

Chapter 3 - The Erosion of Public Trust

Trust in government is a crucial indicator of democratic health as trust enables governments to tackle difficult policy problems.⁴⁴ Researchers have extensively studied the impact of extremism on the stability of democracy in America. However, the tinder box of political tensions over the last six years has urged political scientists to look more closely at the role political institutions have played in destabilizing American democracy. The internet perpetuated the evolution of media as a political weapon. Social media has hastened the breakdown of the pillars our system of government relies on. The internet and social media have streamlined the ease with which people can organize, radicalize, and mobilize to exploit division in America to change our common understanding, laws, and governance standards. It is, therefore, not surprising that social media is at the epicenter of the breakdown of American Democracy. But it did not start there.

3.1 Yesterday's Newspaper

The origins of journalism date back to Rome circa 59 B.C., in what was termed *Acta Diurna* or daily events. Julius Caesar ordered them to hang throughout the city and told of the news, military actions, and entertainment.⁴⁵ By the 1800s, newspapers were mainly edited by the owner/proprietor. Newspapers, especially before the Civil War, were highly politicized, often subsidized by political parties to distribute the party's

⁴⁴ Elad Klein and Joshua Robison. "Like, Post, and Distrust? How Social Media Use Affects Trust in Government." *Political Communication* 37 (2019): 47.

⁴⁵ "Acta Diurna: The Telegraph of Ancient Rome, Bringing You All the Latest Gladiator Combat News," December 23, 2017, Accessed November 1, 2022, <https://www.ancient-origins.net/artifacts-ancient-writings/acta-diurna-telegraph-ancient-rome-bringing-you-all-latest-gladiator-021770>.

platform and views. In 1899, V.S. Yarros opined on the relationship between the press and public opinion, noting four main arguments for the damage posed by the press: influence, efficacy, motivation (for profit), and reach, saying,

“...while the press as a whole has certainly rather gained than lost authority and influence. The newspapers make and mar political fortunes. They “create” great men out of next to nothing and destroy the reputations of men truly fit for leadership. They decide questions of war and peace. They carry elections. They overawe and coerce politicians, rulers, and courts. When they are virtually unanimous, nothing can withstand them.”⁴⁶

Yarros lamented the editorialization of the news as one of the most misleading practices. He claimed that even without editorialization, the press would find other creative ways of “...editing the news, by suppression, exaggeration, emphasis, deprecation, and the thousand and one tricks of the trade.”⁴⁷ The known dangers of massive media influence have not waned but grown 123 years later.

Indeed, the driving factors that characterize media are relatively unchanged today; both newspapers and other media platforms are commercial enterprises. The primary objective of the owner or editor is to optimize profits. The average newspaper is not started so that particular principles may be properly and systematically advocated but so that profits be made by advocating particular principles.⁴⁸ More directly, Yarros insists,

“some lie for revenue, others party advantage and the success of the cause in which they believe...A venomous and hate-inspired press breeds internecine and international animosities, friction, fantastical hostility, and even war... The newspaper overshadows every other educational agency. The lecture room, the pulpit, the public meeting, the pamphlet, the book, what is their influence as compared with that of the daily press?”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Victor S. Yarros, “The Press and Public Opinion,” *American Journal of Sociology* 5:3 (1899) 372-382

⁴⁷ Ibid., 376.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 377-378.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 375.

The incentives were money, power, and political influence. In the United States, journalism has always been considered a champion of social responsibility. But competition for sales in the late 1890s brought about more sensationalized news, lurid reporting, and outright crusades both for and against causes and people. This was the first sign that news was beginning to blur with entertainment. Characterized by scandalous coverage, papers began using banner headlines, color headlines, and copious illustrations in practices that were termed “yellow journalism.”⁵⁰ The University of Missouri began teaching journalism in 1879. New York's Columbia University followed suit in 1912, offering the study of journalism as a graduate program endowed by none other than Joseph Pulitzer himself.⁵¹ As professionalism grew, sensationalistic reporting subsided. A more balanced, fair, and objective nature developed. From the evolution of the telegraph, typewriter, telephone, phonograph, and radio of the Industrial age to television, film, and news magazines of the Golden Age, media has always connected people and content. The Electronic Age really set the stage for the domination of news distribution to the masses with the launch of cable news and the internet.

For most of the 1900s, newspapers, radio, and television were reliable news sources despite the nature of commercial media enterprise. As television became broadly available, three news networks brought daily updates to the nation. Personal politics aside, both reporters and show hosts like Walter Cronkite, Edward R. Murrow, David

⁵⁰ “Yellow Journalism,” Britannica, Updated September 26, 2022, accessed October 20, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/yellow-journalism>.

⁵¹ Universal Class, A Brief History of Journalism, accessed October 22, 2022, <https://www.universalclass.com/articles/writing/journalism-a-brief-history.htm>

Brinkley, Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, Barbara Walters, and Dan Rather would reliably and dutifully report the current events. AM Talk radio then emerged, with conservative shows like Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Glen Beck. Largely overlooked by the FCC (or perhaps reaping the benefit of deregulation) these radio stations and programs have been consumed by conglomerates. Now, the most powerful signals in the biggest markets are dominated by conservative shows. CNN launched in 1980 with around-the-clock coverage, followed by Fox News in 1996. The novel coverage format created the CNN effect. The theory assumes that 24-hour news coverage molds public perception, which, in turn, affects policymakers' agendas. But it may do more than that, it may overwhelm the consumer to the extent that consumers begin to filter input they can more easily process, specifically news that agrees with their existing beliefs. This certainly appears to be the outcome of a news diet consumed on social media. The rise of cable also created a phenomenon known as "narrowcasting," providing a wide assortment of programs tailored to particular, narrow audiences.⁵²

