

## WHAT THEY SAID



"We were supposed to leave at 7:40. Then it was 2:40, then 11:15, then 11:30. **And now, I don't even see our flight.**" — Nicole Vowel, a stranded passenger at Dallas Love Field, after a shutdown of a critical flight safety system Wednesday morning forced all domestic flights nationwide to be grounded for more than 90 minutes to start the day. That outage led to hundreds of flights out of Dallas' airports being canceled or delayed. (Wednesday, The Dallas Morning News)

"We'll remember the men in that locker room, the guys we got to grow up with. [...] **When stuff got tough and things kind of got hard, you saw what type of men we've got** in our locker room that continue to fight, believe." — Texas Christian University quarterback Max Duggan, after the Horned Frogs were defeated in the national championship game by Georgia, 65-7. (Tuesday, The Dallas Morning News)



"The wind has been treacherous, but you just got to bundle up and make sure you stay dry. Rain is part of life. **It's going to be sunny. It's going to rain. I just got to strap my boots up and not give up.**" — Theo Harris, who has been living on the streets of San Francisco since getting out of jail in 2016. (Tuesday, The Associated Press)

"One thing I'm looking forward to is for my kid to watch one of my matches and tell someone, **'That's my mom,'** haha." — Tennis champion Naomi Osaka, announcing on Instagram that she's pregnant and withdrawing from the Australian Open and future competitions. (Wednesday, The New York Times)



"**My Corvette's in a locked garage**, so it's not like it's sitting out on the street." — President Joe Biden, replying to a question on how classified papers were found. A special counsel was assigned by the Justice Department to investigate the handling of classified documents by the president. (Thursday, The New York Times)

"He will make himself **right at home in Florida's right-wing ecosystem of gifting and podcasting**, finding allies with whoever thinks they can use him to advance their far-right agenda." — Andy Reiter, a professor of politics and international relations at Mount Holyoke College, commenting on former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro (pictured) apparently settling in the Sunshine State. (Monday, The Associated Press)



apparently settling in the Sunshine State. (Monday, The Associated Press)

"One minute, you're making mint tea at home, the next, you're invited to be **the Black face of an embattled white organization.**" — Comedian Jerrod Carmichael, commenting on his hosting duties at last week's Golden Globe Awards. (Tuesday, The Washington Post)

"We've dug into not just the language, the rhetoric in these documents, but also the data. And I'd say in that sense, **our analysis really seals the deal on 'Exxon knew.'**" — Geoffrey Supran, lead author of a study in the journal Science that revealed that Exxon Mobil's scientists were remarkably accurate in their predictions about global warming since 1977. (Thursday, The Associated Press)

