

Breaking News: A Democracy in Peril

A Study of the American Fourth Estate, Its Government, and Its Society

BY

Major Lindsay M. Haack

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APPROVAL

The undersigned certify that this thesis meets master's-level standards of research, argumentation, and expression.

DR. STEPHEN E. WRIGHT (Date)

DR. WENDY N. WHITMAN COBB (Date)



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major Lindsay M. Haack graduated from Purdue University with a degree in Aeronautical and Astronautical engineering and received her commission through the Reserved Officer Training Corp in 2007. Upon completing navigator training at Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph, Texas, she was assigned to Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska where she was qualified as an Evaluator Mission Crew Commander onboard the RC-135U COMBAT SENT. She has flown and commanded numerous reconnaissance operations throughout the European and Pacific commands. Following this assignment, she served as the Chief of Command and Control, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Assignments at the Air Force's Personnel Center, acting as the single source manager for over 2,000 rated officers in nine major weapon systems. Prior to selection to the School of Advanced Air and Space studies, she graduated from the Multi-Domain Operational Strategist concentration at the Air Force's Air Command and Staff College at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.



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ABSTRACT

In a democracy, the flow of information is a type of power. In the US, this information flows through a mode of media such as newspaper, radio, television, or the Internet. With each new mode of media, the speed and volume of information has increased to the end user. Today, the preferred mode of media is social media, giving the populace an amplified voice over conventional forms of media. However, this mode of media also brought with it a several societal factors acting as a system. RAND, in a 2018 study, called this system-phenomenon “Truth Decay.”

This study expands upon RAND’s original work and specifically explores the evolution of the television and Internet industries in America, noting the increase of speed and volume of information to society and, ultimately, the resulting negative societal consequences. Within each case study, the research process traces television and the Internet’s control mechanisms. Specifically, the control mechanisms are delineated into laws and regulations instituted by the US government; gatekeepers, acting as the human decision makers in the media loop and often serving as barriers to information; and norms, representing the recursive process of media and society’s effects on one another. The control mechanisms impacts are then compared to five societal elements of Truth Decay. The Truth Decay elements include society’s lack of trust in institutions, increase in partisan polarization, erosion of civil discourse, blurring the line between fact and opinion, and political paralysis. The study attempts to demonstrate that *if the media’s medium alters the speed and volume of information faster than the pace of control mechanisms’, then society will sink into Truth Decay.*

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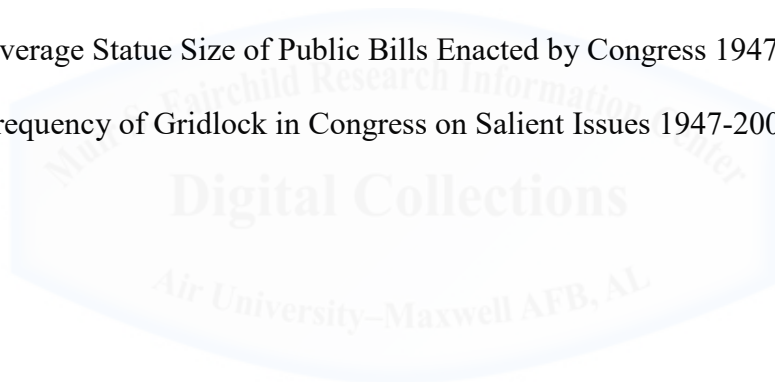
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Chapter 1

America's Great Democratic Experiment

The people are a third class, consisting of those who work with their own hands; they are not politicians, and have not much to live upon. This, when assembled, is the largest and most powerful class in a democracy.

Plato

A democratic form of government, a democratic way of life, presupposes free public education over the long period; it presupposes also an education for personal responsibility that too often is neglected.

Eleanor Roosevelt

We are a democracy, and there is only one way to get a democracy on its feet in the matter of its individual, its social, its municipal, its state, its national conduct, and that is by keeping the public informed about what is going on.

John Pulitzer

Introduction

Information and, more importantly, the flow of information are both crucial in a democratic society. Unfortunately, democracy has a fundamental flaw: the average citizen is uninformed, or worse—misinformed. The peoples' disenfranchisement harkens back to Plato's original musings on hierarchical authority, noting that most of society is unsuited to participate in public duties. Moreover, considering Plato's allegory of the cave, society's perceptions of reality are held as "justified true beliefs," insinuating that a misinformed public is not simply solved through the act of enlightenment.¹ Translated to today, American society is entrenched within its own partisan stripe, most people do not

¹ The Allegory of the Cave is the story of people living in a cave whose only interactions with the outside world are the shadows on the cave walls. Knowing only the shadows, they are their reality to the cave dwellers and justified true beliefs. Even if a cave dweller were to be released into the real world and returns with correct information, Plato suggests that the unenlightened would rise up against the outsider for questioning their world. Wendy N. Whitman Cobb, *Political Science Today* (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2019), 52-53.

partake in the democratic process, and even fewer understand democracy's nuances.² Information is both America's democratic salvation and ground zero for its demise—in order to flourish, America's "great democratic experiment" must have the underpinnings of an engaged and informed society.³ However, as history demonstrates, disengagement and misinformation are epiphenomenon, which partially rests on the shoulders of America's two-party system.

The interaction between the government, the people, and the importance of information harkens to the dialectic relationship of America's founding fathers and the eventual establishment of the dual-party system.⁴ After the Revolutionary War, despite George Washington's parting words in his Farewell Address of 1796, political factions led by Hamilton and Jefferson defined the early national political landscape.⁵ The Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton, believed the future of America's economy hinged on the prosperity of manufacturing and trade. Moreover, after establishing the Bank of New York in 1784 and as the first Secretary of the Treasury, Hamilton's plan for America included establishing a national bank where the US government and handful of wealthy elites would own the majority of bank shares.⁶ The Federalist Party feared anarchy and believed in the power and order of the federal government over individual

² The US trails behind most democratic countries in VAP voting; in the most recent General Election, only 55% of the voting age population voted. Pew Research Center, "US Voter Turnout Trails Most Developed Countries," 21 May 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/>; In the 2014 Annenberg Institutions of Democracy project, 1,416 adults were surveyed, only 36% could name all three branches of government, while 35% couldn't name a single branch. Annenberg Public Policy Center, "Americans know surprisingly little about their government," 17 Sep 2014. <https://cdn.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Civics-survey-press-release-09-17-2014-for-PR-Newswire.pdf>

³ Alexis de Tocqueville coined this term in *Democracy in America* while visiting America in 1831 after observing America in its early years. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (London: Penguin Books, 2003), xvii.

⁴ America's current dual-party system was not intentional; however, the US's "winner-take-all" system tend to create two political parties where proportional representation fosters the development of multiple major parties. This occurrence is known as Duverger's Law. Whitman Cobb, *Political Science Today*, 112–13.

⁵ Specifically, Washington warned against factions that would be "sharpened by the spirit of revenge" and lead to "formal and permanent despotism." Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, "Jefferson versus Hamilton." 2018. <https://teachinghistory.org/history-content/ask-a-historian/24094>.

⁶ Specifically, the USG would own 20% of the shares, and the rest would go to financiers that were close friends of Hamilton. Jonathan Taplin, *Move Fast and Break Things: How Facebook, Google, and Amazon Have Cornered Culture and What It Means for All of Us* (London, England: Pan Macmillan, 2017), 112–114.

states rights.⁷

In contrast, Thomas Jefferson led the Democratic-Republicans and, as the First Secretary of State, thought the future of America lay with its agricultural interest and values.⁸ More importantly, as a Minister to France during the early stages of the French Revolution, Jefferson witnessed and feared tyrannical rule and an overbearing central government. As America codified its constitution, Jefferson urged James Madison from Paris to demand the formation of the Bill of Rights, advocated the restriction of monopolies, and ultimately guarantee the freedom of the press.⁹ Jefferson and Hamilton clashed over the notion of monopolies; Hamilton believed capital should influence politics but not vice versa. Jefferson believed monopolies, especially the establishment of a national bank, would help the wealthy city-dwelling businessmen while ostracizing country-dwelling farmers.¹⁰ Both had America's best interests at the center of their passionate quarrel. Moving into the future, the restriction of monopolies and the freedom of the information via the press, and eventually the media, would weave a tangled web throughout America's 250-year democratic experiment.

Since Jefferson's election as the third President of the United States, he understood the importance of the media (then represented by the printing press) and the effects of misinformation on society.¹¹ At the time, the press unilaterally supported the Federalist Party, attacking the Republican Party's members in attempt to control the

⁷ "Hamilton vs. Jefferson", University of Groningen-Humanities Computing, 2012, <https://www.exploros.com/summary/Hamilton-vs-Jefferson>

⁸ They were actually called Republicans, but by today's standards, they align more with the Democratic Party.

⁹ While Jefferson was the Minister of France, he used James Madison to advocate his point of view. Specifically, Jefferson saw the havoc monopolies such as the British East India Company could produce, namely a strangle on English trade with India and China and more concerning, capital trade's influenced British politics. Taplin, *Move Fast and Break Things*, 112–13.

¹⁰ Hamilton and Jefferson loathed each other and often used the printing press to act as seditious messengers to rile the public. For example, in Philadelphia during the 1800 election, the *Aurora* boasted of Jefferson's greatness while the *Gazette of the United States* suggested that a vote for Jefferson was a vote against God. Since the beginning, elections were hotly contested with muckraking and grandiose rhetoric.

¹¹ Jefferson is quoted as describing the news as, "a state of misinformation is known only to those who are in situations to confront facts within their knowledge with the lies of the day." Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Memorial Edition 8* (Washington DC: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903), 11:224.

political discourse and in turn, the future path of the nation.¹² The press and the printing presses' owners balanced their freedom of speech with the responsibility to inform the public. However, the very freedom their circulation of information afforded also ensured the press could instead divert attention to any subject of their choosing. Typically, those matters revolved around turning a profit by reporting stories that appealed to the largest audience. While newspapers in the early 1800s demonstrated strong partisanship, profit making rarely included in-depth political news, which was expensive to research and report and was less preferred than the sought-after lifestyle and entertainment issues. The distribution of information, critical for any democracy, seemed forever at odds with generating revenue.

Americans' relationship with media fluctuated over time, but started to exhibit rapid change by the end of the long 19th century.¹³ Specifically, in the 1890s, "Yellow Journalism" plagued America, where the media sensationalized and exaggerated news. Until the early 1900s, America's large oceanic borders afforded it a safe haven of political isolation from messier global happenings. Yet, after the US's limited participation in World War I, America began to sense the limits of its isolationism and in turn debated the connection between information and democracy more seriously than in previous decades.

The 1920s and 1930s served as American society's bildungsroman culmination concerning media's relationship with society.¹⁴ In the 1920s, America went through a similar period to the 1890s, called "Jazz Journalism," where tabloid journalism and the rise of the radio industry blurred the line between fact and opinion.¹⁵ By the mid-1930s, philosophers began to contend that both the government and the press had a responsibility to devise means to engage the entire public on decisions that would affect them long term. If citizens, writ large, were confused, alienated, pessimistic, or apathetic

¹² Specifically, the Federalist Party had a monopoly on the newspapers, which advocated for the Federalists goals. In response, Jefferson sponsored newspapers to advocate for Republican priorities. Nathan Schachner, *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography Vol. 2* (New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951), 2:440.

¹³ The long 19th century is 1789-1917, capturing a vast progression of ideas and revolutions during that period.

¹⁴ Bildungsroman are novels that describe the main character's coming of age story.

¹⁵ Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2018), 45-46, 53-54.

toward government, the public was only partially to blame—the media was also culpable.¹⁶

The relationship between the government and the media is a well-worn subject, as is America's technological rise in modernity. However, the role of technology has greatly altered society and media's bond by accentuating their faults of communication while America's larger capitalistic nature places profit at the forefront of corporations charged with information distribution. Technology transformed the mode of media and expanded it from the earliest days of face-to-face communication, to print media, radio, television, and finally the digital age. With each new mode of media, the *speed* and *volume* of information to society has increased, amplifying the rifts of the dueling printing presses' once a day bulletin to the constant real-time national megaphone of the Internet.

Today, the preferred mode of media is social media, giving the populace an amplified voice over the other aforementioned forms of media. Instead of the few "Federalist leaning" printing presses, information distribution has multiplied and flattened to the average citizen meaning, the lower cost-of-entry to distribute information to the masses provides members an equal platform to voice more information, or misinformation, at a faster rate. Similar to Plato's cave, enlightenment as to these actions competes with recursive echo chambers, the long shadows of monopolists' influence, and the power of the almighty dollar. In short, the notions of an engaged public enabling a flourishing democracy have not changed, yet the combative nature of America's dual party system, the freedom of media corporations to form monopolies, and the pursuit of profit over an informed public has changed society. In 2018, the RAND Corporation launched a first-cut study into this exact societal transformation, noting a growing and inter-related set of phenomena they call "Truth Decay."

RAND's study highlighted 12 interrelated trends, causes, and consequences that suggest recent shifts in the US's information structure and their effect on the political systems are eroding the fabric of American democracy and societal discourse. This study was timely in the throes of "fake news" mania and RAND carefully and deliberately

¹⁶ While an acceptable sentiment for most of the entire 20th century, with the advent of the Internet, specifically, social media, a confused public no longer, solely, rests on the shoulders of media and the government. Rich, *Truth Decay*, 235-138.

noted that the world is *not* “post-fact” and that “fake news” is only an acute symptom of the overall chronic problem of Truth Decay.¹⁷ Moreover, the narrow focus of “fake news” distracts from the deeper systemic issues.¹⁸ While addressing purposefully misleading information is crucial, society is not linking the broader holistic implications for America’s complex system of democracy. While RAND traced the historical roots of Truth Decay as far back as the aforementioned ages of “yellow” and “jazz journalism,” the study largely served as a clarion call for further research into these phenomena both within America and abroad.¹⁹ RAND provided an excellent framework to guide further discussions to improve the health of American democracy and this study looks to further RAND’s initial probe of media’s role in the phenomena of Truth Decay.²⁰

Study Overview

To begin, this study will narrow RAND’s 12-variable system into five key elements as laid out in Table 1. This study will look to demonstrate correlation between two modes of media (the television industry and the Internet) and their subsequent control mechanisms’ effects on the five elements of Truth Decay. The five chosen elements represent the core elements of RAND’s initial 12-variable system, which is not to say RAND’s other elements are insignificant or are not still present in the system, but an attempt at narrowing the “ambitious” field of study. If this study’s proposition shows a correlation, then researchers should consider a deeper look into all 12 variables. Specifically, this study proposes: *if the media’s medium alters the speed and volume of information faster than the pace of control mechanisms’, then society will sink into Truth Decay.* Therefore, control mechanisms and Truth Decay have a direct correlation.

Terminology

Much of the terminology in this paper coincides with definitions that RAND’s

¹⁷ “Post-fact” refers to post-factual politics in which debate is framed largely by appeals to emotion disconnected from the details of policy and repetitive talking points; Rich, *Truth Decay*, 2.

¹⁸ The term “fake news” can be traced back as far as the 1970s; however, in today’s context it has started to change from implying the information is false to a term used to imply a person does not agree with your stand. Whether the information is correct or not is irrelevant. There is a difference between fact and opinion and not agreeing with someone’s opinion by calling it “fake news” is a growing trend in 2020.

¹⁹ Rich, *Truth Decay*, 1–11.

²⁰ RAND’s initial look into Truth Decay highlighted many potential reasons. While not conducting causation or correlation studies into anyone field, initial exploration showed potential in the media, academic and research organizations, political actors and the government, and foreign actors. Rich, *Truth Decay*, 175–88.

study and taxonomy defines. However, this project will diverge in terms of the variables it examines.

Truth Decay: Truth Decay does not refer to “truth” in the philosophical sense or with respect to routine scientific breakthroughs, which alter what is considered “truth” throughout the scientific professions. Instead, the system of Truth Decay identifies a set of trends relating to the importance of fact-based analysis.²¹ For the remainder of this paper, Truth Decay as a system will refer to five scoped and inter-related elements this study defines and not the original 12-element system defined by RAND:²² This project introduces this study’s Truth Decay elements, which serve as the dependent variables, in Table 1 and will further discuss them in the study’s methodology section.

Table 1 Truth Decay Elements

Truth Decay Elements	Description
1. Declining trust in formerly respected institutions	Institutions referring to the US executive and legislative branches and the media
2. An increase in polarization throughout society	This study focuses on partisan polarization where members have attachments as either strong Republicans or Democrats in Congress and within society ²³
3. Erosion of civil discourse	Civil discourse refers to robust, honest, and frank dialogue that advances public interests
4. Society’s blurring of the line between fact and opinion	Blurring fact and opinion refers to arguments clearly based on beliefs and attitudes are intermingled or confused with objective facts
5. Political Paralysis	Paralysis refers to frequency of gridlock in Congress, or the ratio of bills introduced to bills passed within a session

Source: Author’s Original Work

²¹ In this sense, this study maintains similar views with RAND with respect to the idea of what Truth Decay is trying to do and not do, which is not to have a Plato vs Aristotle philosophical debate on what is “truth.” Rich, *Truth Decay*, x.

²² The idea of “core” elements of Truth Decay is based on the author’s opinion and additional research.

²³ Partisanship is different than polarization; polarization refers to the extent to which parties have separated themselves into homogeneous groups whereas partisanship refers to the party an individual prefers. Whitman Cobb, *Political Science Today*, 159.

Methodology

This study will use two individual media case studies (television and the Internet) and process trace three categories of control mechanisms within each industry to ascertain the effects on the system of Truth Decay.²⁴ While the study exclusively looks at the television industry and the internet, the project's scope does not negate the effect of the printing press and radio on the media industry. Similarly, when tracing the advent of the Internet, the new media's presence does not completely negate that of the previous mode(s).²⁵

While the two case studies attempt to isolate the control mechanisms and the system of Truth Decay to their respective modes of media and periods, in reality, the delineation for the environment is not sterile and insulated. Instead, the explanation has a fungible quality and all modes of media (print, radio, television, internet, and social media) have an effect on one another throughout the existence of the other mediums.²⁶ With that said, an initial look into correlation between modes of media and control mechanisms in relation to Truth Decay must start with an analysis at some level, and this study serves to act as a first cut to demonstrate correlation as a beacon for further research.

Case Studies

The two individual case studies examine the rise of the television and Internet industry and their effects on the flow and distribution of information to society. This study will specifically look at two of the most significant factors in the modes of media: the speed of information in the medium and the volume of information in the medium.

1. Television (1950s-1990s): While television was originally invented in 1927, it was not until after World War II that television became a mainstay in the average American home. Therefore, this study will trace control mechanisms in the television industry from 1950 until 1999.

²⁴ This study is an exploratory study to determine if further research is needed with regards of implementing control mechanisms to influence Truth Decay.

²⁵ For example, the advent and acceptance of the television did not render radio and print media obsolete but did alter each medians approach and relationship with the American public.

²⁶ This exact topic will be addressed further in Chapter 5, implications for further research.

2. Internet (2000-2010): The Internet's origins date back into the 1960s, but it was not until the 1990s that the Internet started to resemble today's network-of-networks and not until 2000 when more than 50 percent of Americans regularly using the internet.²⁷ Therefore, this study will trace control mechanisms for the internet from 2000-2010. While there were, undoubtedly, mechanisms set in place by the late 1990s, the majority of Americans did not have computers nor were they using the internet.²⁸ This period also witnessed the advent of social media; however, it was not until after 2010 when social media usage spiked to over 50 percent; as such, it is outside the scope of this particular study, but is further addressed in Chapter 5: Implications for the Future.²⁹

Control Mechanisms

Societies use legal, structural, and normative means to control the media. However, defining the limits of government control over the flow of information raises grave concerns in a democratic society, especially if it counters a guaranteed positive right to the populace as it does in the US.³⁰ Using a sliding scale to grade media under the government's control and media predominantly under private control, the US falls in the latter, meaning the government is obliged to employ the media the best they can without direct command of its organizations.³¹ Not directly commanding the media does not mean that the US government cannot influence the media; for example, the government can limit entry into the media business while not mandating content.³² This study will attempt to demonstrate that an increase in various control mechanisms

²⁷ History.com, "Who Invented the Internet", History, accessed 1 Jan 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/who-invented-the-internet>; This data is an average, Pew Research does account for demographics such as age, ethnicity, income of household and educational levels and their overall effect on usage. Pew Research Center, "American Internet Access 2000-2015," webpage, 1 Jan, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/06/26/americans-internet-access-2000-2015/>

²⁸ While the internet was available, it was used more in academic circles and by early adopters and was yet to be considered "mainstream."

²⁹ Social media is "on-line communication used by people to create networks and collectives to share information and ideas." <https://historycooperative.org/the-history-of-social-media/>; Pew Research Center, "Social Media Usage 2005-2015," webpage, 8 Oct 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/10/08/social-networking-usage-2005-2015/>

³⁰ Doris A. Graber and Johanna Dunaway, *Mass Media and American Politics* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2017), 18-20.

³¹ W.P. Davison, J.R. Boylan, and F.T.C. Yu, *Mass Media: Systems and Effects* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1982), 46, 64.

³² Graber and Dunaway, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 18.

correlates an influence within the trends of Truth Decay.³³ This study will define and trace control mechanisms in three distinct categories:

1. Laws and Regulations: This category can be bifurcated into two fields: the laws and regulations that apply to all businesses (as media is a business) and laws and regulations that ensure media institutions act in accordance with public policy. In short, even though the First Amendment protects the press's right to freedom of speech, it does not protect the parent media companies' business aspect of operations.³⁴ In addition, another regulation, which frequently surfaces with media, is censorship. The US government censors information by way of classifying material, placing it out of the reach of the media and therefore the public. In turn, the media can and does execute self-censoring for various reasons, centering on the notion of profit loss.³⁵
2. Gatekeepers: Gatekeepers are the structural mechanisms that act as barriers to information, most often seen as the human decision-makers in the media loop who exert final control over what media choices becomes available to the public. This list includes examples such as the newspaper editor who decides what story would make it "above the fold" to disc jockeys at radio stations, from television executive producers to website editors and internet hyperlink controllers, to name a few.³⁶ These individuals, in addition to the laws and regulations, play a critical role in the media as they determine what will widely be accessible as news, which is not to say gatekeepers can act without boundaries.

Gatekeepers could choose not to report a major event, which in turn would affect viewership and ultimately profit—tying the gatekeepers' power to a profit-driven cost-benefit analysis. Essentially, gatekeepers balance economic and

³³ This does *not* imply an increase in various control is the proposed or best solution to the issue of Truth Decay. Specific solutions will be further discussed in Chapter 5, *Implications for the Future*.

³⁴ The Supreme Court vehemently upheld these standards in 1937, *Associated Press v National Labor Relations Board*, 301 U.S. 103, 1937 where they ruled the Associated Press was not immune from regulation just because it was an agency of the press. Davison, Boylan, and Yu, *Mass Media: Systems and Effects*, 68–69.

³⁵ For example, self-censorship could range from preventing viewership loss or to stymie future government intervention over content and practices. Media self-censoring is a large trend during the Internet case study.

³⁶ Graber and Dunaway, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 158.

political pressures while simultaneously keeping the public informed.³⁷

Gatekeepers typically use five criteria when choosing news stories: stories with strong impact; stories with violence, conflict, disaster, or scandal; stories that have familiarity; proximity; or are timely and novel.³⁸ Stories exhibiting one or more of these traits, considered “newsworthy” by the industry, eventually reach the public as information.

Furthermore, gatekeepers select the sources for news, which can highlight how certain news organizations can accumulate disparate appraisals of events, which leads toward various interpretations of the event of question. Moreover, with respect to the volume of information, if (and when) the media’s volume of information is more than possible to transmit at any one time, numerous important stories remain buried or untold. To summarize, gatekeepers’ inclinations decide what constitutes important information and how they frame the news to the public, which in turn determines the news’ impact and effect on society writ large.³⁹

3. Norms: In addition, a control on mass media is social norms. Mass media can influence individuals and society’s cultural milieu by exposing the consumer to new orientations and opinions that in turn allows people to learn and adjust their pre-existing attitudes and opinions to keep pace with the evolving world.⁴⁰

Similarly, society can affect media and therefore the flow of information. Societies have social norms, which the media generally adheres to due to its need for public approval or fears of retaliation; thus, the media is unlikely to ridicule sacred concepts or widely accepted values.⁴¹ This idea also integrates with media self-censorship and “free expression.” For example, social norms suggest limiting types of material that could harm children or the use of ethnic or racial slurs that damage minorities’ self-image.⁴² Finally, norms as a form of control mechanism integrate with gatekeepers as these individuals select what is news against the

³⁷ Graber and Dunaway, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 161.

³⁸ Graber and Dunaway, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 163–64.

³⁹ Graber and Dunaway, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 11.

⁴⁰ Graber and Dunaway, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 12, 343.

⁴¹ Graber and Dunaway, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 13.

⁴² Graber and Dunaway, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 21.

backdrop of societal pressures and their specific organizations demands and goals, which typically have a cost-benefit and legal analysis.

Truth Decay System

The independent variables are the three types of control mechanisms while the dependent variables will be the five elements of the Truth Decay system, highlighted in Table 1. As with any system, a change in any one element will cause a shift in the other elements, which makes the primary effort of the study to show correlation, not causation with respect to the control mechanisms. In short, outside variables will have an influence on society, but this study seeks to show correlation with the culminating effects of the three control mechanisms. Specifically, the television and Internet case studies will leverage *within* case data to ascertain if Truth Decay trends have increased or decreased with the addition of the various control mechanisms.

Figure 1 is a depiction of the proposition in notional form. Viewing the system from a nuanced perspective, after the new mode of media is introduced and as the system moves toward a valley of Truth Decay, the influence of the control mechanisms aid in society's oscillating climb out of decay. In this study, numerous control mechanisms affect the system; however, the system could reflect a lag as implementation and their subsequent effects are not instantaneous. Finally, many factors could truncate society's climb out of Truth Decay. For example, an improvement in the current mode of media altering the speed or volume of information to society could truncate the climb out of Truth Decay, or adding an additional mode of media, thereby layering the effects of each individual medium also could affect society.

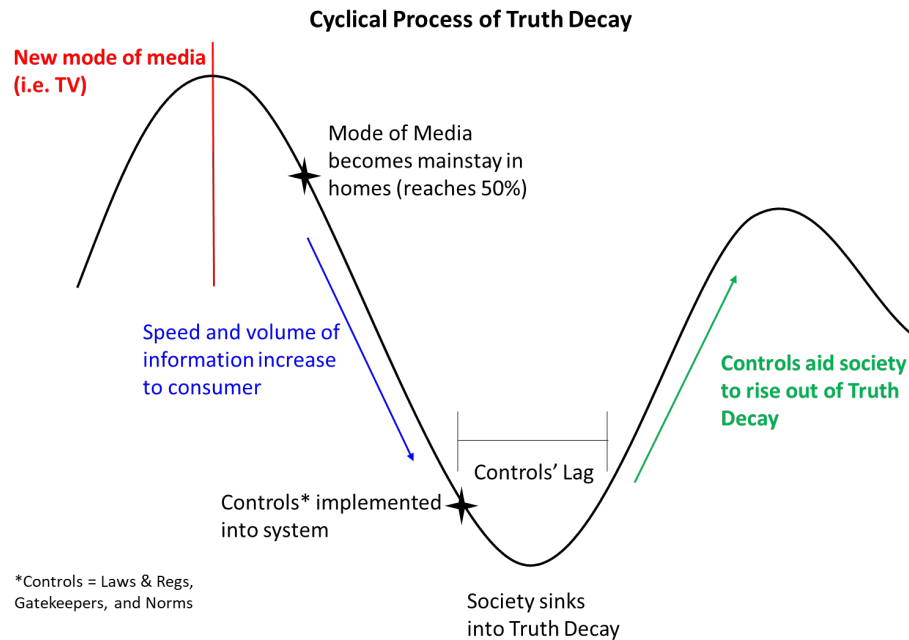


Figure 1 Cyclical Process of Truth Decay

Source: Author's Original Work

Figure 2 is a depiction of the proposition in extended time. Overall, the trend line for Truth Decay should be negative as the control mechanisms can only influence society for a period until the different media industries (i.e. television and the Internet) respond to advance the medium—usually to increase profitability. Notionally, due to the increase speed and volume of information, the trend line for Truth Decay should be negative with increased periods of oscillations, as society continues to struggle with the ability to cope with the onslaught of information.

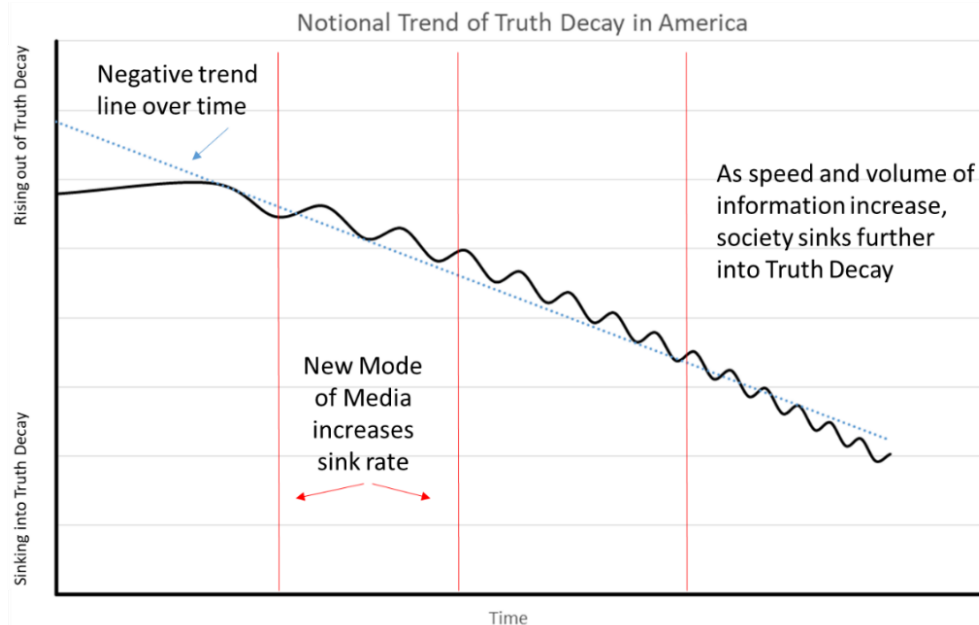


Figure 2: Notional Trend of Truth Decay in America

Source: Author's Original Work

The five chosen elements in the Truth Decay system and their operationalization are at the core of this research; therefore, it is beneficial to revisit the specific elements of Table 1 and the purpose and significance of each elements' trends the study will analyze. Due to the scope (1950 until 2010) and nature of the study, some of the elements of Truth Decay are easily examined while others must be creatively measured. There is no study (yet) that measures "Truth Decay" as a whole as the phenomena are at the brink of codification. Instead, within case study data, for example, polling data on large portions of America, will act as the societal measuring stick to ascertain the levels of Truth Decay over time with respect to the modes of media.⁴³

1. Declining trust in formerly respected institutions. The first major element in the system of Truth Decay is the loss of trust in formerly respected institutions that provide information. Specifically, this study will track the population's trust of the US executive and legislative branches and the US media by using surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) and Pew Research Center, where the institutions polled Americans trust of various institutions over the course of three

⁴³ Even polling data is complicated as there is limited polling data in the late 20th century, asking the pertinent societal questions relevant to the new technologies and media forms of the 21st century.

decades.⁴⁴

Trust in the government anchors on perception and is worth discussing at length, as it is a key element within this study. Perception of the government is a function of the scope of government and its subsequent performance. Congress's two legislative chambers serve to pass budgets, represent opinions, and make laws under the guise of promoting the general welfare and providing defense and liberty for its people.⁴⁵ However, as previously discussed, the scope of what government should do was not an originally agreed upon fact, even amongst the founding fathers.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the performance of government begs the question, "compared to what?" Expectations? Past governments or other democracies? Research suggests that many Americans think the government is inefficient and wasteful, but the US's system was not intended to be efficient. Instead, the US system encourages extensive debate and protects social liberties at the price of efficiency.⁴⁷ The role of government and its performance give way to perceptions, which eventually manifests into the ebb and flow of trust by the nation.

The population's trust in the media is the second factor of declining trust in formerly respected institutions and has intricate touch points with trust in the government. The media serves as the equalizing informant for the three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial) and has a unique relation with each. The media's relationship with the presidency is often at odds as the media routinely embarrasses executive administrations.⁴⁸ In addition, the executive branch regards the media as depriving its control over political situations while truncating complicated policies to soundbites, potentially narrowing the scope for the American public outside

⁴⁴ There are many domains and institutions that provide information or services within the US Government, such as the Military or outside the Government such as financial and medical communities. These may affect the populations' overall demeanor but are outside the scope of this study.

⁴⁵ P.J. Quirk, S.A. Binder, and Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands. *The Legislative Branch. Institutions of American Democracy Series*, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005), 461.; J.S.N. Júnior, J.S.N.P.Z.D.C. King, J.S. Nye, P. Zelikow, and D.C. King, *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 6.

⁴⁶ Recall Alexander Hamilton believed the US needed a strong central government where Thomas Jefferson believed in a smaller government. These arguments echo similar disagreements today.

⁴⁷ Júnior et al., *Why People Don't Trust Government*, 5,8.

⁴⁸ The judicial branch of the government, while important, will remain outside the scope of this study. It is worth noting that during the research, trust in the Supreme Court ran on average 10-15% higher than both Congress and the presidency.

the original purview of the administration.⁴⁹ In contrast, the media views their role *not* as deliberately showing the incumbent administration negatively, but acting as guardians of the public interest to ensure the government is being honest and efficient.⁵⁰

The media and Congress have a unique relationship, as the spotlight falls unevenly on the two chambers. Most news stories concerning Congress are concentrated in members' home states, with far fewer stories presented at the national level that do not also share a spotlight with the presidency.⁵¹ The US president acts as a single focus area and actor for the media, while Congress's physical make up and various business locations are vast, making the coverage challenging. Moreover, the president tells the American people *what* is going on in government; the business of Congress is the *how* of government operations and the population is far more interested in "what" than "how."⁵² In addition, Congress does not use the media as a method to disseminate the whole-of-the-legislative branch's work; instead, members of Congress primarily use the media to communicate with their constituents while also using national coverage as a platform to launch personal projects. While the media's relationship to Congress is similar to the executive branch, there is one major exception: neither Congress nor the media needs their relationship as much as the president needs the media.⁵³

In an opposing view, some view the mistrust of the media as an exercise in "shooting the messenger." Similarly, some can perceive the mistrust of the government as the system working "as advertised." The Constitution, deliberately designed to negate tyrannical rule, is intended for citizens to question those in power.⁵⁴ Moreover, if most Americans view the US as the best place in the world to live and do not interpret the inefficiencies within government as a cause for a coup d'état or revolution, then the system is *working*.⁵⁵ However, the erosion of trust and confidence in both the government and the media has significant implications as mistrust can lead a society past skepticism and into cynicism. Cynicism could lay the foundation in the search for new

⁴⁹ Graber and Dunaway, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 230, 234.

⁵⁰ Graber and Dunaway, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 233.

⁵¹ Graber and Dunaway, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 258.

⁵² As Chapter 2 will demonstrate, this fact is most apparent with the advent and low viewership of C-SPAN

⁵³ Graber and Dunaway, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 265.

⁵⁴ In this instance, the tyrannical leader being King George during the American Revolution of 1776.

⁵⁵ Júnior et al., *Why People Don't Trust Government*, 2–8.

sources of information, which may not be trustworthy, to fill the void and exacerbate the condition of Truth Decay.⁵⁶

2. An increase in polarization throughout society. Polarization is a unique element within this study in that it acts as an inducing driver and is further exacerbated by the other elements of Truth Decay, ultimately increasing insular thinking. Polarization throughout society represents itself in numerous forms; this study will focus on partisan polarization both in Congress and in American society.⁵⁷ Political polarization is a larger societal issue because it allows each party to develop their own interpretation of facts and information, further fortifying their own entrenched ideology.⁵⁸

To measure partisan polarization within Congress, the study will focus on voting records as voting is the cornerstone of American democracy and *should* reflect what constituents (the American public) value.⁵⁹ Moreover, Congressional voting records span the entire length of this study, providing a rich context. The study will operationalize partisan polarization by analyzing how unified the Democratic and Republican parties are within both the House and the Senate by using DW-NOMINATE scores to represent legislators voting records on a spatial map.⁶⁰ The DW scores allow analysts to determine how liberal or conservative each congressional session is and the degree of polarization between parties over time. Moreover, congressional voting records are available for the entire period of this Truth Decay study and have been proven an accurate measure of congressional attitude.

With respect to the American public, there are many ways to measure society's

⁵⁶ The RAND study highlights that a decline in trust could lead to skepticism. Skepticism is not by itself a negative thought process, as it is part of critical thinking. However, if skepticism evolves to cynicism, than that has implications for society. Rich, *Truth Decay*, 37.

⁵⁷ There are many measurable aspects of polarization throughout a society. For example, economic polarization and the growing divide among class lines, highlighting the few touch points between the very rich and poor and sociodemographic measure the gradual segregation of American's who live near like-minded people. While important to show the overall polarization of a society, this study focuses on the legislative branch and society's partisanship.

⁵⁸ Rich, *Truth Decay*, 152.

⁵⁹ Congressional voting should reflect constituent values, or risk replacement by the people of a representative that does reflect current values.

⁶⁰ DW-NOMINATE stands for "Dynamic Weighted NOMINAI Three-step Estimation" and was developed by Poole and Rosenthal in the 1980s. The creators standardized congressional voting behavior on every recorded vote within a two-year congressional session and created a scale of -2 to +2 where more votes that are liberal would trend toward -2 and more conservative views towards +2. Whitman Cobb, *Political Science Today*, 160–61.

mood concerning partisan politics. For example, polls that question large portions of society concerning future or past voting actions in primary elections often aid in presidential outcome predictions.⁶¹ However, as seen in the 2016 presidential election, these predictions often fall flat as the individual might not be registered to vote or even likely to vote. In addition to large portions of society not voting, those that do vote typically represent the left and right-wing extremes, giving way to the sentiment that the polarization in Washington reflects the polarization and values of the “engaged” public.⁶² For this reason, the disengaged center could feel underrepresented, further eroding trust in the legislative branch.

Therefore, this study will operationalize societal partisan polarization not by voting record, but by using large-N polling, asking Americans to rank score their partisan–ideological views on a 7-point scale performed by NORC’s General Social Survey. The 50-year study asks Americans to place themselves on a spectrum ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative, attempting to capture the extremes (typical voter) and the less extreme (mass middle) viewpoints of society. The resulting data demonstrates the variation of liberal and conservativeness of Americans over time, tracking society’s converging and diverging stances. The data reveals that Americans have been shifting their opinions gradually, while political parties have become extreme. With party unity on the rise and a decrease in percentage of “centrists” in Congress, citizens’ trust of government can be influenced by lack of representations that hold their values, as the populace is more trusting of politicians who share similar concerns.⁶³

Partisan polarization within Congress and society is important for the study as it both influences and reinforces other elements of Truth Decay. Partisan polarization within society, when viewed as a single actor, has many potential causal mechanisms. Yet this study proposes that when viewed within the Truth Decay system, there is a correlation with the flow of information, specifically the relationship with the speed, volume, and diversity of information and the subsequent control mechanisms in media.

