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Oral Roberts University

Fake News?

The Decline of Trust in American News Media

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Senior Paper

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November 28, 2018

The Decline of Trust in American News Media

Life in America has many staples holding it together. From McDonald's and Chevy to Levi's and Apple products, the American existence has been branded by many such identifying trademarks. These commodities, along with countless others, have transformed and guided the way life in this country has progressed and been lived over the centuries. Just those specific four alone have significantly changed the way Americans (respectively) eat, travel, dress, and communicate; they have drastically affected how people live their lives and have considerably altered the future. Another such staple exists, one that not only has shaped the way people live, but fundamentally and single-handedly has affected the way people *think*. This organization is overarching, its impact significantly larger than any fast food chain or clothing line – its influence stretching into the lives of millions every single day. This staple is the media.

The “media” consists of organizations such as the *New York Times*, Fox News, Cable News Network (CNN), National Public Radio (NPR), and the Associated Press (AP). These organizations, along with many others, have a main function of investigating and reporting important events or details to the American people, events that constitute the “news.” Even from the early days of colonial America where printing press newspapers were delivered by foot or horseback, the news has always been an integral part of being a citizen of the United States. Spreading information as quickly and correctly as possible is needed for the success of any large group of people, especially a growing Republic still working to become firmly established. The range of topics that have been covered by news organizations is wide. At times, the broadcasts and news channels have warned the public about the potential outbreak of a deadly disease or the projected path of an approaching storm. Other times, the media has actively participated in the political arena, covering topics such as campaigns, debates, and press conferences. Thomas

Jefferson highlights the importance of information during elections: “A well-informed electorate is a prerequisite to democracy.” Overall, anything the public has needed to know has been communicated via the media. The government especially has used the media a considerable amount, relaying important information to American people via press releases in the White House.

Media as a whole has ventured a great way from what it formerly looked like in the days of a younger United States. The news has shaped the ideas and opinions of many, and has been pivotal in the formation and advancement of American politics. Media has, overall, been a massive part of life in the United States. One cannot live without at least being introduced to a media platform, and at worst being bombarded every day from a multitude of platforms.

News organizations, much like any other facet of American culture, have seen many shifts. These shifts have affected the news medium. “Medium” refers to the means by which news or information is conveyed to the American public. Over the years, these methods of publishing information have changed. These mediums have transformed from printing press newspapers to radio broadcasts, then to evening television, eventually welcoming the internet as a viable news source. This body has changed drastically over the decades and centuries since the conception of this country.

The United States is 242 years old, and within that time, everything has changed, especially the media. The press today is so overwhelming and encompassing in everyday life, it is hard to imagine a time without press. However, such a time did exist. Pre-Revolution America found some colonial governments opposed to an accessible press. Virginia Governor William Berkley wrote in 1671: “I thank God, there are no free schools nor printing and I hope we shall not have, these hundred years, for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into

the world, and printing has divulged them, and libels against the best government. God keep us from both." The British government reinforced this line of thinking by warning the Governor of Massachusetts, "Great inconvenience may arise by the liberty of printing." Britain at the time had outlawed printing or publishing done without the approval of the government. "No person [was to] keep any printing-press for printing, nor any book, pamphlet or other matter whatsoever."

The first known example of "news" in America was *Publick Occurences*, a newspaper published by Benjamin Harris on September 25, 1690 in Boston, Massachusetts. Although earlier one-page news pamphlets had been printed, this was the first sign of what soon would be known as a "newspaper." *Publick Occurences* had four pages and a promise from Harris to deliver a monthly issue – or whenever newsworthy items needed to be reported. However, since officials viewed free press as troublesome in the colonies, *Publick Occurences* was soon banned. The Governor of Massachusetts stated that the newspaper enclosed "sundry doubtful and uncertain Reports." Every copy of *Publick Occurences* was destroyed, except for one. Ironically enough, this copy now rests in the British Library. According to a Massachusetts website, one historian once wrote, "The first newspaper published in America became the first to be suppressed by authorities."

