

The Ever-Changing American Media Landscape

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Introduction

Communicating with voters has long been a challenge for both political parties, but in recent years, the problem has grown more urgent. Across the United States, and particularly in Texas, distrust of government institutions has reached new heights. At the same time, faith in the media has eroded, with many Americans questioning not only the accuracy of reporting but the motives behind it. The rise of social media has further complicated the landscape by amplifying misinformation, conspiracy theories, and partisan narratives, often blurring the line between fact and fiction. These dynamics have created a cycle of distrust that weakens civic engagement, polarizes communities, and undermines confidence in democracy itself. Understanding how this climate of skepticism developed, and whether there is a path toward rebuilding trust, are critical questions for policymakers, journalists, and voters alike. This brief explores the role of digital platforms in shaping the current media landscape, the roots of media distrust, and the potential solutions that might restore confidence in media institutions.

Areas of Focus

Where are Americans **actually getting their news?**

As Americans have developed a complicated relationship with traditional media, they have sought out their news in newer, sometimes unvetted, capacities. News is defined by the Britannica dictionary first as “new information or a report about something that has happened recently” and secondly as “information that is reported in a newspaper, magazine, television news program, etc.”ⁱ According to the Pew Research Center’s 2024 fact sheet, only 4 percent of Americans prefer to receive their news from a print source; 6 percent prefer radio, and 32 percent prefer television. That leaves a massive 58 percent of Americans who prefer to get their news from a digital sourceⁱⁱ. Pew defines “a digital news platform” as a news website or app, social media, web browser search, or a podcast.

Why are traditional news moving away from their original business models?

Traditional news sources, i.e. radio, print, and TV, are no longer as convenient as social media or articles. For example, CNN's website and Instagram page are easier to access from a phone or a computer, which most Americans have access to almost all the time. Audience preferences have quickly moved toward brief, video-based content, especially on social platforms, leaving newsrooms built around text or TV broadcast formats struggling to adapt. The 24/7 news cycle of digital platforms prioritizes constant updates over in-depth, long-form reporting, often leaving yesterday's story forgotten in the flood of new content. Additionally, the internet has upended the advertising-based revenue model that sustained journalism for decades. Online platforms such as Google and Meta dominate the digital ad market by leveraging user data, siphoning away the majority of ad spending that once went to newspapers and television. As a result, many outlets face shrinking revenues and are forced to cut budgets, consolidate, or lay off staff. These cuts often reduce reporting capacity and quality, which in turn further erodes public trust and audience engagement. Attempts to replace lost revenue with digital subscriptions and paywalls have had limited success, as most audiences remain unwilling to pay for news content. According to the 2024 Pew Research Center Fact sheet, 83% of Americans have not paid for news in the last year, although 74% say they have encountered a pay wall when attempting to access the news onlineⁱⁱⁱ.

What is the source of eroded public trust in American media?

American journalism faces a crisis of credibility. Public trust in mass media has fallen to record lows. Recent Gallup polling shows that 69 percent of Americans report having "no trust at all" in the media, and just 31 percent express even a "fair amount" of confidence^{iv}. The rise of algorithm-driven social media platforms has deepened the problem by creating echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs and limit exposure to opposing viewpoints. At the same time, misinformation and disinformation spread rapidly across decentralized online networks. A 2022 report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) even described social media as an "existential threat" to traditional, trustworthy journalism^v.

The most devastating consequence of the loss of traditional media overall has been the collapse of local journalism. Thousands of newsrooms and newspapers have closed across the United States in the last decade, leaving many counties with no local coverage at all. AP reports that 3,200 newspapers have closed since 2005, shutting their doors at a pace of two per week in the year 2023^{vi}. According to PBS, 23 news operations across five states closed their doors in August of this year alone^{vii}. The disappearance of these local news stations creates “news deserts,” defined by the UNC Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media as “a community, either rural or urban, with limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grassroots level”^{viii}. It is estimated that nearly one-fifth of Americans live in a news desert^{ix}. Without local reporters, citizens often turn to social media for information, where misinformation and political polarization thrive. The loss of local news not only undermines trust but also threatens the foundations of democratic participation at the community level^x.

Recommendations

Expand public broadcasting and digital platforms

With the federal government moving to reduce funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), Texas risks losing vital support for local PBS and NPR affiliates that provide trusted, community-centered journalism. These outlets are especially important in rural and underserved areas, where commercial media has retreated and partisan outlets dominate. By stepping in to expand funding and supporting digital innovation, Texas can ensure that public broadcasters remain strong sources of nonpartisan information. Investment should include not only maintaining traditional radio and television programming but also developing digital platforms, podcasts, and streaming services that meet audiences where they are. This dual strategy would preserve access to trusted news while modernizing the delivery system for the next generation.

From the nation’s founding, a free press has been seen as essential to American democracy, enshrined in the First Amendment as a safeguard against government overreach

and a guarantor of an informed public. Early policies like subsidized postal rates for newspapers demonstrated a commitment to ensuring wide access to publicly necessary information. That spirit carried forward into the era of broadcasting, when the mid-20th century saw major investments in wiring the country for radio and television. These efforts—often backed by federal infrastructure projects and licensing rules—helped ensure that Americans, whether in cities or rural towns, could participate in a shared civic conversation. Together, this history underscores a long tradition of treating access to reliable information as a public good worth supporting. While our government may not have a constitutional duty to provide free news, there is a responsibility to continue the precedent set by our forefathers.

