

# [***The Erosion of America's Civil Dialogue and the Path to Recovery***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BC9-R181-DY68-100F-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** Media brands like Newsweek have a role to play in restoring civility and accountability in our public discourse – and it begins by understanding how changes in the media landscape led us here in the first place.

**Body**

*By Dayan Candappa*

"Fake news."

When [*Donald Trump*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/donald-trump?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) began using this phrase it became clear that something fundamental had changed in American public discourse. This two-word statement—and its appeal to many millions of Americans—were symptoms of a deeper malaise afflicting our national conversation for years.

These problems began long before Trump's political ascent. Of course there was never a time when all Americans trusted all media. Nor was it ever the case that newsrooms covered every story in an assiduously neutral fashion. But there was certainly a time when newsrooms took their role as conveners and moderators of the national conversation seriously, when editors and executives paid more attention to earning and keeping the trust of broad swathes of the American public than they did to the adulation or wrath of a particular tribe.

Over the last several decades, those values have changed. By the time Trump was in the White House, most newsrooms behaved as if they were operating in a one-party state. Readers, listeners and viewers could tell which party ran the show by simply scanning the headlines or tuning in for a few minutes. They could just as easily find a newsroom that toed the other party's line, if they preferred that.

Of course, media companies made quite a bit of money playing to tribal loyalty and ideological consistency. And news consumers everywhere gained the satisfaction of having their worldview affirmed again and again. But somewhere, in the midst of all the profit and partisan outrage, America lost something. A fundamental breakdown has ensued; [***politics*** *is polarized*](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/) and [*trust in media is at all time lows*](https://youtu.be/VdH7G9I30No?list=PLZ9z-Af5ISaswq9yoHM32olz4-AITb1Dl). Dialogue has fragmented into isolated, self-confirming filter bubbles. We seem to be engaging more but understanding one another less, a cycle that is to the immediate detriment of a democratic system, based principally on civil discourse.

Media brands like *Newsweek* have a role to play in restoring civility and accountability in our public discourse – and it begins by understanding how changes in the media landscape led us here in the first place.

The media industry has changed rapidly over the past 15 years, but two seismic shifts in particular explain how we arrived: (1) social media disrupted news distribution, and (2) the changing nature of news monetization.

**Social Media, Mediating the Social**

Most Americans now get their news from social media, platforms where algorithms drive users toward engagement, above all else. "People learn to express more outrage over time because they are rewarded by the basic design of social media," [*reported one recent Yale study on Twitter behaviors*](https://news.yale.edu/2021/08/13/likes-and-shares-teach-people-express-more-outrage-online), because outrage propels engagement, or better, "enragement." This has led to a digital landscape where controversy and anger about ideas move faster than the ideas themselves.

We've also lost our compass for who to trust. The social news feeds flatten all content into the same format, blurring the lines between different publishers. Whether it's a reputable news outlet or a dubious blog, all content appears the same in the infinite scroll of platforms like [*Facebook*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/facebook?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), [*Reddit*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/reddit?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) or [*Google*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/google?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships). This has diluted the brand equity of publishers that spent decades winning trust from the American public, and sowed fertile ground for actual fake news and misinformation. Today, Americans under 30 trust social media platforms[*almost as much as national journalism organizations*](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/10/27/u-s-adults-under-30-now-trust-information-from-social-media-almost-as-much-as-from-national-news-outlets/).

Partly in response to the fickle nature of a business based on social media-driven virality, publishers have moved toward subscription models to fund their journalism. Subscriptions are a winning business model, but also create incentives for news publishers to affirm their subscribers' worldview, creating echo chambers and reinforcing filter bubbles. Paywalls also lock out nonpaying viewers, restricting the amount of free-flowing news from an outlet with an established subscription program.

There are at least three unintended consequences. Real news becomes indecipherable from truly fake news. Social media users are pushed to engage most deeply with controversial divisive issues, while access to high quality content is restricted by paywalls and subscriptions.

Does any of this feel familiar?

**Platforming Debate**

Lately, public discourse seems fixated more on who has the right to participate rather than on the rules of engagement. We're witnessing a contentious debate around "platforming" and "de-platforming" voices, suggesting that the role of media and social media companies is mainly to decide who gets to participate. The result is a confusing mix of voices considered legitimate or illegitimate, instead of a discourse of ideas rooted in civility and informed by a common set of facts.

If there is good news in all this it is that the era of outrage fed virally appears to be fading. Social media companies are pulling away from news, forcing publishers to ask tough questions. Can we build an audience around transparency and trustworthiness rather than outrage? And will subscribers pay for news with which they profoundly disagree?

The way forward is not to focus on the platforming of voices, but the structure of the platforms themselves. At *Newsweek*, we think part of the solution is to platform *debate itself.*

The nature of debate inherently encourages the exploration of diverse viewpoints and cultivates a deeper understanding of complex issues. It presents an opportunity to reframe contentious conversations into constructive exchanges, promoting empathy and mutual respect.

This revitalization effort also necessitates a bold move from publishers to present debate between multiple perspectives on contentious topics. We must reimagine the role of opinion pieces, showcasing the discourse itself – the interplay of ideas – rather than merely promoting a singular viewpoint. This shift may unsettle some readers, but it's an essential step towards restoring a healthier civic dialogue.

Above all, a renewed commitment to the principles of journalism is paramount in restoring trust in media. Civil dialogue thrives on a shared reality, a common set of facts that forms the foundation of any meaningful debate. This necessitates rigorous fact-checking, transparent sourcing, and an unwavering dedication to the truth. It also requires a degree of humility, a willingness to earn back lost credibility with transparency and a commitment to trustworthiness. In the words of Newsweek's mission, it is a commitment to "speak to—and listen to—readers across the political and cultural spectrum."

The decline of American public discourse is not inevitable. It has real causes and there are real solutions for addressing them. Newsweek Voices is our effort at one such solution. If we and other news organizations adopt more of the structure of formal competitive debate, we are one step closer to restoring our public discourse to health.

*Dayan Candappa*

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[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2350987/dayan-candappa.jpg)

**Graphic**

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