The Spread of Inaccurate Political Information in the Era of Distrusted News Media

By Jonathan Ladd, with Alex Podkul

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Authors' biographies

Jonathan Ladd is an associate professor in the McCourt School of Public Policy and the department of government at Georgetown University and a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. His book, "Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters," won the Goldsmith Book Prize from Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy.

Alex Podkul is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of government at Georgetown University.

Once the news faker obtains access to the press wires all the honest editors alive will not be able to repair the mischief he can do. An editor receiving a news item over the wire has no opportunity to test its authenticity as he would in the case of a local report. The offices of the members of The Associated Press in this country are connected with one another, and its centers of news gathering and distribution by a system of telegraph wires that in a single circuit would extend five times around the globe. This constitutes a very sensitive organism. Put your finger on it in New York, and it vibrates in San Francisco.

—from a 1925 Harper's article "Fake news and the public"
(as quoted in Baum et al., "Combating Fake News")

The loss of the public's trust in the news media

In the 1970s, several national surveys began regularly asking respondents about their trust in the news media (measured as "trust" or "confidence" or with other similar wording). Since then, these surveys have found a steady, general trend of Americans losing faith in the media. For example, Gallup has repeatedly asked respondents, "How much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media … when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?" In May 1972, 68 percent of respondents had "a great deal" or "a fair amount," while only 6 percent had "none at all." Yet by September 2016, only 32 percent had "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust and confidence, and 27 percent had "none at all."[1]

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[1] Art Swift, "Americans' Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low," Gallup, Sept. 14, 2016, http://www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx.

General Social Survey (GSS), a major academic poll conducted every two or three years since 1972, has also documented this trend. Since 1973, it has asked a battery of institutional confidence questions, premised with the following: "I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?" One of the institutions listed is the "press." From 1973 to 2016, the percentage of respondents with "a great deal" of confidence in the press dropped from 23 percent to 8 percent, while those answering "hardly any" increased drastically from 15 percent to 50 percent.

There is a gap in media trust between Democrats and Republicans has widened over the decades, even as it has declined among those of all party affiliations. The official 2014 GSS report noted that "Republicans are less likely than Democrats and Independents to express confidence in the press."[2] In late April 2017, Morning Consult found stark partisan differences in responses to the question, "Who do you trust more to tell you the truth: national political media, Trump's White House, or don't know?" Among Democrats, 54 percent answered that they trusted the national political media more, while only 12 percent said they had more trust in President Trump's White House. Among Republicans, however, those responses were flipped and the gap between the two

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[2] "Confidence in Institutions: Trends in Americans' Attitudes toward Government, Media, and Business," The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research (APNORC), 2015, http://www.apnorc.org/projects/Pages/HTML percent20Reports/confidence-in-institutions-trends-in-americans-attitudes-toward-government-media-and-business0310-2333.aspx.

institutions was even steeper, with only 10 percent choosing the national political media and 72 percent selecting Trump's White House[3]

As Figures 1 and 2 show, the overall decline in confidence in the press, and partisan polarization on the topic, didn't occur at exactly the same time. In fact, you can think of the change in confidence in the press as taking place in two phases. The first phase was the 1980s and 1990s, when average confidence in the press declined, without much of a gap opening between the parties. Confidence in the press declined in both parties. The second phase is after 2000, when confidence in the press polarized along party lines. A large gap opened between the parties in their levels of confidence in the press, a gap that persists to this day.

One existing interpretation of declining trust in the press is that it reflects the broader trend of disappearing trust in a broad list of American national institutions. Some studies suggest that low "trust in government" might stem "from a more general political malaise."[4] However, there are reasons to think that the press has special problems with low confidence. First, the decline in confidence in the press is more rapid than it is in other institutions. Second, partisan and ideological differences in confidence are larger for the press than for other institutions[5].

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[3] Easley, Cameron. April 28, 2017. "Political Media Earns Poor Marks from Americans." *Morning Consult*. https://morningconsult.com/2017/04/28/political-media-earns-poor-marks-americans/

[4] David A. Jones, "Why Americans Don't Trust the Media: A Preliminary Analysis," Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics 9, no. 2 (spring 2004): 60-75.

[5] Paul Gronke and Timothy E. Cook, "Disdaining the Media: The American Public's Changing Attitudes Toward the News," Political Communication 24, no. 3 (2007): 259-281;

There could be several explanations for why conservatives and Republicans have lost more trust in the media. Several of the most probable explanations are connected to the fragmentation of the media industry. Since 1980, as the number of news choices has grown to include explicitly conservative and liberal sources. Media trust has dropped particularly low among conservatives and Republicans who regularly listen to political talk radio.[6] In this new environment, conservatives' stances toward "the media" or "the press" are likely related to what they see as the establishment (or "mainstream" media) and its relationship to more conservative sources. In my book, I found that if you asked people about "the media" or "the press" in open-ended questions in a national poll, they associated these terms with conventional (more old-fashioned) news organizations such as the national network television news and major newspapers such as The New York Times. On cable and the internet, when they discussed Fox News Channel or conservative talk radio programs, they contrasted them with "the media" or "the press." Many people seem to see these types of media as very different, almost opposites. Liking one goes with disliking the other.

