

An Analysis of Americans' Trust in the News Media

by
Andrea Ana Uskokovic

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract approved: _____

Christopher Stout

With trust in the media reaching an all-time low among Americans, I wanted to explore what prompted this shift in attitude. This thesis analyzes how Americans' perspectives on the credibility of modern-day media and the value they place on the freedom of the press are heavily influenced by their preferred leader. I hypothesize that the 2016 election of President-Elect Donald Trump and his successive rhetoric galvanized a large portion of Americans to doubt the news media in addition to increasing partisan division and animosity. My hypothesis is a secondary analysis based on existing data presented in a variety of academic sources that I synthesize to reach my conclusion.

The structure of this essay is intended to present fluctuations in trust in the media, focusing on the ten-year time span from 2008 to 2018. This ten-year time span includes the election and presidency of Barack Obama in addition to the election and beginning of the presidency of Donald Trump. Fundamentally, the analysis reveals how elite polarization can ultimately lead to affective polarization. Affective polarization is a phenomenon wherein the animosity between political parties leads to high levels of hostility (Frymer 2011, 338). This data will have important

consequences for figuring out how the power of the media affects countries differently and how it has changed throughout history. Furthermore, understanding the public's view of the media is vital in looking towards the future of politics because the media has immense power within democracy but a lack of trust could signal that this power is diminishing.

Key Words: media credibility, political science, media, news media, media trust, 2016 US presidential election, Trump phenomenon, motivated skepticism, political polarization, affective polarization.

Corresponding e-mail address: uskokova@oregonstate.edu

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Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Economics project of Andrea Ana Uskokovic presented on May 28, 2020.

APPROVED:

Christopher Stout, Mentor, representing School of Public Policy

Rorie Solberg, Committee Member, representing School of Public Policy

Elizabeth Schroeder, Committee Member, representing School of Public Policy

Toni Doolen, Dean, Oregon State University Honors College

I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

Andrea Ana Uskokovic, Author

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Introduction

Today, people are constantly being bombarded with stimuli from all aspects of life; whether it be advertisements, entertainment, or education. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, people today are spending more time following the news than at any other point in history (Pew Research Center 2010, 2). However, one aspect of these many messages that is often overlooked is; who is distributing this information and what are their motives? While many news media outlets may try to present an accurate picture to their audience, in many cases, it can remain difficult for news media consumers to sort through the varying accounts presented by different outlets. Other news media sources may choose to purposely

exclude valuable information or report the news from ideological perspectives to influence or manipulate the facts and portray a false narrative (Arceneaux et al. 2012, 178).

Over time, research has indicated that news media consumers have come to believe that the news media has a political bias and it should not be trusted. The degree to which consumers trust the news media depends largely on their political ideology and partisanship, their view of the economy, and their trust in government and fellow citizens (Lee 2010, 9). In a survey, 47% of respondents stated that they believe the news media are politically biased (Lee 2010, 11). Furthermore, another study that analyzed roll call votes in Congress showed that America is experiencing more political polarization today than at any time since 1789 (Watts et al. 2013, 1135). Over the past ten years, data has shown that trust in the media has been consistently declining. However, during the 2016 Presidential Election, trust in the media reached an all-time low. Republicans reported decreasing levels of trust in the news media while Democrats reported increasing levels of trust (Brenan 2020, 1). This downwards trend and sudden decrease in trust begs the question; what prompted this shift in attitude?

Since the 2016 Presidential Election, concerns over “fake news” misinforming the American public have only continued to rise. The term “fake news” has become largely synonymous with President Donald Trump who employs it to describe the majority of news media outlets. The rise of “fake news” was supported by social media, especially Twitter, which President Donald Trump frequently uses to communicate his policies and opinions. Allcott reports that 14% of Americans

consider social media their most important news source and that in the three months before the election, false news stories favoring Donald Trump were shared a total of thirty million times on Facebook (Allcott et al. 2017, 212). This is significantly more than Presidential Candidate Hillary Clinton who had eight million favorable false news stories shared on Facebook three months before the election (Allcott et al. 2017, 214). Additionally, over half of the individuals who reported seeing a fake news story also reported believing it (Allcott et al. 2017, 223). The level of perceived credibility and the prevalence with which fake news stories have circulated social media has made it very difficult for the United States Government or Facebook to warn or censor these stories. This in conjunction with the fact that people are more likely to believe their preferred leader has allowed President Donald Trump to influence the American people's level of trust in the news media and increase polarization.