3.2 The Rise of Partisan Media

Rupert Murdoch was Chairman and CEO of News Corporation since 1979, which became 21st Century Fox. In October 1996, 21st Century Fox launched Fox News Channel, with Roger Ailes as its Chairman and CEO. Ailes articulated the mission of Fox News to provide an antidote to mainstream liberal media bias.⁵³ Ailes was a former

⁵² Piers Robinson, *The CNN effect: The myth of news, foreign policy, and intervention* (London: Routledge, 2002). 49.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Republican political operative with no background in journalism. Fox became the only major network with an expressed political viewpoint.⁵⁴ The rise of Fox news coincided with a surging Republican majority in Congress.

The emergence of new media in the 21st century made news interactive and decentralized. Investigative journalists became central players in exposing crimes and unethical and illegal political activities. From Nixon to Clinton, they covered all manner of spectacle, but in the 1990s, when the news and the internet collided, the ethos of journalism changed. The race to first break a story broke the methodical sourcing and commitment to truth that had guided decades prior. Many news stations tried to toe the line, remaining non-partisan, but as the demands for content and ratings increased, so did the politicization of content. This also created a challenge for the editors, who were under more pressure to release stories for speed rather than accuracy.

Partisan news outlets have greatly injured journalistic integrity that relied on fair and balanced reporting, credible sources, impartiality, truthfulness, and the multitude of core principles largely intact in the modern news age. Social media are even more insidious, fueled by ratings, clicks, user volume, and ad sales revenue, aided by instant gratification social technology, virtually nonexistent content moderation, and monied political actors. The internet brought about blogs, allowing experts and laypeople to opine publicly on current events. The “yellow journalism” practices of eras past have again reared their ugly head, aided by the instantaneous technology of the internet. Legitimate news organizations struggle to provide a competitive content stream to keep viewers'

⁵⁴ Ibid.

attention. Retraction or correction has been effective in traditional news modalities when information is incorrectly reported by accident rather than malicious intent. However, as society has become ensnared in the grip of news through the filter of social media, these retractions have far less impact than they used to if they happen at all. Social media is so instantaneous that a retraction or correction does little to mitigate the viral spread of incorrect assertions. Outlets today seem far less likely to voluntarily utilize these methods, with many refusing to do so and no path to hold them accountable.

The 1990s were characterized by dynamic societal, cultural, and economic changes; because of the gulf war, closing the gender gap, pollution/climate change concerns, increased immigration, and the birth of social networks and Google. America was coming off the savings and loan scandal of 1989 and into an economic boom that began in 1991, driven by the growth of globalization and the technology sector. In the '90s, Generation X came of age, bringing more openness to common understandings of sexuality, gender, religion, and social issues like poverty and AIDS. The cultural progress of the '90s posed a challenge to the traditional concept of cultural norms. To preserve their traditional culture, politicians developed a more aggressive political strategy.

3.3 Anti-Social Media

The rise of new media in the 1990s was widely celebrated as a significant and positive advancement in communication, connectedness, and a boon for democracy,⁵⁵ but it has become clear that the unrestrained format has allowed for chaos and disruption of

⁵⁵ Jeffrey B. Abramson and Gary R. Orren, F. Christopher Arterton, *Electronic Commonwealth: The Impact of New Media Technologies on Democratic Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1998)

the journalistic standards Americans relied on for truth. Social networks completely shifted the paradigm of news delivery. Rather than selecting news sources independently as in the past, social media users do not choose content on social media – it is chosen for them via algorithms that deliver homogeneous content, further polarizing users and creating a mythic echo chamber that gives the impression of broader collective agreement. That broader collective agreement makes users more vulnerable to suspending critical thinking and allowing confirmation bias to guide attitudes. Articles from reputable sources are intermixed with questionable sources, sponsored content, ads, and posts from friends and family members, all optimized in a feedback loop created to mirror the user’s attitudes, whose data is constantly collected and targeted. Social media companies are designed for profit and to continually drive usage numbers; users are the commodity. User-generated content is also virtually unmoderated, so nearly everything goes.

To make matters worse, previously accepted journalistic standards do not apply because the accuracy of content is now at the discretion of the user (or algorithm) rather than trained news media. Watching the news used to be a utilitarian activity;⁵⁶ now, it has inextricably meshed with social/hedonistic usage.⁵⁷ Given the “free for all” environment, it is not surprising that intentionally misleading and divisive content proliferates. The lines between traditional media news and infotainment are intractably blurred. Division

⁵⁶ Thomas J. Johnson, Barbara K. Kaye, “Reasons to believe: Influence of credibility on motivations for using social networks,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 50, (2015): 544-555, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.04.002>.

⁵⁷ Kalpana Chauhan, and Anandan Pillai, “Role of Content Strategy in Social Media Brand Communities: A Case of Higher Education Institutes in India,” *Journal of Product & Brand Management* 22:1, (2013) 40-51.

sells, clickbait articles reign, and ratings drive unhinged performative entertainment “news.” Unshackled and virtually unrestrained, opportunists have exploited the freedom of speech to achieve their goals, and utilitarian news consumption has become novel entertainment. Despite awareness of the damaging impacts of their algorithms and the significance of the negative topics driving hostility, isolation, and division, these platforms have primarily opted to maintain the status quo and reject the known solutions that would diffuse online agita, revealing their commercial nature again. Our democracy depends heavily on objective and fair journalism. The departure from societal norms of news organizations as credible utilitarian entities contributes to the erosion of democracy.