In another study, researchers experimentally manipulated which news sources respondents in a national poll were asked whether they trusted. Respondents' reactions

and Jonathan M. Ladd, "Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters," (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[6] Jones, "Why Americans Don't Trust the Media," and Ladd, "Why Americans Hate the Media." For a comparative international approach to this issue looking at European countries, see Gal Ariely, "Trusting the Press and Political Trust: A Conditional Relationship," Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties 25, no. 3 (August 2015): 351-367.

about their *own* media sources differed from their impressions of *others'* media. When participants were asked about their own media, the approval rating was nearly 75 percent, but when they were asked about "the press" (as it is presented in the GSS), the approval rating dropped to below 40 percent.[7] People like *their* media, just not *the* media. Considering that there is substantial evidence of ideological selectivity in media use,[8] this issue is particularly noteworthy. A conservative might trust Fox News but not CNN, MSNBC or NPR, whereas a liberal might trust CNN but not Fox News.

Thus, a good deal of the lower trust among Republicans is connected to their beliefs about "liberal bias" in the mainstream media.[9] Democrats' media trust has declined relatively less because they view the establishment sources that the phrases "the media" and "the press" call to mind as being more sympathetic to liberalism. Why do they think this? There are two explanations that are not mutually exclusive. First, the public may listen, watch or read all these news outlets directly and perceive that news in mainstream and liberal outlets is more slanted toward liberals and Democrats than the news on explicitly conservative outlets like Fox News and conservative talk radio.(This is, I think an indisputable statement about the ideological slants of these outlets *relative to*

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[7] See Figure 2 in Andrew Daniller et al., "Measuring Trust in the Press in a Changing Media Environment," Communication Methods and Measures 11, no. 1 (2017): 76-85.

[8] Shanto Iyengar and Kyu S. Hahn, "Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use," Journal of Communication 59, no. 1 (2009): 19-39.

[9] Jones, "Why Americans Don't Trust the Media."

each other. Everyone can agree on this, even if liberals and conservatives disagree about which slant is correct.)

Direct perception may influence some people, but a much wider swath of the public has an opinion about many different news sources than watches/listens/reads them on a regular basis. It seems clear that another reason for the ideological divide in media trust is what people hear about these outlets second- or thirdhand. Rhetoric from politicians and pundits about the news media has become more negative in recent decades. This is true of both parties, but especially among conservatives and Republicans. Many people consume these news sources occasionally or never, but hear about them from politicians, pundits and their friends and neighbors.

This all creates clear public images of Fox News, conservative talk radio, CNN, MSNBC, NPR, as well as the other major networks and newspapers that people see as part of the mainstream media. When asked to evaluate either "the media" or "the press" as a whole, or specific outlets, they respond based on the images in their heads about these outlets, which comes a bit from experience (when it exists), but also from their mental image of where these outlets stand in the landscape of partisan politics. People now evaluate the news media in polls the way they evaluate politicians and political groups: based on thoughts and feelings they have attached to those outlets from both their experience and what they have heard about them through the mass media and popular culture generally.

In summary, the overall decline in media trust (among both political parties and independents) likely occurred because of the overall decline in trust in American

institutions, the polarization of American political parties and the fragmentation of the news industry. These changes had independent causal force, but also were more influential because they were all happening at the same time and built on each other. Some of Americans' increasing skepticism of all large institutions (as evident in polling questions about trust and confidence in these institutions) spilled onto the media as well. At the same time, the American party system was getting more polarized, meaning that Democrats and Republicans had increasingly different worldviews and attacked each other more viciously. Changes in media technology led to the creation of cable news channels and, later, internet news sources. These sources changed the image of the news media in several ways. Changes in FCC regulations allowed partisan radio programs to flourish. The major sources of political news developed different partisan reputations, and these were liked by some parts of the political spectrum and disliked by others. Ideological news sources also had an ideological and professional incentive to use their platforms to attack the mainstream news media, and they did. Politicians and pundits in this polarized party system and fragmented media landscape had an incentive to also criticize the mainstream media and partisan outlets affiliated with their ideological opponents, and they did.

The challenge of correcting misperceptions

The problem of misinformation did not start in the present fragmented media era. False beliefs, conspiracy theories and inaccurate political rumors have spread among the public for at least all of American history, and possibly all of human history. Yet that

doesn't mean Americans should become complacent about the problem. False beliefs among consumers of modern American journalism have unique attributes that are worth considering in detail. The following section examines certain types of misinformation— fake news and conspiratorial beliefs—that consistently spread among some portions of the American public, and why false beliefs persist even after evidence has been presented to correct them.

