much animus and distrust among the public as the press: according to data from Gallup, only 20 percent of Americans trust newspapers, and only 21 percent trust television news, lower numbers than all but two other government and social institutions—big business (18 percent) and Congress (9 percent; Gallup 2016).¹ Similarly, most Americans think that the press is biased and cannot effectively separate fact from opinion (Knight Foundation 2018). Yet at the same time, the vast majority of Americans feel the media play a vital role in our democracy: 8 in 10 citizens say that the media are critical or very important to our democracy, and this sentiment is shared by supermajorities in every demographic subgroup (Knight Foundation 2018). Research in political science and communication supports this belief: media coverage is vital to political knowledge (Barabas and Jerit 2009), to fighting corruption (Hasen 2015), to encouraging political participation (Hayes and Lawless 2015), and to keeping elected officials in line with their constituents' wishes (Arnold 2004, Snyder and Strömberg 2010). This presents a paradox: while the public and scholars acknowledge the press's vital role in a free society, the public has little confidence that the press can perform that role effectively. What, if anything, can be done?

Sadly, the answer to that question may well be “not much.” The three key challenges I see facing the media environment in the 21st century—the erosion of public trust (and the conflation with partisan polarization), the struggle to develop a successful model for local journalism, and how to regulate media outlets—have no easy solutions. Instead, we must consider how to adapt to the contemporary reality and move forward from there.

The Erosion of Public Trust and a Return to an Era of Partisan Media

The erosion of public trust in the media has been well-documented by a host of scholars (e.g., Ladd 2012, Gronke and Cook 2007). While Walter Cronkite may have once been the most trusted man in America (Ladd 2012, 1), today journalists are routinely excoriated for promulgating fake news and alternative facts. This decline in press trust is not simply confined to one or two specific groups, but rather is happening throughout the population—*all* groups in society have lost faith in the media (Pearl 2018).²

That said, of course, there is one group for whom the decline in trust has been especially sharp: Republicans. The reason why is no secret: Republican officials have

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¹ The other institutions were: the military, police, churches and organized religion, the medical system, the presidency, the U.S. Supreme Court, public schools, banks, organized labor, and the criminal justice system.

² While part of the story is that Americans generally have become less trusting of institutions over time, the drop in press-specific trust is especially large and steep, even relative to other institutions (Gronke and Cooke 2007).

routinely decried the liberal bias of the mainstream media since the Nixon era.³ Donald Trump—with his incessant cries of “fake news!”—may be the apotheosis of this trend, but he is a part of it, rather than something more *sui generis*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Republican voters trust the press quite a bit less than other Americans (Ladd 2012). For example, since the early 1970s, the General Social Survey has been asking respondents a battery of questions about their confidence in various political and civic institutions, one of which is the press. The question reads: “I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say that you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them? What about the press?” Figure 1 plots the proportion of Democrats and Republicans who have either “some confidence” or “a great of confidence” in the press by year.

[See addendum Figure 1]

Republicans have always been more distrustful of the press, and that gap has grown especially large since the mid-1990s. In 2016 (the most recent GSS survey), 59 percent of Democrats, but only 38 percent of Republicans, have at least some confidence (or a great deal of confidence) in the press. Note that this implies that nearly 6 in 10 Republicans in 2016 had hardly any confidence at all in press! This is a vindication for the elite-driven model of public opinion posited by Zaller (1992): Republican elites say the press is untrustworthy, and Republican voters follow suit.⁴

This Republican distrust of the press has an important consequence: the development of a parallel partisan media system. While the origins of conservative media go back decades (Hemmer 2016), critiques of the biased press allowed an alternative media ecosystem—from Rush Limbaugh, to Drudge Report and TownHall, to Fox News—to flourish (Grossman and Hopkins 2016). While there are parallel outlets on the left (most notably, MSNBC on cable TV and a variety of websites online, such as Huffington Post), in part because Democrats maintain higher levels of trust in the mass media, the left-wing media ecosystem has been much less richly developed (though it has grown in recent years as well, especially under Trump).

This suggests that perhaps we are returning to an earlier era of a more partisan press, something that characterizes many other democracies and was the norm throughout U.S. political history. Indeed, as Ladd (2012) documents, the period of the objective, mainstream press in the middle of the 20th century is really a historical anomaly, resulting both from journalism’s developing stature as a legitimate profession (which required it to shift from partisan advocacy to objective, fact-based reporting; see also Groeling 2010), and the lack of partisan polarization in the U.S. in the post-war period. Over time, with more competition from soft news and entertainment options, hard news declined, and

³ This brings up the inevitable question of whether the press is, in fact, biased. While there are some examples that do suggest partisan biases (Groseclose 2011), broader scholarly overviews suggest relatively limited political biases (D’Alesio and Allen 2000). Rather than being biased towards one party, it seems that media outlets are biased towards those they endorse (Kahn and Kenny 2002, Druckman and Parkin 2005), most of whom are incumbents (Ansolabehere, Lessem, and Snyder 2006).