News media consumers have become increasingly disenfranchised due to the rise of propaganda, the advancement of the internet which has allowed consumers to pick and choose which information they believe, a lack of distinguishing between reporting and opinion, and an increase in attacks on the news media by political leaders. This essay explores how American's perspectives on the credibility of modern-day media are heavily influenced by their leader, focusing on the ten-year time span between 2008 to 2018. I hypothesize that the 2016 election of President-Elect Donald Trump and his successive rhetoric galvanized a large portion of Americans to doubt the news media in addition to increasing partisan division and animosity. This relationship highlights how elite polarization can ultimately lead to affective polarization.

Literature Review

It's natural for humans to seek information which reinforces previously held beliefs about the world. This is called selective exposure and it is particularly prevalent within the context of news media and politics (Nelson et al. 2017, 3). Literature has shown that people want to reinforce their political predisposition and therefore seek information in alignment with their preexisting views (Kim 2017, 664). A recent study conducted in 2020 at the Pew Research Center supports this claim with its finding that liberals and conservatives receive information from different news sources (Gramlich 2020, 2). While 88% of consistent conservatives said that they trust Fox News, 81% of consistent liberals stated that they distrust Fox News, further highlighting the partisan divide (Kim 2018, 41). In another survey conducted at the Pew Research Center, they found that the public will offer better evaluations of the news sources they use most often when compared to news organizations in general (Pew Research Center 2011, 1). This finding stresses the prevalence of selective exposure because it demonstrates that people are more inclined to support politicians and organizations which reinforce their previously held beliefs about the world. The Pew Research Center also conducted a survey which showed that since 1985, evaluations on press performance have become increasingly negative. In 2011, 66% of survey participants said they believed stories are often inaccurate, 77% believed that the press tended to favor one side and 80% believed that the press is often influenced by powerful people and organizations (Pew Research Center 2011,

2). The culmination of these studies demonstrates that over time, trust in the media has decreased substantially.

An aversion to information which would challenge one's beliefs is detrimental because, according to Yonghwan Kim, author of multiple studies regarding trust in the media, disagreement is essential to a sound democracy as it promotes careful consideration of different perspectives which enhances political understanding and confidence (Kim 2015, 922). It may be argued that an individual should hold the blame for choosing to engage in selective exposure. However, trends in the news media during the late 1980s and early 2000s have created an environment conducive to subjective news (Arceneaux et al. 2012, 179). It defies human nature to expose oneself to information that negates their preexisting opinions (Arceneaux et al. 2012, 183). As a result, distrust in the media has only continued to rise in the United States and throughout much of the world.

Multiple studies have also made a connection between selective exposure and polarization. One study conducted by Lyn Van Swol found that people in like-minded groups were likely to form more extreme and polarized attitudes because they were influenced by the most extreme group members (Swol 2009, 190). Another 2010 study concluded that as people began consuming more congenial media outlets, they also began to hold more polarized attitudes towards political candidates (Kim 2015, 920). This study found evidence to support the argument that that selective exposure leads to polarization as opposed to polarization leading to selective exposure (Kim 2015, 920). This is an important distinction when arguing that polarization is the result of media influence. Furthermore, while selective exposure leads to polarization,

polarization is tied to distrust in the media. Therefore, when individuals engage in selective exposure, they are more likely to become polarized and have a lower level of trust in the news media (Wicks et al 2013, 1136).

The fragmentation and distrust in the news media is largely a self-fulfilling prophecy because people who identify with conservatism will typically only watch conservative news sources while people who identify with more liberal ideologies will watch news sources that support these ideas. Arceneaux supports this finding in his research by stating that, “scholars have recognized for decades that people selectively expose themselves to media messages, blunting media effects.” (Arceneaux et al. 2012, 180). Furthermore, Charles Taber writes that consumers are “... prone to overly accommodate supportive evidence while dismissing evidence that challenges their prior attitudes” (Taber et al. 2006, 755). Proponents of political groups have a tendency to view the news media as biased towards their own viewpoints while favoring those of the opposite political group (Eveland et al. 2003, 106). The more bias in the news media that an individual perceives to see, the lower their trust in the news media will be. Therefore, when President Donald Trump uses negative rhetoric to describe the news media and imply that they are biased, it is predicted that trust in the news media will decline among his supporters.

In certain situations, partisan outlets may go so far as to tout conspiracy theories, whether this is due to a lack of research or ulterior motive. Academic research indicates that conspiracy theories are not limited to extremists, they are prevalent across a variety of demographics and political attitudes (Miller et al. 2015, 830). Simply because a conspiracy theory may appear to be irrational does not

preclude it from being politically and socially significant (Miller et al. 2015, 832). An example of such a conspiracy theory that had consequential political and social consequences was the notion that President Barack Obama was born in Kenya. In order to address this conspiracy theory, the president put aside the concerns of two wars and a poor economy in order to have a press conference where he released his birth certificate.