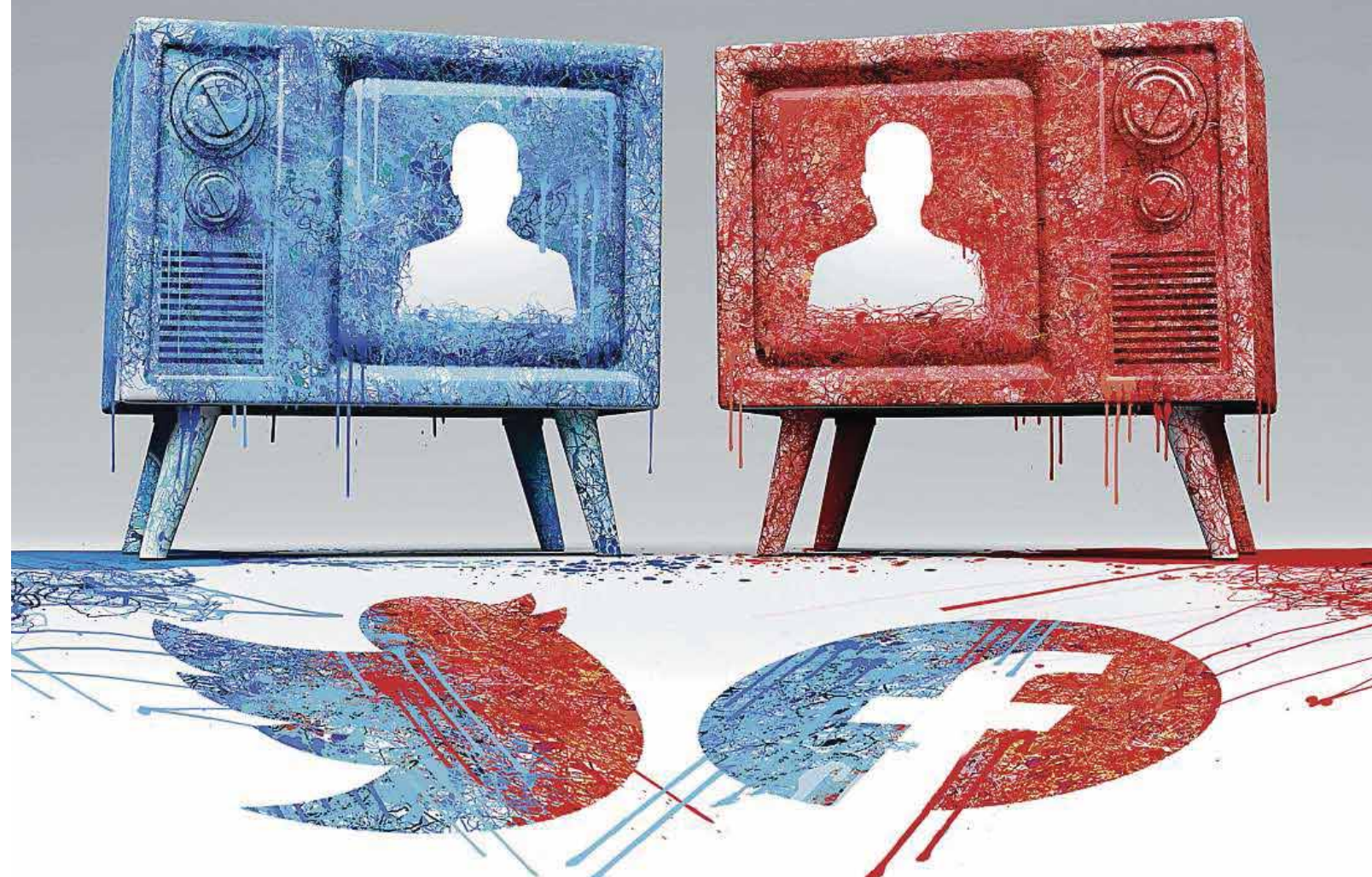
"They were looking not just anywhere in the country but someplace in the world to launch this. **They decided North Texas would be a good fit.**" — Frisco Mayor Jeff Cheney, after announcing that Universal Parks and Resorts will build a kid-themed park in the North Texas suburb. (Wednesday, The Dallas Morning News)



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# Regaining the public's trust

Faith in the news media is tragically low, but how do we restore credibility?



Michael Hogue/Staff Artist

## EDITORIAL

In a statement recognizing National Newspaper Week some 40 years ago, President Ronald Reagan extolled the central role of the media in American democracy.

"Since the founding of this nation, freedom of the press has been a fundamental tenet of American life," Reagan said on Oct. 6, 1983. "There is no more essential ingredient than a free, strong and independent press to our continued success in what the Founding Fathers called our 'noble experiment' in self government."

Fast forward to Oct. 29, 2018, when President Donald Trump called the news media the "Enemy of the People" in a tweet shortly after a series of mail bombs were sent to prominent Democrats and a cable news network by a political extremist.

"There is great anger in our Country caused in part by inaccurate, and even fraudulent, reporting of the news," Trump wrote on his Twitter account. "The Fake News Media, the true Enemy of the People, must stop the open & obvious hostility & report the news accurately & fairly."

Indeed, just as Reagan's remarks reflected the populace's high, post-Watergate respect for the nation's free press, Trump's comments mirrored waning trust in this once-admired American institution, now scoffed at during these times of deep political polarization.

While once we all seemed to be at least accepting of a common set of facts related to us by the members of a trusted news media, now we don't even seem to agree on what a fact is.

