

Why Is Everyone Mad at the Mainstream Media?

IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY, the news media were one of America's most trusted institutions. The 1956 American National Election Study (ANES) found that 66% of Americans thought newspapers were fair, while only 27% said they were unfair. These views were bipartisan, with 78% of Republicans and 64% of Democrats viewing newspapers as fair. When the Roper Organization asked a similar question about network news in two 1964 polls, 71% and 61% of the public thought it was fair, while just 12% and 17% thought it was unfair. In 1973, when the General Social Survey (GSS) began regularly measuring confidence in various national institutions, only 15% of respondents had "hardly any" confidence in the press.

Prominent journalists were among the most respected figures in the country. A famous 1972 poll found that 72% of Americans trusted CBS *Evening News* anchor Walter Cronkite, a higher share than any other public figure received in the survey. In 1976, *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's investigations that uncovered the Watergate scandal were dramatized in a movie adaptation of their book *All the President's Men*. In the commercially successful film, the journalists were depicted heroically and played by Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman, two of the era's most charismatic movie stars.¹ In popular culture, journalists were noble defenders of democracy and the public interest.

Today, the news media's place in society has changed. In the 2008 GSS, the portion of Americans expressing "hardly any" confidence in the press had risen to 45%. A 2004 *Chronicle of Higher Education* poll found that only 10% of Americans had "a great deal" of confidence in the "national news media," about the same as lawyers, in whom 9% of Americans had "a great deal" of confidence.

This decline in media trust was accompanied by a fragmentation of the news industry. Once, the media landscape largely consisted of a few national television news networks, local television news, and newspapers. The vast majority of these journalists were committed to a style of "objective" journalism that rose to prominence in the early twentieth century.

¹ See West (2001, 64). Details on the polling results reported in the first three paragraphs of this chapter are provided in chapters 3 and 4.



*"So is Cameron Diaz really a babe, or is that another thing
we've been led to believe by the biased media?"*

Figure 1-1. Cartoon from the *New Yorker*. Source: The New Yorker Collection from cartoonbank.com. All Rights Reserved.

As a result, there was little diversity in coverage styles. Media choices have greatly proliferated in the past 40 years. New options include political talk radio, cable news channels, Internet news and opinion sites, as well as many entertainment-oriented media options. These choices offer a great variety of news styles, including more partisan and tabloid-oriented approaches.

As the media landscape has expanded, institutional (or mainstream) media outlets have come under increasing criticism from politicians, activists, and pundits. Sometimes these criticisms are transmitted by institutional news sources. Yet they also come through the newer, alternative media outlets. As a result, the trustworthiness of more professionalized forms of journalism is under steady assault.

Overall, those practicing conventional, objective journalism are in a much different position than they were a generation ago. They are dramatically less trusted by the public, face harsh and persistent political criticism, and must compete with less conventional news sources as well as many other entertainment options.

THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

It can be easy to see this shift as a fall from grace. Once, institutional journalists were powerful guardians of the republic, maintaining high standards of political discourse and routing out misbehavior by politicians and other public officials. Now, institutional journalists lack public trust and are swarmed by newer forms of reporting that flout the old standards, potentially leaving the public defenseless against political misbehavior. In this way of thinking, a powerful media establishment free of competition or political attacks is the natural and optimal state of the world, interrupted by strange, nefarious deviations in recent decades. These trends, therefore, should be reversed and journalism returned to its proper place in American politics and society.

In an article subtitled “Why Is Everyone Mad at the Mainstream Media?” Nicholas Lemann (2005), dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, recalls some of his first memories of the media establishment from his childhood in the early 1960s:

I remember being sent, as a child, from Louisiana on summer visits to my grandparents in New Jersey. My grandfather, who was a pediatrician in the town of Perth Amboy, would sit in his easy chair on Sundays reading the [*New York*] *Times* in a spirit not dissimilar to that of someone taking the sacrament. After finishing one article, he’d begin the next—who was he to decide what, of the material the *Times*’ editors had chosen to publish, he had the right to skip? Quite often, the aural accompaniment to this exercise was the soothing music of WQXR, the *Times*’ radio station, which between segments of classical music would occasionally air interviews with *Times* correspondents and critics—men, I inferred from their calm, distinguished voices, with neat Vandyke beards, their heads wreathed in contemplative clouds of pipe smoke. (170–72)

He goes on to recount the institutional media’s glory days: “The civil rights movement, the Vietnam war (in particular, the Pentagon Papers), and Watergate all registered as examples of the big, prestigious journalistic organs asserting themselves, rather than merely passing along what government officials had said, and being rewarded with more power and influence and more admiration from the public” (172).

