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AMERICAN JOURNALISM AS AN INSTITUTION

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INTRODUCTION

"The Fake News Media has never been so wrong or so dirty. Purposely incorrect stories and phony sources to meet their agenda of hate. Sad!"¹ So wrote President Donald Trump on Twitter on June 13, 2017. That the president of the United States would say this, and on a social media platform that affords him direct access to millions of Americans on his own terms, is a mark of the peculiar situation of journalism in contemporary American life.

It would be hard to deny that journalism in general, and political journalism in particular, is in a state of flux in our country—perhaps even in a state of crisis. But what is the nature of this crisis? Is it a problem for the nation as a whole? And what kind of response might it require?

Journalism is not in crisis in every respect, of course. Demand for its offerings is on the rise as public interest in politics has soared in the Trump era. The supply of journalism is plentiful too, and its quality—while obviously variable given the immense diversity of outlets now available—is surely on par with any golden age of journalism one might point to. The economics of journalism in the information age has been brutal, but a dynamic and increasingly diverse media ecosystem has nonetheless arisen in this century, and new technologies have obviously offered new opportunities as well. The freedom of the press, which has not always been secure in our country, is in no real jeopardy, or even in much question or dispute.

So what's the problem? The crisis confronting American journalism is a crisis of public confidence, a crisis of integrity and trust. The issue is not so much trust in individual journalists, or even in particular publications, networks or platforms, though some come in for more criticism than others. Rather, it is a matter of trust in American journalism as a whole, or trust in so-called mainstream journalism as an institution, understood as part of the array of institutions that compose the American establishment.

American journalists have never been at ease understanding their work as part of such an array of institutions. Journalism in a democracy always prides itself on its ability to hone a certain civic skepticism, to hold leaders to account, to uncover important facts hidden from the public, and to enable citizens to assess their elected officials. In this sense, American journalism sometimes imagines itself to be countercultural, or an anti-establishment force in the mold of the muckrakers of old. There are, of course, elements of this way of thinking and operating in the work of contemporary American news organizations. But journalism in America, and especially political journalism, underwent a multidecade process of institutionalization over the first half or so of the 20th century that fundamentally transformed its character.

¹ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/874576057579565056>.



Over time, political journalism came largely to be practiced by highly educated cultural elites in America's major cities, and the largest and most prominent media enterprises came to be owned by major corporations. Journalists fell into the habit of applying their skepticism mostly toward critics of elite institutions and challengers to elite norms, and their work had come to be implicitly protective of what might be called an establishmentarian status quo. And yet most political journalists have never conceived of themselves and their work in this way, and so were not prepared to defend themselves against a rising tide of anti-institutional sentiment in the latter years of the 20th century.

That tide has continued to rise in this century. American journalism, like most of our major institutions, has been subject to intense social, cultural and economic pressures that have undone some of its institutionalist forms and character, undermining its ethic and social standing, and increasingly subjecting it to competition from less established and less institutional media. America's traditional media giants are still largely populated by highly educated elites and mostly owned by major corporations, but they are now struggling for dominance with much less established competitors of various types. No one imagines that the major newspapers or networks have some inherent claim on our trust or attention.

In this sense, American journalism exemplifies a larger pattern in our national life, as public trust in institutions of all sorts has plummeted in recent decades while the culture has grown far more variegated, fragmented and diverse. But the crisis of American journalism is especially acute because journalism conveys information that is only valuable to the degree it is deemed reliable, so a crisis of confidence presents it with a particularly challenging problem.

Contemporary American journalism is unprepared to confront the basic character of this problem, to defend itself and to assert the value of institutional journalism. To understand the challenges it confronts, American journalism will have to think more clearly about institutions and their roles.

THE TROUBLE WITH THE PRESS

This is by no means the first time that American journalism has found itself in crisis. And the nature of some past crises of the press can help us gain a better understanding of today's distinct circumstances.

One very notable instance of a self-declared crisis of journalism offers a sharp contrast to today's situation. In 1942, with the world at war and the nation having already endured a decade of nearly uninterrupted emergency mobilizations of various sorts, the freedom of the press seemed to some prominent Americans to be threatened. Henry Luce, the publisher of *Time* magazine, approached University of Chicago President Robert M. Hutchins about launching an inquiry into the state of that essential liberty. Hutchins gathered a commission of eminent scholars and public thinkers and took up the question over a period of several years. The result, the so-called Hutchins Commission report, was published at the end of 1946 and offers a snapshot of the state of the press at midcentury.²

While the commission was charged with contemplating the state of freedom of the press, it did direct itself to the question of public trust in journalism. The reasons for worry on that front, in the opinion of the commission's members, had largely to do with the intense institutional consolidation that American journalism had been undergoing. "The modern press itself is a new phenomenon," the commission noted.

