It's On You:
Reflection, Knowledge, and Trust in a New Media Environment

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Chapter I: Introduction

“Wherever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government.”

—Thomas Jefferson

For a democracy to function properly, trust must exist within the polity. Trust in the government working for the people. Trust in the government's processes. And trust in one's fellow citizens. Without the presence of trust, effective governing and a healthy society is hard to achieve.[1] Trust doesn't just materialize, though. A product of transparency in governance, provision of basic goods, and the upholding of democratic values, trust is cultivated, earned, and fostered over long periods of time. Without trust, democracies devolve into chaos without shared values, processes, and future goals. At its essence, trust is a form of glue that plays a vital role in holding functioning democracies together.

Henry Brady and Thomas Kent, both University of California-Berkeley affiliated political scientists, explain how trust has declined at different levels in their article *Fifty Years of Declining Confidence and Increasing Polarization in Trust in American Institutions*. Using primarily Gallup data over the past 50 years, Brady and Kent illustrate how confidence has dropped in 19 of 20 "political and nonpolitical" institutions, with the military being the one outlier.[2]

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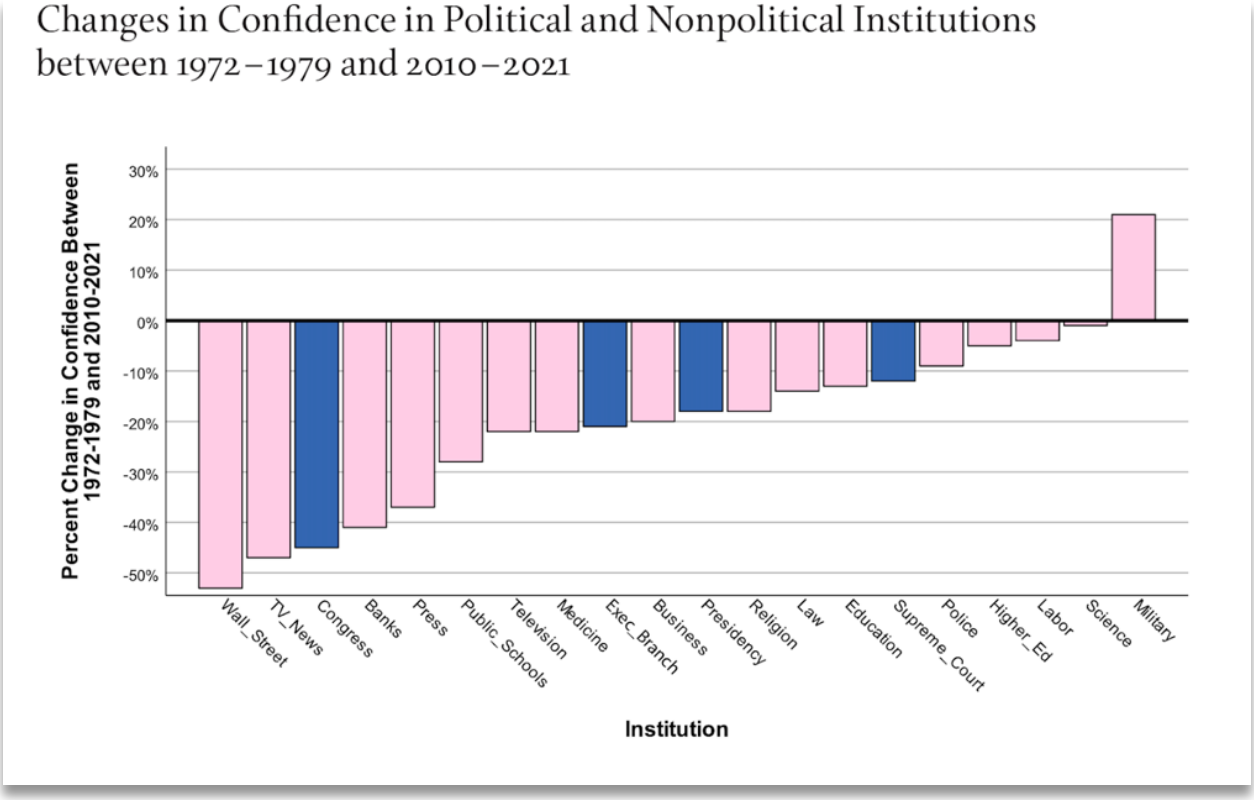
[1] "The Aspen Institute - - The New Media Environment." https://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/Knight-Commission-TMD/2019/report/details/0286/Knight-Commission (September 15, 2022).

[2] "Fifty Years of Declining Confidence & Increasing Polarization in Trust in American Institutions." 2022. *American Academy of Arts & Sciences*. https://www.amacad.org/publication/fifty-years-declining-confidence-increasing-polarization-trust-american-institutions (April 23, 2023).

Figure 1:



In response to the data, Brady and Kent pose the question, "How do we know that confidence questions are capturing something real?" To analyze this, they look at the outlier: the military. What the authors find are confidence peaks that are closely aligned with national and international security episodes, like the Iraq and Gulf Wars, and 9/11(Brady and Kent 2022). They then perform the same analysis for Wall Street and find confidence ebbs and flows with major economic events and crises.

For the political institutions (Supreme Court, Executive Branch, Congress, and the Presidency) in the study, confidence is based on which party is in control, as one might imagine. However, the correlation between party in power and trust is much clearer for the Presidency and

the Executive Branch. While Congress and the Supreme Court are more complicated due to their political makeup, they exhibit some of the same tendencies (Brady and Kent 2022).

In America, the past 20 years have been marked by major political shifts, along with massive scientific and technological innovation. The congruence of these two trends has shifted the political psychology and spirit of American society. Polarization has increased and the ideological divide has grown immensely (Settle).[3] Those on opposite sides of the political aisle increasingly refuse to listen to one another and draw character conclusions based on political beliefs (Settle 2018, 7).

Brady and Kent exhibit the increasing polarization in relation to declining trust. Figures two and three demonstrate how trust has not only declined, but differently, depending on what side of the aisle one finds themself on.

Figure 2:

[3] Settle, Jaime. 2018. *Frenemies*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Polarization in Confidence in Institutions in 1972 – 1979

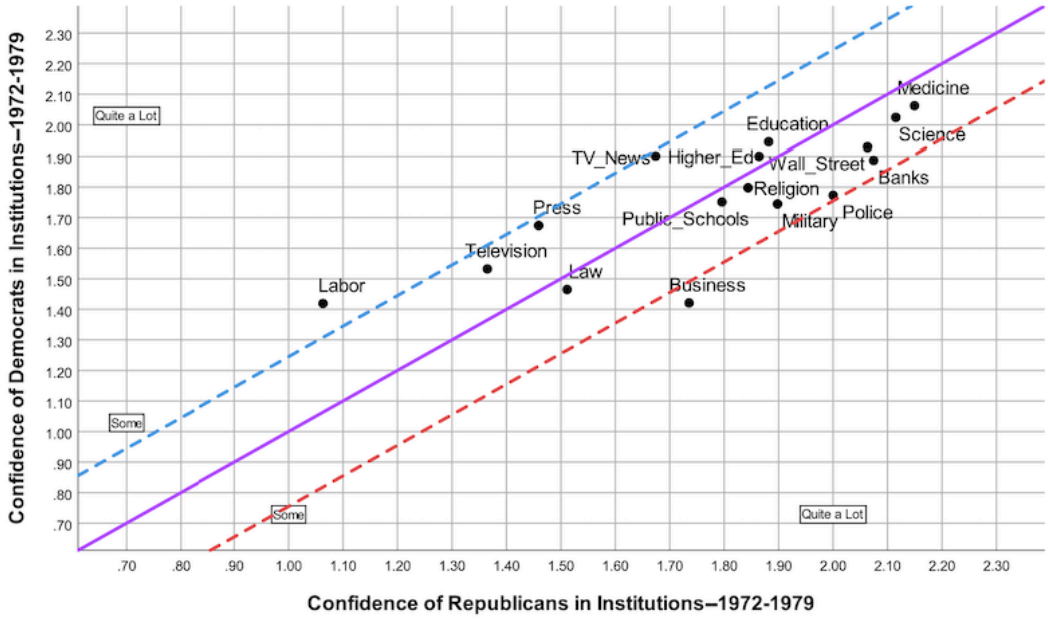
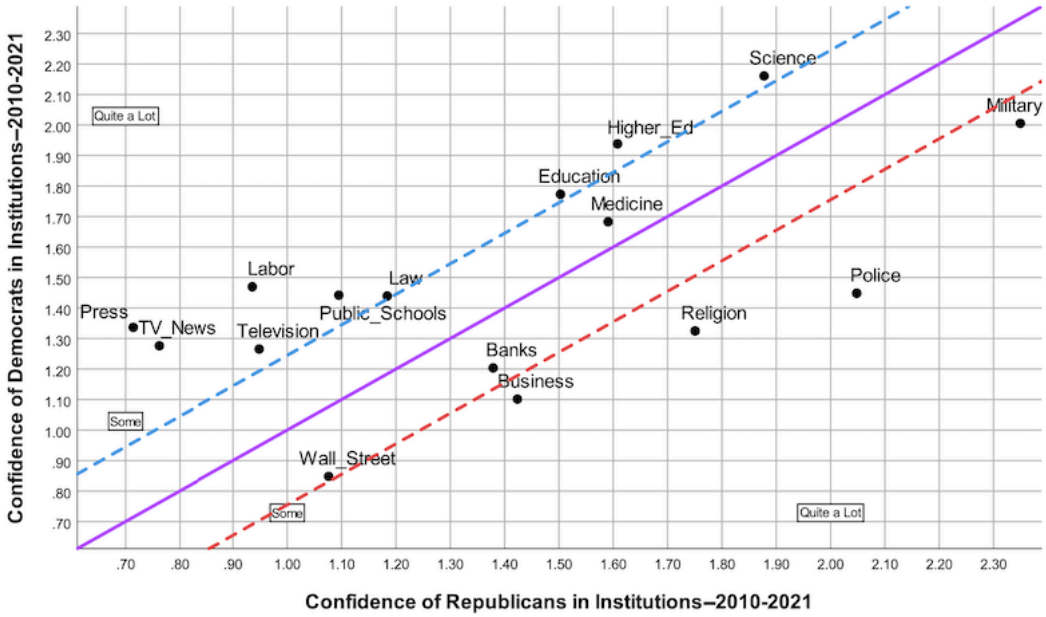


Figure 3:

Polarization in Confidence in Institutions in 2010 – 2021



Source (Figures 8 and 9): Authors' data and calculations from pooled Gallup Polls, Harris Polls, and General Social Surveys.