At the birth of the nation, the newspaper had become the main form of information distribution among the American people. Years before the Revolutionary War, in 1704, the first continuous press was established in Boston. Called the *Boston News-Letter*, this paper was unlike *Publick Occurences* in that it survived longer than one issue. John Campbell, the publisher and editor, was the former Boston postmaster. With this position, Campbell had access to news and information coming out of Europe, which he began including in his *Boston News-*

Letter. Soon, other printing presses began to spring up in other cities and colonies across American. The rise of the Revolutionary War in the 18th century gave a tremendous opportunity to new press organizations. British troops invading the American colonies and committing offenses against the colonists united the people against Britain and King George and aided in the rise and momentum of the newspaper.

The 19th century brought with it new machinery and technology used in printing newspapers. These new technologies, like the linotype machine, made newspaper printing both faster and cheaper. The types of reports in newspapers also began to shift. Yellow journalism was introduced to the American reader, which offered crude, sensational, and entertaining material for consumers. Later, muckraking became commonplace, which was the exposure via news report of corruption, often times in government.

The advent of the radio came in the 20th century, specifically the 1920s. Organizations like the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) sprang up and starting running news programs. The radio was important for the average American because it carried news to the more rural areas of the country, instantly involving more people in information relay.

Later in the 20th century, media was again forever changed with the advent of the television. Now, news consumers could watch the news, or view a politician for the first time. Body language and physical appearance became instantly important in settings such as presidential debates and addresses. A news program called *See It Now*, featuring a man named Edward Murrow, became one of the first television journalism programs in 1951, giving way to much expansion later on. Much like the age of radio, news organizations started forming around the new news medium. Common networks still in use today, such as ABC and CBS, were

formed and began televising their news reports. By the 1960s, most households had a television. This is when the first televised presidential debate occurred, between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. The television soon became a useful tool for impacting the people. A political leader could offer reassurance or encouragement after a tragedy. 9 /11 is a perfect example, where President Bush sent a message to the world that America would mourn the loss of our men and women greatly, and that she would not stand for what happened that day. News distribution had become fast with the radio, but even faster with the television.

However, media was in for one more update, this time coming around the turn of the century. Internet revolutionized life in many ways when it began its rise in the 2000s. News was a large part of that revolution. Just like the introduction of each previous news medium, the introduction of the internet made it easier to access news reports. New media outlets were formed, like *The Huffington Post*, where writers could post online blogs or news reports that were then accessible at the click of a button. The introduction of the internet would also eventually bring many of the newspapers online for easier access in order to compete with online news sources. The internet also brought with it something completely new to the world: Social media. Now, with platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, ordinary citizens could post articles, videos, and opinion pieces that could be seen by anyone in the world. News organizations quickly began taking advantage of this aspect of the internet. Soon, social media was being used by many of the news organizations as another platform to distribute their issues and reports. The swap and distribution of information was made faster than it had ever been before. With the advent of social media, the sharing of opinions and political views increased because people could view news articles and pages and share/send them to other people.

From the colonial days of America, news has come a long way. The country has gone from a physical newspaper being the only means of information distribution to instant sharing of updates and reports through the internet to anyone in the world. News mediums in America have changed drastically, and these changes have had a multitude of effects. These shifts in news media, along with the growing need for immediacy in reporting, the stark polarization of news outlets, and the utilization of anonymous sources, have ultimately resulted in a decline in trust in the media by the American public.

Review of Literature

Since this senior paper will be two-pronged in nature, the sources used within are gathered into two distinct groups. The first group of sources deals with the advancement of media in America over the years. These sources agree that news today looks little like it used to back during most of the 1900s. Several of these sources, like Paul Farhi's "Going Respectable?" article in the *American Journal Review*, comment on news sources today, such as the tabloid *National Enquirer*, which reports on celebrity crushes, drama among professional sports player, etc. They comment that the quality and relevance of reported and distributed news has possibly changed. Another aspect that many of these sources share is their research concerning the advancement of news types. For instance, they research the transition from newspaper to online news, or from radio to online news (i.e. news on television, phones, tablets, laptops, etc.). An additional, recent, and growing source of news for Americans is social media. These sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, give both media groups and ordinary citizens the power to post and share ideas with the world at the click of a button. In an article titled "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2017," Elisa Shearer and Jeffrey Gottfried discuss the addition of social

media as an option for American news consumers. The report references surveys that show increases in numbers of people who view news on social media.