In 2010, stemming from comments made by then-New York Lt. Gov. Betsy McCaughey, many major Republican politicians claimed President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act (ACA or Obamacare) included state-sanctioned "death panels," which implied that "government officials [were] to decide whether individual citizens should receive health care based on a calculation of their level of productivity in society." While this suggestion was false, the rumor plagued health care politics (particularly on the right) for a long time. How can one correct political misinformation like this? A pair of experiments found that simply correcting the record on death panels was inadequate to change the public's misperceptions. The best way to make corrections was to have them come from individuals for whom the corrections "run counter to their personal and political interests."[10]

In another study that has been frequently discussed in the press and heavily cited in academia, Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler discovered that issuing a correction is not enough to change false beliefs. They looked at publicly held beliefs regarding "weapons of

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[10] Adam J. Berinsky, "Rumors and Health Care Reform: Experiments in Political Misinformation," British Journal of Political Science 47, no. 2 (April 2017): 241-262.

mass destruction" in Iraq, tax cuts and revenue, and stem cell research during the George W. Bush administration and found a *backfire effect*: Misperceptions increased among some people. They looked at the misperception that Iraq held "weapons of mass destruction" before American intervention in 2003 and found that the effect of correcting this misinformation actually increased misperceptions among conservatives actually.[11] However, replications indicate that this backfire effect might not be as widespread as first suggested. Experiments can get corrections to work.[12] So caution is warranted. But whether or not there is a true backfire effect, and how prevalent it is, what seems clear is that correcting false beliefs is challenging.

The difficulty of correcting misperceptions is a problem not just because the public should be more informed as an end unto itself. Misperceptions can influence how politicians respond to the American public. There is some evidence that legislators responding to constituent mail treat members of the public who are misinformed remarkably differently from those who are informed or uninformed. In a survey experiment, state legislative offices were less likely to respond to emails from misinformed constituents than to uninformed constituents. While the uninformed are

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[11] Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," Political Behavior 32, no. 2 (June 2010): 303-330.

[12] Thomas Wood and Ethan Porter, "The Elusive Backfire Effect: Mass Attitudes' Steadfast Factual Adherence," Political Behavior (Forthcoming).

seen as persuadable, the misinformed are taken as "holding stronger opinions and being less open-minded."[13]

Finally, even in the rare cases in which inaccurate beliefs can be corrected, there does appear to be a *belief echo*, which misinformation continues to influence political attitudes even after it has been debunked. In a series of experimental studies, Emily Thorson asked respondents to evaluate candidates. Misinformation was provided, but then corrected. Opposing party respondents had lower opinions of the candidates than when they started, *even after that misinformation was corrected*. Thorson writes, "Exposure to misinformation creates belief echoes: lingering effects on attitudes that persisted even after the misinformation is effectively corrected. … The idea continues to exert an effect on attitudes."[14]

Combating conspiratorial beliefs (i.e., fake news)

This brings us to the 2016 presidential campaign and its aftermath. Since the election, there has been an ongoing national conversation regarding what to do with the proliferation and spread of fake news among the American public. Stories such as "FBI Director Comey just proved his bias by putting Trump sign on his front lawn"

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[13] D. J. Flynn, "How Do Politicians Respond to Misinformed Constituents? Results from an Elite Survey Experiment" (working paper, 2016).

[14] Emily Thorson, "Belief Echoes: The Persistent Effects of Corrected Misinformation," Political Communication 33, no. 3 (2016): 460-480.

(countercurrentnews.com) or "Donald Trump protester speaks out: 'I was paid $3,500 to protest Trump's rally'" (abcnews.com.co) went viral, especially in the final weeks leading up to Election Day. Many have worried about the democratic consequences of fake news, i.e., whether voters were using doctored stories as part of their decision-making process. In this section, I will first review some of the recent stories and figures surrounding fake news; next, I will draw upon the conspiracy theory literature in political science to highlight what is known about fake news; and finally, I will share some policy suggestions made by the political science community for handling this issue.

Although there is continuing debate around the definition of fake news, for purposes of my discussion, I'll define it in a very specific and limited way. On Election Day 2016, The New York Times introduced two broad categories for what qualifies as fake news. The first includes hoaxes. Examples can include reporting incorrect poll numbers or falsely portraying political actors on social media. The Times noted that the latter could include false portrayals of politicians (such as a viral tweet from an impersonating Twitter account) or even false portrayals of media organizations (such as the fake site The Denver Guardian).[15] The second includes misinformation from otherwise legitimate resources. For example, the Times found that clothing company Urban Outfitters mistakenly told its followers on Twitter to be sure to bring their "voter's registration card" to the polls. The Times' definition is the one I will employ here. I believe this two-part

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[15] Katie Rogers and Jonah Engel Bromwich, "The hoaxes, fake news and misinformation we saw on Election Day," The New York Times, Nov. 8, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/us/politics/debunk-fake-news-election-day.html.

definition of fake news also fits the definition used by economists Hunt Allcott and

Matthew Gentzkow: "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could

mislead readers."[16]

I am going to keep my attention on this form of fake news. I consider news that is

simply biased or slanted to be a separate category, which I won't focus on here. The main

reason is that I think news bias, while a legitimate problem, has always been with us to

varying degrees. But completely fictitious or fabricated news stories, while also always

with us to some degree, have grown more frequent in the last few years, especially in the

2016 campaign.

