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Introduction

Trusted Communicators

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Trust in media institutions has declined more or less apace with trust in every other kind of major institution in public life. Or perhaps it is more correct, as Ashutosh Bhagwat observes in his contribution to this project, to say that trust has declined in the *types* of media institutions, the proverbial Walter Cronkites, that dominated "the media" during the twentieth-century period when modern American ideals around free speech and journalistic value were still taking form.

Today much of the trust that mainstream media institutions once enjoyed has migrated, in a fragmented way, toward attention merchants of various shapes and scales that treat the news as a mere opportunity to juice engagement by serving identity-affirming content to targeted market segments. And though some of the major mainstream media institutions survive and continue to produce top-quality factual reporting (the *New York Times*, for example), even these outlets must play the identity-affirmation game at some level. There is no way in such an environment for America's trusted media communicators to play the consensus-building role that they once did. Instead, the trust dynamic between Americans and their many news sources today works to accelerate polarization and exacerbate their seeming inability to agree on the facts.

All of the authors in this research cluster agree that the collapse in media trust (or diffusion of media trust, however you want to view it) stems, at least in part, from technological changes that have expanded competition among news producers and created a "buyer's market" for news. Within these constraints, what can worthy, fact-based media institutions do to restore the trust they have lost?

In Chapter 2, "Getting to Trustworthiness (but Not Necessarily to Trust)," Helen Norton opens the discussion by backing up a step: What does it mean for a news outlet to be *worthy* of trust? The question invites two observations. First, an institution may misappropriate the trust of many readers, or something functionally similar to trust, by pandering to them, manipulating them, or engaging in a range of other similar practices that make an institution *less* worthy of trust rather than

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more. But second, it may also be possible for an institution to gain a degree of public trust by demonstrating its trustworthiness in noticeable ways – and if done skillfully, this second approach may provide at least a partial path toward aligning economic viability with ethical reporting. Professor Norton's chapter takes some initial steps on this path, identifying a working index of trustworthy and non-trustworthy media behaviors and offering some ways to elevate trustworthy behaviors. But she acknowledges that this high road will be hard and uncertain.

In Chapter 3, "Sober and Self-Guided Newsgathering," Jane Bambauer discusses one particularly insidious form of untrustworthy reporting: dramatic coverage of facts that are accurate but nevertheless misleading because they are statistically unrepresentative. Such reporting, which often plays on identity-driven fears or hostilities, causes harm by inspiring news consumers to approach life, and each other, with overcaution and hostility. But as Professor Bambauer argues, media institutions trying to compete in a fragmented market face intense pressure to produce just this kind of content. Audiences demand it because they are victims of heuristic biases that make them crave identity affirmation. Professor Bambauer therefore proposes a bit of very difficult jujitsu: If news producers cannot get out from under reader demands in a buyers' market, then they should try to reshape reader demands by retraining them to put facts in better perspective – or at least to invest their trust more intelligently in institutions that do. But this maneuver – as Professor Bambauer concedes – will take a very long time to execute.

In Chapter 4, "The New Gatekeepers? Social Media and the 'Search for Truth'," Ashutosh Bhagwat questions whether it is even appropriate to hope that some new generation of gatekeepers can pick up the Walter Cronkite mantle. As he argues, the whole notion that a select few should play gatekeeper based on their status as elite "trusted communicators" chafes against the "marketplace of ideas" theory that conventionally motivates First Amendment thought. Or perhaps more to the point, a market clustered around trusted communicators looks less like the bazaar that Oliver Wendell Holmes envisioned and more like a *real* market, with heavy concentrations of power that tend to draw from accidental circumstances and endowment effects rather than some ideal of consumer rationality. On this view, Cronkite had the public's trust because there was only enough spectrum for a few networks; Google has the public's trust because it is the gateway to the internet. Yet we have looked to these gatekeepers to set terms for public discourse and the democratic process – an odd result given that neither gatekeeper secured its position by actually persuading the public.

Finally, in Chapter 5, "Beyond the Watchdog: Using Law to Build Trust in the Press," Erin Carroll argues that the various problems of media trust may appear less intractable if the law would update its sense of the role journalists should play in a democratic society. For more than half a century, an adversarial "watchdog" ethic of journalism provides the near-exclusive metric for journalistic prestige in the United States. This same view of the press shapes the most memorable press-freedom

rhetoric from the Supreme Court and animates most portrayals of journalists doing good work in movies and TV. But the watchdog role, as Professor Carroll observes, can exacerbate partisan dynamics while narrowing a news institution's base of trust in the community. So while the watchdog ethic provides invaluable benefits to democratic governance, it can also *frustrate* democratic governance and impair trust in media if news institutions lean exclusively into it. Instead, Professor Carroll urges news institutions to rediscover the largely forgotten idea that news institutions should aspire to act as *facilitators* and *fora* for citizen discourse in a democratic community. Such a role does not lend itself so much to the segmented identity-affirmation dynamic that undermines public consensus and solidarity and motivates untrustworthy coverage. And as a mode of speech governance, this is a role that would ideally advance public discourse rather than control it.