The second group of sources deals with the decline of trust by Americans in American media. This group of sources includes many polls and studies done by multiple groups across the country. These studies have been conducted on a multitude of areas concerning the media. The body of this paper is divided into three areas: The growing need for immediacy in reporting, the stark polarization of the American media, and the onset of anonymous source use.

Sources were used in each section to show the legitimacy of that specific aspect of the current media in America (i.e. the need for immediacy), as well as to show the negative effect that aspect has had on the public's trust in the media. Before each section was introduced, two Gallup studies were used to show that the overall trust in the media has declined. The first, done in 2016, is titled "Americans' Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low." The second, titled "Media Use and Evaluation," is very similar, except that it was done two years later, during 2018. Both these sources show the obvious fact that, since the late 1900s, trust in the American media has steadily declined.

The first section uses sources that comment on the speeding up both of the current culture and the current media. One such source is an article written by Steffany Winkelmann titled "The Microwave Generation and Quick Wins." Winkelmann comments on how upcoming generation of Americans lack patience and "want everything right now."

Two other sources used in this section show the consequences of speeding up the news. The first is an NPR article concerning their mistake while covering the Tucson shooting which injured Representative Gabrielle Giffords. The second source is an article by the *Chicago*

Tribune detailing their mistake during the 1948 Presidential Election. The *Tribune* reported early that Dewey had won the White House, when, in reality, Truman had actually won. These two sources are powerful testaments to the dangers of reporting too quickly.

The second section uses sources that comment both on the polarization of the country and of the media. A Pew Research Center article is used to show the severity of the political divide in American today. One USC writer, Laura Paisley, even asserts that the “Political polarization [is] at its worst since the Civil War.” A different Pew Research Center article, written by Michael Barthel and Amy Mitchell and titled “Americans’ Attitudes About the News Media Deeply Divided Along Partisan Lines,” shows the political divide in America affects how people view the media. Another article, this one by *Forbes* writer Brett Edkins, asserts that the “U.S. Media [is] Among [the] Most Polarized In The World.” This article comments on the extreme polarization in news media consumption in the U.S.

The third and final section includes articles that discuss the growing acceptance of anonymity in news sources. The most recent and arguably most blatant case of this is the use by *The New York Times* of an anonymous source from within President Trump’s administration. A man or woman within the White House wrote a letter, detailing how he or she is part of a group that is working against the President from the inside. An article by *The Washington Post* titled “The New York Times op-ed shows the Internet’s biggest drawback” is also used in this section. The author, Gary Abernathy condemns this action of publishing the anonymous letter, writing about the danger of using anonymous sources. In an article for *The Federalist*, James Kelley expresses a similar opinion to that of Abernathy. In his article “When Will The Media Realize That Anonymous Sources Undermine Their Credibility?” Kelley discusses the damaging practice of using anonymous sources in news articles and reports.

Body

“If you don’t read the newspaper, you’re uninformed. If you read the newspaper, you’re misinformed.” This pointed comment by Mark Twain has unfortunately become an opinion shared by many in today’s culture, especially in America. Many studies and published articles show that trust or confidence in the American media by the American people has recently reached new lows.

Gallup Inc. is a research based consulting company that (according to their website) “delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems,” along with conducting public opinion polls. One such poll dates back to 1972, and is entitled “Americans’ Trust in the Mass Media.” Conducted on an annual basis since 1997, this poll asks how much “trust and confidence” the American people place in the press. In 1976, the poll recorded a record high: 72% of Americans retained a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media. After 1976, this poll was not taken again until 1997. At that point, the number of people who placed a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media had descended to barely comprising the majority of Americans (53%). By 2017, that number had fallen even further, reaching an all-time low of 32%. Less than one third of Americans trusted American media.