This is very similar to U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s historic interpretation.² In the *Hastings Law Review*, Stewart (1974–75, 634) summarizes his view: “The primary purpose of the constitutional

² For more on Stewart’s views on the role of the press in American democracy and his inability to persuade a Supreme Court majority to accept them, see Cook (2005).

guarantee of a free press was . . . to create a fourth institution of Government as an additional check on the three official branches. . . . The relevant metaphor, I think, is the metaphor of the Fourth Estate.” Consistent with this, MSNBC pundit and longtime *Newsweek* columnist Howard Fineman (2005) laments the changing place of the institutional media in American society by saying,

A political party is dying before our eyes—and I don’t mean the Democrats. I’m talking about the “mainstream media” . . . [which] is regarded with ever growing suspicion by American voters, viewers and readers, who increasingly turn for information and analysis only to non-[mainstream] outlets that tend to reinforce the sectarian views of discrete slices of the electorate. . . . Still, the notion of a neutral, non-partisan mainstream press was, to me at least, worth holding onto. Now it’s pretty much dead, at least as the public sees things. . . . It’s hard to know now who, if anyone, in the “media” has any credibility.

Along similar lines, veteran journalist James Fallows (1996, 1) mournfully opens his book critiquing political journalism by stating, “Americans have never been truly fond of their press. Through the last decade, however, their disdain for the media establishment has reached new levels. Americans believe that the news media have become too arrogant, cynical, scandal-minded, and destructive.” Ted Koppel (2010), longtime host of ABC’s *Nightline*, expresses his own discontent with the demise of the mid-twentieth-century media regime, writing,

To witness Keith Olbermann . . . suspended even briefly last week for making financial contributions to Democratic political candidates seemed like a whimsical, arcane holdover from a long-gone era of television journalism, when the networks considered the collection and dissemination of substantive and unbiased news to be a public trust. . . . While I can appreciate the financial logic of drowning television viewers in a flood of opinions designed to confirm their own biases, the trend is not good for the republic. It is, though, the natural outcome of a growing sense of national entitlement. . . . [A]mong the many benefits we have come to believe the founding fathers intended for us, the latest is news we can choose. . . . Much of the American public used to gather before the electronic hearth every evening, separate but together, while Walter Cronkite, Chet Huntley, David Brinkley, Frank Reynolds and Howard K. Smith offered relatively unbiased accounts of information that their respective news organizations believed the public needed to know. . . . It was an imperfect, untidy little Eden of journalism where reporters were motivated to gather facts about important issues.

While almost all commentators on the media at least briefly mention that there were previous exceptions to mainstream media hegemony, many still give the impression that this dominance is historically typical. It is the natural and superior state of the world. As quoted above, Fal-lows claims antipathy toward the media has “reached new levels.” Similarly, former editor in chief of *The Hotline* and current *Congressional Quarterly* blogger Craig Crawford (2006, 25) writes, “Today’s media is as bullied as ever.”

Commentators depict the consequences of declining trust in the institutional media as severe. Crawford (2006) expresses concern that “. . . the vilification of the news media by politicians has diminished the power of an independent press” (11) and that “[p]ublic distrust of the news media is one of the most hazardous political challenges now facing Americans” (19). David S. Broder (2006), the longtime *Washington Post* columnist considered the dean of the Washington press corps, notes that “The hardest question any Washington reporter faces these days, whenever talking with voters outside the capital, is simply: Can I believe anything I’m told by those politicians in Washington—or by the press?” In lamenting the bipartisanship of attacks on media trustworthiness, then-editor of the *New Republic* Franklin Foer (2005) writes,