Early reports of fake news dominating the 2016 election cycle often revolved

around the unmitigated spread of these reports through social media. For example, one

report from the Columbia Journalism Review found that fake news traffic was much more

dependent on Facebook than "real news" traffic: "Nearly 30 percent of all fake news traffic

could be linked back to Facebook," whereas that was true only for about 8 percent of real

news traffic.[17] Looking specifically at the spread of fake news via social media, however,

the issue of fake news truly stands out. Another cursory report from BuzzFeed News

revealed that in the weeks leading to the election (defined as from August to Election

Day), fake news stories garnered more Facebook engagement (in the form of shares,

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[16] Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016
Election," Journal of Economic Perspectives 31, no. 2 (spring 2017): 211-236.

[17] Jacob L. Nelson, "Is 'Fake News' a Fake Problem?" Columbia Journalism Review, Jan. 31,
2017, https://www.cjr.org/analysis/fake-news-facebook-audience-drudge-breitbart-
study.php.

reactions and comments) than real news stories. Whereas there were 7.3 million Facebook engagements with mainstream news, there were 8.7 million engagements with fake news. Even more significant, some of the most viral individual stories in the last weeks before the election were from fake news sources. For example, the fake news story "Pope Francis shocks world, endorses Donald Trump for president, releases statement" (published by Ending the Fed*)* garnered 960,000 shares, reactions and comments, whereas the most shared real news story on Facebook, "Trump's history of corruption is mind-boggling. So why is Clinton supposedly the corrupt one?" (published by The Washington Post), received only 849,000 shares, reactions and comments.[18]

The issue of fake news exists well beyond Facebook and has spilled over into other forms of social media as well. One study looking at Twitter accounts from Michigan voters in the first 10 days of November 2016 discovered that fake news was the most shared type of political content, finding that "the number of links to junk news alone is roughly equivalent to the number of links to professionally researched journalism."[19]

This proliferation of fake news over social media accounts is especially significant, considering that surveys consistently find more and more Americans are getting their news from those platforms. One survey conducted in early 2016 found that 38 percent of

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[18] Craig Silverman, "This analysis shows how viral fake news stories outperformed real news on Facebook," BuzzFeed News, Nov. 16, 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook?utm_term=.gqZNJZLVB9#.trKWAZD37q.

[19] Philip N. Howard et al., "Data Memo: Junk News and Bots During the U.S. Election: What Were Michigan Voters Sharing Over Twitter?" The Project on Computational Propaganda, Oxford University, March 26, 2017.

Americans get their news online (from "social media, websites/apps"), including half of those (50 percent) ages 18-29 and half of those (49 percent) ages 30-49.[20] This makes the fake news problem even more dire.

The issue of fake news is so widespread that it has gone beyond America's borders. Following a string of recent elections in Europe, reports have indicated that fake news attempted to influence voters over the past year in the United Kingdom,[21] the Netherlands,[22] Germany[23] and France,[24] with much speculation surrounding Russian influence behind the creation and dissemination of these stories in each case. Although these countries have different political and media cultures, and so will tackle fake news differently from the United States, it is worth noting that some of the cursory, comparative reports of fake news in social media closely resemble some of the findings in

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[20] Amy Mitchell et al., "The Modern News Consumer: News Attitudes and Practices in the Digital Era," Pew Research Center, July 7, 2016, http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/the-modern-news-consumer/

[21] Robert Booth, "Truth seekers: inside the UK election's fake news war room," The Guardian, May 19, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/19/truth-seekers-inside-the-uk-elections-fake-news-war-room.

[22] Cynthia Kroet, "Russia spread fake news during Dutch election: report," Politico, April 4, 2017, http://www.politico.eu/article/russia-spread-fake-news-during-dutch-election-report-putin/.

[23] Xenia Tan, "Are German elections the next frontier of Russia-sponsored 'fake news'?" CNBC, May 5, 2017, http://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/05/are-german-elections-the-next-frontier-of-russia-sponsored-fake-news.html.

[24] Mark Hosenball and Joseph Menn, "Experts say automated accounts sharing fake news ahead of French election," Reuters, April 20, 2017, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-socialmedia-idUSKBN17M31G.

the United States. For example, one study of Twitter use in the German presidential

election found junk news made up nearly 20 percent of the links shared.[25] In another

study focusing on the French presidential runoff election, only 6 percent of links shared

over Twitter linked to "junk news" stories.[26] Overall, these studies seem to show that fake

news during election campaigns is a worry in other countries but that the problem is

worse in the United States.

Several reports have even sought out the opinions of the public to gauge their

views on fake news. A Pew Research Center report titled "Many Americans believe fake

news is sowing confusion" reported on a survey fielded after the presidential election, in

early December 2016. Pew discovered that 64 percent of Americans believe "made-up

news has caused a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current events," with

even higher figures for the highly educated (67 percent among the college educated) and

the wealthy (73 percent among those making $75,000 or more a year). Considering a lot of

the conversations about fake news have focused on its spread on social media, it is

interesting to see that one in three (32 percent) American adults say they "often see fake

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[25] Lisa-Maria Neudert, Bence Kollanyi, and Philip N. Howard, "Junk News and Bots During the German Federal Presidency Election: What Were German Voters Sharing Over Twitter?" The Project on Computational Propaganda, Oxford University, March 27, 2017, http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/2017/03/26/junk-news-and-bots-during-the-germany-federal-presidency-election-what-were-german-voters-sharing-over-twitter/.