A similar study was conducted by The Poynter Institute for Media Studies. This organization focuses on research and education concerning journalism, claiming on their website to be “the world’s leading instructor, innovator, convener, and resource for anyone who aspires to engage and inform citizens in 21st Century democracies.” In 2017, Poynter conducted a public opinion survey, asking 2,100 adult Americans about their level of trust in and attitudes toward the media. This survey suggests several alarming facts about the media and its consumers.

According to this survey, 49% of Americans trust the media to report news “fully, accurately and fairly.” The survey also reports that a startling 44% of Americans believe that the media fabricates stories about President Trump more than once in a while.

These two studies offer compelling evidence that trust in the media is at an alarmingly low level. Since the 1972 apex of media trust recorded by Gallup, the people’s confidence in the media has slowly declined. Whether or not the media has become less credible is a separate issue, however. Considering the aforementioned surveys and studies, the public’s *perception* of the media’s credibility has taken a negative turn annually. This fact begs the question: What caused the public to start doubting the news?

One reason for the decline in trust is the speeding up of the news. News in the 21st century is delivered to the public much faster than ever before. This acceleration matches the growing need for immediacy in American culture. The generation of young people who are now becoming college students and graduates has been handed a rather unfortunate title: The Microwave Generation. This slang term is used by many to describe the fast paced and “need it now” culture of the latest addition to the American workforce. In former days, for example, one had to prepare meals in a stove or an oven, and the process took longer. Now, one simply has to place a disposable tray in the microwave, punch a few buttons, and within minutes dinner has been served. In her article “The Microwave Generation and Quick Wins,” Steffany Winkelmann, an email marketing analyst, writes about this generation of people. “We want everything right now, we can't wait, and instantaneous results are what we get us most excited. We love Amazon Prime, we love Instagram 'likes,' and we need to check our phones every 3 minutes.”

Unfortunately, many Americans want their news like they want their TV dinners: Fast. Just like the transformation occurring in the meal preparation industry, news consumption has experienced a similar conversion. News has become faster and more convenient.

Pew Research Center, hereafter referred to as PRC, is (according to their website) a “nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping the world.” PRC often provides valuable polls done on the American public concerning politics and media. According to a PRC survey conducted in 2018, 68% of American adults consume news on social media platforms. The same survey reports that, when asked about the benefits drawing them to news on social media, Americans mention convenience more than anything else. In fact, 21% mention the ease of using social media news. Therefore, the people who were polled cared more about how convenient their news sources were than how accurate their news sources were.

The most alarming statistic from this survey speaks profoundly to the negative effect that the growing sense of immediacy is having on the trust bestowed in the media. According to the study, 57% of American adults who consume news on social media say they *expect* that news to be “largely inaccurate.” Even though 68% of adults consume news on social media, the majority of those people do not trust the news they are viewing.

People enjoy the immediacy that is offered by news platforms of the 21st century, especially the internet. Previously, this was not an option. When news only traveled via newspaper, the speed of news was limited to the speed of printing press and horseback. Now, information sharing is instant via the internet. However, there is a cost for that immediacy, and that cost is accuracy. This sacrifice of precision in exchange for speed has led to some very embarrassing and costly mistakes in the world of journalism.

One such mistake occurred in November of 1948. It was an election year, and Presidential Incumbent Harry Truman was running against a favored opponent, Thomas Dewey, a Republican from New York. All the polls and political analysts were reporting that Dewey was going to take the White House. The Chicago *Tribune* believed it too, however, they wanted to be the first to publically announce the President's defeat. The headline for the morning paper read "DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN." The paper had gone to the press when radio broadcasts began to report the race was closer than anyone had expected. Truman would, ironically, go on to win Illinois, as well as four more years of Presidency that day. The *Tribune* wanted to be the first to report the incumbent's victory, so they went to print quickly, before all the facts had been gathered, and for that, their November 3, 1948 headline will live in infamy.