Skepticism can be extremely valuable in determining whether a particular news source is trustworthy. However, skepticism can become a bias when it is irrationally opposed to change and when it guides an individual to avoid information that does not align with their beliefs (Miller et al. 2015, 840). While there certainly are many difficulties when it comes to determining fact from fiction within the news media, many consumers have also taken their skepticism to the extreme.

Americans have become increasingly disenfranchised with the news media due to a variety of reasons. These include the rise of propaganda, the advancement of the internet which has allowed consumers to pick and choose which information they believe, a lack of distinguishing between reporting and opinion, and an increase in attacks on the news media by political leaders. One example that illustrates the negative impact that news media can have on people's opinions is Plato's *Republic*. In Plato's *Republic*, Plato explores the harmful consequences of omission and painting a false narrative through his Allegory of the Cave. This is extremely relevant to understanding how the news media spreads propaganda which can cause citizens to lose trust in the objectivity of news reports.

The Allegory of the Cave reveals the vast impact that the media one consumes can have on their perception of the world. It highlights the innate problems of trying to reach a just conclusion without having all of the necessary information and exemplifies the necessity of a free and fair press. In the Allegory of the Cave, prisoners have spent their whole lives chained to a cave and facing a blank wall (Plato et al. 2008, 21). The prisoners have observed and named the shadows which they see projected on the wall and these shadows come from the fire that burns behind them which they are unaware of (Plato et al. 2008, 21). The shadows and the names they have given these shadows are these prisoner's reality. This is directly comparable to the "reality" that propaganda creates. Moreover, the prisoners of the cave have no desire to leave the cave because they only know that they have experienced in their own lives and they do not understand that there can be a better life for them. The allegory ends with the prisoners escaping their bonds and finally experiencing the sun (Plato et al. 2008, 23). The various manners of their release and healing from these bonds are similar to different types of media that try to influence one's thinking. Plato utilizes the sun as an analogy for the truth that many people are unable to see. It has progressively become more difficult to see this truth as partisan divides have increased and consumers have become disenfranchised with the news media. A lack of perceived objective trust can be dangerous because it will inevitably negatively impact the level of approval for the news media. The Allegory of the Cave reveals that if people do not take the initiative to expose themselves to different perspectives, then they will remain uninformed on the true nature of reality.

Another concept presented by Plato in *The Republic* that connects to the news media in contemporary politics is the Noble Lie. The Noble Lie is often a myth that is spread and propagated by the elite to advance their own political agenda (Plato et al. 2008, 6). Ideologies are means of lobbying people to support individuals, particularly the elite. Therefore, lying becomes part of the process by which they feed the masses what the elite want them to hear. By planting these ideologies, politicians can garner the support they need. Partisan news sources that are ideological in nature are proliferated to make individuals buy into a certain belief (DiMaggio et al. 1996, 725).

Additionally, the advancement of the internet has allowed consumers to pick and choose which information they believe which has resulted in a rise in selective exposure. Recent advancements in technology have a significant influence on how the news media is disseminated and an individual's level of trust towards the news media (Postman 2004, 9). One way in which it influences these aspects of people's lives is its ability to provide convenience. Now that most tasks have been greatly simplified by technology, people have become accustomed to this level of convenience and this makes them heavily reliant on technology. Technology is essential in quickly distributing information at high speeds. Not only has it become more convenient for consumers to find the information they are searching for but, it has also become much more convenient for companies and governments to overwhelm consumers with advertisements and information. This has been especially exacerbated through the creation of the internet which according to Hobbs, "... has become a key medium for disseminating propaganda in all forms and flavors and, like radio, it routinely conflates entertainment, information, and persuasion," (Hobbs et al. 2014, 57).

Along with the many benefits of technology also come the pitfalls associated with an over-reliance on certain technology without a healthy dose of skepticism. Some of these pitfalls include; a tendency to believe false narratives (including propaganda) and the fact that it has become much more convenient for companies and governments to overwhelm consumers with information that can often be false. Neil Postman explores this phenomenon in his article, “The Information Age: A Blessing or a Curse?” where he argues that while consumers have been enjoying all the benefits of these new technologies, they have in turn created a new problem. “We have transformed information into a form of garbage and ourselves into garbage collectors,” (Postman 2004, 8). Over time, this information overload leads people to feel that all the information is meaningless because they are unable to differentiate what is accurate and useful to them from what is oftentimes propaganda. As a result, people will often look to their preferred leader to make sense of what is happening and limit their news consumption to their favorite news outlet (Levendusky 2010, 125). However, these actions only serve to increase partisan division and animosity as both sides of the aisle further entrench themselves into their previously held beliefs.