As trust pertains to the media, composed of the "Press," "TV News" and "Television," a supposedly objective institution meant to work for all Americans, the political divide is particularly concerning.

One should understand the variance in political trust and distrust, however. According to the Aspen Institute's *Knight Commission Report on Trust, Media, and Democracy*, there are two kinds of political institutional trust—Particular and General (Aspen 2019, 19). Particular trust consists of having faith in what an individual elected official stands for (Aspen 2019). General trust, conversely, is the belief in "political processes" that govern the country (Aspen 2019, 19). Lack of particular trust is expected, according to the report, and at some levels is healthy. In a democracy, there are going to be representatives who stand for issues we disagree with, and it is our right as members of a democratic polity to hold them accountable through voting. However,

the decline in general trust is what proves dangerous for a democracy (Aspen 2019). Lack of faith in the government and its core institutions has the potential to cause serious harm to a country. This paper will focus on general trust's decline in America.

There are multiple factors that have contributed to the decline in trust over the past number of decades, including, but not limited to, economic inequality, political corruption, polarization, a changing media landscape, and the government's inability to pass meaningful legislation. There is no one element that is responsible for trust levels in a democracy, as a complex issue like trust has numerous influencing factors. While acknowledging the confluence of driving forces that impact trust, this thesis will focus deeply on the media environment's role.

Often referred to as the "Fourth Branch of Government" in the United States of America, and a distinguishing factor of the American experiment (Aspen 2019, 25), a healthy news media landscape is essential to a flourishing democracy. The media informs citizens and helps to "hold those in power accountable" (Aspen 2019, 23). According to the same Aspen Institute report, "The media—whether local or national, liberal or conservative, print, broadcast or digital—are the lifeblood of the republic" (Aspen 2019, 23).

Today, the political media landscape is vastly different than it was 20 years ago, 30 years ago, 40 years ago, and so on. Gone are the days of printing press domination, consequential newspaper circulation, and broadcast television profusion. Sure, these news mediums are still around, but the evolution of the World Wide Web—and subsequently social media—has turned the way that people engage with political information on its head. Hundreds of news outlets exist, all offering their own perspective on the state of governmental affairs (Aspen 2019, 47).

Blogs, videos, tweets, and personal posts help compose what is a highly diverse media ecosystem, which this paper will analyze in depth later on (Aspen 2019).

While much debate exists surrounding the pros and cons of the new media ecology we inhabit today, there is one thing that's immune to debate—and that's the fact that the way humans consume news has changed rapidly in recent years and will continue to change going forward. As a result, the questions that come to my mind are how do we, as consumers of news, adapt to this rapidly changing environment? Is it even possible with today's media landscape to have a democracy that's run by an educated public? And how do we reverse the trust trends that this paper will explain and analyze?

One way to approach these complex questions is to draw from ancient political theory, specifically Aristotle's virtuous citizen theory. In *Politics*, Aristotle discusses the reciprocal relationship between a virtuous citizenry and a virtuous government. Healthy democracies—and societies as a whole—rely on the character of its people. And according to Aristotle, in order to achieve true happiness in life, or "Eudaimonia," one has to cultivate and foster a series of virtues (Aristotle 340 BCE/2011).[4]

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, he discusses each virtue in depth. Courage, generosity, temperance, wit, and justice are just a few of the virtues that Aristotle champions in the work. To Aristotle, it was not only important to possess each of the relevant virtues, but to possess them in the right amount—or in the correct "disposition" (Aristotle 340 BCE/2011). To Aristotle, each virtue was found in the middle of a spectrum between deficiency and excess—both of which represent vices. For example, courage is found between cowardice on the deficient end, and

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[4] Bartlett, Robert, and Susan Collins. 2011. *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. University of Chicago.

recklessness on the excess end. Generosity sits between wastefulness and stinginess. And justice is the average of unfairness and injustice. Aristotle referred to the medial location of these virtues on the spectrum as the "Golden Mean" theory (Aristotle 340 BCE/2011).

One virtue in particular, though, I believe is held in dangerous deficiency in America today: phronesis. According to Aristotle, phronesis, or practical wisdom, is one of the most important knowledge-related virtues that a human can possess. Phronesis enables humans to take information about an issue or a set of facts and draw their own, individual conclusions about how to act in response to the given information (Aristotle 340 BCE/2011). Phronesis helps citizens make decisions that both account for relevant information and are in line with individual morals and values (Aristotle 340 BCE/2011). And phronesis forces people to ask thoughtful questions and think for themselves (Aristotle 340 BCE/2011).

Here, it is important to think about the relationship between a given news environment and phronesis. I argue that the media environment can make it easier or harder to foster one's phronesis, so it is worthwhile to engage in a thought experiment that contemplates what type of news landscape would be ideal for the acquisition of this knowledge virtue.

First, and on a basic level, an ideal political news environment must contain enough information to inform a polity about domestic policy, international policy, and public affairs more broadly. If a news environment doesn't contain the necessary information to inform the public, then it is already failing. Additionally, the information in a news environment must be credible. More than factually correct content and responsible journalistic practices, I argue that a credible environment must be the product of a business model that isn't inherently provocative and divisive.

Another element of credibility is transparency, and this is something that ideal phronesis requires in a news environment. Transparency breeds trust, so a landscape where people know who is feeding them information and how that information is getting to them would create greater trust, but also increased feelings of autonomy in decision-making and opinion-forming.

An ideal political news landscape would offer a diversity of viewpoints on important issues—because of a responsible business model and without politicians undermining trust in the landscape itself. Diversity of thought is imperative in a democracy, and I believe that an environment that provides facts upon which to build different opinions contributes to debate, compromise, and individual political knowledge.

In addition to diversity of thought in this ideal news environment, I believe that a diversity of mediums is important. As I will discuss throughout the paper, different news mediums lend themselves to different types of content. In a phronesis-rich society, the mediums through which people consume news would be diverse, resulting in consumption of different authors, sources, and content.

I argue that this ideal news environment would not be oversaturated, which is hard to achieve today with the prominence of mobile phones and social media. As I mention above, sufficient information is imperative for a healthy landscape—and while I believe that today's environment has enough content, I don't think the public has a reliable way to consume it. Phronesis is fostered through news consumption, but also reflection and thought. As a result, a news environment that isn't always pushing us articles to read and content to engage with would enable an individual to take the time to reflect, think, and form opinions.

This thought experiment is utopic in the sense that we are far from having a perfect news environment today, and with the complexity of technology and the diversity of the American polity, obtaining one is difficult. Something to ponder, though, is how when used correctly, technology could assist us in achieving an ideal news environment, instead of hindering it. Understanding how the type of environment I just explained would lend itself to ideal, and even easy phronesis acquisition is helpful as I lay out how the current landscape is falling short.

Chapter two will discuss the decline in institutional and social trust in America over the last 50 years. Important to any functioning democracy, the chapter will explain how and why the current trust landscape is the way it is. And when it comes to phronesis, a core element of a healthy democratic polity, a lack of trust in institutions and each other inhibits its acquisition and impact.

Chapter three will give a brief history of the American media, from the printing press to today's fragmented environment. The chapter will then explain the innerworkings of a singular, powerful source in today's landscape: Facebook. Through discussion of Facebook's psychological impact as well as its News Feed feature, I will discuss how the social media platform has made it even more important—and difficult—for individuals to foster their phronesis. I will then discuss how those of different generations engage with political information on Facebook. This is important to understand for the future of democracy because if we can learn how those of different ages engage with news in today's environment, it can guide the relevant stakeholders on how to make the landscape into one more closely aligned with the ideal standard that I explain above.

Chapter II: Trust Landscape

"Post-truth is an adjective defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'."

— Oxford Dictionary

Say, for example, you need a new pair of shoes. Oftentimes, you will conduct online research into different brands, read reviews, and sometimes even try on the pair in person. After consuming the necessary information, you will then purchase the pair that you view as the best option. What has occurred in this process is knowledge acquisition about a product, followed by a decision that is partially informed by how much trust you have in all the different shoe options. In this case, conducting due diligence prior to deciding helped you, the consumer, build confidence in a specific product, making it more likely that you will be pleased with the shoe that arrives at your doorstep or the pair you return home from the store with.

I argue that we can apply this same concept to politics. If an individual can acquire knowledge, or phronesis, through responsible news consumption, they will be more knowledgeable about politics, better equipped to make educated decisions, and hold higher levels of governmental trust. If one has greater knowledge of a political system and a government's innerworkings, they are more likely to have confidence and positive attitudes when the government is delivering on its responsibilities—and hold it accountable when it needs to be.

One element of both the shoe-buying thought experiment and phronesis-rich news consumption is the period of reflection that occurs between content acquisition and decision-making. When we shop for shoes, we automatically—consciously or not—take the necessary time to reflect on our research and ultimately come to a decision about what we want. If a shoe-buyer decided to purchase the very first pair that they tried on—without taking time to reflect and potentially conduct further research—I argue there's a much higher chance they will be disappointed in their purchase.

The political news environment, as I explain above, does not lack the necessary amount of content to educate the public. However, the way that the content is produced and distributed to consumers does not encourage the necessary reflection that ultimately informs true knowledge. Specifically, I argue that the news environment's pervasive and highly partisan nature doesn't encourage or enable time for reflection, making it much more difficult to acquire phronesis.

As I outline the decline in governmental trust in this section, I urge you to contemplate this relationship between reflection, knowledge, and trust, one that I believe starts with the first, leads to the second, and ends with the third.

Michiko Kakutani's *Death of Truth* traces the current trust environment back to its roots, explaining how different factors and forces have contributed to what we observe today. Kakutani argues that trust has been in decline since the 1960's.[5] Some of the decline, as a result of the multiple wars, political scandals, and financial crises, are deserving of our skepticism and heavy questioning (Kakutani 2018). What has catalyzed the "death of truth" has been the news

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[5] Kakutani, Michiko. 2018. *Death of Truth*. Tim Duggan Books.

landscape changed by the internet, as well as a philosophical shift in thinking about objective truths (Kakutani 2018).

Toward the end of the 1900's, postmodernism took hold in numerous aspects of American life. From the arts to academia, people began to think differently about information as a whole (Kakutani 2018). While postmodernism is a complex and diverse philosophy, Kakutani broadly categorizes it as "denying an objective reality existing independently from human perception, contending that knowledge is filtered through prisms of class, race, gender, and other variables" (Kakutani 2018, 47).