As part of our series on the American Middle, we recognize that polarization within the news media has contributed to divisions in our society and eroded trust in the news media. We have taken a closer look at the depth of this problem and considered potential causes. And, because we believe most people share our desire for less polarization in the media, we offer several recommendations for rebuilding public trust in the press and bolstering the institutions that provide our nation with the information we need to function as citizens.

## THE AMERICAN MIDDLE

Part of our Opinion series exploring *The American Middle*, this editorial examines why and how the public has lost trust in today's polarized news media, and how we can undo the damage this has caused.

# The Dallas Morning News

Established October 1, 1885

## Publishers

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E. M. (Ted) Dealey 1940-1960 John A. Rector Jr. 1985-1986  
Joe M. Dealey 1960-1980 Burl Osborne 1986-2001  
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*Acknowledge the right of the people  
to get from the newspaper both sides  
of every important question.*

G. B. Dealey

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Sunday, January 15, 2023

## Editorial

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### A skeptical public

Studies show that distrust of the media has only deepened in these recent years of political polarization. No longer are news organizations widely considered credible sources of objective and accurate information. Instead, they're looked at with suspicion, with consumers wondering if what they're hearing or reading is true or made up, fair or slanted. And while some groups are more suspicious than others, an increasing number of people are questioning the truth of what they're hearing, watching and reading.

This reality is borne out in statistics.

According to a Pew Research Center survey of adults in summer 2022, just 61% of Americans said they had some or a lot of trust in the information they get from national news organizations. That's a significant drop from the 76% of adults who felt that way in 2016.

The youngest adults surveyed, those age 18-29, had the least amount of trust in the national news — just 56%. The oldest Americans, those 65 and over, had the most, at 67%.

Local news organizations fared better in the Pew survey, but they also saw declining faith in their products. Among all adults, 71% said they had some or a lot of trust in the information they got from their local news outlets. But that was also a big drop from just six years ago, when 82% said they trusted their hometown news.

So what are the reasons for this slow and steady erosion of trust in the news media? Trying to pinpoint them in the fast-changing world of communication can be like grasping at Jell-O. It seems obvious the decline is part of an overall loss of faith in many institutions, such as academia and elections administration. Still, some experts have identified what they believe are the biggest factors specific to the media.

### Losing trust

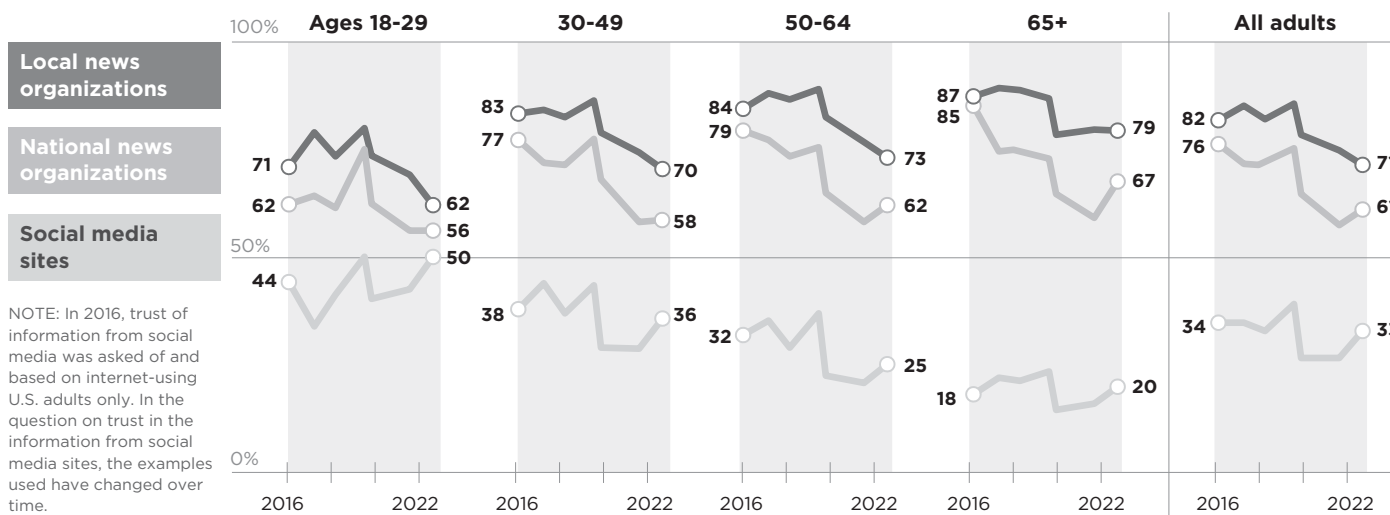
According to a report by the nonpartisan Aspen Institute, which in 2017 formed a commission to examine trust in the media, there are six major reasons for this decline.