Misinformation is "a category of claim for which there is at least substantial agreement (or even consensus rejection) when judged as to truth value among the widest feasible range of observers."⁵⁸ In contrast, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and propaganda is defined as “a special type of misinformation distinguished by the intent of the promoter”⁵⁹ Disinformation is false or misleading information intentionally spread with ill intent. This synonym for propaganda usually has a political or economic objective, is intended to influence public attitudes, or hide the truth. Disinformation is used to incite strong feelings. It affects behaviors, including sharing and liking on social media, that expand its spread and potentially its impact. Misinformation is false or misleading information that is spread unintentionally. While it is “intention neutral,” it can be incredibly harmful, especially when individuals don’t realize they share false

⁵⁸ Brian G. Southwell, Emily A. Thorson, and Laura Sheble (eds) *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*, (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2018)

⁵⁹ Ibid, 3.

information but share it widely.⁶⁰ The difference between misinformation and disinformation in terms of the intent of the content creator or distributor is essential to consider and can assist in formulating viable policy changes. But the distinction between truth and fiction is at the core of this monumental social challenge. Defining what is true and false has become a common political strategy, replacing debates based on a mutually agreed-on set of facts.⁶¹ In the age of social media, these false stories are shared, tweeted, and re-tweeted at a dizzying pace. The cascade of misinformation far and wide overwhelms people's critical thinking and erodes people's discretion and judgment.

The consequences of this phenomenon are undeniable, "We worry that misinformation (or false information) might lead people to hold misperceptions (or false beliefs) and that these misperceptions, especially when they occur among mass audiences, may have downstream consequences for health, social harmony, and political life."⁶² Americans have seen the damaging impact of this surging phenomenon over the last six years in all three distinct and equally powerful areas: public health on a global scale through the COVID-19 pandemic, the deepening polarization of the population, and elections/political institutions.

Democracies depend on shared experience and a common understanding of facts. One cannot judge the merit of any issue when two sides cannot agree on basic facts. The strategy of those seeking to exploit diminished critical thinking is this: don't deny

⁶⁰ Amy O'Hara and Jodi Nelson, *Combatting Digital Disinformation*, October 2020, <https://hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Final-Hewlett-evaluation-report-on-disinformation-.pdf>.

⁶¹ Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The spread of true and false news online." *Science*, 359:6380, (2018) 1146–1151.

⁶² Brian G. Southwell, Emily A. Thorson, and Laura Sheble (eds) *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*, (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2018)

corruption, incompetence, or allegations; accuse the other side of the same and leave the public confused. If the public thinks all politicians, health leaders, or political institutions are corrupt, then at least they benefit from supporting a changemaker that aligns with their beliefs. Further amplifying division, partisan-leaning populations select news sources that agree with their preexisting biases and create a deeper silo of perspective. An October 2022 Gallup poll shows that 38 percent of the public has no trust in the media at all, which outpaces a great deal/fair amount for the first time.⁶³ Americans' trust in the media remains sharply polarized along partisan lines, with 70 percent of Democrats, 14 percent of Republicans, and 27 percent of independents saying they have a great deal or fair amount of confidence.⁶⁴

Public trust in government was at an all-time low of 17 percent in 2019, down sixty points from its all-time high of 77 percent in 1964.⁶⁵ Researchers have examined identifiable psychological or demographic characteristics correlated to conspiracy beliefs and paired them with vulnerabilities. Developing effective strategies to combat the surge of distrust includes profiling and defining the factors contributing to conspiracy ideation, considering personality and cognitive factors. It is also essential to determine the historical and cultural features that cultivate such predispositions. The impact and diffusion of propaganda and misinformation can inform corrective tactics based on psychology and human behavior. The effect of misinformation and disinformation is essentially the same but understanding the intent of the creator and the intent of those

⁶³ Megan Brennan, "Americans' trust in media remains near record low," Gallup, October 18, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/403166/americans-trust-media-remains-near-record-low.aspx>

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Pew Research Center, Public Trust in Government, 1958-2022, June 6, 2022, Accessed October 25, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/public-trust-in-government-1958-2022/>.

who share or amplify content will help determine realistic solutions. Coupled with policy changes and efforts to support a more informed electorate, these interdisciplinary responses to misinformation are crucial to turning the tide of public confidence in the media and the government.

3.4 “Net” Impact

There are two theoretical results of this increased mistrust: disengagement and targeted mobilization. Which development occurs appears to be determined by existing beliefs on efficacy. According to Vivien Hart, “the highly competent politically who were also distrustful politically were more active than the highly competent and trustful.”⁶⁶ A bright light of this chaotic and combative time is that voter turnout has steadily increased since 2016, both in midterm and presidential elections, demonstrating that despite a lack of confidence, voters still believe in political efficacy.

Unleashed in the virtual environment once fringe position conspiracy theories have become mainstream. One only needs to look at the surge in Qanon believers and coverage to recognize that what was once whispered in anonymous chat rooms and behind closed doors is now front stage, occupying seats in state legislatures, election boards, and Congress. The change in public discourse, combined with the proliferation of social media, the 24-hour news cycle, and online discussion forums, have amplified and, to some extent, normalized these conspiracy theories. The boundary between

⁶⁶ Vivien Hart, *Distrust and Democracy: political distrust in Britain and America*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978)

ultranationalists and mainstream conservative Republicans is becoming indistinguishable, not only to the public but to social media company moderators too.

