What Does "Trust in the Media" Mean?

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Is public trust in the news media in decline? So polls seem to indicate. But the decline goes back to the early 1970s, and it may be that "trust" in the media at that point was too high for the good of a journalism trying to serve democracy. And "the media" is a very recent (1970s) notion popularized by some because it sounded more abstract and distant than a familiar term like "the press." It may even be that people answering a pollster are not trying to report accurately their level of trust but are acting politically to align themselves with their favored party's perceived critique of the media. This essay tries to reach a deeper understanding of what gives rise to faith or skepticism in various cultural authorities, including journalism.

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1920 novel *This Side of Paradise*, the main character, Amory, harangues his friend and fellow Princeton graduate Tom, a writer for a public affairs weekly:

> "People try so hard to believe in leaders now, pitifully hard. But we no sooner get a popular reformer or politician or soldier or writer or philosopher . . . than the cross-currents of criticism wash him away. . . . People get sick of hearing the same name over and over."
>
> "Then you blame it on the press?"
>
> "Absolutely. Look at you, you're on *The New Democracy*, considered the most brilliant weekly in the country. . . . What's your business? Why, to be as clever, as interesting and as brilliantly cynical as possible about every man, doctrine, book or policy that is assigned you to deal with."[1]

People have "blamed it on the press" for a long time. They have felt grave doubts about the press long before social media, at times when politics was polarized and times when it was not, and even before the broad disillusionment with established institutional authority that blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s, when young people were urged not to trust anybody "over thirty." This is worth keeping in mind as I, in a skeptical mood myself, try to think through contemporary anxiety about declining trust, particularly declining trust in what we have come to call – in recent decades – "the media."

As measured trust in most American institutions has sharply declined over the last fifty years, leading news institutions have undergone a dramatic transforma-

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tion, the reverberations of which have yet to be fully acknowledged, even by journalists themselves. Dissatisfaction with journalism grew in the 1960s. What journalists upheld as "objectivity" came to be criticized as what would later be called "he said, she said" journalism, "false balance" journalism, or "bothsidesism" in sharp, even derisive, and ultimately potent critiques. As multiple scholars have documented, news since the 1960s has become deeper, more analytical or contextual, less fully focused on what happened in the past twenty-four hours, more investigative, and more likely to take "holding government accountable" or "speaking truth to power" as an essential goal. In a sense, journalists not only continued to be fact-centered but also guided by a more explicit avowal of the public service function of upholding democracy itself.

One could go further to say that journalism in the past fifty years did not *continue* to seek evidence to back up assertions in news stories but *began* to seek evidence, and to show it, for the first time. Twenty-three years ago, when journalist and media critic Carl Sessions Stepp compared ten metropolitan daily newspapers from 1962 to 1963 with the same papers from 1998 to 1999, he found the 1963 papers "naively trusting of government, shamelessly boosterish, unembarrassedly hokey and obliging," and was himself particularly surprised to find stories "often not attributed at all, simply passing along an unquestioned, quasi-official sense of things."[2] In the "bothsidesism" style of news that dominated newspapers in 1963, quoting one party to a dispute or an electoral contest and then quoting the other was the whole of the reporter's obligation. Going behind or beyond the statements of the quoted persons, invariably elite figures, was not required. It was particularly in the work of investigative reporters in the late 1960s and the 1970s that journalists became detectives seeking documentable evidence to paint a picture of the current events they were covering. Later, as digital tools for reporters emerged, the capacity to document and to investigate became greater than ever, and a reporter did not require the extravagant resources of a *New York Times* newsroom to be able to write authoritative stories.

I will elaborate on the importance of this 1960s/1970s transformation in what follows, not to deny the importance of the more recent digital transformation, but to put into perspective that latter change from a top-down "media-to-the-masses" communication model to a "networked public sphere" with more horizontal lines of communication, more individual and self-appointed sources of news, genuine or fake, and more unedited news content abounding from all corners. Journalism has changed substantially at least twice in fifty years, and the technological change of the early 2000s should not eclipse the political and cultural change of the 1970s in comprehending journalism today. (Arguably, there was a third, largely independent political change: the repeal of the "fairness doctrine" by the Federal Communication Commission in 1987, the action that opened the way to right-wing talk radio, notably Rush Limbaugh's syndicated show, and

later, in cable television, to Fox News.) Facebook became publicly accessible in 2006; Twitter was born the same year; YouTube in 2005. Declining trust in major institutions, as measured by surveys, was already apparent three decades earlier – not only before Facebook was launched but before Mark Zuckerberg was born.