[26] Clementine Desigaud et al., "Junk News and Bots During the French Presidential Election: What Are French Voters Sharing Over Twitter?" The Project on Computational Propaganda, Oxford University, May 4, 2017, http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/2017/04/21/computational-propaganda-junk-news-and-the-french-election/.

political news online" and even nearly one in four (23 percent) admitted to sharing a "political news story online" they either knew at the time or later found out "was made up."[27]

The changing definition of fake news has complicated discussions of it. Then President-elect Donald Trump famously referred to CNN as "fake news" at a press conference, stating, "Your organization's terrible. ... You are fake news."[28] This sentiment has continued with others simply referring to news they don't like as fake news. One Harvard-Harris poll reported by The Hill found that "65 percent of voters believe there is a lot of fake news in the mainstream media," a figure including 80 percent of Republicans, 60 percent of independents and 53 percent of Democrats.[29] Increasingly, people who don't trust or have confidence in the mainstream news media, express that by saying that it is "fake news," because that phrase is so widely used. It is hard to tell from polls such as this which people are reporting on how much they see news stories they simply don't like

[27] Michael Barthel, Amy Mitchell and Jesse Holcomb, "Many Americans Believe Fake News Is Sowing Confusion," Pew Research Center, Dec. 15, 2016, http://www.journalism.org/2016/12/15/many-americans-believe-fake-news-is-sowing-confusion/.

[28] Nicholas Fandos, "10 key moments and more from Trump's news conference," The New York Times, Jan. 11, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/11/us/politics/trump-news-conference-highlights.html.

[29] Jonathan Easley, "Poll: Majority says mainstream media publishes fake news," The Hill, May 24, 2017, http://www.thehill.com/homenews/campaign/334897-poll-majority-says-mainstream-media-publishes-fake-news.

or are biased against them, and which are seeing stories that are "intentionally and verifiably false."[30]

One of the greatest issues regarding the spread of fake news is that it makes it difficult for news media consumers to separate what is true from what is false. In one early study about fake news in the 2016 presidential election, Allcott and Gentzkow found from a nationally representative post-election online survey that Republicans were less likely than Democrats to believe articles that were true. Similarly, the researchers discovered that fake news was much more problematic on the political right than it was on the left. In their collection of 156 false election-related news stories in the final three months before the election, they found 115 pro-Trump fake stories and only 41 that favored Hillary Clinton. Related to there being many more stories, the pro-Trump stories were shared 30 million times on social media, whereas the pro-Clinton stories were shared only 7.6 million times. Using their survey data in conjunction with their web browsing data, they determined that the average American adult "saw and remembered" about 1.14 fake news articles. Whether this exposure influenced voting decisions is a separate question, but this exposure does reveal the breadth of fake news in 2016.[31]

In terms of consumers *processing* these news stories, empirical literature based on the 2016 election demonstrates that the effectiveness of fake news is conditioned on both *source credibility* and *familiarity.* First, source credibility—which depends on expertise and trustworthiness—is particularly significant in today's polarized political

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[30] Allcott and Gentzkow, "Social Media."
[31] Ibid.

environment. In one experiment, researchers found that when information comes from polarizing sources, consumers tend to agree with their co-partisan or co-ideological producers. In one study, poll respondents were provided a claim (for example, about vaccines causing autism) and randomly exposed to either a version where the claim was unattributed or version where the claim was attributed to Donald Trump. Trump-supporting Republicans were more likely to believe claims of misinformation when Trump's name was attached to them than otherwise. Similarly, when claims were factual (for example, regarding the level of U.S. national debt), Democrats were less likely to believe the information when Trump's name was attached to it[32]

Second, *familiarity* (brought about by prior exposure) has been found to significantly increase the *perceived* accuracy of a particular story (cf. the *illusory truth effect*). When comparing real and fake news, one study discovered a correlation between familiarity of a story and its perceived accuracy, ultimately finding that although real news had a higher overall rating than fake news, *familiar* fake news had a higher perceived accuracy rating than *unfamiliar* real news. Even just one exposure to a fake news story increases its perception of accuracy, and the effect is long-lasting. A second study, built upon the first, established a causal link between familiarity and perceived accuracy by using a three-stage experimental design. It found that familiarity caused an increase in perceived accuracy *even if a warning was present* (stating, "Disputed by third party fact-checkers"). As long as fake news continues to go viral, there is significant

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[32] Briony Swire et al., "Processing Political Misinformation: Comprehending the Trump Phenomenon," Royal Society Open Science 4 (2017): 2-21.

evidence that many of the stories will continue to be perceived as true just by virtue of going viral.[33]

The ability to discern real from fake stories is particularly poor among youth. In a large study that included 15 assessments across middle school, high school and college students on discerning the difference between types of media content (including website homepage analysis and tweet analysis), Stanford researchers concluded: "Young people's ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: *bleak*."[34]

While many conversations surrounding fake news focus on how it is spread (particularly through social media), it is also important to look at the content of this misinformation. Reports such as bipartisanreport.com's "Pennsylvania Federal Court grants legal authority to remove Trump after Russian meddling" or dailyheadlines.net's "Election night: Hillary was drunk, got physical with Mook and Podesta"[35] have no basis in fact, yet are spread widely, and many consumers are at risk to believe them.

