

Opportunities for Oversight: Suggested Solutions for Broken Trust in Mainstream Media

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Tasked with disseminating accurate and relevant information, mainstream news media has long ensured that all Americans can play their part in our democracy, acting as a watchdog against corruption and other infidelities while also keeping them generally informed about current events, elections, and more (University of Minnesota 2010; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). However, the media can only fulfill its intended purpose if the target audience trusts it implicitly as a reliable source of information. Unfortunately, trust in American news media has declined sharply over recent years, with a 2018 Gallup poll showing that sixty-nine percent of U.S. adults stated that they lost trust in the media from 2008-2018, while thirty percent asserted that their lost trust can never be regained (Knight Foundation 2018). The same poll found that the main reasons for this drop in trust were doubts about the level of accuracy and concerns about increasing amounts of bias, which were reported at 75% and 66% among respondents, respectively. Addressing these prominent issues is imperative to allowing the public to place their trust back in mainstream media, as well as to position media outlets as unbiased, accurate sources of relevant information moving forward. To that end, potential solutions include: creating independent, non-governmental oversight organizations that can be joined voluntarily by media outlets in order to ensure accuracy is always maintained by a third party, and by establishing a universally recognized metric for evaluating media

bias that can be assigned to news coverage by a committee of qualified professionals to incentivize news organizations to report as impartially as possible.

Non-governmental, voluntarily joined oversight boards have proven effective in restoring trust in beleaguered organizations in the past. After Meta (formerly known as Facebook) experienced a data scandal that dropped its market capital by over \$100 billion (Neate 2018), it established the independent Oversight Board that, while imperfect, added transparency to content moderation and helped Facebook regain trust (Foot 2020). Similarly, since trust in police hit record lows in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, Citizen Review Boards have been crucial in rehabilitating the relationships between police departments and the communities they serve by ensuring that private citizens have a role in preventing police brutality (Holliday and Wagstaff 2022). Public trust in mainstream news outlets would likewise benefit from the establishment of an independent oversight committee made up of selected journalists and academics that would prevent inaccurate reporting and mandate corrections and accountability in the event of an error. Membership in this proposed committee would be entirely voluntary, thus giving media outlets the opportunity to show Americans they are committed to transparency and accuracy. In addition, said committee would mandate that

corrections issued on erroneous reporting be broadcast with just as much reach and prominence as the original story, guaranteeing that the correction is noticed by as many viewers of the incorrect version as possible and putting an end to the tendency to bury corrections in order to maintain a facade of infallibility. Potential critics of this idea might claim that this degree of oversight would limit free press, but because the oversight committee would consist entirely of civilians, there would be no concern of free press being restricted, only crystallized and held to a standard of accuracy long missing in news coverage. These changes would surely repair American sentiment regarding the accuracy of news and would go a long way towards strengthening trust in mainstream media outlets.

Addressing the issue of biased reporting, however, is significantly more complicated. The biases that plague our news come from a wide range of sources, making a solution difficult to find. Political scientist Lance Bennett posits that “the core of the US news system remains the legacy press with its dependence on official sources, and its tendency to avoid taking sides, even when evidence points to which version of a story is closer to the truth,” showing he believes that there is a clear bias towards neutrality in mainstream news (Bennett 2016). However, partisan bias remains an ever-growing issue, with for-profit networks such as Fox News and NBC maintaining 93% Republican and 95% Democratic viewer bases, respectively, and feeling pressure to present news in ways that both appeal to and entertain their deeply polarized audiences (Grieco 2020). This leads to “a polarizing feedback loop: an ‘echo chamber’ where partisans can

reinforce and strengthen their initial biases” (Martin and Yurukoglu 2017). A potential solution to this issue would be to create a universally recognized system for analyzing the amount of bias present in news coverage and enlist a third-party organization staffed with journalists, academics, and political scientists to monitor mainstream news output and assign a “bias rating” to each story accompanied by brief commentary as to why that specific rating was assigned, doing away with any potential claims of the “biased ratings” being biased themselves. “Bias ratings” would be released immediately after the story is published and compiled on a website that functions in a similar manner to Snopes for checking the veracity of claims made by celebrities or Rotten Tomatoes for rating films and TV. Assuming this rating system gained significant traction, it would mitigate the effects of both neutral and partisan bias, with the third-party “bias rating” ensuring that consumers of news are aware of the slant present in said news and know what kinds of politically charged rhetoric to look out for in the future. In addition, media outlets would be incentivized to report more objectively to lower their “bias rating”, especially if the website had a continuously updated ranking list of the most biased outlets based on the average amount of slant present per article. Another potential application of this rating system would be to allow news outlets to [opt in](#) to having the “bias rating” appear directly on their site alongside the original article, showing the public that they are committed to maintaining honesty and integrity in their reporting. These proposed changes would make a massive impact on how Americans relate to the media, educating them about potential biases, holding news outlets accountable for slanted or

partisan output, and paving the way for a media environment focused on information rather than entertainment, and that can be trusted by all Americans.

Trust in the media is crucial to maintaining the stability of our democracy. People can only be active participants in democracy if they are sufficiently informed about current events, elections, and political trends, all of which are reported through mainstream media. American trust in media outlets has been broken, and the public is not quick to forgive. However, hopefully, the implementation of some of the aforementioned solutions will allow Americans to trust wholeheartedly in the media once again, depolarizing the masses and restoring much-needed balance and lucidity to our teetering political system.

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