⁶¹ Polls of this type rely on inferential statistics and weighted samples to make predictions, as one cannot simply poll all of America. Whitman Cobb, *Political Science Today*, 159.

⁶² Alan Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 37.

⁶³ Júnior et al., *Why People Don’t Trust Government*, 166–74.

The diversity of information, which a person consumes through media's agenda, can shape budding partisan identity and social views throughout America.⁶⁴

3. Erosion of civil discourse. Civil discourse is “robust, honest, frank, and constructive dialogue and deliberation that seeks to advance the public interest.”⁶⁵ Civil discourse relies on the bedrock of social capital, which refers to “the connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”⁶⁶ Societies that act collectively can achieve common goals while simultaneously fostering generalized reciprocity.⁶⁷ Alternatively, societies with isolated individuals, or worse, communities that use social capital toward malevolent purposes erode civil discourse and the subsequent functioning of democracy.

Incivility, in any given society, is a contextually based measurement, meaning behaviors appropriate in one culture could be inappropriate in others. In short, civil discourse has a norming element that could change over time, making “baseline” indicators in a society difficult to measure. Given the above definition of civil discourse and social capital, emphasizing constructive dialogue and societal connections, this study will measure civil discourse at the organization and individual level.

At the organizational level, this study will use The Annenberg Public Policy Center's 76-year study of comity within Congress.⁶⁸ During the period, the Center focused on searching for words that indicate a public attack while Congress was in session, for example, tallying any time name-calling, aspersions, lying, non-cooperation, pejoratives for speech and vulgarity in addition to phrases such as “the House will be in Order” and “Member Requested to Suspend.”

⁶⁴ The agenda-setting function of mass media study demonstrated in 1968 that the key issues to voters reflected what the mass media outlined versus regardless of what the candidates said or actual beliefs. Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176.

⁶⁵ Carli Brosseau, “Executive Session: Civil Discourse in Progress,” *Frankly Speaking*, Vol 1, No. 2 (October 27, 2011).

⁶⁶ R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 19.

⁶⁷ Reciprocity meaning exchanging things for mutual benefit while generalized reciprocity refers to doing something for someone with the expectation that someone else (not necessarily that person) will do something for me at a later time. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 20.

⁶⁸ Comity is based on the norm of reciprocal courtesy and that the debates within Congress are not personal and that parties on both sides of the aisle are of “good will and integrity motivated by conviction.” Annenberg Public Policy Center, *Civility in Congress (1935-2011) as Reflected in the Taking Down Process*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2011), 5.

At the individual level, this study will measure civic engagement, specifically synthesizing multiple surveys from different sources over time to analyze society's civil engagement such as serving on a committee or attended a public meeting.⁶⁹ If members are isolated from society and not civically engaged, then opportunities for civil discourse are reduced. In sum, civic engagement builds society's bridging capital and expands the fringes of American's social networks outside the tight clusters of like-minded thinkers, allowing a diffusion of diverse information.⁷⁰ As civil discourse erodes and partisan polarization increases, the interrelated outcomes can push society further into Truth Decay.

4. Blurring the line between fact and opinion. The fourth element of the Truth Decay system is society's tendency to blur the line between fact and opinion. This study is concerned when opinions (arguments clearly based on beliefs and attitudes) are intermingled or confused with objective facts.⁷¹ As the mode of media increases both the speed and volume of information, the consumer is overwhelmed with content.⁷² If the presented information blurs the line between objective facts versus colorful opinion, and the vast majority of the information falls into this blurring category, then misperceptions throughout society will follow. Like the dueling newspaper printers of Jefferson's era, emphasizing opinions or libelous information is not new, but still has devastating facts on society and the system of Truth Decay.

Blurring facts and opinions is a challenging element to operationalize due to the lack of available information on this exact Truth Decay element over the 70 years in question. Essentially, society has not tracked and measured its ability to distinguish fact

⁶⁹I would like to thank Dr. Keele for the use of his data concerning civic engagement in the 20th century and Dr. Jennifer Wolak who provided her crucial consolidation of the same work into the 21st century. Keele, "Macro Measures and Mechanics of Social Capital."

⁷⁰ Kadushin argues that social networks are not a new phenomenon and that information diffusion makes up the shape and density of a network and the bridging points are key components to allow elements (in this case information) to pass within the various clusters of the world's networks. Putman argues that civil engagement was a key component to the bridging points. Charles Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks: Theories, Concepts, and Findings* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press USA, 2012), 13, 17, 143.

⁷¹ An objective fact could be information from a research finding that is not biased. An example: "several research studies show an active lifestyle reduces risk of heart disease" versus an opinion, "Cross-Fit workouts can replace the need for an active lifestyle." Rich, *Truth Decay*, 27.

⁷² Content could include both information, entertainment, or a co-mingling of the two.

from opinion throughout time.⁷³ However, there are core components surrounding blurring fact and opinion and this study will operationalize the data by searching for contextual news articles from 1950-2010 that call for media reform as a possible indication of blurring fact and opinion. Specifically, the study will synthesize historical archives, searching for phrases such as, “critical thinking,” “media bias,” “facts-based evidence,” or “news bias” within news articles that demonstrate public sentiment at the time.⁷⁴ For example, this study searched within the content of “letters to the editor,” “commentary,” and the “editorial sections” for the key aforementioned phrases.⁷⁵

Blurring fact and opinion usually has an agenda, and this agenda can be shaped by media bias. Society calling for reform is one rudimentary method to measure this element over time.

Additionally, in 2004, Google began to archive the frequency and volume of “Googled” terms. This study will use Google’s archives to show the search frequency of “fake news,” “media bias in the US,” and “critical thinking” from 2004 until 2010. Together, using archived newsprints and trending internet searches, the study can determine if society was aware of the inclinations surrounding blurring fact and opinion.

Using this approach is not without caution or critique. First, the measurement assumes that society is cognitively aware of media bias or yearning for “fact-based evidence.” Furthermore, it relies on newsprint and society’s access to newsprint to measure a phenomenon in different media mediums such as television and internet—meaning the measurement may be more indicative of print media than television.⁷⁶ While valid observations, print media often acted as the lead in agenda setting for the

⁷³ This is starting to change; since 2010, analysts have tracked the media’s tendencies to blur facts and opinions, as the increased incidences becomes further self-evident. Desilver, Drew. “Q&A: Telling the difference between factual and opinion statements in the news.” *Pew Research Center*, 18 June 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/18/qa-telling-the-difference-between-factual-and-opinion-statements-in-the-news/>.

⁷⁴ The study used ProQuest data base to conduct the search. ProQuest contains four databases including the Digital National Security Archive, The Historical Newspapers Archive which contains papers such as the New York Times with Index, the Research Library Archive which contains a diversified mix of scholarly journals, trade publications, and magazines, and the US Newstream Archive which is the largest collection of local and regional newspapers.

⁷⁵ An editorial is an opinion-based article that could range on a myriad of topics; letters to the editor are responses after a patron asks the editor a question; and a commentary is a written explanation submitted by the readers.

⁷⁶ The problem of using newsprint will exacerbate over time, especially after the 1960s when circulations numbers started to decline further in lieu of the television.

nation and is one of the only archived sources of data that covers the period in question.⁷⁷

5. Political paralysis. The fifth and final element in the Truth Decay system is political paralysis and, as stated earlier, the other elements of Truth Decay both feed into and exacerbate this element. As a society delineates fact from opinion and polarization creates obstacles for civil discourse, political stalemate and the erosion of trust soon follows. While the Founding Fathers did not intend for the American government to be efficient, it was also not intended to become stagnant, with languishing periods of inaction or delay causing economic and social consequences in society. Rigid, inflexible governing is costly to Americans in terms of economic activity and efficiency to modify programs to meet societal needs—to say nothing of the loss of global credibility.⁷⁸

In this study, political paralysis will be operationalized using three different measures. The first and second measures are tracking the ratio of House and Senate bills passed versus introduced, indicating paralysis over time. While bills' legislative size and complexity have both increased over the recent years, in a non-paralytic society, the relative amount of legislation passed should not change. The final indicator measures the frequency of congressional gridlock on salient issues tallying the number of failed agenda issues each Congress to the total number of agenda issues of each Congress, meaning temporary paralysis on certain issues.⁷⁹ Specifically, this study will use data on the House and Senate, looking at the two-year congressional sessions per data point and measure salient issues by mentioning issues that were referenced five or more times in the *New York Times*. Debate is key in a democracy, but paralysis stalls the political debate envisioned by the American founding fathers.

SUMMARY

In summary, this study expands upon RAND's examination of recent changes in the US's information structure and its deleterious effects on the health of society's democracy and discourse. Specifically, how does the media affect and exacerbate Truth Decay? This study asserts that: *if the media's medium alters the speed and volume of information faster than the pace of control mechanisms', then society will sink into Truth*

⁷⁷ McCombs and Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," 176-187.

⁷⁸ Rich, *Truth Decay*, 204-5.

⁷⁹ Sarah A. Binder, *Stalemate: Causes and Consequences of Legislative Gridlock* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 156-57.

Decay. The study will trace this proposition throughout the arc of the television and Internet industry. As the reader follows the television industry in Chapter 2 and the Internet in Chapter 3, key themes emerge that harken back to Jefferson and Hamilton's debates: restrictions on monopolies and the freedom of information; the dialectic nature of pursuit of revenue and the distribution of pertinent information; and the disengagement of the public coupled with misinformation from the media. These trends weave a web around the primary arc of the study, influencing decisions that in turn effect the control mechanisms and society's spiral into Truth Decay. This correlation is significant for America's future democracy and warrants further research.



Chapter 2

Now Ladies and Gentlemen, We Add Sight to Sound!

But when television is bad, nothing is worse...[but if] you keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off, I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland.

Newton Minow, Chairman of the FCC

If all we know about local issues and candidates comes from 30-second TV ads, our precious right to vote is a sham.

Director of Rocky Mountain Media Watch

Once again, television was the great American hearth. The assumption was that we were all one family [again].

New York Times, January 29, 1986 reporting on the Challenger explosion caught on TV

Introduction

If the long 19th century marked the start of a global transformation of technology, then the 20th century's legacy would be the impact of technology on communication. Prior to World War II (WWII), the United States (US) used the long-established newspapers and newly popular radio as the mediums through which to communicate to the masses. After early successes in radio broadcasts, the media industry manufactured receivers and created broadcast schedules to pave the way for the first radio station by 1920.¹ Considered a revolutionary pace at the time, by 1928, 10 million radio sets were in operation and by 1935 the number grew to 31 million, making "listening to the radio" a leading national pastime.² Comparably, television's promise of "utopia" at the World's Fair in New York was initially stonewalled by America's involvement in WWII, but rapidly delivered on its promise once America's guns fell silent in Europe and the Pacific. In 1948, only one percent of US households owned a television; however, by 1955 and 1959 that number grew to 75 and 90 percent respectively, its pace from

¹ "Milestones: First Wireless Radio Broadcast by Reginald A. Fessenden, 1906", Engineering and Technology History Wiki, 1 Feb 2020, https://ethw.org/Milestones:First_Wireless_Radio_Broadcast_by_Reginald_A._Fessenden,_1906

² Robert Atwan, Barry Orton, and William Vesterman. *American Mass Media: Industries and Issues*. 1st ed. (Manhattan, NY: Random House, 1978), 257.

introduction to mass acceptance dwarfing radio and earmarking America's 50-year love affair with "the tube."³

This chapter is an in-depth look at television as a mode of media with respect to the three control mechanisms laid out in Chapter 1. To aid in the 50-year review of television, the chapter will break down this timeframe into three distinct periods: 1950-1959, 1960-1979, and 1980-1999, which coincide with major cultural changes within America. Each period will provide a contextual overview of the time and trace the major laws and regulations with respect to television, track crucial gatekeeper impacts on television, and highlight key norming functions within America. Evaluating the key dates and trends of the three control mechanisms against the five elements of Truth Decay in Chapter 4, will determine if control mechanisms have any effect on Truth Decay as a system. Finally, the implications of the study are the subject of Chapter 5 *Implications for the Future*.

1950-1959: From Communism's Dark Roots to the Golden Age of Television⁴

The 1950s in America witnessed large changes within society: post war "booms," mass migration to the suburbs, a foreshadowing of the larger 1960s civil rights moments and the initial frost of the Cold War. The Cold War stirred America's interest in communism or more specifically the "domino-effect" of communism. While this played differently across the globe, domestically, it took on the form of, among other things, a space race and McCarthyism—all captured on television.⁵

For four years, until the Senate condemned his actions, Senator Joseph McCarthy led America on a communist red herring ruse, conjuring images of sympathizers across Hollywood, the drama captured by the compelling images on television in 1954.⁶ McCarthy, in conjunction with President Eisenhower's election, gave America its first

³ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 217, 221.

⁴ This is the expression most often used to describe 1948-1955, referring to the age of live television; Anthony Slide, *The Television Industry: A Historical Dictionary* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1991), 120.

⁵ While the Russian launch of Sputnik in 1957 acted as the catalyst for what is now the global satellite system, satellite communication and television did not take hold in the US until 1963 when satellite first was used for television and not until the 1980s where it became popular in America.

⁶ ABC was the only network to cover the hearings live from start to finish, while NBC and CBS offered snippets from the event. Robert J. Donovan and Ray Scherer. *Unslient Revolution: Television News and American Public Life, 1948-1991* (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 23, 34.

taste of dramatic political news, capitalizing on the speed of radio, but with the added benefit of compelling video coverage. The novelty concerning the timeliness of the message, the added synthesis of full motion picture with sound, and the broad reach of television had an immediate effect on American's trust in news sources.

To demonstrate this level of trust, consider a 1939 Roper study, about the pace of credibility in news sources from 1939 until 1972. It asked Americans, "If you heard conflicting versions of the same story from these sources, which would be most likely to believe?" As seen in Figure 3, by the late 1950s, radio's credibility had dropped drastically in favor of the television and by the mid-1960s, television gained and maintained pole position.⁷

RADIO AND TELEVISION CREDIBILITY

"If you heard conflicting versions of the same story from these sources, which would you be most likely to believe?" (1939) "If you got conflicting or different reports of the same news story....which of the four versions would you be most inclined to believe...?"(1959, 1964, 1972)

	<u>1939</u>	<u>1959</u>	<u>1964</u>	<u>1968</u>	<u>1972</u>
<u>Most Believable</u>					
Radio	40%	12%	8%	8%	8%
Television		21	41	44	48
Newspapers	27	32	23	21	21
Authority you heard speak	13				
Magazines		10	10	11	10
DK, NA, "Depends"	20	17	18	16	13

Sources: 1939: Elmo Roper for *Fortune* reported in Peter, "The American Listener in 1940," *Annals*, January 1941; Elmo Roper and Burns Roper, "What people think of television and other mass media 1959-1972," New York: Television Information Office, May 1973. Other studies have shown somewhat different preferences depending on how the questions were asked, for a discussion see V. Stone, *Journal of Broadcasting*, XIV:1, p. 1.

Figure 3: Radio and Television Credibility

Source: Adapted from L.W. Lichty and M.C. Topping, American Broadcasting: A Source Book on the History of Radio and Television, Studies in Public Communication (Hastings House Publishers, 1975), 526.

While television was gaining credibility, it quickly bifurcated into two camps: information and entertainment—wherein the political arena often acted as the bridge between the two factions.⁸ A foreshadow for the future, combining information and

⁷ L.W. Lichty and M.C. Topping. *American Broadcasting: A Source Book on the History of Radio and Television* (New York, NY: Hastings House Publishers, 1975), 526.

⁸ This study will primarily focus on television as an informative source and briefly look at television as an entertainment source to provide context as it relates to the analysis of Truth Decay.

entertainment provided the media industry outstanding opportunities for revenue, but left many Americans unable to distinguish the blurring of the two camps.

The final contextual consideration of the 1950s is the advent of cable television, initially known as CATV (Community Antenna Television).⁹ Cable television entered US homes not long after the standard television networks, although the early systems were very limited in terms of transmission technology and scarcity of nearby channels to retransmit.¹⁰ Cost of distribution ensured cable television's slow start, taking 15 years (1948-1963) to connect cable to the first million Americans, pushing off any real regulation for cable until the 1960s. Even as late as 1959, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) saw cable as a local re-transmission service requiring no additional agency; however, this drastically changed by the 1960s.¹¹ The 1961-1980 segment further discusses cable television.

Laws and Regulations 1950-1959.

Television's regulation, much like its origins, did not evolve in response to the contextual environment a la Darwin; rather, regulation was defined in the image of its higher creator, the radio industry.¹² During WWII, the television industry continued to tinker with the technology and, after the war, the industry was essentially a replica of radio, meaning advertisers funded the programming, which were adaptations of established radio shows, combining sight and sound.¹³ The initial regulations of radio, and thus television, set the tone for how America received and perceived the world around them.

To provide context, radio's regulatory origins only preceded television's regulations by 20 years with the Wireless Act of 1910, passed at the behest of the Navy to require radio communications on ocean steamers for safety purposes. The 1912 sinking

⁹ Slide, *The Television Industry: A Historical Dictionary*, 44.

¹⁰ Network television refers to the system of providing various channels to the consumer through radio waves while cable television system provides channels through signals via cables.

¹¹ Robert W. Crandall and Harold W. Furchtgott-Roth, *Cable TV: Regulation or Competition?* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1996), 1-2.

¹² At this time, radio was dominated by RCA who was the founder of NBC. While the field stagnated during WWII, RCA's NBC and CBS were the only companies strong enough to survive. Founder's myopia notwithstanding, it was hard to predict television's place in history in the 1930s.

¹³ Tim Wu, *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2010) 139, 153.

of the *Titanic* spurred Congress out of the laissez faire doldrums of deliberation and, over the next 14 years, radio regulations received rich additional provisions to deconflict frequencies and times for broadcasts for both sea and land-based usage. However, managed by the Bureau of Navigation and then the Federal Radio Commission (FRC), there was no real power to enforce compliance. The lack of authority and the US Government's tepid interactions eventually spurred a major change in 1934.¹⁴

The Telecommunications Act of 1934 "regulated interstate and foreign communications by wire and radio in the public interests" and, due to television's transmission over airwaves, its initial regulation fell under this new Act.¹⁵ The Act was also responsible for the creation of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), composed of seven presidentially appointed and Senate confirmed members who provided oversight as the principle regulatory body for US broadcasting.¹⁶ In this period, through multiple Supreme Court cases, the American people came to a simple conclusion: "broadcasting was different from print media," and, while entitled to some First Amendment protections, it needed government oversight. In short, the Act of 1934 (which remained in effect for over 60 years) ensured that while the US Government did not *censor* radio or television broadcasts, anyone wanting to obtain a license to broadcast in America had to first acquire the permission of the US Government.¹⁷

Television licensing procedures were comparable to radio at first and the FCC continued the FRC's paper tiger routine, granting hundreds of licenses with little thought, and little *actual* oversight.¹⁸ Carte blanche licensing continued until 1948 when the FCC paused all permits. At this time, the FCC began to realize the implications of television and developed a "plan" for the entire US, ensuring a "fair and equitable" distribution of

¹⁴ Lichty and Topping, *American Broadcasting: A Source Book*, 527.

¹⁵ Slide, *The Television Industry: A Historical Dictionary*, 104.

¹⁶ Broadcasting includes television, (commercial and educational), AM/FM radio, CATV, aviation, shipboard, amateur, and citizens' radios. Slide, *The Television Industry: A Historical Dictionary*, 105.

¹⁷ L.A. Scot Powe and A. Lucas Jr., *American Broadcasting and the First Amendment* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 31, 49.

¹⁸ The only way the FRC could wield power was to deny license renewals. For example, in 1929 they denied the Great Lakes Broadcasting Company license renewals for three radio stations and stated, "Broadcasting stations are licensed to serve the public, and not for the purpose of furthering the private or selfish interests of individuals or groups of individuals." Gary W. Selnow and Richard R. Gilbert, *Society's Impact on Television: How the Viewing Public Shapes Television Programming* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1993), 92.

airwaves.¹⁹ The FCC's plan resolved technical-receiver compatibility issues and proportioned large segments of bandwidth for potential broadcasters. Yet these overly large segments of the broadcast spectrum ensured a physical limitation, hindering fair competition throughout the television medium.²⁰ Meanwhile, American consumers realized television was not a temporary success and television procurement boomed, as did the licensing applications, which massed under the 1948 halt until the FCC resumed licensing in 1952.²¹ At this time, newly elected President Eisenhower recognized the implications of the new medium and set out to capitalize on the venture by giving the FCC new teeth.

After the four-year logjam, the reinstating of VHF broadcasting licensing in the 1950s was scandalous at best; Eisenhower stacked the FCC with partisan Republican hawks applying licensing criteria spuriously to those television outlets that supported the Republican Party.²² A 1959 study by Bernard Schwartz analyzed FCC hearings of the early 1950s and found that, of the nine contentious newspaper applicants applying for television broadcasting licenses, only one was an Adlai Stevenson supporter, Eisenhower's opponent in the 1952 election. Schwartz's evidence suggests only "friends of Ike" received an audience with the voters.²³ Licensing in the 1950s was political and chaotic in terms of volume and recipients, a trend that did not change until deregulation in the 1970s.

The final key regulation affecting the 1950s was the "Fairness Doctrine." The

¹⁹ Ironically, this "freeze" benefited two large networks, NBC and CBS, who consolidated their gains and established their networks as having popular, high quality programming, which was the exact monopoly the FCC was trying to prevent. Powe and Lucas Jr., *American Broadcasting and the First Amendment*, 74–78.

²⁰ One of the main compatibility issues involved colored vs black and white television sets. The FCC ruled in favor of RCA vs CBS. While CBS's product was superior, RCA's colored televisions were compatible with current black and whites—a contentious ruling at the time for CBS. In addition, the plan set aside large sections of UHF frequency, which proved to be inferior to VHF in terms of both quality and range. Selnow and Gilbert, *Society's Impact on Television: How the Viewing Public Shapes Television Programming*, 85–86.

²¹ This was a costly mistake by the motion picture industry who egregiously misjudge the impact and potential of television, leaving radio to dictate terms of the new medium with little rivalry.

Atwan, Orton, and Vesterman, *American Mass Media: Industries and Issues*, 364.

²² At the time, the FCC provided VHF (very high frequency) and UHF (ultra high frequency) licensing as part of the plan; however, VHF was desired due to technological limitations at the time. In addition, the FCC used 11 factors as criteria for licensing, to summarize: "present a prospect of varied service to the community; a past record of broadcast service; local residents preferred to outsiders; active ownership favored over absentee." The subjective criteria were not equipped to please everyone. Powe and Lucas Jr., *American Broadcasting and the First Amendment*, 78–84.

²³ Bernard Schwartz, *The Professor and the Commissions* (New York, NY: Knopf Publishing, 1959), 47.

genesis of the doctrine originates as far back as the 1920s, but it was not until 1959 that Congress codified it by including its nomenclature in an amendment of Section 315 of the Communications Act of 1934.²⁴ Most consider its major impact to be in the 1960s, but given its importance, the study will briefly discuss the Doctrine here and the ramifications in the 1960-1979 segment.

The Fairness Doctrine had two requirements: broadcasters should devote a reasonable amount of programming to controversial issues of public interest and coverage of the issues must be fair in that it represents the contrasting points of view.²⁵ The Supreme Court reiterated the point—“[the doctrine] requires discussion of public issues be presented on broadcast stations, and that each side of those issues...be given fair coverage.”²⁶ However, the Doctrine does not quantify or dictate to licensees how to determine which issue to broadcast, if that issue is controversial, or of public interest, or how to determine “reasonable amount of programming.” Furthermore, while the FCC maintained the Fairness Doctrine standards, the Commission relied on complaints from the public to find broadcasters in noncompliance. If the public did not complain, it was a challenge for the FCC to enforce the standards evenly across the country. The significance of the 1959 codification by Congress was that it compelled the FCC to enforce the standards versus the ability to suspend the doctrine if it were in the best interest of the public.²⁷ Now, suspension needed Congressional approval, regardless of the circumstances.²⁸

Gatekeepers 1950-1959.

The government could alter the regulatory landscape of the television industry,

²⁴ The amended section reiterated that nothing relived broadcasters from the obligations of the Fairness Doctrine, calling the document out by name—this amendment was later appealed by District of Columbia Court of Appeals in 1986. Cronauer. “The Fairness Doctrine: A solution in Search of a Problem,” *Federal Communications Law Journal*, Vol 47, Issue 1 (Fall 1994), 60. In addition, the exact date of when the Fairness Doctrine was implemented is somewhat controversial—see Simmons, *The Fairness Doctrine and the Media* Chapter 2 for a through history.

²⁵ Steven J. Simmons, *The Fairness Doctrine and the Media* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 9.

²⁶ Public issues meaning controversial and of public importance; *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC*, 395 U.S. 367, 369 (1966).

²⁷ Simmons, *The Fairness Doctrine and the Media*, 53.

²⁸ The Fairness Doctrine applied to broadcasted media, however newsprint was not under the purview of the new doctrine.

enforcing laws amongst the entire field. However, equally important to television were the men within the industry who decided when and what the American public would see and hear.²⁹ In the 1950s, this gatekeeper was the networks and the government worked hard to curtail their power.

As television exploded, the FCC grappled with the growing monopoly of broadcast station ownership. Airwaves were a “scarce” resource, the carrier of information to society.³⁰ The FCC understood both the limits of the medium and the simultaneous need for diverse viewpoints for society and found the compromising solution--diverse station ownership.³¹ While ownership began with radio mandates, they quickly morphed to include television. Starting in the 1940s, the Duopoly Rule stated no one person or company could own more than one broadcast station (AM, FM, television) in a single market, supporting the FCC’s larger strategy that diverse ownership begets diverse viewpoints. Despite the FCC’s best efforts, the National Broadcasting Company’s (NBC) two networks and the Columbia Broadcasting System’s (CBS) affiliates made up 85 percent of America’s total nighttime broadcasting power, which forced new FCC mandates on network-affiliate relationships.³² While there were numerous mandates, the largest change forced NBC to sell a network as one network could no longer own another.³³ In short, the FCC attempted to pursue a localism strategy versus a competitive regional or national broadcasting market and prevent large chain networks from forming a cartel on America’s information and entertainment consumption.³⁴

²⁹ This is not a gender neutral typo—there were hardly any women or people of color with power within the television industry at this time.

³⁰ Roger L. Sadler, *Electronic Media Law* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 101.

³¹ The Supreme Court in 1943 further confirmed the FCC’s strategy in *NBC v. U.S.*, 319 U.S. 198, stating that the radio spectrum is not large enough to accommodate everyone. Sadler, *Electronic Media Law*, 101.

³² The beginning of World War II hindered mass movements into television broadcasting; coupled with the FCC freeze of 1948, with only 50 lucky TV stations on the air. NBC radio broadcast, which started slightly before CBS in the 1920s dominated the 1930s leading up to the war. Following the war NBC, CBS and the newly formed ABC developed television networks, simultaneously making it difficult for any additional network to compete. Lichty and Topping, *American Broadcasting: A Source Book*, 93, 157–62.

³³ This network would go on to become the American Broadcasting System (ABC); Sadler, *Electronic Media Law*, 101–3.

³⁴ While easy to cast judgement in hindsight, the FCC confronted shaping not only the new mediums technical character (resolving incompatibilities as they did with RCA and CBS colored televisions), but its industrial structure (localism) and social role as the medium developed, understanding their decisions may impede further technical progress. Lichty and Topping, *American Broadcasting: A Source Book*, 66–67.

In reality, the over emphasis on monopoly tilted the bias towards renewing smaller individual stations that were allowed to air minimal public affairs content in order to maintain competition with the larger networks' entertainment divisions. This ensured that news could not compete with the growing popularity of entertainment programming dominating the medium. More concerned with monopolies, in 1953, the FCC instituted the "7-7-7 Rule," ensuring one party could not own more than seven AM, seven FM, and seven television stations and those stations could not serve more than 25 percent of the national audience. Following these regulations, the nation formed their primary networks, known as the Big Three (ABC, NBC, and CBS), who acted as gatekeepers to America's information and they were largely focused on entertainment until the end of the 1950s.³⁵

The networks did have a large influence on content, but there were also lower echelon members within each organization, such as television producers, that influenced the networks' content. In the 1950s, the primary broadcasters were located in New York, where the recorded national news was then distributed via mail carrier to local broadcasting affiliates. This trend changed in 1952 with live broadcasting.³⁶ For the first time, Americans were able to watch live coverage of the US presidential election and it caused superficial changes. For example, because the coverage was live, it was the first time that television producers (not government officials) decided what part of the presidential nominating conventions the nation would see.³⁷ If coverage seemed slow, television producers decided to focus reporting on interviews or meetings in various downtown hotels, giving coverage a new range and mobility. While television producers were, and still are, a media gatekeeper, the 1952 elections are a key point in history that showcase the nascent power of television producers who could choose what to report on in real time. In addition to US laws and regulations depicting who and how many television licenses could be doled out, the gatekeepers decided "when" and "what"

³⁵ The networks in the 1950s dedicated, on average, 70 percent of their programming to variety, drama and quiz shows and only seven percent to news broadcasting. This decision centered on profit; while it cost more to make the various shows versus news, it brought in highly desired advertising for the networks. Lichty and Topping, *American Broadcasting: A Source Book*, 439.

³⁶ Bill Ganzel, "Television," Wessel's Living History Farm, 3 Feb 2020, https://livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe50s/life_17.html

³⁷ Donovan and Scherer, *Unslient Revolution*, 220–21.

America would watch, ultimately casing new norms in society that would continue to ripple into the 21st century.

Norms 1950-1959.

The television drastically changed America, but two norms from an industry perspective also occurred: self-regulation by broadcasters and the onslaught of television advertising and public relations specialists. In the wake of the 1950s Quiz Show scandals, the “Television Code” offered a self-induced set of regulations implemented by the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) that went into effect in 1952.³⁸ The code ensured “Program Standards” and “Advertising Standards” across the medium; among other items, it prohibited profanity, illicit sex or other debaucheries, using horror for its own sake, and limited commercial minutes per hour.³⁹ While instituted by the NAB, code enforcement was self-regulated by the networks, with the only penalties or ramifications for negating the program standards being the costly loss of viewers.⁴⁰ The television code started the norm of what was and was not acceptable on television by broadcast standards, as well as through feedback by the public.

It was beneficial for the Television Code to limit allotted commercial time because, by 1954, television commercials were the leading advertising mechanism in America.⁴¹ However, commercials were not limited to products. President Eisenhower, for instance, took advantage of consolidating long speeches into 30-second sound bites to capture the attention of America. The focus on advertising and live politics spawned the political campaign specialist and the long-established public relations career field

³⁸ Following the Supreme Court ruling in *FCC v. American Broadcasting Co., Inc.* 347 U.S 284, quiz shows were deemed to not be a form of gambling, and therefore could be televised. In the 1950s, this made way for numerous quiz shows, which initially had poor results due to contestants being unable to win. Producers, in cahoots with contestants, rigged the games to provide more entertainment to America. Once the public found out, advertisers pulled funding and networks throttled producers into compliance. Charles Van Doren, “All the Answers: The quiz-show Scandals—and the Aftermath,” *The New Yorker*, 28 July 2008; <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/07/28/all-the-answers>

³⁹ “Television History: The First 75 Years”, TVHistory.TV, 3 Feb 2020, <http://www.tvhistory.tv/SEAL-Good-Practice4.JPG>

⁴⁰ Viewership was key and wedded to advertising. Advertisers in turn sought the largest audience, looking for specific demographics. In short, advertisers pay networks to provide audiences who will in turn buy their products. Selnow and Gilbert, *Society's Impact on Television: How the Viewing Public Shapes Television Programming*, 152–67.

⁴¹ US History Online Textbook, “The Land of Television,” Independence Hall Association of Philadelphia, 1 Feb 20, <https://www.ushistory.org/us/53c.asp>.

blossomed as an industry, seeing the number of practitioners passing the 100,000 mark.⁴² Television was booming and advertising and public relations specialists acted as ground floor adopters of this new medium. This mix of control mechanisms had lasting effects on television for the next two decades.

To summarize the key events in the 1950s, the television industry followed radio's lead in both regulations and reliance on advertising for programming. Table 2 recaps the key dates that will be evaluated in Chapter 4 "Modes of Media's Truth Decay." Based on Table 2, if America were suffering from elements of Truth Decay in the 1950s, then 1952 should show a large positive change with respect to providing America information while 1953 and 1959 would show smaller changes to the system.

Table 2 Summary of 1950-1959

Years	Laws & Regulations	Gatekeepers	Norms
1952	FCC Resumes TV licensing	Live TV broadcasting gives more power to network producers	NAB institutes "Television Code" to ensure programming standards are not obscene.
1953	FCC limits ownership rights of multiple media with 7-7-7 Rule	N/A	N/A
1959	Congress codifies Fairness Doctrine with little effect in the 1950s	N/A	N/A

Source: Author's Original Work

1960-1979: From the Promise of Camelot to the Haze of Malaise⁴³

If the grey-flannelled era of the 1950s spawned the spider web of connective and shared experiences across America through television, then the 1960s acted as the long overdue backlash towards discrimination, with television amplifying the demand signal

⁴² S.M. Cutlip, A.H. Center, and G.M. Broom, *Effective Public Relations* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1994), 121.

⁴³ The youthfulness of Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline drew parallels to King Arthur ruling over Camelot (the US) as the optimism was high in America for white protestant males. Watergate refers the scandal that eventually forced President Nixon's resignation in 1974.

for reform. Television was able to capture Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s (MLK) march on Washington as civil rights riots dominated urban areas, most notably the riots of 1964, riots which only increased after MLK's assassination in 1968.⁴⁴ While the US abolished most legal forms of discrimination by 1965, America's century old Civil War wounds continued to weep as minorities' newfound legal status did little in terms of economic equality and social acceptance across the country. Minority movements highlighted social inequalities of all kinds and marches continued across America, from college campuses to the streets of Washington, with television acting as the loadstar to navigate likeminded supporters to the cause.⁴⁵

The 1960s and 1970s also connected Americans through political events, taking society from the promise of Camelot to Watergate.⁴⁶ America watched President Kennedy's time in office, from his election in 1960 to the 18-minute national address concerning the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and finally to his fateful assassination in 1963. Society shared these experiences as one through television. As America grieved after Kennedy's assassination, the nation also prepared for war under President Johnson, who led the US into Vietnam to combat the spread of communism. With the nation at war, Johnson's campaign promise to make America a "Great Society" conflicted with a budget-consuming international strategy, derailing his domestic agenda⁴⁷

The end of the 1960s marked both high and low points for America, from the giant leap for mankind with the *Apollo 11* moon landing to the continued saga of the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War marked a turning point in the news-television relationship for America as the events surrounding US soldiers were viewable to the

⁴⁴ Television's effect on the civil rights movements cannot be overstated; network coverage exposed white supremacy in the South leaving many southern journalists struggling to find the "center" on a polarizing topic. True extremists such as the Ku Klux Klan were convinced blacks were "happy with their lot" and network coverage encouraged protests. Thankfully, they were right, and the coverage helped spur the mid 1960s reforms. Charles L. Ponce de Leon, *That's the Way It Is: A History of Television News in America*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 70–71.

⁴⁵ In addition to MLK's civil rights movement, another in this time was feminist movements which garnered a win with *Roe v Wade* in 1973, a dividing decision across America. US History Online Textbook, "Roe v Wade and its Impacts," 1 Feb 2020, www.ushistory.org/us/57d.asp

⁴⁶ US History Online Textbook, "Politics from Camelot to Watergate," Independence Hall Association of Philadelphia, 1 Feb 2020, <https://www.ushistory.org/us/56.asp>.

⁴⁷ His "great society" referred to his domestic agenda of fighting the "war on poverty and racial injustice" but as the US budget was dominated by the Vietnam War, his domestic agenda never materialized. Frederick S. Lane, *The Decency Wars: The Campaign to Cleanse American Culture*, (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010), 98.

society writ large with little time delay.⁴⁸ Confronted with vivid images of US Marines in disarray and the siege of the US embassy in Saigon, the shocking loss of the Tet Offensive in 1968 soured America's outlook on the ability to win in Vietnam.⁴⁹ Once President Nixon took office in 1969, his Administration searched for solutions to bring American troops home with honor.⁵⁰ While Nixon inherited a war he did not want, his hardline approach to liberals and conservative rhetoric of "us vs. them" led the Administration down a path of questionable tactics resulting in the Watergate scandal. The scandal acted as Nixon's final undoing and he resigned before Congress could formally impeach him. Meanwhile, the televised hearings provided Americans both information and entertainment.⁵¹ To illustrate, Figure 4 depicts the percentage of homes reached for key US events during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

After the smarting loss in the Vietnam War and the scandalous resignation of President Nixon, the remainder of the 1970s signaled the end of America's post-WWII honeymoon. Economic inflation plagued both the Ford and Carter administrations and America, searching for a new identity, found itself with a new outrageous fashion style and a seemingly decaying morality, spurring the growing Christian Right movement in response.⁵² As Americans yearned for a light on a shining hill to lead them through the malaise, television was able to provide them news and entertainment—often simultaneously.

⁴⁸ In comparison, networks covering the Korean War, film took three days to reach US audiences while Vietnam used communication satellites to relay information—a transmitter cost around \$3,000 for 10 minutes. Lichty and Topping, *American Broadcasting: A Source Book*, 427.

⁴⁹ P.W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *LikeWar* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 34.

⁵⁰ The last American left Vietnam in 1973.

⁵¹ Us vs. them refers to Nixon's thoughts on the state of the US, "us" refereeing to conservative middle-class, "church-going" Americans and "them" as liberal, antiwar free love counter culture. US History Online Textbook, "Undoing a President," 1 Feb 2020, <https://www.ushistory.org/us/58a.asp>.

⁵² This refers to the increased drug use, sexual promiscuity, and a rising divorce rate in the 1970s. US History Online Textbook, "A Time of Malaise," Independence Hall Association of Philadelphia, 1 Feb 2020, <https://www.ushistory.org/us/58.asp>.

LARGEST TELEVISION AUDIENCES

<u>Year</u>	<u>Special Event</u>	<u>% Homes Reached</u>	<u>Average Hours Viewed</u>
1960	Election Returns	91.8%	4:30
1961	Kennedy Inaugural	59.5	
1962	Glenn Space Flight	81.4	5:15
1963	Death of President Kennedy	96.1	31.38
1964	Election Returns	90.6	2:51
1965	Gemini IV Space Walk	92.1	4:47
1966	Election Returns	84.4	6:10
1967	Johnson State of Union	59.6	
1968	Democratic Convention	90.1	9:28
1969	Apollo 11 on Moon	93.9	15:35
1969	Nixon Vietnam Address	61.6	
1973	Nixon Vietnam Truce Address	62.9	
1974	Nixon Resignation Address	60.3	

<u>Date</u>	<u>Entertainment Program</u>	<u>Rating</u>
Jan. 15, 1970	Bob Hope Christmas Show	46.6
Aug. 29, 1967	The Fugitive (last episode)	45.9
Jan. 14, 1971	Bob Hope	45.0
Feb. 9, 1964	Ed Sullivan (Beatles)	44.6
Jan. 16, 1972	Super Bowl VI	44.2
Jan. 8, 1964	Beverly Hillbillies	44.0
Apr. 4, 1970	Academy Awards	43.4
Feb. 16, 1964	Ed Sullivan (Beatles)	43.2
Jan. 15, 1964	Beverly Hillbillies	42.8
Jan. 14, 1973	Super Bowl VII	42.7

Figure 4: Largest Television Audiences

Source: Adapted from L.W. Lichty and M.C. Topping, American Broadcasting: A Source Book on the History of Radio and Television, Studies in Public Communication (Hastings House Publishers, 1975), 524.