Populations most vulnerable to misinformation from social media are found along predictable lines. As noted in the charts below, those who get their news from social media have lower political knowledge, education, and household income than those who get news from other sources. There is an undeniable relationship between vulnerability to misinformation and education, particularly in demographic groups that are active consumers of news from social media and biased news sources who utilize repetition. The higher the volume of biased messages – real or fake – the more intensified the impact of confirmation bias.⁶⁷

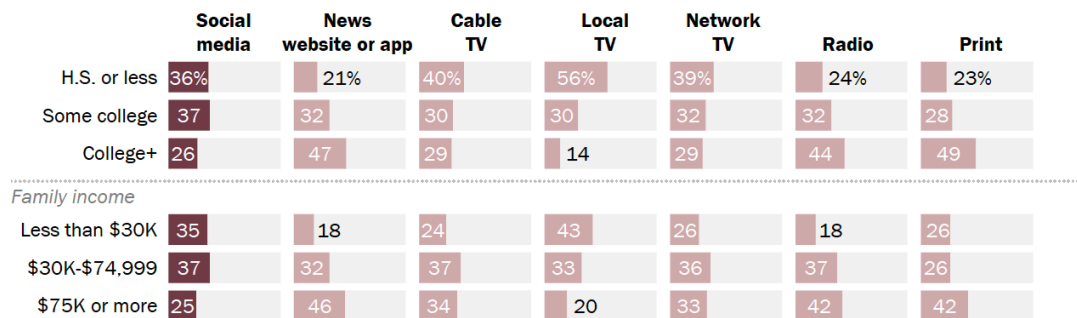
There is a correlation between those with a higher level of education being less inclined to believe misinformation than those with cursory education. From the studies conducted below, the higher education, and higher income population relies on news websites or print for their news consumption, while the lower education and lower income population consume news primarily on social media and local television. Likewise, those who have higher political knowledge depend more heavily on news websites, radio, and print. While education and income may not be a causal factor, it is most certainly a statistically significant corollary to higher political knowledge and support the reliability of news websites, radio and print over social media, and local news as news sources. It

⁶⁷ Patricia Moravec, Randall Minas, and Alan Dennis, "Fake news on social media: People believe what they want to believe when it makes no sense at all." *Kelly School of Business Research Paper No. 18-87*, (2018).

also demonstrates that those who depend heavily on social media, cable and local networks for their news did not follow the coronavirus very closely.

Americans who get most of their news from social media tend to have lower levels of education and household income than those who get news from several other platforms

Among U.S. adults who say each pathway is the most common way they get political and election news, % who are ...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019.

"Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2 "Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable" Pew Research Center, July 30, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/07/30/americans-who-mainly-get-their-news-on-social-media-are-less-engaged-less-knowledgeable/>.

There appears to be a link between groups that are less politically savvy, have more cursory education, and have lower household incomes as a sub-population that feels ignored and unseen and have developed an ideological scapegoat to justify their feelings of exclusion. Other causal factors are low status, the feeling of being on the losing side, and overall prejudice against powerful groups.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, Robbie and Aleksandra Cichocka, "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* (2017), 538-542

Those who depend on social media for political news have lower political knowledge than most other groups

% of U.S. adults who have ____, according to an index of nine knowledge questions

Among those who say ____ is the most common way they get political and election news

	High political knowledge	Middle political knowledge	Low political knowledge
News website or app	45%	31%	23%
Radio	42	34	24
Print	41	29	31
Cable TV	35	29	35
Network TV	29	35	36
Social media	17	27	57
Local TV	10	21	69

Note: Knowledge index created from nine political knowledge questions. High political knowledge includes those who answered eight or nine questions correctly, middle knowledge includes those who answered six or seven questions correctly, and low knowledge includes those who answered five or fewer questions correctly. Answers correct as of November 2019.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019. "Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable"

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Those who turn to social media for news are least likely to be following the coronavirus very closely

% of U.S. adults who say they have been following news about the coronavirus outbreak ...

Among those who say ____ is the most common way they get political news

	Very closely	Fairly closely	NET
Network TV	50%	42%	92%
Cable TV	50	39	89
Print	45	47	92
News website/app	44	46	90
Radio	37	50	87
Local TV	32	47	79
Social media	23	56	79

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 4-10, 2020.

"Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 3 & 3, "Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable" Pew Research Center, July 30, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/07/30/americans-who-mainly-get-their-news-on-social-media-are-less-engaged-less-knowledgeable/>.

Decades-long efforts to demonize specific groups and aggressive misinformation campaigns available to a broad audience have collided, resulting in increased rates of distrust in the population and vulnerability to misinformation and conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theorists often feel a sense of alliance with a group of people who "belong," this collective sense of belonging overcomes the prior sense of isolation and lowers the threshold of critical thinking.