Some fake stories are so elaborate that they might fairly be called conspiracy theories. In their book-length history of American conspiracy theories, Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent describe a conspiracy theory as the belief in the existence of "a

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[33] Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone D. Cannon and David G. Rand, "Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News" (working paper, 2017).

[34] Stanford History Education Group, "Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning," 2016, sheg.stanford.edu.

[35] Pennycook et al., "Prior Exposure" supporting information.

secret arrangement between two or more actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government institutions."[36] Conspiracy theories are surprisingly widely held in the U.S. One estimate, drawn from four repeated nationally representative surveys, finds that *half* of the American public reports believing at least one popular conspiracy theory. The most popular conspiracy theories include the "9/11 truther" conspiracy, Obama "birtherism," and chemtrails as a clandestine government program. From these surveys, what prompts belief in these theories becomes clearer. Consistently across surveys, the greatest predictor of belief in conspiracy theories is *not* authoritarianism, ignorance or political conservatism, but rather "attraction to Manichean narratives," which is measured as one's agreement with the statement, "Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil."[37]

Consistent with this finding, other research suggests a "conspiracy dimension" mapped onto the typical ideological spectrum, which creates space for both left-leaning and right-leaning conspiracies. Seeking to understand this dimension, Uscinski and Parent write that survey data again confirm that conspiratorial predispositions are "flat across ideology and partisanship." Instead, they find that those with low socioeconomic status, who are less likely to participate in politics, and who are "more accepting of violence, less apt to work in financial services, government, or the military" are more

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[36] Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, "American Conspiracy Theories" (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[37] J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion," American Journal of Political Science 58, no. 4 (October 2014): 952-966.

likely to accept conspiracy theories.[38] This suggests that the conspiracy theories' and fake news' greater prominence on the political right in the 2016 election may not be a typical pattern. It may have resulted from one or more of the unusual circumstances of that election: a Democratic candidate who was unusually unpopular and had for decades been the object of conspiracy theories, or the involvement of Russian intelligence services spreading misinformation.

The challenge of fighting fake news in the era of social news sharing and media distrust

Given all of this, how should the United States confront the challenge of media distrust and fake news? In report produced by a conference sponsored by Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and Northeastern University titled "Combating fake news: an agenda for research and action," a team of professors propose three things. First, they recommend including more conservatives in discussions of "misinformation in politics." Second, they suggest "collaborating more closely with journalists in order to make the truth 'louder.'" Third, they endorse "developing multidisciplinary community-wide shared resources for conducting academic research on the presence and dissemination of misinformation on social media platforms."[39]

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[38] Uscinski and Parent, "American Conspiracy Theories."

[39] Matthew Baum, David Lazer and Nicco Mele, "Combating Fake News: An Agenda for Research and Action," notes from conference at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and Northeastern University, 2017.

However, these solutions raise the question of who is responsible for preventing fake news from spreading. For what it's worth, the public believes that government/politicians/elected officials, social networking sites and search engines, and members of the public are almost equally responsible for "preventing completely made-up news from gaining attention" (45, 42 and 43 percent, respectively).[40] Considering the first group, government/politicians/elected officials, many have already spoken out against the dangers of fake news—for example, Clinton came out with suggestions for the tech community to implement—and some have even introduced legislation to try to handle the issue (see, e.g., California Assembly Bill 1104). Turning to the second group, social networking sites and search engines, Facebook and Google have already pledged to tackle this problem. Facebook has announced "changes to its Trending Topics feature … to better promote reliable news articles."[41] Yet despite these policy recommendations from a variety of sources, others still say there is "not much" that can be done about conspiracy theories.[42] Google, which has close to a monopoly on internet search in the United States, announced in April 2017 that it will try to make fake news stories less prominent in its search results. It will tweak its search algorithm to "surface more

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[40] Barthel et al., "Sowing Confusion."

[41] Ibid.

[42] Uscinski and Parent, "American Conspiracy Theories."

authoritative pages and demote low-quality content."[43] Time will tell if this is successful. I

hope it is. But it runs the risk of failing to stop inaccurate information while financially

penalizing smaller news outlets that aren't "authoritative" sources and thus are pushed

lower in search results.

Finally, it is useful to be clear about what is not the solution. There is no way to go

back to the era of limited media competition and no news sharing over social media. Any

solution that tries to turn back the clock would limit free speech so dramatically that the

cure would be worse than the disease. It might be possible to reduce partisan polarization

(which fuels media distrust and conspiratorial thinking), but no one has the solution yet.