Its typical unit is the great agency of mass communication. These agencies can facilitate thought and discussion. They can stifle it. They can advance the progress of civilization or they can thwart it. They can debase and vulgarize mankind. They can endanger the peace of the world; they can do so accidentally, in a fit of absence of mind. They can play up or down the news and its significance, foster and feed emotions, create complacent fictions and blind spots, misuse the great words, and uphold empty slogans. Their scope and power are increasing every day as new instruments become available to them. These instruments can spread lies faster and farther than our forefathers dreamed when they enshrined the freedom of the press in the First Amendment to our Constitution.³

2 The official name of the group was the Commission on Freedom of the Press. The commission's members—along with Hutchins they were Zechariah Chafee, John M. Clark, John Dickinson, William E. Hocking, Harold Lasswell, Archibald MacLeish, Charles Merriam, Reinhold Niebuhr, Robert Redfield, Beardsley Ruml, Arthur Schlesinger and George N. Schuster—were scholars and intellectuals, but none were journalists or otherwise much involved in the work of the press. This contributed to what both critics and defenders of the commission's work acknowledged was an outsider's view of the state of American journalism, focused particularly on the relationship of journalism to the larger society.

3 "A Free and Responsible Press: The Report of the Hutchins Commission" (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1947), 3.



In some respects, these concerns are very similar to those that might be voiced today. The power of the press is enormous, and its capacity to abuse this power is therefore very great. These are worries about the possessors of concentrated power, and they express a self-conscious apprehension about the degree of that concentration. In a sense, these are inherently populist worries, despite the distinctly elite character of the Hutchins Commission and its members. Arguments like these are still the ones most commonly voiced by today's populist critics of the mainstream media.

And yet, the way the Hutchins Commission thought about that concentration of power can help us see how much things have changed. "A technical society requires concentration of economic power," the commission noted.

Since such concentration is a threat to democracy, democracy replies by breaking up some centers of power that are too large and too strong and by controlling, or even owning, others. Modern society requires great agencies of mass communication. They, too, are concentrations of power. But breaking up a vast network of communication is a different thing from breaking up an oil monopoly or a tobacco monopoly. If the people set out to break up a unit of communication on the theory that it is too large and strong, they may destroy a service which they require. Moreover, since action to break up an agency of communication must be taken at the instance of a department of the government, the risk is considerable that the freedom of the press will be imperiled through the application of political pressure by that department.⁴

It seemed obvious to the commission's members that a modern mass society would require centralized mass media and that there was little plausible prospect of effectively breaking up such concentration. This is not nearly so obvious now. In fact, the commission's stark terms might compel an observer of the contemporary media environment to wonder if the problem we confront is actually properly understood as a problem of concentration at all.

There is certainly some significant concentration of power in some facets of the media, as there are throughout our economy. A few large corporations control the platforms through which vast swaths of our society obtain their information. But the most significant of these are not actually media companies, in the sense that they do not produce journalistic content. They are owners of information management and social media platforms such as Google, Twitter and Facebook. They possess the ability (which Google and Facebook employ, while Twitter generally does not) to filter our access to information through complex algorithms that can exercise enormous influence over what information reaches which Americans under what circumstances, generally without the knowledge of their users.⁵

But these are not the targets of populist anger toward the media. That anger is directed toward the power of traditional media, which has actually been declining and fragmenting for decades. Long gone are the days when

4 Ibid., 5.

5 This power has been the subject of growing scholarly interest. See for instance the work of Eli Pariser.



network evening newscasts drew the eyes of an absolute majority of the nation, and when two or three major newspapers monopolized the public's understanding of key national events. Complaints about the media still naturally fall into the grooves of popular rejection of elite authority, but as the president's tweet above suggests, they often have at least as much to do with skepticism about the integrity of the mainstream media as with its power. Indeed, far from a function of concentration, this skepticism seems rooted at least partially in a breakdown of confidence that has to do with the multiplicity and fragmentation of sources of information. It is not so much the media's power or the power of its owners that makes it hard to trust as it is its lack of evident authority and integrity.

In this regard, today's media crisis looks more like some challenges that American journalism has confronted at times of fragmentation and fracture, rather than in the peculiar era of consolidation in the middle of the 20th century. Perhaps above all, it resembles the circumstances of journalism in the early republic, when barriers to entry were relatively low and the media environment was teeming with voices large and (mostly) small.