At stake here is what it means to ask people how much they "trust" or "have confidence in" "the media." What do we learn from opinion polls about what respondents mean? In what follows, I raise some doubts about whether current anxiety concerning the apparently growing distrust of the media today is really merited.

Did people ever trust the media? People often recall – or think they recall – that longtime CBS News television anchor Walter Cronkite was in his day "the most trusted man in America." If you Google that phrase (as I did on October 11, 2021, and again on January 16, 2022) you immediately come up with Walter Cronkite. Why? Because a public opinion poll in 1972 asked respondents which of the leading political figures of the day they trusted most. Cronkite's name was thrown in as a kind of standard of comparison: how do any and all of the politicians compare to some well-known and well-regarded nonpolitical figure? Seventy-three percent of those polled placed Cronkite as the person on the list they most trusted, ahead of a general construct – "average senator" (67 percent) – and well ahead of the then most trusted politician, Senator Edmund Muskie (61 percent). Chances are that any other leading news person or probably many a movie star or athlete would have come out as well or better than Cronkite. A 1974 poll found Cronkite less popular than rival TV news stars John Chancellor, Harry Reasoner, and Howard K. Smith.[3] Cronkite was "most trusted" simply because he was not a politician, and we remember him as such simply because the pollsters chose him as their standard.

Somehow, people have wanted to believe that somewhere, just before all the ruckus began over civil rights and Vietnam and women's roles and status, at some time just before yesterday, the media had been a pillar of central, neutral, moderate, unquestioning Americanism, and Walter Cronkite was as good a symbol of that era as anyone.

But that is an illusion. Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson ran in 1952 against what he called the "one-party press," a Republican press, that is. And if you looked at the corporate ownership of the country's newspapers, their antagonism toward Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, and their overwhelming editorial-page support for Republican candidates, certainly he was right. If you go back very much further than the 1940s, you reach a moment when "trust in the media" would have been an incomprehensible phrase. News outlets were understood to be advocates for one party or the other, not neutral truth-tellers.

"Reader, do you trust the newspaper you read?"

"Well, sure, I'm comfortable with it. It's my paper."

"Do you trust the other guy's paper?"

"Of course not, why would I?"

In common parlance, there was no "news media." There was no "mainstream media." There was "the press," a term that, Richard Nixon decided in his presidential years, was too cozy and familiar. Journalists, in his estimation, were united against him, and he was not entirely wrong. Journalists went gaga over Jack Kennedy, bowled over in the 1960 campaign and the early days of the Kennedy administration by his charm and good-looking family.

After Nixon became president, he still felt aggrieved by journalists and worked strategically to muddy their reputation. To refer to journalists as "the press" ceded them an emotional upper hand, an aura of rectitude armed with First Amendment privilege. Nixon urged his staff to use the term "the media" rather than "the press." William Safire, the public relations professional who became a Nixon speechwriter, recalls in his memoir: "The press became 'the media' because the word had a manipulative, Madison Avenue, all-encompassing connotation, and the press hated it." Nixon judged journalists to be his dedicated opponents, and Safire reports that Nixon declared that "the press is the enemy" at least a dozen times in his presence.[4]

There was a moment, beginning in the late 1950s, when watching the television networks' evening news shows became a settled ritual in many of America's living rooms, with their cautious, measured, oh-so-sober, and soporific tone. This may have been the beginning of something called "the media." Until then, Americans would have been hard put to identify a thing that today people comfortably recognize as "the mainstream media." (According to Google Ngram, the term begins its rise to prominence at the very end of the 1970s and then shot rapidly upward.)[5]

The full entrance of "the media" into the American vocabulary arrived at about the same moment that distrust in the media intensified, but in a one-sided fashion. Barry Goldwater and his supporters, in his 1964 campaign for the presidency, were convinced that the media, and notably the three major television news networks, were deeply biased against him.[6] "The media" as a monolith was something of a novelty for Americans and one that, early on, Republicans found more threatening than did Democrats.

