

# MEDIA

## 2

CHAPTER

PARTISAN REPORTING, THE DELUGE OF FAKE NEWS AND EVEN THE PRESIDENT'S COMMENTS ON MEDIA TRUSTWORTHINESS HAVE CAST A SHADOW OVER THE ENTIRE U.S. MEDIA INDUSTRY. AMERICANS ARE INCREASINGLY SKEPTICAL OF ALL NEWS THEY READ AND INCREASINGLY RELY ON THEIR OWN IMPERFECT ABILITY TO READ BETWEEN THE LINES AND FIND THE TRUTH FOR THEMSELVES.

The 2016 election campaign is a case study in the political fractures across the American media landscape. As November 8, 2016 – Election Day – dawned, The New York Times predicted that Hillary Clinton had an 85 percent chance of winning.<sup>1</sup> Every major poll predicted Clinton would be the winner,<sup>2</sup> and, although news anchors attempted to maintain some suspense in their coverage, it was clear they believed Clinton would sail to victory.

As the results started coming in, the anchors struggled to hide their shock. Martha Raddatz shed tears on ABC, Wolf Blitzer seemed dumbfounded on CNN and even comedian Stephen Colbert's live show took a somber turn. "I think we can agree that this has been an absolutely exhausting, bruising election for everyone and it has come to an ending that I did not imagine," Colbert told his audience.<sup>3</sup>

After thousands of hours of election coverage and countless newspaper and magazine articles dissecting the campaigns, then-Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly said, "I think you'll never have a result this shocking, where people got it this shockingly wrong."<sup>4</sup>

### INFOTAINMENT

The American news landscape is changing rapidly. In 2013, 54 percent of Americans consumed their news online. Only three years later, that number had climbed to 72 percent.<sup>5</sup> With the accompanying proliferation of

news websites – some of which are bare-bones operations that thrive via social media shares – expensive, traditional news organizations are scrambling to hold on to their audience and advertisers. They have gone online, experimented with content and picked up the pace of coverage. But if the transition has been difficult for the major players, it has been brutal for many local and regional newspapers, which lack the resources to compete. Over the past 70 years, the number of newspapers in the United States fell by nearly one-fourth, from 1,749 in 1945 to 1,331 at the end of 2014.<sup>6</sup> Close to 100 of those closed in the past decade, leaving important gaps in local news coverage.



 Linda Shapley, Denver, Colorado

Linda Shapley, managing editor at the respected Denver Post in Colorado, says the paper is "constantly battling the push and pull between trying to make sure that



*“They’re focusing on the wrong thing because it’s good for ratings, and we’re not getting the real important story.”*

————— *Stephanie Monahan*

we’re doing our best for our print readers and yet still trying to grow our traffic.”

Television news has also changed in the past decade, with cable news channels such as CNN, MSNBC and Fox News gaining viewers and boosting profits.<sup>7</sup> Constant “breaking news” bulletins or panels of talking heads bickering over the latest headlines have become cable news staples.

“They’re focusing on the wrong thing because it’s good for ratings, and we’re not getting the real important story,” says Stephanie Monahan, who oversees Philadelphia’s volunteer programs. She cites as an example disagreement over the size of the crowd at President Donald Trump’s January 2017 inauguration. It was a trivial story, Monahan says, yet it dominated headlines for weeks because the president tweeted about it and Americans were eager to watch the drama unfold.

## ANXIETY

Trump’s victory was an emotional moment for his supporters and critics alike, exacerbating many Americans’ tribal approach to politics. Cable news has capitalized on and stokes the heightened anxiety, to the point of distressing some viewers.

Martha Thompson of El Paso, Texas, says she stopped watching CNN regularly because, “I put the channel on and my blood pressure goes up.”



 Martha Thompson, El Paso, Texas

Blood pressures are rising on the left in particular. Jhana Bach, an organizer for the Seattle chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW), admits:

“Since the election I haven’t been able to deal with very much news. ... I listen to the news on NPR [public radio], but every time they actually play Trump’s quotes, I have to change the channel. And anytime they’re having a spokesperson, a mouthpiece for him that’s giving a point of view that’s just blatantly ridiculous, I have

to change the channel. So I've been doing a lot of trying to navigate my mental health with getting the best sources. So that's kind of where I've landed – strategic searches for things I want to know about.”