Newspapers deserve an army of enemies that nag them to be less lazy, less timid, and less nice. But they don’t deserve the savage treatment that they routinely receive in the blogosphere. . . . [T]he blogosphere nurses an ideological disdain for “Mainstream Media”—or MSM, as it has derisively (and somewhat adolescently) come to be known. Perusing the *Huffington Post*, a hub of liberal blogging, you’ll find the MSM lambasted for its “usual sub-par, unsatisfactory, wholly misinformed, shitty job”; the MSM is, after all, filled with “lazy stenographer[s] . . . posing as journalist[s who] will gladly cut and paste this Republican propaganda.” Or, to put it even more bluntly, the “Beltway media really makes no effort to do anything other than parrot totally out-of-touch conventional wisdom—no matter how inane, stupid and ridiculous it is.” You would expect this kind of populism from the right, which long ago pioneered the trashing of the MSM . . . [but by] repeating conservative criticisms about the allegedly elitist, sycophantic, biased MSM, liberal bloggers have played straight into conservative hands. These bloggers have begun unwittingly doing conservatives’ dirty work.

While no author puts things this plainly, I can roughly summarize this conventional wisdom with two assertions. First, a widely trusted, elite, professional media establishment is a natural part of national politics. Recent trends toward a more distrusted media establishment under fire from politicians and a more fragmented and heterogeneous media landscape,

while not entirely unprecedented, are still perilous developments. Second, declining trust in the institutional media has large and potentially dire consequences, preventing journalists from checking political power and the public from learning essential information about public affairs.

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

This book examines the role of the news media in the American political system. In doing so, it especially focuses on the causes and consequences of declining public trust in the institutional news media over the past 40 years. It finds that the type of conventional wisdom summarized above is only partially correct.

The conventional wisdom's first claim is false. The existence of an independent, powerful, widely respected news media establishment is an historical anomaly. Prior to the twentieth century, such an institution had never existed in American history. We should not misinterpret this circumstance, whatever its merits, as the historical norm.

There are structural factors working against the existence of a dominant institutional news media. Politicians who desire public support feel threatened by independent sources of information. Thus, they tend to use whatever means are available to prevent the media from becoming a trusted independent news source. Political leaders have used various methods for this task throughout history, including government suppression of independent media, founding and promoting government-controlled news outlets, and publicly attacking the credibility of outlets outside their control.

Another structural impediment is market demand for more partisan or entertaining styles of news. Even when journalists desire to produce informative, nonpartisan, nonsensational news, which can enhance the profession's respectability and trustworthiness, the market for this style of news is limited. It is difficult to find a large audience willing to regularly consume this type of news when other options are available. In this way, market pressure leads to more sensational and partisan forms of news. Both reduce trust in the institutional media, the former directly and the latter by transmitting partisan media criticism.

The mid-twentieth-century institutional news media briefly gained the public's trust for two reasons. First, low levels of economic competition enabled journalism to become highly professionalized. Journalists had the autonomy to enforce a professional norm of objectivity, greatly reducing salacious or explicitly partisan news coverage. Second, the lack of party polarization reduced political criticism of the institutional press. When these two things ended, trust in the media declined.

On the other hand, the conventional wisdom's second assertion, that media distrust has major negative consequences, is true to some extent. Media distrust is consequential. It changes the way people acquire information and form political preferences.

Overall, media distrust leads to substantial information loss among the mass public. Those who distrust the media both resist the information they receive from institutional news outlets and increasingly seek out partisan news sources that confirm their preexisting views. As a result, these individuals are less responsive to national policy outcomes, relying more on their political predispositions to form beliefs and preferences.

As the institutional media's mid-twentieth-century hegemony has ended in recent decades, journalists producing a professionalized style of news have not disappeared. Rather than returning to the media landscape that existed before journalism's professionalization, institutional journalists and news organizations now compete with newer news outlets employing different styles. As a result, institutional media trust has not become less important as the media has fragmented.

If anything, people now have stronger views about the institutional media, and those views are more consequential. Media trust's impact is large because people must regularly choose whether to believe messages coming from institutional or alternative sources as well as whether to simply rely on their partisanship to form their beliefs. In this way, declining media trust is a contributing factor to the polarization of the American political system (while also being a partial consequence of it). In the extreme, the partisanship and unresponsiveness to information that results from media distrust could prevent the public from holding politicians accountable for policy outcomes.