In that domain as well, America can't go back to the way things were 50 years ago. Parties

were less polarized then because national Democrats had allied themselves with Jim

Crow-supporting Southern Democrats. The country would be better off with a system in

which the parties had less animosity (what public opinion scholars call "affective

partisanship") and were closer ideologically, without either party regressing in their

positions on racial equality.

Ultimately, America needs more responsible news outlets and more responsible

political parties. Both are necessary to clamp down on political misinformation. Even

news organizations that have a partisan slant should see that it is not in their long-term

interest to spread false stories. Even when they are debunked by those outlets, simply

talking about them at all can leave "belief echoes" that influence people. And these false

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[43] Alex Hern, "Google acts against fake news on search engine," The Guardian, April 25, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/apr/25/google-launches-major-offensive-against-fake-news.

stories reduce trust in all media sources. Political parties need to realize that there are things worse than losing an election. Americans need to cut down on their most partisan impulses, whether it is trying to attack and delegitimize the news media or winking and nodding at false news stories that attack their opponents. These things degrade the quality of democracy for everyone.

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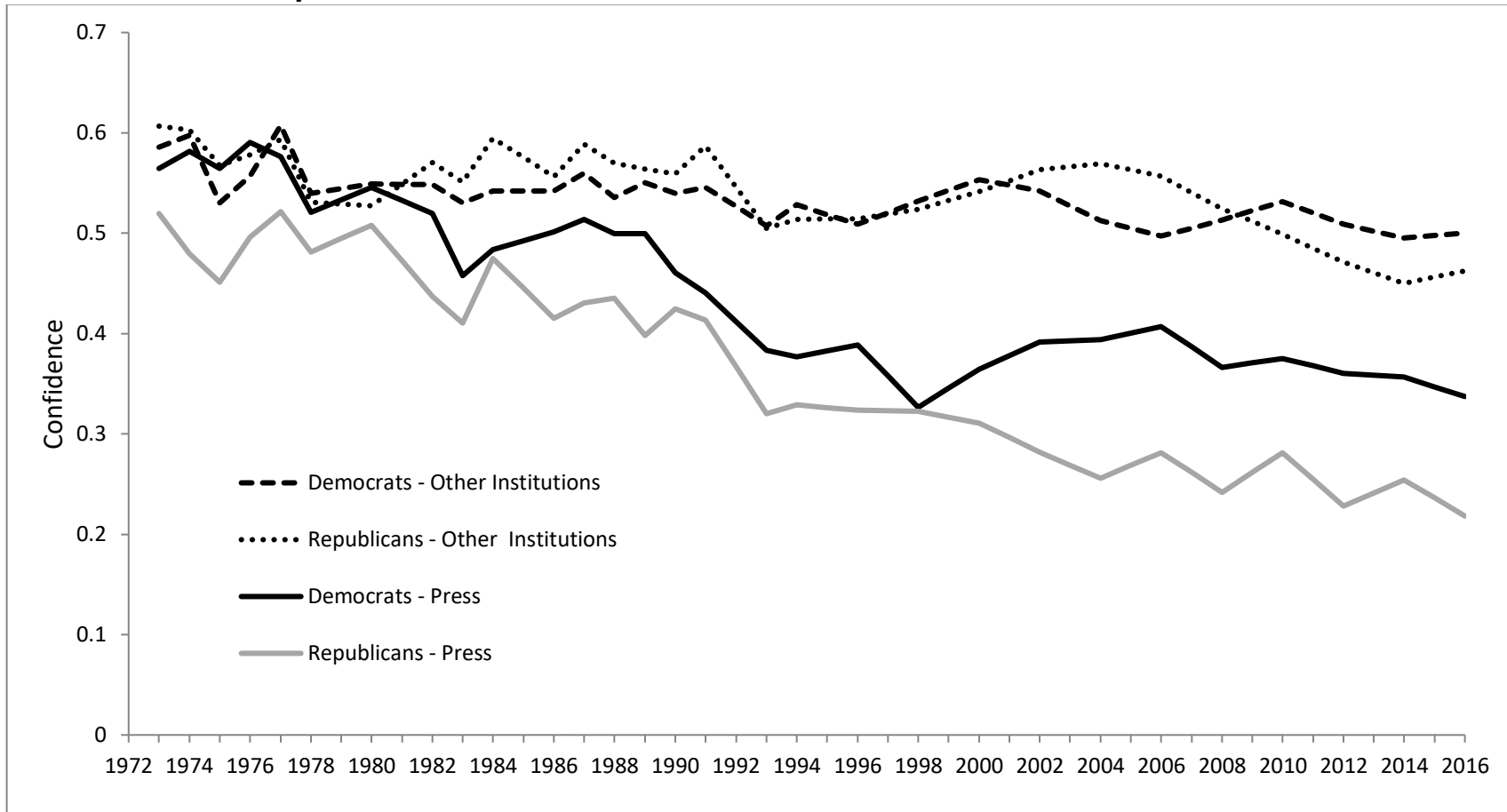
Figure 1: Confidence in the Press Compared to Other Institutions, 1973-2016
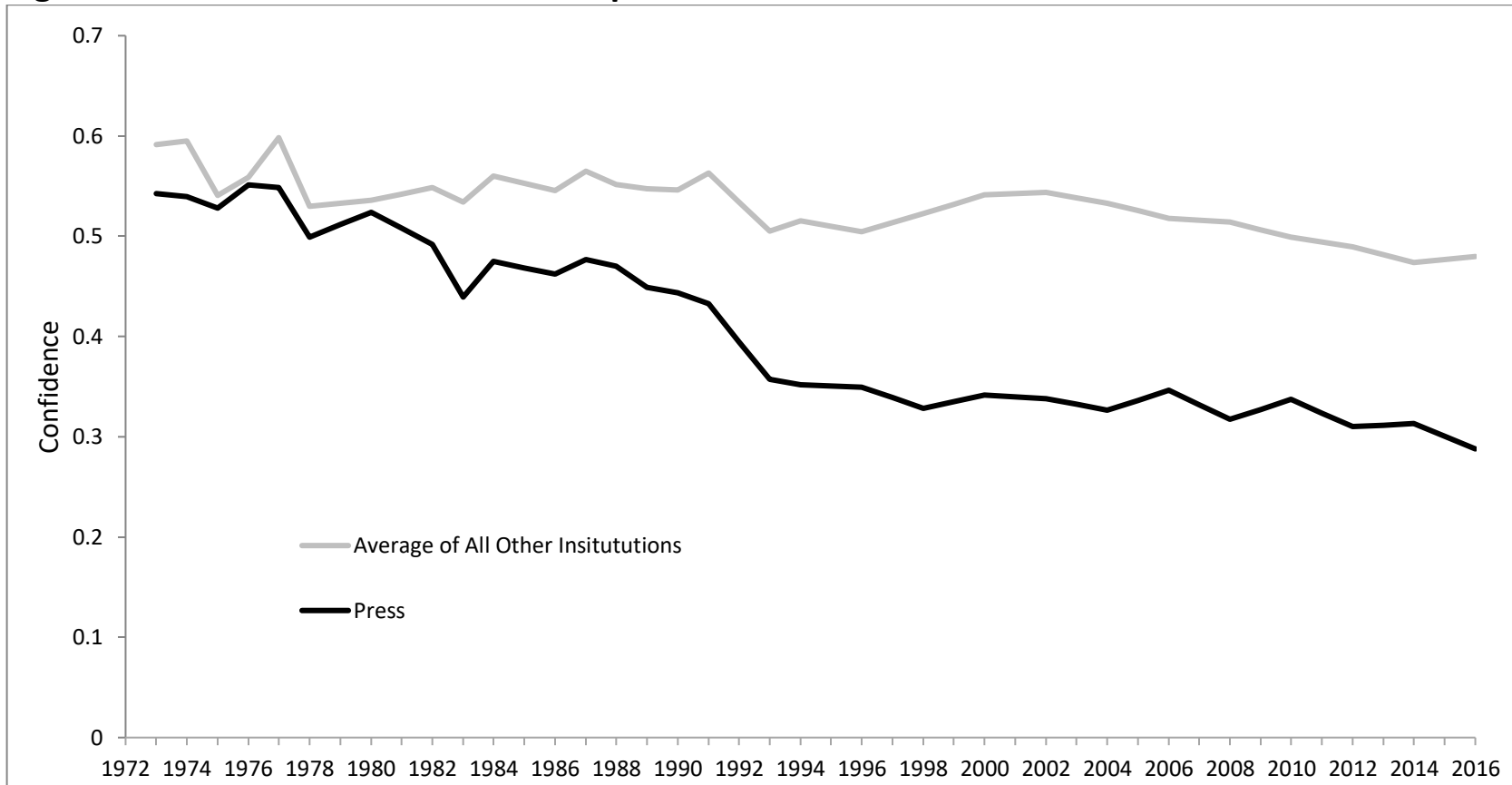
Source: 1973-2016 General Social Surveys

Note: Figure graphs average confidence across all respondents in the given GSS survey. Responses are coded so that 1 indicates "a great deal," .5 indicates "only some," and 0 indicates "hardly any" trust. The y-axis indicates the average confidence across the whole (weighted) sample when the responses are coded this way. Institutions included in the average calculation are all institutions, other than the press, where confidence was probed in every GSS survey from 1973 to 2016.

Figure 2: Confidence in the Press compared to Confidence in Other Institutions among Democrats and Republicans, 1973-2016

Source: 1973-2016 General Social Surveys

Note: Figure graphs average confidence across all respondents in the given GSS survey. Responses are coded so that 1 indicates "a great deal," .5 indicates "only some," and 0 indicates "hardly any" trust. The y-axis indicates the average confidence across the whole (weighted) sample when the responses are coded this way. Institutions included in the average calculation are all institutions, other than the press, where confidence was probed in every GSS survey from 1973 to 2016.