## POLARIZATION

When Americans go online to get their news, they typically need not even search for what interests them, as social media sites such as Facebook use algorithms that show them news stories that align with their political orientation and personal preferences. The resulting “information silos” are making it increasingly difficult for Americans of differing political views to agree even on basics.

*“I have really tried to be careful about not clinging just to all of my news from ... my social media feed because I recognize that there's a filter bubble.”*

————— Kimberly Larson

“I have really tried to be careful about not clinging just to all of my news from ... my social media feed because I recognize that there's a filter bubble,” says Kimberly Larson, communications director at Climate Solutions, an environmental group in Seattle. Larson knows the news she sees on her Facebook page is left-leaning, full of posts from fellow environmentalists, but says, “I definitely catch a lot of news from colleagues on social media that I would have missed otherwise.”



▲ Joe Wardy, El Paso, Texas

Joe Wardy, a former mayor of El Paso and president and chief executive of a startup incubator, says the media feed this polarization:

*“Everything's become more opinionated. It's all opinionated facts. Not really true facts.”*

————— Lou Jasikoff

“I think that true journalism requires balance. Looking to both sides of an issue. Looking to find alternative viewpoints, to let the readers decide what they think. Today that's been abandoned. It's about sensationalism, it's about ratings, about what sells what little newspapers there are. I have a great concern. I think that it finally culminated in the last presidential election. I think there's a huge distrust. I think that the media reporting – depending on what side you're on – is very biased. And I don't think it's healthy.”

Lou Jasikoff, a radio producer and newspaper founder in Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania, agrees. “Everything's become more opinionated. It's all opinionated facts. Not really true facts,” he says.

## CONSERVATIVE MEDIA

Fox News has dominated the conservative media landscape for more than two decades, with outspoken personalities such as Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly shaping many Americans' perspectives on important national and global issues. The network has long been accused by those on the left of shading the truth to fit its conservative bent, particularly on issues such as climate change.

More recently, online outlets including the Drudge Report and Breitbart have developed significant followings with their ultra-conservative and conspiratorial news coverage. Breitbart, a right-wing site known for incendiary stories of questionable veracity, was founded in 2007 but came into its own in the 2016 election with its outspoken support of Trump's candidacy. The site's former executive chairman, Steve Bannon, was an adviser on the Trump campaign and later became chief strategist in the Trump White House.

Few liberals take seriously claims made by the popular conservative media.

“My knee-jerk reaction [to conservative news] is, ‘This is crazy,’” says Karen Gann, a liberal stay-at-home mother in Huntsville, Alabama, one of the nation's most conservative states.



 Karen Gann, Huntsville, Alabama

The 2016 election brought home to many on the left that they did not understand how conservative Americans felt or thought. Gann says she has started reading conservative news sites because she wants to get out of her “bubble.” “I would really like to learn how people who are more conservative, how they are thinking. Where their brains are with all of this,” she says.

### “MAINSTREAM MEDIA”

On the other side of the political spectrum, conservatives have long complained that major news outlets such as The New York Times, The Washington Post and CNN have a liberal bias.



 Mayor Woody Jacobs, Cullman, Alabama

Some conservatives were particularly frustrated by the 2016 election coverage, which they said was unfairly critical of Trump under the guise of neutrality. “You get tired of an agenda from national news markets. And it was pretty obvious, watching it,” says Woody Jacobs, the mayor of Cullman, Alabama. Jacobs says he enjoyed watching the shocked newscasters on election night “because ... they showed their true colors of what they were thinking – where they thought it was going to go.”

Conservatives also deride mainstream and left-leaning media as elitist. Marty Connors, the former chairman of Alabama’s Republican Party, says journalists “think that they’re smarter than what they are.” Trump’s presidency, he argues, has in some ways rendered the media irrelevant. Although he says he doesn’t like the president’s notorious “3 a.m. tweets,” he appreciates that Trump has found a way to get around the media filter:

“The original fault of the media [is] that they [believe they] are superior to anyone. ... [They] feel that they are the ones that get to determine what is and is not news. Well, what happens when a president goes around you and ignores you? Well, that’s got to really [make you angry]. Because you’re no longer the arbiter of what’s important. So that’s why they’re all bent out of shape.”