Conspiracy theorists form a “unitary closed-off worldview in which beliefs come together in a mutually supportive network known as a monological belief system”;⁶⁹ they can become disenfranchised over time by what they perceive to be a power beyond reasonable limits in the hands of malevolent actors⁷⁰ and elevate self and “in-group” by allowing blame for negative outcomes to be attributed to others. Traditional monological beliefs are merely the tip of the iceberg in which one conspiracy predicts belief in a wide variety of others.⁷¹ This viewpoint is evident in the Q-anon conspiracy group; their motto, “Where we go one, we go all,” reflects this sentiment. Furthermore, Wood et al. (2012) demonstrated that people are quite willing to believe contradictory conspiracy theories (for example, that Osama Bin Laden is still alive and that he was already dead when the U.S. raid took place) and also that a belief system of even incompatible conspiracy theories is “held together” by the higher-order belief that government officials are often deceptive.⁷²

Those who endorse conspiracy theories seem to be brought together by concerns of skewed morality, and these concerns link an otherwise heterogeneous group of individuals.⁷³ It is the power of conspiracy theories to give broad, unifying explanations

⁶⁹ Michael J. Wood, Karen M. Douglas, and Robbie M. Sutton, “Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories.” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3:6 (2012), 767–73.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Virem Swami, Rebecca Coles, Stefan Stieger, Jakob Pietschnig, Adrian Furnham, Sherry Rehim, and Martin Voracek, “Conspiracist ideation in Britain and Austria: Evidence of a monological belief system and associations between individual psychological differences and real-world and fictitious conspiracy theories” *British Journal of Psychology*. 102:3, (2011), 443-463.

⁷² Joanne Miller, “Do COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory Beliefs Form a Monological Belief System?” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 53:2, (2020), 319-326.

⁷³ Brian L. Keeley, “Of Conspiracy Theories.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 3 (1999): 109–26.

at the expense of plausibility.⁷⁴ There are many additional psychological explanations for attraction to conspiracy theories:

- Feeling powerless & lack of control (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008)
- To crave explanation in a fundamentally confusing world (Keeley, 1999)
- Motivated by background political beliefs (Kahan, 2015)
- To seek social individuation (Raab et al. 2003)
- To be misled by the “echo chambers” of online opinion (Bessi et al., 2015) (Del. Vicario et al., 2016)
- Following a monological belief system in which every event is connected to another (Goertzel 1994, Swami et al. 2011, Vander Kinden, 2015)
- Lack of ability to think critically and rationally
- Lower levels of analytic thinking (Swami, et al. 2014)
- Overestimate likelihood of co-occurring events
- Perceive agency and intentionality where it does not exist (Douglas et al., 2016)⁷⁵

Some researchers conclude that conspiracy ideation is stable over time; others believe external factors trigger these personality vulnerabilities. Conspiracy ideation is linked to rejection of science,⁷⁶ which would explain the anti-science response seen to the COVID-19 pandemic for more than two full years. In his study examining the reasons behind the rejection of the COVID-19 vaccine, political scientist John Hibbing explains that far from being authoritarians, the followers of leaders such as Donald Trump stridently oppose all authority figures who divert attention from what they believe are the real threats: immigrants, powerful foreign enemies, diversity, terrorists, and criminals.⁷⁷ He asserts that this population is not authoritarian but rather securitarian, believing the

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Colin Klein, Peter Clutton, and Vince Polito, "Topic Modeling Reveals Distinct Interests within an Online Conspiracy Forum." *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, (2018), 189.

⁷⁶ Stephan Lewandowsky, Gilles E. Gignac, Klaus Oberauer, "The Role of Conspiracist Ideation and Worldviews in Predicting Rejection of Science," *PLoS ONE* 8:10, (2013)

⁷⁷ John R Hibbing, "Why Do Trump's Authoritarian Followers Resist COVID-19 Authorities? Because They Are Not Really Authoritarian Followers," *Frontiers in Political Science* 4:880798, (July 2022): 1, accessed October 15, 2022, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362176484_Why_Do_Trump%27s_Authoritarian_Followers_Resist_COVID-19_Authorities_Because_They_Are_Not_Really_Authoritarian_Followers

essential task of a human being is to protect a person, family, culture, and country from the tangible threats posed by outsiders and defining outsiders as those who have different appearances, religion, cultural practices, skin tones, societal norms, languages, and national origins. Furthermore, he observes that this “insider” group respects the dominant religion (Christianity), the dominant sexual orientation (straight), the dominant cultural practices (non-Muslim), and the dominant language (English), all conceived as the last vestiges under threat. Hibbing’s theory explains an alignment between the overarching values of the Republican party (including the America First agenda), conspiracy theorists, coronavirus deniers, election deniers, and those who use social media as their primary news source.

The chimera of broad-scope support on social media platforms was perpetuated by a small but vocal group of monological believers; Klein et al. (2018) found that only 5 percent of posters made 64 percent of the comments in the studied forum, saying “Conspiracy narratives that are all-encompassing, pulling in a diverse group of people who may have little in common with one another, each of whom can find what they need in a fragment of a larger tale.” Klein and Robinson offer a different perspective indicating that how social media is used interacts with the individual’s partisan predispositions, suggesting that trust in government is increased or decreased depending on the user’s relationship to the ruling party.⁷⁸ But if that is true, then the data would show an increased trust in government among Republicans during the Trump era, which it does not.

⁷⁸ Elad Klein and Joshua Robison. “Like, Post, and Distrust? How Social Media Use Affects Trust in Government.” *Political Communication* 37 (2019): 49.