As is the case throughout history across all cultures, those with extreme beliefs took advantage of ideological shifts to carry out an agenda. In this case, Kakutani calls these people "radical postmodernists" (Kakutani 2018, 54). One such area that these radicals cynically questioned was the ability to teach history, because after all, if everything is seen through a different lens, then there is no longer objective truth (Kakutani 2018).

In her explanation of the "radical postmodernists" argument, though, Kakutani is clear to denounce those who try to lump postmodernism and multiculturalism together (Kakutani 2018, 53). Multiculturalism, according to Kakutani, "offered a crucial antidote to traditional narratives of American exceptionalism and Western triumphalism by opening the once narrow gates of history to the voices of women, African Americans, Native Americans…" (Kakutani 2018, 53).

As many aspects of society became more individualized and increasingly framed through personal experiences, oftentimes disregarded and unheard voices were able to express themselves through music, art, and literature (Kakutani 2018). And because there were now multiple approaches to making sense of society's happenings, dialogue on controversial issues

grew and flourished (Kakutani 2018). Different viewpoints questioned previously unanimously understood events and facts. However, these "radical postmodernists" took advantage of the culture shift, attempting to justify and "equate" beliefs under the postmodern umbrella (Kakutani 2018, 73).

Former author David Foster-Wallace echoes Kakutani's argument in his 2005 Atlantic article titled *Host*, writing, "The ever number of ideological news outlets creates precisely the kind of relativism that cultural conservatives decry, a kind of epistemic free-for-all in which 'the truth' is wholly a matter of perspective and agenda."[6] More simply put, postmodernism opened the door for much more subjectivity around issues that were once thought to be objective (Foster-Wallace 2005).

When we consider the role of phronesis as it relates to countering the aforementioned postmodern philosophical shift, the virtue becomes even more important. If, as Kakutani and Foster-Wallace argue, truth and objectivity have become less important in modern discourse, then it becomes even more necessary for individuals to take the extra step when consuming political information. To ultimately build back the loss of trust that Kakutani explains, investigative and thoughtful news consumption that digs through the subjective and agenda-ridden content is imperative.

Another angle from which to analyze trust trends is the governmental side, and Brady and Kent point to a legitimacy issue. As the authors put it, "legitimacy underlies confidence" (Brady and Kent 2022). They believe that when an institution is viewed as legitimate, the polity will not only trust the institution, but heed its advice and guidance as well. Additionally, greater

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[6] Wallace, Story by David Foster. 2005. "Host." *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/04/host/303812/ (January 30, 2023).

institutional trust correlates with greater "political efficacy," and the inverse is also true (Brady and Kent 2022).

Political scientist and Stanford Fellow Margaret Levi echoes Brady and Kent in her piece *Trustworthy Government: The Obligations of Government & the Responsibilities of the Governed*, in which she homes in on the importance of legitimacy and the process by which governments build trust. Levi argues that gaining public trust is a crucial and particularly challenging task to accomplish for democracies right now. Democratic governments deal with large and diverse sub-groups and communities, and there are a variety of elements that contribute to strong institutional trust in a country.[7]

I argue that a polity consisting of phronesis-rich individuals makes it easier for a government to gain legitimacy. This isn't to say that ideal phronesis among the public means everyone agrees on political issues. What it does mean is that if people engage with information in an inquisitive manner, come to their own conclusions, and verify content, they will be more knowledgeable about what a government must do to be legitimate. Therefore, when the government is executing on its role, people will acknowledge its legitimacy and understand the good that it's doing.

Levi begins the piece by explaining her "virtuous circle" theory. Simply put, if a government is trustworthy, meaning it provides basic goods and services and puts people's interests first, then it will be trusted (Levi 2022).

Figure 4:

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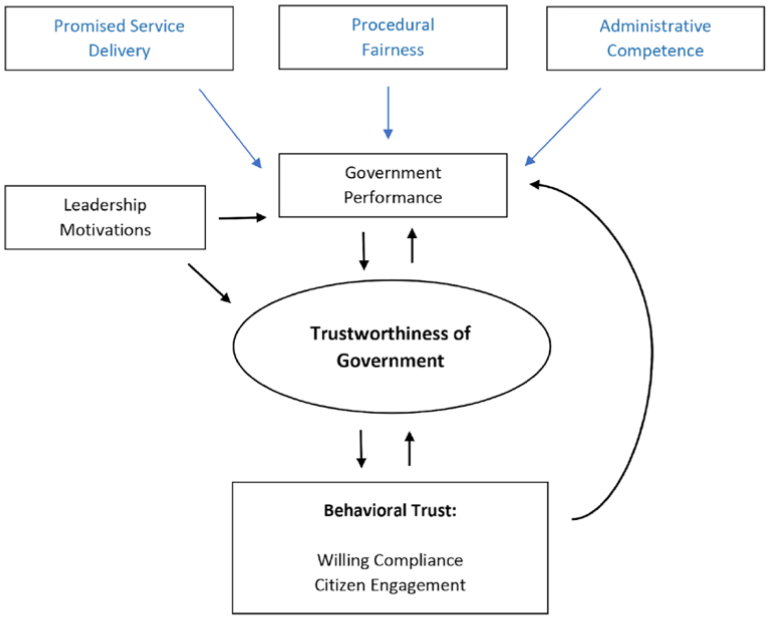
[7] Levi, Margaret. 2022. "Trustworthy Government: The Obligations of Government & the Responsibilities of the Governed." *American Academy of Arts & Sciences*. https://www.amacad.org/publication/trustworthy-government-obligations-government-responsibilities-governed (December 24, 2022).

Figure 1
Virtuous Circle of Government



Earlier versions of the virtuous circle appeared in Margaret Levi, Audrey Sacks, and Tom R. Tyler, "Conceptualizing Legitimacy, Measuring Legitimating Beliefs," *American Behavioral Scientist* 53 (3) (2009): 354–375; and Margaret Levi and Audrey Sacks, "Legitimating Beliefs: Concepts and Measures," *Regulation & Governance* 3 (4) (2009): 311–333.

However, if a government fails to act in a trustworthy manner, meaning it does not provide basic goods and services, then it will not be trusted (Levi 2022). This explanation is over-simplistic but provides a baseline framework for understanding Levi's theory. Levi continues, acknowledging that among a democratic polity exists people with varying opinions on government and its policies (Levi 2022).

Levi points to the current political landscape in America to demonstrate an environment where the required healthy skepticism in any democracy has devolved into a "vicious circle of distrust" (Levi 2022). This devolution is the result of a few different factors.

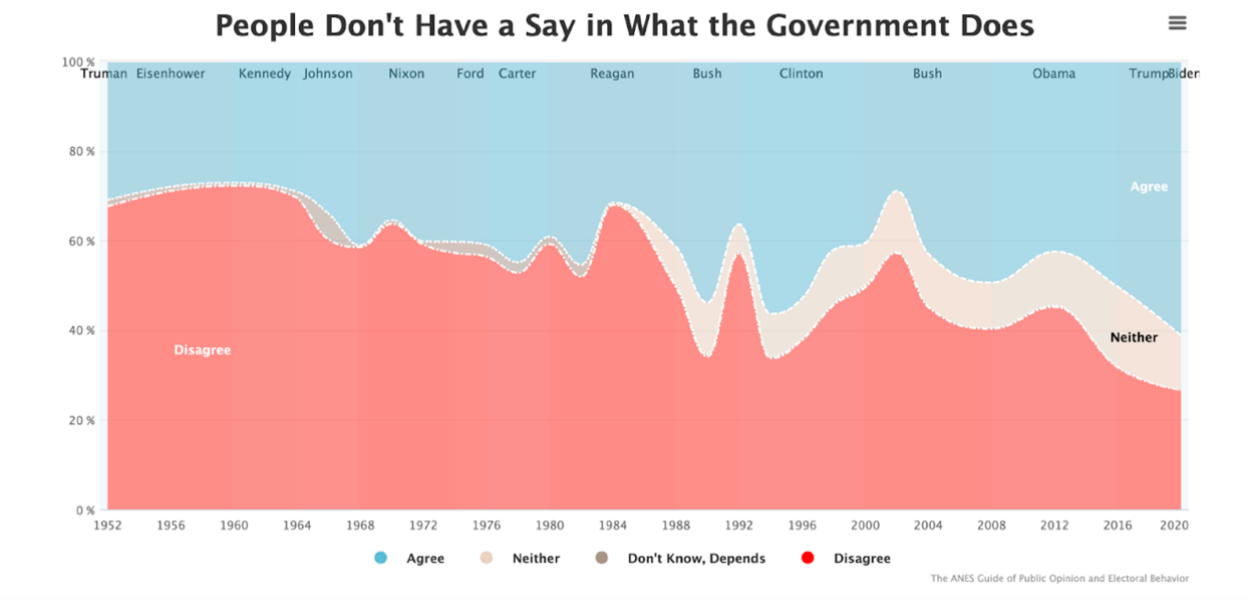
One such factor is what Levi describes as the "concerted effort to undermine citizen confidence in and reliance on government" (Levi 2022). This "concerted effort" exhibits itself in

the "campaign to reduce the size of the government" (Levi 2022) and is problematic because as the government shrinks in size and reach, it does less of what people want a government to do, further exacerbating the aforementioned "vicious circle" (Levi 2022).

Brady, Kent, and Levi all discuss the importance of government legitimacy as an element of trust-building among a democratic polity. Achieving legitimacy, however, is deeper than a credible and transparent media environment that informs citizens on who to vote out of office. A legitimate government is responsible for listening to the people it represents. If citizens do not feel that their government is hearing their concerns—on an institutional and systemic level—then trust is hard to foster. The American National Election Studies (ANES) conducts a Time Series Survey, in which they aim to gauge public opinion on a wide range of political attitudes, including if the American public feels its voice is heard by the government. Figure five shows the responses over time, demonstrating an increasing number of people who feel that they don't have "a say in what government does."[8]

Figure 5:

[8] "ANES Guide." *ANES | American National Election Studies*. https://electionstudies.org/resources/anes-guide/ (December 3, 2022).



Ultimately, to establish and maintain a "virtuous circle," governments must build institutions that encourage its citizens to healthily challenge information and form educated opinions (Levi 2022). Democratic institutions must be formed with the understanding that polities are diverse and complex, and that establishing trust—while letting constructive skepticism thrive—can be achieved through a multitude of ways (Levi 2022). Additionally, while acknowledging the diversity of democratic polities within a liberal society, it is imperative that governments listen to the public and reflect the public's desires in policymaking.