This infatuation Americans have developed with expediency in news has unfortunately carried into the age of technology. The errors that accompany this aspect of 21st century news have been quite evident. On January 8, 2011, those errors were, again, given a spotlight for the whole world to see, one of the downsides of modern technology. On this day, Representative Gabrielle Giffords was hosting an event in Tucson, Arizona. At approximately 10:10 a.m., a man named Jared Loughner entered the event and started shooting at people with a pistol. By 1:01 p.m., the Newscast unit at National Public Radio (NPR) had reported that Representative Giffords was dead. At 2:01 p.m., NPR newscaster Barbara Klein carried the news into her segment, also reporting that Representative Giffords had been killed in the shooting. At 2:06 p.m., an email bulletin went out to NPR subscribers concerning the shooting. At 2:12 p.m. Andy Carvin, NPR's social media editor, tweeted to NPR's 2 million followers that Giffords had been killed by a shooter. By 2:30 p.m., four hours and twenty minutes after the shooting, NPR

received a report that Giffords was alive, in surgery at the hospital, and NPR quickly began airing a different report, using the word “shot” instead of the word “killed.”

However, by that point, the damage had already been dealt. Before the day was over, other news sources had begun airing the story reporting that the Congresswoman was dead. CNN, Fox News, and the *New York Times* were among those who reported the story, all of which used NPR as their source. Thirty minutes after the initial NPR report, the Big Three television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) were carrying headlines that Giffords had been killed, with CBS and NBC even doing special reports on the matter.

On that day, NPR stressed at (and succeeded at) getting the story first. In the fast-paced world of light speed news, that is precedent that has been set. However, since Giffords was taken to the hospital, it was not confirmed until later that she was still alive. Adequate time was not given for the story to progress, and so the news organizations involved ran the story without complete knowledge of what they were airing, resulting in a false report. Robert Garcia is the Executive Producer of Newscast for NPR. “The upside of having information first is fleeting...The downside is enormous, painful,” said Garcia, according to NPR’s own online report on this matter.

This colossal mistake on NPR’s part shows one of the reasons trust in the media has declined, one of the reasons that the majority of social media news users do not trust social media news. Concerning breaking news, the drive to get it first has overtaken the drive to get it right.

The second reason trust in the media has fallen to record lows is the polarization of not only the media, but of the country as a whole. Many have claimed that America is the most polarized it has been since the Civil War. One *Forbes* writer, Brett Edkins, references a report

from the Reuters Institute, writing, “America’s media environment is more polarized than any other Western country.” The battle between Republican and Democrat, right and left, Conservative and Liberal, rages every day, and seems to reach into every area of life. From abortion to taxes to immigration to gun control, the social and political divide in the United States seems to know no bounds. This division has, of course, drastically affected the media in America. Although this is a very serious topic in today’s world, political division in America’s current news media is far from original.

News in the United States had yet to escape infancy before outside political influence began to set in. In the early days of the nation, when printing press newspapers were still the only media, the papers began to run out of money. The cost of printing and distributing was not being fully offset by the revenue from subscriptions and advertising. Something had to be done or the newspapers were going to go bankrupt. The papers soon realized that their only hope was a bailout, and certain politicians readily agreed. Soon, political parties began financially supporting the newspapers. However, these groups of politicians were specifically supporting the presses that agreed and aided in their agendas and policies. One writer for *Lumen*, a government information cite, wrote, “The divisions that occurred during the United States’ early history created a change and moved the nation into the party press era, in which partisanship and political party loyalty dominated the choice of editorial content.” The time of partisan-swayed presses continues today.

Laura Paisley is a writer for the University of Southern California’s news site. In her article “Political polarization at its worst since the Civil War,” Paisley asserts that “Ideological distance between the parties began to grow during the 1970s to the extent that Congress is now more polarized than at any time since the late 1870s Reconstruction Era.” Paisley also presents

an interesting statistic called the overlap interval. This measure is a way to gage the political spectrum on the two-party system. The overlap interval measures how many Republican members of Congress lean to the right of the farthest right-leaning Democrat, as well as how many Democratic members of Congress lean to the left of the farthest left leaning Republican. Both the Republican members of Congress who fall farther to the left than the most right leaning Democrats, along with the Democratic members of Congress who fall farther to the right than the most left leaning Republicans, would be considered part of the overlap. “Today, the overlap interval is zero,” Paisley reports.