The first cause is the proliferation of news sources, from ca-

## Whom do you trust?

**U.S. adults under 30 are now almost as likely to trust information on social media sites as information from national news outlets.**

*Percent of U.S. adults who say they have some or a lot of trust in the information they get from ...*

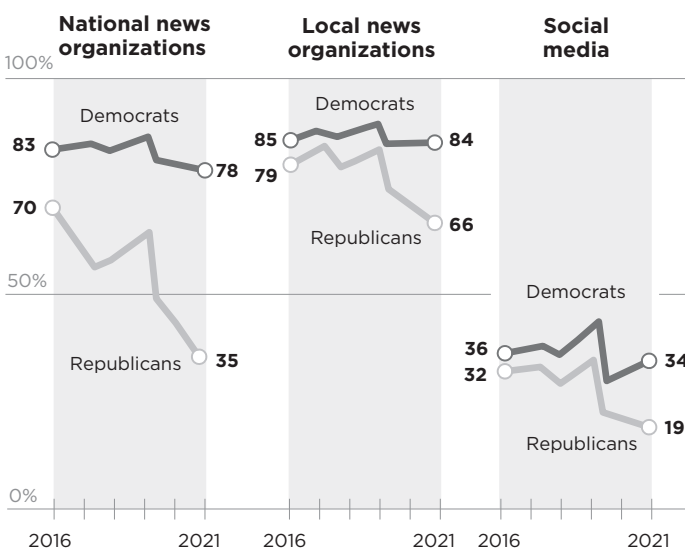


NOTE: In 2016, trust of information from social media was asked of and based on internet-using U.S. adults only. In the question on trust in the information from social media sites, the examples used have changed over time.

SOURCE Annual Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted most recently July 18-Aug. 21, 2022

### Wider partisan gaps emerged in trust of national and local news organizations and social media.

*Percent of U.S. adults who say they have some or a lot of trust in the information that comes from ...*



NOTE: In 2016, trust of information from social media was asked of and based on internet-using U.S. adults only. In the question on trust in the information from social media sites, the examples used have changed over time.

SOURCE Annual Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted most recently June 14-27, 2021

Staff Graphic

ble news channels to a dizzying number of internet "news" sites. This paradox of choice has actually made it harder, not easier, for Americans to feel well-informed, according to the institute's Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy, a partnership with John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which studied the topic for two years.

The commission cited a 2018 Gallup poll that found only about 4 in 10 people were confident in their ability to "navigate the news environment to remain knowledgeable on current events and determine what is factually true."

The second reason is the public's loss of connection with the media source that created the news story.

News stories once consumed in newspapers, magazines or on a particular channel are now of-

ten funneled to consumers through internet platforms rather than actual sites of news organizations, the commission noted. This has made it harder for consumers to differentiate between "good" journalism produced by experienced reporters from stories based on rumors or falsehoods, creating distrust with all of it.

A third factor has been the blurring of lines between news and opinion in the media, the commission found. This blurring took off with the 1987 repeal of the Federal Communication Commission's Fairness Doctrine, a Reagan administration decision that opened the door for endless partisan commentaries on talk radio and 24-hour cable network shows.

"The consensus on what constitutes 'the news' began to erode," the commission report said. More recently, it added,

conservative media have attacked "mainstream media" as being inherently biased toward the left.

