

**NEWS
CIRCULATION
IN SOCIAL
MEDIA IS
BROKEN**

**CAN USERS LEARN TO REBUILD
TRUST?**

Melinda Garza
March 13, 2021

REBUILDING TRUST IN AN AGE WHERE THERE IS VIRTUALLY NONE

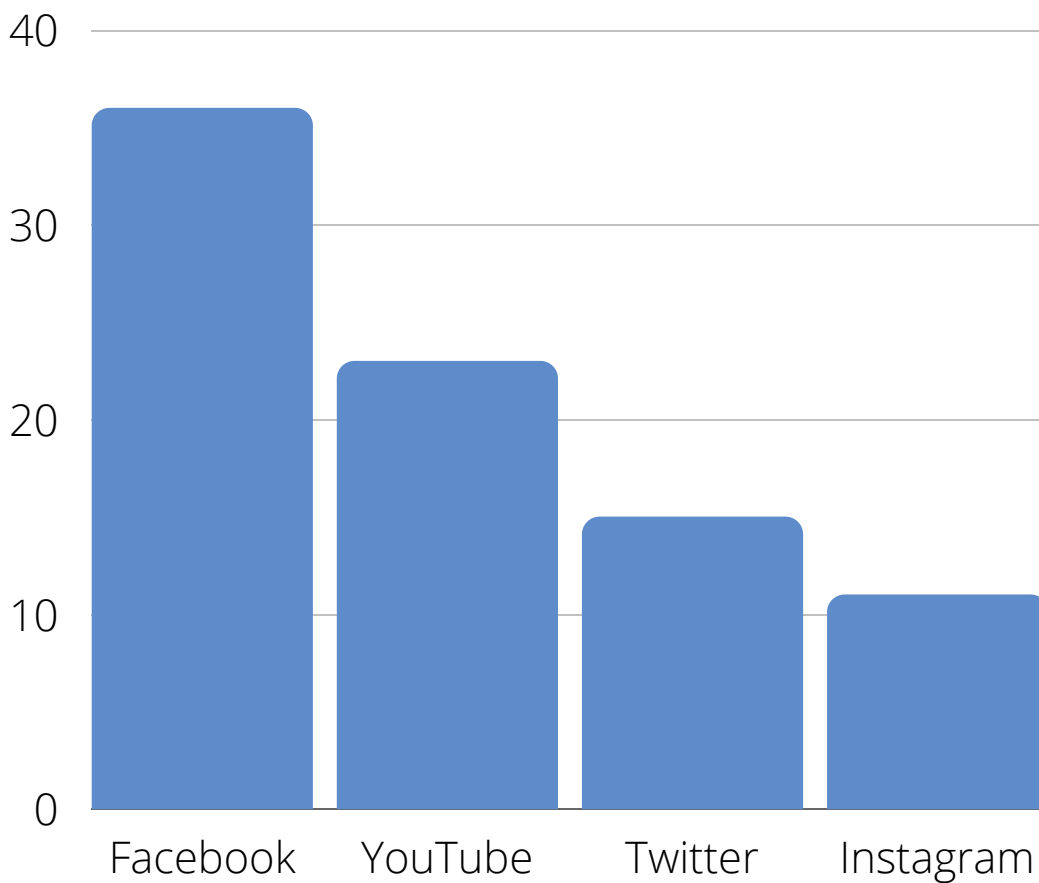
When social media began, it was a bubble of information. It was a place in which a person could connect with another, reaching through space and time to interact with others, share opinions, stay in touch and find others who shared your same way of thinking— or expand and interact with those who didn't. You were able to gather knowledge and ideas, but also build on your own. Since its start in the early 2000s, though, it has begun to mold itself into a new entity. One in which opinions are shared as facts, spread virally and anyone with a differing position is seen as a target to instigate disagreements.

Anyone with a smartphone now has access to social media 24/7. It's led us to dramatically change our way of life in a very short span of time. Not just with ourselves, but with the nature of our work, our relationships with friends and family, and within our own community. It's changed so considerably— and so quickly— that we haven't really had the time to digest it and consider its impact. From YouTube to Instagram to TikTok, social media platforms are nowhere near their original intent of connection, and are now places one visits to share our views and opinions on politics, moral and our daily interactions with the world around us.

Nowadays we get our entertainment, news, memes and hot family gossip of the day through our social media platform of choice, and sites like Facebook and Twitter have become thoroughfares for our main sources for news. In less than two decades with social media in our lives, our generation has gone from laughing at memes of funny cats to relying on them for our primary source of important information. Currently, about 86 percent of U.S. adults say they get their news from their smartphone (Shearer, 2021). However, despite the number of people turning to social media for their primary news source, there has also been a shift in the scale of distrust and questions of accuracy being shared. Recent studies over the last few months now show that nearly 60 percent of Americans do not trust the news they see on social media (Southern, 2021). Does the level of distrust around news have anything to do with the platforms they're being shared on? Social media is broken, and with that, the trust readers once had in them. With such a high percentage of mistrust, we should now ask if there's anything that could be done to rebuild that trust.