Nonetheless, the transformation of the public sphere has led to an increasingly inclusive and transparent democratic culture. The average person now has numerous mediums through which they can participate in political discord and hold their elected officials accountable. Prior to the transformation of the public sphere, politics was often monopolized by predominantly affluent Caucasian men who had the money and power necessary to influence politicians. Nonetheless, as everyday people have become empowered to participate in democracy, companies and

governments have simply perfected their ability to create propaganda and influence the masses through advancements in technology. This idea is summarized by Renee Hobbs's statement that "the pleasure and power associated with the ability to 'deceive the world' are ever more evident as easy access to the tools of communication enables everyone to be a propagandist... (Hobbs et al. 2014, 61).

Another reason that news media consumers have become disenfranchised is due to a lack of distinguishing between reporting and opinion. Certain news media sources are known for having either a conservative bias or liberal bias and the news media can range from being very objective to extremely biased. The objectivity of the news media directly depends on the validity of the source they are using and whether the news source has an ulterior motive to only represent one point of view or purposely exclude important information. In the era of "fake news," these partisan divides have only continued to increase (Hobbs et al. 2014, 59).

The large number of news outlets that have become partisan can affect voting and other political behavior by influencing their consumers' attitudes (Schroeder et al. 2015, 2). One example of a partisan outlet that has influenced a large number of Americans is Fox News, the most-watched cable news network. In a poll conducted by Gallup, Fox News is the only news source with a majority-trust from Republicans whereas Democrats report having trust in six different news sources (Brenan 2020, 3). Elizabeth Schroeder asserts that they found a positive correlation of 0.24 between transcript informativeness and issue favorability to the Republican Party (Schroeder et al. 2015, 4). This could indicate that Fox News has changed knowledge in a partisan way. Overall, partisan outlets are largely a double-edged sword because they

can be helpful when presenting a useful point of view on the issues, but they can also serve to distort people's beliefs (Schroeder et al. 2015, 2).

Finally, an increase in attacks on the news media by political leaders to garner support has led many Americans to feel disenfranchised. The medium through which a message is relayed has the power to decide when, how, and where the message will be distributed (Ardevol-Abreu et al. 2016, 708). This is highlighted by the differences that can be observed between reporting on Fox News and CNN. Both outlets cover the same news and yet when they present the information, the resulting narratives are different. For instance, one study found a positive association with viewing non-Fox news programs (such as CNN and MSNBC) and the acceptance of global warming because Fox News tends to support Republican interests, one of which is denying climate change (Hmielowski et al. 2013, 870). Hence, the medium through which a story will be represented takes an extremely important role.

Furthermore, news media fragmentation and partisanship has become so commonplace that even the President of the United States will only take interviews on Fox News. Since Fox News has a long-documented history of supporting the Republican agenda and Donald Trump's agenda, it is the only news media network he consistently visits. It is comfortable for him because it is an echo chamber where everyone generally agrees with each other and nobody challenges each other's opinions. At times, it even appears that Fox News will act on behalf of President Trump as a state-owned media (Grossmann et al. 2019, 549). Fox News' apparent connection with President Donald Trump serves to emphasize the polarization taking place in the United States. As Americans have become more polarized and their

distrust in the media has risen, they have begun to limit their trust in the media to their preferred source(s), such as Fox News. This phenomenon has made it easier for politicians such as Donald Trump to influence people's opinions of the media. Once an individual has limited their potential news sources to only one, they can easily become a part of an "echo-chamber" where they will not be forced to question their opinions.

While this is not entirely a unique phenomenon, it has certainly become more common throughout the current political administration (Grossmann et al. 2019, 553). On a typical news cycle, one will not notice many Democrats visiting Fox News because they know that the exchange will likely be volatile, and vice versa. Politicians deliberately select the medium, often a partisan news media outlet, which best suits their motivations and they think will provide the most favorable coverage of their ideas. Moreover, the repeated accusations towards the media of bias and partisanship by politicians have effectively disenfranchised many news media consumers from believing what they see and hear from certain sources. Some politicians, such as President Donald Trump, have begun using much clearer cues in their rhetoric and this has influenced a large number of Americans. People are inclined to follow their preferred leader and this phenomenon is supported by the fact that since the 2016 Presidential Election, Republicans have reported decreasing levels of trust in the news media while Democrats have reported increasing levels of trust (Brenan 2020, 2).

Throughout the history of the United States, people have utilized a variety of news media formats to disseminate knowledge. For instance, following World War II, Americans were becoming progressively more scared of Communism. One influential leader who emerged from what later came to be known as the Second Red Scare (a time period where the United States government was preoccupied with searching for Communists) was Joseph McCarthy. He was a United States Senator from Wisconsin who became notorious for subpoenaing both members of the United States government and prominent members of society in a number of anti-communist investigations.