*“You get tired of an agenda from national news markets.”*

————— Woody Jacobs

Beyond the mainstream media, conservatives also frequently criticize left-leaning networks such as MSNBC and websites such as Slate and The Huffington Post, which have been heavily critical of the president and Republican Congress.

### FAKE NEWS

Trump’s focus on the media made them a central preoccupation throughout his campaign and the first months of his presidency. “The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!”<sup>8</sup> he told his Twitter followers shortly after taking office. Trump has long lambasted critical journalists and media outlets, but now he has a powerful platform from which to attack them.

*“It’s a different thing entirely when unwelcome news... becomes labeled fake news.”*

————— Linda Shapley

The president’s use of the term “fake news” to describe those critical of him has sown confusion about the veracity of all news. He has tapped into Republican distrust of the mainstream media and fanned fears about

## RACE AND THE MEDIA

Although ethnic and racial minorities account for approximately 35 percent of the U.S. population, they make up only 13 percent of daily newspaper employees.<sup>16</sup> Minorities are also underrepresented in television news, particularly in local programming.<sup>17</sup> Much of the American news media landscape is dominated by white anchors, reporters and political pundits.

*“One feed that I’ve been paying attention to – it’s very much connected to my community – is TV One, because they cover stuff in the African-American community that other folks don’t.”*

————— LeDawn Sullivan

Many Hispanic-Americans turn to Spanish-language news sources, from local radio stations and newspapers to large national networks such as Univision, to get their news. Julie Patiño of the Denver Foundation in Colorado is an avid reader of The New York Times and other English-language publications, but she understands why Spanish-language programming is popular among the United States’ 56.6 million Hispanics.<sup>18</sup> “You have someone speaking your language. There are people that report on things that have credibility, and that’s where you get your news,” she says.

Small-business owner Blanca Gallego grew up in Mexico but for years has lived in Pecos, Texas, with her U.S.-born husband, who is white. She notices major differences between the news coverage she sees on Hispanic networks and what her husband sees on English-speaking ones, particularly on issues of importance to the Hispanic community, including Trump’s proposal to build a wall on the U.S. border with Mexico. “Our networks, Hispanic networks, say one thing, and the Anglo networks say another one,” she says. “Of course, each media covers what the people want to hear.”

Hispanic-Americans are not the only minority to seek out news that focuses on issues important to their communities. LeDawn Sullivan, director of community leadership at the Denver Foundation, is frustrated by television news coverage of Trump’s presidency and now consumes much of her news through online feeds. “One feed that I’ve been paying attention to – it’s very much connected to my community – is TV One, because they cover stuff in the African-American community that other folks don’t,” she says. “So if I want to know what’s going on nationally, I have to go there. Because otherwise I won’t know.” Sullivan cites as an example of this coverage gap a string of disappearances of young African-American women that was largely ignored by mainstream media.

## TRUST IN MASS MEDIA BY PARTY

■ *Republicans*

■ *Democrats*



Gallup

its agenda and bias. Shapley, of The Denver Post, concedes, “There’s no doubt that there’s more fake news,” but her definition – “When [you have] somebody who’s deliberately intending to mislead the public about a political thing” – is very different from Trump’s. “It’s a different thing entirely when unwelcome news ... becomes labeled fake news,” she says.

Shapley gives an example of fake news: In November 2016, days before the election, a site calling itself the Denver Guardian published a sensational story about a murder-suicide related to Hillary Clinton’s email scandal. The newspaper does not exist and the murder-suicide was fictional, but the article was shared thousands of times on Facebook. Shapley and her paper reacted swiftly, publishing an article that refuted the claims made by the so-called Denver Guardian. The Post provided readers with a bulleted list of evidence that the story and website were bogus and even included a Google Street View image of the alleged address of the fake newspaper, which turned out to be a parking lot.<sup>9</sup>

*“I think one of the main reasons you see a Trump presidency is the American people have lost faith that they were being told the truth, whether it’s by their own government or the media.”*

— Lou Jasikoff

Jasikoff, the radio producer from Pennsylvania, says, “I think one of the main reasons you see a Trump presidency is the American people have lost faith that they were being told the truth, whether it’s by their own government or the media.” Indeed, Americans’ trust in mainstream media is dwindling. In a 2016 Gallup poll, only 14 percent of Republican respondents said they had a “great deal” or “fair amount” of trust, compared with 51 percent of Democrats. In the previous year, 32 percent of Republicans and 55 percent of Democrats trusted the mainstream media.