SOCIAL MEDIA AS A NEWS SOURCE



In the last few years, major life-altering events like the 2016 and 2020 elections, the COVID-19 pandemic and other major occurrences, social media companies are struggling now more than ever with misleading information being shared on their platforms. We as users see it firsthand everyday. With just over half of U.S. adults saying they get their news from social media and use what they find online to continue to spread it across their own sites, distrust in where users are getting their information begins to grow, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted from August 31 to September 2020 (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021).

During the survey, participants were asked about 11 social media platforms and where they got their news on a regular basis. With no surprise to most, Facebook topped the list with about 36 percent, or a third of U.S. adults getting their news from there consistently. Following Facebook was YouTube with 23 percent then Twitter at 15 percent. One in 10 Americans reported using platforms like Instagram (11 percent), Reddit (six percent), Snapchat (four percent), LinkedIn (four percent), TikTok (three percent) and Tumblr/Twitter (each at 1 percent) as regular sources for news (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021).



With such a large percentage of users relying on social media for their news, why don't people fully trust it? Unsurprisingly, the study found it is because they have major concerns about bias, hidden agendas such as selling products and advertising, and spin. In a report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, researchers found that main concerns about political biases were particularly significant, where 34 percent of respondents who had distrust in news media cited concerns as to the main reason why the lack of trust stemmed from (Newman & Fletcher, 2017). Researchers also noted that the concern was even more critical among those on the political right, and found they were three times more likely to not trust the news media than those on the left.

A news organization's credibility affects everyone, including the company's. They, as a brand, are also deeply affected by *who* is sharing their content on social media as there are in some cases drastic demographic differences between those who use social media for their news consumption. For instance, white adults make up a large portion of Facebook users to gather news. They also found that women are 63 percent more likely to get their news from Facebook than men, who are at 35 percent (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021).

Simply put, a large portion of the public does not trust the news media and the platforms that share it due partly to bias and hidden agendas. At some point, we've all felt that powerful people are using the media to push their own political or economic interests, as opposed to what they believe should represent the ordinary user.

If neither the social media platforms nor the news media do anything to change these mentalities, the number of people who trust the media will continue to grow and the number of clicks they get on social media may start to go down, which means fewer opportunities for profit on behalf of the advertisers.



PEOPLE HAVE A COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP WITH SPREADING MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Now more than ever, people are relying on social media to get the latest updates with the biggest news stories out there. With the COVID-19 pandemic, every household in the world is in need of the most up-to-date information. However, in the hunt for the latest data, a new era of misinformation was not only born, but spread significantly.

In an article on the nonprofit independent news organization The Conversation from March 2020, the authors describe the negative impact social media has had during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. While public health officials were working hard to carefully craft their statements and to make sure they were accurate and safe to post, people online got restless and instead began an “infodemic” by spreading misinformation and causing confusion, all because they wanted the information at that very moment— it didn’t matter if it was accurate or not. The authors plea for social media consumers to practice digital literacy as a way to combat the way social media may be creating an irreversible post-truth age, in which opinions rival truth and facts in their public influence.



If the pandemic has shown us anything over the last year, it's just how much power social media wields. A 50-state COVID-19 survey about Americans' attitudes and behaviors during the pandemic found that those who get the majority of their news from social media are more likely to believe misinformation about coronavirus conspiracies, risk factors and preventative treatments, according to the survey's latest results (Baum et al., 2020).

For the survey, researchers asked 21,000 individuals whether they believed 11 false claims about COVID-19, six of which were about conspiracies or risk factors and five were about preventative treatments that had been circulating on social media since the beginning of the pandemic. Between seven and 22 percent of respondents indicated what they believed to be true in one of the false claims.

We are facing an unprecedented crisis of public understanding and spreading of misinformation, and social media and the media have played huge roles in allowing it to happen.

During the 2016 United States presidential election, false news stories swept social media, especially on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These stories had no basis in fact, but were still seen everywhere, and users were quick to either click on the links or just use the headline as the basis of their opinion. The aftermath of the 2016 reshaped our public opinion about tech platforms, and brought forth scrutiny from every side of the spectrum.

Flashback a few years to the election of 2016, the term “fake news” rose in popularity and began to be heavily used by then nominee Donald Trump, political pundits, journalists and aunts and uncles during Thanksgiving gatherings across the country. These extremely partisan stories were everywhere, and completely overwhelmed Facebook. You couldn't get away from them if you had any online presence, to the point that they even began to outperform real news stories. These fake news stories generated millions of interactions throughout the campaign, and it completely accelerated polarization across the country (Newton, 2020). On Facebook's end, it created a massive issue for the brand since the News Feed had now become home for hoaxes, conspiracies and spam. Their response was to develop a bipartisan network of fact-checkers and begin coding new ways to change their algorithm to favor friends and family over links. They expanded their teams and started building on a new initiative they were calling “platform integrity,” but the damage had been done.