One telling artifact of that era is a brief essay published anonymously by Benjamin Franklin in 1789, called "An Account of the Supremest Court of Judicature in Pennsylvania, viz., The Court of the Press."⁶ Like much of Franklin's writing, this short essay is at least partially satirical, but it advances a very serious point: that anyone with access to a printing press can make wild, unfounded accusations and destroy the reputation of anyone he might target. The press has great power with no clear limits on its use. It is in this sense like a court without law. "It may receive and promulgate accusations of all kinds against all persons and characters among the citizens of the State, and even against all inferior courts," Franklin wrote, "and may judge, sentence, and condemn to infamy, not only private individuals, but public bodies, etc., with or without inquiry or hearing, at the court's direction."⁷ This court, Franklin noted, is not governed by any clear rules:

The accused is allowed no grand jury to judge of the truth of the accusation before it is publicly made, nor is the name of the accuser made known to him, nor has he an opportunity of confronting the witnesses against him, for they are kept in the dark as in the Spanish court of Inquisition. Nor is there any petty jury of his peers, sworn to try the truth of the charges. The proceedings are also sometimes so rapid that an honest, good citizen may find himself suddenly and unexpectedly accused, and in the same morning judged and condemned and sentence pronounced against him, that he is a rogue and a villain. Yet, if an officer of this court receives the slightest check for misconduct in this his office, he claims immediately the rights of a free citizen by the constitution and demands to know his accuser, to confront the witnesses, and to have a fair trial by a jury of his peers.⁸

⁶ Although the essay was originally anonymous, there is no dispute about Franklin's authorship. An authoritative text, used here for all citations, can be found in Albert Henry Smyth, ed., "The Writings of Benjamin Franklin" (New York: Macmillan Co., 1905), vol. 10, 36-40. For an exceptionally valuable analysis of Franklin's essay, see Arthur Milikh, "Franklin and the Free Press," *National Affairs*, spring 2017, 129-141.

⁷ Smyth, "Benjamin Franklin," 37.

⁸ Ibid.



The danger from abuses of power by this pseudo-court is thus immense, Franklin suggested, and it amounts in essence to the capacity to purvey lies without consequences. The danger is fake news, one might say, or journalists spreading “purposely incorrect stories and phony sources to meet their agenda of hate.”

At the core of the complaint is the assertion of an absence of standards. And as Franklin understood, this lack of standards was a function not of the concentration of media power but precisely of its dilution. The power of the press in his time, Franklin wrote, was available to anyone who, “by education or practice in scribbling, has acquired a tolerable style as to grammar and construction, so as to bear printing; or who is possessed by a press and a few types.”⁹ Anyone in possession of these could become a menace in the court of public opinion, and his victims could have little recourse. “For if you make the least complaint of the judge’s conduct,” Franklin wrote, “he daubs his blacking balls in your face wherever he meets you; and, besides tearing your private character to flitters, marks you out for the odium of the public, as an enemy to the liberty of the press.”¹⁰

To Franklin, there seemed no real remedy to this problem except constraints upon that liberty of the press. And he was willing to suggest that some such limits might be called for. “If by the liberty of the press were understood merely the liberty of discussing the propriety of public measures and political opinions, let us have as much of it as you please,” he wrote.

[B]ut if it means the liberty of affronting, calumniating, and defaming one another, I, for my part, own myself willing to part with my share of it whenever our legislators shall please so to alter the law, and shall cheerfully consent to exchange my liberty of abusing others for the privilege of not being abused myself.¹¹

But that remedy has, with good reason, generally been ruled out of bounds in our politics, at least beyond very narrowly constructed libel laws. Franklin wrote this two years before the Bill of Rights was ratified, but he was well aware of the abiding commitment to the freedom of the press in American public life, a cause he had certainly championed himself at times.¹² He seems to have intended to raise the question of how the power of journalism to abuse its subjects might be contained rather than seriously to propose legislative limits on the press.

9 Ibid., 39.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 40.

12 Franklin was himself a prominent printer and publisher, and at several points in his career made forthright arguments in defense of the freedom of the press as essential to the preservation of liberty and good government. A useful source on this front is Lorraine Smith Pangle, “The Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin” (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF JOURNALISM

For us, Franklin's essay can help to clarify the nature of a problem that today's populist rhetoric about the press mostly obscures. Although they employ terms drawn from complaints about the power of the establishment, today's populist critics of the press seem really to be objecting to an absence of standards and integrity, not to an excess of concentrated power. They are asking, in a sense, for a more reliable and perhaps even more authoritative press.