Television had many effects on America in this time which featured an assassination, vivid images of war, and a disgraced president. While this period will be remembered for its images, these images were brought to the public under the watchful eye of the FCC who regulated the monopolies of both network television and the budding cable industry.

Laws and Regulations 1960-1979.

With television no longer seeming to be a risky capital venture, the industry boomed and so did the FCC's regulations. To begin, network-broadcasting regulations largely followed the Telecommunications Act of 1934, which affected America's three television-broadcasting networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC (The Big Three), which enjoyed a monopoly on American television audiences. The primary focus for The Big Three was not necessarily to inform America, but to generate revenue through highly popular variety, drama, and quiz shows. News programming for The Big Three consumed less

than 10 percent of total network programming from the 1950s to the 1970s. This point is further demonstrated by network spending. For example, in 1971, NBC spent \$100 million in total programming cost with only \$9 million of the budget dedicated to news production. Regardless of the type of programming, the clear evidence proved America was watching more television.⁵³

During this television bull market, the FCC, in addition to providing broadcasting licenses to companies, continually and consciously pursued the 1940s strategy of “localism.” In short, the US Government controlled a large portion of what American audiences saw through the FCC’s granting and renewal of broadcast licensing. This approach worked well in the 1950s, but by the 1960s, America’s entrepreneurship ethos emerged with the rapid growth of cable television, which challenged the FCC’s vision of localism and the viability of small-market broadcasters.

Cable broadcasters recognized a void in service to rural areas since television networks primarily placed antennas and focused signal strength to support urban viewers. The advent of CATV in the 1960s allowed rural areas to share in the American experience, servicing over 650,000 subscribers. Living up to technological hype, as the lattice of coaxial cable started to blanket the nation, cable subscriptions soared, reaching 4.5 million by the 1970s, foreshadowing the FCC’s intervention in television’s new faction.

The FCC and the television networks had wildly different views on the growth of cable. The cable industry had just begun to attract the FCC’s attention while cable’s mere existence was a primary concern to The Big Three, who were troubled with a legitimate challenger to their established monopoly.⁵⁴ Cable’s role was always intended to be a local service, supporting a defined geographical area. Yet the networks claimed the cable industry was nothing more than a pack of thieves, “syphoning” and rebroadcasting *their* signal while charging a subscriber’s fee.⁵⁵ In the 1950s, the FCC’s

⁵³ On average, America was watching an additional 30 minutes of television per year. Lichty and Topping, *American Broadcasting: A Source Book*, 439, 523.

⁵⁴ The competition really centered on profit and advertising. Thomas Hazlett, “If a TV Station Broadcasts in the Forest,” (working paper, Time-Warner Cable 2011), 4-5.

⁵⁵ The network complaints were not unfounded at the time. CATV picked up local broadcast through constructed antennas and then distributed them via coaxial cable to provide a “cleaner” picture to residents at a cost. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/rise-cable-television>

lack of involvement stemmed from the fact cable programming did not use the medium of airwaves but coaxial cable. Nevertheless, the FCC could no longer sit idle during the competitive turmoil of the 1960s.

Therefore, in 1962, the FCC reconsidered their position on cable broadcasting and, in 1965, it issued its first official regulation titled “First Cable Television Report and Order” and then promptly issued a second regulation in 1966. Together, the regulations limited cable television to “small local markets that were *not* being served by the major broadcast networks” and included “must carry” clauses to insure local broadcast signals reached the surrounding populace.⁵⁶ Originally created to safeguard local broadcast stations from the cable market shares, “must carry” rules caused contention from the beginning. The new regulations bound cable companies to accept any local broadcast station that requested carriage, regardless of viewership or profit considerations.⁵⁷ However, despite the regulations, cable subscriptions continued to grow at the rate of over two million new subscribers every two years and both consumers and the cable companies complained at the limits government had placed on cable. Unfortunately, cable companies had to wait a decade before finding reprieve.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, in 1967, the FCC put forth regulation concerning a review of the Fairness Doctrine’s personal attack and political editorial rules while Congress passed the Public Broadcast Act. The FCC produced hefty tomes on personal attacks and political rules centered on ensuring an attacked member’s entitlement to “fair” airtime to respond to the accuser with the ultimate intent of guaranteeing an informed public concerning controversial issues. Through case rulings, the FCC reaffirmed the attack rules with the exemption of “newscasts, bona fide news interviews, and attacks made on candidates by supporters of other candidates.”⁵⁹ In addition, the political editorial rules stated that if a

⁵⁶ *Encyclopedia.com*, s.v. “The Rise of Cable Television,” accessed 5 Feb 2020, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/rise-cable-television>

⁵⁷ As this study will trace, must carry rules changed throughout television’s time (1987, 1992) in attempts to satisfy compatibility with First Amendment rights.

⁵⁸ Crandall and Furchtgott-Roth, *Cable TV: Regulation or Competition?*, 3-5.

⁵⁹ One of the most well cited cases is the Supreme Court’s decision in *Red Lion Broadcasting Co v. FCC*, which held the FCC’s ruling to be statutorily authorized and constitutional. Essentially Red Lion broadcasted a show featuring the personal attack of Mr. Cook, who had previously criticized presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Cook, upon learning this information demanded time to refute the claims. Red Lion refused, which brought the case to the FCC. The FCC (and the Supreme Court) sided with Cook. While the segment’s airtime was less than 15 minutes, *Red Lion v. FCC* is considered a cornerstone case in broadcasting. Simmons, *The Fairness Doctrine and the Media*, 78–79.

broadcast endorses or opposes a candidate for election, the unendorsed candidate must be notified and allowed a “reasonable” opportunity to respond. Though formulated with good intentions, the subjectivity issues that surrounded the Fairness Doctrine left a confusing trail of precedent on what constitutes “an attack,” “a reasonable opportunity,” and a “controversial issue of public importance.” This ultimately left some broadcasters to question the validity of the regulation in its entirety.⁶⁰ The Fairness Doctrine acted as an agenda setting mechanism, not dictating *what* could be said as much as providing a balance of content and airtime to discuss public issues.⁶¹

The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, which sought to encourage diversity and expand non-commercial broadcasting, saw the birth of the Public Broadcast Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR). The Act, signed by President Johnson, would “provide funds to aid local stations, create innovative programs, and increase the service of broadcasting” in the interest of the public.⁶² Unlike commercial networks which rely on advertising, PBS is a combination of private funding (typically by donation) and government funding. Government sponsored content was, and still is, a controversial topic, but, the new government sponsored network channel added to the sources of information for the American public.

The early 1970s saw another attempt to prohibit network monopoly by providing regulation aimed at forbidding the network broadcasting companies from controlling the programming aired on their networks. First, in network broadcasting, the FCC instituted the 1970 Financial Interest and Syndication Rules (fin-syn). This regulation prevented The Big Three from owning any of the programming they aired on prime time television or from airing any of the syndicated programming in which their networks had financial stakes.⁶³ The fin-syn rules attempted to promote diversity of source, outlet, and programming to America by curbing The Big Three’s monopsony of power and ability to

⁶⁰ Simmons, *The Fairness Doctrine and the Media*, 80–81.

⁶¹ Selnow and Gilbert, *Society’s Impact on Television: How the Viewing Public Shapes Television Programming*, 103.

⁶² J.E. Burke, *A Historical-Analytical Study of the Legislative and Political Origins of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967* (Manhattan, NY: Arno Press, 1979).

⁶³ Syndicated programming refers to television programs that were made and sold directly to television stations instead of through a network. In many cases, networks paid a licensing fee in exchange for airing rights and in return, the production companies used deficit finance to help cover the cost of production, knowing they would recuperate the cost in re-runs. William Hoynes and David Croteau, *Business of Media: Corporate Media and The Public Interest* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), 85.

unfairly take advantage of producers.⁶⁴ While this regulation did not affect the way Americans received their news, by not owning any of the television shows, networks had to continue their primary focus on the program creation process to maintain their audiences and turn a profit for the company.⁶⁵ Network news was still not a primary source of revenue, which resulted in the continued focus on entertainment.

Before deregulation occurred, the FCC attempted to find “middle ground” between the networks and cable television in the interest of the public. For example, in 1972, cable systems had to carry all local broadcast signals while local syndicate programming was protected from competition by blacking out imported (potentially more desired) signals. Moreover, cable providers had to set aside channels for educational, government, and public access programming and the new regulations essentially banned premium programming for which viewers paid extra. For instance, the cable networks could only provide one feature film a month while prohibiting broadcast of live sporting events—these rules all but stifled the cable networks.⁶⁶ Cries of “foul” echoed across America and, by 1974, the FCC began the deregulation wave that allowed cable to flourish, continuing the deregulation trends into 1977 and concluding in 1979. Deregulation laws addressed the restrictions on “how many” and “what kind” of programming the cable companies could provide.

While cable developed quickly, so too did other factions such as satellite communication, which prompted the FCC’s 1975 decision to allow satellite usage for television broadcasts. Following this ruling, the newly formed Home Box Office (HBO) used the new ruling to distribute its signal nationwide via satellite reception demonstrating the great demand for premium service as evident in the 1975 boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. This event served as the first time America was able to watch a major sporting event live from around the world.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Monopsony is similar to the phrase, “monopoly power” and is an economic term meaning “a market structure where a single entity substantially controls the market.” Networks, with respect to programming, produced, aired, and syndicated them, controlling the entire vertical process and ensuring deals that proved advantageous to the Big Three Networks. Selnow and Gilbert, *Society’s Impact on Television: How the Viewing Public Shapes Television Programming*, 160.

⁶⁵ This also allowed smaller production companies to make a profit in Hollywood. Amanda D. Lotz (2007). *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. 86–90.

⁶⁶ Crandall and Furchtgott-Roth, *Cable TV: Regulation or Competition?*, 3.

⁶⁷ R.A. Smith, *Play-by-Play: Radio, Television, and Big-Time College Sport* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 101. The broadcast originated from Manila, Philippine Islands.

To summarize, this era primarily displayed the US Government's ability to balance regulations to ensure the television industry continued to grow, but not at the expense of any one faction gaining a monopoly over the entire field. The throttling of monopolies would continue to be a characteristic trend for the FCC, effecting both the gatekeepers and norms of America into the 21st century.

Gatekeepers 1960-1979

The gatekeepers in this era largely did not change from the 1950s, but the 1970s malaise did change the way America perceived information, including broadcasted news. By the mid-1970s, the networks had news audiences reaching upwards of 50 million viewers making them attractive to sponsors and thus a source of profit. Identifying stories and communicating them to a diverse audience with different interests challenged networks, especially affiliate stations who acted as "grudging accomplices." However, in this era, the networks began to see their role as "establishing a national perspective" and to "ensure seemingly random events were related to wider problems that directly affected [America's] well-being."⁶⁸ Many of the stories emphasized conflict, a way to further comply with the Fairness Doctrine, but, due to the volume of news stories, many did not receive the nuanced attention they deserved. In an attempt to "establish a national perspective," networks demanded vague comments on the news, but as live images rolled in from events such as the civil rights movements, objectivity was difficult. Advancing television technology changed network news, and live images replaced the stagnant talking heads that summarized national stories.

In 1974, the invention of the portable TV camera allowed greater freedom in live news coverage. With the news' large audience, reporting went from one anchor to entire "news teams," focused on the viewer experience with color television, updated anchor desks, music, and logo designs. In addition, public relations had always been a consideration, but now, consultants conducted private market research, which shifted the focus from "information the consumer needed to know" to bringing people "information they wanted to see." Broadcasting companies were required to provide information, but the ratings that brought in advertisers and capital were wed to their popular variety,

⁶⁸ Ponce de Leon, *That's the Way It Is: A History of Television News in America*, 66–67.

drama, and quiz show programming. Keeping in line with the 1950s, broadcasting networks had a major effect on dedicated airtime to the news while the producers still acted as the regulatory gatekeeper concerning *what* news reached the American public.

Norms 1960-1979

Similar to the 1950s, the laws and gatekeeper choices had a norming effect on America, specifically in the early 1970s, which brought with it amplified concepts of “indecent.” Prior to the 1970s, indecency discussions centered on radio’s occasional use of profanity or television’s fancy camera work, shifting America’s focus to Elvis Presley’s top half to stave off indecent suggestions from the King’s pelvic gyrations.⁶⁹ Slick camera work, of course, only mattered if America was actually watching Elvis on The Ed Sullivan Show—they were, as shown by the Nielsen Company. Developed in the 1960s, Nielsen used select televisions to serve as a “sample audience” to track what America watched, empowering broadcasters to better charge advertisers for different shows. As the company hit their stride in the 1970s, Nielsen further refined their audience demographics by age groups laying an exploratory map for broadcasters to target demographics with larger sources of disposable income, namely eighteen- to thirty-year-old males. The first to capitalize on the new data was the lagging network of ABC, who pitched less substantial and more visually appealing television featuring attractive women with fewer bras, such as *Charlie’s Angels*. The new norm of “jiggle TV” took ABC’s audience strength to number one within a span of two years, leaving the other networks to follow suit. For networks, “lowbrow was the new high.”⁷⁰

This new norm did not please everyone. Pressure from Congress and the FCC forced the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) to revisit the Television Code in 1975. The NAB sought to cut back on sex and violence on television with the “Family Viewing Standard.”⁷¹ The whistleblower to the spiraling wasteland on television was the president of CBS, concerned about a trend of sadism and violence. The NAB agreed

⁶⁹ Lili Levi, *The FCC’s Regulation of Indecency*, First Reports, vol 7, no. 1 (April 2008), 2–4.

⁷⁰ While America only had three networks, ABC was so far in third that the industry joked “if they put the Vietnam War on ABC, it would be canceled in 13 weeks.” In comparison, with *Charlie’s Angels*, over half of the televisions in America tuned in weekly. Lane, *The Decency Wars: The Campaign to Cleanse American Culture*, 113–18.

⁷¹ Slide, *The Television Industry: A Historical Dictionary*, 276–77.

with CBS and ensured that between the hours of 7 and 9 p.m. (Eastern Standard Time), the approximately 14 million children that watched television would only see “family friendly” content, a cornerstone of the Family Viewing Standard. While consumers appreciated the new norm, programmers viewed it as a form of writing censorship and saw its effect on profits.⁷²

A 1975 *New York Times* article summarized the landscape between the networks, program production, and the impact of revenue, stating prime time was the critical viewing hours within the US to capture a large audience for ratings and review. Prior to the NAB’s revision, television shows filled with violence and sex dominated prime evening time slots. Under the new standards, these programs had to move to other less advantageous time slots to make way for the Family Viewing Hours. Moreover, production made a large portion of their profits from syndication rights. For example, a network might pay \$270,000 for a show that costs upwards of \$300,000 in total production; the marginal deficit was recuperated by advertising the “re-runs.” With the new self-regulation, shows created prior to the Family Viewing Hour were not eligible to be re-played from 7 to 8 EST unless networks were willing to pay for the costly additional editing to make the programs compliant.⁷³ Nevertheless, while American consumers sifted through the malaise of the 1970s, they felt better about the television content consumed by their children. Meanwhile, networks and television programming companies did not appreciate the break in status quo during the downtrodden economic environment, but with a new Administration in sight, things in America started to look up.

To summarize, the television industry gatekeepers balanced the responsibility of ensuring an informed public while focusing primarily on generating revenue for the networks. The FCC, in turn continued to ensure that neither the networks nor the cable industry writ large could dominate the entire field. Table 3 highlights the key dates for this era. Unlike the 1950s, the late 1960s displayed key elements of Truth Decay and

⁷² David Black, “Inside TV’s ‘Family Hour’ Feud,” *New York Times*, 7 December 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/12/07/archives/inside-tvs-family-hour-feud-inside-the-family-viewing-hour-feud.html>

⁷³ David Black, “Inside TV’s ‘Family Hour’ Feud,” *New York Times*, 7 December 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/12/07/archives/inside-tvs-family-hour-feud-inside-the-family-viewing-hour-feud.html>

therefore regulation changes should start to show greater effect on the Truth Decay system. For example, the deregulation wake of 1974 coupled with greater freedom of gatekeepers should see America start to recover from the effects of Truth Decay or moving from a negative trend to positive uptick. The trend should continue into 1975 with the addition of satellite television and the Family Viewing Hour attempts to normalize what was viewable to America's youth during prime time.

Table 3 Summary of 1960-1979

Years	Laws & Regulations	Gatekeepers	Norms
1965-66	FCC limits cable to local markets and ensures "must carry" clauses	N/A	N/A
1967	FCC Reviews Fairness Doctrine's personal attack rules; Public Broadcast Act encourages diversity & expands non-commercial broadcasting	N/A	N/A
1970	Fin-Syn rules stop networks from owning programing they sponsor	N/A	N/A
1974	Start of small deregulations of Cable concerning "how many" and what kind" of programming	Portable Cameras allow greater freedom of access/content coverage to America	N/A
1975	FCC allows Satellites to distribute television signals	N/A	NAB institutes Family Viewing Hour in America to protect youth.

Source: Author's Original Work

1980s-1999: From Television Signing Off to 24-Hour News Cycles⁷⁴

President Ronald Reagan dominated the 1980s; from his landslide presidential victory over Jimmy Carter to his “trickle-down” economics and his oversight of the Cold War thaw, the “Great Communicator” was determined to pull America out of its 1970s funk.⁷⁵ Responding to the 1970s decline in the economy, “Reaganomics,” the media dubbed portmanteau for President Reagan’s economic ambitions, envisioned liberating tax cuts for top earning Americans in the hope that the wealth would trickle down and stimulate the middle and lower class economies. This action, coupled with history’s largest military increase in spending during peacetime, ensured that the national debt soared from one to three trillion dollars, unintentionally pushing the economic downside of his plan on future generations.⁷⁶ Moreover, Reagan led America into the final stages of the Russia-US nuclear standoff. America watched as the 1980 US Olympic hockey team defeated the four-time reigning Soviet champions, the actual hockey victory serving as an ideological Cold War triumph that Reagan then punctuated with his 1987 iconic charge, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall,” signaling the Cold War’s final stages.⁷⁷ With the reprieve from the threat of communism and the economy stabilizing for many, America started to thrive by the end of the 1980s.

American society, of course, could watch their economy and key societal events unfold on television, especially with the advent of the Cable News Network (CNN) and the 24-hour news cycle. With media acting as the unofficial fourth estate to offer checks and balances on the three branches of government, the introduction of the 24-hour news cycle had a large norming effect on American society.⁷⁸ The re-focus on news brought

⁷⁴ In the early 1980s, television broadcasting companies would actually shut down, as running the station for 24 hours was too costly for such a small viewing audience. Of course, this would change with the growth of cable and the 24-hour news cycle.

⁷⁵ Reagan, trained in film acting, was said to naturally put Americans at ease. While, at the time, the oldest President elected to office, his demeanor betrayed his age of 69—even the assassination attempt on 1981 could not stop his drive, leading many Americans to believe, “it was morning again in America.” US History, “Morning in America”, 5 Feb 2020, <https://www.ushistory.org/us/59a.asp>

⁷⁶ US History Online Textbook, “Morning in America,” Independence Hall Association of Philadelphia, 5 Feb 2020, <https://www.ushistory.org/us/59a.asp>

⁷⁷ The Bush Administration oversaw the Berlin Wall’s actual destruction in 1989, groundwork laid by Reagan.

⁷⁸ The 24-hour news cycle will be discussed at length in the “Norms” section. In addition, the original use of “fourth estate” can be traced back to 1787 in British Parliament; while some refer to it as the fourth branch of government, this connotation is politically charged as it suggests that the Government controls the media. J. Schultz, G. Brennan, and F.G. Castles, *Reviving the Fourth Estate: Democracy, Accountability and the Media* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 49.

long needed competition to the field, pressuring the networks to focus on news production in addition to revenue generating entertainment programs such as *Dallas* and *M*A*S*H*. The focus on news ensured multi-cast coverage of key events such as the 1986 *Challenger* explosion that killed seven crewmembers after a 73-second flight. CNN's live coverage of the event coupled with ABC's live audience reaction shocked and temporarily unified the nation bringing society both key information and a grotesque form of entertainment.

As American culture shifted from leg warmers and yuppies to frosted hair boy bands, America's culture of technology also blossomed in the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁷⁹ America in the 1990s doubled down on the 1980s "computer age," continuing to foster innovations such as computers, mobile phones, and the Internet. The Internet, the focus of Chapter 3, underwent critical changes during this period so when the average American was ready to adopt a computer and the World Wide Web into their homes, they would have a network that was largely standardized.⁸⁰ Furthermore, the advent of the FOX network in 1987 ensured further competition among The Big Three with all four of the networks scrambling to compete with viewers' range of programming options with the multi-channel transition. The multi-channel transition allowed audiences to move past the only three options of the 1960s (The Big Three) to hundreds of choices by the 1990s. To help facilitate viewers' preferences, cable companies broke their cable packages into different purchasing tiers, their variety finding niche places in America's homes. This competition between the networks and cable ensured America had the opportunity to receive a variety of entertainment and information.

The information of the 1990s had major political, military, and economic underpinnings, starting with the George H.W. Bush Administration's oversight of the early 1990s. After Saddam Hussain invaded Kuwait, the US conducted Operation Desert Storm, a six-week war with political aims to push back Saddam's regime. The "shock and awe" campaign achieved its overall objectives while simultaneously finding

⁷⁹ A yuppie was considered a derogatory moniker for young business people who were considered pompous, arrogant, and too concerned with high fashion consumer goods while gloating about their success. Investopedia, "Yuppie", 8 February 2020, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/y/yuppie.asp>

⁸⁰ Google opened on the market at \$85 a share, comparatively, the shares have now increased 535% Turo, "The Story of Jeff Bezos' \$250,000 Investment into Google in 1998," Growthink, 5 Oct 2009, <https://www.growthink.com/content/story-jeff-bezos-250000-investment-google-1998>

vindication from the failures of Vietnam. On the heels of victory, Bush oversaw the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Cold War, announcing to his fellow Americans in December 1991 that the 50-year conflict was finally over. These two events received intense media coverage, most notably by CNN using satellite technology to bring the Iraq war into American homes in near real time.⁸¹ These two pivotal wins for America should have won Bush a second administration, but instead, he lost to Bill Clinton in 1992, ceding the economic narrative to the Arkansas Democrat.⁸²

President Clinton did have an effect on the 1990s thriving economy, overseeing an annual average gross domestic product increase of three percent from 1990 through 1999 while simultaneously increasing American jobs by 1.7 million. However, his overall economic success depended on Americans' news source-du jour. For example, some media sources suggested that the success of the economy relied on Clinton's signing of North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a Republican initiative.⁸³ In essence, the competition across the television medium provided viewers a host of programming options, leaving the networks and cable networks scrambling to further refine their niche news audiences. Media conglomerates solved this problem by serving up similar information but emphasizing partisan themes that aligned with viewers' politics.

The variation in news sources increased the volume of information to the average American. For example, the CNN effect brought humanitarian issues to the doorsteps of America. The speed, frequency, and extent of the vivid sensationalized 24-hour news coverage ensured hostile acts in far off places such as Rwanda or famine in Ethiopia

⁸¹ D. Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Oxfordshire, England: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2019), 1–20.

⁸² This was satirically highlighted on Saturday Night Live with Dana Carvey famously parodying H.W. Bush, "Place in history? Se-cure!" referring to the Desert Storm and the Cold War; David Halberstam, "War in a Time of Peace," *New York Times*, 30 September 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/30/books/chapters/war-in-a-time-of-peace.html>

⁸³ James Pethokoukis, "Was the 1990s Clinton Economy Really That Good?," 17 June 2015, <https://www.aei.org/economics/political-economy/was-the-1990s-clinton-economy-really-that-good/>.

could not go unnoticed.⁸⁴ Of course, international news was not the only focus of the media as domestically; President Clinton's sex scandal, his vehement denial, and the subsequent perjury and impeachment trial engulfed the nation.⁸⁵ Midwifed by the days of McCarthyism and Watergate and matured by the O.J. Simpson trial, the media had perfected the sensational aspect of providing America simultaneous information and entertainment.⁸⁶

The speed and volume of information available for America to consume in the early 1980s increased due in the wake of the FCC's deregulation moves of the late 1970s. The deregulation acts and the cable industry's boom would again force the FCC to impose restrictions on the cable industry, continuing its metronomic relationship with the television industry. However, as technology changed the speed and volume of information to America, the FCC's small rudder would need to abandon the smaller changes of the 1970s and institute major changes to steer regulation in the growing age of information.

Laws and Regulations 1980-1999

The cable deregulation trends of the late 1970s acted as a crucial step in allowing competition to grow, but to stave off stagnation, the cable industry needed a direct lifeline, which it received from Congress with the 1984 Cable Act. In 1979, there were 11 basic cable networks and 10 premium network channels with 77 percent of all cable systems offering less than 12 channels to viewers.⁸⁷ Congress's 1984 Cable Act sought

⁸⁴ The CNN effect is a theory that tries to describe conditions under which the US would employ military forces. The theory suggests that shocking images of humanitarian crises force US policy makers into regions they otherwise might not have stake. Gilboa, "The CNN Effect: The Search for a Communication Theory of International Relations." The Rwanda genocide of 1994 saw over 800K people murdered in 100 days. The US still smarting from the losses in Somalia did not support the UN or Belgium, both of which pulled out of the conflict. BBC News. "Rwanda genocide: 100 days of slaughter." 4 April 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-26875506>; For insights into the Ethiopian famine, consider Donovan and Scherer, *Unslient Revolution*, 153.

⁸⁵ President Clinton's most iconic, and perhaps damning, quote of the ordeal "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Ms. Lewinsky. Richard A. Posner, *An Affair of State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1-15.

⁸⁶ The other iconic trial that gripped the nation was the OJ Simpson trial in 1995 where television aided in the three-ring circus of a trial, including the televised two hour California 405 freeway "chase." Chang, Rachel. "O.J. Simpson's Freeway Chase: What Happened to the White Ford Bronco." *Biography*, 17 June 2019. <https://www.biography.com/news/oj-simpson-bronco-chase-car-museum>.

⁸⁷ Crandall and Furchtgott-Roth, *Cable TV: Regulation or Competition?*, 6-7.

to balance local, state, and federal laws, all of whom vied for dominance in the growing marketplace competition.⁸⁸ The 1984 Act came at a time when conflict between local regulators and the cable companies were at their peak, the quarrels essentially stagnating the wiring of urban areas to receive cable network signals.⁸⁹ In short, the Act allowed the chargeable rates of all cable systems facing “effective competition” to be deregulated, curtailing the power of local regulators.

The final stipulation of the 1984 Act concerned telephone companies which were denied the right to offer cable service in their franchised areas for fear of the telephone companies subsidizing their new cable investments with funds from their monopoly in the telephone industry.⁹⁰ While the telephone industry’s relationship with the US Government will be discussed in Chapter 3, the Act’s deregulation allowed the cable industry to spend more than \$15 billion in the wiring of America. The Act’s effects were felt as early as 1989, when the number of cable channels available to Americans had tripled and subscriptions soared past 47 million.⁹¹

Questions of ownership and monopoly continued to attract the FCC’s attention. In 1985, the Rule of Sevens became the Rule of Twelves, allowing parties to own 12 AM, 12 FM, and 12 television stations. This rule changed again in 1992 to the 18-18-12 Rule and in 1994 to the 20-20-12 Rule to allow failing radio stations to have continued growth.⁹² In addition, the FCC prohibited cross-ownership of multiple information mediums. For example, television stations were not allowed to simultaneously own a newspaper that serviced the same local market. This represented the FCC’s attempt to limit cross ownership and provide a diverse source of information to the American

⁸⁸ Wenmouth Williams, Jr. and Kathleen Mahoney, “Perceived Impact of the Cable Policy Act of 1984,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 31, no. 2 (1987): 193–205.

⁸⁹ The local regulator differed across the country; in some instances it could be the state, county, city or municipality and its purpose was to address issues concerning cable rates, tier rates, customer service issues concerning the cable companies. Williams, Jr. and Mahoney, “Perceived Impact of the Cable Policy Act of 1984,” 193.

⁹⁰ Specifically, this hurt the system of Bell Telephone Companies (colloquially called Ma Bell) which had a monopoly on telephone services from 1877 until 1984 where the Justice Department mandated the breakup into regional companies called “Baby Bells.” Crandall and Furchtgott-Roth, *Cable TV: Regulation or Competition?*, 7.

⁹¹ Crandall and Furchtgott-Roth, 5 *Cable TV: Regulation or Competition*, 5–6.; California Cable & Telecommunications Association, “History of Cable,” 4 Feb 2020, <https://www.cable.org/learn/history-of-cable/>

⁹² Sadler, *Electronic Media Law*, 105.

public.

Diversity concerning programming also continued to be a fault line. The 1970s' fin-syn rules increased pressure over program syndication but found a pressure valve with 1992 legal proceedings in the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals. In essence, due to the burgeoning competition within the television industry in the 1990s, networks no longer held the monopsony of power to whipsaw independent producers into financially unstable situations, negating the need for the power-balancing fin-syn ruling. Therefore, the FCC complied with the Court's remand by eliminating the more stifling aspects of the fin-syn rules in 1993, allowing networks to immediately populate schedules with programming owned by the network.⁹³ A theme was beginning to develop in the 1990s: the television industry clamored for FCC noninterference in lieu of competition only to flex newfound power in the deregulated wake.

While networks were winning small victories, the cable companies received a healthy dose of oversight with the 1992 Consumer Protection and Competition Act, forcibly promoting availability of diverse views and information. Since the deregulation era, the monthly rates for the most basic cable packages had increased across the country by 40 percent or more and, due to the nature of cable, subscribers did not have the opportunity to select between competing cable companies.⁹⁴ In short, cable became the de facto delivery system for broadcast programming and consumers had little to no choice in cable providers. Through an arduous process, the 1992 Act executed by the FCC reestablished the market approach and instituted rate regulation and a "basic" tier of local channels which had to be carried by the cable companies. The networks cheered since they wanted to see compensation on a per-subscriber basis and own a marketable product. Meanwhile, the cable companies howled that any free signal (from antennas, etc.) should remain free.⁹⁵ As these arguments embroiled the concerned parties, the rest of America was on the eve of the largest change to communications since 1934—the Telecommunications Act of 1996.

⁹³ Hoynes and Croteau, *Business of Media: Corporate Media and The Public Interest*, 100–101.

⁹⁴ Public Law 102-385—Oct 5, 1992

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Kolbert, THE MEDIA BUSINESS: Television; To pay or not to pay? A war of words heats up between cable systems and broadcasters, 23 Aug 1993, *The New York Times*, 12 Feb 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/08/23/business/media-business-television-pay-not-pay-war-words-heats-up-between-cable-systems.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

Until 1996, the FCC attempted to limit, perhaps inelegantly, the cross-concentration of ownership within mass media.⁹⁶ While the Act of 1984 served as the deregulation watershed, it paled in comparison to 1996 legislation. The 1996 Act sought to create competition among different kinds of telecommunication, to include the Internet, and foster further innovation in the midst of the technological revolution.⁹⁷ The Act's most controversial deed allowed for media cross-ownership, essentially opening up the television industry to an unfettered free market under the guise of bolstering competition for American viewers. In reality, with the new maximum ceiling of reaching 35 percent of total US homes, local phone companies could buy out local cable companies and vice versa. The result, coupled with the rate-regulation overturn of the 1992, was that in cities of 50,000 people or less, there could be hundreds of channels—but one voice, one provider, and no competition to lower rates.⁹⁸

The 1996 Act allowed mass media concentrations, deregulated cable's pay-rates, and effected licensing and television ratings, but ultimately it raised post hoc fallacy concerns.⁹⁹ Whom did the bill actually benefit? The *New York Times* had the correct idea after the 1984 Act when reporters suggested, "Congress needs to examine the financial fallout, learn who will benefit how much, and ask 'why.'"¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately, in this instance, the telecommunications industry, in the form of political action committee (PAC) money, was lining the coffers of the very members of Congress overseeing the subcommittee.¹⁰¹ With the watchdogs' pockets laden with donations, the joint venture cartels began, with \$50 billion in industry mergers and acquisitions as early as July of 1996. Mergers aside, America's cable bill averaged a 10.4 percent hike during the first

⁹⁶ When the FCC developed the Rules of Seven and Twelve to include the maximum of 25% US audience make up, many within the television industry thought the numbers were arbitrary. This may have well been the case since the FCC could not articulate their decisions on these numbers.

⁹⁷ The internet will be further discussed in Chapter 3; Aufderheide, "Communication Policy and the Public Interest," 9–27.

⁹⁸ D. Hazen, J. Winokur, and Institute for Alternative Journalism, *We the Media: A Citizens' Guide to Fighting for Media Democracy* (Ft Meyers, FL: New Press, 1997), 18–19.

⁹⁹ Licensing renewal procedures were relaxed and television shows now had to be accompanied with ratings similar to the movie systems.

¹⁰⁰ "Who Shall Own How Much TV," *New York Times*, 3 August 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/08/03/opinion/who-shall-own-how-much-tv.html>

¹⁰¹ For example, in addition to the hundreds of thousands of dollars contributed to key members of the telecommunications subcommittees, AT&T's PAC distributed \$166,500 the day after lawmakers reached consensus on the bill, the highest amount of any day during that election cycle. Hazen et al., *We the Media: A Citizens' Guide to Fighting for Media Democracy*, 22.

half of 1996. Perhaps more telling is that neither the passage nor signing of the most significant change in America's telecommunication system made the top 10 news stories in their respective weeks on The Big Three's networks.¹⁰² When Ted Koppel, who hosted ABC's *Nightline*, ran a story on the largest change to telecommunications since the 1930s and asked for comments, ABC told them to speak to CBS, who said "no comment," as did NBC and Fox.¹⁰³ If America did not read the national newsprint, the entire event could have gone completely unnoticed.

Gatekeepers 1980-1999

Since the 1950s, a running theme throughout the television industry was the influence of the networks and television producers concerning what programming America received. With the massive mergers made possible by the 1996 Act, media cartels grew their empires to include networks, affiliate stations, cable, newspapers, and magazines. This mattered because large media corporations, not the government, could self-censor information outlets.¹⁰⁴

As one example, ABC produced a hard-hitting report for *Prime Time Live* in 1990 concerning Disney theme parks, titled "Tragic Kingdom." The segment highlighted Disney's shirking of local laws and shoddy construction practices to meet deadlines. To counter the unfriendly press, Disney launched its own PR campaign to triage any fallout with the public. Following Disney's purchase of ABC in 1995, the network instead cast the theme parks in a positive, regulation-following light, highlighting the role of private industry censoring information.¹⁰⁵ In short, business owners, who are also media cartels, are less likely to allow negative brand tarnishing information to surface, robbing the consumer and viewer of vital information.

The public relations (PR) field surely blossomed in the 1950s, however, by 1997

¹⁰² The Tyndall Report tracks the nightly network newscasts coverage of different topics; currently their website traces issues back to 2006. Hazen and Winokur's book, published in 1997 would have had access to their most prevalent data. Hazen et al., *We the Media: A Citizens' Guide to Fighting for Media Democracy*, 22.

¹⁰³ Hazen et al., *We the Media: A Citizens' Guide to Fighting for Media Democracy*, 19.

¹⁰⁴ America, since throwing off the oppressive regime of King George, has always been concerned with government overreach. However, a potential blind spot for the nation is the same overreach by private industry. While merely a footnote in the television industry, this theme will have cascading effects within the Internet era.

¹⁰⁵ This archived video is not available on ABC's site, a partial segment can be found on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40p5WFMTzjk>

the field was a full-on jungle with US companies shelling out \$3.5 billion to PR firms and PR specialists outnumbering journalists by a 3-to-1 ratio.¹⁰⁶ In this period, 40 percent of television “news” was in reality a canned PR product, a fact media habitually and conveniently undisclosed.¹⁰⁷ The “news” provided by PR firms was paid for by various clients who decided what and how they wanted America to perceive them or their company. For example, consider Kathie Lee Gifford and the child labor sweatshops stories surrounding her clothing line of the same name. Using a damage-control PR firm, the news did not focus on the story—global child labor issues—rather, it focused on Kathie Lee, the “committed labor activist” who pledged 50 percent of her clothing line profits to the Central American children exploited by greedy corporations (like hers.) Armed with her own talk show, Kathie Lee continued the favorable narrative while labor-rights activists had no counterpunch platform to inform the public of reality. Kathie Lee’s clothing line only contributed *10 percent*—meanwhile child labor continues to embroil the youth of Central America.¹⁰⁸ Public figures and companies with resources to retain PR firms played by a different set of rules and the television industry was happy to facilitate.

Finally, PR firms changed the nature of grassroots movements, replacing the days of the civil rights marches with “Astroturf” movements. Astroturf movements, which represented supposedly grassroots origins, used pre-recorded “news” releases, created by PR firms to be aired on the nightly news, with the intent of skewing viewers’ perceptions of what America valued. A classic PR example is America’s disposal of toxic sewage with a PR firm rebranding and selling the sludge to farmers as “biosolids” and “vitamin pills for the earth,” giving the toxic stew a glossy veneer to alleviate Americas concerns.¹⁰⁹ The television industry, along with other media forms, played a contributing

¹⁰⁶ Laura Follis, “The Impact of Public Relations on News,” Journalism thesis, California Polytechnic University (2013), 6–7.

¹⁰⁷ Hazen et al., *We the Media: A Citizens’ Guide to Fighting for Media Democracy*, 73.

¹⁰⁸ *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee* was a daily show syndicated by Disney who also had PR issues with Child Labor Laws; Hazen et al., *We the Media: A Citizens’ Guide to Fighting for Media Democracy*, 73. Strom, Stephanie. “A Sweetheart Becomes Suspect; Looking Behind Those Kathie Lee Labels.” *The New York Times*, 27 June 1996. <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/06/27/business/a-sweetheart-becomes-suspect-looking-behind-those-kathie-lee-labels.html>.

¹⁰⁹ The satirical film *Thank you for Smoking* captures the essence of the “Astroturf” PR movements. J.C. Stauber and S. Rampton, *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You!* (London, England: Constable and Robinson Ltd, 2004), 99–120.

role in facilitating this façade to the American public.

Norms of 1980-1999

The speed and the volume of information from television had numerous normalizing effects on society. This section will explore physical norms such as the advent of the multi-channel television and the 24-hour news cycle with the subsequent challenge of filling such a news cycle. The physical norms amplified social norms such as the previously mentioned onslaught of 24-hour news and Congress's response with the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN.) Finally, the section will explore the escalating social norm of television violence and the effects on America's youth.