In *Misinformation and Mass Media*, the authors examine the recipient's engagement with misinformation, the impacts of such exposure, and potential solutions to these complex problems. It evaluates the ways people approach information, then goes on to consider the validation of that information by the recipients' immediate social group.⁷⁹ The authors conclude that correcting misinformation is not entirely mitigating as many people still refuse to change their beliefs and intentionally avoid sources that debunk those beliefs. Consistent with that conclusion, Moravec et al. found that fake news, even when identified as fake, does not cause the reader to reject it when it agrees with their views. Confirmation bias dominates decision-making, with only 17 percent of participants accurately identifying fake news.⁸⁰ By way of example, the study suggests that flipping a coin would yield a better result. Fewer than 50 percent of Americans are confident they can even identify misinformation. This study examined the neurophysiology of users to determine the cognitive processing that takes place when a user encounters fake news; in short, consumption of news that requires little cognitive effort to evaluate is accepted, and even when challenged, what is desired reality is accepted versus what is known to be authentic. Even when considering the news for a more extended time and with more significant cognitive effort, the credibility determination did not change. Compounding matters the false confidence of the public in

⁷⁹ Brian G. Southwell, Emily A. Thorson, and Laura Sheble (eds) *Misinformation and Mass Audiences*, (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2018)

⁸⁰ Patricia Moravec, Randall Minas, and Alan Dennis, "Fake news on social media: People believe what they want to believe when it makes no sense at all." *Kelly School of Business Research Paper No. 18-87*, (2018).

their ability to detect fake news from the truth; 84 percent of users believe they can detect it,⁸¹ but as mentioned above, the data demonstrate a far smaller percentage actually can.

Misinformation labeled as such on social media does not dissuade the reader from its veracity; in fact, it perpetuates the belief. The cognitive dissonance triggered by a fake news flag exacerbated the belief in fake news, the flag is ineffective, but there is hope that additional or different signaling mechanisms may overcome the confirmation bias and resolve cognitive dissonance.⁸² Pennycook and Rand evaluated and concluded that subjects are capable of discerning truth from “fake news” based on research using a Cognitive Reflection Test on subjects and found that regardless of their ideology, susceptibility to misinformation is a result of lazy thinking (rather than lack of critical thinking) versus partisan bias. In more precise terms, they concluded that users who believe misinformation know it is misinformation and accept it despite recognizing its implausible nature.⁸³ Facebook began using a 3rd party fact-checker in 2016 to flag fake news articles but discontinued it by 2017 and reintroduced it in 2020. One relevant data point from that feature was that the flags significantly decreased the likelihood of people sharing fake news articles, even if it did not change the minds of those who chose to believe the fake news story. In a related process, many politicians have posted and shared headlines that reflect their incendiary attitudes only to find the articles are satire.

⁸¹ Michael Barthel, Amy Mitchell, and Jesse Holcomb, “Many Americans Believe Fake News is Sowing Confusion,” Pew Research Center, (2016), 15.

⁸² Patricia Moravec, Randall Minas, and Alan Dennis, “Fake news on social media: People believe what they want to believe when it makes no sense at all.” *Kelly School of Business Research Paper No. 18-87*, (2018).

⁸³ Gordon Pennycook, “Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning,” *Cognition*, (2018), 188.

Research indicates that bias exists in favor of engaging in contentious topics in a social media environment rather than remaining silent or neutral.⁸⁴ More disturbing is that most articles shared on social media are never actually read by the poster. A study called Social Clicks found that Twitter users never bothered to read articles they shared an astounding 50 percent of the time.⁸⁵

The most contentious issues in America today are race and social issues like gun control and immigration. These issues drive most of the partisan polarization in the nation and are especially featured on social media. Russian interference used the dissemination of fake news and its promotion on social media as a significant meddling tactic.⁸⁶ According to Facebook's congressional testimony, fake accounts linked to the Russian Internet Research Agency bought 3000 ads on divisive issues that up to 5 million users viewed before the election.⁸⁷ The effort impersonated U.S. citizens to give the impression of broad public support. It created pages and groups for causes related to polarizing U.S. issues and purchased ads to promote its pages.⁸⁸ While there is no evidence that Russia was able to alter vote counts remotely, there is no way to measure the impact of the disinformation campaign on the psyche and perspective of American voters. But even the bipartisan report with its own recommendations did not yield an appropriate legislative

⁸⁴ Jonas E, Schulz-Hardt S, Frey D, Thelen N. "Confirmation bias in sequential information search after preliminary decisions: an expansion of dissonance theoretical research on selective exposure to information," *J Pers Soc Psychol*, 80:4, (2001), 557-7, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11316221/>.

⁸⁵ Maksym Gabielkov, Arthi Ramachandran, Augustin Chaintreau, Arnaud Legout, "Social Clicks: What and Who Gets Read on Twitter?" *ACM SIGMETRICS Performance Evaluation Review*, 44, (2016), 179-192.

⁸⁶ Leticia Bode, Ceren Budak, Jonathan M. Ladd, Frank Newport, Josh Pasek, Lisa O. Singh, Stuart N. Soroka, and Michael W. Traugott., *Words That Matter: How the News and Social Media Shaped the 2016 Presidential Campaign*. (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 155.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt1vw0rct>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

response. Two measures were offered by Democrats aimed to require campaigns to report offers of foreign support, both were blocked by Republican Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith from Missouri, who provided no reason for her objection.⁸⁹ There has been no shortage of effort to address election security at the state level, but those efforts have also avoided transparency, generally yielding a vote-suppressing result rather than a campaign regulating one.

Limited content moderation and policy on these social platforms create ripe conditions for conspiracies and divisive content to proliferate. Free speech cannot be abridged by the government, but threats of violence and bad actors have developed a laser-focused ability to walk to the edge of threats and still inflict maximum damage. This can be seen in all matters of American politics, specifically concerning elections, social issues, civil rights, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Private tech companies are beginning to act in some areas of this effort after years of trying to frame their lack of action in the language of human rights. After years of violating community standards with lies and misinformation, in the wake of the 2020 election, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube de-platformed Donald Trump. But in the countdown to the 2022 midterm election, Elon Musk bought Twitter, and in the days leading up to election day, havoc ensued. There was an immediate uptick in users motioning the N-word by nearly 500 percent.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Joshua Eaton, "Russia targeted all 50 states in 2016 election hacking campaign, Senate report confirms," Think Progress, July 25, 2019.