The decline of measured trust in the media parallels the decline of trust in other leading institutions and can be traced back to the 1970s. Low trust in the media is not distinctively an internet problem, a Facebook problem, a Twitter problem, or a generalized social media problem, even if the new media ex-

acerbate it. Yes, social media offer a microphone to individuals who want to promote any old picture of reality that suits either their politics or their crackpot senses of humor or both. And yes, people learn about news in increasingly networked ways. Still, many continue to get news directly from television even as television continues for the most part to take its cues from those print-and-online organizations once known as newspapers. And many others, to be sure, access news online and may not know if their news comes originally from newspapers or television or online-only news operations or friends and family who post on social media, or the cloaked persons or bots who serve as agents of dedicated disinformation campaigns. This may well contribute to distrust of any and all assertions coming from unknown entities beyond one's immediate social circles.

The transformative role of new information technology for newspapers is undeniable. Digital technology essentially destroyed their longstanding advertising-based business model, forcing a devastating loss of newsroom jobs, shuttering some newspapers and hollowing out many others, not to mention making national and international news outlets readily available to anyone with a laptop or mobile phone, thereby further reducing people's dependence on local, metropolitan, or regional daily papers. But declining trust in the media predates the internet by several decades.

What has been lost in the simplified print-to-broadcast-to-digital technology-fixated tale of journalism's history is how dramatically journalism changed in the decades just prior to the internet. The most significant change in American journalism between the 1950s and the rise of the internet and, after 2000, social media is the well-documented emergence of a more aggressive, more independent, more evidence-based, and more interpretive journalism. Besides the work of Carl Sessions Stepp, already mentioned, are other corroborating longitudinal studies. Political scientist Thomas Patterson has shown that leading news outlets grew more and more negative in covering both Republican and Democratic presidential candidates between the 1960s and 1990s.[7] A variety of studies of negativity in the news in European Union countries shows comparable trends in European journalism at the same time.[8] Sociolinguists Steven Clayman and John Heritage and their colleagues have closely examined the questions journalists have asked in presidential press conferences from 1953 to 2000. They found that the questions grew more assertive, even adversarial, over time, and in no year after 1968 did the level of assertiveness ever drop as low as the tallies reached from 1953 to 1967.[9]

Journalism scholar Katherine Fink and I added to this literature with our own study.[10] In what we call "contextual reporting," the journalist's work is less to record the views of key actors in political events and more to analyze and explain them. More than other concurrent changes, this one altered the front page in a way that put a premium on the story or stories *behind* the story. The move from writing down what political leaders said to contextualizing what they said and

did, and why, offered a new model of journalism. We looked at a sample of front pages in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Milwaukee Journal* for 1955, 1967, 1979, 1991, and 2003. The new model seeped into the work of journalism with surprisingly little fanfare. Journalists continued to defend their work as "objective" or "balanced" while, in practice, transforming what they meant by such terms. Fink and I found that in 1955, in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Milwaukee Journal*, 85 percent of front-page stories were conventional who-what-when-where stories, 9 percent contextual, and 6 percent "other." Focus on that first figure and track it through succeeding years: in 1955, 85 percent of all front-page stories were conventional who-what-when-where stories; in 1967, 79 percent; in 1979, 60 percent; in 1991, 51 percent; and by 2003, 47 percent. In 2003, then, about half of front-page stories were forms of contextual reporting. Contextual journalism emerged as a powerful and prevalent companion to conventional reporting. The news media became an institution to reckon with as never before, and not because news organizations had political agendas of their own, although sometimes they did, but because they had attained a preeminent role in civil society as a monitor of government.