In addition to creating trust between the government and the public, Levi argues for greater trust *within* the public. She writes, "Democratic governments can and should enhance social solidarity among groups within the polity even those distrustful of each other" (Levi 2022). The idea of "social solidarity among groups" is often referred to as social trust. Author David Brooks defines the term as "a measure of the moral quality of a society" and a

"generalized faith in the people of your community."[9] Political scientist Francis Fukuyama characterizes "high-trust societies" (Brooks 2020) as having "spontaneous sociability" (Brooks 2020). And the research shows that these societies with robust social trust have less corruption, more entrepreneurship, a more "civically engaged" public, and stronger economies (Brooks 2020). A 2014 University of Chicago study found that "only 30.3 percent of Americans agreed that 'most people can be trusted.'"[10] Conversely, distrust forces individuals to feel what philosopher Emile Durkheim defined as "anomie," the feeling "of being disconnected from society" and "that the only person you can really trust is yourself" (Brooks 2020). Brooks argues that in "periods of distrust," populism emerges because it is the "ideology of betrayal" (Brooks 2020).

Phronesis, I argue, is applicable to the phenomenon of social trust as well. How are we, as individuals, supposed to trust our fellow citizens if we don't know anything about them? As I argue above, knowledge breeds political trust, and it is no different for social trust. And while separate from political trust, the focus of this paper, social trust also relies on a healthy media environment. If social trust is to be rebuilt in America, it is imperative that members of the public have a way to learn about and engage with people who are different from themselves. However, the current media landscape lends itself to greater segregation of individuals and ideas, which only makes interaction with diverse groups of people more difficult.

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[9] Brooks, David. 2020. "America Is Having a Moral Convulsion." *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/10/collapsing-levels-trust-are-devastating-america/616581/

[10] "GSS General Social Survey | NORC." https://gss.norc.org/ (April 23, 2023).

Chapter III: Media's Role

"Perhaps, just as humans began a few decades ago to think of their physical world as an environment, an ecology, that they could help manage better or worse, so now we need an environmental (even ecological) way of thinking about media."

— Nick Couldry, *Media: Why it Matters*

Part I: Fragmentation's Roots

Over time, specifically the past few decades, the media landscape has shifted immensely. I argue that a desire for profit and notoriety in an increasingly overcrowded industry has created a news environment that values entertainment, sensationalism, and constant engagement, resulting in more fragmentation and less credibility. In a period like this, individuals must take it upon themselves to thoughtfully question and analyze content to become truly educated on current events and public affairs, and foster what Aristotle refers to as phronesis.

Before I dive into today's media landscape, though, one should understand the origins of communication in the United States. I argue that it is important to know the basics of the American media landscape's history because it contains elements that are similar to those in the ideal news environment that I contemplate in the introduction. Paul Starr's *The Creation of the Media* becomes relevant here. Starr traces the current state of the media all the way back to the 15th century, offering a detailed analysis of how we went from the rudimentary printing press in Great Britain to the diverse, globalized, and highly connected environment of today. Invented in the mid 1400's by Johannes Gutenberg, the printing press was one of the first major technological developments in the communication space.[11] For the first time, governments could inform its citizens through the printed word en masse (Starr 2004, 26-27). Mass communication evolved into an organized postal service and eventually a communication network throughout Europe (Starr 2004, 30-31).

In America, communication networks took time to develop, but once they did, they expanded rapidly. Under British rule, the colonies had all their news filtered (Starr 2004, 47). As

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[11] Starr, Paul. 2004. *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications*. Basic Books.

a result, the information they did get was highly modified, censored, and framed from the British lens (Starr 2004, 47). Postmaster John Campbell created the Boston Newsletter in 1704, which was the very first news publication in the colonies (Starr 2004, 55). The newsletter consisted mainly of content from the London Papers, but nevertheless, the colonies now had a physical newspaper (Starr 2004, 55).

As more outlets began popping up in the colonies, "public debate" increased. Starr writes, "the shift from monopoly to competition in printing and newspapers" along with "increasing diversity of colonial societies" contributed to greater discussion among the general public (Starr 2004, 56). Years later, starting in 1765, is when "partisan engagement of newspaper in political conflict" began (Starr 2004, 57). However, as Starr notes, for the majority of the "colonial era" partisan journalism didn't exist (Starr 2004, 60). Because journalism was so local, outlets tried to appeal to as many people as possible, so they refrained from injecting partisan beliefs into their content. Starr characterizes free press at the time as "one that was open to all points of view, not one that exclusively expressed a viewpoint of its own" (Starr 2004, 60).

Communication in the colonial era, though, was nothing in comparison to the Revolutionary Era. Starr explains, writing, "The Revolutionary era—the period extending from the pre-Revolutionary crisis beginning around 1765 through the writing of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights—was as much the foundational period for communications as it was for government in the United States" (Starr 2004, 48). Once independent, the United States rigorously developed its post office and public school system as foundational institutions (Starr 2004, 48). The dedication to development resulted in a population that was literate and educated.

French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville famously came to America, and his visit spurred the well-known book, titled *Democracy in America*. In the piece, de Tocqueville writes about the "astonishing circulation of letters and newspapers" he observed in 1830 (Starr 2004, 48). Of Americans, he writes that they "talk the language of a town; he is aware of the past, curious about the future, and ready to argue about the present" (Starr 2004, 48). This period, I argue, was a time of high political knowledge. While the environment was entirely different than it is today, the level of engagement with and reverence for a flourishing journalism industry was no-doubt present.

When measured against what I discuss as an ideal news environment in the introduction, this text-heavy era lends itself to phronesis acquisition in many ways. The content's neutrality and a press that welcomed diversity of thought are nonexistent characteristics today. Additionally, de Tocqueville's observations lead me to believe that individual phronesis may have been flourishing at the time, with the high levels of political debate and public awareness that he writes about.

Over time, the telegraph, telephone, and radio took hold of America and the entire world, creating more interconnected communication networks (Starr 2004). As with any series of technological innovations, the medium shift forced people to change the way they engage with information. What was once a highly text-focused society has over time transitioned to an audio, then visual, and now multimedia environment.

As I make the case for why it is crucial, especially today, to foster our individual phronesis through thoughtful consumption of media, I believe we must define what media is. A term that is used so frequently to describe technology, news, and institutions, media is seemingly

all encompassing. It is important to understand its meaning in the context of this paper because without basic knowledge of what media is, it will be difficult to look at both its shift and impact over time.

Nick Couldry, a Professor of Media at the London School of Economics, writes the book titled *Media: Why it Matters.* In the piece, Couldry defines media and explores its role today. Among the many issues Couldry writes about, he discusses the function of media at its essence. One of these functions, according to Couldry, is the media's responsibility of "representing" information for its consumers (Couldry 2020, 34). Rather straightforward on its surface, representing information consists of informing the public of events and issues going on in society. Couldry proposes a thought experiment, however, urging his readers to reconsider the media's role of "representing" as "re-presenting." Couldry writes, "Media present us with a world for our reactions, involvement, and disgust, but this is always a *re*-presentation, just *one way* that media have chosen to present to us what they have heard, read, and seen" (Couldry 2020, 34-35). As the media landscape is explained and analyzed throughout this paper, I urge you to think about the media's role as "re-presenter" of information, and its implications, especially in the increasingly fragmented environment that exists today.

Markus Prior is a political science professor and author at Princeton University. Among other topics, Prior studies the history of the media landscape in America, and how its evolution has impacted people's relationship with and participation in politics. Prior's *Post Broadcast Democracy* is an in-depth analysis of the history of broadcast media in the United States and explains some of the very first factors that contributed to today's entertainment age.

Prior classifies today's environment as a "high-choice" one, while the days that Starr writes about are considered "low-choice," and he argues that as options for media engagement increased, different demographics altered their consumption habits.[12] Switchers are those who tuned into the political news media when it was a "low choice" environment and tended to be moderate and hold less radical political views (Prior 2007). Prior argues that as a result, switchers were fond of the "low-choice" environment because they could get their news without having to sift through numerous—often hyper-politicized—channels and programs (Prior 2007, 44). With the evolution of cable news and entertainment television, the "low-choice" media environment became a "high-choice" one, and switchers switched from watching news to more general entertainment (Prior 2007). The exit of this moderate group of voters from the media landscape created a more highly partisan viewership of cable news and as the viewership demographic became more politically divided, news networks needed to respond with more partisan programming.

I believe that this low-to-high shift has had both positive and negative effects—and greatly altered the process of phronesis acquisition. One element of the ideal news landscape that I discuss in the introduction is a diversity of viewpoints. This diversity, I argue, that the high-choice environment has catalyzed, is a positive. However, like a pendulum, the high-choice environment has swung so far that to gain viewership, outlets have needed to sensationalize information. Ultimately, the high choice environmental shift laid the framework for the algorithmically driven and hyper-politicized environment that exists today, one that makes it more difficult for individuals to foster their practical knowledge virtue.

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[12] Prior, Markus. 2007. *Post Broadcast Democracy*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

While Prior primarily writes that the creation of entertainment programs on television forced the change in consumption, author Neil Postman believes that television as a medium is *inherently* entertainment-focused.[13] Postman echoes de Tocqueville in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death,* arguing that during times in American history where the printing press dominated, and written word more broadly, citizens were more educated, engaged, and participatory in American politics (Postman 1985). With the development of television, and as Postman writes, any technology, mediums of engagement change, and therefore content does as well.

A core element of the impact that changing media has is something that Postman takes from literary critic Northrop Frye. "Resonance," according to Frye, is the idea that "a particular statement in a particular context acquires a universal significance" (Postman 1985, 17). Postman takes Frye's idea and through application to communication theory, argues that every form of media has its own "resonance." Media affects how we understand and make sense of information, and "imposes itself on our consciousness" (Postman 1985, 18). As Postman writes, "It [media] sometimes has the power to become implicated in our concepts of piety, or goodness, or beauty. And it is always implicated in the ways we define and regulate our ideas of truth" (Postman 1985, 18).

Therefore, with any technological advancement comes a change in fundamental debate, discussion, and consumption habits. Certain technologies emphasize specific types of thinking and knowledge. Postman writes, "medium changes" support "certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom" and create "new forms of truth-telling" (Postman 1985, 27).

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[13] Postman, Neil. 1985. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Penguin.

In today's landscape, there are a plethora of different news mediums. Social media, television, and podcasts are only a few types of content that make up a diverse ecosystem. If we once again return to the ideal landscape that I lay out in the introduction, today's environment isn't lagging in the medium diversity area. However, the one medium that I believe is crucial in helping build a phronesis rich environment is fading: the newspaper. As Starr discusses above, when the newspaper industry was flourishing, individuals were knowledgeable and participatory in political discourse. While I acknowledge that it is difficult to compare environments that existed hundreds of years apart, I do believe that newspapers force consumers to focus on the content at hand, without the distractions of digital media.