The advent of multi-channel television saw the birth of the remote control and videocassette recorder in the 1980s and the 1990s and various set-top boxes to streamline the many sources of inbound media to American homes. These devices also allowed viewers to record programs to watch at their leisure which had effects on television ratings and, ultimately, the cable networks, advertisers, and the media industry.¹¹⁰ Multi-channel television allowed cable companies to provide tiers of channels, giving a range of options from basic and premium, which were not beholden to rate laws thanks to the 1996 Act. Moreover, by the mid-1990s, there were 14 multiple system owners in the US with over one million subscribers each, accounting for over 72 percent of all US subscribers, narrowing America's choices with respect to cable providers.¹¹¹ America was watching more television, but they were also watching what they wanted, when they wanted it, without inconvenience. The multi-channel phenomenon started this viewership trend in large part due to the competition amongst television programming, to include the 24-hour news cycles.

As previously mentioned, the birth of CNN and the 24-hour news cycle was the brainchild of Ted Turner; his vision of the network stemmed from the contemporary

¹¹⁰ Recording television shows and then consuming them later gave Americans freedoms, but had potential to skew Nielsen ratings with rules that the show had to have been watched within one day of the original broadcast. These devices also gave researchers additional insight into America's psyche. For example, the 2004 Super Bowl Halftime wardrobe malfunction was the most TiVo'ed and replayed moment in the history of TiVo. Reuters, "TiVo: Jackson stunt most replayed moment ever." 3 February 2004. <http://www.cnn.com/2004/TECH/ptech/02/03/television.tivo.reut/index.html>.

¹¹¹ Multiple System Owner refers to a company which owns and operates two or more cable system such as Time Warner Cable. Crandall and Furchtgott-Roth, *Cable TV: Regulation or Competition?*, 9-10.

perception of news networks reporting, “quasi-tabloid, quasi-celebrity news...waiting for the next great crisis.”¹¹² While the iconic news tickers were only used for stock market statistics and sports scores, 24-hours news segments needed help in shaping the news, giving way to the professional pundit to provide comprehensible analysis to the average viewer.¹¹³

In the 1970s, shaping the news centered on topics such as the economy or themes that were difficult to visually present with live footage or photos, a trend that changed by the end of the 1980s. By 1988, news shaping morphed into pundits who influenced Americans on subjective domestic and political issues.¹¹⁴ Early on, news shapers differed from the actual newsmakers who were part of the event. For example, criminals, victims, candidates for office, military leaders, and foreign dignitaries all clearly had a specific side or vested interests. In contrast, news shapers were consultants to the media outlets offering America their “expert” or “scholarly” detached analysis, suggesting non-partisan views on events around the world. As news shapers moved from the economy to subjective stories, the expert portrayal of news shapers or pundits quickly garnered the moniker of bias.¹¹⁵ The bias possibly stemmed from the woeful lack of diversity within the entire industry. Two different studies from the 1980s both found that the vast majority of news professionals were white, educated, males and sourced news shapers that fit the same profile.¹¹⁶ Moreover, most of the education stemmed from the Northeast Ivy League region as did a majority of news stories.

Finally, to illustrate the growing frequency of networks relying on news shapers for their stories, consider the 1980 and 1988 studies sampling two weeks’ worth of segments throughout six selected months of the year. In 1980, there were 88 news shaper

¹¹² Liane Hansen and David Folkenflik, “The Power of the 24-Hour News Cycle,” 29 May 2005, *National Public Radio*, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4671485>

¹¹³ The news ticker, now called a chyron (for the Chyron Company that manufactures the on-screen graphic software) did not really start until after the terrorists attacks on 9/11 when Fox News Channel placed a ticker on the screen to be followed quickly by the other news outlets.

¹¹⁴ For example, which presidential candidate won the debate; such important topics were no longer suitable for the public to decide. Lawrence C. Soley, *The News Shapers: The Sources Who Explain the News* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1992), 152.

¹¹⁵ Despite the moniker of “expert” or “analyst,” there are many examples in the 1980s of news outlets using pundits with questionable expertise. Soley, *The News Shapers: The Sources Who Explain the News*, 1–6, 29.

¹¹⁶ Specifically over 90 percent of the 238 reporters surveyed were white and educated and over 75 percent were male. Soley, *The News Shapers: The Sources Who Explain the News*, 21–22.

appearances, but in 1988, that number jumped to 260 appearances. However, both study samples demonstrated a lack of diversity.¹¹⁷ In reality, once used, a news shaper's likelihood of being used again was extremely high, not because the shaper was the best option, but because of their recentness on the network. This frequency of pundits providing opinions mesmerized portions of society into believing news events and shaped televised reports were synonymous.¹¹⁸

Since the advent of television, it was the president who captured the public's eye, a fact amplified by 24-hour news coverage. However, Congress set about to change this trend with the 1979 advent of C-SPAN.¹¹⁹ The channel originally televised sessions of the House of Representatives, commencing full-time operations in 1982 with the Senate following with full-time televised operations in 1987. C-SPAN is unique in that it provided a public-affairs-only programming in an unedited gavel-to-gavel style production. The channel, financed by the cable industry, had the lowest affiliate fee (5 cents) and total production cost (\$2,300) when compared to other programming.¹²⁰ The channel's creation was intended to give average citizens greater access to government proceedings.¹²¹ While America now had access to its legislative leaders, by 1994, only 8.6 percent of society was reportedly watching with that number inching to 12 percent by 2004.¹²² If America was concerned about the "what" of government, it did not appear to want to watch the "how."

¹¹⁷ For example, female news shapers were used approximately six percent of the time. Soley, *The News Shapers: The Sources Who Explain the News*, 31–36.

¹¹⁸ Soley, *The News Shapers: The Sources Who Explain the News*, 19.

¹¹⁹ Congress had previously debated opening up their doors for the American public to view legislation in action. The 1970s debates concerning this topic centered on how it would be produced (industry concerned with government dictating how news would reach society), who would pay for it (it was decided it should be a public service), and where it should reside. While PBS was subsidized by the government, it was designed to prevent direct control of content—hence CSPAN. Public Broadcasting Corporation, "Public Broadcasting Act of 1967," <http://www.cpb.org/aboutpb/act/>

¹²⁰ John Higgins, "Man on a Mission: C-SPAN's Kennedy Sees a Multiplatform Future for Public Affairs," *Broadcasting & Cable*, March 27, 2006, 24.

¹²¹ While C-SPAN never intended to provide more than Americans to see government in action, it provided interesting coverage of legislation during the Persian Gulf conflict of 1991 and the House impeachment vote and Senate trial of President Clinton. National Cable Satellite Corporation, *C-Span Milestones*, 7 Feb 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110717175854/http://legacy.c-span.org/about/company/index.asp?code=MILESTONES>

¹²² Harden, Blaine (May 9, 1996). "Feasting on C-SPAN; Diet of Public Affairs TV Puts Political Junkies Inside Beltway". The Washington Post, 25 Feb 2020 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2004/03/18/confessions-of-a-c-span-junkie/5d5563b8-08d5-427c-817a-cf0d2d0bc123/>

The final norming factor of this era was the evolution of television's portrayal of sex and violence, a response in large part due to the preference of viewers, punctuated by the epidemic of schoolyard shootings in the early 1990s.¹²³ While the 1970s gave America "jiggle TV" resulting in NAB-instituted standards such as the "Family Viewing Hour," research from the 1970s on violence in relation to future aggression poured in. A New York study that began in 1963 sampled 875 third graders and followed them for a 22-year period. While the study originally looked to correlate parenting styles with children's aggressive behavior, the researchers realized that television-viewing habits seemed to have a substantial role in adult life aggression. In short, this research suggested that children watching TV violence learned aggressive habits which had long-term consequences such as higher incarceration rates.¹²⁴

Advancements in social cognitive theory stated that a child's attention and retention of modeled behavior, such as that on television, could help explain imitational responses. Furthermore, decades of research into catharsis theory was unsubstantiated, meaning aggression could not be "purged" through exposure to violence, tantamount to ancient "humours" to be drained.¹²⁵ Children of the mid-1990s watched 22,000 hours of television by the time they were 18, witnessed 8,000 murders by the time they were 12, and received a total of 60 percent of their information from the television. Moreover, a 1994 Newsweek poll found 67 percent of those polled blamed television for the country's moral crisis, absconding parents who allowed 14 percent of their child's entire existence to be consumed by television.¹²⁶

The government intervened in 1990 with the Children's Television Act (CTA) aimed at increasing educational programming and again with the 1996 Act, instituting the V-chip. The FCC's commission on the CTA echoed the independent polling data, finding that America's youth were watching more television and determined the market forces of competition landscape had not produced an adequate amount of educational

¹²³ Ponce de Leon, *That's the Way It Is: A History of Television News in America*, xv; Victor C. Strasburger and Barbara J. Wilson, *Television Violence: Sixty Years of Research* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2014), 33.

¹²⁴ A study surveying 500 grade school children and following those 15 years produced similar results in 2003. Strasburger and Wilson, *Television Violence: Sixty Years of Research*, 15–17.

¹²⁵ Strasburger and Wilson, *Television Violence: Sixty Years of Research*, 25.

¹²⁶ Hazen, Winokur, and Institute for Alternative Journalism, *We the Media: A Citizens' Guide to Fighting for Media Democracy*, 64.

programming.¹²⁷ The government took the norm a step further with the 1996 Act, requiring all television sets with screens larger than 13 inches to include the V-chip technology to allow parents to block content based on the new program standards rating system.¹²⁸ The public lambasted the rating system, which designated what industry thought was suitable for children; for example TV-Y, suitable for all children versus TV-PG, where parental guidance was recommended. Instead, public opinion surveys showed the population preferred the description of the content so they could decide if it was “TV-Y” or not which further spurred the program labeling, such as “MV” for mild violence, to accompany the recommended audience. With the best intentions, the Act proved fruitless. The FCC released a report in 2007 that called for tougher regulations from Congress concerning television violence, as the V-chip blocking technology and rating system are not effective.¹²⁹

To summarize the 1980s and 1990s, the deregulation watershed of 1984 set the tone for the monumental Act of 1996. While the 1996 Act was intended to facilitate competition, instead it led to joint venture cartels who diversified their portfolios and narrowed down options for millions of America in terms of television industry service provider. Table 4 summarizes the key periods within the 1980s and 1990s.

Table 4 Summary of 1980-1999

Years	Laws & Regulations	Gatekeepers	Norms
1984	Cable Act acts as the start of deregulation watershed to allow effective competition and balance local, state, and federal laws	N/A	N/A
1985	18-18-12 Rule increases the amount of cross-media	N/A	N/A

¹²⁷ Federal Communications Commission Office of Public Affairs, “FCC Fact Sheet: Children’s Television Programming,” April 1995, https://transition.fcc.gov/Bureaus/Mass_Media/Factsheets/kidstv.txt

¹²⁸ Monroe E. Price, *The V-Chip Debate: Content Filtering from Television to the Internet* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers, 1998), 119.

¹²⁹ Federal Communications Commission, MB Docket No. 04-261, “In the Matter of Violent Television Programming And Its Impact On Children,” 25 April 2007, http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/FCCviolence.pdf?mod=article_inline

	platform ownership		
1987	N/A	N/A	CSPAN created with very few Americans watching the “how” of government
1988	N/A	N/A	News shapers start to become a staple in American newsrooms
1990	N/A	N/A	Children’s Television Act increases educational programming as parents become more concerned with violence on TV
1992	20-20-12 increases cross-media platform ownership with the aim to help failing radio; Consumer Protection and Competition Act promotes availability of diverse views and info while reigning in Cable’s rates	N/A	N/A
1993	Fin-Syn rulings overturned, allowing networks to populate schedules with their own programming	N/A	N/A
1996	Largest Telecommunications Act in 60 years aimed at promoting competition	Joint Venture Cartels owned multiple sources of information distribution and brands	VChip aids the Children Television Act in ensuring standards of ratings for programming
1997	N/A	PR Firms	N/A

		outnumber journalists 3-to-1	
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Source: Author's Original Work

Considering the above dates, the trends in Chapter 4 should demonstrate that when the government deregulates and allows private industry to control the landscape of information distribution, there should be corresponding inflection points within the Truth Decay variables. Therefore, to some degree, following 1984 and, to a major degree, following 1996, America should have a large shift within the Truth Decay variables. The small changes in regulation and norms between these two poles should have little to no effect on the overall downward trend but culminate with a large shift by 1996. In this context, if there were to be a single point to demonstrate change within the Truth Decay system it will be 1996. Unlike the early 1950s, when data collection among the various variables was lower and previous points within history, which did not align the key laws, gatekeepers, and norms—1996 has major implications in all of the control mechanisms, and therefore should demonstrate large amplitude changes within the system.

SUMMARY

This chapter provided a contextual overview of America from the 1950s until the turn of the 21st century and mapped the key regulations affecting the television industry. As time progressed, the gatekeepers such as the major networks and television producers each possessed individual agency, but also acted homogeneously in their pursuit of ratings, which in turn provided critical revenue. Another key gatekeeper were the various public relations firms that started to shape the news and aided the norming of pundits on television. These news shapers displayed a lack of diversity and started to conflate opinion with facts beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Moreover, while America demanded “better” standards of programming concerning indecency and violence, Nielsen’s ratings indicated programmers were providing America *exactly* what it wanted, be it more “jiggle TV” or information tinted with their own brand of partisan stripe. To reiterate the key proposition from Chapter 1, as the speed and volume of information continued to bombard America for over 50 years, the onslaught entrenched society in an insidious spiral of Truth Decay.

America's love affair with "the tube" and the novelty of combining sight with sound all but ensured government oversight of the new medium. The FCC provided control that both favored and curtailed the monopsony powers of the network and cable industries, acting as an erratic vacillating metronome of regulation. In turn, the networks and cable industry responded not only to the regulatory landscape of the FCC but the commercial market, seeking profit as the ultimate goal for each organization. By the end of the 1980s and into the mid-1990s, the television industry rhetorically cried for the opportunity to serve America better by allowing unfettered competition; in reality, the uncontrolled industry cemented joint venture cartel monopolies. In short, the dialectic nature of ensuring profitability and public service of distributing information ensured information was entertaining but left a growing cancer within its wake.

In the next chapter, titled "*The Information Superhighway and the Changing of the Guard*," I continue to trace the control mechanisms governing the use of the Internet within America. As was evident with the television industry, the government enacts regulations to foster crucial innovative growth, which in turn increases the information available to the public and augments the speed at which it reaches them. These changes also change the nature of who the gatekeepers are and their level of power which will ultimately shape America's norms. As Chapter 4 "*Modes of Media and Truth Decay*" will explore, these rapid changes will have an effect on society, pushing them deeper into throes of Truth Decay.

Chapter 3

The Information Highway and the Changing of the Guard

The truth is no online database will replace your daily newspaper, no CD-ROM can take the place of a competent teacher and no computer network will change the way government works.

1995 Article in Newsweek: Why the Internet will Fail

Just like Kennedy brought in the television presidency, I think [America] is about to see the first wired, connected, networked presidency.

Democratic Strategist after Obama's 2008 victory

Don't be evil.

Google's Motto

Introduction

The Internet's origins did not have the pomp and circumstance of a World's Fair, nor did it have grandioso opening remarks from the president to commence the momentous achievement. Instead, the Internet's quiet beginnings were the result of a beeping beach ball orbiting the earth, launched by the Soviet Union. America's surprise following the Soviet Union's unveiling of Sputnik in 1957 was palpable. Previously, society assumed the US had a natural advantage in space and the Cold War. However, as sensational coverage of the space race continued, the Eisenhower Administration "had to do something" to lift the national mood out of hysteria.¹ In response, Eisenhower approved the creation of the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) to keep pace with the Soviets by creating "unimagined weapons of the future" to secure America's defense. As America's involvement in limited wars progressed, so did ARPA, which eventually started to conduct research in the field of computer science. Eventually ARPA initiated an experiment on a cross-country computer network, called ARPANET, which laid the foundational bedrock of the connective Internet system known today.²

¹ Sputnik was actually less of a shock to the inter-circle of Eisenhower's Administration, as they wrestled with setting a precedent for objects orbiting over sovereign territory. Sputnik actually solved these conundrum—but it did panic the public, causing the need to "do something." Sharon Weinberger, *The Imagineers of War: The Untold History of DARPA, the Pentagon Agency That Changed the World* (New York, NY: Knopf Publishing, 2017), 31–39.

² ARPANET is the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network. Today, the organization is known as "DAPRA" where the "D" stands for "Defense." Weinberger, *The Imagineers of War*, 122–23.

The Internet went from ARPANET's humble connection of four hosts in 1969 to the modern Internet, with billions of computers connected on every continent. Yet, the transition took 50 years. Therefore, to provide context, this chapter will begin by readdressing the 1990s and the role of the telephone industry in America through the lens of the growing Internet phenomenon. These contextual understandings are paramount as they directly relate to the control mechanisms of the 2000s. Next, similar to Chapter 2, this chapter will provide an overview of American society throughout 2000-2010 when the Internet was adopted into American homes and then discuss the laws and regulations, the gatekeepers, and the norms of the Internet. The chapter's key milestones, dates, and those of television are the central topics in Chapter 4 *Modes of Media and Truth Decay*.

1990s Revisited: From the dull tone of dial-up to ringing in the New Year with Y2K

Within 30 years in the US, the Internet went from a government-only network to numerous commercial service providers that provide Internet access for average Americans. From a technical standpoint, ARPANET fulfilled its role to share government and the academic industry's information on a protective and connected network. Therefore, in 1987, DARPA handed its work over to the Defense Communication Agency, which continued developing and researching the military's networks.³ Meanwhile ARPANET's exit left other branches of government to search for the network's successor. The search ended with the National Science Foundation (NSF) acting as the Internet's new champion and backbone for standardization options.⁴

NSF's network started in 1986 and laid the groundwork to enable faster network connections, the most notable advancement being the transmission-control protocol/internet protocol, or TCP/IP, that could regulate the transmission of data across the expanding network.⁵ Then in 1988, NSF collaborated with CERN's important work concerning hypertext markup language (HTML) that allowed linkages and uniform

³ In 1972, ARPA became the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency.

⁴ ARPA was still in the business of Imagineering weapons for war, not running a communications network. Perhaps ironically, the NSF's origins also began with America's space race and the technocratic society that began in the 1950s; National Science Foundation, 22 Feb 20, <https://www.nsf.gov>

⁵ Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 36–37.

resource locaters (URL) which provided an easy-to-find location for every item.⁶ In short, the TCP/IP and the standardized HTML procedures produced the World Wide Web of today.⁷ To summarize 30 years of multiple organizations' contributions of laborious engineering: the growing prevalence of computers across America coupled with a standardized infrastructure of the Internet—offering access to the popular World Wide Web due to legalizing commercial activity—allowed the Internet to flourish. From 1987 to 1989, the number of Internet users expanded from 28,000 to 160,000 and, as America entered the 1990s, user rates went from doubling each year to doubling in three months.⁸ America was going online and loving their connective experience.

Depending on the reader's memory, or perhaps knowledge of history, access to the Internet happened via the intricate telephone systems of America—a web of its own with a sordid past. To understand the regulations of the 1990s as they affect the 2000s, it is necessary to summarize the US Government's 100-year relationship with the telephone industry.

After the advent of the telephone in 1876, Alexander Bell founded the Bell Company and subsidized the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T) in 1884 to provide long distance services. By 1903, the two companies formally merged and AT&T, colloquially known as “Ma Bell,” supported dozens of “Baby Bell Companies” across the US.⁹ AT&T dominated the field in the early 1900s, using a scorched earth tactic to dominate competitors in the field, thereby offering the best (and only) product to America. Prior to AT&T's monopoly, the US Government instituted the Sherman Act in 1890, a broad antitrust statute that prohibited “agreements in restraint of

⁶ Tim Berners-Lee while working at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, developed a new way to link information via hypertext (language) and TCP/IP protocols, creating a large database eventually known as the World Wide Web. (The internet is an infrastructure and the Web is a service that uses the infrastructure.) In short, HTTP is the way a computer asks another computer for Web pages while HTML is the manner in which those pages are written so any computer can understand and display them correctly.

⁷ There were actually many pockets of groups creating interconnected networks both in American and globally. NFS is typically credited as being the leading backbone of what is currently the Internet. National Science Foundation, 22 Feb 2020, https://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=103050.

⁸ The internet and the web are not synonyms. A simple analogy, the internet is the bookstore and the web are books. Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 38–39.

⁹ Bell and AT&T are interchangeable and are frequently used interchangeably. Wu, *The Master Switch*, 17.

trade” and heavily punished institutions that abused their monopolists’ power.¹⁰ In short, the Sherman Act was never meant to ensure lower prices, but “prevent a few among us from using our political and economic institutions to concentrate power in their own hands.”¹¹ However, this new law did not apply in the same manner for AT&T, now the largest phone company in America. The US Government could not have competing phone companies installing redundant telephone lines across America, so, in exchange for “just and fair” regulated monopoly, Bell would serve the “entire public, for the good of the public.”¹²

This arrangement between AT&T and the US Government was further codified with the 1934 Telecommunications Act. Similar to radio and the fledgling television industry, the 1934 Act classified the telephone industry as a “common carrier” which meant that they must remain end-to-end neutral for transportation of data and offer “universal service” to the public. Under the guise of service to the public, fortified by the government’s guarantee of monopoly, AT&T blanketed the nation with long-distance phone lines, serving as black gold for anyone wanting to transmit data over long distance, be it radio in the 1930s or the Internet’s founders in the 1960s.

However, AT&T was in for a shock in the 1970s, which served as precursor to the onslaught of regulations in the 1980s. To begin, the Nixon Administration wanted to revisit the monopolist’s power relationship with the nation, bolstering anti-trust laws and exchanging “regulated monopoly” language for “competition” and “deregulation.” AT&T was not pleased.¹³ For 70 years, AT&T had served the public and, in *their* corporate mind, “there were sectors of the economy where the nation is better served by

¹⁰ Antitrust laws are also referred to as competition laws, developed by the US Government to protect the public from (potential) predatory business practices. For example, Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company was prosecuted for such antitrust violations and the Justice Department’s verdict broke Standard Oil into 35 smaller companies, essentially helping smaller businesses at the expense of the self-made company. This is essentially the reoccurring plot theme in Ayn Rand classic 1957 book “Atlas Shrugged”. Wu, *The Master Switch*, 55.

¹¹ Taplin, *Move Fast and Break Things*, 112.

¹² What “fair and just” referred to is special rules that stifled the innovative market place from adding any disruptive technology of competition to the field, such as the Hush-A-Phone of the 1950s, which could be added to the phone to make conversations more private. Never mind any number of switch girls that could have been listening in. Furthermore, AT&T could charge different rates, but they were subject to the government regulations. Wu, *The Master Switch*, 100–114.

¹³ Read: livid.

modes of *cooperation* [verses] *competition*.”¹⁴ The US Government did not agree.

A foreshadow to the AT&T empire’s demise, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) began by skimming AT&T’s most profitable business, long-distance communications by allowing Microwave Communications Incorporated (MCI) to operate in that domain.¹⁵ In 1984, the US Government completely stepped away from AT&T, removing their decades-long monopolist shield and subjected the phone company to a tsunami of regulations. In addition to long-distance service, local and regional monopolies were also “sliced and diced,” piecemealing the company to allow more telephone competition. AT&T was forced to share the profits from the infrastructure of which they had laid and maintained for the last century.¹⁶ When the Internet came calling in the 1990s, the Government’s interventions ensured the monolithic giant was merely a husk of its former glory.

While the telephone industry smarted from government regulation, the Internet industry began. The 1990s Internet had the hallmarks of today’s Internet but was actually drastically different. First, the Internet was slow, painstakingly slow. The now iconic dial-up tones of services such as America Online (AOL) ensured single telephone-lined homes would not receive incoming calls while their Internet users enjoyed the .0024 bytes per second to access the web’s content.¹⁷ Second, not many American households even *owned* computers. The Department of Labor’s Computer Ownership Study found that only 15 percent of American homes owned a computer in 1990, creeping to 35 percent by 1997, and those that did purchase private computers were middle-aged, high-income families.¹⁸

¹⁴ Wu, *The Master Switch*, 187–95.

¹⁵ MCI was a small upstart that initially acted as thorn in AT&T’s well-guarded side and turned into the company’s *bête noire*.

¹⁶ Ayn Rand would spin in her grave (she died in 1982). To give a slight counterbalance to the breakup, AT&T realized the prognosis and used some of its power to try to undermine the FCC’s competition initiative. The “civil disobedience” such as cutting off service to competitors served as further evidence for government intervention and hastened the monopoly’s break up.

¹⁷ To compare, today’s average Internet connection speed is 25 Mbps. At the old speeds, users would spend upwards of two to five hours to download music from the popular Napster site. Today, consumers show frustration with connections speeds that enter into the 5 Mbps range—still 2000-times faster than in the 1990s. Jane Reuter, “A Brief History of Internet Service Providers,” Inside Viasat (blog), 20 Feb 2020, <https://corpblog.viasat.com/a-brief-history-of-internet-service-providers/>

¹⁸ Department of Labor, “Computer Ownership up Sharply in the 1990s” 4 March 1999; Accessed 26 Feb 2020; <https://www.bls.gov/opub/btn/archive/computer-ownership-up-sharply-in-the-1990s.pdf>

Alternatively, private industry adopted computers faster than the average American family in the 1990s but varied with respect to putting the company “online.” This rapid adoption rate was partially due to the online commercial activity ban abrogated in 1995. In 1990, there were 3 million computers connected to the Internet, by 1995, that number was 16 million. After the ban was lifted, private industry flocked to the Internet and the number soared to 360 million computers by the turn of the millennium.¹⁹ However, for companies that dominated other domains of media, adopting the new superhighway of information was still considered a risky venture.

For example, consider the top newspapers in America who were in a multi-decade Hobbesian struggle with the television industry, the catalyst for newspapers continuous decline in total circulation since the 1950s.²⁰ Some of the top newspapers of then and today, such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Times* saw an opportunity, but still approached the Internet with caution. While these corporations created online websites in the mid-1990s, they held onto their old paradigms of information dissemination and ultimately struggled to market and aggregate online customers in the new industry.²¹ Meanwhile, other entrepreneurs took advantage of the low-cost of entry to web development and boldly staked their claim deep into the heart of the new mode of media. A quintessential example is the Drudge Report, providing Americans the news online and the first to break the shocking scoop on the President

¹⁹ Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 39.

²⁰ Pew Research Center, “State of the News Media Report”, accessed 20 Feb 2020, <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/06/30143308/state-of-the-news-media-report-2016-final.pdf>; Midland Daily News, Circulation of Top US Newspapers, 18 Nov 2002, <https://www.ourmidland.com/news/article/Circulation-of-Top-U-S-Newspapers-7119635.php>

²¹ To further illustrate, by 2010 those online newspapers’ visitors averaged 14 minutes on the respective sites—barely enough time scan headlines and read the opening paragraphs of stories. To compare, in 2002 the LA Times was the #2 paper in terms of total print circulation numbers; however, the newspaper was very late to offer their paper as an online service and the paper as of 2019 only has 170,000 digital subscriptions, compared to the New York Times 2.7 million. Joshua Benton, “The LA Times’ disappointing digital numbers show the game’s not just about drawing in subscribers—its’ about keeping them,” *Nieman Lab*, 31 Jul 2019, <https://www.niemanlab.org>. Jennifer Saba, “Exclusive: Average Time Spent at Top 30 Newspaper Sites,” *Editor & Publisher*, 25 Sep 2009 <https://www.editorandpublisher.com/news/exclusive-average-time-spent-at-top-30-newspaper-sites/>; David Shedden, “Today in Media History: Wall Street Journal Launched its first full online site in 1996”, *Poynter*, 29 Apr 2015; <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2015/today-in-media-history-wall-street-journal-launched-its-first-full-online-site-in-1996/>; Joseph Lichterman, “20 Years Ago Today, NYTimes.com debuted “on-line” on the web,” *Nieman Lab*, 22 Jun 2016, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2016/01/20-years-ago-today-nytimes-com-debuted-on-line-on-the-web/>.

Clinton sex scandal.²² Nevertheless, even though many households did not have computers and the internet was relatively new (and slow), it did not prevent the US Government's heavy involvement.

The US government has a history of supporting and then destroying monopolists' power, be it the telephone industry or the FCCs undermining and reformatifying of the cable and network television industry.²³ The trend continued into the 1990s with respect to the Internet, which were beholden to the telephone lines. First, the High Performance Computing Act of 1991, colloquially called the "Gore Bill," put congressional effort into developing a national information infrastructure, or the "Information Superhighway."²⁴ The Act's intent was to foster free trade and cooperation between government, academia, and industry on the Internet.²⁵ This Act sent America toiling down the road of advancing the network, which was further boosted by the watershed legislation in 1996.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996, as discussed in Chapter 2, had large ramifications on the television industry but also marked the true beginning of the Internet age, defining the fitness landscape for the coexistence of the telephone industry and the Internet.²⁶ The Internet had been categorized as an "informational service" unlike its telephone and television industry brethren who fell under "common carrier" laws in order to facilitate "an oasis from regulation in the broadband world [and] to incentivize

²² BBC Breaking News, "Scandalous Scoop Breaks Online," *BBC News*, 25 January 1998, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special_report/1998/clinton_scandal/50031.stm

²³ Wu, *The Master Switch*, 177.

²⁴ Then Congressman Gore was critical in passing this Act and during a 1999 interview with CNN, he stated how crucial the administration was in setting up the internet—this was turned into a cocktail party punchline and Gore never could shake media's false claim that "He invented the internet." *Computer History Museum*, accessed 20 Feb 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20070710170917/http://www.computerhistory.org/internet_history/internet_history_90s.shtml; Glenn Kessler, "A cautionary tale for politicians: Al Gore and the 'invention' of the Internet". *Washington Post*, 13 November 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2013/11/04/a-cautionary-tale-for-politicians-al-gore-and-the-invention-of-the-internet/>.

²⁵ Recall that the ARPANET was really for government and academia and not for the commercial sector. Both President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore saw the potential in the new medium. Moreover, it aided in the production of the first World Wide Web browser, Mosaic starting the internet boom of the 1990s. *Living Internet*, "Mosaic—The First Global Web Browser, accessed 20 Feb 2020, https://www.livinginternet.com/w/wi_mosaic.htm

²⁶ Fitness landscapes refers to the ability to adapt to the current environment to continue the evolutionary process, usually represented by mountain peaks. From an evolutionary standpoint, it is why some species prosper (finding their way to the top of the mountain) while others go extinct (die in a valley) based on genotype or phenotype fitness. In markets, injects (in this case regulation) alters the natural evolution of organisms (in this case the Internet) respond to the environment.

companies to invest.”²⁷ The cable industry took the initiative in stride, pouring capital into the unregulated medium. The return on investment for developing America’s first broadband and many of the first high-speed Internet-access services in the nation was high. To keep competitive pace, the telephone industry, in turn, deployed the digital subscriber line (DSL) to allow more data through their existing copper-line infrastructure.

As the internet matured in the mid to late 1990s, the proliferation of pornography within the medium caused a knee-jerk moral panic throughout society, forcing government intervention with the Communications Decency Act (CDA). However, in 1997, the Supreme Court ruled that the CDA infringed upon America’s right to free speech, emphasized in the first court ruling of the Internet in *Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union*. Moreover, the courts ruled the entire CDA was unconstitutional except 47 U.S.C. Section 230. Section 230, which serves as the sacrosanct code for Silicon Valley, delineating websites as either a platform or a publisher and further establishing that websites relying on user-generated content could not be treated as a publisher.²⁸ In addition, provisions within Section 230, such as the “Good Samaritan” regulation, protect platforms from libel lawsuits as long as the website in question makes a “good-faith” effort to block and screen offensive material. In short, Section 230 ensured websites, such as Facebook or YouTube were not responsible for their users’ content as long as they curated the content with moderation.

While striking down CDA was a landmark event for the continued growth of the Internet, Section 230 did have unfortunate consequences. One of the consequences, under the new law, complicated the mortifying problem for law enforcement efforts to bring charges against child abuse or child pornography, as websites were just a vessel of the crime, not the publisher. Forensic cyber-crime units were still in the developmental stages during the 1990s, making definitive attribution and justice for cyber-related crimes

²⁷ Recall that common carrier laws ensured that the business being paid to transport items (goods/people/data) is agnostic to thing being transported, while information services just provided information. In reality, the internet should have fallen under the carrier rules (which it eventually did in 2015) but to spur growth and keep regulations at a minimum, it was classified as information services. E. Ehrlich, “A Brief History of Internet Regulation,” 2–4. *Progressive Policy Institute* 20 (2014). The oasis remarks were made by FCC Chairman William E. Kennard at the US Telecom Association Annual Convention in October 1999.

²⁸ For example, publishers create content, such as the *New York Times*, while platforms would act as the newsstand to hold the content.

challenging. Fortunately, Microsoft took action and provided companies free software whose advanced algorithms could flag child pornography and aid in eliminating it from the networks.

Furthermore, the 1998 Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), which prohibited websites from displaying copyrighted material without consent, received a judicial ruling that a “fair use” plea could be made with websites before eradicating the questionable material. The Internet was enjoying the freedoms of its “informational service” classification and, in attempts to further negate the ire of the US Government, most corporations self-censored to avoid oversight. In sum, with the exception of copyright infringement and child pornography, many websites did little to regulate content.²⁹

While the Internet was executing self “content moderation,” the telephone industry continued smarting from heavy government regulation, specifically, the “unbundling” statutes from the 1996 Act, which stated any significant investment into providing better Internet service, must be shared with the competition at wholesale prices set by the government.³⁰ This statute curtailed the telephone industry’s monopoly, leaving little incentive for innovative Internet-solutions while the cable industry pulled ahead in the deregulation wake.³¹ The complaints of those slighted by the new delineation echoed the frustrations of those in 1934, but the taxonomy did have the intended effect as America’s online experience enhanced with faster web connections leading into the new millennium. Government regulated the telephone industry for 100 years and afforded special advantages to the Internet industry in the 1990s. The Internet thus matured quickly in the 2000s and set a breakneck pace for regulations, gatekeepers, and America’s norms.

2000-2010: From the storms of .com bubble bursts to the reign of Google & Facebook

²⁹ Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 224–27.

³⁰ Ehrlich, “A Brief History of Internet Regulation,” 7.

³¹ For example, fiber optic cable was a vast improvement over copper lines, however installing this to homes would have to be resourced to competitors effectively freezing the phone companies’ investment initiatives. Ehrlich, “A Brief History of Internet Regulation,” 8.

The beginning of the new millennium centered on predications about the Internet ranging anywhere from Chicken Little's "the sky is falling" to a digital starry-eyed *Pollyanna* utopia. After the Y2K scare, it seemed if the former held more weight. In the late 1990s, "dot-coms" were the in-vogue investment opportunity for wealthy tycoons, resulting in a host of dot-com corporations by 1997. However, a series of mismanagement of revenue saw the once prosperous dot-com stocks lose \$1.7 trillion in market value by the turn of the century—Chicken Little indeed.³²

Nonetheless, the beginning of the 2000s held Internet bright spots with millennials. For example, the "Wisdom of the Crowd" movement as evident by the creation and success of Wikipedia in 2001 and other network platforms created in the early 2000s such as Myspace, Facebook, and Twitter seemed to bond America's new generation.³³ These platforms initiated the start of the second stage of the Internet, or "Web 2.0," where the web would be dominated by dynamic user generated content and social media's crowd "wisdom."³⁴ While the Internet was the genesis of huge trends in the 2000s, the ultimate defining moment in the decade happened on September 11, 2001.

Most Americans can recall where they were and what they were doing when the Twin Towers fell; it held the nation's rapt attention like no event in recent history, dominating every medium of information. It dwarfed every aspect of Americans' lives, reminiscent of the fears following Pearl Harbor in 1941, reinforcing the idea that "we are not isolated from foreign attack." In response, President Bush announced America's "War on Terror," launching the US military into a generational war. At the helm only months before the attack, the War on Terror would serve as Bush's legacy in history, as

³² The new hypertext transfer protocol (http) allowed users to navigate the web better and the low cost of entry saw hundreds of new companies online in short order, using mediums such as the 2000 Super bowl to launch their advertising in January. In addition, the new startups invested heavily in banner ads, but did not adjust with click-rates dropped. Investors feared missing out focused more on the idea of the startup versus if the startup had a strong business model—most did not "Here's Why The Dot Com Bubble Began And Why It Popped". *Business Insider*. December 15, 2010. <https://www.businessinsider.com/heres-why-the-dot-com-bubble-began-and-why-it-popped-2010->; CNN Money "The \$1.7 Trillion dot.com lesson" *CNN Money*, 9 November 2000, <https://money.cnn.com/2000/11/09/technology/overview/>.

³³ Facebook's story is well-known and eventually overtook Myspace in 2008 as the new king of social media where over 35% of adults had a social profile. Marc Schenker, "Former MySpace CEO explains why MySpace lost out to Facebook so badly," *Digital Trends*, Accessed 28 Feb 2020.

³⁴ Essentially Web 2.0 made making websites easier, more interactive such as using PC-based software. Mike Wolcott, "What is Web 2.0?," *CBS News*, 1 May 2008, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-is-web-20/>.

he went on to win the general election in 2004 against the Democratic nominee, John Kerry.³⁵

Still in the throes of the War on Terror, Bush's administration would go on to "bungle" the largest natural disaster in US history, attempting to provide guidance and relief in the 2005 Hurricane Katrina tragedy.³⁶ Katrina saw over 1800 fatalities, but also showed America the power of the Internet, using it as a lifeline to connect family members or offer help and assistance.³⁷ The Internet was changing America and "change" was the new slogan of the 2007 election cycle.

Elections in the US started to adopt more technology, as evident with President Obama's win over opponent John McCain. When Obama started his campaign, he announced his vice president pick of Joe Biden on a budding platform called Twitter, a revolutionary moment in 2007. Meanwhile, Apple released the iPhone during Obama's 2007 campaign for a cool \$600 and polling data suggested people were getting online from a variety of platforms to receive their presidential election information.³⁸ For instance, Pew Research Center started tracking this very phenomenon in the mid-1990s and Figure 5 demonstrates that, while television still ruled the information sector, the Internet was already surpassing the newspaper industry. In addition, Figure 5 also shows the percentage of the US population that owned different online devices and their growing use of social media by the end of 2000s. The Internet changed how Americans perceived their government and received the news.

³⁵ For example, one would have to think hard to remember the Gore-Bush Florida recount of 2000, an extreme controversial topic at the time, eclipsed by the 2001 events. Ron Elving, "The Florida Recount of 2000: The Nightmare That Keeps On Haunting," 12 November 2018, *National Public Radio*, <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/12/666812854/the-florida-recount-of-2000-a-nightmare-that-goes-on-haunting>.

³⁶ Evan Thomas, "The Government Response to Katrina: A Disaster Within a Disaster", 18 September 2005, *Newsweek*, <https://www.newsweek.com/government-response-katrina-disaster-within-disaster-118257>.

³⁷ For example, the American Red Cross dedicated a portion of their website to reunite families, CNN stood up a help center online and Craigslist looked to support families who had lost everything in the hurricane. Mary Madden, "Hurricane Katrina: In the face of disaster and chaos, people use the internet to coordinate relief", *Pew Research Center*, 7 September 2005, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2005/09/07/hurricane-katrina-in-the-face-of-disaster-and-chaos-people-use-the-internet-to-coordinate-relief/>.