The same may be said, up to a point, about the complaints of today's populists more generally. Although their instinctive parlance is the vocabulary of downtrodden masses crying out against the abuses of an oppressive elite, they are actually accusing that elite of being too weak, not too strong. This is surely true of President Trump's populism, which treats America's core institutions as pathetic, inept and run by losers, not as confident and domineering. It is a populism yearning for a lost American greatness that was made possible by a very confident establishment, even if it would also clearly be uncomfortable with some of the practices and views of that establishment.

If the essential problem is integrity, then it might be useful to consider whether and how the press avoided the implications of Franklin's argument, and how its reputation might have come to be reinforced at different times. This, needless to say, is a subject ripe with complexity and more suitable for a multivolume work than an essay. It has also received no shortage of scholarly attention over the years. But here I will gesture toward one facet of the question that seems particularly relevant to our contemporary circumstances: the idea of journalism as an institution in American life, which involved both the consolidation of journalism as an industry and the professionalization of journalism as a practice.

The arc of that process followed the path of a broader consolidation of American life, from the middle decades of the 19th century through the middle of the 20th, driven by technological advances, economic transformation and political reforms. Under the pressure of industrialization, the influence of progressive politics and the emergence of genuinely mass media, the scale of American life increased dramatically and drove a consolidation or centralization of politics, economics, culture and national identity.¹³ One result was the emergence of national newspapers, and later radio and television journalism, which gradually spurred the development of a standardized, formalized journalism very different from the sort Franklin describes.

¹³ For a fuller history of these trends, understood in these terms, see my book "The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism" (New York: Basic Books, 2016).



Barriers to entry, particularly barriers of cost and technological complexity, meant that journalism was no longer accessible to anyone who could write clearly or print pamphlets. It was instead the purview of large, organized corporate entities that insisted on some formal structure. Journalism gradually became a profession—with some broadly accepted general standards, with means of training new professionals (as journalism schools popped up throughout American higher education), and with a strong ethic and a straightforward set of common commitments.

This was no panacea to the trouble with journalistic power, of course. Indeed, it yielded precisely the institutionalized, centralized journalism about which the Hutchins Commission raised concerns, as corporate power and elite consolidation threatened to strangle public discourse. But it was an institutionalized journalism with at least some answer to offer to concerns about basic integrity, and so with some means of laying claim to public confidence and trust.

This consolidated form of American journalism reached its apex in the middle decades of the last century, perhaps peaking around the mid-1970s. In that era, public confidence in journalism rose to extraordinary heights, along with a broader public confidence in America's large institutions. In 1976, Gallup found that 72 percent of Americans had confidence in the news media.¹⁴

Since that time, and again in line with the broader trend of public views about our nation's institutions, trust in journalism has plummeted. Last year, Gallup found that roughly 32 percent of the public expressed trust in the press.¹⁵ At the same time, journalism, like some other key institutions, has gone through a deconsolidation. As barriers to entry have fallen dramatically thanks to technology, and as public expectations have shifted, today's journalistic landscape looks more and more like that of Franklin's time, with its attendant strengths and weaknesses.

But to look beneath the surface of these trends, and to think as well about what remedies might be available to the contemporary crisis of the press, it would be wise to wonder what lay behind the enormous and unusual public confidence in journalism (and in other institutions) in that peculiar mid-20th-century American moment.

14 For Gallup's historical figures, see <http://www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>.

15 Ibid.

TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS

To consider that subject, we might begin with some very basic questions. What does it mean to speak of something as “an institution”? And what does it mean to “trust” an institution?¹⁶

Institutions are, in essence, the forms of our associational life. Whether as an actual corporate entity (such as a school, business or legislature) or as a body of rules, practices, norms and behaviors (such as the institution of marriage or a profession), an institution gives structure to the ways in which people live together. Generally speaking, institutions work to accomplish a socially essential task (educating the young, making laws, defending the country, helping the poor, producing some service or product, meeting a need) by establishing a structure and process—a *form*—for combining people’s efforts toward performing that task. In the process, the institution also forms people to carry out that task effectively, responsibly and reliably. It creates an ethic that defines how they go about their common work, which in turn shapes their behavior and character in doing so. And that ethic often involves a way of achieving the institution’s core goal effectively while guarding against some of the dangers that always follow us into social life, such as individual selfishness, avarice, ambition, lust and vice. Society values the institution because it carries out that task, but also because it forms people to do it appropriately, properly or ethically.