In 2014, PRC published two reports concerning polarization in America and American media. The first was titled “Political Polarization in the American Public.” In this report, PRC presents data that confirms America’s polarization is reaching new levels. A survey was conducted on 10,000 American adults measuring political positions and views. According to this study, between 1994 and 2004, the political distance between the average Republican and average Democrat remained relatively the same. However, by 2014, PRC found that the divisions between the two parties were wider than at any time in the last twenty years.

The polarization in the United States is even more obvious when one views the effect it has had on the organizations providing news for the American people. Since Americans are radically divided concerning political views (Liberal vs. Conservative), it is no surprise that they are similarly divided concerning which news they chose to consume. This is shown in the second report from PRC, called “Political Polarization and Media Habits.” The study states that “When it comes to getting news about politics and government, liberals and conservatives inhabit different worlds. There is little overlap in the news sources they turn to and trust.” In this study, Americans were asked from which news sources they receive information concerning

government and politics. The results were resounding and showed the extreme polarization of the American people. Liberals listed left-leaning news organizations as their news sources, such as CNN, MSNBC, and the *New York Times*. Conservatives grouped mainly around one specific, right-leaning news source: Fox News. Overall, the two sides stick with their respective news sources, rarely ever straying over to the news organizations on the other side of the aisle.

The great divide in media usage by the American public was not the only thing discovered by the second PRC study. The study also found that the political divide in America is driving distrust in the news media. This study presented 36 news sources to the study participants and asked about their feelings towards those news organizations. Conservatives distrusted 24 of the 36 news sources listed in the survey, while Liberals trusted 28 of the 36. Other studies have found similar results. A different PRC study titled “Americans’ Attitudes About the News Media Deeply Divided Along Partisan Lines” shows that only 11% of Republicans find national news organizations very trustworthy, with 34% of Democrats feeling the same. In his *Forbes* article, titled “Report: U.S. Media Among Most Polarized In The World,” Brett Edkins references a report from The Reuters Institute called the Digital News Report. In it, Edkins finds that 51% of “left-leaning Americans” trust the news, while only 20% of “right-leaning Americans” trust the news. Edkins again references the report, stating: “Right-leaning Americans are far more likely to say they avoid the news because ‘I can’t rely on news to be true.’”

Furthermore, the public divide in America has driven down trust in yet another way. The Media Insight Project, created by the American Press Institute (API) and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, has conducted studies on the public’s attitude towards the American media. The American Press Institute published an article concerning the Media Insight Project, stating, “On many fronts, Americans are skeptical of ‘the news media’ in the

abstract, but generally trust the news they themselves rely on.” Basically, the Media Insight Project is reporting that the average American is skeptical of the media, with the exception of whatever news that person regularly consumes. For example, if a man consumes news from CNN on a daily basis, he likely distrusts other news sources outside of CNN, simply because they are part of the “news media.” Likewise, if a woman is a loyal consumer of Fox, she distrusts CNN because it is part of the outside “news media.” Logically, this mentality by the American public results in distrust of all media organizations, since not everyone consumes the same media.

According to Gallup, 35% of the country is Conservative, totaling nearly 114 million people. The information in the abovementioned PRC and The Media Insight studies is varied concerning the percentage of Conservatives that trust the media. However, both agree that the vast majority of Conservatives in this country do not trust the media. This means that the majority of group of people 114 million strong does not trust the national news they see, hear, and read every day.