This does not mean that all was well with American journalism by the 1990s, but it does mean that the news media have not fallen from the great days of magazine muckrakers in the first decade of the twentieth century, like Ida Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens, or the days of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Casual or simply nostalgic analysts have fallen for the temptation of a "declinist" portrait of historical trends. But the Ida Tarbell days of muckraking lasted just a few years and never extended very far beyond a handful of middle-class national magazines; "muckraking," as Teddy Roosevelt derisively labeled it at the time, had little influence on the daily press. And when Woodward and Bernstein more than half a century later broke open the Watergate story, it took months for any other news organization to assign reporters to the story. Investigative reporting à la Woodward and Bernstein certainly grew beyond *The Washington Post*, but it has never been a quantitatively significant part of any news organization's budget or time on the air or space on the page, at least not until the establishment of ProPublica (founded in 2007) and other substantial online news organizations that devote themselves primarily to investigative reporting.

What did change, and changed in a major way, was a move from who-what-when-where reporting to analytical "how" and "why" reporting, often focusing on a broader time frame than the past twenty-four hours, giving a context for the story at hand.

People of an ardently conservative persuasion judge the media to be very liberal; people of powerfully liberal convictions find the media to be pawns in the hands of conservatives. This is a familiar enough phenomenon to have acquired a name in academia: the "hostile media effect."[11] The common response of journal-

ists has been that "we must be doing our job right if we have offended people both left and right." But the news media will always offend partisans of the far left and the far right; partisan judgments of media bias are consistently unreliable. The lesson, for my purposes here, is that perfectly sane and intelligent, but politically hypersensitive, people may arrive at wildly off-base conclusions about the media. People think they know the media; what they do not know is how their preconceptions shape what they know.

Our age, like so many others, is an age of both credulity and skepticism, but what may be distinctive about our time is that the skepticism is approved, encouraged, and taught. Complaints about the snarkiness of reporters and columnists did not begin with social media, as the opening quotation from Fitzgerald in 1920 indicates. The capacity of journalism to demean and destroy is not a new discovery. But there is something different now: the institutionalization of skepticism as a value. To be accepted as a grown-up, there is now a cultural pressure to be, like the Princeton graduates of Fitzgerald's novel a century ago, knowing, critical, and skeptical, if not cynical.

What is "trust"? And what is "the media" or "the news" or "journalism" that people are trusting or distrusting? What do respondents in surveys think the question is that they are supposed to be answering?

The question of declining trust in the news media is vexed not only because survey respondents may not understand what "trust" means, but also because "the media" is not a readily comprehensible entity. What further complicates the analysis of declining trust is the underlying premise that the high level of trust in the early 1960s we have descended from was a good thing. But trust in institutions is salutary for democracy only to a point. The decline in trust in most institutions that public polling has documented since the 1960s was a decline from what was arguably much too unquestioning a level of trust. This is clearly true with the federal government, the media, banking, corporate America, organized labor, and organized religion. Trust must be distinguished from complacency, the kind of complacency that accepted President Eisenhower's lies about the U-2 spy plane, President Kennedy's lies about the "missile gap," President Johnson's lies about the war in Vietnam, and President Nixon's lies about Watergate. It required the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s to shake that overgenerous level of deference to American political institutions and reduce it to a level of "civic skepticism" more fitting for a democratic society.[12]

Some common phrases like "blaming the messenger" or "killing the messenger" go back at least to ancient Greece, when Sophocles in *Antigone* notes, "no one loves the messenger who brings bad news." As news grew more negative and more critical, people had more reason to find journalism distasteful. What people do not like about the media is its implicit or explicit criticism of their heroes or their

home teams. In a two-party system like that of the United States, the president is either Republican or Democrat, and confidence in the president or the presidency is typically significantly higher among Republicans when there is a Republican president and higher among Democrats when there is a Democratic president. So we might amend "nobody loves the bringer of bad tidings" to add "no one loves to hear *good* news of the opposing party." To the extent that the news flatters an opponent or criticizes a fellow partisan, trust measured by surveys will decline in ways that have little (or even nothing) to do with some deeper or abiding level of trust in the institution, only with portraits of the incumbent leaders of the institution.