Foster-Wallace discusses a similar idea in the previously mentioned 2005 Atlantic article. In the piece, he describes the news landscape as "a kaleidoscope of information options." Like Postman, Foster-Wallace was ahead of his time in his analysis. In 2005, social media had yet to take off the way it has, yet he writes, "never before have there been so many different national news sources-different now in terms of both media and ideology" (Foster-Wallace 2005). In theory, Foster-Wallace argues, the "high choice" environment that both he and Prior discuss should be a good thing, exposing consumers of media to different viewpoints and a variety of content. But, as Foster-Wallace observed in 2005, and as we are experiencing now, "it is increasingly hard to determine which sources to pay attention to and how exactly to distinguish real information from spin" (Foster-Wallace 2005). The discussion that Foster-Wallace engages in here is the very reason why those that use the "kaleidoscope of information" must be thoughtful, reflective, and inquisitive about the news they consume to obtain and foster their phronesis.

There's no denying the complexity of the media environment and the comprehensive impact that it has on us. Lee Rainie, Pew's Director of Internet and Technology Research, explains what he believes are the eight ways that digital media is different from previous forms.

Firstly, Rainie writes, the digital media landscape of today is "pervasive."[14] Almost a third of Americans say they are "almost constantly" online. 85% of Americans own smartphones (Rainie 2022). Almost all forms of media have become digital, and with Americans' constant engagement with the internet and smartphones, digital media has become a major part of our lives.

Secondly, Rainie argues, is that digital media is "portable." Increased levels of cellular phone usage have separated "place-based media gadgetry" and media consumption (Rainie 2022). Humans can now consume media wherever and whenever they want. The third element of digital media is its "visibility" and "persistence" (Rainie 2022). In today's landscape, content "sticks around" and is much more easily accessible (Rainie 2022).

Elements four through eight include media's personalized, participatory, replicable, spreadable, and searchable characteristics (Rainie 2022). Ultimately, the current digital landscape exposes and intensifies numerous aspects of an individual's preferences, from political affiliations to social networks. Additionally, the algorithmic capabilities enable large tech firms to use these personal observations to cultivate certain messages and personalized environments, creating a whole new mindset about who and what can be trusted. Logically, one might argue that the pervasive and constant nature of digital media would make for a *more* educated public due to its easy accessibility. As I discuss in the introduction, an oversaturated environment

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[14] Rainie, Lee. "Networked Trust & the Future of Media." *American Academy of Arts & Sciences*. https://www.amacad.org/publication/networked-trust-future-media (December 23, 2022).

inhibits phronesis acquisition because it limits time for reflection and thought. Therefore, the pervasiveness that Rainie describes as a result of the new media environment is in fact detrimental to political learning, not beneficial.

Eitan Hersh uses much of what Rainie discusses to explain "political hobbyism," something he argues is a result of the current media environment. "Political hobbyism," according to Hersh, is the phenomenon whereby people use technology, often social media, to engage with politics as if it were a sport.[15] Through multiple examples analogizing politics to sport, Hersh tries to convince the reader that all people really care about is "taking their team's side" and says that "if politics is a sport, then the only way worth watching it is as a fan embracing the rivalry" (Hersh 2020, 36). According to Hersh, this sport-like approach best represents the current partisan landscape Americans are experiencing today.

Media, according to Hersh, plays a fundamental role in creating an environment in which hobbyism can flourish. He writes, "The increased number of media choices has not only revealed that we demand outrage and celebrity political gossip, but that we do not demand news about our local communities" (Hersh 2020, 18). So, as levels of newspaper consumption have decreased, the interest in and engagement with local communities have followed a similar course. What has risen in its place is a media sphere where the end goal of political participation and media engagement isn't political change or learning, but rather "moral outrage" (Hersh 2004). Hersh argues that this "moral outrage" is a "shortcut" for people to make themselves *feel* engaged in the political system, but without actually gleaning anything meaningful (Hersh 2020, 126).

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[15] Hersh, Eitan. 2020. *Politics Is for Power: How to Move Beyond Political Hobbyism, Take Action, and Make Real Change*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Hersh writes, "When we approach politics as hobbyists, on the sidelines rooting, on the phone lines demanding, on social media emoting, we are the ones who are pushing those in Congress to dig in their heels rather than legislate" (Hersh 2020, 123). Over time, politicians have shifted their focus from passing policy to benefit constituents in the long run, to satisfying people's emotional demands immediately, ultimately driving the two political parties further apart.

Ultimately, by treating politics as a game—or a source of entertainment—people become *less* knowledgeable because they simply engage with the media as a sport, there to root on their team without actually consuming meaningful information.

The final element of today's environment is the prominence of sensational content. Literature and media scholar Roberto Simanowski writes about news as entertainment in the context of Facebook. Facebook, like most social media companies, cares about site traffic and how much time its users spend on the platform. Simanowski argues that the engagement approach incentivizes a few things.

Firstly, engagement prioritization leads to Facebook pushing content that draws the user in. This approach results in "sensationalist" content being fed to the user, which Simanowski notes is oftentimes untrue content, especially when political.[16] Secondly, Facebook pushes content that makes the user feel "comfortable" (Simanowski 2018, 9), resulting in the user finding themself in a "filter bubble" (Simanowski 2018, 9). Finally, and a key inhibitor of the acquisition of phronesis, is that the immense content levels on Facebook "undermine the basis for the existence of quality journalism" (Simanowski 2018, 9). While Facebook offers

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[16] Simanowski, Roberto. 2018. *The Death Algorithm and Other Digital Dilemmas*. The MIT Press.

mainstream news access to the site, it's impossible for fair and objective journalism to compete with the "banality and sensationalism" of the majority of political content on the platform (Simanowski 2018, 9). When combined, hyperbolic and oftentimes fake news, filter bubbles, and the suffocation of objective journalism creates an information environment of distrust of one another as well as democratic institutions.

The prevalence of sensational content sits in direct juxtaposition to the landscape that ideal phronesis requires. News aimed at riling up individuals without conveying meaningful information makes the process of virtue acquisition difficult and cumbersome. Oftentimes fake as well, sensational content pushes members of the polity to the ends of the political spectrum, which only exacerbates institutional distrust, social distrust, and meaningless news consumption.

Part II: Facebook's Psychological Impact

As I enter a discussion surrounding the psychological impact of Facebook on news consumption, I believe it is important to once again ponder the question of how we, as consumers of news, should be adapting to this constantly changing landscape. One way to do so, among many, is to simply have the conscious understanding that Facebook, and social media platforms more broadly, are not designed to be effective disseminators of credible news, no matter how much news they contain. Through your reading about Facebook's engagement strategy and design process in this section, I urge you to build consistent skepticism when engaging with the platform, with the understanding that it is by no means a verified news outlet.

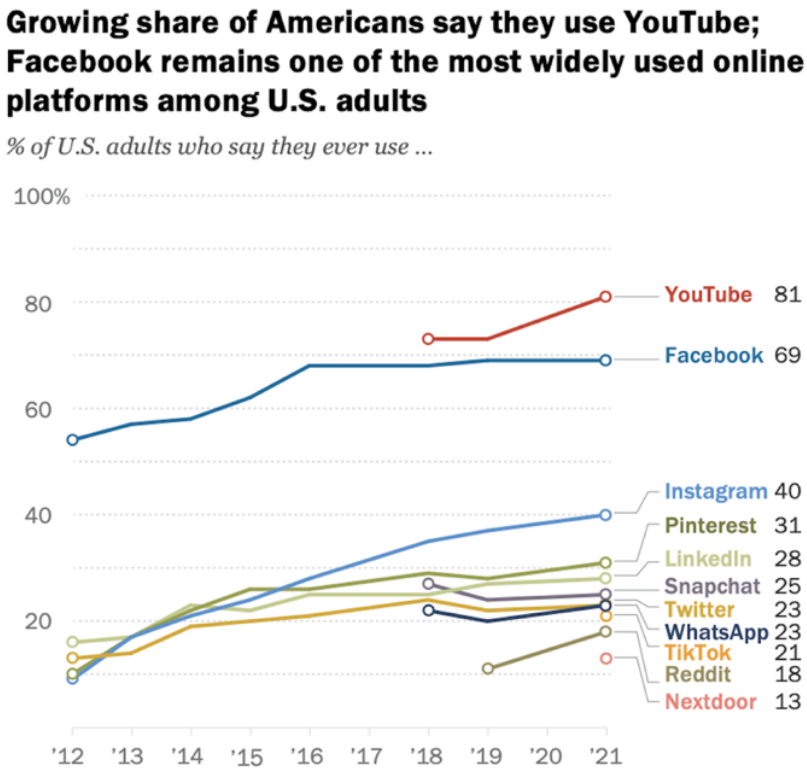
Facebook's history is one marked by groundbreaking technological innovation, rapid growth, and a society-altering impact. Started by Harvard undergraduate Mark Zuckerberg and a few of his classmates in 2004, Facebook's original purpose was to be a site where one could build a social network and engage with profiles of other Harvard students. Once introduced, however, the site's popularity spread quickly—first to other Ivy League universities, then colleges around the country. By 2004's end, over one million people were using the platform and today, the platform has just under 3 billion users.[17]

Pew Research Center has conducted numerous surveys on social media use, and its findings exhibit widespread engagement as a source of entertainment, but also information. Figures six and seven demonstrate the percentage of Americans who say they use social media over a nine-year period and the percentage of Americans who say they get news from social media in 2020, respectively.[18]

Figure 6:

[17] "Facebook MAU Worldwide 2022." *Statista*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/ (April 23, 2023).

[18] Atske, Sara. 2021. "News Consumption Across Social Media in 2021." *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*. https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/09/20/news-consumption-across-social-media-in-2021/ (April 23, 2023).