During this time in the 1950s, television played a crucial role in popular culture and McCarthy was one of the first politicians to capitalize on this newfound popularity to spread his ideas about the great danger an ideological contamination of communism and communist sympathizers posed to American society. He utilized the spotlight that he attained by targeting famous individuals to provoke fear in the American people about the infiltration of Communists in their communities and to encourage people to expose these individuals for the safety of society. This strategy was McCarthy's way of gaining name recognition to ensure that he would be reelected.

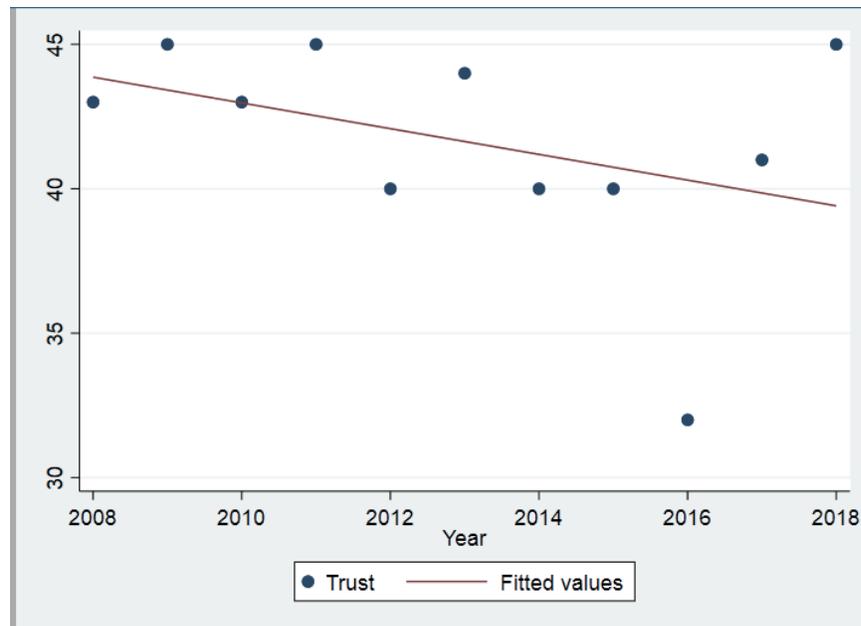
Joseph McCarthy's approach to targeting famous individuals and exploiting them to the media is a phenomenon that we see occurring at much higher levels in the American political climate today. Over the past 25 years, Presidential Campaigns have experienced a rapid rise in negative campaign advertisements. The 2008 Presidential Election marked the highest number of attack ads to ever air to date.

According to John Geer, the reasoning behind this rise in negative campaign advertisements is due to the extreme polarization of American politics today which has only led to an increasing number of negative advertisements (Geer 2012, 422). The animosity between presidential candidates manifests as attack advertisements and Geer believes that this is likely a factor contributing to higher rates of negative advertisements. Geer asserts that because the news media covers negative advertisements so thoroughly, presidential consultants and candidates have an extra incentive to air them (Geer 2012, 423).

Present-Day Media in the United States

In the present-day, it appears as though there has been a resurgence in polarization, extremist views, and distrust towards the news media and in the United States. In order to more accurately demonstrate how trust in the media has fallen over the past ten years in the United States, I utilized data from a Gallup Poll which illustrated Americans' Trust in Mass Media to create a scatter plot (Brenan 2020, 2). This Gallup Poll was conducted over a ten-year time span using a random sample of approximately 1,000 adults living in the United States each time. The results have a margin of sampling error of ± 4 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. In the poll, Americans were asked: "In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media – such as newspapers, TV and radio – when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly – a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?" (Brenan 2020, 2). I used Stata to create a scatter plot for the data that was obtained. The following scatter plot displays the percentage of individuals who