The third reason for the decline in trust, brought on by the changing media in America, is also a byproduct of the age of technology: Anonymity. With the advent of social media, texting, emailing, and instant messaging, much of the modern world’s communication has been made remote, removed, distant, and intangible. Gone are the days of physical letters and memos operating as the main source of communication between two parties. The coupling of the Internet with technology has made it easier to communicate, share ideas, and pass along information remotely, and more importantly, *anonymously*. Now, people use social media apps like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat to communicate. Many aspects of social media, such as fake accounts and profiles, allow people to say and post whatever they want without any real

repercussions. Many leave anonymous comments on online articles, inciting heated arguments between political positions. Some news networks have even begun airing tweets that they believe are newsworthy, some of which are made by anonymous users on Twitter. According to a Social Media Today article, Facebook removed 583 million fake accounts just in the first three months of 2018. Yik Yak, a former app for the iPhone and Android, allowed users to post *completely anonymously* on message boards for anyone in a five-mile radius to read. This app came under heavy fire after multiple schools were sent into lockdown due to violent, anonymous messages posted to the app. This eventually led to the app being shut down.

The recent confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh was made rather arduous at first. This difficulty for him was caused not by lack of experience as a judge, or any other reasonable factor that might make it hard for one to become a member of the Supreme Court. The difficulty arose when an anonymous woman claimed that Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her several decades earlier while the two were in high school. The claim garnered little traction, until the woman decided to go public with her identity. Additionally, by the end of the confirmation process, one of the women who had come forward admitted to fabricating her entire testimony against the judge, simply out of political motivation.

However, the real problem with anonymity exists because some news organizations have started accepting anonymity as a viable and credible news source. The most egregious example of this happened recently, on September 5, 2018. As many know, President Trump has traversed a rocky road during his presidency, and many have left his side because of it. He has faced repeated resistance from many politicians concerning his plans and policies. However, on September 5, the opposition reached for new lows. *The New York Times* published an article on that day. In it, one such supporter of the resistance against President Trump spoke out. This

person, claiming to be a part of the President's administration, writes anonymously that he/she is one of many people who are working against the President's plans from the inside. The person never reveals his/her identity, and *The Times* defends this action, writing at the beginning of the article, "*The Times* is taking the rare step of publishing an anonymous Op-Ed essay. We have done so at the request of the author, a senior official in the Trump administration whose identity is known to us and whose job would be jeopardized by its disclosure. We believe publishing this essay anonymously is the only way to deliver an important perspective to our readers."

The assertion that the writer's job would be on the line if his/her identity was to be revealed is a weak argument according to Gary Abernathy, a writer for *The Washington Post*. Abernathy argues that with anonymity, there is no retribution for words written or spoken. "The risk of retribution," Abernathy writes, "lawsuits, advertiser boycotts, ridicule, harm to reputation — is what keeps, and has always kept, expressed opinion somewhere between the lines of responsibility."

Many disagreed with the move to publish the anonymous article, especially the President, who called it a "gutless editorial," according to the Associated Press. On June 15, 2017, less than a year before *The Times* published their anonymous article, Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein issued a warning to the American people. "Americans should exercise caution before accepting as true any stories attributed to anonymous 'officials,' particularly when they do not identify the country -- let alone the branch or agency of government -- with which the alleged sources supposedly are affiliated." The move to publish the letter from the anonymous White House official also violated the Society of Professional Journalism Code of Ethics, which states: "Identify sources clearly. The public is entitled to as much information as possible to judge the reliability and motivations of sources."

As if the general distrust in the media had not shrunk low enough, the anonymity seems to simply push it lower. Associated Press Managing Editors conducted a survey of 1,611 readers in 42 states concerning their opinion and level of trust in anonymous sources. Although many say it should be available to reporters to use, 44% of those readers replied that if a reporter does use an anonymous source, the reader is less likely to trust the story. Referencing the results of the survey, Ryan Pitts, a writer for Poynter, says many of the readers call it a “double-edged sword.” On one hand, anonymity opens the door to expose the truth in areas otherwise unavailable. However, others assert that there is a possibility for false claims when using anonymity, such as Bruce Fritz, one of the survey respondents. “The use of anonymous sources makes the media a dupe for putting out unreliable stories.” Sometimes, the use of anonymous sources may seem a viable option, and in former days it was used both scarcely and carefully. Now, this tool is no longer taboo, and is used “for such trivial nonsense as telling us what mood the president was in on Tuesday,” according to Gary Abernathy. In an article for *The Federalist*, James Kelly writes about the use of anonymity. In his article titled “When Will The Media Realize That Anonymous Sources Undermine Their Credibility?” Kelly discusses the use of words like “some,” and “many” in news articles. Although subtle, the use of these words in news reports and articles is another form of anonymity. In his article, Kelly quotes the *New Yorker*, analyzing its use of these words. “Some critics suggest...” writes the *New Yorker*. “Some people who have observed the Mercers’ political evolution worry...” Kelly goes on to list many more examples, commenting on the *New Yorker*’s use of this subtle anonymity. “Some critics suggest...” “Which ones?” asks Kelly. “Some people who have observed the Mercers’ political evolution worry...” writes the *New Yorker*, to which Kelly asks, “Which ones? Says who?” In his aforementioned article, Abernathy asserts: “Anonymity carries little credibility.” However, if a name was included in