⁴ Further, it need not simply be elected officials promoting such cues: interest groups and social movements aligned with the parties can also provide anti-press cues. For example, the NRA has recently run ads attacking the press (Relman 2018), and such views are another powerful cue for many Republican voters.

with more partisan polarization, critiques of the press became a political tool. Partisan outlets both cause and reflect polarization in the mass public (Stroud 2011, Levendusky 2013): they help drive people to the ideological poles (especially if they're already somewhat extreme), but they also require partisan divisions in the mass public (few moderates willingly watch Hannity or Maddow). Understanding how we adapt to this new system, rather than bemoaning the passing of an older model, is likely to be the more productive path forward.

One might critique this reasoning by noting that without an objective press to discern the truth that there can be no agreement on the facts. Such a criticism, however, misses a more fundamental point about human reasoning in an era of partisan polarization. Even when presented with genuinely objective information, humans naturally see it through the lens of their prior beliefs. We maintain the façade of objectivity, but in reality, we are all biased processors (political psychologists call this phenomenon motivated reasoning, see Taber and Lodge 2006). In an era of polarized parties, where the mass public is increasingly sorted (Levendusky 2009) and affectively polarized with antipathy for the other party (Abramowitz and Webster 2018), even with a press that could state the capital-T “truth,” there is little guarantee that Democrats and Republicans would agree on it (see also Mutz 2006). In this sense, the lack of media trust is more a symptom than a cause of our polarized politics. Until we can lessen the partisan tribalism that has taken root in American politics, changing the media ecosystem is unlikely to have much of an effect.

What Is the Model for Local News?

While Americans may not trust the press as a whole, there is one medium in which a majority of Americans—and a majority of all major subgroups—have confidence: their local newspaper (Knight Foundation 2018).⁵ This is consistent with other work showing that Americans trust the news sources that they use, even if they disdain the press as a whole (Daniller et al. 2017). There is a major irony here, as local newspapers increasingly face dire economic circumstances, and their numbers continue to shrink. According to data from the Pew Research Center, from the 1960s through the 1980s, roughly 60 million Americans read a daily newspaper. By 2016, that number had fallen to around 35 million, a decline of about 40 percent at the same time that the nation grew considerably in population (Pew Research Center 2016). Not only are newspaper audiences shrinking, so are the number of newsroom employees—down 40 percent since 1994—and even newspapers themselves: since 2004, more than 100 newspapers have closed (*ibid*). Now several large cities—including New Orleans and Birmingham—do not have a any daily newspaper.

This is especially troubling given the normatively vital role played by local newspapers. In areas without local papers, political participation falls, as people know less about the candidates for office (Lawless and Hayes 2015). Further, local papers are key to keeping members of Congress in line with their districts political leanings: in districts where newspaper coverage is better (i.e., the newspaper's audience lines up with

⁵ There is one exception: only 45% of Republicans share this sentiment. That said, this is quite a bit higher than their confidence in any other branch of the media.

the member's district), members of Congress are more likely to hew to their districts' wishes (Snyder and Strömberg 2010). Because national media cannot cover 435 house districts—let alone thousands of local political offices—national media are a poor substitute for these outlets. Further, while national media organizations have managed the transition to the digital era, local papers have not. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal* have all figured out a successful paywall strategy, garnering large digital revenues: *The New York Times*, for example, reported that it made over \$1 billion dollars in subscription revenue in 2017, driven by strong digital subscription sales (Ember 2018). Sadly, few if any local papers have figured out this paywall model, and their economic situation continues to decline.

One possibility—floated by various academics, and even endorsed by *Wall Street Journal* publisher Rupert Murdoch—is to have Facebook, Twitter, and Google pay newspapers whenever they link to their content. Social networks and online search platforms benefit from newspaper content that drives traffic to their sites, and so these platforms should help to subsidize the cost of this production. Such funds could be used to pay for normatively valuable, but less profitable, journalistic activities such as investigative reporting and local news coverage (Schlosberg 2016, Borchers 2018). While such a strategy seems reasonable, exactly *how* such a strategy would work is far from clear. Who would collect these payments? How much would they be, and how would they be calculated? How would they be redistributed back to news outlets? How would Google and Facebook respond? While the idea may be great in the abstract, it may prove far more difficult to achieve in reality.