Today, the news media can be understood as one of a set of knowledge-producing institutions in a "knowledge society." When sociologist Daniel Bell popularized the term "post-industrial society" in the early 1970s to define our times, he wrote that he just as well could have named it the "knowledge society," the "information society," or the "professional society."[13] In any event, the university, as the location for the formation of professionals in science and engineering and for the advancement of research generally, became, in Bell's view, the central institution of the postindustrial world after World War II. And while academics, if they think about these matters at all, have largely abandoned the effort to locate a central guiding value for higher education – at least since University of California President Clark Kerr in 1963 dubbed universities "multiversities" – higher education has implicitly adopted organized skepticism as a supreme principle.[14] This is a dogma of humility, the conviction that what we know and what we profess, whether in physics or sociology or literary studies, will be challenged and will be reconstituted in a different shape, and that this is how human knowledge advances toward a new temporary consolidation (and another and another thereafter). At the San Francisco Women's March early in 2017, a child held up a sign that read: "What do we want? Evidence-based science. When do we want it? After peer review." If the university has a creed, that is it.

Since 1945, more and more journalists came to their work with a college education. Of journalists fifty-five years or older in 1971, 55 percent did not have college degrees; of those fifty-five and older in 2002, only 22 percent were not college graduates. Of journalists aged twenty-five to thirty-four in 2002, only 7 percent were not college graduates.[15] Their readers were more likely to have college degrees, too. Between 1940 and 1970, the percentage of the adult population with college degrees grew from about 3 percent to 20 percent. In 2018, it was 35 percent.

Equally important, college students came to receive a more critical education. Academic culture itself, like journalism, adopted more "adversarial" habits in the 1960s, not politically adversarial but intellectually adversarial. Faculty came to expect students to learn to "read against the text" in courses in the humanities, not simply to learn to revere accepted canons of high culture. And in the sciences and

social sciences, students were increasingly encouraged to imagine themselves as fledgling scientists, moving on to a next level of insight by criticizing the assumptions, methods, or reasoning of the exemplars whose work they were assigned to read. Students heard the message that the morally right way to go through life was with an "open mind," eager for new evidence and not permanently attached to yesterday's convictions.[16]

This may seem far afield from journalism, but as journalism became a more sophisticated, more interpretive, and less rote and ritualistic practice, it began to be recognized as a cousin of the knowledge professions spawned in the universities.

The change in journalism's role was the joint product of several closely connected developments: government, especially the federal government, grew larger and more engaged in people's everyday lives; the culture of journalism changed and journalists asserted themselves more aggressively; and many governmental institutions became less secretive and more attuned to the news media, eager for media attention and approval. As the federal government expanded its reach (in civil rights, economic regulation, environmental responsibility, and social welfare programs like food stamps and medical insurance for the poor and the elderly), as the women's movement proclaimed that "the personal is political," and as stylistic innovation in journalism proved a force of its own, the very idea of "covering politics" changed.[17] American political journalism changed profoundly from "inside Washington" politics toward a widening of focus to economic, social, and cultural life and toward a deepening of investigation and analysis. No example is more powerful than the #MeToo movement that sparked revelations of sexual harassment and sexual abuse around the world, propelled by investigative journalists at *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* magazine.

News coverage became more probing, more analytical, and more transgressive of conventional lines between public and private. In response, powerful institutions adapted to a world in which journalists had a more formidable presence. New legislation made governing more public, such as through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in 1966, which established a formal procedure for citizens to request the release of information held by government agencies and enabled citizens to sue an agency if it failed to release the information in accord with the law.

The FOIA (whose passage was strongly supported by the press) was just the beginning. The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 brought more "sunlight" to Congress. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 required federal agencies to provide and publicly release "environmental impact statements," making possible lawsuits to prevent or modify anticipated government actions affecting the environment. The campaign finance laws of 1971 and 1973 required public disclosure of campaign contributions. These, as well as the Inspector General Act of 1978 and other legislation, were transparency-oriented milestones. Politicians and government officers could now more often be held accountable.[18]

All of this helped support a journalism hitched to a more interpretive ideal of objectivity than the simple routines of "quote one side, quote the other" that guided 1950s reporting.[19] Journalism changed, and changed for the better. No one now defends what one veteran reporter called the "rather sleepy" journalism of the 1950s.[20] The journalism that succeeded it was more intellectually ambitious. It was more "featurized" journalism with front-page stories of an interpretive cast. Consistent with this trend, the Pulitzer Prizes added an award for "explanatory reporting" in 1985; by the 1990s, it attracted so many entries that an administrator of the prizes said things were getting "out of hand."[21]