³⁸ Even though smartphones debuted in the late 2000s, even by 2011, only 35 percent of Americans owned smartphones and the penetration would not reach over 50 percent until 2014. "Mobile Fact Sheet", *Pew Research Center*, 12 June 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile>. For more information on social media and the Obama campaign, visit <https://www.pewresearch.org/2017/01/10/how-america-changed-during-barack-obamas-presidency/>.

American's Sources of News, Using Social Media & Own an Electronic Device

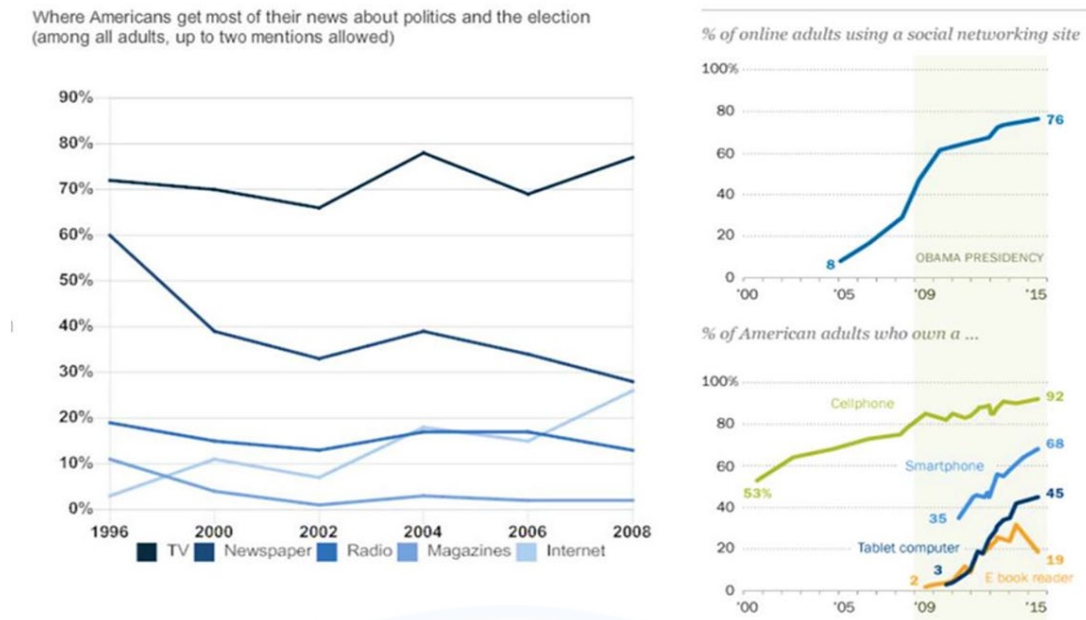


Figure 5: American's Sources of News, Use of Social Media & Owning of Electronics

Source: Adapted from "The Internet's Role in Campaign 2008," Pew Research Washington, D.C.; 15, April 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2009/04/15/the-internets-role-in-campaign-2008/>

While television still enjoyed a healthy lead in terms of America's medium du jour for news, newsprint was in a freefall. Americans were buying fewer newspapers and advertisers were finding new outlets to sell their products.³⁹ In 2006, the Newspaper Association of America saw advertising spending in newsprint increase by 0.3 percent in a year, (\$10.5 billion) whereas online advertising surged by 35 percent (\$613 million). While newsprint still possessed the lion's share of total advertising revenue, the trend was clear—the future of advertising was on the Internet.⁴⁰ To compensate, large news sources started to re-think the way they interacted with Americans by dedicating teams to focus solely on digital journalism while physically shrinking their print editions. For example,

³⁹ The newspaper industry receives 75 percent of their revenue from advertising and on average reserve 60-70 percent of their space for ads. A decrease in advertising is certain death for the industry. Hazen et al., *We the Media: A Citizens' Guide to Fighting for Media Democracy*, 40.

⁴⁰ Advertising accounts for approximately 75 to 80 percent of a newspaper's total revenue, so the slow growth rate of advertising was a large warning signal. Julie Bosman, "Online Newspaper Ads Gaining Ground on Print", 6 June 2006, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/06/business/media/06adco.html>.

in 2007, top newspapers across the country cut their physical papers' size by more than an inch. On the surface, the five percent reduction of news space seemed irrelevant, but in light of advertising moving to the Internet and dwindling circulation, the paper shrinkage saved on average \$12 million per year.⁴¹ The Internet was proving to live up to its disruptive hype and media industries started to react.

As the market stabilized from the dot-com bubble burst and Web 2.0's initiative took root, the final contextual consideration for this decade was the rise of the titans of the Internet industry: Apple, Google, Amazon, and Facebook.⁴² It is important to understand these four companies prior to the discussion of the control mechanisms of the Internet as these companies shaped the future of the Internet as well as the US Government response.

To begin, Americans could access each of these web services faster than previously imaginable in the 1990s. The advent of broadband in the 1990s started to gain real traction in the 2000s. In 2000, six percent of Americans utilized broadband service and that number spiked to 80 percent by 2007. In short, when the average American spent his or her 30 hours on the internet and perhaps searched for something to buy; they could do it at a faster rate.⁴³

America likes to shop, a trend that continues online. For instance, e-commerce revenue grew from \$7.4 billion in 2000 to \$34.7 billion in 2007, accounting for 3.4 percent of total retail sales within the US. Meanwhile, Amazon made a cool \$14.8 million in 2007.⁴⁴ In a Pew Research study, 81 percent of Americans conducted online research of a product prior to purchase. However, the same study showed users were

⁴¹ Katherine Q. Seelye, "Times to Reduce Page Size and Close a Plant in 2008", 18 July 2006, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/18/business/media/18web.html>; Richard Perez Pena, U.S. Newspaper Circulation Falls 10%", *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/27/business/media/27audit.html>

⁴² There are literally dozens of books (and movies) on these companies and their impact on industry. Instead of trying to summarize each company, this study will focus their interaction with America via the Internet.

⁴³ Website Optimization, LLC., "US Broadband Penetration Breaks 80% Among Active Internet Users - Canadians Log Most Time Online - March 2007 Bandwidth Report", 21 Feb 20, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131030184150/http://www.websiteoptimization.com/bw/0703/>

⁴⁴ \$14 Million is a rounding error for Amazon now, the monolith of the industry, making \$70 billion in a single quarter in 2019. Emil Protalinski, "Amazon reports \$70.0 billion in Q3 2019 revenue: AWS up 35%, subscriptions up 34%, and 'other' up 44%", *Venture Beat Commerce*, 24 October 2019, <https://venturebeat.com/2019/10/24/amazon-earnings-q3-2019/>. John Horrigan, "Online Shopping," *Pew Research Center*, 13 February 2008, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2008/02/13/online-shopping/>.

frustrated by the lack of specific information or overwhelmed by the amount of irrelevant information with respect to the search inquiry. Amazon, which started as a simple online bookstore, eventually developed a solution for personalized search criteria that provided the user recommendations based on past purchases. This proved to be a profitable business model and it was like the Internet's writ large search solution—Google.

The story of Google's rise to fame and corporate culture is a well-worn subject. Suffice it to say that their algorithm that crawled across the Internet searching for data and providing ranked output in accordance with search importance acted as a watershed moment for search algorithms.⁴⁵ In the simplest terms, Google's specialization was no different from Bell's telephone "switchboard girls" in the days of yesteryear, connecting users with the information they sought. Using the old telephone system as an analogy, the user understood whom they wanted to contact without necessarily knowing the other party's exact extension.⁴⁶ Google provided the same service, connecting user and information without the user knowing the exact domain name.

Google's domination as a search engine grew rapidly, as did their corporate relationships, none closer with or perhaps more important than Apple. In 2007, the two organizations were akin to two peas in a pod: Google revolutionized the Internet and Apple did the same with the iPhone, offering "an iPod with touch controls, a revolutionary mobile phone, [and] a breakthrough Internet Communications device."⁴⁷ However, the relationship soured after Apple announced it would operate exclusively on one network—AT&T. AT&T, the perennial phoenix rising from the ashes of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, represented everything in a corporation that Google despised.⁴⁸ In Google's mind, companies such as AT&T, and now Apple, were big and integrated behemoths, attempting to do and own everything while Google's mission was

⁴⁵ What was once a company offering a simple search engine morphed into a company that managed eight products with one billion users. "Google Turns 20: How an Internet Search Engine Reshaped the World", *The Verge*, 27 September 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/9/5/17823490/google-20th-birthday-anniversary-history-milestones>

⁴⁶ This exact topic will be further addressed in the Gatekeeper section.

⁴⁷ The iPod and Apples iTunes were the corporate equivalent to Napster. Napster was dissolved in the 1990s for "stealing" musicians work and making it available for free download to the masses. Perhaps suffering from founders myopia, Apple saw the potential and legally sought the music industry's blessing making way for iTunes in 2003 and other streaming devises such as Spotify in 2006. Wu, *The Master Switch*, 269–71.

⁴⁸ After the 1996 Act, AT&T consolidating a majority of its previous empire and looked to enter into the future of Internet a la Apple.

specialized. They did not own the content of the web or the transportation infrastructure of the Internet linking the consumer to the web; they were specialized—a hedgehog in a den of foxes.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, America largely did not notice or care about the internal rivalry of the two companies.

Similar to Amazon, Apple, and Google, Facebook needs no introduction. What was once humble beginnings in a Harvard dormitory in 2004 turned into a multi-billion dollar company touting 300 million users in 2009 with a growth rate of 10 million people per month.⁵⁰ Facebook replaced other social media platforms such as Myspace and attracted users to its brand by offering novelties such as a “newsfeed.”⁵¹ The social media platform’s newsfeed allowed a user to see what items were trending amongst their friends, adding to the trend by “liking” it too.⁵² For example, whether Americans watched NBC’s “Friends” season finale on television, or NBC’s bigger hit series “The Office,” individuals could see what their friends “liked.”⁵³

Facebook built networks of bonding capital, linking like-minded thinkers while amplifying current trends. Similarly, the social platform’s algorithm undermined the ability of individuals to bridge outside their immediate circle to increase exposure to an aggregation of thoughts.⁵⁴ Instead, the platform fed the user trending information and information shared by their immediate circle, exacerbating their symptoms of an echo

⁴⁹ This view was a bit hypocritical, especially with Google exploring new sources of revenue becoming quite the foxy behemoth themselves. Wu, *The Master Switch*, 272–81.

⁵⁰ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (London, England: Penguin Publishing, 2011), 38.

⁵¹ Corporations call this “lock-in” as the hypothetical point in which the user is *so* invested in your service that even if a better service was available, the time to switch is not worth it. Imagine taking your Facebook profile and moving it to a *better* social media platform. The investment time would most likely not be worth it to the user. Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 40–41.

⁵² This was different from Myspace, where the user had to visit each individual friend’s page to see what they were thinking and posting. Facebook’s newsfeed brought that information directly to each user.

⁵³ Users could also watch NBC on their new online streaming service—Hulu. The friends season finale was the most watched entertainment telecast in the 2000s and fourth overall in television history behind *M*A*S*H*, *Cheers*, and *Seinfeld*. Bill Carter, “Friends’ Finale’s Audience Is the Fourth Biggest Ever”, 8 May 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/08/arts/friends-finale-s-audience-is-the-fourth-biggest-ever.html>. Moreover, in 2018, the Office is the highest streamed show on Netflix, five years after the show’s season finale. Jason Lynch, “The Office, Friends and Grey’s Anatomy Were Netflix’s Most Streamed Shows Last Year”, 7 May 2019, <https://www.adweek.com/tv-streaming/the-office-friends-and-greys-anatomy-were-netflixs-most-streamed-shows-last-year/>.

⁵⁴ The foundational work for bonding vs bridging is the foundation of Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*, but originated with Gittell and Vidal. Ross Gittell and Avis Vidal, *Community Organizing: Building Social Capital as a Development Strategy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 13–33.

chamber. In short, the Internet (through platforms like Facebook) allowed Americans to find and follow people who thought like them while selectively filtering information based on trends.

Long gone were the days of the US Government attempting to garner buy-in and promote the idea of the Internet. Society adopted the new medium wholesale, and as smartphones and other connective devices proliferated the country, each American held more power in the palm of their individual hand than at any other period in history. The dueling printing presses of Jefferson's time or even Roosevelt's fireside chats and televisions evening news had set times and volumes of information. Now, information was constantly a click away, manipulated by algorithms and it was starting to affect how American society perceived the world. There was little government regulation did to stop the trend.⁵⁵

Laws and Regulations 2000-2010

Internet regulations in the 2000s were offspring of the 1996 Act's deregulation wake of controversies, namely promoting both inter-modal and intra-modal competition. Both changed the markets of Internet development.⁵⁶ In 2002, the new FCC Chairman, Michael Powell, doubled down on the 1996 Act's taxonomy and classified both Internet and cable companies as an "information service," leaving the telephone industry standing without a chair as the music stopped. These implications for the telephone industry did not have time to fully mature for in 2003, the FCC eliminated the unbundling requirement that stymied the natural market of fiber optics, allowing the phone companies to stamp out local competition.⁵⁷ The new 2002 taxonomy had long-lasting ramifications, namely the discussion of "net neutrality."

Network neutrality, a term coined by Dr. Tim Wu, argues that Internet service

⁵⁵ Wu, *The Master Switch*, 298.

⁵⁶ Inter-modal refers to the convergence of different delivery modes of information such as telephones, television, and the Internet while intra-modal refers to the competition within a given industry; Ehrlich, "A Brief History of Internet Regulation," 6.

⁵⁷ The unbundling of fiber optics was also a bit controversial because the regulation stipulated fiber could be unbundled, but hybrid loops of fiber and copper fell under different regulations. This eventually led to a Supreme Court case the FCC v Brand X where the small town Santa Monica Company questioned the FCC guidance on classifying the cable industry as an information service versus a carrier service. The courts ruled in favor of the FCC and the regulation did not change. Ehrlich, "A Brief History of Internet Regulation," 10-11.

providers (ISP) must treat all data on the Internet the same and not discriminate between network users. In essence, the net neutrality debate centers on competing interests of the private sector's profit and the public sector's interests. Wu, amongst others, argued, "ISPs would likely prefer short term interest [squashing competition] to the long term benefits an 'open Internet' would provide." Network neutrality and the public would be served best by a "Darwinian competition among every conceivable use of the Internet," ensuring only the best survives.⁵⁸

The message marinated over the next few years and, by 2005, the FCC adopted four network neutrality principles which were intended to preserve and promote the open character of the Internet in the new age of broadband. Specifically, the four principles ensured consumers were entitled to 1) lawful internet content of their choice; 2) run applications and services of their choice; 3) connect to their choice of legal devices that did not harm the network; and 4) competition among network providers, application and service providers, and content providers.⁵⁹ This characterization did not please everyone. For example, the CEO of AT&T rising once again to its zenith openly complained,

Why should they be allowed to use my pipes? The Internet can't be free in *that* sense, because we and the cable companies have made an investment and for a Google or Yahoo! or Vonage or anybody to expect to use these pipes [for] free is nuts!⁶⁰

This complaint was only the first and eventually, they resulted in the FCC engaging in legal rulings and fines, the most notable in 2007.

In 2007, Comcast, the largest cable company in the US, was found blocking and severely delaying file-sharing traffic for consumers using the Bit Torrent protocol.⁶¹ The illegal distribution of copyrighted material notwithstanding, Comcast was showing favoritism, or in their words, "protecting its network from being crippled by one type of

⁵⁸ Wu, "Network Neutrality, Broadband Discrimination."; <https://medium.com/@TebbaVonMathenstien/network-neutrality-a-history-of-common-carrier-laws-1884-2018-2b592f22ed2e>.

⁵⁹ Federal Communications Commission, Policy Statement FCC 05-151, 23 September 2005, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-05-151A1.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Tyler Elliot Bettilyon, "Network Neutrality: A History of Common Carrier Laws 1884-2018", 12 December 2017, <https://medium.com/@TebbaVonMathenstien/network-neutrality-a-history-of-common-carrier-laws-1884-2018-2b592f22ed2e>.

⁶¹ Once Comcast acquired AT&T Broadband for \$44.5 billion, they reached over 22 million subscribers within the US, becoming one of the largest. Security and Exchange Commission, "Current Report Pursuant to Section 13 OR 15(D) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934", 23 September 2005, <http://edgar.secdatabase.com/86/89882201501011/filing-main.html>.

traffic.” The FCC launched an investigation and ruled in a 3-2 vote that Comcast’s throttling was unlawful, requiring a cease-and-desist and future-solution transparency. The FCC’s intent was to send a signal to and set a precedent for other ISPs, an action that backlashed in 2010 when the US Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit overturned the FCC’s cease and desist order.⁶² Essentially, the Courts reminded the FCC and the legislative branch that they had categorized the Internet as an “information service,” not a telecommunications service—ergo the FCC had no authority to regulate network management as they did with the television industry.⁶³

For the remainder of the decade, the FCC attempted in vain to fight for network neutrality, their futile attempts bearing some fruit in 2010 with the FCC Open Internet Order. Reminiscent of the 2007 Comcast ruling, this order prohibited wired ISPs from discriminating against any legal content on the Internet, meaning the ISPs could not block or slow down data transfer. This order acted as the first solidified step in maintaining a vision of “net neutrality.” The FCC attempted similar tactics with the 2007 Comcast case, thus the verdict from the US Court of Appeals in the case of *Verizon v. FCC*, should have been no surprise. The Courts ruled as they did in 2007, this time in favor of Verizon; still classified as an “information service,” the FCC had no authority to regulate the Internet.

The US Government, through the FCC, maintained the laws and regulations throughout the 2000s that echoed the goals of the 1934 and 1996 Acts: to balance the growth of technology and ensure common access at affordable rates across America. The lesson, similar to those of the television industry, is that investment and capital follow the path of least resistance—typically, where regulation (or the absence thereof) allows it to go.⁶⁴ The Government’s misclassification of the Internet assured its growth but altered the fitness landscape to cede censorship power and information distribution to individual corporations, which acted as the medium’s Gatekeeper overlords.

⁶² Marguerite Reardon, “Net neutrality: How we got from there to here,” 24 February 2015, <https://www.cnet.com/news/net-neutrality-from-there-to-here/>.

⁶³ This would continue until 2015, when the FCC categorized the internet as a carrier service, subjecting it to regulations. Ehrlich, “A Brief History of Internet Regulation,” 13.

⁶⁴ Ehrlich, “A Brief History of Internet Regulation,” 14.

Gatekeepers 2000-2010

The previous section's rules and regulations concerned how Americans connected to the Internet through ISPs over a host of physical mediums: broadband, DSL, or fiber optics. However, once connected to the Internet, users needed to navigate the vast network. One way to navigate was to go directly to a domain by the unique URL, such as "www.nytimes.com." Yet, without the exact domain name, users would often use a search engine and, while there were many search engine gladiators in the early 2000s, only one champion left the arena: Google.⁶⁵ Search engines act as a gatekeeper for information, but the "how" of this particular gatekeeper is different and worth exploring in detail.

A search engine is the method most people use to find information and, for a growing portion of the web, Google alone determines what is "important, relevant, and true."⁶⁶ Whatever information is displayed on the first page of Google creates the user's sense of reality, giving great power to an algorithm. That algorithm had a significant change in December of 2009, when Google announced a "personalized search for everyone," using 57 different inputs ranging from physical location to previous search history to predict and tailor each individual search. For example, in 2010, two left-leaning educated women searched for "BP" following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. For one user, Google's first page displayed investment information and an advertisement for British Petroleum, returning 180 million results while the other user saw news about the spill and returned 139 million results. The algorithm determined what each of the women saw, even if they were seeking the same information.⁶⁷ In this case, both women knew what they were looking for and could filter as required. However, what if a user was less certain about the information they sought?

The personalized algorithm has garnered a name, the "filter bubble," coined by author Eli Pariser in his study of digital technology. No longer unique to Google, companies like Amazon and Facebook use the personalized algorithm approach to tailor user experience. Pariser cautions that the filter bubble is problematic because the user

⁶⁵ Today, Google is a verb, synonymous with a function.

⁶⁶ Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything: (And Why We Should Worry)* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).

⁶⁷ Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 1–3.

does not choose to enter into this personalized bubble, they cannot see if the assumptions the algorithm are making are correct, nor can they opt out.⁶⁸

For example, consider the protests in Ferguson, Missouri following the killing of an African American teenager at the hands of a white police officer. As people sought information online, social media outlets such as Twitter showed something was happening in Ferguson while Facebook's algorithm, reliant on trending "likes," was displaying the "ice-bucket challenge" to raise awareness of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS.) The limitations of the algorithm are obvious. ALS awareness is a noble cause and easy to show support by "liking" on newsfeeds. However, if the algorithm is optimized to measurable results such as propagating "liked" trends, it is difficult to demonstrate that Ferguson was an important story, as few "like" police brutality.⁶⁹ Depending on each user's personal filter bubble, it could have taken greater personal effort to understand what happened in Ferguson.⁷⁰

In addition to personal filters altering what Americans viewed on the Internet, advertising companies and public relation firms easily transitioned to distorting information within the new medium. At the turn of the century, advertising went from static banner ads to interactive popup ads that also bore the "pay-per-click" (PPC) stream of revenue for various websites. In 2002, Google not only used the PPC ads to generate revenue but also instituted the "click-through-rate" that allowed more relevant ads to move to the top.⁷¹ These actions provided requested data to the user and ensured that companies were not needlessly paying to be on page one if it did not generate revenue. Similarly, in 2010, social media platforms such as Twitter launched "promoted tweets" to

⁶⁸ Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 9–10.

⁶⁹ Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 155–56. To provide further context, The Big Three networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) first reported on the event 1 week (ABC) to 3 weeks (NBC) from the actual shooting on 9 April 2014 while the New York Times first wrote about the event 4 days later. "Q&A: What Happened in Ferguson?", The New York Times, 10 August 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/ferguson-missouri-town-under-siege-after-police-shooting.html?searchResultPosition=1>. To find past trending news stories on the Big Three, visit the Tyndall report, <http://tyndallreport.com>.

⁷⁰ By 2015, Facebook would serve as the social media hegemon, yet in one study, over 62 percent had no idea algorithms controlled what they saw and were powerless to alter the virality. Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*, 156.

⁷¹ Ankit Oberoi, "The History of Online Advertising," 3 July 2013, <https://www.adpushup.com/blog/the-history-of-online-advertising/>.

generate revenue with the intent of users interacting and re-tweeting the advertising which had the potential to create a “viral buzz.”⁷² While the initial business model sparked skepticism, by 2018, Twitter’s net worth reached \$4.4 billion on the New York Stock Exchange.⁷³ However, some companies or individuals did not want to be on any search engine return or to go viral. Some wanted to fade into oblivion.

Search engine manipulation can occur in a variety of ways, but the most common are corporation sponsored manipulation or search engine directed. Public relations firms that provided news stories for the television industry went to similar great lengths to promote or bury information on the Internet. While it is easy to spot advertising on search engines, as denoted by the—albeit small—“AD” next to website, it is harder to discover when information is purposely being buried from the user. PR firms understand no one is searching past the first few pages of Google or any other search engine. With enough financial resources, information can become much harder to find.

In addition to corporations paying for censorship, search engines also have the right to censor any content they choose, such as the autocomplete list, which suggests search options as you type in phrases to selecting articles for Google News.⁷⁴ Google News reserves the right to ban any content that does not fit within the corporation’s agenda, which has traditionally tilted toward liberal leaning viewpoints.⁷⁵ Moreover, the corporation can actually ban corporations from returning in a search, which it did to JCPenney (JCP) in 2010. In 2010, JCP had more than 1,000 stores retailing \$17 billion in total revenue. They had also found a weakness in Google. In short, JCP paid to have thousands of links placed on hundreds of abandoned hovel websites to give the appearance of relevancy. Google’s search engine surveyed the vast Web and saw a diverse grouping of websites covering an array of search material from dresses to

⁷² Emma Barnett, “Twitter launches ‘promoted tweets’ in a bid to make money,” The Telegraph, 13 April 2010, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/twitter/7586446/Twitter-launches-promoted-tweets-in-a-bid-to-make-money.html>

⁷³ Sean Dennison, “How Much is Twitter Worth?”, 5 September 2018, <https://www.gobankingrates.com/money/business/how-much-is-twitter-worth/>

⁷⁴ For example, during the 2016 election, typing “Crooked hill” did not generate one of the top phrases of the year, “Crooked Hillary Clinton”. Robert Epstein, “The New Censorship,” 22 June 2016, US News, <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2016-06-22/google-is-the-worlds-biggest-censor-and-its-power-must-be-regulated>

⁷⁵ World News Daily Staff, “Google dumps news sites that criticize radical Islam”, 23 May 2006, <https://www.wnd.com/2006/05/36293/>

comforters all linking back to JCPenney.com. Google defines this strategy as an illegal “black hat” strategy and can penalize any corporation with no oversight. For example, searching for “Samsonite carry-on luggage” typically returned JCP in the pole position on the search engine, but after Google’s penalty, it moved to page seven.⁷⁶ No one in search of luggage or news typically goes to page seven.

The gatekeepers significantly changed within the 2000s, as search engines had tremendous power over American society. Personalized searches ensured echo chamber effects were amplified over time. While the personalized algorithm aids in an e-commerce shopping experience from Amazon, when searching for information the personalization could block out dissenting information and give users a “confirmation bias” to previously held conceptions. In short, the filter bubble is a recursive process that feeds on itself, influences the users’ decisions, and ultimately shapes whom they are providing credence to the notion that virality shapes reality.⁷⁷ Moreover, PR firms that pay to have information amplified or buried in conjunction with search engine corporations focused on profits could also alter the fitness landscape of finding information. America has always been leery of the government infringing upon positive rights to free speech and censoring data, yet many did not recognize the changing of the guard in 2010.

Norms 2000-2010

America’s acceptance of the Internet started to produce norms within society, namely lowering the economic cost to a medium’s entry to disseminate information as evident by the popularity of blogging and online digital journalism. Digital journalism has origins as far back as the late 1980s, but did not gain broad proliferation until the 2000s where most Americans had computers and access to the Internet.⁷⁸ Similar to the

⁷⁶ David Segal, “The Dirty Little Secrets of Search,” 12 February 2011, The New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/13/business/13search.html?_r=0&auth=login-email&login=email&pagewanted=all

⁷⁷ Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 113, 127; Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 240.

⁷⁸ Viewtron, created in 1983, was one of the first systems to send electronic news directly to its readers, two decades before the technology curve. The company fizzled with only a few thousand readers. Josh Sanburn, “A Brief History of Digital News”, 1 February 2011, Time Online, <http://content.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,2045682,00.html>

24-hour news of the television industry, digital journalism created opportunities for niche audiences. In relation to newsprint, the online source clashed between balancing profit seeking and public service.⁷⁹ Portals such as AOL and Yahoo! acted as aggregators of various news links while traditional news online outlets such as the *New York Times* contained only their own news articles. Most aggregating websites grouped articles topically with toolbars and linked to various sections for further exploration. Digital journals offered a newfound speed with catchy article titles often “scooping” traditional brick and mortar sources.⁸⁰ However, making money proved troublesome, even online.

While news has never been truly profitable across any medium, within the newsprint industry, profit predominantly came from advertising that was protected at all costs. In contrast, publishing the news via the web cost half that of traditional newsprint.⁸¹ Despite that advantage, the supply and demand ratio did not favor profitability, the chief reason being an abundance of free news on the Internet. Few Americans were willing to pay for such a widely distributed commodity, especially Americans who spent only a modicum of their time on news-related activity. Lack of subscriptions once again made advertising king of the medium.⁸²

After the dot-com bubble burst in 2000, stock prices of web-only news sites lost an average of 77 percent in value while, at the same time, all major news outlets drastically cut online budgets and staff. To supplement, new websites developed new ways to bring clients back into the fold by branching out of banner and pop-up ads and moving to “rich media” advertising using Hollywood trailers and entertainment to gain traction. Websites also started to offer “premium content” such as financial information, sports analysis, and video clips to attract attention. These tactics had a slow start but by 2006, America responded as online news source viewership started to rise. Figure 6 shows both an increase in online news traffic and an increase in total minutes of online news starting in 2006.

⁷⁹ B. Kovach and T. Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2001), 13.

⁸⁰ Ben Scott, “A Contemporary History of Digital Journalism,” *Television & New Media* 6, no. 1 (2005): 89–126.

⁸¹ Harper, *And That's the Way It Will Be: News and Information in a Digital World*, 70.

⁸² Only truly exclusive content could be sold to subscribers, headline news was too available to have a need to pay for subscriptions. Scott, “A Contemporary History of Digital Journalism,” 89–126.

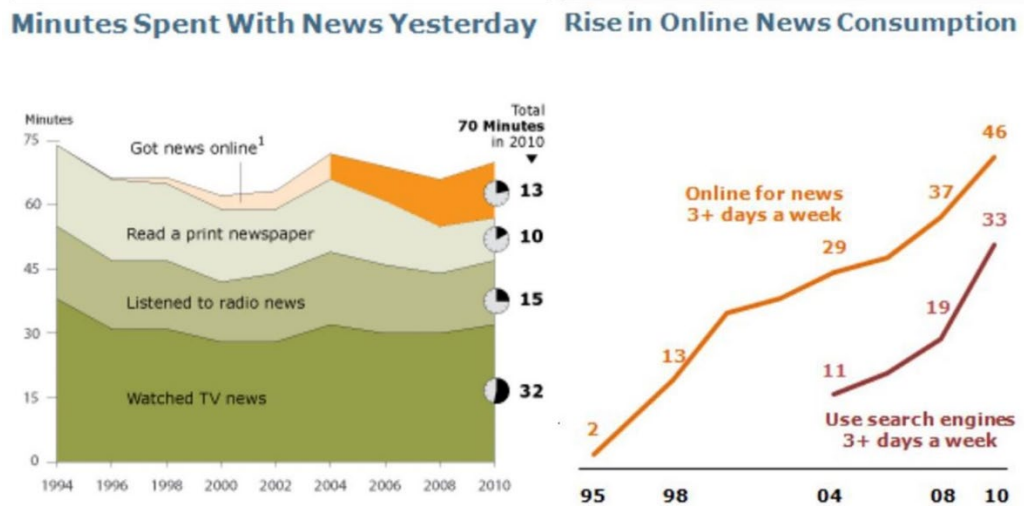


Figure 6: Americans Spending More Time Following the News

Source: Adapted from “Americans Spending More time Following the News,” Pew Research Center, 12 September 2010, <https://www.people-press.org/2010/09/12/americans-spending-more-time-following-the-news/>

The counterweight to mainstream media and the structure of digital journalism was the growing trend of blogging. Blogging had been around since the mid-1990s, but with very few households owning computers or having Internet access, the penetration of the medium was not deep. Blogging moved the news medium from a monologue to a conversation, most evident after the 9/11 attacks when blogging gained traction. By 2002, the form underwent a major change, namely that many blogs were monetized with blog ads.⁸³ Google purchased popular websites such as “Blogger” while companies such as Technorati served as a blog index to sort the growing medium by content and authority, boosting exposure to the articles.⁸⁴ During the 2003 Iraq war, blogging provided Americans with a “grunt’s eye-view” and challenged the formats of mainstream journalism and their hegemonic articulation of the war.⁸⁵ One of the most famous

⁸³ Ads along with generating traffic to your blog can be the sole source of income for some. In 2020, average bloggers make \$32,000 a year while some make over \$400,000. Grant Sabatier, “How Much Money Can You Make Blogging?”, 10 January 2020, <https://millennialmoney.com/how-much-money-make-blogging/>

⁸⁴ Internet Archive Way Back Machine, “History of Technorati”, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160310135429/http://technorati.com/company/history-of-technorati/>

⁸⁵ When a nation goes to war, the government typically constructs a narrative depicting the enemy as evil, legitimizing its destruction—providing a contextual interpretative framework that is often adopted by mainstream media professionals. Cammaerts and Carpentier, “Blogging the 2003 Iraq War: Challenging the Ideological Model of War and Mainstream Journalism?”, 1–4.

examples was Salam Pax's blog, an Iraqi native that used a pseudonym that combined the Arabic and Latin words for peace to chronicle his personal experience on the streets of Baghdad as the war progressed.⁸⁶ With the Iraq war's new boost to the medium, Technorati saw blogging's exponential growth rate double each year, reaching new peaks by the middle of the decade. For example, spring of 2006 started with approximately 26 million blogs and ended with over 50 million, marking a key turning period for the America's new norm as seen in Figure 7.⁸⁷

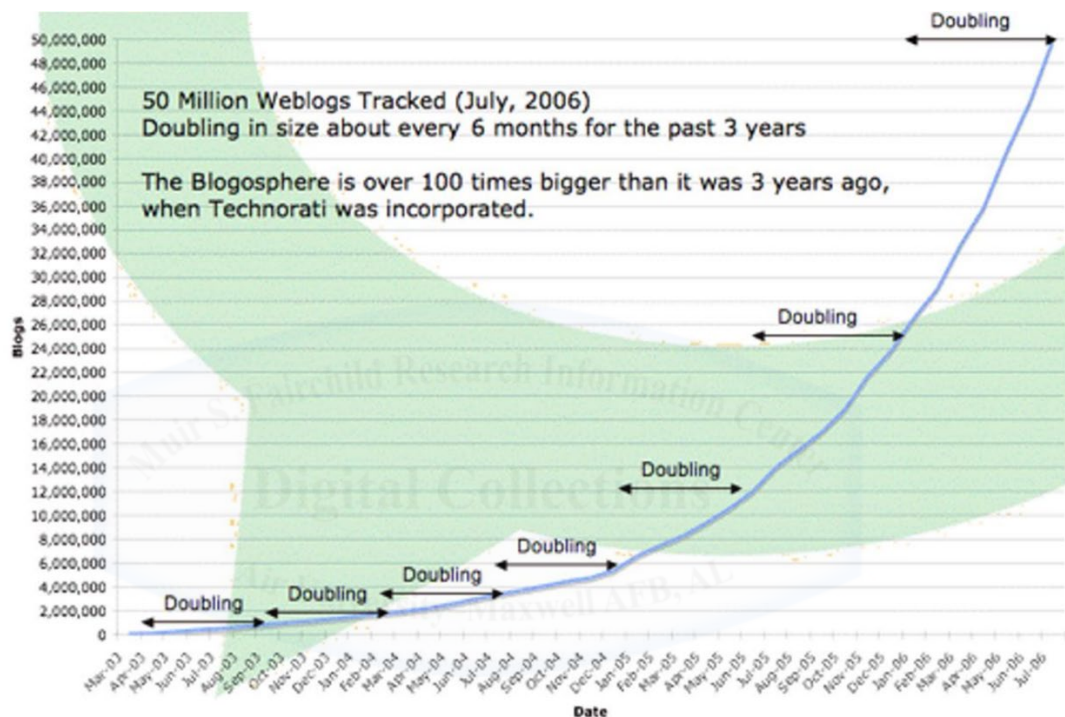


Figure 7: Cumulative Web Blogs March 2003 to June 2006

Source: Adapted from David Sifry, "State of the Blogosphere August 2006," 10 Mar 2006, <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/2006/08/state-of-the-blogosphere-august-2006>

Both digital journalism and blogging exposed America to more information, but also amplified views of average persons who had access to the Internet. While some reputable digital journals held the same standards for sources, others did not, often conflating opinion with factual information. Whether digital journalism or blogging started the norm, in 2006, America started to take note of the new medium and started to

⁸⁶ Rory McCarthy, "Salam's Story," 30 May 2003, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/may/30/iraq.digitalmedia>

⁸⁷ David Sifry, "State of the Blogosphere", 6 August 2006, <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/2006/08/state-of-the-blogosphere-august-2006>

use it as a source of information—for good or for ill. As with any new technology, one can always find nefarious acts and in the 2000s, ill acts took on the form of cyberbullying.

Americans have always been protective of their children with respect to new technology and the trend continued with the proliferation of modern communication. The term “bullying” arcs back to the early 1500s, associated with the elements of survival interlaced with competition. Defined by the new form of communication, cyberbullying allowed modern day negative schoolyard transgressions to become increasingly rampant and widespread.⁸⁸ Cyberbullying has the same concepts as traditional mistreatments while allowing the offender to mask his or her identity, the secrecy leading youth to amplify cruelty more than was traditionally seen in face-to-face bullying. As computers became more prevalent and parents purchased cell phones for their children, the results were children who were in constant contact with peers. Sadly, some children used the connective power for ill and thrived under the cloaked anonymity.

Cyberbullying research increased after 2006 when an anxious mother created a fake Myspace account to spy on her daughter’s former friend, Megan Meier, after the two had a falling out. The fictitious “Josh Evans” flirted with Megan online and earned the 13-year-old’s trust, but after an online argument with multiple classmates, “Josh” turned on Megan and joined the bullying “fun,” heaving insults with the crowd. In shock, Megan shut herself in her bedroom and hung herself. Later analysis would show her last message received was from Josh, “You’re a shitty person, and the world would be a better place without you.” The 47-year-old mother, tried in a court of law and convicted for her obvious involvement, was later acquitted as cyber laws had simply not caught up with the times.⁸⁹

While tragic and avoidable, Megan’s death sparked change within dozens of states who adopted cyberbullying laws while researchers began studying the phenomenon

⁸⁸ Richard Donegan, “Bullying and Cyberbullying: History, Statistics, Law, Prevention and Analysis,” *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 3, no. 1 (2012): 33-42.

⁸⁹ During trial, testimony revealed Megan had admitted suicidal thoughts prior to killing herself, but only revealed these ideations to her once best friend Sarah Drew, daughter of the mother Lori Drew on trial. Neither felt responsible for the teen’s premature death. Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 227–28.

with renewed vigor.⁹⁰ The academic field continued to hone what constituted “cyberbullying” and new research demonstrated that by 2010, text messages via cellphone were the weapon of choice for cyberbullying (83 percent) followed by Internet, specifically using the social media platform of Facebook.⁹¹ In response, Facebook, Google, and Twitter reached a reluctant agreement of platform censorship and issued a general ban of harassment and personal threats on their sites with enforcement generally stemming from user complaints.⁹² Shrouded by tragedy, the year 2006 formally identified the growing norm of cyberbullying in America.

SUMMARY

Breathless proclamations of how the Internet will act as a revolutionary change within society are a tired sport. However, as America adopted computers into their homes and deregulation allowed corporations to foster innovative solutions to allow faster Internet connectivity, society began to change. Distribution of news was no longer a one-way communication flow as lower cost of entry allowed average citizens an amplified voice. The television industry provided information to the public, with societal norms taking longer-lead times to effect change within the industry. The Internet, through many different applications, still allowed information to flow to society, but society could in turn answer and alter norms much faster. Moreover, algorithms that focused on engagement metrics rewarded members of society that could gain enough attention, amplifying the message regardless of the content or usefulness of the information. Previously, government television regulations, focused on ensuring an informed public through diversity, using licensing renewals and regulations such as the Fairness Doctrine to enforce compliance. The Internet categorized as an “information service” allowed rapid growth but removed the intermediary of the traditional media and curtailed the FCC’s ability to regulate, significantly altering the gatekeepers and their

⁹⁰ States adopted laws with varying severity, ranging from school sanctions for both on and off campus behavior all the way to criminal sanctions. Today, all 50 states mandate that all schools have a cyberbullying policy. Cyberbullying Research Center, “Bullying Laws Across America”, <https://cyberbullying.org/bullying-laws>

⁹¹ Cyberbullying ranged from teasing, to name calling and rumor spreading to actual physical threats. Donegan, “Bullying and Cyberbullying: History, Statistics, Law, Prevention and Analysis,” 35.