those *New Yorker* sentences, this would bring that credibility. Abernathy claims that the use of anonymity, specifically in the case of the anonymous letter from the member of President Trump's administration, is a compromise, not a benefit. "It is discouraging," writes Abernathy, "that a major media outlet would excuse cowardice — that is the right word — under the cloak of anonymity."

Conclusion

Since the conception of American news with the 18th century printing presses, the news has completely transformed. The inventions of the radio and television made news reports more accessible. The advent of the internet made news reports instantaneous and global. In 2018, the media looks nothing like it did during the Revolutionary War. People no longer have to wait for news to reach their doorstep; it is now just a click away.

This change of news media has caused a drastic drop in trust by the American people. The morphing of the press has led to the three current aspects of the news that Americans witness often in modern day America. The first aspect, the need for immediacy in reporting, was brought on by the cultural shift and the onset of the Microwave Generation. News must now be delivered quickly, so less thought is given to quality, which drags trust down with it.

The second aspect that has negatively affected levels of trust in the media is the polarization of the public and media alike. The nation is divided – red and blue, and so are the news networks for the most part. This has led to people taking sides not only in their personal lives, but in the news they consume, value, and especially, *trust*. People trust the news on their side, but not the news from the other side of the aisle. This of course has driven down trust

overall, with conservatives distrusting liberal news organizations, and liberals distrusting conservative news organizations.

The final aspect that has led to a trust decrease is the rise of anonymity. More and more often in today's news world, unnamed or anonymous sources are being used in news stories. The internet, specifically, has given power to anyone with a phone and internet connection to make claims or post thoughts for the world to see, all without revealing their identity. Some of the large news organizations, such as the *New York Times*, have given these sources a place in their publications, and the backlash has been extensive.

Many other aspects of American culture and news media may also be to blame for the plummeting degree of trust Americans place in the media. Different studies show different numbers for the current level of trust in the media. According to the abovementioned study, Gallup says that in 1976, 72% of the public placed "a great deal or fair amount" of trust in the media. By 2017, Gallup reported that number had dropped to less than one third (32%) of all Americans. In their study, Poynter publishes a slightly more optimistic number (although still the minority), reporting that 49% of Americans now trust the media to report the news "fully, accurately and fairly." Regardless of where the current number actually rests, the main problem remains: A far lower percentage of Americans trust the media than in former days, and the three aspects discussed in this paper (need for immediacy in reporting, polarization of news media, and utilization of anonymous sources) are largely to blame. The Code of Ethics for The Society of Professional Journalism contains a phrase that perfectly and pointedly addresses the current situation of the American press: "The most important professional possession of journalists is credibility. If the news consumers don't have faith that the stories they are reading or watching

are accurate and fair, if they suspect information attributed to an anonymous source has been made up, then the journalists are as useful as a parka at the equator.”

One area of future study could be centered on the consequences resulting from this extreme lack of trust. As shown above, the majority of people in America, at one level or another, do not believe the news they either read, watch, or hear. Further study could be conducted concerning the repercussions of this. What happens when the majority of a citizenry does not trust the national news available to them? Another study could ask, How does the American media go about restoring the public’s trust to what it once was?

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