However, while largely agreeing that media distrust has potentially negative consequences, I add an important caveat. It is doubtful that returning to a depolarized party system with a highly respected and homogeneous news industry is either feasible or desirable. The mid-twentieth-century party system was a product of a unique historical circumstance, where civil rights constituted a salient national issue while remaining separate from the main partisan and ideological cleavages. Additionally, the lack of competitive pressure faced by news organizations was a product of a unique period in the media's technological development, which would be impossible to re-create.

In addition to being infeasible, restoring these circumstances is not necessarily even desirable. Party systems that fail to offer voters clear alternatives can also prevent them from holding elected leaders accountable, the same consequence we fear media distrust producing. Furthermore, there are other reasons to doubt whether the public should put all its faith in a homogeneous style of news practiced by a relatively small

number of media organizations. What if the media establishment fails to live up to its professional ideal of providing accurate and objective information? In addition, is it not desirable for people to have the personal freedom to choose to consume more partisan or sensational news? Finally, would there be unintended consequences of policy interventions intrusive enough to completely reverse the tendency toward more a fragmented, less professionalized media landscape?

In light of these considerations, the United States should strive for a balance between a highly trusted, homogenous media establishment with little viable competition and an extremely fragmented media environment without any widely trusted information sources. In this middle path, individuals would continue to have a wide range of choices, including partisan, sensational, or conventionally objective news, as well as the option of avoiding news altogether. Yet the remaining institutional journalists and news outlets would continue to transmit important political information, with a significant portion of the public retaining enough confidence in the institutional press to use this information to hold government accountable.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book marshals several types of evidence to make this argument. The next three chapters put the American news media's relationship with the mass public and place in the political system in historical context. Chapter 2 reviews relations between the press and political leaders from 15th-century Europe, following the invention of the printing press, through late-nineteenth-century America. It reveals that, through time, political leaders were consistently hostile to efforts by the press to become involved in politics as independent actors. While political figures often cultivated party- or government-controlled newspapers, they attacked newspapers that either strived for independent influence or affiliated with rival politicians.

Chapter 3 traces the evolution of the American news media from an eclectic mix of partisan, independent, or nonpolitical newspapers and journals into an influential political institution by the mid-twentieth century. The institutionalization of the American press coincided with less party polarization, a reduction in partisan media criticism, and a reduction in economic competition faced by media outlets. These trends peaked in the 1950s and 1960s.

Chapter 4 shows how all these patterns reversed from the 1970s through the 2000s. While reviewing this, I look carefully at attitudes toward the institutional news media in these decades. Using a variety of polling data, I

examine what people mean when they express an opinion about the news media as an institution. I conclude that in recent decades Americans have had well-formed opinions about the institutional news media, which are stable over time and consistent across different question wordings.

Chapter 5 explores what factors cause people to distrust the institutional news media by analyzing data from national surveys and two original survey experiments. Despite many different claims in the literature, I find the strongest evidence supporting the role of two variables in reducing media trust: elite partisan media criticism and tabloid-style news coverage. While I find some effects of other variables, they tend to be either smaller in size, not statistically significant at comparable sample sizes and dosages, or more contingent on circumstances.

Chapter 6 explores the consequences of media distrust for the ways in which people learn politically relevant information, such as national conditions in major policy domains. Employing cross-sectional, panel, and original experimental data, I find that media distrust affects how people learn, particularly about national security and economic performance. Those who distrust the media are more resistant to new information about national conditions, instead relying more on their predispositions to form their beliefs.

Chapter 7 tests whether these effects on political learning have consequences for election preference formation. Using panel and pooled cross-sectional survey data, I find that distrust of the news media alters presidential and congressional voting through its effects on learning. Those who distrust the media base their votes more on partisan predispositions and less on current national conditions.

Chapter 8 returns to the overall argument outlined in this chapter. It reiterates that circumstances like those in mid-twentieth-century America, where the news media constituted a respected, powerful, independent force in politics, are rare. It further argues that the two major factors that reduce media trust—partisan criticism and tabloid-style news—are natural consequences of political and economic competition, respectively. The mid-twentieth century was unusual in that these competitive forces were both greatly curbed. I argue that extreme versions of either a centralized, homogenous, unchallenged, and trusted news media establishment or a fragmented, partisan, sensationalist media are both undesirable. I conclude by discussing several possible ways to achieve balance between these extremes.