This understanding of the roles of institutions helps to clarify what trust in an institution might mean. People trust an institution because it seems to have an ethic that makes those within it more trustworthy. People trust political institutions because they are shaped to take seriously some obligation to the public interest as they pursue the work of self-government, and they shape the people who populate them to do the same. People trust the military because it values courage, honor and duty in carrying out the defense of the nation, and forms men and women who do too. People trust a business because it promises quality and integrity in meeting some need, and rewards its employees when they deliver. People trust a university because it is shaped, and shapes those within its orbit in turn, to be devoted to learning and truth. People trust a journalistic institution because it has high standards of honesty in reporting the news that make its work reliable.

¹⁶ The scholarly literature on institutionalism in sociology, political science, economics, history and other fields is of course immense and always growing. I do not pretend to have mastered that vast literature, though I have benefited greatly from my exploration of it in what follows, particularly in my own field of political science. No single source has shaped the structure of this argument, but I have been especially influenced by the late Hugh Heclo’s wonderful 2008 book, “On Thinking Institutionally.” I do not adopt Heclo’s definition of “institution” here; mine is closer to Alexis de Tocqueville’s way of thinking about the term. And the distinction I draw between formative and performative institutions lies outside his analysis of the character of institutions. But Heclo’s overall disposition toward the subject, and his engagement with the political science literature regarding institutions, has done a lot to shape my own.



People “lose faith” in an institution when they no longer believe it plays this ethical or formative role. One way in which this might happen is when institutions plainly fail to protect the public from avarice or selfishness or vice in the carrying out of their primary purposes, as when a bank cheats its customers or a member of the clergy abuses a vulnerable child. Another is when they simply fail to impose an ethic on the people within them and seem to exist only to serve those individuals’ interests—and as a result seem to be unworthy of trust not because they have failed to earn it but because they appear not to seek or desire it. And something like that is what has been happening to American institutions in recent decades.

In fact, the public’s very understanding of the purpose of institutions has changed subtly but fundamentally. Americans have moved, very roughly speaking, from thinking of institutions as “molds” that shape and form people’s characters and habits toward seeing them as “platforms” that allow people to be themselves before a wider world. The former understanding would have institutions counterbalance individualism; the latter only has them intensify it. And this subtle, gradual change in expectations has driven and magnified the loss of trust in institutions.

When the public doesn’t think of its institutions as *formative* but as *performative*—when the presidency and Congress are just stages for individual performance art, when a university becomes a venue for vain virtue signaling, when journalism is indistinguishable from a megaphone—they become harder to trust. They aren’t really asking for trust. And many of the most significant social, political, cultural and intellectual institutions of American society are going through this transformation from mold to platform. The few exceptions—most notably the military, the most unabashedly formative of America’s institutions—prove the rule, because they tend to be the few institutions in which people aren’t losing faith. And many of the genuinely novel institutions of the 21st century (most notably the virtual institutions of social media) are inherently shaped as platforms and not molds. They are ways for individuals to shine, not ways for them to be transformed by an ethic shared with others. It would be strange to trust a platform, and people often don’t.

In one sense, the loss of faith in journalism is just a facet of a much broader decline of confidence in a variety of national institutions that have gone through various forms of this transformation from mold toward platform. The degree to which the public has lost faith in the media is on par with the loss of faith in other key institutions, so there may be no way to push back against this trend without reversing a far larger set of social forces. Yet journalism is different, because trust is its currency in a more fundamental sense. It exists to convey information and cannot perform its basic function without the trust of its audience. Journalism is also uniquely subject to the effects of some important technological innovations in recent years, especially to the rise of social media.



It is the internet and social media, perhaps more than any other factor, which have helped transform American journalism from a mold institution into a platform institution. By multiplying and fragmenting sources of information, the web and social media have turned the work of journalism into artifacts of self-expression for different groups of Americans, as people filter and select among news sources, then distribute the work of those they choose—or those chosen for them by algorithms meant to predict their preferences—among their virtual circles. And by providing powerful independent platforms for dissemination, social media in particular have turned many journalists from participants in the work of institutions to managers of personal brands who carefully tend to their own public presence and presentation. Even reporters for major national newspapers and television networks, whose formal work is subject to layers of editing and verification, now have a constant presence on Twitter and other social networks, and offer both reporting and commentary in an ongoing way. This makes it difficult to distinguish the work of individuals from the work of institutions, and increasingly turns journalistic institutions into platforms for the personal brands of individual reporters.