Social media platforms are the root of disinformation that's spread everyday. Platforms are doing what they can to fix it where they can, but over the last few years, the stigma of fake news online has only grown.



BECOMING ARBITERS OF TRUTH

Factors that have aided in mistrust of news is a history of inaccurate stories, biased journalists, sensationalism and *where* it's posted and shared. On the other hand, factors that can help contribute to trust online are in-depth coverage, repetitive news outlets and journalists, and those that are open to feedback from their viewers or readers.

Paying attention to in-depth coverage is a key component that Cal Newport argues in “Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World.” In it, he references a movement called the The Slow Media Manifesto. Similar to “slow food,” which was created to counter the negative effects of fast-food culture, Sabria David, Jörg Blumtritt and Benedikt Köhler propose an addition to the slow life movement.

Slow media works to remove the quickness that comes from breaking news and politics and circulated on social media. By taking part in this movement, one is able to not only prevent our focus from being fragmented by the likes of click bait and misinformation, but encourages us to only focus on the highest quality content. Newport argues that breaking news is naturally of lower quality because journalists and reporters have not had the time to fully and deeply process all the information that's out there. We too should take the time to understand what we're reading and where it's coming from.

By taking part in Slow Media, users are not distracted with any hidden agendas that may come from the news platform or source such as political or monetary agendas. It's another way to organize our media, and reflect on the news we do absorb. “The key to embracing Slow Media is the general commitment to maximizing the quality of what you consume and the conditions under which you consume it,” he said (Newport, 2019).



We as consumers can take our own steps toward progress, but we cannot do it alone. Social media platforms need to make editorial decisions once misinformation begins to circulate and take action immediately. For instance, news stories posted on social media platforms, be it Twitter or Facebook or any other platform, should contain a detailed fact check report. The goal would be that individuals may be less likely to share or believe articles that have been labeled as false or inaccurate. It can also force media sites and politicians to take preemptive action because they will not want to be called out. If it happens frequently, readers may completely lose trust in them, which will make them lose money if they stop clicking on their site altogether. With this system in place, news sites and social media platforms will need to work harder to earn and keep our trust. Additionally, if a news article is ever found to be inaccurate or contain any falsehoods, the social media platform it was shared on should send all readers who shared or read it a notification so they think twice before sharing the misinformation.

“*The key to embracing Slow Media is the general commitment to maximizing the quality of what you consume and the conditions under which you consume it.*”

– Cal Newport in *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*

Readers need to continue to take responsibility for the news they read online and ensure the voices we follow on social media are trustworthy and factcheck anything we may be hesitant of. There's an ever-growing percentage of U.S. adults who are trusting the news media less and less. We can't allow that to continue being the case though. News is vital to our everyday lives and essential to protect as our first amendment right. We need to start trusting the media again. But fixing the trust problem will require publishers, platforms and readers to work together. We as consumers must seek only quality content, social media platforms need to apply restrictions to what's shared and news outlets need to be able to deliver the news we deserve, which is fair, honest and free of clickbait.

THE BOTTOM LINE



How many factors can impact how readers perceive news on social media? We can count the person or reporter who worked on the story, the producer who assigned the story, the media outlet, the social media editor, the social media platform they posted it on and a myriad of other elements that each play a role in the reader's opinion of the article.

As one can assume, a trusted journalist posting from a reputable news outlet will get mostly positive perceptions about the article. To its opposite, someone who is un-credible or untrusted who shares from an unknown news source will probably lead to no trust or credibility. What this shows is that teamwork is necessary to provide fair and unbiased news to the public. Everyone has their role to play. A benefit to each of us bringing something to the table is a more positive place to source information. We shouldn't be scared to post or share news articles online. We need trust where it's coming from, which means trusting the journalist to do all they can and the social media platforms to protect us as readers when they can't.

TAKING STEPS FORWARD

When it comes to repairing trust between readers, social media platforms, and the press, those in power need to prioritize authentic and clear communication. What does that mean? That if news organizations want to get our trust back, we need to start holding them accountable and encourage them to start taking active steps to communicate their goals and their methods. A start could be having them share unedited interviews with the public for full disclosure and prevent anything being taken out of context, as well as have them explain their journalistic practices to their audiences.