European journalism moved simultaneously in the same direction, even without the Vietnam War and Watergate. This is recounted in a careful study of Swedish public broadcasting from 1925 to 2005, as well as in studies of German campaign coverage from 1949 to 2005, and accounts of changes toward more critical and more journalist-centered reporting in the Netherlands in the 1990s and in France from the 1960s to 1990s.[22] A comparative study of newspapers in the United States, Britain, Germany, Switzerland, France, and Italy in 1960–1961 and 2006–2007 shows a decrease in "news items" (that is, "he said, she said" conventional news reports) in five of the six countries (not France) and an increase in "information mixed with interpretation" in all six countries.[23] Whatever explanation one arrives at for these changes, it has to account for changes that affected European as well as American journalism, public broadcasting as well as commercial news output, broadcast news as well as print, and all this taking root before the internet.

In the long stretch of history from the democracy of ancient Athens to the twenty-first century, popular government has shifted from what political theorist John Keane has called "assembly" government (picture ancient Athens) to "representative" government (the basic form of democratic governance as it arose in the eighteenth century) to "monitory" democracy.[24] In the United States, "assembly government" was largely limited to local government in New England; the town meeting model never became the template for U.S. state or federal government. In the federal government, representation was the primary governmental form from the country's beginning in 1789 to 1945.

But post 1945, as Keane tells the story, there has been a politicization of everyday life, a sprawl of rights-consciousness, and a new availability of low-cost civic engagement, from 5K runs for breast cancer research and benefit concerts to blogging and hashtag-spawned social movements. In this era, representative institutions constituted through elections remain central, but they are supplemented in ways notable enough to qualify as a new species of democracy. Various terms for this new model of democracy have been offered – from "audience democracy" to "between-election democracy" to "counter-democracy" – but Keane's "monitory democracy" may be the most fitting.[25] Monitory democracy calls attention to

how civil society holds government accountable, not only at the voting booth on election day but in 24/7 surveillance of governmental activity, or what Keane has called "the continuous public chastening of those who exercise power."[26]

The contrast to representative democracy lies particularly in the term "continuous." The character of democracy shifted from one in which citizens normally acted on disapproval of government only by voting to "throw the bums out" on election day to one in which thousands of civil society organizations kept government under surveillance, hundreds of them as nonprofits seeking what they judge to be the public good. There were social movements in the nineteenth century, but the proliferation in the twentieth century of nongovernmental organizations combined with the availability of information from the (often reluctant) government, the spread of public skepticism as a value, and the amplification of all this by the rapid dissemination of information online provides the infrastructure for "continuous public chastening." In monitory democracy, journalism has adopted self-consciously and assertively the role of holding government accountable to its constitutional duties and to a broad obligation to serve the public. "Accountability" as a general term for holding government accountable to the public, or to national laws and traditions, has come into general usage only in the past generation, growing rapidly from the 1990s on.[27] "Accountability journalism" or "accountability reporting" are, likewise, terms of relatively recent invention. Leonard Downie Jr., *The Washington Post*'s executive editor from 1991 to 2008, was one of the first to make regular use of the term "accountability journalism."[28]

If Keane is right, democracy has morphed from representative to monitory since 1945 and more intensively so since the early 1970s. If Bell is right, society has become less social-elite-centered and more university-centered and science-centered since 1945. And if I am right, journalism has changed dramatically in the period from 1965 to 1980 or 1990, never abandoning the ideal of "objectivity" but in practice demanding a more interpretive and less rigid version of it. There is now less need to trust journalists, in a sense, because they identify their sources more often than they did in the 1950s and 1960s. But there is more reason to question them because their ambition is to explain events, not just to record them.