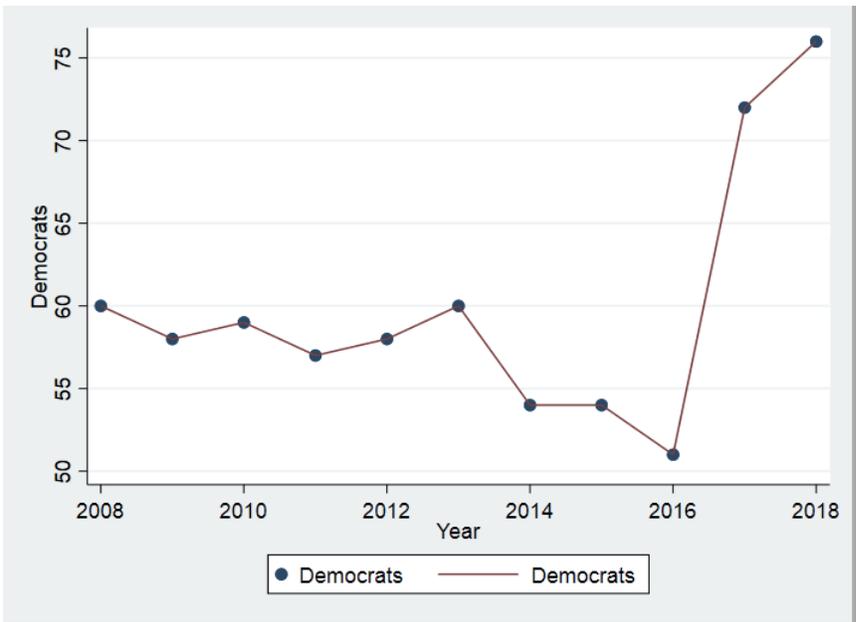
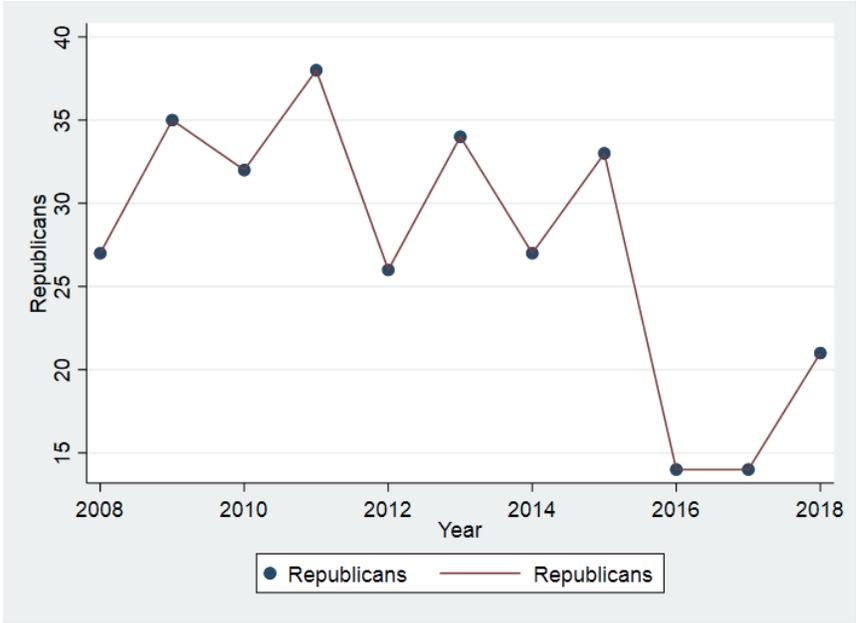
participated in the poll and who either stated that they trusted the mass media a great deal or a fair amount.

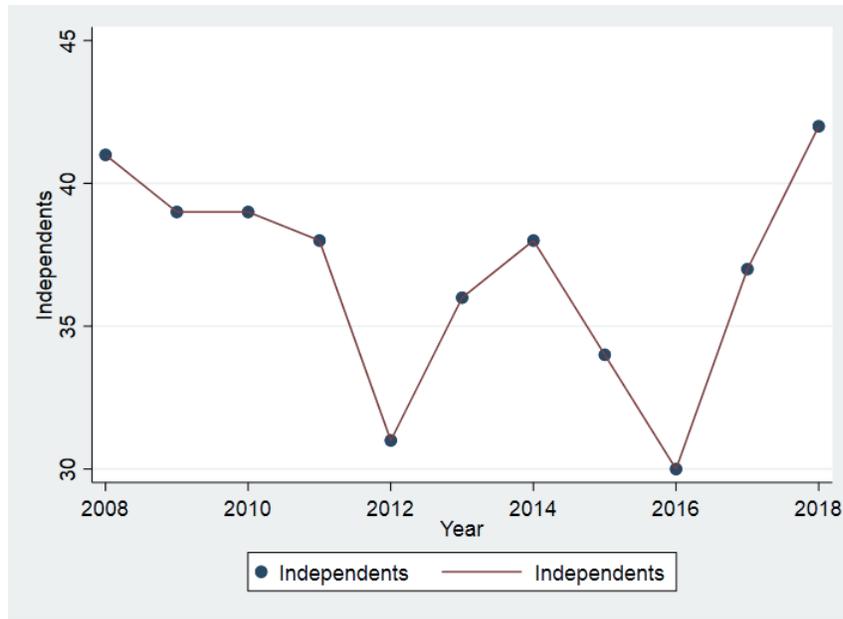


As you can see, the poll was conducted every year from 2008 to 2018 and it shows that trust in the media has been decreasing over time. This indicates that Americans largely believe that the mass media is untrustworthy. Americans' trust in the news media has been corroding over time but this is not necessarily surprising within the context of the current highly polarized climate (Brenan 2020, 2). Nonetheless, after hitting the lowest recorded point in 2016 (the year that President Donald Trump was elected) there does appear to be a 13-point increase from 32% in 2016 to 45% in 2018. This marks a significant improvement in the two years subsequent to Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential Campaign. Overall, the data shows that although there have been small improvements in trust levels since the 2016 election, the United States remains sharply polarized. This is further supported by the

Stata regression shown below which predicts that every year, trust in the media is expected to fall by 0.45 percentage points.