⁹⁰ Joshua Zitset and Sam Tabahriti, "Use of N-word on Twitter jumped by almost 500% after Elon Musk's takeover as trolls test limits on free speech, report says," *Insider*, October 29, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musk-twitter-takeover-sparked-n-word-use-jump-2022-10>.

3.5 Polarization for Profit

Clickbait extremism has been profitable for social media and mainstream media companies who have benefitted from misinformation campaigns, violent media content and the viral videos of rioters at the Capitol. Tech Transparency Project found that more than 80 white supremacist groups have a presence on Facebook, including some that Facebook itself has labeled as “dangerous organizations.”⁹¹ Moreover, when test users searched for the names of white supremacist groups on Facebook, the search results were often monetized with ads—meaning Facebook is profiting off them.⁹² Worse, Facebook searches for some groups with “Ku Klux Klan” in their name generated ads for Black churches, highlighting minority institutions to a user searching for white supremacist content.⁹³

Media companies have also monetized extreme polarization; nine of the top ten cable news shows are on Fox, a media entity that has defended its top-rated host, Tucker Carlson, against defamation by claiming he “cannot be understood to have been stating facts, but instead that he was delivering an opinion using hyperbole for effect.” The judge agreed, saying in her ruling that “given Mr. Carlson’s reputation, any reasonable viewer ‘arrive[s] with an appropriate amount of skepticism about the statements he makes... This ‘general tenor’ of the show should then inform a viewer that he is not ‘stating actual facts’ about the topics he discusses and is instead engaging in ‘exaggeration’ and ‘non-literal

⁹¹ “Facebook Profits from White Supremacy Groups,” Tech Transparency Project, August 10, 2022, accessed October 28, 2022, <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/facebook-profits-white-supremacist-groups>

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

commentary."⁹⁴ The top distributor of “news” is an organization that relies little on the factual basis of its content. Republicans and American conservatives have cultivated and employed public distrust in government to garner strategic benefits.⁹⁵

It's not the only example of rhetoric mobilizing believers. The book “Words That Matter,” co-authored by academics at Georgetown University and the University of Michigan, analyzes what voters paid attention to and who created it, high-quality producers (journalists) or low-quality producers (fake news). They said that the news ecosystem in 2016 – historically thought to be regulated by the gatekeeping capabilities of traditional news organizations – included many low-quality news producers that created and disseminated a broad range of low-quality news content for a broad range of reasons. They noted that readers commonly do not pay attention to or remember the source of news they read online.⁹⁶ To examine how a rumor can yield dangerous action, one rumor circulating online from the 2016 WikiLeaks email leak claimed the Podesta emails contained coded messages referring to a pedophile ring operating out of a pizza parlor in Washington D.C., resulting in a vigilante from North Carolina busting into Comet Ping Pong to expose the ring and save the children. Welch fired his gun multiple times when he found a locked storage closet while “securing” the facility. Known now as “Pizzagate,” the background tells a little about how this happened: on Oct. 28, 2016, one

⁹⁴ Sonam Sheth, “Fox News won a court case by 'persuasively' arguing that no 'reasonable viewer' takes Tucker Carlson seriously,” Business Insider, September 24, 2020, accessed October 19, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/fox-news-karen-mcdougal-case-tucker-carlson-2020-9>.

⁹⁵ Amy Fried and Douglas B. Harris, *At War with Government*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021)

⁹⁶ Leticia Bode, Ceren Budak, Jonathan M. Ladd, Frank Newport, Josh Pasek, Lisa O. Singh, Stuart N. Soroka, and Michael W. Traugott., *Words That Matter: How the News and Social Media Shaped the 2016 Presidential Campaign*. (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 155. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt1vw0rct>.

week before the election, FBI Director James B. Comey told Congress and the press that he was reopening the investigation of Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server. Two days later, someone tweeting under the handle @DavidGoldbergNY cited rumors that the new emails "point to a pedophilia ring and @HillaryClinton is at the center."⁹⁷ The rumor was retweeted more than 6,000 times. The notion quickly moved to other social-media platforms, including 4chan and Reddit, mainly through anonymous or pseudonymous posts. On the far-right site Infowars, talk-show host Alex Jones repeatedly suggested that Clinton was involved in a child sex ring and that her campaign chairman, John Podesta, indulged in satanic rituals.⁹⁸

That was just the beginning; as the world watched on January 6th, 2020, the mobilization of thousands of Trump supporters flooding the Capitol, online misinformation and hateful rhetoric have dire consequences. Bias and fake news can influence whole populations of voters and sway the outcomes of elections, in addition to deepening polarization, perpetuating mistrust, and motivating people to violence. Other instances of domestic election interference via social media have been reported. Douglass Mackey was criminally charged in Federal court with election interference after he solicited voters to vote by text. William Sweeney, the acting U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, said what Mackey did "amounted to nothing short of vote theft. It is illegal behavior that contributes to the erosion of the public's trust in our electoral processes." Mackey was ranked in 2016 by the MIT Media Lab as the 107th

⁹⁷ Marc Fisher, John. Woodrow Cox, Peter Hermann, "Pizzagate: From rumor, to hashtag, to gunfire in D.C.," *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/pizzagate-from-rumor-to-hashtag-to-gunfire-in-dc/2016/12/06/4c7def50-bbd4-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html

⁹⁸ Ibid.