That is all part of the context for today's general cultural disquiet, but it fails to recognize a decided resistance to this "knowledge society" world with its attachment to peer review, its commitment to humility, and its expectation that the content of truth will change over time. This resistance has grown dramatically, and on January 6, 2021, unnervingly. One of its nontrivial outcomes is that Republicans are far more likely than Democrats to distrust the media, seeing journalism – correctly – as part of the knowledge society. Republican leaders are also more likely than their Democratic counterparts to reject commonplaces of medical science, notably the efficacy of vaccinations in diminishing the incident and intensity of illnesses, including COVID-19. There is a growing gap between Republicans and

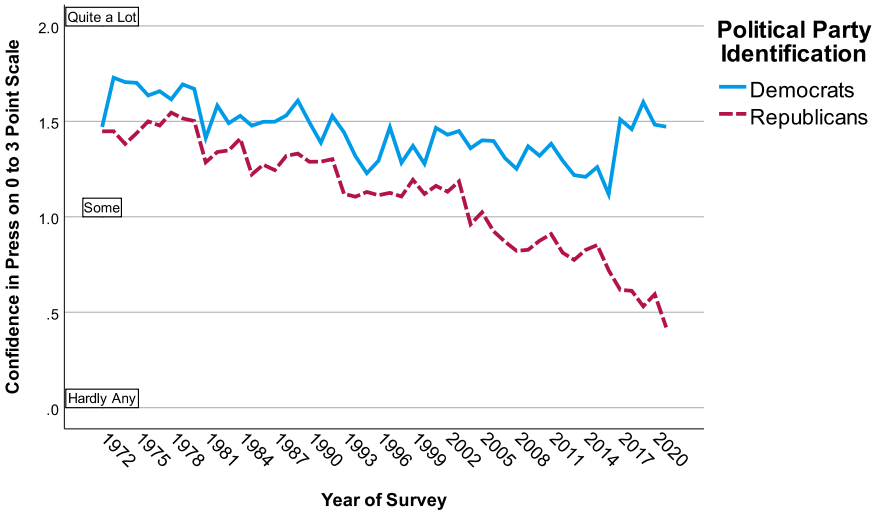
Democrats in trusting the media, and while Democrats since 2000 have shown steady or growing trust in the media, Republicans' confidence in the media has continued a downward plunge (see Figure 1).

Is this true for college-educated Republicans, exposed directly to higher education's evidence-centered ethos? Very much so. Their trust in the media declined at about the same rate as the decline among Republicans with only a high school education. What to make of this? One can say, easily enough, that this is a vivid reminder that political opinions are – as they have long been – more about identity than about information. The whole notion of "the informed citizen" was at most a minor theme for America's founding fathers whose experience of elections was one in which voters were expected to judge candidates' character and community standing. Aspirants for office offered the voters their good name, not advocacy of a party or a policy. The ideal of the informed citizen arose in the Progressive Era (1890–1920) as part of a reform movement that made its mark on journalists and intellectuals and various segments of liberalism including, perhaps, high school history teachers and writers of election day editorials, but it did not lead masses of people to deviate from the ethnic, class, and religious foundations of their political selves.[29]

Moreover, the difference between Republicans and Democrats in the surveys may be accentuated by a gap between what pollsters think they are finding and what respondents think they are doing. When the polling experts probe for what factual political knowledge people have, the respondents may be answering as "cheerleaders" for their favorite party or candidate. Pollsters think they are learning about partisan differences in perception of reality, but poll respondents may turn out to be taking "low-cost opportunities to express . . . partisan affinities."[30]

The divide between Republicans and Democrats in their level of trust in various institutions, including the media, is implicitly reinforced by political scientist Katherine Cramer's remarkable in-depth interviews with rural Wisconsin citizens in her 2016 *The Politics of Resentment*. What, she set out to discover, led so many Wisconsin voters to deeply resent the state's leading cities (Milwaukee and Madison); its state employees in general; the people who "shower before work, not afterwards," as one of her interviewees put it; the pensions and health insurance that state employment provided; and pretty much everything about the University of Wisconsin–Madison, except its football team? Why were rural voters so attached to what Cramer calls "rural consciousness" in the early 2010s and so supportive of then-governor Scott Walker and his campaign to deprive state employees of their collective bargaining rights? Interestingly, the news media play no role in Cramer's study. The rural newspapers were conventionally respectful of incumbent politicians (the Madison and Milwaukee papers were tougher). The political views of the people Cramer talked to came from their communities, not distant media. Her closing chapter is titled "We Teach These Things to Each Other."