Growing share of Americans say they use YouTube; Facebook remains one of the most widely used online platforms among U.S. adults
% of U.S. adults who say they ever use ...
100%
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YouTube 81
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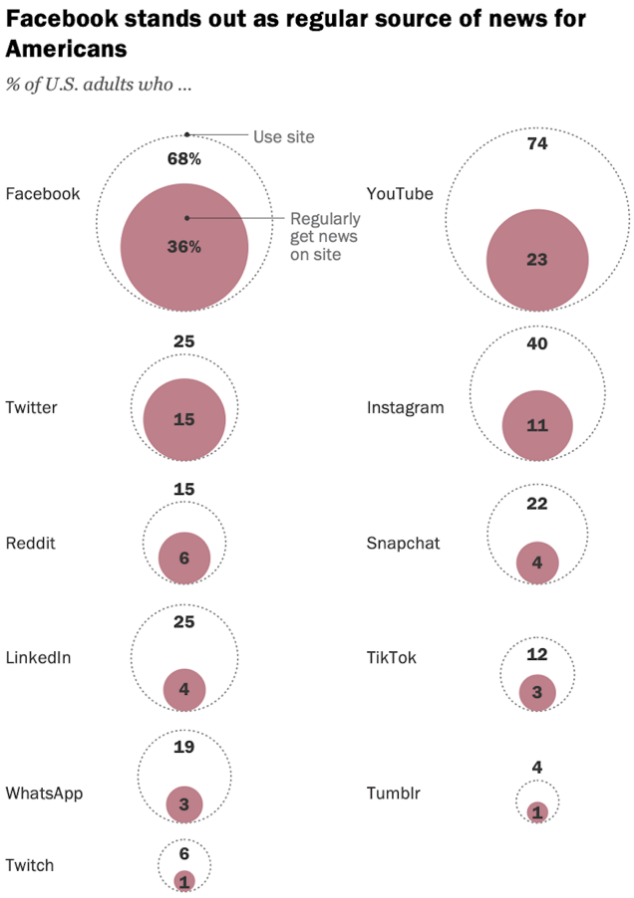
Pinterest 31
LinkedIn 28
Snapchat 25
Twitter 23
WhatsApp 23
TikTok 21
Reddit 18
Nextdoor 13

Figure 7:



While Facebook is not the most used social media platform, it is the platform on which the greatest percentage of people say they get their news. According to the data, over a third of Americans say that Facebook is a "regular source of news" (Atske 2021). Considering much of what this paper's previous section explains, the fact that in America, over 110,000,000 million people cite Facebook as an information source is concerning and truly represents the media landscape's shift to its current fragmented state.

Much of Facebook's success is a result of a business model that aims to capitalize off natural human psychological tendencies. Although founded by computer scientists and engineers, the company has had an uncanny ability to build and modify features of the platform that satisfy

some of the most basic and core human desires, such as pleasure, identity alignment, and social connection.[19]

Max Fisher writes *The Chaos Machine*, in which he explains the rise in prominence of social media, outlining how Facebook and similar platforms have reached such high engagement levels. Fisher writes, "Social apps hijack a compulsion—a need to connect—that can be even more powerful than hunger or greed" (Fisher 2022, 26). This compulsion, as it turns out, has proven so strong that it has altered the way people engage with information—and each other as a whole. Sean Parker, the first president of Facebook, is on record posing the following question in relation to the platform's innovation strategy: "How do we [Facebook] consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?" (Fisher 2022, 24). The answer, which has proven highly successful, was to "give you [the user] a little dopamine hit every once in a while" (Fisher 2022, 25). These "dopamine hits" have taken the form of likes and comments, and ultimately contributed to the term Social Feedback Loop: A psychological framework that uses "a vulnerability in human psychology" to keep users coming back to the platform, according to Parker (Fisher 2022, 25).

In addition to the dopamine hits that likes and comments catalyze, Facebook has been able to capitalize on the human desire for cultivating and maintaining a strong identity. According to Fisher, "the single most powerful force on social media is identity" (Fisher 2022, 31). Identity informs how humans see and interact with the world around them and is oftentimes an important expressive element of one's being. Polish psychologist Henry Tajfel characterizes identity as the way in which "we bond ourselves to the group and they to us" (Fisher 2022, 32).

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[19] Fisher, Max. 2022. *The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World*. Little, Brown and Company.

Both Tajfel and Fisher argue that the desire to create a "shared identity" is so strong, that humans will oftentimes create one from a foundation that doesn't actually exist. The example Fisher uses is a study in which a group of people are assigned one of two meaningless characteristics through a coin flip. They are then asked to play a game, and those with the same characteristics expressed "greater generosity" to each other, even though the given characteristic had no real meaning (Fisher 2022, 33). This desire for shared identity is precisely what Facebook has thrived off of through making every "tap or swipe into a social act" (Fisher 2022, 33).

This capitalization off subconscious human tendencies is where transparency in a news environment becomes relevant. I argue that ideal phronesis requires a landscape in which consumers of news know how and why news gets funneled to them. In Facebook's case, there is little to no transparency. Algorithms dictate everything and the user has a minimal part in the content dissemination process. I believe that this lack of transparency decreases an individual's autonomy in choosing what to read and what not to read. And ultimately, if an individual isn't truly choosing what type of content they are exposed to, phronesis acquisition becomes near impossible.

Another social feature that highlights human desire for shared identity are Facebook groups. Exclusive online spaces where people with similar beliefs or interests can connect and discuss relevant issues, Facebook groups were developed on the platform in 2010 (Fisher 2022, 64). Fisher discusses their impact, but not without introducing Robin Dunbar, a British anthropologist, and his theory, commonly known as "Dunbar's Limit" (Fisher 2022, 63). Dunbar's Limit states that the human brain is only capable of having 150 meaningful relationships. Beyond 150, relationships become shallow and harder to maintain. However,

Fisher argues that Facebook challenged this theory through the development of the groups feature and they once again capitalized off humans' desire for connection, using shared identity to do it. If users could manufacture different online communities around certain issues, then they would be able to *feel* like they have relationships with far more than 150 people, while also discovering new aspects of their own individual identities.

While shared identity is highly important and can be used to foster unity and responsibility within a democracy, it also has downsides, many of which social media use exacerbates. Specifically, the confluence of high content levels, instant gratification, and human nature's desire for strong identity can cause "prejudice and hostility" against those in out-groups (Fisher 2022, 144). This prejudice, specifically in relation to Facebook groups, has the potential to stoke conflict, create division, and form information bubbles (Fisher 2022, 144). And when surrounded solely by people who think the same way as one does, deciphering what is real and what isn't becomes much more difficult. Ultimately, the end result is an erosion of trust in each other and our institutions, and a decline in intellectual curiosity about learning what's fact and what isn't.

Part III: The News Feed

One element of David Foster-Wallace's previously discussed "kaleidoscope" of information is Facebook's News Feed feature. Originally not an aspect of the Facebook platform, the News Feed was born in 2006. Fisher refers to its development as the "dawn of the social media era" (Fisher 2022, 20). What this new feature allowed users to do was post or share a

picture, article, or link, and everyone they were connected with would be able to see the content, as opposed to a specific selected person. In essence, the News Feed enabled Facebook users to become mass communicators to their respective networks. In a 2016 Facebook post celebrating the anniversary of the News Feed, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg wrote, "News Feed was the first real social feed…News Feed has been one of the big bets we've made in the past 10 years that has shaped our community and the whole internet the most" (Settle 2018, 32).

William and Mary researcher Jaime Settle homes in on the News Feed advancement, characterizing it as the "shift from profile management to user interaction about the content they generate" (Settle 2018, 33). In addition to the News Feed changing the mode of news consumption, it also altered the *content.* Settle argues that media is—and always has been— "a reflection of the incentives and structure of the system in which it is produced" (Settle 2018, 62), resulting in news producers only intensifying the creation of "human-interest" content that is aimed to elicit engagement in the form of clicks and shares. Additionally, the News Feed has massively shifted the levels of "inadvertent exposure" to political news (Settle 2018, 44). As Prior discusses, many people chose to disengage with political news as the landscape became a "high choice" one. However, it is difficult to not consume political content on Facebook because the News Feed feature houses *both* social and political media, so there is essentially one "channel" for all content (Settle 2018, 64). The single "channel" design results in political news reaching more people than if one had separate "channels" for political news and social news (Settle 2018, 64).

The News Feed's implication for phronesis acquisition is multi-pronged. First, as discussed above, the content that the News Feed houses tends to be sensational and oftentimes

unverified. Second, the single "channel" design lumps news and entertainment together, and in an environment where much of the news is created to also be entertainment, it becomes difficult to decipher what is truly informational and what isn't. Third, the News Feed offers an opportunity to not only consume news, but engage in discussion with other users, which when used correctly can have positive outcomes—and when used incorrectly can have negative ones.

Kim, Weeks, Lane, Han, and Kwak author *Sharing and Commenting Facilitate Political Learning on Facebook: Evidence from a Two-Wave Panel Study*, in which they analyze the element of political expression. They believe that to partake in active political learning on social media, users must actually participate in "political expression" in the online spaces as opposed to passively engaging with the content. When we think about how to reverse the trust trends that are explained throughout this paper, the authors' research into the effectiveness of "political expression" as a means of learning is crucial.[20]

In the piece, Kim et al. examine the communication mediation model to learn about the relationship between exposure to political information on social media, political expression, and political knowledge. The authors define the communication mediation model as a discussion of "the indirect effect of exposure to news and political information on cognitive and participatory outcomes through interpersonal discussion of public affairs" (Kim et al. 2021). They believe that social media has the "potential to play the same role that interpersonal talk plays in the communication mediation model" (Kim et al. 2021).

In the study, they measure "political information reception on Facebook," "political expression on Facebook," and "political knowledge" (Kim et al. 2021). The authors propose

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[20] Kim, Dam Hee et al. 2021. "Sharing and Commenting Facilitate Political Learning on Facebook: Evidence From a Two-Wave Panel Study." *Social Media + Society* 7(3): 20563051211047876.

three hypotheses. The first one predicts that a positive correlation will emerge between "political information reception and political expression" (Kim et al. 2021). The second hypothesis states that expression will be positively correlated to knowledge (Kim et al. 2021). The third and final hypothesis predicts that "political information on Facebook will indirectly increase political knowledge through the influence of political expression on Facebook" (Kim et al. 2021).

To test these hypotheses, the researchers conducted a "two-wave panel survey" during the 2016 election season. Through the sampling of a wide demographic of people in September and November of 2016, Kim et al. were able to gain an understanding of political knowledge acquisition through Facebook engagement—filling in the holes they believed previous studies contained.

Their findings are multifaceted and provide insight into how people engage with social media more generally. Firstly, they find that people who use Facebook as a source for political news express themselves at higher rates than those who don't use it for information acquisition (Kim et al. 2021), acknowledging that this finding corroborates the previous studies on the topic. The most substantial finding from the study, though, directly relates to the communication mediation model that the authors so thoroughly explain as a foundation for the study itself. They find that there is indeed a relationship between engagement with political information on Facebook and acquisition of political knowledge—through expression (Kim et al. 2021).

The researchers analyze how people engage with Facebook and if substantial political learning occurs through this type of engagement and importantly, they lay a foundation by explaining how *when used in a certain way*, Facebook has the potential to contribute to phronesis acquisition (Kim et al. 2021).