Perhaps one of the greatest factors that has chipped away at public trust of the media, however, has been the widespread dissemination of false or misleading information. Of course, propaganda intended to influence attitudes and even win votes is nothing new to American society. But the "internet, with its radical openness, has introduced new forms of problematic content," according to the commission. That ranges from troubling but often harmless misinformation to the more serious disinformation, which is knowingly sharing false information intended to cause harm.

Often this damaging disinformation is tailored to appeal to the deepest fears of a particular group so that it is more likely to be spread more quickly in moments of outrage. The commission noted one of the starkest examples of this in recent years was Russia's use of American social media platforms to affect the 2016 election. The commission noted that the disinformation spread by Russia wasn't so much intended to favor one candidate over another, as it was to sow distrust and confusion about the reliability of sources of information.

Along with disinformation, Americans don't feel like they're getting all of the facts — and it would appear they're right. A February 2022 Pew survey of journalists found that they differ significantly from the public in the importance they place on "bothsidesism" — whether reporters should always try to give equal coverage to all sides of a story. Such an approach has historically been a central mission of news gathering.

A majority of journalists surveyed, 55%, say they do not believe every side of a story deserves equal coverage; 76% of Americans say they do.

The readers and viewers are right here, and if journalists ensured they were fairly presenting all sides of a story in a neutral light, and letting the facts speak for themselves, it could go a long way toward restoring lost trust.

A fifth reason so many Americans distrust the news media, according to the commission, is the decline of local news organizations. More people trust local news sources than national ones. That's likely because consumers feel a higher level of accountability from news produced close to home. But as local news outlets have shut their doors, consumers haven't connected with out-of-reach national sources.

Finally, the commission identified the growing practice among the public, as well as pundits and politicians, to polit-

icize criticism of the media. Americans tend to be more critical of "the media" rather than "my media," the news sources one goes to for his daily diet of partisan commentary. And several high-profile politicians, including Trump, have made regular criticism of the media part of their worldview.

So what can be done to stop the downward slide of trust in what was once one of America's most-admired institutions? How can the news media become less polarized and more representative of the American Middle?

### Restoring trust

It's worth noting that the public's relationship with the press has never been one of perfect trust. And it's also worth noting that a partisan press that delights some and infuriates others is nothing new to our nation.

The ideal of objective reporting was really a concept that arose as late 19th- and early 20th-century publishers tried to attract audiences with diverse viewpoints.

In 1787, Thomas Jefferson famously said that "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

His opinion of the press declined with time or as he came under its scrutiny. In 1807, he wrote that "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle."

Those nostalgic for "the way things used to be" probably don't have a sense of how rough and tumble they really were.

But there is little doubt that the supply of strong, independent local reporting has declined to the detriment of the country.

That has proved to be a hard problem to resolve, as newspapers that always supplied the lion's share of local, fact-based reporting have withered in the internet economy.

As people have increasingly turned to cable television and social media for information, trust in "the media" has declined along with the quality of information they get.

Some might suggest a return to something like the Fairness Doctrine, when Americans' sources of information were limited and news organizations worked under clear regulations and, during the middle 20th century at least, adhered to courteous traditions.

There is constant debate in politics now about whether social media platforms are unfair and biased in their content moderation. Republican legis-

lators around the country are pressuring social media companies over what is or isn't on their sites.

Trying to legislate our way into a "fair" media is foolish. Even if it could be done, regulating content disseminated off the public airwaves is fraught with First Amendment concerns. It also ignores the nation's long history of a partisan press.

There is a role for better government regulation. But that mainly relates to limiting the broad libel protections that social media companies enjoy, protections that traditional news organizations do not have. The civil courts have long done a good job of holding publishers responsible for the quality of their content. They should have greater sway with internet publishers as well. Doing so would help level the economic playing field that has put a lot of traditional publishers on their heels.

But, by and large, involving the government in the business of speech and the dissemination of information is an error and one we would surely regret.

### A path forward

So where does that leave us? As with so many of our civic problems, it's worth turning to the thoughts of our founders.

Jefferson said it in 1817: "An enlightened citizenry is indispensable for the proper functioning of a republic."