Figure 1
Trust in Media by Party Identification, 1972–2020



Source: Henry Brady–Thomas Kent database of confidence questions from Gallup Polls, General Social Survey, and Harris Polls. See Henry E. Brady & Thomas B. Kent, "Fifty Years of Declining Confidence & Increasing Polarization in Trust in American Institutions," *Dædalus* 151 (4) (Fall 2022): 43–66.

Obviously, I share no nostalgia for 1950s journalism. In the representation of people of color and women in the newsroom and in the news, yes, the mainstream media of the 1950s and early 1960s was clearly deficient, and largely blind to its own limitations, like most other institutions of the day. Even as news organizations came to recognize the exclusion of women and people of color in both their newsrooms and their news content and pledged to rectify their practices in and after the 1970s, their performance lagged well behind their stated goals.

As for the representation of political conservatives, it depends on what one means by "political conservatives." If it means "leaders of the Republican Party," no, the mainstream media through the years have consistently represented Republicans and Democrats with roughly the same level of deference or skepticism. True, over time, the news media grew more critical of Republican presidential candidates, but they also grew more critical of Democratic presidential candidates.[31] They grew more critical, period. But as the Republican Party moved further to the right, from the "Tea Party" on through Donald Trump, the task of the

news media has become more complex and more contentious. "He said, she said" is all very well under normal circumstances, but at some point, a party can stake a position so far outside customary democratic values that a journalism committed to democracy has to cry: "Out of bounds!"

The United States seems to have reached that point. A Trump-minded Republican Party that holds to a lie that the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent (although, curiously, the Republicans for House and Senate who were newly elected or returned to office in the same election with the same ballots have no quarrels with the legitimacy of *their* own victories) has in effect proclaimed open opposition to democracy itself.

There is no U.S. precedent for this. It puts the news media in an unenviable position. How does a conscientious journalist seek to be fair-minded between two parties when one of them seeks to trash democracy itself? Do sharply antidemocratic positions deserve an "on the one hand" treatment when the majority of elected leaders of the Republican Party excuse, condone, or applaud armed insurrection against duly elected government? That is the dilemma for the conscientious journalist today.

A closing word about the digital era in journalism: We certainly know the digital space is full of screaming and dreaming on both the far right and the far left. And we know it provides information and entertainment, connection and companionship to many millions, a link for friends and family living far from one another, new access to vital, life-saving information for people who, for instance, suffer from rare diseases. It has opened windows and broadened horizons and, in journalism, increased research capabilities and enabled cooperation among journalists across national borders for unprecedented investigative work.

I would not wish away online communication. Utopian dreams for the internet have been scaled back, even as nightmares of interminable communicative disaster linger. In politics, online communication is laced with venom, dangerous fantasy, intentional misinformation, and verbal violence particularly toward women and people of color. Is this any worse than what once was written on the walls of public bathrooms? Yes, it is, in its targeting of specific, named individuals, in its violations of privacy, in its easy accessibility to the untutored and unstable, and in its terroristic impulse and death threats.[32]

In the wake of the digital revolution, when social media make rumor, gossip, fake news, parody, and other quasinews genres just as easy to access as content produced by professional journalism (or so it seems), journalists have to wonder whether their function in society has fundamentally shifted. My sense of the research is that portraits of a move from gatekeeper professionals communicating vertically to the public toward horizontal communication among members of the

public communicating to one another exaggerate how much of a monopoly "gatekeeper" journalism had on the public mind in the past. They also fail to acknowledge that today most people who go online for news still get their news directly or indirectly from mainstream media. While much research is underway, still more research is needed! A satisfying synthesis has so far proved elusive.[33]

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ENDNOTES

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[28] Leonard Downie Jr., email communication, November 22, 2017, in which Downie writes, "I believe I was the first to use the term accountability journalism widely and often."

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[33] For one among many cautious assessments of the power of social media in promoting broad distrust, see Adam M. Enders, Joseph Uscinski, Michelle I. Seelig, et al., "The Relationship between Social Media, Political Behavior Use and Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation," *Political Behavior* (2021): 1–24. They conclude, as does "a growing body of literature," that "the effects of online misinformation and conspiracy theories are likely smaller than commonly assumed and concentrated among audiences exhibiting particular characteristics," notably, a high willingness to accept conspiratorial claims.