Settle also creates a specific framework for her analysis of Facebook engagement, categorizing it into "expression," "news," and "discussion." She calls this the "END Framework of social media interaction" (Settle 2018, 50). In her framework analysis, Settle discusses how online news content has changed over time, specifically as a result of the News Feed. She argues that the high choice environment, of which Prior and others write about, has created much wider incentives and greater motivation for news producers (Settle 2018, 59). For mainstream news outlets whose content gets circulated on Facebook, it pays to have headlines and content that is going to generate as many likes and clicks as possible (Settle 2018, 61). For "opinion leaders," as Settle refers to them, the News Feed enables a single Facebook user to reach tens of thousands of people through content sharing (Settle 2018, 61).

Here, one should understand the work of Austrian American sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld. Lazarsfeld is known for his "two-step flow" of communication theory. When analyzing news consumption surrounding the 1940 presidential election, Lazarsfeld formulated the argument that the real power in information flow is between people, rather than between media outlets and its viewers (Settle 2018, 59). In his mind, the "two-step flow" is first between media outlets and prominent "opinion leaders," then between those "opinion leaders" and the people (Settle 2018, 59). According to Lazarsfeld, it is the second step where the impactful information consumption takes place.

Facebook's News Feed information environment validates the Lazarsfeld theory, as the prospect of persuasion and information sharing through content circulation by "opinion leaders" on the site are far-reaching (Settle 2018. 59). And while Kim et al. find that expression on the platform has the potential to lead to political learning, the large amount of unverified content is

proving to be a barrier to that learning. I argue that a design that separates entertainment from news would make phronesis acquisition easier, as there would be less gray area surrounding what is news and what isn't. Additionally, having two separate "channels" would de-incentivize news content from being as sensationalized because they would no longer be competing for attention against entertainment. This, I believe, would make conscious and directed news consumption more common while also making that consumed content more credible.

Part IV: Generational Differences

When compared to other studied subgroups on the topic of news consumption, little exists surrounding generational differences. While there is a robust literature on the relationship between political ideology, race, and sex on media consumption, I argue that understanding how those of different generations engage with and consume news on social media is also important. Media's rapid development and always-changing nature means that those born in different eras have vastly different relationships with the landscape. Fietkiewicz et al. writes, "The generational cohorts occur around shared experiences or events 'interpreted through a common lens based on life stage,' rather than being based on social class and geography, hence, each generation shares a common perspective."[21] As a result, those of different ages may have different online behaviors, such as straightforward consumption, sharing, and content creation. Ultimately, knowledge about

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[21] Fietkiewicz, Kaja J., Elmar Lins, Katsiaryna S. Baran, and Wolfgang G. Stock. 2016. "Inter-Generational Comparison of Social Media Use: Investigating the Online Behavior of Different Generational Cohorts." In *2016 49th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS)*, , 3829–38.

who struggles with news consumption in the current environment can inform us on how to fix the anti-democratic trust trends that we suffer from.

Heinrich Heine University researchers Fietkiewicz, Lins, Baran, and Stock run a study that looks at straightforward social media use between generations. They aim to understand what generations use which social media platforms with the highest frequency, and how that informs users' consumption behavior. Before explaining the intricacies of the study, however, it is important to outline the authors' typology for the distinct generations.

The generations used in the study are Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z. Those in Gen X, characterized as Gen Xers, are those born between the years 1956 and 1976 (Fietkiewicz et al. 2016). Members of Gen Y, or the "digital natives" are those born between the late 1970's and the early 1990's (Fietkiewicz et al. 2016). And Gen Z'ers were born in the late 1990's up until the early 2010's (Fietkiewicz et al. 2016). The classification of these different generations is important because each one has a different relationship with media and technology.

To test the platform's use frequency and motivation, the researchers chose 13 social media sites. These included Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram, among others. The first question was simply "Do you use [insert name of platform]?" (Fietkiewicz et al. 2016) Based on the response, a second question populated: "How often do you use [insert name of platform]?" (Fietkiewicz et al. 2016) And finally, a third question would be posed based on the response, asking the user to complete the following sentence: "In relation to [insert name of platform] it is important to me that…" (Fietkiewicz et al. 2016) Of the responses, 47 were from Gen X, 221 were from Gen Y, and 90 were from Gen Z (Fietkiewicz et al. 2016).

Pertaining to Facebook specifically, the authors find that those in Gen X are far less likely to use the platform than those in Gen Y (Fietkiewicz et al. 2016). This finding they attribute to Facebook's growth occurring in Gen Y's young adult years (Fietkiewicz et al. 2016). Conversely, Gen X's hesitancy to use Facebook is in line with their frequent characterization as "digital immigrants," those "who lag behind with the usage of social media compared to younger generations" (Fietkiewicz et al. 2016). Additionally, the authors note that Facebook's privacy concerns could impact a generation that is naturally more timid when adopting new technology (Fietkiewicz et al. 2016).

One increasingly important and prominently used feature of social media is the ability to express a given viewpoint. Through content creation and dissemination, as well as profile to profile interaction, expression on social media platforms is an essential aspect of news consumption, as Kim et al. prove above. Natalie Pang and Yue Ting Woo author a piece titled *What drives changes in expressive social media use for generational cohorts?* In the study, Pang and Woo explore media use—and its impact— among different "generational cohorts" across two elections in Singapore.[22]

Pang and Woo discuss that the development of the "worldwide web" has created a vastly different landscape for members of political systems to engage with and absorb political information (Pang and Woo 2022). Changing media impacts interest, knowledge, and expression, and the study attempts to explain some of the roots and consequences of this shifting media environment.

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[22] Pang, Natalie, and Yue Ting Woo. 2022. "What Drives Changes in Expressive Social Media Use for Generational Cohorts?" *International Communication Gazette* 84(4): 306–30.

With the assistance of a Singaporean market research firm, Pang and Woo were able to combine the survey data from the 2015 and 2020 elections, matching like respondents in different cohorts in the process. Pang and Woo give the example of a 21-year-old Chinese woman from 2015 being matched to a 26-year-old Chinese woman in 2020 to be able to make the closest comparison. Respondents' socio-economic status, gender, and ethnicity were also taken into account in order to see how behaviors changed from one election to the next (Pang and Woo 2022).

To measure the changes in political expression, the researchers looked at a variety of potential factors, including perceived "political efficacy," social and mass media use, "political knowledge," trust in media, and "political talk" (Pang and Woo 2022). Political efficacy is how confident citizens are in their ability to influence what happens in politics (Pang and Woo 2022). Pang and Woo use previous frameworks that sub categorize political efficacy into internal, external, and collective efficacy (Pang and Woo 2022). The two authors use various survey techniques to gather data on these respective topics, such as multiple-choice questions, Likert-scale responses, and internal vs. external attitude questionnaires formulated in previous related studies (Pang and Woo 2022).

Pang and Woo's results are significant in helping to explain the potential effect of media use on political expression. For levels of expressive use—social media use where people are simply projecting their opinions—there was a massive increase from 2015 to 2020 (Pang and Woo 2022). There was no change in political efficacy but there was a significant drop in knowledge from one election to the next (Pang and Woo 2022). Possibly most consequential, Pang and Woo find that levels of political talk—individual level discussion of politics—

decreased significantly between elections (Pang and Woo 2022). For those aged 26-40, using social media *and* consuming mass media was crucial in determining political expression (Pang and Woo 2022). However, for those aged 41-60, it was *solely* social media use that proved important in determining political expression (Pang and Woo 2022). Their findings are informative in displaying the relationship between consumption, knowledge, and expression. However, what happens when the content being circulated is fake? And how do those of different ages perform in deciphering what is fake and what is not?

Scholars Eugene Loos and Jordy Nijenhuis aim to answer the above questions in their study titled *Consuming Fake News: A Matter of Age? The Perception of Political Fake News Stories in Facebook Ads*. The scholars argue that the way the media is currently constructed, characterized by fragmentation and a heavy social media presence, "low quality and 'fake news'" dominate an ever-weakening environment.[23] In the study, the authors cite previous work that found those between the ages of 14 and 19 "gravitate toward fake news, 'snarky' talk radio, and opinionated current event shows" (Loos and Nijenhuis 2020).

Loos and Nijenhuis ultimately decided to create a fake website of their own to answer the question "What is the role of age in fake news consumption on social media?" They published 14 articles on the WordPress site, all with outlandish and eye-catching headlines like "BREAKING: Plans revealed to skip National anthem during Superbowl!!" (Loos and Nijenhuis 2020). The catch, however, was that the actual content in the article included a "surprise message" about the implications of fake news (Loos and Nijenhuis 2020). Facebook ultimately allowed all 14 of the

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[23] Loos, Eugène, and Jordy Nijenhuis. 2020. "Consuming Fake News: A Matter of Age? The Perception of Political Fake News Stories in Facebook Ads." In *Human Aspects of IT for the Aged Population. Technology and Society*, Lecture Notes in Computer Science, eds. Qin Gao and Jia Zhou. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 69–88.

articles to be posted on the social media platform as advertisements. Loos and Nijenhuis monitored the engagement with the articles over a five-month period.

The fake news articles reached just under 120,000 people—of all ages—and 12.7% actually opened the links (Loos and Nijenhuis 2020). What the authors ultimately found is that certain age ranges did indeed engage with the fake news differently (Loos and Nijenhuis 2020).

The researchers concluded that young people, while adept at navigating social media platforms, struggle with "evaluating information" on social media (Loos and Nijenhuis 2020). However, the older generations were the ones among which the content spread more rapidly. Loos and Nijenhuis acknowledge that the political nature of the articles could have been pushed toward the older generation, but they nonetheless were consumed at a higher level (Loos and Nijenhuis 2020).

An interesting and implicative finding, however, was the reaction to the headlines in Facebook's comment section. The stories sparked vociferous debate exhibiting a wide range of emotional opinions (Loos and Nijenhuis 2020). Both the nature and number of responses forces the authors to believe that "many persons took the headlines at face value," exhibiting a lack of interest and commitment to knowledge acquisition and valuable news consumption (Loos and Nijenhuis 2020). I argue that Loos and Nijenhuis' findings, especially this latter element of taking headlines at face value without actually reading the articles, is at the core of the issue our society has today: a lack of intellectual curiosity and a disinterest in actual knowledge acquisition among wide swaths of news consumers.

Chapter IV: Conclusion

"Prudence is bound up with action. As a result, one ought to have [knowledge of] both [universals and particulars], but more so of the latter."

— Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

The focus of this research paper was to analyze the way that a changing media landscape impacts trust in American political institutions. Through explanation of broad trust trends, a rapidly shifting media ecosystem, and a specific case study of news consumption on Facebook, the paper exhibits the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of how Americans consume news.