How Should We Regulate the Post-Broadcast Era

Finally, I close by posing a challenge for the post-broadcast media environment: what, exactly, is a media outlet, and how should they be regulated? This seems trivial, but is anything but in the modern media ecosystem. The FCC rules are written to apply to clearly defined content producers like television stations, radio stations, and newspapers. But what about online sources like InfoWars, Drudge Report, or Town Hall? What about Facebook, Twitter, and Google, who may not produce content, but certainly are key delivery mechanisms in the modern era? This raises a host of contentious issues. For example, can President Trump block U.S. citizens on Twitter, or is this tantamount to him curtailing their right to free speech (Caplan 2017)? Do Twitter or Facebook have an obligation to remove Russian-linked trolls—or other forms of nefarious propaganda—from their networks? Should Facebook have to disclose who pays for ads that viewers see, and make it impossible for someone to buy ads targeting those who describe themselves as “Jew haters” (Angwin, Varner, and Tobin 2017)? All of these issues raise thorny regulatory questions, as the legal basis for regulating these companies is unclear, and there are fundamental concerns about free speech and privacy as well. Nevertheless, given the role that social media and online search outlets play in the contemporary media environment, understanding how to regulate their role—and its impact on the broader political system—is a particularly important task.

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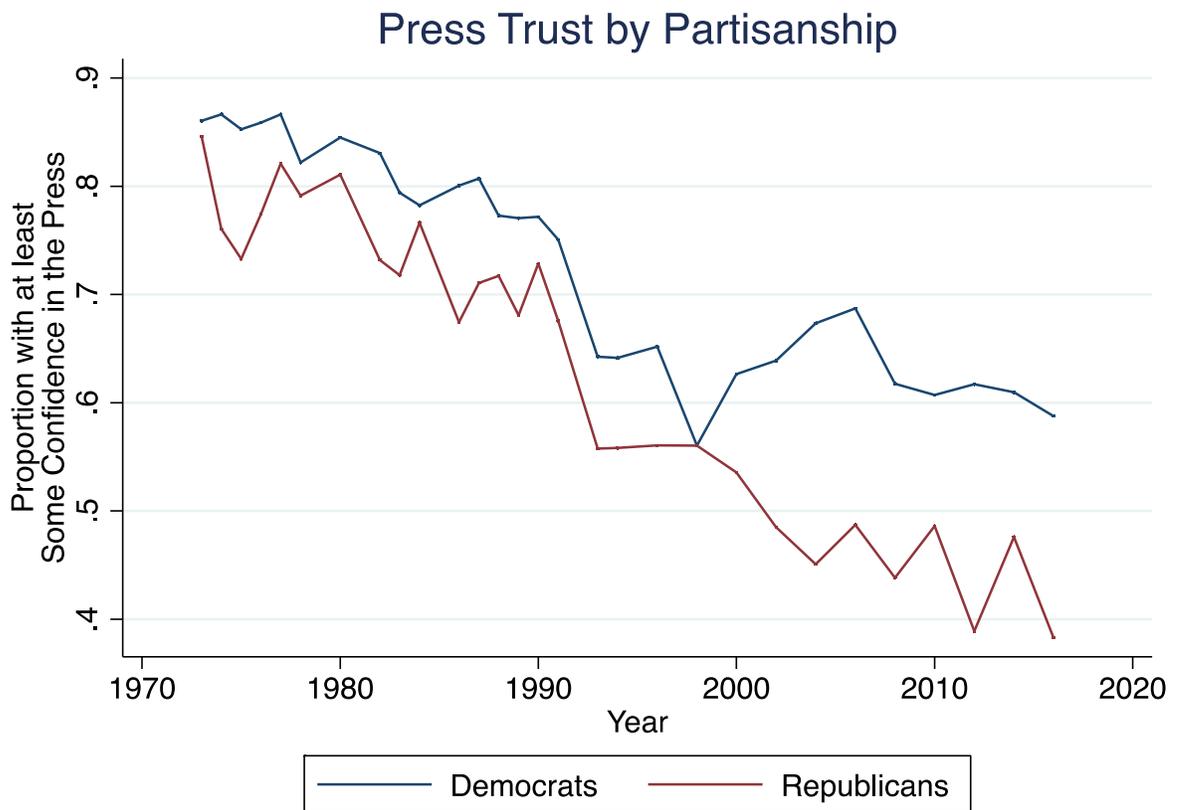


Figure 1: Press Trust by Partisanship, 1972-2016

Note: The graph shows the fraction of the population who have at least some confidence in the press in each year of the GSS data, separated by partisanship.