▲ Lou Jasikoff, Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania

Shapley observed this mistrust during the 2016 election cycle:

“Every campaign it bubbles up. Where one side will say,

‘You’re treating the other side better than you’re treating my side.’ ... You know, any time that we would have something that was negative of Hillary Clinton we would get complaints from people who supported her. When we had things that were negative of Donald Trump, we would get complaints from people who supported Donald Trump. And so, it became a very divisive line.”

Shapley understands why people are frustrated but says, “Our newsroom does not have an agenda. ... We don’t sit at meetings and decide, ‘Oh, well this is really going to be embarrassing for the president, so this is what’s going to be on Page 1.’ We decide that this is a Page 1 story because it’s an important issue that everybody wants to know more about. ... Our editorial views are not held by everybody in the newsroom.”

To combat this growing mistrust of media, The Post has tried to be more transparent, publishing articles to explain its processes and decisions. When the paper’s editorial board endorsed Clinton for president in 2016, it provided readers with information about what that meant, Shapley says, explaining “Here’s what a presidential endorsement means. It doesn’t mean that this is how the newsroom feels. This is the view of the editorial page and this is a person who is separate from the newsroom and is not involved with the choosing of those decisions.”

## FINDING THE TRUTH

Alison, a retired educator in Huntsville, Alabama, who did not give her last name, says that in her years as a science teacher and in writing her doctoral thesis, she learned to consult primary sources. But she cannot always do that with news reports. “Most of the time when I’m trying to check these things out, either I don’t know what the primary source is or I have no access to it,” she says. The president may be cutting out the middleman by tweeting directly to the American people, but many sources, particularly government leaks and anonymous comments, are difficult to assess.

*“I’m more skeptical of what I read and what I see, and I probably require more sources of information that triangulate on an issue.”*

————— *Richard Schulik*

As trust in the media wanes, some Americans are consulting more news sources, often from different political perspectives. “I’m more skeptical of what I read and what I see, and I probably require more sources of information that triangulate on an issue,” Richard Schulik, a professor of medicine at the University of Colorado,



says. “[I] am more likely to form my own opinion now, rather than just take things at face value.” A 2013 Pew survey found that 34 percent of left-leaning MSNBC’s viewers also watch right-leaning Fox News,<sup>10</sup> and 28 percent of Fox News viewers also watch MSNBC’s liberal coverage. About half of the viewers of both channels also watched CNN, which is typically seen as centrist or center-left.<sup>11</sup>



 Sarah Emerson, Birmingham, Alabama

Sarah Emerson, a conservative law student in Birmingham, Alabama, also browses new sites from across the political spectrum. “I’ll look across the board and just try to fact-find that way. Because you really have to look at multiple sources to be able to see what’s going on in our country,” she says. “When it’s a more partisan site, you kind of have to read past the partisanship in it to see the truth.”

Many Americans feel confident in their ability to find the truth about an issue on their own, but recent studies suggest that most cannot. An Ipsos poll conducted for the BuzzFeed news website found that American adults are fooled by fake news headlines 75 percent of the time.<sup>12</sup> Further, more than 80 percent of middle school students taking part in a Stanford University study mistakenly believed that an advertisement they were shown was a real news story.<sup>13</sup> In the same study, most high school students were quick to believe a fake image and caption. Only 20 percent of the students questioned the source of the image or information.<sup>14</sup>

Fake news stories are also extremely prevalent: Top fake news stories leading up to the election outperformed legitimate ones on Facebook.<sup>15</sup>

Partisan reporting, the deluge of fake news and even the president’s comments on media trustworthiness have cast a shadow over the entire U.S. media industry. Americans are increasingly skeptical of all news they read and increasingly rely on their own imperfect ability to read between the lines and find the truth for themselves. In an increasingly politically divided media landscape, without improved media literacy, Americans are prone to misinterpret information or believe misinformation.

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