I argue that in the news environment we currently inhabit, one marked by fragmentation and pervasive media, it is of the utmost importance that members of the American polity work to foster their individual practical knowledge, or phronesis, to reverse the declining trust trends. In the introduction I engage in a thought experiment that describes what I view as a news environment that ideal phronesis requires—and I measure our current landscape against this standard throughout the piece.

As exhibited in the "Trust Landscape" section of the paper, the qualitative and quantitative data on trust levels in American politics show a worrying downward trend in the polity's faith in our core institutions. The emergence of postmodernism ideology in the 1960's opened the door for subjectivity around issues that had widely garnered objective beliefs until

that point (Kakutani 2018, 46-47). Postmodernism's impact, in conjunction with technological advancement, slowly eroded the legitimacy and veracity of information and enabled "radical postmodernists" to gain devoted followers (Kakutani 2018).

The data, studied by Thomas Kent, Henry Brady, and Margaret Levi, display a decline in trust across numerous political and apolitical institutions over the past 50 years, with the only consistently trusted institution being the military. The lack of legitimacy that the political institutions hold in today's society has contributed to a "cycle of distrust" that is proving difficult to emerge from (Levi 2022). When a democratic government doesn't execute on its basic duties of providing public goods and safety, then a decrease in legitimacy occurs—which is hard to regain (Levi 2022). Additionally, political arguments for less government make it even more difficult for the government itself to successfully carry out its duties, further deepening the distrust cycle (Levi 2022). Institutions, healthy ones at least, need to encourage a degree of skepticism from the general public while also executing on their duties.

What makes the formation and governance of healthy institutions difficult, however, is an increasingly opaque, oversaturated, and irresponsibly constructed news landscape. What used to be a text-heavy society at its formation has become one dominated by television and social media. The "Fragmentation's Roots" section explains how television forced the moderate news viewer away from news consumption, leaving a more divided and extreme consumer demographic (Prior 2007). The development of the internet and social media only made the landscape more fragmented and forced news outlets to become more radical to stay afloat in an oversaturated environment (Foster-Wallace 2005). Algorithms, specifically, have made news "pervasive and portable," meaning media is always with us (Rainie 2022). As a result, the news

oftentimes consumes the user instead of the opposite. Social media's engagement feature drives politicians and the public further from the spectrum's middle point, sowing seeds of distrust in the process (Hersh 2020).

Facebook, a pioneer in the social media industry, revolutionized news consumption back in 2006 with the development of the News Feed (Settle 2018). A feature by which a user could see a never-ending stream of content from his or her connections, the News Feed not only changed the way people consume information, but the information itself (Settle 2020). Human psychology's desire for instant gratification coupled with Facebook's algorithmic power formed into a highly saturated news landscape, consisting of some mainstream journalism, as well as sensational, conspiratorial, and fake news. The prevalence of this sensational, conspiratorial, and fake news misinforms the public and makes it harder to decipher what to trust and what not to—and impacts those of various generations differently.

While a relative lack of qualitative research exists on the generational differences in social media use, it's clear that those across the age spectrum have different consumption habits. High school students have been known to show preferable attitudes toward news outlets with sensational, "snarky" headlines (Loos and Nijenhuis 2020). Those of older generations were more likely to consume and share fake news articles on Facebook, and while millennials may be tech savvy, research shows that they struggle with deciphering accurate from inaccurate information on Facebook (Loos and Nijenhuis 2020).

To summarize, the United States is in a current state of distrust when it comes to institutions. Trust levels in both political and apolitical institutions have been declining for decades and while there are many contributing factors, the highly fragmented media landscape

has played a role. It is more difficult to decipher now than ever what information is true and what isn't, and social media's opaque algorithms act as powerful disseminators of news. Where information used to be able to be consumed at face value, true learning and phronesis acquisition today requires greater effort, commitment, and investigation.

Additionally, I argue that reflection is crucial to fostering individual phronesis. For all the reasons given throughout the paper, from sensational content to its pervasive nature, the current media landscape makes reflection difficult because there is always a new, more emotionally charged story coming down the pipe. If institutions are to regain trust, I believe that the news environment must become one that encourages more reflection, *and* individuals need to welcome reflective time as a part of their consumption habits.

Limitations do exist in my textual analysis-heavy research. Firstly, a vast literature exists surrounding the issues of institutional trust and media consumption. With the time and scope of this paper, it would be impossible to engage with all the relevant material on the broad decline in American political trust. The same goes for research on the recent shift in how Americans engage with and consume political information. Through pointed and direct analysis, I attempted to engage with as much of the most directly relevant existing work on my topic, but by no means consumed a fully comprehensive set of literature.

Much of what is discussed in the paper represents political news consumption on social media as a societal ill, which for all the reasons I write about, the argument can be made. However, one must understand, in addition to the exhibited research, that technological advancement has the *potential* for high levels of learning. When used correctly, good information

is attainable. The current media landscape makes it harder to find that good information, but it is nevertheless out there for consumption.

Democracies fail for several reasons, one of which is a loss of public trust in a government's political institutions. When a polity begins to lose institutional trust, it becomes harder and harder for a government to regain it. The American National Election Studies' "Trust in Government Index" measures Americans' trust levels on a scale of 0 (least trusting) to 100 (most trusting). In 2002, the average score was 43.5. Ten years later the index had fallen to 22.8. And, eight years after that, in 2020, the score sat at 16.8 (ANES).

There's no denying that these trends are worrisome, especially when one considers the democratic backsliding taking place across Eastern Europe, specifically in Hungary, Poland, and Turkey. Over this same 18-year period, there have been numerous events that have rightfully shifted the psyche of the American people: The September 11th attacks in 2001 and the declaration of The War on Terror that followed, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic that took the lives of over one million Americans. All of these events were cataclysmic and affected how people view the United States government then and now.

There is another factor, though, that has catalyzed declining trust levels: the rapid and extreme shift in how Americans consume information. As I have discussed, the oversaturation and fragmentation of the media landscape that has occurred over the past number of decades has made it difficult to decipher what's true, what isn't, and who can be trusted. In any democracy, transparency must exist, especially around governmental actions. Once a government becomes shrouded in secrecy, or at the very least, it becomes difficult to educate oneself about policy

through political news, then a media environment is no longer healthy. This, I believe, is the stage we are at today.

Now, I'd prefer not to have you finish reading this paper despondent and depressed about the state of American Democracy and its media environment, pondering if we, the greatest country on earth, are headed for civil war and authoritarianism in the next five years.

To be very clear, I do not believe this is the case.

While there is no denying that the issues that I discuss throughout this paper are worrisome, dangerous, and immediate, there are ways that I believe we, as a society, can dig ourselves out of the current hole we inhabit. To do this, the burden falls on everyone. By everyone, I mean both the social media platforms that now house gargantuan levels of information as well as all of us, those who consume news.

There's a saying in the technology industry, and it goes like this: "Move fast and break things." The idea behind this slogan is that in an entrepreneurial environment, the best route is to invent and try new things, and then fix issues after something has failed or broken down. If we are going to rebuild our media environment into a healthy, trustworthy, and credible one, then it is imperative that the "move fast and break things" mindset is retired. Instead, technology entrepreneurs, and those who invest in them, must think long term about emerging technologies' potential negative consequences down the line. Referred to as "consequence scanning" or "longtermism," this approach to technology innovation considers diverse perspectives, including those from social workers, politicians, and medical professionals, in addition to solely technologists and engineers.[24] The idea with this approach to innovation is that the potential

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[24] MacAskill, William. 2022. "Opinion | The Case for Longtermism." *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/05/opinion/the-case-for-longtermism.html (May 9, 2023).

negative consequences that could emerge years into a company's life will be considered and addressed before they even become a problem. I argue that if Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook more broadly had taken a "longtermism" approach to their own innovation, we may not find ourselves in the position we do today with Facebook's toxic information environment.

According to Lee Rainie, there is hope for the future of trust and accuracy in digital media. Reducing the polarizing nature of social media platforms through systemic algorithm alteration is a place to start (Rainie 2022). If social media companies can create algorithms aimed at fostering discussion-heavy landscapes and healthy debate, argumentative behavior and win-at-all-costs discourse would decrease (Rainie 2022). Increased algorithmic transparency would also help foster more institutional trust among social media users. Judith Donath, a researcher at Harvard's Berkman Klein Center writes that "The [algorithmic] process should not be a black box into which we feed data and out comes an answer, but a transparent process designed not just to produce a result, but to explain how it came up with that result" (Rainie 2022). In a 2017 conference on technology ethics, German Justice Minister Heiko Maas echoed Donath's sentiment, demanding greater "transparency requirements for algorithms" (Simanowski 2018).

Nick Couldry also discusses the algorithm issue, arguing that governments and corporations monitor and control us more "opaquely" than ever before (Couldry 2020, 113). Where governments and corporations used to control citizens through means of media colonization and blatant propaganda manipulation, algorithms enable control through quieter, more subdued means (Couldry 2020). Nobody sees or directly interacts with algorithms, yet they are there, monitoring and gathering information about human behavior without pause. In the case of Facebook, Couldry argues, this algorithmic control ultimately leads to a "less transparent"

reality for the user, because the content a given user consumes isn't actually representative of the world (Couldry 2020, 113).

Rainie also argues for a more robust and healthy journalism industry, believing that it would help revive "the heart of civic life." By "pumping much more accurate information into the media ecosystem," journalists can drown out the false information that's floating around and being circulated among media consumers (Rainie 2022).

Just as important as a more responsible approach to innovation, greater transparency, and more robust journalism, are the habits of news consumers. It is the responsibility of the general public to investigate, ask questions, reflect, and think for themselves in a liberal democratic society. I argue that while information is so readily available at our fingertips, the incentive to dive deeply and thoughtfully question content has dissipated. And ultimately, systemic change starts with individual acts.

In the context of this issue, the necessary individual acts consist of consuming news more responsibly and having a greater dedication to finding the truth—both tasks that are not easy in today's environment—yet are more important than ever. If we are to emerge from the information crisis that I believe we are currently in, *individuals* must foster their *individual* phronesis. If we, as a collective society can achieve this, I argue that not only will our political institutions begin to regain the trust of the public, but social trust will improve as well. Additionally, the public will feel more involved and heard when it comes to policy. And when a polity is both educated and feels heard by the government is when democracies can be truly run by the people. Aristotle argues that practical knowledge, or phronesis, is one of the most crucial

individual virtues that a human can possess. Today, it is something that people need to work harder to obtain.

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