⁹² Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 228.

powers of information distribution to private corporations such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Twitter. To quote one digital technology expert, “The great virtue of the Internet is that it erodes power from the center and takes it to the periphery...it erodes the power of institutions over people while giving the individuals the power to run their own lives.”⁹³ However, the newfound individual power coupled with the onslaught of information at dizzying speeds left some of society unable to discern fact from opinion, turning to their preferred brand of partisan stripe for comfort.

Table 5 highlights the key dates from 2000-2010 concerning laws and regulations, gatekeeper trends, and norms within society. Dates, which overlap multiple control mechanisms, should see larger variations in Chapter 4 with respect to Truth Decay system variables.

Table 5 Summary of 2000-2010

Years	Laws & Regulations	Gatekeepers	Norms
2002	Internet classified as Information Service	N/A	N/A
2003	FCC rescinded the unbundling clause		
2006	N/A	N/A	America spends more time with online news; America blogging exponentially increases; America awakens to the realities of cyberbullying
2010	N/A	Google introduces personalized searches; Twitter allows Promoted tweets	N/A

Source: Author's Original Work

The Internet in the first decade of the 2000s has three possible markers to test the

⁹³ The quote is by Esther Dyson, an angel investor in digital technology, biotechnology, and outer space ventures. Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 59.

Truth Decay System, yet no individual control mechanisms dates aligned with one another. Therefore, the results in Chapter 4's "Modes of Media's Truth Decay" should demonstrate only minor shifts in amplitude corresponding the 2000 decade. In addition, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 had long lasting effects on the development of the Internet. As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, if any one date demonstrates the control mechanisms effects on Truth Decay, it will be 1996. As the combined effects of television and the Internet amplify the volume and speed of information to the population, society should exhibit downward trend into Truth Decay.



Chapter 4

Modes of Media and Truth Decay

The thing I missed most was information—free uncensored, undistorted, abundant information.

*US Senator John McCain,
Commentating on his 5-year POW status in Vietnam*

America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.

*US Senators, falsely misquoting Abraham Lincoln**

When an idea has seized the mind of the American people, be it correct or unreasonable, nothing is harder than to rid them of it.

Alexis de Tocqueville, observing America in 1831

Introduction

The previous two chapters traced the arc of the television and the Internet industry, paying particular attention to the laws and regulations, gatekeepers, and the norms that influenced the development and proliferation of the two mediums. This chapter will synthesize this information and compare the key dates of the mediums against the five dependent variables of the Truth Decay system. In addition, this chapter will introduce each Truth Decay element and its subsequent data and provide an analysis of the Truth Decay variables strength weighted against the proposition of the study. The end of the chapter will provide an overall assessment and credence of the effect of control mechanisms against the Truth Decay system as a whole. To summarize the study's material thus far, Table 6 highlights the five elements of Truth Decay evaluated in this chapter while Table 7 highlights the dates of importance.

* Abraham Lincoln never actually said these words. The phrase was conjured from his 1838 "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions" Speech given to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield. The misquotation has perpetuated throughout time, amplified by multiple Senators quoting the misinformation, giving the perception that the statement is true. For an example, see 19 May 2005 Senate Congressional Record, page S5503.

Table 6 Truth Decay Elements

Truth Decay Elements	Description
1. Declining trust in formerly respected institutions	Institutions referring to the US executive and legislative branches and the media
2. An increase in polarization throughout society	This study focuses on partisan polarization where members have attachments as either strong Republicans or Democrats in Congress and within society
3. Erosion of civil discourse	Civil discourse refers to robust, honest, and frank dialogue that advances public interests
4. Society's blurring of the line between fact and opinion	Blurring fact and opinion refers to arguments clearly based on beliefs and attitudes are intermingled or confused with objective facts
5. Political Paralysis	Paralysis refers to frequency of gridlock in Congress, or the ratio of bills introduced to bills passed within a session

Source: Author's Original Summary

Table 7 Summary of Television and Internet Dates

	1952	1953	1959	1965	1967	1970	1974	1975	1984	1985	1987	1988	1990	1992	1993	1996	2002	2003	2006	2010
Laws & Regs	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X	X		
Gate-keeper	X						X									X				X
Norms	X							X			X	X	X			X			X	

Source: Author's Original Summary

Table 7 aids in the visualization of the key dates this study will look at within the system of Truth Decay; from this visualization, there are four important points. First, only three periods within the study demonstrate multiple mechanisms of control with respect to influence on the medium. While the study's proposition is that the control mechanisms should have an effect on Truth Decay as a system, multiple control

mechanisms aligning simultaneously should amplify the influence. Therefore 1952, 1974, and 1996 should be key indicators to support the correlation of control and Truth Decay. Second, the elongated nature and lack of alignment of the various control mechanisms across time should demonstrate society's steady decline into Truth Decay, most often represented by a negative trend line. A notational depiction of this trend line is in Figure 8. Third, because regulations' effects are not instantaneous and some of the available polling data on society may have occurred before the control event in question, the effect on Truth Decay as a system is an estimate. Essentially, the study could demonstrate a lag in the various data. Figure 9 illustrates this phenomenon. Finally, the magnitude of the control mechanism also changes the influence on the system. As mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3, the Telecommunication Act of 1996 was the largest communication regulation in the previous 60 years and had major effects on both the television and Internet industries. While this study aims to measure a complex system, with multiple variables and intervening elements, if any one year will show correlation to the proposition, it should be 1996.

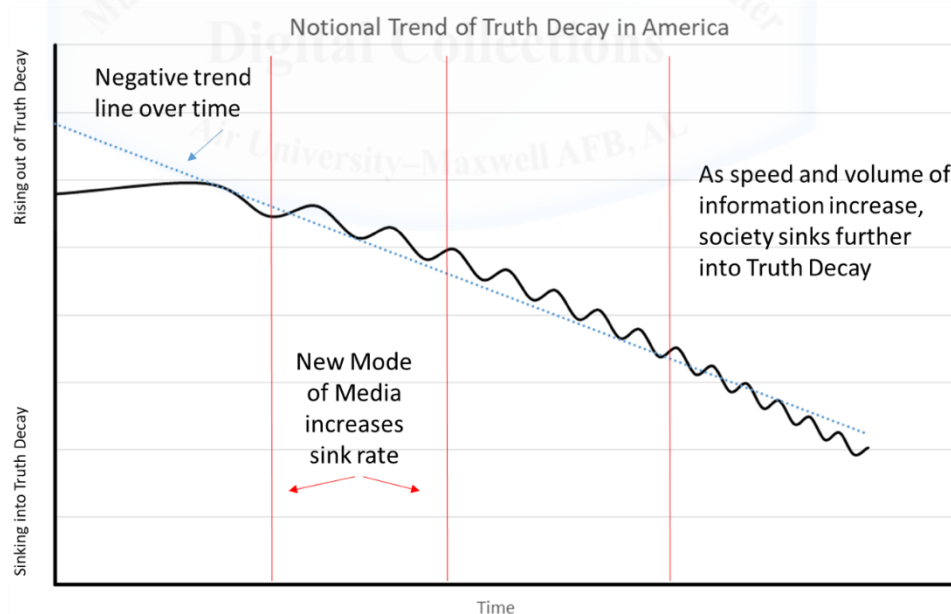


Figure 8: Notional Trend of Truth Decay in America

Source: Author's Original Work

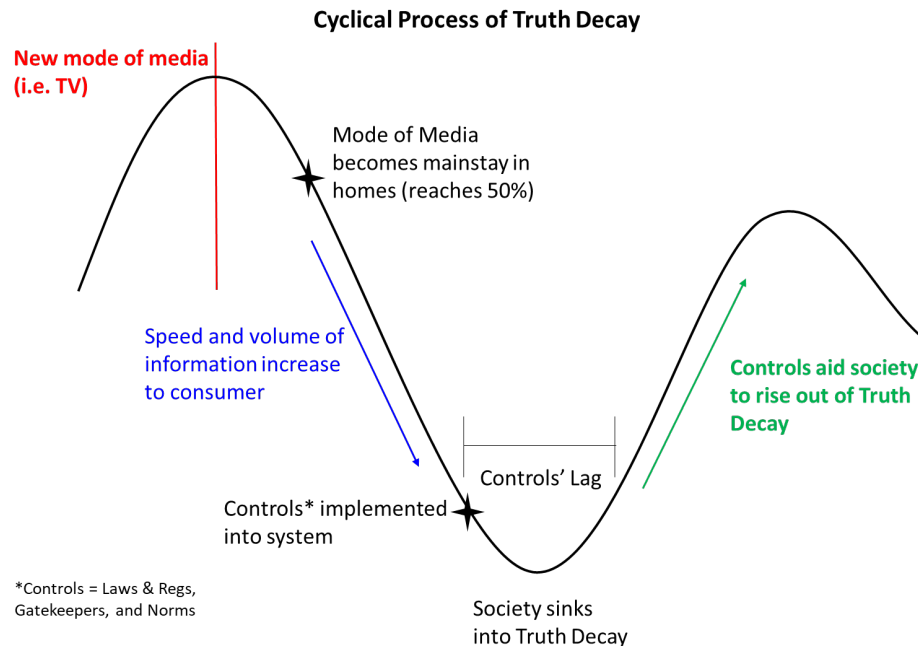


Figure 9 Cyclical Process of Truth Decay

Source: Author's Original Work

Truth Decay Element #1: Declining trust in formerly respected institutions

The first element in the system of Truth Decay is the loss of trust in formerly respected institutions that provide information. Specifically, this study relies on two public opinion surveys. The first is the General Social Survey (GSS), conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. This study began in 1972 and asked samples of Americans: “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.” Figure 10, Figure 11, and Figure 12 are the results for the executive branch, legislative branch, and media, respectively. Specifically, these figures display the consolidated responses for “a great deal and only some confidence” within the respective institutions.

Next, because the GSS does not cover the entire period in question for this study, the second public data survey displays the consolidated effort, conducted by the Pew Research Center, which synthesizes surveys from eight different organizations. Together, over the course of 50 years, the survey organizations asked a variation of the question, “Do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right ‘just about

always,’ or ‘most of the time.’”¹ This question does not discriminate between the three branches of government, nor does it cover the entire period in question. While not ideal, the consolidated effort by Pew does provide insight into Americans’ psyche at the time and can be compared to the GSS data, which asks specific questions of interest to this study from the 1970s onward.

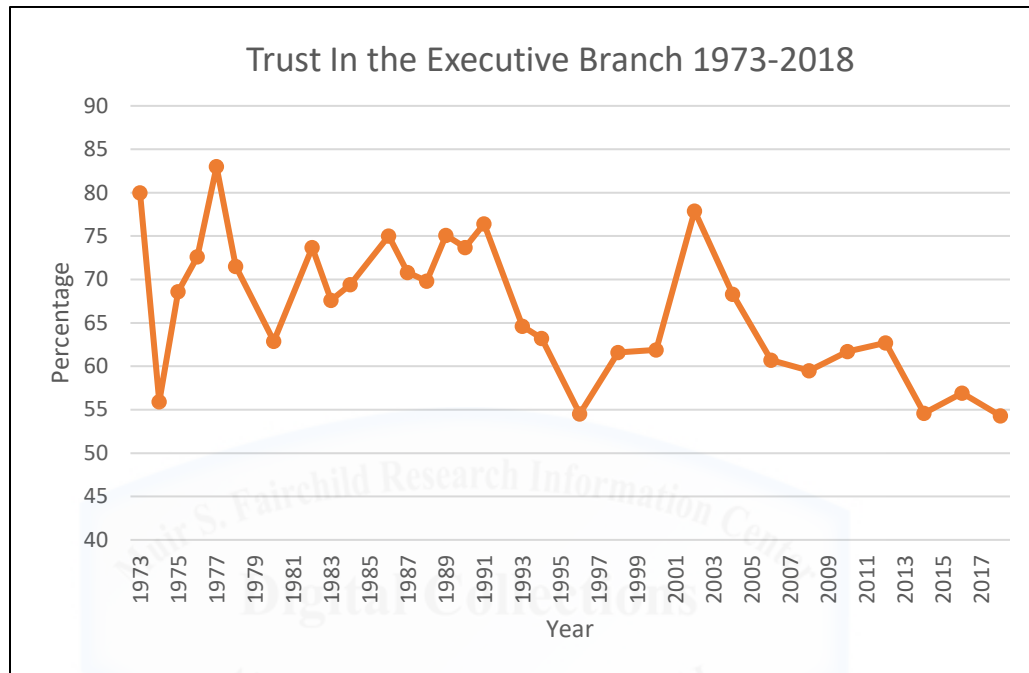


Figure 10: Trust in the Executive Branch 1973-2018

Source: Adapted from Tom W. Smith, Michael Davern, Jeremy Freese, Stephen L. Morgan, General Social Surveys, 1972-2018, NORC, University of Chicago, <https://gss.norc.org>

¹ Specifically, the sources are: Pew Research Center, National Election Studies, Gallup, ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, and CNN polls.

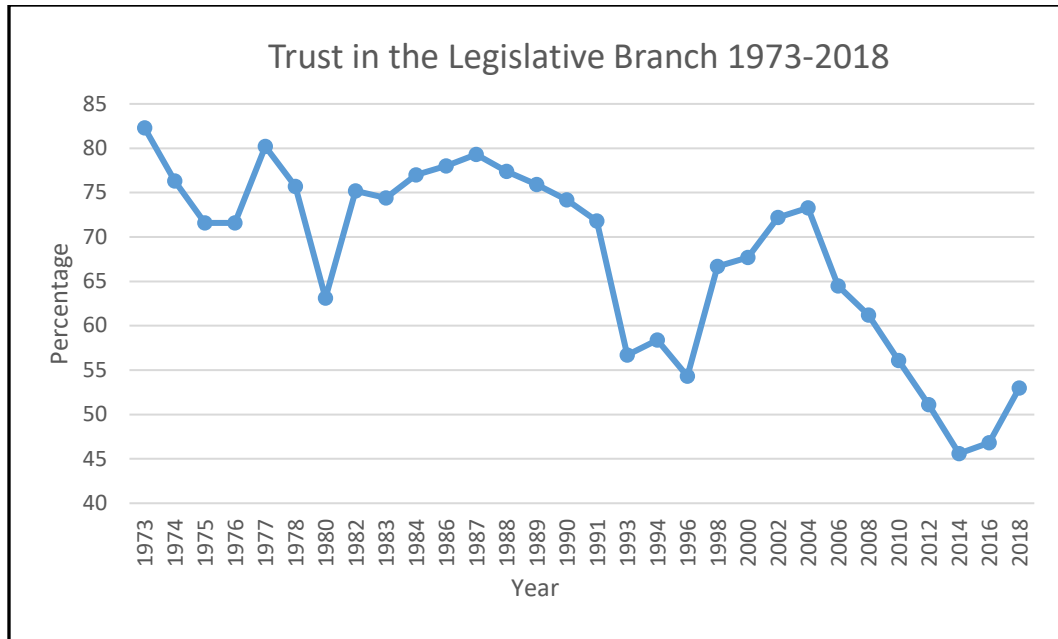


Figure 11: Trust in the Legislative Branch 1973-2018

Source: Adapted from Tom W. Smith, Michael Davern, Jeremy Freese, Stephen L. Morgan, *General Social Surveys, 1972-2018*, NORC, University of Chicago, <https://gss.norc.org>

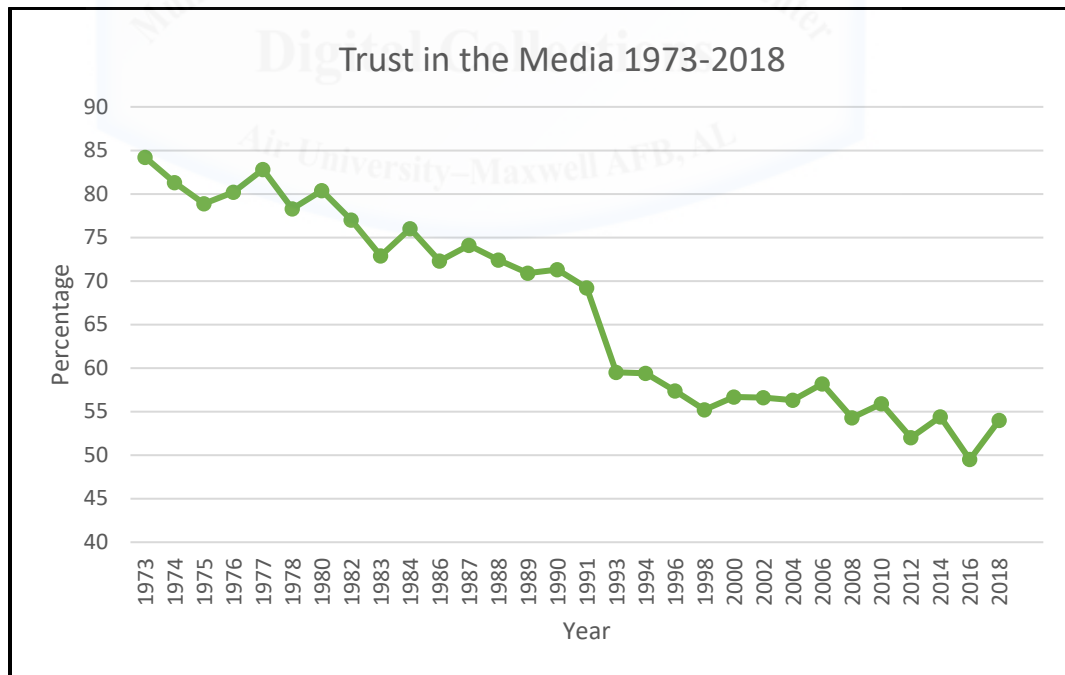


Figure 12: Trust in the Media 1973-2018

Source: Adapted from Tom W. Smith, Michael Davern, Jeremy Freese, Stephen L. Morgan, *General Social Surveys, 1972-2018*, NORC, University of Chicago, <https://gss.norc.org>

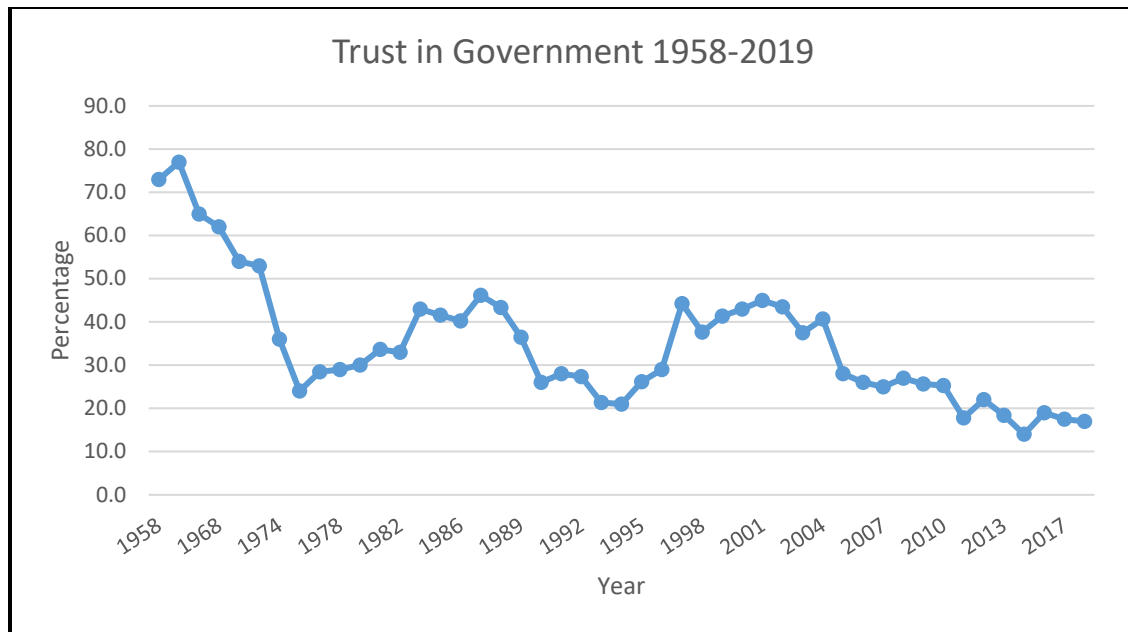


Figure 13: Trust in Government 1958-2019

Source: Adapted from "Public Trust in the Government" Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. April 2017, <https://www.people-press.org/2017/05/03/public-trust-in-government-remains-near-historic-lows-as-partisan-attitudes-shift/1-19/>

Using the above figures, the first element of Truth Decay, declining trust in formerly trusted institutions will be analyzed from a comprehensive vantage against the three major dates in question, 1952, 1974, and 1996, and finally for any large trend changes within the data.² First, analyzing the first element from a total scale, each individual institution demonstrated a negative trend line over the course of the study including the consolidated Pew data in Figure 13. Furthermore, concerning trust in the media, the average rate of change over the entire span of the study demonstrated a nearly two percent decline in trust per year. In short, America, regardless of input, steadily grew to distrust the media. American society, based on a large-scale view of the first element, clearly demonstrated a negative decline into Truth Decay over time.

Second, with respect to the three major dates in question, there are high indications of correlation between control mechanisms in both 1974 and 1996.³ First, to determine if the data following the specific years in question are significant, this study

² Recall that 1996 should be the single largest shift in Truth Decay within the evaluated time period based on the influence of the control mechanisms of that year.

³ Unfortunately, proper data does not exist to test the 1952 data, but the Pew Research Center data does confirm the negative trend line.

used a 95 percent confidence interval calculation to determine the significance of the rate of change.⁴ Both years in question show society steadily decreasing their trust in all three institutions or within a year to two-year lag of the time in question, sharply increasing their trust in both the executive and legislative branches, or rising out of Truth Decay.

Table 8 displays the lower and upper confidence interval of the rates of change for trust in the executive branch, the legislative branch, and the media. As the data demonstrates, the rate of change in the respective sections indicates sharp changes of trust, moving from a decline into an abrupt positive change. Moreover, the rate of change following the years in question is statistically significant and support the study's proposition of rising out of a period of Truth Decay. Looking specifically at the legislative branch in 1974, the initial rate of change is trending in the wrong direction, however, within a two-year window, the rate of change is 8.6, trending in the correct direction and statistically significant. The media, which exhibited a steady decrease over the entire period, also demonstrated statistically significant rates of change within the highlighted years, however the trend was not in the study's predicted direction.

Table 8 Truth Decay Element #1 Rate of Change

	Trust in Executive Branch	Trust in Legislative Branch	Trust in Media
Lower CI	-4.142	-3.379	-2.228
Upper CI	2.37	1.358	0.145
1974 Rate of Change	12.7	-4.7	-2.4
1996 Rate of Change	7.1	12.4	-2.2

Source: Author's Original Work

Finally, looking at each institution over time for any large changes, there were sharp increases in trust in the executive and legislative branches between 1980 and 1981 and sharp decreases in trust between 2002 through 2004. While no control mechanism was present in 1980, 2002 did have a continuing regulation, recognizing the Internet as an

⁴ A 95 percent confidence interval uses an upper and lower threshold of values that contain 95 percent of the true mean of the population.

information service as opposed to a carrier service.⁵ However, the drastic changes concerning trust could have centered on the elections of the same period or the continued aftershocks following the attacks on 9/11.

In summary, concerning declining trust in formerly trusted institutions, this study shows society steadily decreasing their trust in the executive branch, the legislative branch, and the media. Moreover, this study also showed strong influence of in 1974 and 1996, key dates of control mechanism. Using a scale of low, moderate, and high, the overall assessment of control mechanisms influence on the first element of truth decay is moderate. Trust is a matter of perception, containing elements government performance, both informed and influenced by the media.⁶

Truth Decay Element #2: An increase in polarization throughout society

The second element in the system of Truth Decay is an increase in polarization throughout society. Specifically, this study focuses on partisan polarization in Congress and American society. Partisan polarization in Congress is demonstrated using DW-NOMINATE scores to represent legislators' voting records on a spatial map. The DW scores allow analysts to determine how liberal or conservative each congressional session is and the degree of polarization between parties over time. Moreover, the creators of the DW scores standardized congressional voting behavior on every recorded vote within a two-year congressional session and created a scale of -2 to +2 where votes that are more liberal would trend toward -2 and more conservative views towards +2.⁷ Polarization is then measured as the absolute difference between the median Republican and Democrat in each session. Figure 14 displays the polarization in the House and Senate from 1871 until 2017 while Figure 15 displays the polarization of Congress concerning the years in question, 1947 until 2017.

The study also measures partisan polarization at the individual level. The GSS

⁵ These sharp changes at the beginning of the millennium could also be the aftereffects of 9/11.

⁶ For the first element, the Truth Decay phenomenon in question has been evaluated over time. However, in many elements for this study, there is a shortage of empirical data which measures the exact event in question. Without a rigorous documentation in the exact data, this study offers a wide qualitative evaluation of the mid-range theory's explanatory power by categorizing each element as low, moderate, or high. Any further refinement or broadening of the categories would overextend or negate the usefulness of the proposition's explanatory power. Furthermore, RAND in their 2018 study had similar issues and binned their findings into loose approximations based on availability of data.

⁷Whitman Cobb, *Political Science Today*, 160–61.

asked respondents, “We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I’m going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal—point 1—to extremely conservative—point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?” Figure 16 is the graphical depiction of liberal versus conservative responses while Figure 17 is the difference between the two groups.⁸ Difference values that approach “0” are less polarized and values that approach “1” are more polarized. Again, based on the timing of the GSS study, there is no data concerning the polarization of society prior to 1974.

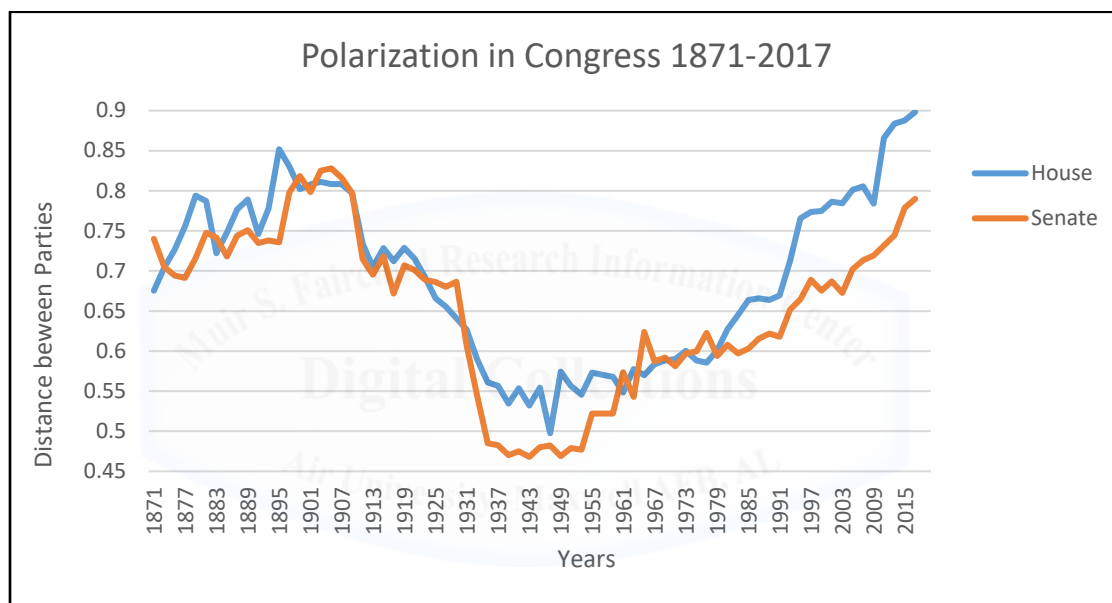


Figure 14 Polarization in Congress 1871-2017

Source: Adapted from Jeffrey B. Lewis, Keith Poole, Howard Rosenthal, Adam Boche, Aaron Rudkin, and Luke Sonnett, Voteview: Congressional Roll Call Database, <https://voteview.com>

⁸ Response options 1, 2, and 3 were coded as “Liberal” and response options 5, 6, 7 were coded as “Conservative.” Response option 4 was coded as “moderate.” For Figure 16 and Figure 17 responses 1-3 and 5- were combined to create the “Liberal” and “Conservative” categories.

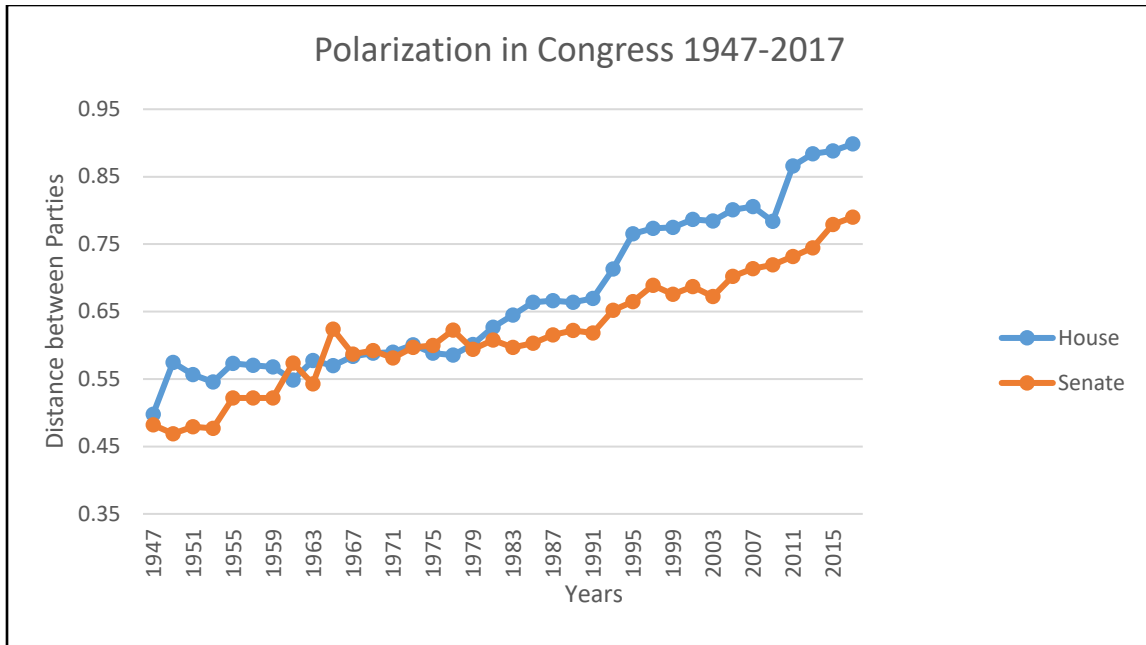


Figure 15: Polarization in Congress 1947-2017

Source: Adapted from Jeffrey B. Lewis, Keith Poole, Howard Rosenthal, Adam Boche, Aaron Rudkin, and Luke Sonnett, *Voteview: Congressional Roll Call Database*, <https://voteview.com>

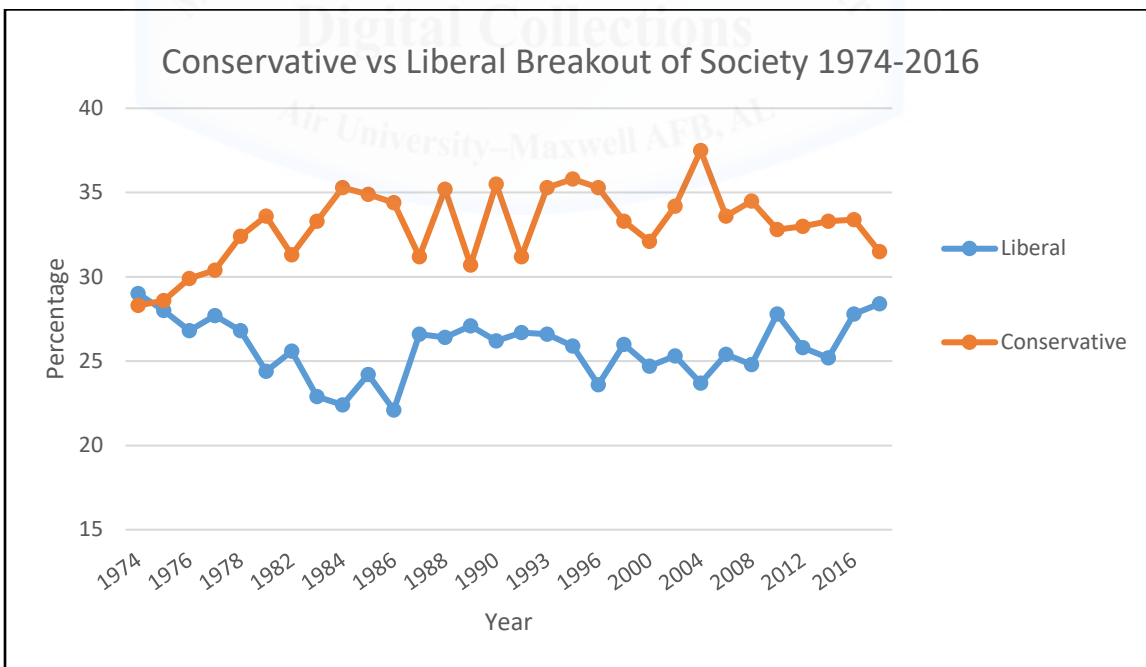


Figure 16: Conservative vs Liberal Breakout of Society 1974-2016

Source: Adapted from Tom W. Smith, Michael Davern, Jeremy Freese, Stephen L. Morgan, *General Social Surveys, 1972-2018*, NORC, University of Chicago, <https://gss.norc.org>

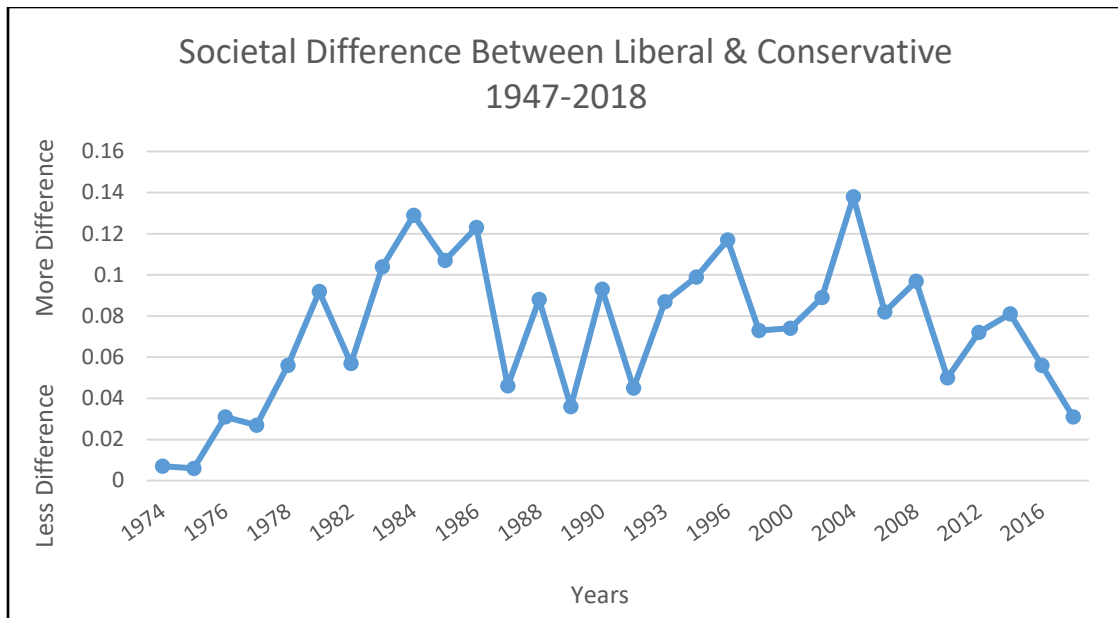


Figure 17 Societal Difference between Liberal & Conservative 1947-2018

Source: Adapted from Tom W. Smith, Michael Davern, Jeremy Freese, Stephen L. Morgan, General Social Surveys, 1972-2018, NORC, University of Chicago, <https://gss.norc.org>

First, analyzing the second element from a total scale from 1950 until 2010, the distance between the two parties did begin to widen around the mid-1980s into the 1990s. In other words, polarization within Congress increased. Recall from Chapter 2, most Americans owned television from the 1950s onward, but only had three basic network options and few had subscriptions to cable. However, as the government deregulated cable, it allowed the industry to flourish and access to more information at greater speeds. Furthermore, the widening of partisan polarization continued into the Internet age.

Table 9 highlights the lower and upper confidence interval of the rates of change for both the legislative branch and society focusing on the key years in question, 1952, 1974, and 1996. The results are mixed. The rate of change within the House and Senate demonstrate shifts that are statistically significant, while societal change averages less and is not statistically significant. While there are many contextual factors that influence partisan polarization throughout society, the beginning of the divide demonstrates loose correlation with Americans' additional access to information at greater speeds due to

technology.⁹

Table 9 Truth Decay Element #2 Rate of Change

	House DW	Senate DW	Societal Views
Lower CI	0.003397	0.000783	-0.12166
Upper CI	0.19517	0.016817	0.015545
1952 one- year Rate of Change	-0.011	-0.002	N/A
1952 three- year Rate of Change	0.004667	0.014333	N/A
1974 one- year Rate of Change	-0.012	0.0025	-0.001
1974 three- year Rate of Change	-0.0075	0.01275	0.006666667
1996 one- year Rate of Change	0.008	0.0245	0.044
1996 four- year Rate of Change	0.00475	0.0055	-0.0215

Source: Author's Original Work

Furthermore, Figures 16 and 17 show that Americans have also slightly increased their polarization over time. While the slight increase in polarization over time does fit the proposition, the results are not as dramatic as the polarization within Congress, nor are they statistically significant. An explanation for this is that average Americans do not widely shift their basic preferences for a particular political party; rather political elites, who are ideologically distant, have widened the gap between citizens and the government.¹⁰ Citizens who identify as strong partisans are the same individuals who will become involved in government, conduct work for a political campaign, and answer-polling questions concerning their political behavior. In short, strong partisans, on average, have grown more ideologically extreme over the last three decades while the

⁹ Partisan polarization by no means was or is caused by the television industry; however, the medium's ability to increase the speed and volume of information could have exacerbated the situation.

¹⁰ Júnior et al., *Why People Don't Trust Government*, 156.

average citizen remains closer to the center and disengaged from politics.¹¹

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, American society displayed a sharp decrease in trust of government entities. With respect to the second element of Truth Decay, government elites were growing in polarization while the average American remained in the center, growing distrustful of politicians who did not share similar concerns. Figure 17 supports this data, showing a slight increase in societal polarization with much of the data lying outside of the trend line while Figure 15 demonstrates Congress' continued polarization and alienation from their constituents.

In summary, concerning the increase polarization throughout society, both Congress and Americans demonstrate a growing polarization over time. However, the data is mixed with respect to supporting the idea that polarization shifted in line with the control mechanisms' dates for the television and Internet industry. Partisan polarization did increase over time and, as partisan polarization increases, society descends further into Truth Decay. Yet, given the mixed results, and using a scale of low, moderate, and high, the overall assessment of control mechanisms influence on the second element of truth decay is moderate.