People need to be better educated about the media itself. The way information is gathered and disseminated has changed faster than society's ability to keep up with what is trustworthy and what isn't.

We have to do a better job understanding how we get our news. Thankfully, media literacy has become a greater concern from elementary to graduate school. And it should be because so many people now get their information from unreliable sources.

That's an easy trap to fall into because we seem to be hardwired to seek sources that confirm our biases rather than challenge them. Social media and partisan cable news have benefited enormously from that human impulse. And social media has made it especially pernicious by building algorithms to exploit it.

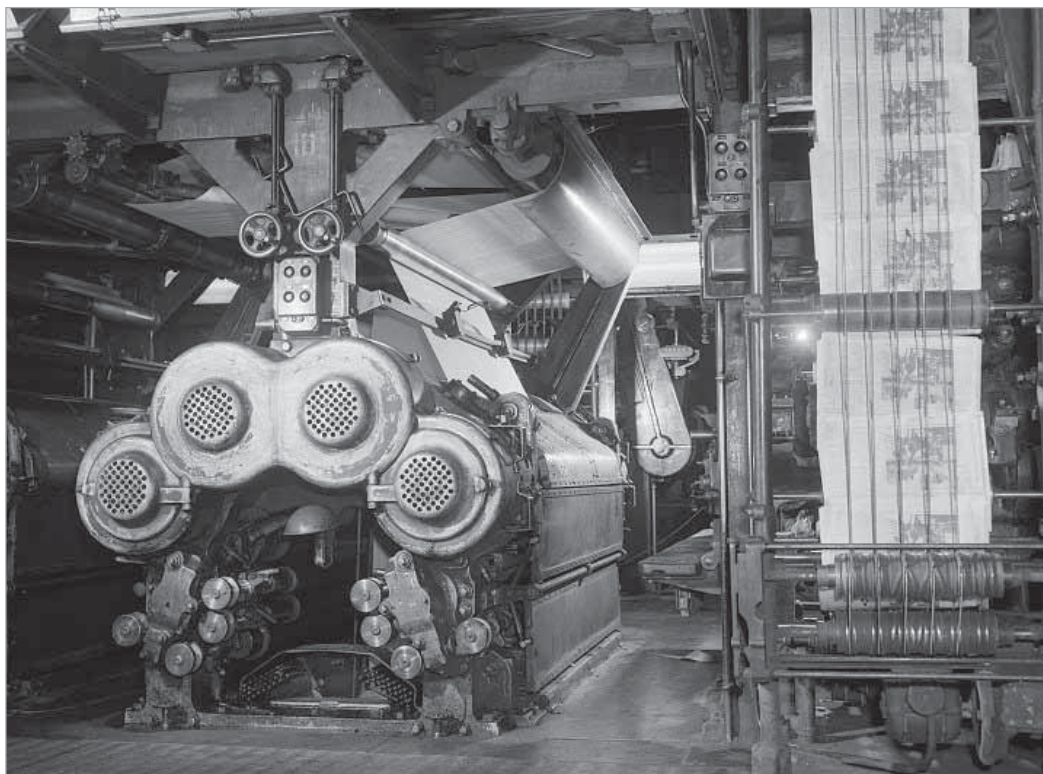
Countering that impulse will take an organized and active effort on the part of people to not only understand where their information comes from but also to seek sources of information that are committed to getting the facts right, providing context and offering all relevant sides to a story.

It's hard work to do that. But it is crucial to the function of a republic and a free society.

Fair regulation can help, not by measuring the fairness of content but by putting all publishers on more equal regulatory footing, whether they are social media companies or television stations or newspapers.

Public trust in the news media has broken down over many decades, so building it back up may well take as long. But we believe that despite the tendency to be drawn to echo chambers, most Americans don't want polarized news organizations. They want once again to trust the nation's free press.

With a deeper understanding of the reasons for this collapse in trust, and a concerted commitment to fixing these problems, perhaps we can restore some of what's been lost and ensure we have the facts we need to do our work as citizens.



File Photo/Getty Images

**Newspaper presses are pictured** in the mid-20th century. In 1787, Thomas Jefferson famously said that "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."