Establish a Texas Local Journalism Fund

Local journalism is in crisis. Across Texas, small-town newspapers have shuttered, leaving news deserts where citizens lack access to timely reporting on school boards, city councils, and local events. This erosion undermines civic engagement and accountability, as residents are left with little to no coverage of decisions that directly affect their lives. A Texas Local Journalism Fund could provide grants, low-interest loans, and technical support to community newsrooms, nonprofit outlets, and emerging digital publications. By sustaining these organizations, the fund would help rebuild the information infrastructure so that communities need to stay informed and engaged. In doing so, Texas would set a national example of how states can protect democracy at the local level.

Invest in media literacy education

In an age of viral misinformation, equipping Texans with media literacy skills is as important as teaching reading or math. According to a study completed by Media Literacy Now, 84 percent of adults surveyed support required media literacy education in school^{xi}. Young people are increasingly encountering news and information through social media, where false or misleading content often spreads faster than fact-based reporting. Texas can respond by embedding media literacy into K–12 curricula and expanding library-based programs for lifelong learners. These programs should teach students how to verify sources, identify bias, and understand how algorithms shape what they see online. Media literacy education empowers

individuals not only to resist misinformation but also to become active, critical participants in democratic life. By investing early and broadly, Texas can strengthen its civic culture and reduce the corrosive effects of disinformation.

Continue to expand rural broadband access

Reliable high-speed internet is no longer a luxury—it is the backbone of economic, education, healthcare, and civic participation. Yet many rural Texans still lack consistent access, leaving them cut off from digital news and vital services. Continued state investment in broadband infrastructure is essential to closing this digital divide. Expanding rural broadband would allow residents to stream news content, access local reporting, and participate in online civic forums, ensuring they are not excluded from the digital public square. Moreover, these investments would yield broader benefits, from improving telehealth to enabling remote work. According to the Texas Comptroller, of the 254 Texas counties, 70 percent are rural counties. Of those Texans, it is estimated that only 69 percent have access to high-speed internet^{xii}. By treating broadband as critical infrastructure, Texas can ensure that all residents, regardless of geography, have equal access to information and opportunities.

Conclusion

The relationship between Americans and the media has undergone a profound transformation over the last two decades. As digital platforms have displaced traditional news outlets, the public has gained faster and more convenient access to information, often at the cost of depth, reliability, and trust. The decline of the traditional media business model, the rise of misinformation and echo chambers, and the slow disappearance of local journalism have all contributed to a media landscape that leaves many voters uncertain about what to believe. Yet, the need for trustworthy, accessible information is more critical than ever in sustaining civic engagement and democratic participation. Addressing this crisis will require innovation from news organizations, responsibility from digital platforms, and renewed commitment from policymakers to support transparent, public-oriented journalism.

For Texas in particular, the stakes are high. As one of the nation's most politically dynamic states, Texas needs a strong foundation of informed voters to ensure accountability and effective governance. State and local leaders should prioritize continued investment in public news initiatives and digital platforms, invest in local journalists and rural broadband expansion, and invest in media literacy education. By taking these proactive steps, Texas can not only rebuild public trust in the media but also strengthen democratic participation at every level.

ⁱ *News Definition & Meaning | Britannica Dictionary*. (n.d.). Wwww.britannica.com.

<https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/news>

ⁱⁱ Pew Research Center. (2024, September 17). *News Platform Fact Sheet*. Pew Research Center.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Beshay. (2025, June 24). *Few Americans pay for news when they encounter paywalls*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/06/24/few-americans-pay-for-news-when-they-encounter-paywalls/>

^{iv} Brenan, M. (2024, October 14). *Americans' Trust in Media Remains at Trend Low*. Gallup; Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/651977/americans-trust-media-remains-trend-low.aspx>

^v United Nations. (2022, March 10). *Social media poses "existential threat" to traditional, trustworthy news: UNESCO*. UN News. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113702>

^{vi} BAUDER, D. (2024, October 23). *Local news sources are still drying up, but there's growth in digital sites in metro areas*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/newspapers-closing-jobs-lost-digital-fa82ebfdefdde058a1cbfaea1a59fb69>

^{vii} *Dozens of rural newspapers shut down in latest disappearance of local journalism*. (2025, August 15). PBS News. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/dozens-of-rural-newspapers-shut-down-in-latest-disappearance-of-local-journalism>

^{viii} What is Exactly is a "News Desert"? (2018, July 26). Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media. <https://www.cislm.org/what-exactly-is-a-news-desert/>

^{ix} Collier, J., & Graham, E. (n.d.). *EVEN IN "NEWS DESERTS" PEOPLE STILL GET NEWS SUMMARY*. Retrieved September 15, 2025, from <https://mediaengagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Even-in-News-Deserts-People-Still-Get-News.pdf>

^x Ardia, D., Ringel, E., Smith Ekstrand, V., & Fox, A. (n.d.). *Addressing the decline of local news, rise of platforms, and spread of mis- and disinformation online | The Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life (CITAP)*. Unc.edu. <https://citap.unc.edu/news/local-news-platforms-mis-disinformation/>

^{xi} Media Literacy Now. (2022, September 7). *National Survey Finds Most U.S. Adults Have Not Had Media Literacy Education in High School*. Medialiteracynow.org. <https://medialiteracynow.org/nationalsurvey2022/>

^{xii} Mulverhill, L. (2019, October). *Texas' Digital Divide*. Comptroller.texas.gov. <https://comptroller.texas.gov/economy/fiscal-notes/archive/2019/oct/divide.php>