Truth Decay Element #3: Erosion of civil discourse

The third element in the system of Truth Decay is the erosion of civil discourse. Civil discourse refers to "robust, honest, frank, and constructive dialogue and deliberation that seeks to advance the public interest."¹² Incivility, in any given society, is a contextually based measurement, meaning behaviors appropriate in one culture could be inappropriate in others. In short, civil discourse has a norming element that could change over time. Specifically, this study measures the erosion of civil discourse at an organizational and individual level.

At the organizational level, the study uses the Annenberg Public Policy Center's 76-year study of comity within Congress.¹³ The Center focused on searching for words

¹¹ Júnior et al., 170–75.

¹² Carli Brosseau, "Executive Session: Civil Discourse in Progress," *Frankly Speaking*, Vol 1, No. 2 (October 27, 2011).

¹³ Comity is based on the norm of reciprocal courtesy and that the debates within Congress are not personal and that parties on both sides of the aisle are of "good will and integrity motivated by conviction." Annenberg Public Policy Center, "Civility in Congress (1935-2011) as Reflected in the Taking Down Process," 5.

that indicate a public attack while Congress was in session; for example, tallying any time name-calling, aspersions, lying, non-cooperation, pejoratives for speech and vulgarity in addition to phrases such as “the House will be in Order” and “Member Requested to Suspend.” Figure 18 demonstrates the total requests that words be taken down as a result of a ruling from the chair as using words, “ruled out of order” while Figure 19 includes total requests including presidential-centered attacks with rulings. Within each figure, there are markers with “R” and “D,” which denote when Congress changed control between the two parties.

At the individual level, the study measures civic engagement by using polling data to evaluate American society’s civil engagement, such as serving on a committee or attended a public meeting, over time.¹⁴ Civil discourse relies on the bedrock of social capital which refers to “the connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”¹⁵ Societies that act collectively can achieve common goals while simultaneously fostering generalized reciprocity.¹⁶ Alternatively, societies with isolated individuals or worse, communities that use social capital toward malevolent purposes erode civil discourse and the subsequent functioning of democracy.

For this study, no single American survey covers the entire time for the Truth Decay study, therefore this study synthesizes multiple studies to capture Truth Decay’s third element. The first study used was the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research on civil engagement from 1973 to 1998. Roper asked the question, “Now here is a list of things some people do about government or politics. Have you happened to have done any of those things in the past year? (If yes, which ones: Attended a public meeting, wrote a letter to Congress, served on a committee or organization.)” Figure 20 displays the civic engagement of Americans from 1973 until 1998.

In addition, this study uses the Pew Research Center’s complementary study,

¹⁴I would like to thank Dr. Keele for the use of his data concerning civic engagement in the 20th century and Dr. Jennifer Wolak who provided her crucial consolidation of the same work into the 21st century. Keele, “Macro Measures and Mechanics of Social Capital.”

¹⁵ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 19.

¹⁶ Reciprocity meaning exchanging things for mutual benefit while generalized reciprocity refers to doing something for someone with the expectation that someone else (not necessarily that person) will do something for me at a later time. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 20.

which began in the 2000s, asking Americans, “Do you belong to or ever work with: local social club or charitable organization; community groups, sports groups or some other local group?” A very limited study, the Center asked questions in 2002, 2008, and 2010. Figure 21 displays America’s civic engagement from 2002-2010. Similarly, the Gallup Poll ran a religious engagement study from 1992 to 2019 asking if members, “Do you happened to be a member of a church or synagogue? How important would you say religion is in your own life? How often do you attend church or a synagogue?” While this Gallup Poll introduces religion, a potentially galvanizing topic, Figure 22 provides further context into America’s lack of engagement and stock in religion from 1992 until 2019.

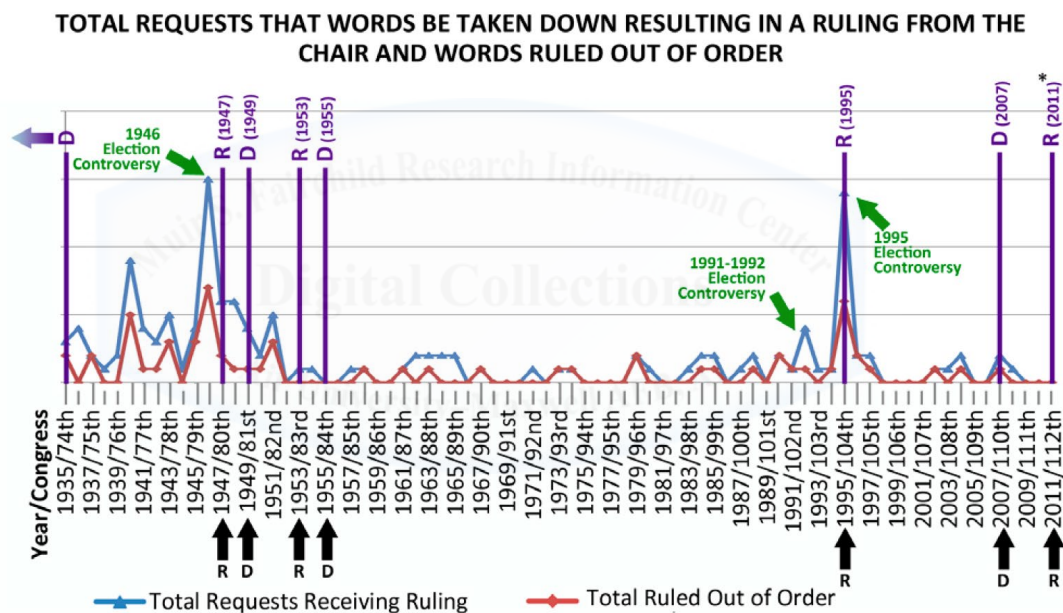


Figure 18: Total Requests of Words Ruled out of Order from 1935-2011

Source: Adapted from Kathleen Jamieson, *Civility in Congress*, The Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania, September 2011, <https://cdn.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org>

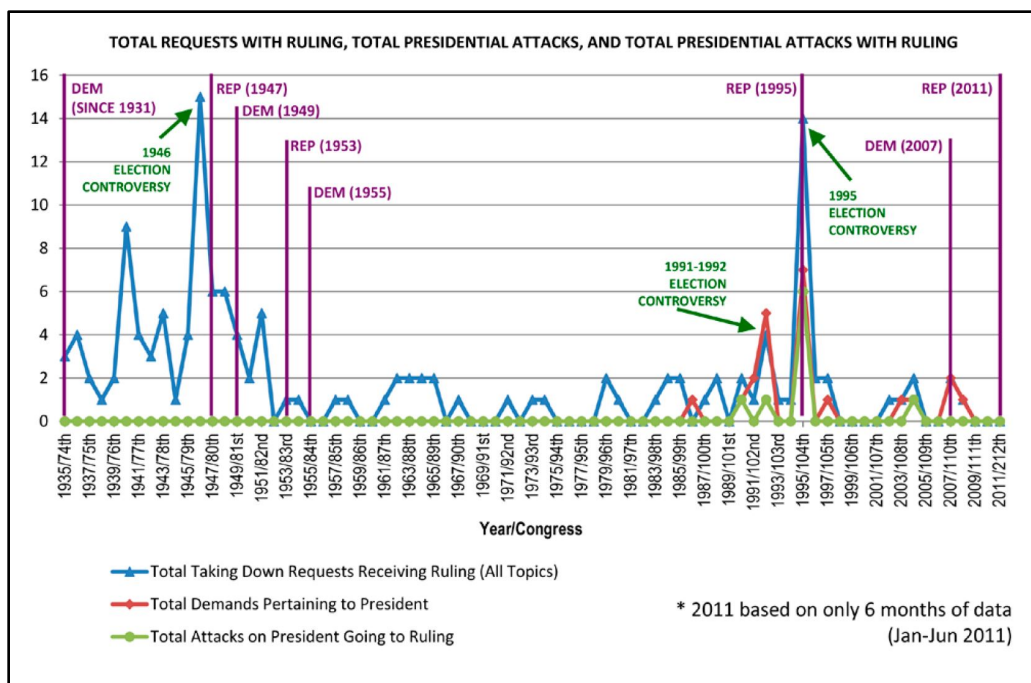


Figure 19: Total Rulings with Presidential Attacks from 1935-2011

Source: Adapted from Kathleen Jamieson, *Civility in Congress*, The Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania, September 2011, <https://cdn.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org>

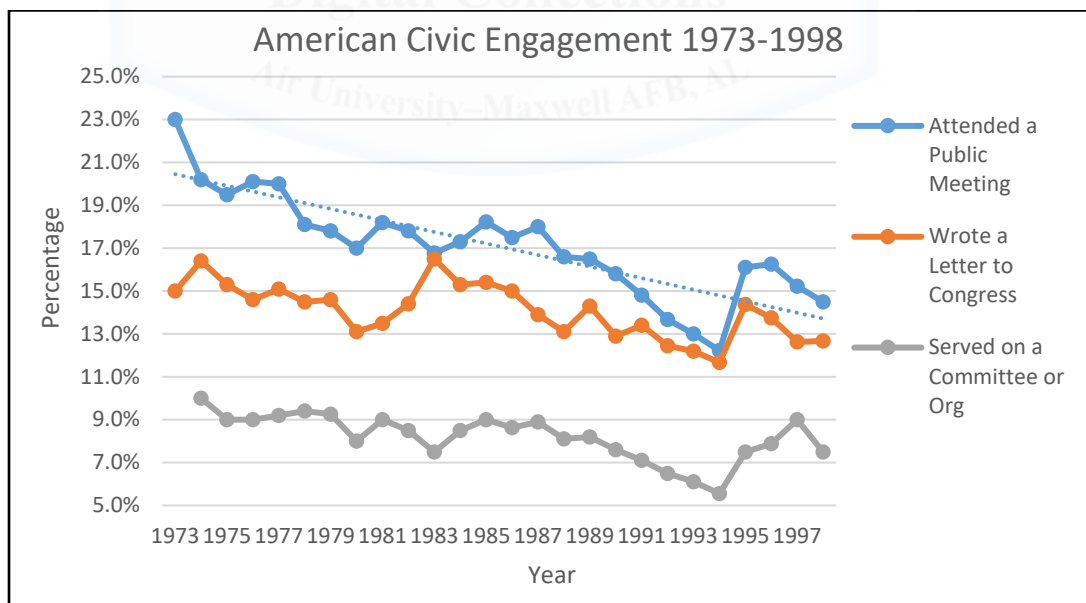


Figure 20: American Civic Engagement 1973-1998

Source: Adapted from "Social and Political Trends Survey," Roper Center for Public Opinion Research as quoted in Luke Keele's "Macro Measures and Mechanics of Social Capital" *Political Analysis* 13, no 2 (2005): 139-56.

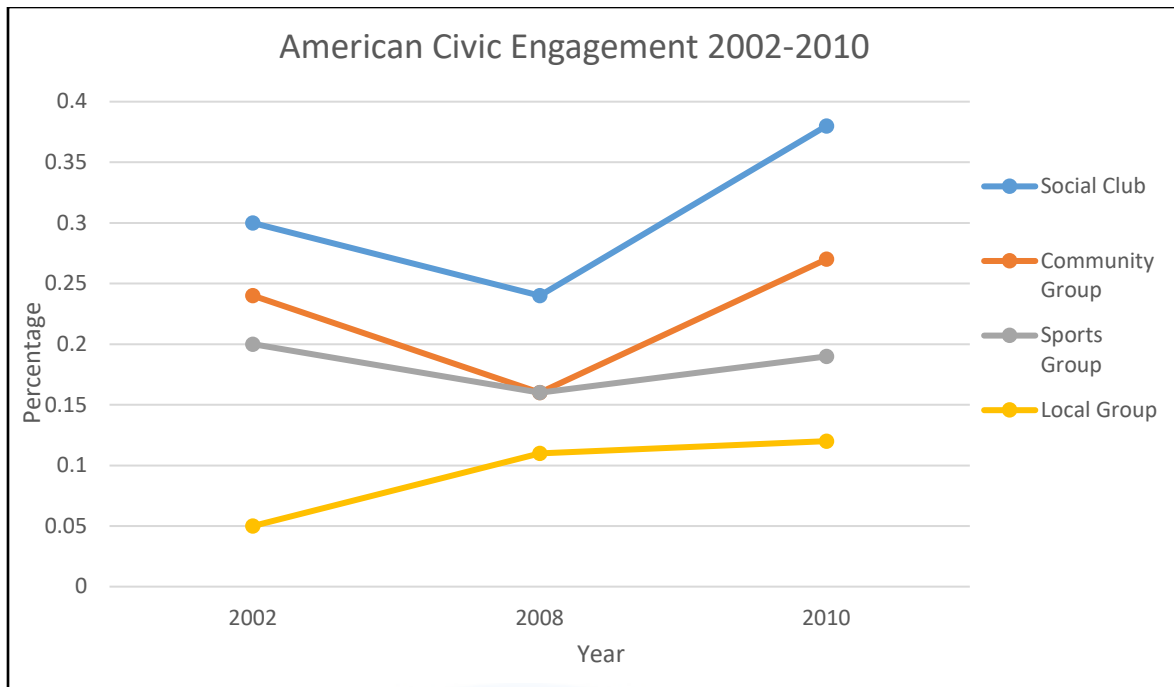


Figure 21: American Civic Engagement 2002-2010

Source: Adapted from Pew Research Center, study on Civic Engagement as compiled by Dr. Jennifer Wolak in her continuation of Dr. Luke Keele's work on Social Capital.

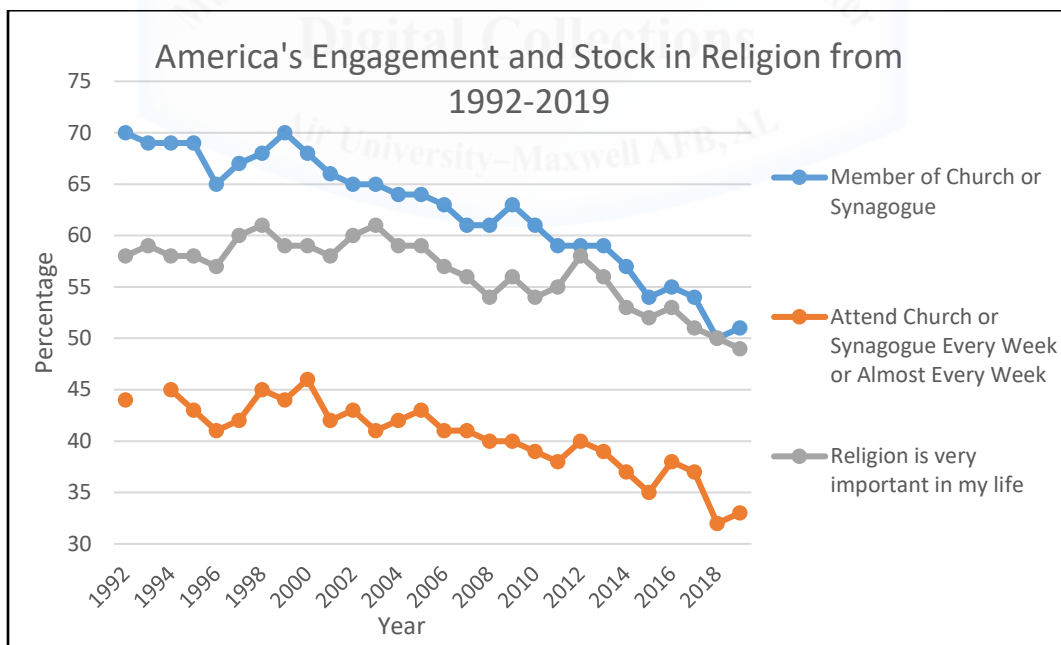


Figure 22: American Engagement and Stock in Religion from 1992-2019

Source: Adapted from multiple religious studies conducted from 1992-2019, from Gallup Research Center, <https://news.gallup.com>

First, concerning the overall trend of civil discourse within Congress, the legislative branch has shown consistent comity, generating less than five out of order

rulings per two-year session. Courtesy and consideration are foundational pillars of constructive dialogue and deliberation. However, the data from the mid-1980s into the 1990s demonstrate small upticks in out of order rulings, which coincide with Congress' continued polarization and society's sharp decline in trust in the government. This observation further suggests the Truth Decay's elements influence each other as a system.

In contrast, society has steadily declined in their civic engagement over the period in question. The Roper data from Figure 20 suggests very few Americans engaged in civic-minded duties and that small fraction declined over time. Pew's limited data in Figure 21 demonstrates a small increase over the 10-year period, with uneven sampling throughout the period. Finally, Gallup's data in Figure 22 displays American society's decrease membership and attendance in church. While the notion of religion is outside the scope of this particular study, the Gallup data offers further context for American society writ large.¹⁷ Namely, Americans overtime became less involved and disenfranchised with numerous organizations previously held in high esteem, to include civic engagement duties.

Next, concerning the three dates in question, 1952, 1974, and 1996, the data from Congress' out of order rulings do fit the model while societal civic discourse does not. Concerning Congress, each date in question did display a previous uptick in take down ruling requests, followed by a brief period of comity with the largest spike coinciding with the 1996 date. While the congressional data does seem to follow the dates of the Truth Decay study, there are many outside factors that could also account for spikes in incivility. For example, the Annenberg Center suggests in 1996, Congress demonstrated angst over President Clinton's re-election.¹⁸

Table 10 further illustrates the lower and upper confidence interval of the rates of change for both three measurements of society's civic engagement. For the two key dates in question, 1974 and 1996, the rates of change are both statistically significant. The two dates also represent election years, and if society were to engage in outside the norm civil activity, it would most likely be in an election year. The results do not

¹⁷ America's original foundation rested on the shoulders of the Protestant principles, playing a central role in many American's lives.

¹⁸ As a reminder, while President Clinton was currently having an affair at that time, it did not surface until 1998 with the Drudge Report's scoop.

indicate causation but point towards a trending correlation between Truth Decay and the control mechanisms key dates in question.

Table 10 Truth Decay Element #3 Rate of Change

	Attended a Public Meeting	Wrote a Letter to Congress	Served on a Committee or Organization
Lower CI	0.158051	-0.00662	-0.00505
Upper CI	0.175461	0.002615	0.00255
1974 one-year Rate Change	0.1930	-0.011	-0.01
1974 two-year Rate Change	0.1991	0.007	0
1996 one-year Rate Change	0.1506	-0.0113	0.0113
1996 two-year Rate Change	0.1435	0.0004	-0.015

Source: Author's Original Work

In summary, concerning the erosion of civil discourse throughout society, the results are mixed. Overall, Congress demonstrated civility as a whole, with sessions punctuated by small changes that also coincided with key dates associated with control mechanisms. Additionally, Americans demonstrated a decline in civic engagement over time. The civic engagement data does support shifts that are statistically significant and align with the control mechanisms' dates for the television and Internet industry. Moreover, the overall trends support the notion that society continues to sink into Truth Decay over time and the elements do appear to be working in concert with one another.

When considering the Truth Decay system as a whole, the elements do seem to affect one another. For example, America's erosion of civil discourse widens the polarization chasm between Congress and society and continues to sow the seeds of distrust in formerly trusted institutions. The Truth Decay elements work as a system, influencing each other over time. Together the three elements demonstrate American society's further slip into Truth Decay. Given the mixed results of the third element, and using a scale of low, moderate, and high, the overall assessment of control mechanisms influence on the third element of truth decay is moderate.

Truth Decay Element #4: Blurring the line between fact and opinion

The fourth element in the system of Truth Decay is the blurring of the line between fact and opinion. Specifically, this study relies on contextual news articles from 1950-2010 that call for media reform as a possible indication of blurring fact and opinion. The study uses ProQuest's historical archives, searching for letters to the editor, commentary, and editorial sections for phrases such as, "critical thinking," "media bias," "facts-based evidence," or "news bias." Searching these user-centered forums for the aforementioned phrases demonstrate public sentiment at the time.¹⁹ Figure 23 shows the frequency of the phrases from 1950-1990. Figure 24 displays the frequency of phrases from 1990 to 2018 and delineates the data into their respective categories. Displaying the data in this manner allows further scrutiny of the rapid trending starting in the 1990s while seeing the subtle nuances of the 1950s and 1960s.

Additionally, Figures 25, 26, and 27 display the frequency and volume of Google Trend's, "fake news," "media bias in the US," and "critical thinking" from 2004 until 2019, respectively. While the period in question is from 2000 to 2010, based on how Google Trends conducts its search analysis, it is important to capture the entire period. Google Trends reports the search frequency of a term relative to the total number of searches executed on Google. The trend is calculated relative to the time specified, so the index (represented along the y-axis from 0 to 100) could change drastically, depending on the period.²⁰ For this reason, this study has captured all the requisite data at one point in time—flattening the curve but also giving a true representation of the trends from 2004 until 2019.

¹⁹ The study used ProQuest data base to conduct the search. ProQuest contains four databases including the Digital National Security Archive, The Historical Newspapers Archive which contains papers such as the New York Times with Index, the Research Library Archive which contains a diversified mix of scholarly journals, trade publications, and magazines, and the US Newstream Archive which is the largest collection of local and regional newspapers.

²⁰ Whitman Cobb, "Trending Now: Using Big Data to Examine Public Opinion of Space Policy," *Space Policy* 32 (2015): 12–13.

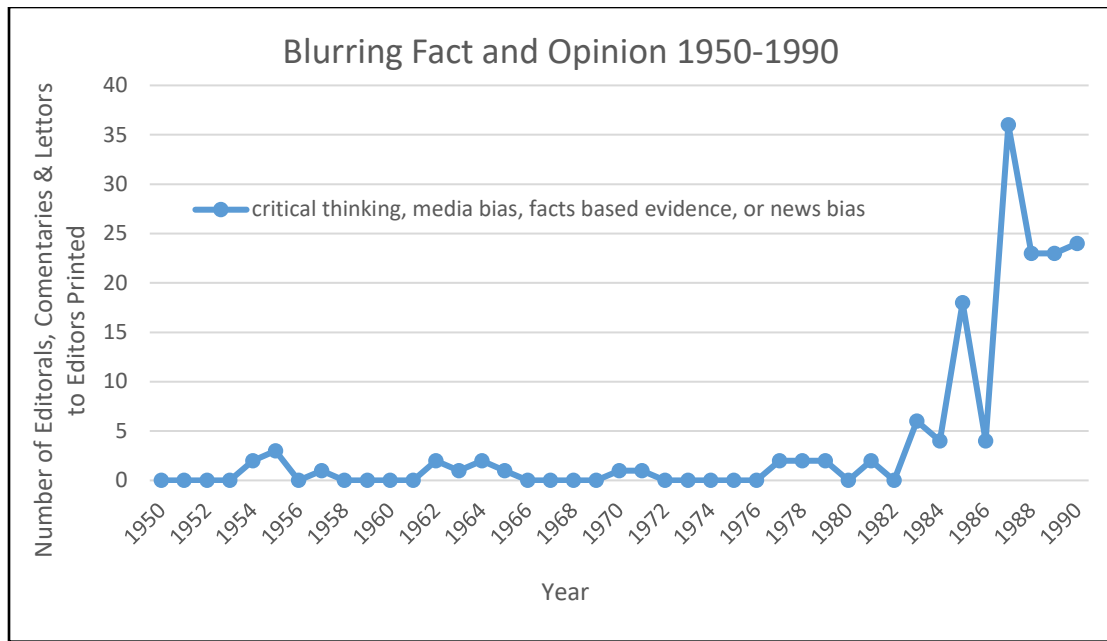


Figure 23: Americans Blurring Fact and Opinion 1950-1990

Source: Adapted from ProQuest Database, searching Editorials, Commentaries, & Letters to Editor for terms “Critical thinking, media bias, facts-based evidence, and news bias, accessed on Dec 2019; <http://proquest.com>.

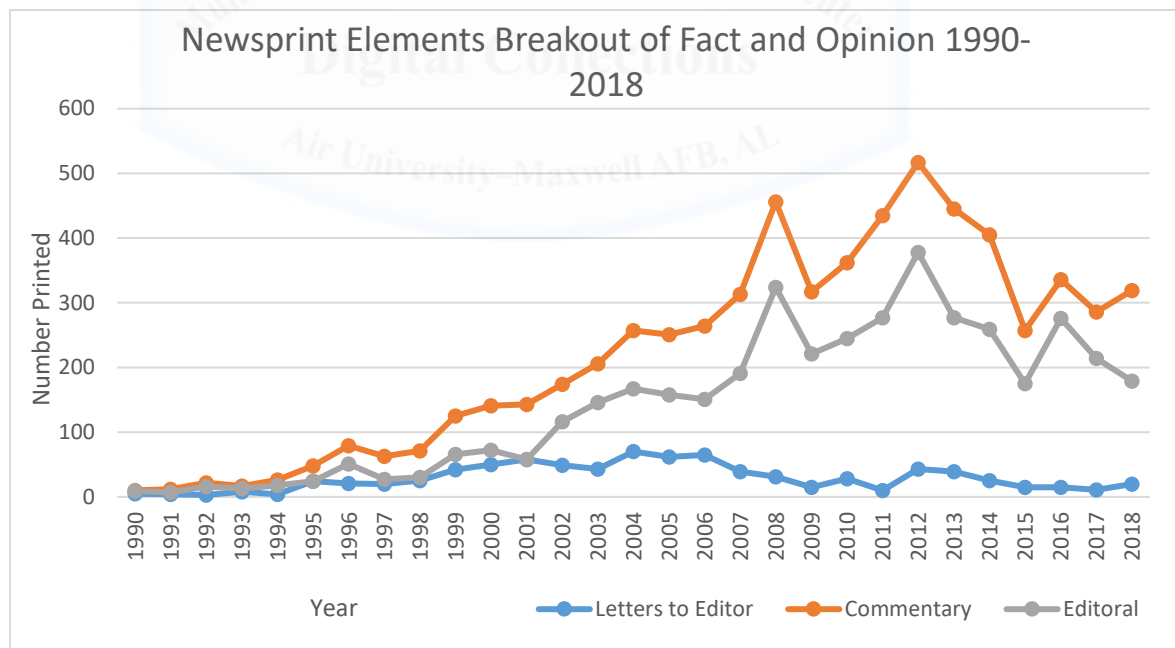


Figure 24: Newsprint Elements Breakout of Fact and Opinion 1990-2018

Source: Adapted from ProQuest Database, searching Editorials, Commentaries, & Letters to Editor for terms “Critical thinking, media bias, facts-based evidence, and news bias, accessed on Dec 2019; <https://proquest.com>.

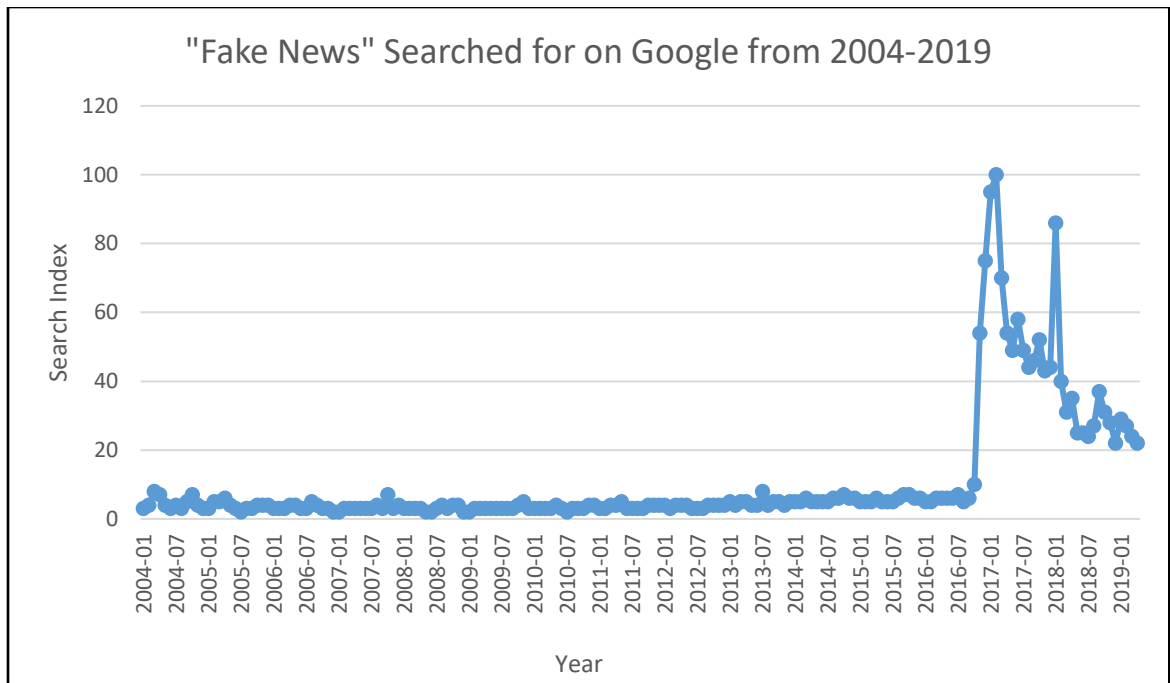


Figure 25: Google Trends' "Fake News" from 2004-2019

Source: Adapted from Google Trends, accessed on Dec 2019,
<https://www.google.com/trends>.

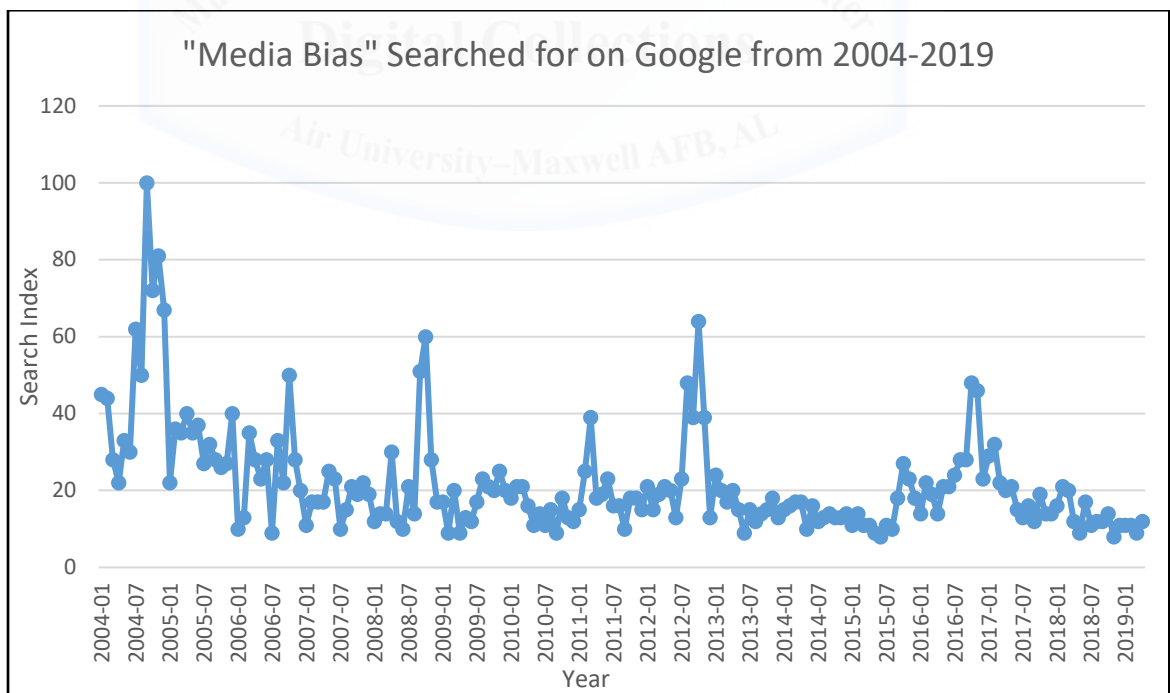


Figure 26: Google Trends' "Media Bias" from 2004-2019

Source: Adapted from Google Trends, accessed on Dec 2019,
<https://www.google.com/trends>.

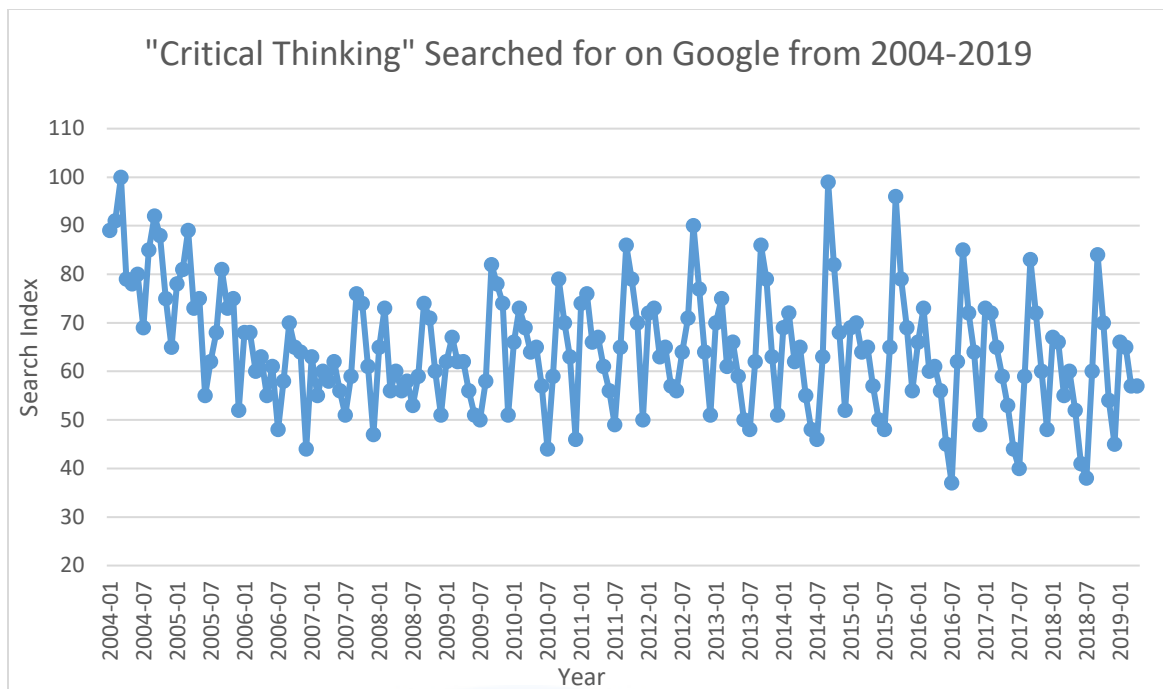


Figure 27: Google Trends’ “Critical Thinking” from 2004-2019

Source: Adapted from Google Trends, accessed on Dec 2019, <https://www.google.com/trends>.

First, based on the trend line concerning interest in writing to newspapers concerning “critical thinking,” “media bias,” “facts-based evidence,” or “news bias,” these terms did increase over time. The increase could stem from either society increasingly blurring the line between fact and opinion, becoming further aware of media blurring fact and opinion, or a combination thereof. However, this trend started its upward trek in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The notable uptick in terms coincided with the period’s increase in available information as provided by the booming cable industry, news programmers’ increased use of news pundits and news shapers to explain information to the public. Recall from Chapter 2 that news shapers often, liberally, inserted their opinion into segments, blurring the line between fact and opinion. Furthermore, with the advent and proliferation of the Internet and blogging, individuals received an amplified voice to influence society. Given society’s increase in polarization and decrease in civil engagement, which in turn decreases social bridging to diverse thoughts, the amplified voices started to reflect ethos-based narrative versus fact. Some members of society are unable to distinguish between the two. Considering that society rarely commented on the terms (less than five) up until the 1980s and then generated

hundreds of letters, editorials, and commentaries in the 2000s, it is highly plausible that the growing volume and speed of information from the television and Internet industries played a key role in the uptick.

Next, analyzing the Google Trend's data on the terms of "fake news," "media bias in the US," and "critical thinking," the correlating results to the Internet control mechanisms are weak. As evident in Figure 25, "fake news" had small searches throughout the entire period but did not really gain traction until the 2016 election, when then presidential candidate Donald Trump popularized the term. Additionally, "media bias" exhibited steady searches throughout time, punctuated by high search trends that coincided with US general elections, providing an indirect indicator that media may have increased their blurring of the lines between fact and opinion during election years, or society became more cognizant of this blurring, or a combination thereof. Finally, "critical thinking" was and is a common search term for American society, presenting a steady trend over time. In sum, the Google Trend data exposes America's cognitive awareness of blurring fact and opinion or at the least, Americans' beliefs that there is a blurring of fact and opinion, most often correlated with election years versus control mechanisms, reducing the explanatory power of the study within the Internet case study.

The analysis of the three dates in question, 1952, 1974, and 1996, from the historical news archives offer limited explanatory power to the study's proposition. For example, neither 1952 nor 1974 fit within the trend concerning a decrease in Truth Decay. However, recall this element is trying to capture society's cognitive awareness through *published* newspaper elements, relying on an editor who may or may not have an additional agenda in publishing said pieces. Nevertheless, Figure 24 demonstrates a large increase in published elements and a sharp decrease of using the key aforementioned terms in newspaper elements surrounding the 1996 timeframe. Given the gradient of the previous upward trend in the key terms, the dip—representing society moving out of a potential period of Truth Decay—1996 is a noteworthy year for the fourth element, and the overall Truth Decay study.

In summary, this study illustrates society either increasingly blurring the line between fact and opinion, becoming further aware of media blurring fact and opinion, or a combination thereof as evident by the trend lines. Likewise, regarding the key dates,

1996 also exhibits a key shift in moving society out of Truth Decay with respect to the fourth element. Society seemed to “google” terms such as “fake news,” “media bias in the US,” and “critical thinking,” during periods surrounding general elections. Finally, given the trend of increasingly blurring fact and opinion in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this aligns with the other elements of Truth Decay and demonstrates the increased speed and volume of television on into the 2000s and Internet Age. Given the overarching limitations of the historical data on this topic, any connection with society’s blurring of fact and opinion with the effects of the control mechanisms are scant correlations, making the overall explanatory power of the fourth element of Truth Decay moderate.

Truth Decay Trend #5: Political Paralysis

The fifth element in the system of Truth Decay is political paralysis. Specifically, this study tracks the ratio of House and Senate bills passed versus introduced, indicating paralysis over time. Figures 28 and 29 display the House and Senate bill-ratios, respectively. An observation related to the ratio of bills introduced versus passed is the growing complexity and size of legislation. To illustrate this point, Figure 30 displays the average pages per stature of public bills enacted by Congress from 1947 to 2018 showing the two-year Congressional sessions.

This study tracks political paralysis by using Sarah Binder’s “gridlock” data from 1947 until 2000.²¹ In the “gridlock” study, Binder generated a list of agenda items and determined if the agenda item was resolved by enactment in that Congressional session. In addition, Binder also tracked the saliency of agenda items and noted when the topic received mention in five or more editorials in *New York Times*, demonstrating the item’s relevancy within the media. Figure 31 is the adaptation of Binder’s work where the frequency of success is 100 and the frequency of gridlock is zero, meaning the lower the number, the lower level of success.

²¹ Binder, *Stalemate: Causes and Consequences of Legislative Gridlock*, 156–57.