most important influencer above NBC News (#114), Steven Colbert (#119) and Newt Gingrich (#141)⁹⁹ Interviewed by Tucker Carlson the day Mackey was charged, Carlson ominously predicted, “a crackdown like this cannot help but create domestic extremism.”¹⁰⁰

Social media companies’ grip on information, data, and their absolute business priorities creates an environment hostile to protecting people and democracy. They represent the cultivation of our worst, most debased tendencies on a large scale and for commercial gain. Social media companies and internet service providers fought hard to shield themselves from liability for their content as they emerged into the new internet space in the 90s. Today they continue to fund lawmakers whose thoughts and prayers are reasonable responses to predictable and preventable violence. The Communications Decency Act of 1996 gave them the shield they sought in Section 230 of the Act, restricting their liability for content on their platforms. The world is a very different place in terms of technology than it was twenty-six years ago. Allowing private companies the flexibility to regulate themselves and require optional content moderation without restrictions is an extraordinarily generous and questionable practice.

John Stuart Mill said, “when society is itself the tyrant—society collectively, over the separate individuals who compose it—its means of tyrannizing are not restricted to the acts which it may do by the hands of its political functionaries.”¹⁰¹ Social media has

⁹⁹ “Social Media Influencer Charged with Election Interference Stemming from Voter Disinformation Campaign,” U.S. Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, Eastern District of New York, January 27, 2021. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/social-media-influencer-charged-election-interference-stemming-voter-disinformation>

¹⁰⁰ Quinta Jerecic, “The Justice Department is Prosecuting an American for Election Interference – in 2016,” *Lawfare*, January 30, 2021.

¹⁰¹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004), Originally published in 1859, 4-5.

spawned the illusion of a tyrannical society, amplified a group of extremist voices creating the impression of a broader movement. At the time of great technological achievement in radio and television that brought messages to the masses, our nation's leaders, fearing potential risk to the public, passed the Radio Act of 1912, regulating the airwaves for military, emergency, law enforcement, and commercial uses. As demands increased, so did the need for oversight, so in 1926 Congress established the Federal Radio Commission (FRC). In 1934 it expanded to include the telephone and was renamed the Federal Communications Commission. The FCC was tasked with regulation, including breaking up monopolies. With the birth of the internet and wireless communication, their role has expanded significantly.

The regulation of social media has become a battlefield centered around the First Amendment, the role and limitations of free speech. Ongoing debates argue that social media platforms are de facto government agencies obliged to facilitate free speech. Others view them as a utility, like the phone telecommunications company, or electric company. In this framing, all traffic in the space would be presumably equal, but that argument doesn't stand up to scrutiny when compared to how the FCC oversees broadcasting concerning decency standards. Some politicians have called for increased regulation of social media, content moderation and the pursuit of anti-trust litigation. Others assert that platforms should not be gatekeepers of decency and should have virtually no limitations at all. The one place where there appear to be mutual agreement is that the Communications Decency Act need to be modified to address ongoing concerns.

In a rare political moment, this may be one area that can garner bipartisan support, although for entirely different reasons; Democrats seek to limit harmful content and combat hate speech and disinformation, and Republicans seek to punish those who enforce decency standards and lift liability protections for the platforms' alleged censorship. Both Trump and Biden have called for Section 230 to be repealed.

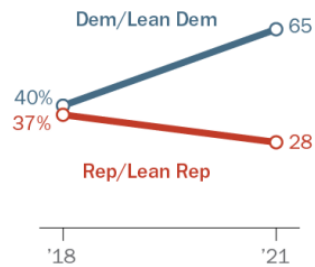
The population is split on who exactly is responsible for stopping the spread of fake news. 45 percent of Americans asked said that government, politicians, and elected officials have a great deal of responsibility, while almost as many (43 percent) say that a great deal of responsibility lies with members of the public and (42 percent) social networking sites and search engines.¹⁰² The partisan positions on this are expected, with a majority of Democrats supporting both governmental and private tech companies expanded roles in restricting information and the majority of Republicans favoring a “wild west” approach with little to no limitations.

¹⁰² Michael Barthel, Amy Mitchell, and Jesse Holcomb, “Many Americans Believe Fake News is Sowing Confusion,” Pew Research Center, (2016), 15.

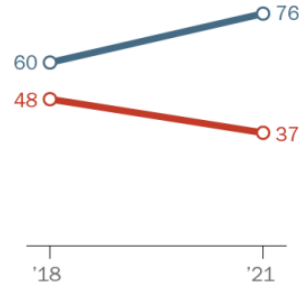
Partisan divisions have widened over role of government, tech firms in restricting misinformation

% of U.S. adults who say ...

The U.S. government should take steps to restrict false info online, even if it limits freedom of info



Tech companies should take steps to restrict false info online, even if it limits freedom of info



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted July 26-Aug. 8, 2021.

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Figure 4 Partisan divisions have widened, “More Americans now say government should take steps to restrict false information online than in 2018,” Pew Research Center, August 18, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/18/more-americans-now-say-government-should-take-steps-to-restrict-false-information-online-than-in-2018/>

The impact of misinformation and disinformation via social media and mainstream media has further eroded the public’s trust in the government and their faith in each other. Focusing on remedies to blunt the impact of these efforts is essential to overcoming them, but the toothpaste cannot be put back in the tube. To defend democracy, if possible, a media environment that can be trusted and reinforce the public’s confidence in government institutions must be cultivated by public pressure, government regulation, and private sector efforts. There is little doubt that Americans will continue to see the erosion of democracy and corruption of the foundations of our democratic institutions if responsive action is not taken.