These trends feed into a self-intensifying cycle that exacerbates mistrust, undermines standards, makes comparisons of reliability a challenge, and leaves the public understandably skeptical about the integrity of contemporary journalism. It also contributes to genuine institutional failures—failures to enforce journalistic standards, to resist various political hysterias and to appropriately restrain the power of the press—that further contribute to public cynicism about journalism. An important reason for the continuing decline of trust in the press is the failure of many journalists to treat journalism itself as a formative institution, and their inclination instead to treat it as another platform for themselves.

A RECOVERY OF TRUST?

There can be no simple solution to this problem. That's clear enough when one considers how wide and deep the public's loss of trust in most national institutions has been in recent decades. But a proper diagnosis must be the first step toward even partial solutions, and thinking institutionally can help cut through the fog of contemporary populist rhetoric and obtain a clearer understanding of the problem. By thinking about today's crisis of journalism in institutional terms, one can begin to see a few paths that American journalism might chart for itself that could at least modestly improve its standing.

First, journalists should see that the problem their profession confronts is a function of public doubts about the integrity of their work. The freedom of the press is not under any genuine threat, their patriotism is not under meaningful assault, they are not really the victims of some wave of abject relativism sweeping the nation that is causing all Americans to give up on the existence of empirical reality. Rather, they are working in an environment that makes it difficult for the public to trust their work, their own practices frequently contribute to this environment, and this is the problem they should seek to solve. That should make demonstrated integrity a valuable source of comparative advantage, which means in turn that the value of certain formal, institutional structures—a code of conduct taken seriously, an overt professionalism, a system of vetting and fact-checking, a newsroom, an editorial team—should not be underestimated.

Second, they should see that journalistic institutions are valued not only for the work they produce but also for the ethic they engender, and therefore also for the attitudes and behaviors they encourage journalists to exhibit. This means, among other things, that journalists should be especially careful to avoid the culture of individual celebrity in American life, which is the very opposite of the culture of institutional integrity. Too often now, prominent political reporters in particular can be found engaging in a never-ending, loose, unstructured form of conversational commentary on television, on Twitter and elsewhere—a conversation carried on in public view but outside the procedural and ethical boundaries of their workplaces that makes it increasingly difficult for journalism to lay claim to institutional integrity, and makes it nearly impossible for journalists to avoid petty partisanship. Journalists inclined to complain about President Trump's behavior should consider whether what Trump is doing relative to what the presidency ought to be might be unnervingly similar to what leading political reporters are doing relative to what journalism ought to be. Both are playing out a self-indulgent celebrity version of the real thing, and in both cases this renders them less able to perform their appropriate and essential work.

Third, journalists should recognize that their profession may have a particularly important role to play in any partial recovery of American



confidence in institutions. This is because journalism stands to offer a means by which to channel our mistrust of other institutions, and so to filter our skepticism in ways that might keep it from further curdling into cynicism. The self-image of American journalists as valiant muckrakers speaking truth to power is frequently exaggerated. Most journalists are highly educated and culturally elite, and much of what they do implicitly involves defending the preconceptions of the powerful, which they share. But journalistic institutions that create a healthy incentive to responsibly uncover abuses of power can nonetheless play a vital role in enabling the larger society to restrain its inclinations to imagine the worst about its major institutions in every realm of life. Holding leaders to account ultimately reinforces public confidence.

Journalism can also play a part in the recovery of confidence in our institutions by explicitly devoting more attention to the work that key institutions do, not only at the national level but in every aspect of American life. This would require an effort to understand and explain the workings of key political, social, communal, religious, economic, civic and familial institutions and to articulate the significance of news events in their terms. The social crisis underlying a great deal of the political tensions now roiling this country is a crisis of alienation—of an unrequited desire to belong. And American journalism has at least a modest role to play in helping more Americans see how and to what they might belong.

After all, the loss of trust in institutions in America is a symptom of a deeper problem. The goal cannot be simply to make Americans trust these institutions in their current forms. Rather, it must be to understand why and how that trust has been lost and to work toward rebuilding it by constructing and reconstructing institutions that deserve it. This cannot mean indulging a nostalgia for some golden age; it has to involve thinking about what means to integrity and trust are native to our time, and what such means might now be fostered and promoted. For American journalism, this implies a heavy burden. But it is a burden that those committed to a thriving, free society, and to the place of a robust free press within it, ought to welcome and embrace.



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