Diversity is also fundamental to earning trust. If organizations want to regain their credibility with all groups of people, especially minorities, they need to start broadening out and authentically mirror their audience. A journalist will organically produce stories that stem from their personal background or experiences, but people of color are marginally underrepresented. Nationally, Hispanic, black and Asian women make up less than 5 percent of newsroom personnel at print and online news publications so local newsrooms remain largely white by most measures (Abbady, 2017). If people of color are able to relate more to news stories, they'll be more inclined to trust where they're coming from and feel comfortable sharing them forward.

Trust is not something social media platforms and news organizations can ask for– it's something they must consistently earn.

CONCLUSION

In fixing the trust problem that consumers, readers and viewers have is going to require publishers, platforms and readers to work together. News organizations have begun to share reporting processes and offer readers fact-checking services, but there is still a lot of work to be done in rebuilding the trust that has been chipping away, especially these last few years. Another way to help news organizations focus less on clickbait and more on deep and thorough investigative work is by shifting away from digital advertising with the sole purpose of making money and toward more reader-supported business models. There's also a long way to go in creating more representation in media organizations by hiring a more diverse range of people across age, economic outlook, race and gender.

Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter must also accept their role in the trust problem, especially when it comes to identifying trustworthy news sources on their platforms and taking responsibility when they fail and misinformation is shared. News organizations and tech giants can continue to combine their efforts to tag-team and create news initiatives like The Trust Project and The News Integrity Initiative.

Rebuilding trust will not be an easy task. It's been slowly disintegrating with every inaccurate, negative or piece of disinformation that's shared out there. It will be a long-term process and will require the publishers, platforms and consumers to take action and responsibility for many years to come. There are several options to start the process, but organizations need to first understand the perceptions and motivations consumers have, and only then can they start to truly make change and progress because consumers will begin to demand it.

REFERENCES:

Abbady, T. (2017, May 1). The Modern Newsroom Is Stuck Behind The Gender And Color Line. NPR.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/05/01/492982066/the-modern-newsroom-is-stuck-behind-the-gender-and-color-line>.

Ali, S. H., & Kurasawa, F. (2021, January 14). #COVID19: Social media both a blessing and a curse during coronavirus pandemic. The Conversation.

<https://theconversation.com/covid19-social-media-both-a-blessing-and-a-curse-during-coronavirus-pandemic-133596>.

Baum, M., Green, J., Simonson, M., Volpe, J. D., Lin, J., Santillana, M., ... Ognyanova, K. (2020, September 23). THE STATE OF THE NATION: A 50-STATE COVID-19 SURVEY REPORT #14: MISINFORMATION AND VACCINE ACCEPTANCE . The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States.

<http://www.kateto.net/covid19/COVID19%20CONSORTIUM%20REPORT%2014%20MISINFO%20SEP%202020.pdf>.

Heyamoto , L., & Milbourn , T. (2019, October 6). 4 things journalists can do to rebuild trust with the public. The Conversation.

<https://theconversation.com/4-things-journalists-can-do-to-rebuild-trust-with-the-public-100445>.

Kulke, S. (2020, September 23). Social media contributes to misinformation about COVID-19. <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2020/09/social-media-contributes-to-misinformation-about-covid-19/>.

Newman, N., & Fletcher, R. (2017, December 1). Bias, Bullshit and Lies: Audience Perspectives on Low Trust in the Media. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/bias-bullshit-and-lies-audience-perspectives-low-trust-media>.

Newport, C. (2016). Deep work: Rules for focused success in a distracted world. New York: Grand Central.

REFERENCES:

Newport, C. (2019). Chapter 7, Join the Attention Resistance. *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (pp. 213-248). Portfolio.

Newton, C. (2020, November 6). Social networks solved their 2016 election problems, but their 2020 problems are bigger. *The Verge*.
<https://www.theverge.com/2020/11/6/21552763/election-2020-tech-social-platforms-facebook-twitter-youtube-misinformation>.

Rosenstiel, T., Sonderman, J., Loker, K., Benz, J., Sterrett, D., Malato, D., ... Swanson, E. (2017, May 24). 'Who shared it?' how Americans decide what news to trust on social media.
<https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/trust-social-media/>.

Shearer, E., & Mitchell, A. (2021, January 12). *News Use Across Social Media Platforms in 2020*. Pew Research Center's Journalism Project.
<https://www.journalism.org/2021/01/12/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-in-2020/>.

Shearer, E. (2021, January 12). 86% of Americans get news online from SMARTPHONE, computer or tablet. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>.

Southern, M. (2021, January 13). 59% of US Adults Do Not Trust News on Social Media. *Search Engine Journal*.
<https://www.searchenginejournal.com/59-of-us-adults-do-not-trust-news-on-social-media/392316/>.

Sullivan, M. (2020, June 9). Social networks are broken. Here's the secret to rebuilding trust. *Fast Company*.
<https://www.fastcompany.com/90513504/social-networks-are-broken-heres-the-secret-to-rebuilding-trust>.