In addition to creating a scatter plot for Americans' trust in the media as a whole, I also created separate scatter plots that display trust in the media based on political party affiliation. The following three scatter plots depict the relationship between trust in the news media from the perspective of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents respectively. It is clear from the scatter plots that Republicans' trust dropped considerably more in 2016 when compared to Democrats and Independents. Although I cannot prove a causal effect, there is an association between decline in trust towards the news media and President Donald Trump. I predict that this is a result of Donald Trump's extremely polarizing and divisive 2016 Presidential Campaign where he referred to the news media as "the enemy of the people" (Brenan 2020, 3). The abrupt decrease in trust among Republicans effectively lowered the overall level of trust towards the news media by Americans. Republicans' trust remains very low throughout the 2008 to 2018 time period with Independents following behind them and Democrats reporting the highest levels of trust of any political party affiliation. In 2018, 21% of Republicans reported trusting the news media compared to 42% of Independents and 76% of Democrats. This highlights the immense partisan divide taking place.





Trump Phenomenon

The scatter plots above demonstrate how Republicans became progressively more distrustful of the media, particularly in 2016. This shift is due to then-President-Elect Donald Trump's constant criticism of the news media's and their coverage of him. While I cannot prove a causal effect, there is an association between decline in trust towards the news media and President Donald Trump. This spurred into action a historical low of 14% trust in the news media on behalf of Republicans. Donald Trump's campaign appeared to have the opposite effect on Democrats who were shown to become significantly more trusting of the news media in 2017 and 2018 following Donald Trump's election. This reveals that Democrats began to support the news media even more once Donald Trump took office. I believe that Republicans became more distrusting of the news media because they did not like the increase in news media that was heavily criticized by Donald Trump and his campaign. On the other hand, Democrats were encouraged to trust the news media even more for the

same reason, because the news was being critical of Donald Trump. This vast distinction between the attitudes of Republicans and Democrats towards the news media is a prime example of selective exposure at play. According to Arceneaux, selective exposure will blunt the effect of counterattitudinal political programming, resulting in more polarization and distrust towards the media (Arceneaux et al. 2012, 181).

Scholars have drawn comparisons between Joseph McCarthy's strategies with those of then Presidential Candidate and now President Donald Trump (Allcott et al. 2017, 212). Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential Campaign was largely fueled by his ability to evoke a sense of fear within the American people about the current state of the union. His most popular campaign slogan "Make America Great Again", suggests that the United States is in a state of disarray and that we must rediscover our past greatness. He further supported these claims by exemplifying his perceived threats to the public safety of the American people and promoting these ideas through a multitude of social media platforms (Allcott et al. 2017, 225). According to President Donald Trump, these major threats include illegal immigration through the U.S.-Mexico border and terrorism from Muslim-majority countries. These assertions introduced a rise in extremist language concerning a number of minority groups in the United States.

The news media plays an essential role in elections, especially presidential elections. In this day and age, television, social media, and the internet are essential to disseminating knowledge for any campaign. The majority of Americans use social media at least once per day and a growing number of Americans use social media as

their primary source of information (Bail et al. 2018, 3). In his research, Christopher Bail asserts that the danger of using social media to discuss politics is that it creates an “echo-chamber” where people engage in selective exposure (Bail et al. 2018, 6). Additionally, Bail’s research followed a number of Republicans and Democrats on the social media site Twitter. The test subjects were random selected to follow a Twitter bot who retweeted extremely partisan tweets. The results of Bail’s study indicate that Republicans experienced a significant increase in their polarization while Democrats show a small increase (Bail et al. 2018, 6).

Moreover, in his research, Tony Bennett has observed a noticeable movement towards the reliance on social media for political information and activism. He claims that shift away from traditional forms of news media has entirely changed the identity of politics because it allows for the instant transfer of information but also a lack of accuracy and validity (Bennett et al. 2016, 36). This shift away from traditional forms of news media has helped in that it allowed more accessibility and variety of thought. However, it also presents a number of new problems because it is increasingly difficult to differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources of information. Furthermore, progress in technology has allowed for more niche conversations but this has in turn limited comprehensive political discussions with people of varying political perspectives (Nyhan et al. 2010, 320).