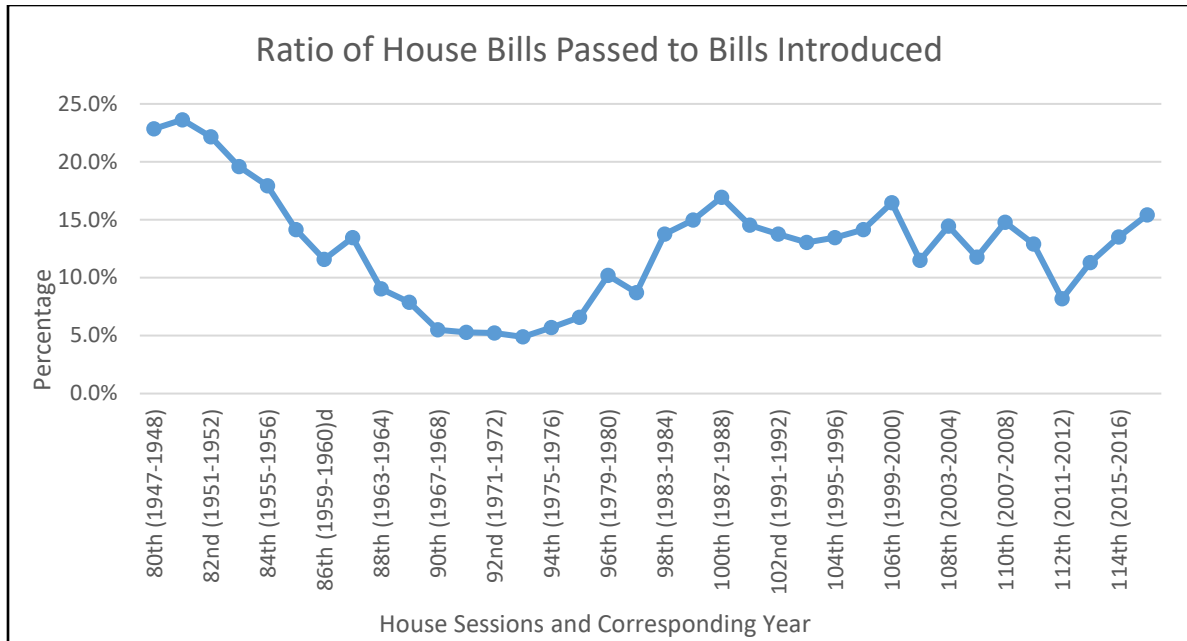


Figure 28: Ratio of House Bills Introduced to Bills Passed 1947-2016

Source: Adapted from Congressional Record (thomas.loc.gov); Office of the Clerk, US House of Representatives; "Resume of Congressional Activity," Congressional Record, 80th Congress - 109th Congress; End of Session Committee Reports; Committee Websites; Office of the Historian - US House of Representatives.

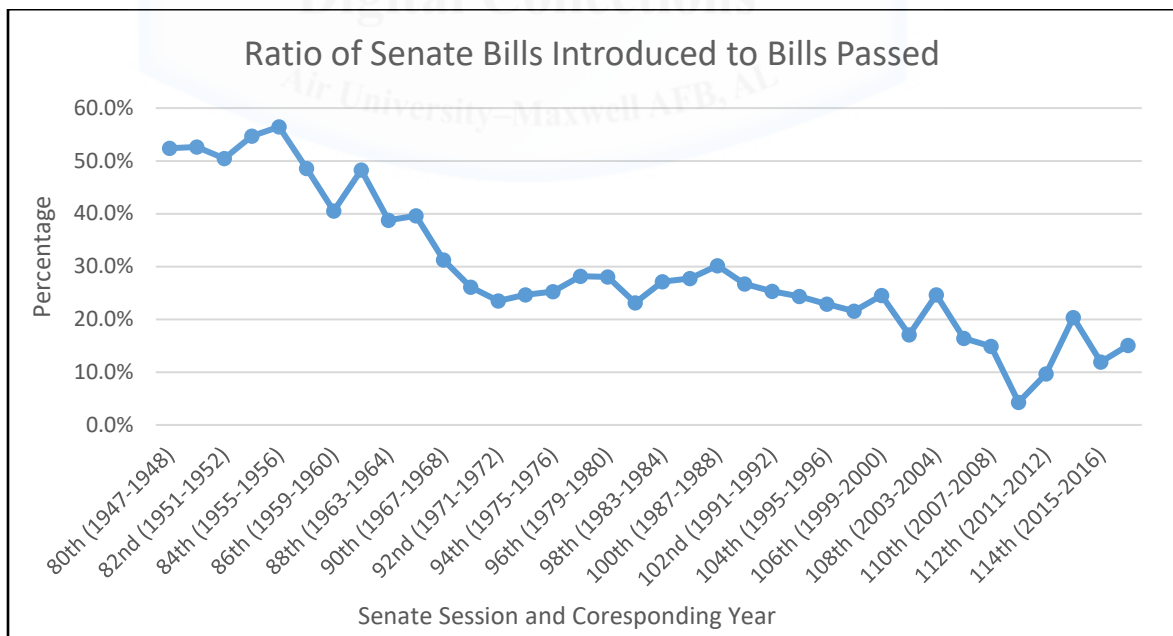


Figure 29: Ratio of Senate Bills Introduced to Bills Passed 1947-2016

Source: Adapted from Congressional Record (thomas.loc.gov); Office of the Secretary, US Senate; Senate Daily Digest; "Resume of Congressional Activity," Congressional Record, 80th Congress - 113th Congress. Congressional Record (thomas.loc.gov); End of Session Committee Reports; Committee Websites.

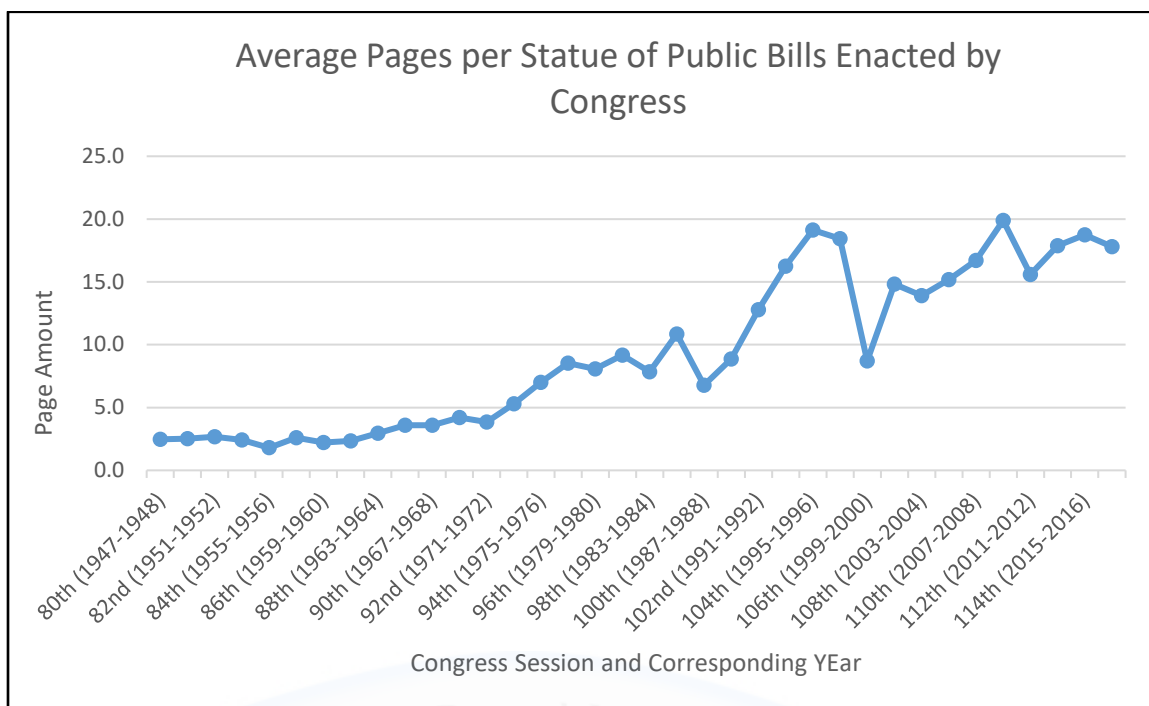


Figure 30 Average Statute Size of Public Bills Enacted by Congress 1947-2016
 Source: Adapted from Federal Register, Statutes Branch; The Library of Congress -- Thomas, (<http://thomas.loc.gov>); United States Statutes at Large, Government Printing Office.

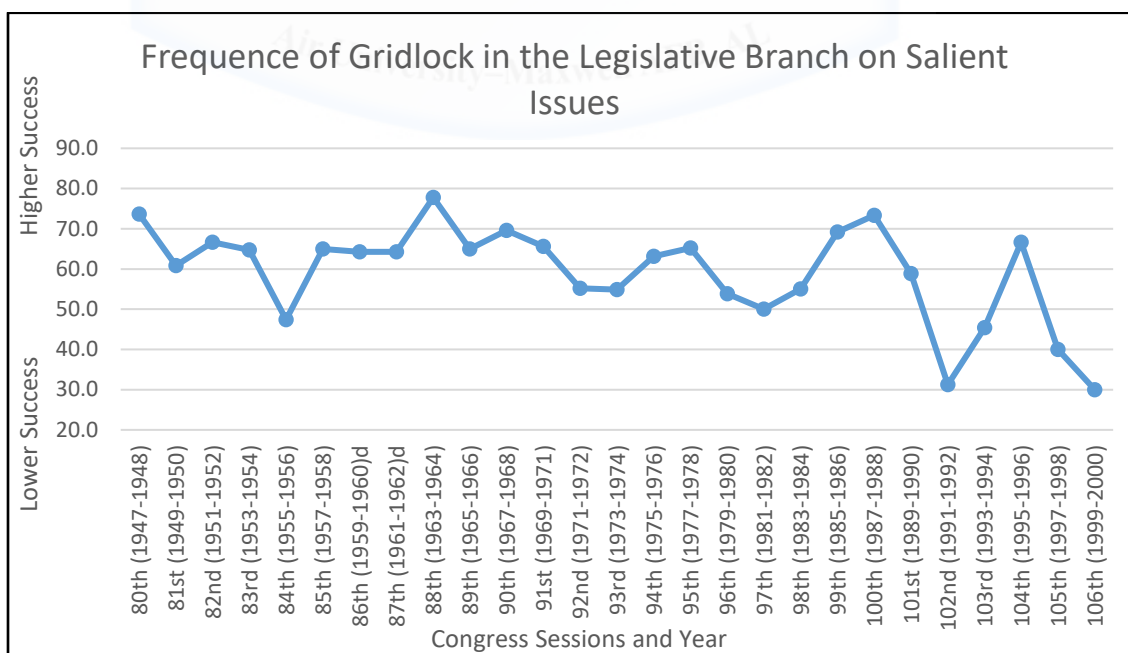


Figure 31: Frequency of Gridlock in Congress on Salient Issues 1947-2000
 Source: Adapted from Sara Binder, *Stalemate: Causes and Consequences of Legislative Gridlock*, 156-157.

Using the above figures, the study evaluates the fifth element of Truth Decay, political paralysis. First, Figures 28 and 29 both demonstrate a decreasing ratio of bills introduced versus passed meaning that Congress, over time, is not as efficient at passing laws and indicating an increase in political paralysis. A partial explanation for this could be the increased complexity of public bills, as evident by Figure 30. However, in a non-paralytic society, the relative amount of legislation passed should not change vis-à-vis the ratio. Moreover, concerning gridlock on salient issues, trends from 1947 until 2000 indicate a lower success rate or that Congress also displayed political paralysis on pointed issues.

Next, with respect to the three dates in question, 1952, 1974, and 1996, the data concerning congressional bill passing and gridlock is mixed. First, concerning the House and Senate ratios, the House of Representatives introduces thousands of more bills as compared to the Senate, which is understandable considering the composition difference between the two. The Senate averages 3,700 bills introduced each congressional session while the House averages 10,300. However, they each average 1,100 passed bills.²² This indicates that while the House data shows small efficiencies in paralysis in both 1974 and 1996, in general, they are busier than, yet not as efficient, as the Senate. The data in 1952 did not support the Truth Decay study and while the study does support the idea of lag-time, in this particular element, the lag came five years later and was most likely influenced by other outside factors.²³ In addition, the gridlock data on salient issues also did not demonstrate significant shifts in 1952 and the three-year lag demonstrated a further paralysis of Congress versus moving out of a period of Truth Decay. Likewise, the 1996 timeframe also demonstrated a shift in the wrong direction while 1974 demonstrated small shifts that aligned with the study's proposition. Over all, the salient gridlock data reveals little credence for the key years.

Finally, looking at the overall trends for outlying peaks and valleys, both the House and Senate entered into a state of political paralysis from the late 1960s into the

²² Source: Adapted from Congressional Record (thomas.loc.gov); Office of the Secretary, US Senate; Senate Daily Digest; "Resume of Congressional Activity," Congressional Record, 80th Congress - 113th Congress. Congressional Record (thomas.loc.gov); End of Session Committee Reports; Committee Websites.

²³ A confidence interval for both the House and Senate was extremely large, giving little explanatory power for the case of this study, and therefore was not included within this chapter.

early 1970s. Interestingly enough, after this period of political paralysis, the House and Senate began to drift in terms of partisan polarization, supporting the idea that the Truth Decay elements work in tandem and reinforce one another. While the 1960s and 1970s dates semi-align with some of the subsequent control mechanisms, other galvanizing contextual events such as the highly controversial war in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal also had effects on Congress' ability paralytic capacity.

In summary, the House and Senate demonstrated political paralysis over time with gridlock on salient issues. The late 1980s and 1990s also demonstrated greater inefficiencies, which coincide with greater increases in volume and speed of information, increased partisan polarization, and subsequent decrease in trust. Again, the interrelated dependencies of Truth Decay signify change in one element can exacerbate other elements within the system. Finally, concerning the introduction of control mechanisms within the key years and political paralysis, the data does not support the trends surrounding 1952, 1974, and 1996. Provided the mixed results, and using a scale of low, moderate, and high, the overall assessment of control mechanisms influence on the fifth element of truth decay is moderate.

Summary of Truth Decay Analysis

This study operationalized the five elements of Truth Decay using a mix of data concerning government organizations and societal polling to discern how the speed and volume of information, with respect to the dependent variable of control mechanisms in the television and Internet industry, influenced society as whole. Specifically, the above sections analyzed each element from a comprehensive standpoint that specifically scrutinized the key dates, which coincided with the introduction of control mechanisms within each media medium. Finally, the study provided a subjective grade of low, moderate, or high for each individual element. Table 11 summarizes the analysis of the Truth Decay study.

Table 11 Truth Decay Study Summary

	Element #1		Element #2		Element #3		Element #4		Element #5	
	Org	Society	Org	Society	Org	Society	Org	Society	Org	Society
Trend	High	N/A	High	Moderate	Moderate	High	N/A	Moderate	High	N/A
1952	N/A	N/A	Low	N/A	Moderate	N/A	N/A	Low	Low	N/A
1974	High	N/A	Low	Low	Moderate	Low	N/A	Low	Low	N/A
1996	High	N/A	Low	Low	Moderate	Low	N/A	High	Low	N/A
Total	Moderate		Moderate		Moderate		Moderate		Moderate	

Source: Author's Original Work

Note: Element #1, "Trust in institutions" and Element #5, "Political Paralysis" did not have a societal operationalization for the study.

The study concludes that the Truth Decay elements do appear to work as a system and society did demonstrate a negative decline into Truth Decay from 1950 to 2010 while the individual dates corresponding to control mechanisms to raise society out of Truth Decay contained mixed results. The study demonstrates American society is clearly declining into Truth Decay and the individual elements demonstrate a degree of influence on one another, working as a system. Recall, the founding fathers never imagined an efficient government; however, the evolution of the printing press into the modernity of today's communication increased the speed and volume of information to the people. As the means of communication evolved, so did the information—the amalgamation of entertainment and information, spurred by organizations that sought profit over a well-informed public while the government attempted to regulate the new medium did reveal a societal change. The change is present in the erosion of civil discourse, which affects how individuals find common ground to lead a government, leading to paralysis and partisan entrenchment, and ultimately spurs a loss of public trust in numerous institutions. In short, the Truth Decay elements did demonstrate an interconnectedness while no outside factors appeared to stymie American society's overall 70-year decline into the phenomena.

When considering the effects of control mechanisms on society's decline into Truth Decay, the study averaged low to moderate subjective scores with relation to the key dates in question, 1952, 1974, and 1996. Moreover, the keystone date of 1996, representing multiple control mechanisms and the largest telecommunications regulation

in the previous 60 years, demonstrates low to moderate influence on each element of the Truth Decay system. Therefore, based on the data, the various control mechanisms in each medium established limited correlation on society overall trend into Truth Decay. Based on complexity theory, a multi-dependent and independent variable study cannot demonstrate causation and should reveal only limited correlation. In this instance, the study's mid-range theory reveals limited correlation with respect to the control mechanisms effect on society, requiring further investigation.

Further research on this topic is needed. The study creatively measured each individual Truth Decay element's societal decline from an organizational level, individual level, or both. However, the only elements that definitively measured society's intent and actions concerning any one element were the first (declining trust in formerly respected institutions) and the fifth element (political paralysis.) In these instances, both elements confirmed moderate to high over all correlation with society's decline into Truth Decay, which provides support to the study's proposition. While control mechanisms only demonstrate loose correlation on the Truth Decay system, it is clear the elements do act as a system and further research on the Truth Decay system itself could aid in future studies to determine other correlating factors that influence society rise or fall.

Given the high correlation of control mechanisms on Truth Decay elements one and five, the other Truth Decay elements should be refined in their operational approaches and reevaluate against the key dates in question. For example, the second element's partisan polarization verified the trend of society declining into Truth Decay, there are other forms of polarization such as sociodemographic and economic that could aid in clarifying the overall polarization of society. Similarly, concerning the fourth element, blurring of fact and opinion, amplifying information at the individual level would greatly bolster the study. For instance, obtaining historical complaints from the Federal Communication Commission's reports on early television programming and cross-referencing the data against subsequent Nielsen ratings might provide a refined television specific, overview of the American public's blurring of fact and opinion.

This study evaluated one small aspect of a complex and dynamic system, with multiple variables and intervening elements, using the 2018-RAND tocsin as loose

research boundaries into the newly recognized phenomena of Truth Decay. The study of Truth Decay as a system and the correlation of various types of control mechanisms on the volume and speed of information should remain a societal focus area, as they both have implications for the future, specifically with the growing trend of social media. In Chapter 5, *Implication for the Future*, this study summarizes the major findings of the analysis and provides implications for America's regulation on social media, taking into account previous control mechanisms limited influence on society's overall decline into Truth Decay.



Chapter 5

Implications for the Future

There's a war out there old friend. A world war. And it's not about who's got the most bullets. It's about who controls the information. What we see and hear, how we work, what we think...it's all about the information!
Cosmo, in *Sneakers*

You take the blue pill...the story ends; you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill...you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.
Morpheus, in *The Matrix*

Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.
The Lorax, from Dr. Seuss' The Lorax

Introduction

Information and, more importantly, the flow of information are both crucial in a democratic society. While the founding fathers encouraged spirited debate at the cost of efficiency, they understood the power of the people's positive rights like free speech. The media, often romanticized as a collection of independents gathering information for citizens to compare with the government's version of events, was not the fourth estate's origin story.¹ Instead, the Federalist and Republican parties weaponized the media for partisan purposes, clamoring for citizens' patronage and vote. Meanwhile, many early printing presses primarily focused on content that generated revenue. Today, while the contexts have changed, the nature of America's founding sentiments has not.

Over time, technology changed as did the media's interaction with the public, the transformation, often ineloquently, regulated and shaped by the government. Despite regulations, the media discovered combining entertainment and information could also prove profitable, aided by technology to increase the speed and volume of their product to society. The role of technology has greatly altered the bond between society and media by accentuating their faults of communication, while the lower cost of entry to the media industry provided average citizens an equal platform to voice information, or

¹ Bob Schieffer, *Overload: Finding the Truth in Today's Deluge of News* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 83.

misinformation at a faster rate. The notions of an engaged public, buttressed by the flow of information are still keystone features of a flourishing democracy, yet this study's findings confirm societal slip into Truth Decay.

This chapter will bring closure to the overall study, breaking the conclusion into three main parts. The first segment will recap the study's intent and its importance, its relation to the larger RAND study, and summarize the findings from Chapter 4. The second segment will discuss implications for the future, specifically highlighting regulations' limited potential in the new domain of social media and social media's effect on America's youth and democratic process. Finally, the third segment will discuss a potential solution in need of further research that will help society in relation to Truth Decay.

Truth Decay Study Summary

This study sought to correlate the relationship of control mechanisms within the television and Internet industries against society's degeneration into the phenomena known as "Truth Decay." The advent of television and Internet increased the speed and volume of information to society at a faster pace than the control mechanisms, as demonstrated by the continued societal decline into Truth Decay. In 2018, RAND's larger study on the same topic served as a tocsin for further research into the recent shifts of America's information structure and their effect on the political system. This study's findings support RAND's initial intentions, namely that information's role appears to be key factor in eroding the fabric of American democracy and societal discourse.

The study traced the laws and regulations, key gatekeepers, and societal norms within the television and Internet industries and evaluated key milestones against the five elements of Truth Decay, exploring organizational and individual trends within each element. Summarizing Chapter 4, there is some evidence of correlation between control mechanisms effect on the speed and volume of information manifesting the change within the various elements of Truth Decay. However, control mechanisms were not able to halt or reverse the overall negative trend as society continues to decrease their trust in institutions, increase partisan polarization, erode civic discourse, blur fact and opinion, and display trends of political paralysis. Control mechanisms' limited effect on Truth Decay has further implications.

Implications for the Future

Technology's rise and its numerous effects on society is a well-worn axiom. A similar, well-linked corollary concerns the advancement of media's technology altering the speed and volume of information to the public. In an attempt at controlling communication monopolies, the government instituted regulations and media tycoons created internal market structures to ensure profit. Together they acted to produce a synergistic control on information. In turn, regulations and gatekeepers' effects affected the norms of society and society recursively influenced the future laws and actions from gatekeepers. Yet, for the combined effects of control within the media industry concerning the distribution of information, society has been unable to alter its steadfast decent into Truth Decay. This implies the solution to the distribution of information within the realm of social media is most likely not solvable by FCC regulations alone.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the 1950s attempted to ensure an informed public with a two-pronged strategy of fostering diverse sources of information and disaggregating various aspects of monopolists' power. Today, the FCC has had little success in guiding Internet regulations since the 1996 Telecommunications Act allows the formation of media cartels and the continued miscategorization of the Internet as an information versus a carrier service. The 1996 Act finally received oversight in 2015 when the FCC categorized the Internet as a carrier service and passed the net neutrality regulation, ensuring equal access and nondiscriminatory treatment on the World Wide Web. In short, the regulation states providers of the internet cannot control how consumers lawfully use the network and must ensure equal access.²

A ten-year-in-the-making victory to ensure America has unadulterated access, took immediate fire, and had little time to gestate societal norms.³ The current head of the FCC, in alignment with the current Administration's wishes, indicated that he "plans to either roll back or decline to enforce" the consumer protection regulations, including

² "The Net Neutrality Debate: Access to Broadband Networks", Congressional Research Service, 15 April 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R40616.pdf>

³ To give an example, without these regulations, the Internet could bifurcate into "fast" and "slow" options. Companies that can afford "fast" connects ensure their information is distributed—regardless of content. Similarly, companies that can only afford "slow" are most likely going to suffer, as very few consumers will wait for information. Equal access ensures an evenly balanced domain that service providers cannot regulate or gauge to earn larger profits.

net neutrality.⁴ In a devastating blow, FCC repealed net neutrality in 2018. The flow of information is only one consequential outcome control mechanisms could have on the future. The flow of information is important, as is the information itself.

A provision of the Communications Decency Act, 47 U.S.C. § 230, which bifurcates websites as platforms or publishers, exacerbates the issues surrounding information.⁵ Social media websites provide average citizens an amplified voice where simplicity, resonance, and novelty are key to controlling the narrative and the Internet writ large.⁶ Today, algorithms spurred by engagement metrics disseminate information to the masses.⁷ Yet, social media websites currently operate with the impunity of a platform *and* the protection of a publisher, allowing them to operate with near immunity. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, act as a curator of content, using the “Good Samaritan” regulation to flag and remove content as they see fit. Instead of government oversight, such as the FCC, purposefully pursuing a strategy of diverse sources to aid the public, the watchdog has changed to private corporations. Americans, stalwart in their mission to never be ruled by a tyrant king or repressive government, missed the changing of the guard with respect to information distribution on the Internet and social media. The power of information distribution and diversification of social media resides within private industries who do not act in the public’s best interest, but to shareholders’ interests in the pursuit of the almighty dollar.

The crux of the problem is social media platforms, which act as information

⁴ The FCC chair, Ajit Pai, was a former lawyer for Verizon and a minority Republican member of the FCC prior to President Trump’s appointment. Steve Lohr, “Net Neutrality Is Trump’s Next Target, Administration Says”, The New York Times, 30 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/30/technology/net-neutrality.html>. Then candidate Trump endorsed internet censorship and balkanization practiced by authoritarian nations, stating, “We have to talk to [tech CEOs] about, maybe in certain areas, closing that internet up in some ways...somebody will say, ‘Oh freedom of speech, freedom of speech.’ Those are foolish people.” Andrew Griffin, “Donald Trump Wants to Ban the Internet, Plans to Ask Bill Gates to ‘Close It Up,’” Independent, December 8, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/donald-trumpwants-to-ban-the-internet-will-ask-bill-gates-to-close-it-up-a6764396.html>

⁵ Recall from Chapter 3, the CDA was overturned by the Supreme Court, however, the Courts kept Section 230.

⁶ Peter Warren Singer and Emerson T Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 156.

⁷ The most widely used algorithm and platform being Facebook. Of those that use social media for news, 52 percent use Facebook to receive their news; Elisa Shearer and Elizabeth Grieco, “Americans Are Wary of the Role Social Media Sites Play in Delivering the News”, Pew Research Center, 2 October 2019, https://www.journalism.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2019/09/PJ_2019.09.25_Social-Media-and-News_FINAL.pdf

leviathans, do not answer to free and fair elections or even to the interest of society. They answer to engagement metrics, and which ultimately serve in the interest of profit.⁸ In a free market society, companies are often beholden to profit, as was true of the previous media industries. However, the speed and volume of information and misinformation within social media medium drastically alters the calculus. The FCC's licensing distribution for television was not always a flawless process, but the current fire sale cost of entry on social media allows citizens who can garner the most attention an audience with the masses. Attention is much easier to accumulate with salacious headlines that resonate with audiences, which are then continually shared within each hemophilic echo chamber, further amplified by algorithms chasing engagement metrics. When social media platforms shield themselves from criticism by selectively hiding behind publishers' free speech rights, they potentially allow harmful and misleading information to the public—that in turn effects American society and its way of life.

Two examples, and further implications, regarding social media's effect on American society include the rearing of its youth and the US's election process. Children suffer in many ways due to misinformation—whether receiving false lessons about shape of the earth or by parents withholding life-saving vaccinations due to anti-vaxxer movements—and there are repercussions to misinformation.⁹ In addition, today's Generation Z has only known a reality defined by smartphones and social media. Social media is this generation's connective tissue; it is where they connect, where they fight boredom, and where they receive their information. Pew's 2016 research revealed that 62% of Americans receive their news from social media. The 2018 follow on study further revealed that large portions of society still use newsprint and television are demographically over the age of 50. Meanwhile, less than 18 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds receive news from these sources, instead turning to social media and online

⁸ Major Rachel Reynolds, "Farewell, Westphalia! Taking Stock of Cyber Leviathans," (working paper, School of Advance Air and Space Studies, Maxell Air Force Base, AL, March 2020, 1-2.

⁹ Due to anti-vaxxers movements on social media, childhood illnesses there were largely eradicated have made a return: in California whooping cough cases have reached a 60-year high while Disneyland resort saw an outbreak of measles that sickened 147 children. Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 125.

journalism.¹⁰ This implies that America's youngest generation does not typically receive news from a diverse set of sources and the sources Generation Z does use are subject to proliferating misinformation, which have further implications for America's democracy.

To illustrate, consider social media's role surrounding the events of 2016 where misinformation affected America's way of life. Russia interfered with the 2016 US general election by using a strategy of probing voter databases, hacking various email servers, and used social media platforms to damage the Clinton campaign and boost Trump's election chances.¹¹ Meanwhile, foreign individuals also spread misinformation on social media, seeking profit from the American political scene, which further aided Russia's efforts.¹²

Russia's primary method of social media interference was by facilitating the spread of false information via sockpuppets and bots. Sockpuppets produced hundreds of social media posts a day with the goal of hijacking the conversation to benefit Russian-favoring initiatives.¹³ In addition, bots, which operate in a similar manner, use artificial intelligence to automate tasks and facilitate conversations, in this instance for malicious purposes. The overarching feature of both is to have plausible credibility at first blush, relying on individuals to retweet or post without further investigating the original message. The reposting of the message then provides the lacking trustworthiness as it garners attention and misinforms.¹⁴ In sum, when used over multiple social media platforms, the interactions compliment and amplify one another. Yet social media companies have little incentive to change.

In 2015, both Facebook and Twitter had indications of Russian interference.

¹⁰ Elisa Shearer, "Social media outpaces print newspapers in the U.S. as a news source", Pew Research Center, 10 December 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/10/social-media-outpaces-print-newspapers-in-the-u-s-as-a-news-source/>

¹¹ These were the summary findings in The Muller Report; Abigail Abrams, "Here's What We Know So Far About Russia's 2016 Meddling", Time, 18 April 2019, <https://time.com/5565991/russia-influence-2016-election/>

¹² One example of foreign actors were the teens from Macedonia who created false information to reserve payment from advertising who paid for "clicks." In six months, using social media to drive American to fake websites, the 18-year-old made roughly \$60,000. Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 118–19.

¹³ Sockpuppets posts typically take on three forms, one resembles a trusted group member, one is to pose as a trusted news source, and one from seemingly trustworthy individuals. Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 111–12.

¹⁴ Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 113.

Twitter engineers were told to ignore the Russian botnets, because every botnet made Twitter look bigger. One engineer who tracked the interference stated that Twitter's leadership was "more concerned with growth numbers than fake and compromised accounts." Facebook also originally ignored and then denied the role its platform played in the 2016 election. Moreover, when then candidate Trump used "hate speech" on the platform—a violation of Facebook policy—the CEO claimed his hands were tied. Translating the subtext, by removing the post, Facebook would lose conservative users and, more importantly, profit.¹⁵ The content on the Internet is verifiably increasing and social media companies act as the ultimate information leviathan, the new gatekeepers protecting investments versus a well-informed society.

The dissemination of information will and does have an effect on the physical world. Social media is no exception. Used for benevolent purposes, social media can aid in a crisis as it did during providing Tharir medical supplies during the grassroots Egyptian revolution.¹⁶ Used for malicious purposes, it can rally faux Astroturf movements, as it did when Russian supported sockpuppets and bots enabled and stage multiple real-life pro-Trump rallies.¹⁷ When taken to extreme forms, it can cause undo violent responses as it did in tragic events surrounding "Pizzagate."¹⁸ Propagating false information, such as Twitter did with @Pizzagate seeing 1.4 million mentions or Alex Jones did with hate rhetoric aimed at his two million YouTube channel subscribers, has

¹⁵ It should be noted by 2017, Facebook took a different stance, they took active measures to ensure America's electoral process by creating a "war room" and cooperating with officials during the US 2018 mid-term elections. Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 141–43.

¹⁶ @TharirSupplies is an example of concerned youth outside of Egypt saw a need to coordinate critical medical supplies in the midst of a revolution. They coordinated complicated logistical problems concerning the funding, supply, and delivery of equipment and biomaterial—all on social media. Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*, 53–60.

¹⁷ Multiple confirmed Astroturf movements concerning Trump rallies spurred by Russian sockpuppets and bots are confirmed. Abigail Abrams, "Here's What We Know So Far About Russia's 2016 Meddling", Time, 18 April 2019, <https://time.com/5565991/russia-influence-2016-election/>

¹⁸ On December 4, 2016, a 28-year-old man, after following the misleading social media information concerning Hillary Clinton's involvement in satanic worship and underage sex trafficking at a particular DC pizza parlor brought a weapon to bring citizen justice to the ring. After arriving, and realizing the information was untrue, he was arrested by police. Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 127–28.

real life consequences.¹⁹ In reality, social media companies such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit are ad generators and garnering attention for content is oxygen for engagement metrics, reaping revenue with each “click.”

All social media platforms compete for attention to generate profit. As the volume of content increases and vies for the same attention, false data can intermingle with verified information. If disentangling the information for America’s youth or general populace does not translate into a source of revenue, social media and other online information distributors have little incentive to do so.

Moving into the Future

Raining on social media’s societal-connective utopian parade has become a tired sport. Similarly, there are numerous solutions proposed by various intellects, scholars, and average citizens on how to “fix” the Internet and social media conundrums, ranging from Orwellian-jeremiads to Tom Sawyer-do-nothing approaches. As this study demonstrated, regulations (and censorship) are unlikely to solve social media’s misinformation hydra, nor would a majority of Americans advocate or tolerate such authoritarian measures. Spreading false and misleading information in American politics is practically a birthright. Yet social media’s distribution of information to society using algorithms that tailor information to each individual’s hemophilic style induces humanity’s natural tendency towards confirmation bias. The more an individual hears or sees a story, especially when it resonates with their own echo chamber, reduces the critical assessment odds of that particular story. In short, social media companies *should* reduce known false information, but censoring false information out of the Internet and social media is not the panoply of salvation.

Regardless of America’s approach to the above implications, any solution provided will have the social underpinnings of *critical thought* and *media literacy* aiding lawmakers to produce regulation, content moderators to aid private companies in eradicating malicious matter, and the public who consumes that information. Critical

¹⁹ After the election, half of Trump voters affirmed their belief that Clinton participated in pedophilia sex trafficking. Catherine Rampell, "Americans--Especially but Not Exclusively Trump Voters--Believe Crazy, Wrong Things," Washington Post, 28 December 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/rampage/wp/2019/12/28/americans-especially-but-not-exclusively-trump-voters-believe-crazy-wrong-things/>.

thinking is a cornerstone to any future for America to climb out of the valley of Truth Decay. Similarly, media literacy can aid in news audience better equipped at identifying hedging language when news outlets and social media platforms publish or share unverified information.²⁰ Fortunately, the phenomena are gaining further research.

The dearth of current societal information and research on Truth Decay is over. Many research centers continue to study America's distrust of each other and institutions, civic engagement in a digital world, and society's ability to discern fact from fiction, specifically in relation to online and social media content. In essence, current research is focused on the very elements that compromise the bedrock of the Truth Decay and are looking for solutions.

For example, in 2018, Pew started researching Americans' ability to distinguish between factual and opinion statements in the news. The study asked Americans to distinguish between five factual statements and five opinion statements, finding that a majority could distinguish three of five, only slightly better than random guesses. Only 26 percent got all five factual statements correct and roughly a quarter got most or all wrong. In addition, those that identify as Republican or Democrat are more likely to think statements are factual if they appeal to their particular partisan cause. The ability to discern between fact and opinion, specifically when it comes to partisan politics, affects not only polarization, but political paralysis. Researching and defining solutions to "blurring fact and opinion" will have effects on the other elements of Truth Decay.

In 2019, the KRC Research Center studied incivility, noting that 93 percent of Americans recognize the growth of incivility and identify it as a problem that leads to intolerance and harassment. Moreover, 57 percent of those polled thought social media acted as the primary driver in the erosion of civility in America. A majority of Americans (over 90 percent) agree civility is important at all levels of government and the lack of incivility leads to political gridlock. More importantly, America recognizes rolling back incivility relies with the individual and future actions include parents teaching civility to their children, while elected officials and the media each play

²⁰ An example of hedging language is using words such as allegedly or the use of a question, "Audio recording allegedly captures Moment Michael Brown was Shot" or "Woman with Three Breasts: Real or Hoax?" There are numerous hedging tactics that lead readers into conflating misinformation with verified information. Graber and Dunaway, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 438–39.

important roles. It appears that segments of society are starting to understand the interdependence of the various elements of Truth Decay without necessarily knowing what overarching moniker to give the phenomena—yet.

In the 1930s, American society recognized that a misinformed public was only partially the government's fault, media was also culpable. Today, Americans, according to the most recent polls, appear to recognize their own self-education and the education of their children as a portion of the solution. While current studies show more than half of America's middle schoolers, who spend 7.5 hours a day on-line, cannot discern fact from fiction or advertising from legitimate news, society admitting a problem and their role in the solution is the first step to recovery.²¹ Critical thinking, as highlighted in Chapter 4, is not an epiphenomenal event to Truth Decay—it lies at the core of America's democracy. Information, the flow of information, and the ability to discern the information are cardinal elements to a democratic society.

Parting Words

"We the people," the preamble that inked the beginning of a revolutionary democratic experiment, dared to suggest that a country's own citizens could govern itself. America's democracy, much like its freedom, was hard fought and has been debated since George Washington took his oath in 1789. Alexis de Tocqueville, after visiting and observing America in 1831, penned *Democracy in America* in 1835 and, among other things, noted Americans' dogmatic tendency to adhere to ideas that fit their belief systems. Furthermore, he noted the power of the media, then represented by the printing press, had extreme influence over the populace; he observed, "the only way to neutralize the influence of the newspapers is to multiply their number."²² Similar to the rhetoric surrounding the Internet and then social media, de Tocqueville's rationale pointed to the fact that a greater source of information would disaggregate potentially harmful power, but also challenge society's ability to come to a consensus. Given social media's implications, his observations appear astute.

Perceptions, now algorithmically tailored to each individual, are in reality, acting

²¹ Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 137.

²² Alexis De Tocqueville, *The Republic of the United States of America, and Its Political Institutions, Reviewed and Examined* (AS Barnes & Company, 1862), 199.

as justified and recursive beliefs. Returning to Plato's allegory of the cave, enlightenment is not simply solved by preaching a prescriptive path toward salvation—people love to be right and despise being proved wrong.²³ Today, America is caught in a maelstrom of political discourse, marbled with seething undertones that stretch the very tapestry of its democracy. Information is power and misinformation may be the existential threat of our time, fostered by unparalleled speed and volume, threatening to tear society apart. Freedom from tyranny and oppression were hard fought battles, so will the fight from freedom of misinformation.

Hope is not lost. Society, perched on the cusp of realization, appears ready for change within our information system. Researchers are beginning to study the effects of Truth Decay, independently. The road ahead will be challenging, but not impossible. When 13 disparate colonies came together to form one nation—the world thought the journey was a fool's errand, an impossible task fraught with peril. Over 240 years later, Americans, resolute in their efforts, have solved many impossible tasks: we have harnessed electricity, created the telegraph, then the telephone; we were the first to break the surly bounds of earth with powered flight and then the first to put a man on the moon; we cured polio, and then invented the microchip and the Internet. Today, Americans are slowly exiting Plato's cave, awakening to the reality of society's discourse. It is up to Americans, all Americans—"We the people"—to continue this great democratic experiment and to fight against that which attempts to divide us. The future is up to us, all us of us. E pluribus Unum—out of many, one.

²³ Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 124-125.

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