The rise in politicians utilizing social media is also an alternate explanation for the decrease in trust in the news media. As politicians have rejected traditional forms of news media in favor of social media, the fragmentation of conversation found on the internet has largely hindered the ability to find common ground and it

has resulted in higher levels of polarization (Hong et al. 2016, 779). Another alternate explanation for the decrease in trust in the news media is the perceived media bias against Presidential Candidate Bernie Sanders. Many scholars have criticized the biased news media coverage of Bernie Sanders' 2016 Presidential Campaign where he received significantly less media coverage than both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton (Muller et al. 2019, 18). Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton's dominance of the news media coverage is another explanation as to why trust in the media has decreased. The prevalence of social media in politics and the treatment of Bernie Sanders are very influential factors in determining the level of trust towards the news media, particularly in 2016. Nonetheless, I believe that the majority of the rise in distrust is associated with Donald Trump's negative rhetoric towards the news media.

The importance of the news media's role in the success of a presidential campaign is exemplified by the 2016 Presidential Election. Although presidential candidate Donald Trump had one of the smallest campaign budgets, he was able to win the election by maintaining the strongest presence in the media. According to research, Donald Trump received approximately \$2 billion worth of free news media attention largely the result of the number of controversies he caused (Muller et al. 2019, 16). Regardless of the fact that much of the news media attention was negative, it still gave Donald Trump the name recognition needed to combat a career politician such as Hillary Clinton.

I hypothesize that the 2016 election of President-Elect Donald Trump and his successive rhetoric galvanized a large portion of Americans to doubt the news media in addition to increasing partisan division and animosity. This relationship highlights

how elite polarization can ultimately lead to affective polarization. According to Theodor Adorno, the perception of the mass media is directly influenced by the nature of the information the public is being fed (Adorno et al. 1975, 13). This assertion is also supported by James Druckman who writes that voters will base their potential candidate evaluations on the topics that are emphasized in the news media, a phenomenon known as priming (Druckman et al. 2005, 1036). Additionally, voters will form their opinions about political events based on how the news media frames those events, a phenomenon known as framing (Druckman et al. 2005, 1036). The information being fed to the public is created by the elite and it is then sent out to be consumed by the masses. Therefore, the elite has the ability to control the masses by censoring what they want to be perceived as truth in society. Adorno highlights the “culture industry”, claiming that within a capitalist society, culture functions like an industry (Adorno et al. 1975, 16). He claims that capitalist societies function like an industry because they are producing information for the consumption of the masses and they profit by maintaining the status quo and keeping the elite at the top.

Conclusion

While the news media can be prejudice and present information in a disingenuous way, research has also reported a hostile media effect wherein news media consumers believe there is a bias in otherwise balanced reporting (Gunther 1992, 162). Many news media consumers that prescribe to a certain ideology will make relative discernments concerning the level of perceived hostility in reporting. They believe that ideologically congruent news is reported fairly while news in

opposition to their ideology is reported unfairly (Arceneaux et al. 2012, 183). This is particularly common when it comes to reporting political controversies because partisan news sources report the news from an ideological point of view, thereby further increasing the antagonistic feelings among consumers (Arceneaux et al. 2012, 185). This problem is far more omnipresent than one would expect. “Over half of the American population consistently endorse some kind of conspiratorial narrative about a current political event or phenomenon,” (Miller et al. 2015, 828).

I hypothesize that the significant increase in trust in the news media among Democrats and to a lesser extent Independents during the 2016 Presidential Election is largely the result of President-Elect Donald Trump’s rhetoric describing the news media. This negative rhetoric had the opposite effect on Republicans who reported a substantial decrease in trust in the news media. This contradiction calls attention to the fact that President Donald Trump’s rhetoric has led to even more partisan division and animosity. However, according to Matthew Levendusky, this divergence in trust in the news media is to be expected because people will follow their preferred leader (Levendusky 2010, 120). Levendusky asserts that people make sense of the world by observing and following the cues of their preferred leader. Through his rhetoric, President-Elect Donald Trump took advantage of the benefits of elite polarization and provided Republicans with even clearer cues, resulting in more consistent supporters and voters (Levendusky 2010, 125). As Republicans began to hear negative rhetoric about the news media on a regular basis from their preferred leader, their attitudes began to change and a distrust in the news media became more normalized within Republican social networks. The same can be said for Democrats who heard these

criticisms of the news media but instead began reporting higher levels of trust as they aligned to their preferred leaders' perspectives. This divergence in trust across partisan lines highlights how elite polarization can ultimately lead to affective polarization.

Establishing an understanding of people's level of trust for the news media is vital in looking towards the future of politics because it has immense power within a democracy. A lack of trust in these institutions signals that this power is diminishing. This has important consequences for how the power of the news media affects a nation and how this power has shifted over time. While immense progress has been made in terms of the democratization of news media, polarization has continued to flourish and there is much more work to be done before there is true news media transparency.

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