



Navigating a Media Landscape Where EVERYONE'S A JOURNALIST

By Marilyn Greenwald

For nearly two decades in the late twentieth century, Americans who wanted to know what was happening in the world could turn to Walter Cronkite, whose moniker was “the most trusted man in America.” With his deep baritone and solemn demeanor, the CBS Evening News anchorman was, indeed, the voice of reason who inspired confidence in his viewers.

Most took seriously the closing phrase of his broadcast each evening: “And that’s the way it is.”

But those were simpler times. In an age of snappy Facebook posts, 280-character tweets and self-promoting ideological blogs, everyone, literally, can aspire to be a critic—or a reporter. The unregulated world of social media today is full of noise and chaos. The truth can be camouflaged or obliterated completely—accidentally or intentionally.

The advent of social media has had a dramatic effect on the distribution, definition, and credibility of “news.” The simpler days of three networks, plentiful hometown newspapers, and local news on the radio are just about gone.

As *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen noted wryly, “History repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as tweet.”

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A NEWS SOURCE

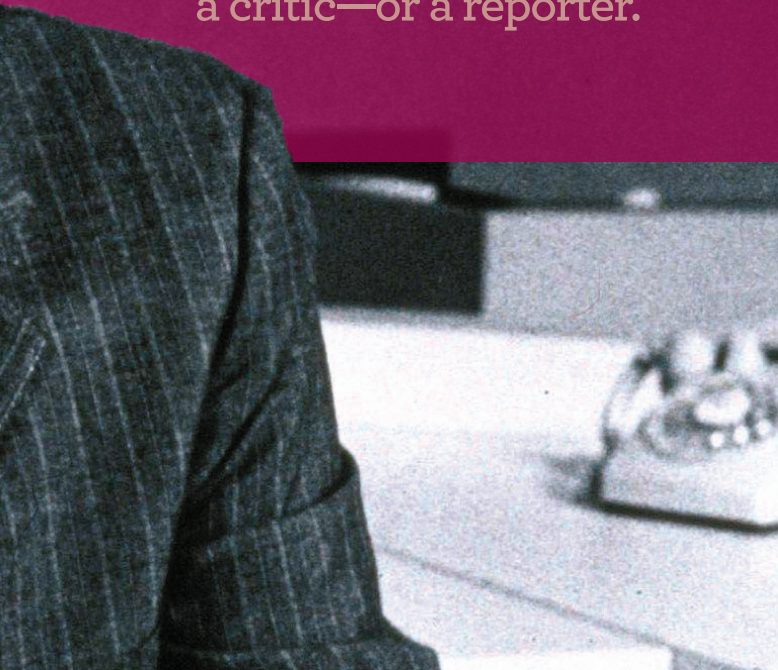
A 2017 Pew Research Center survey showed that two-thirds of Americans get at least some of their news on social media—and 55 percent of Americans age 50 and older are included in that group. (Television was the second most often cited source of news for all age groups).

Although more Americans are using social media platforms for news, they apparently are skeptical of what they are reading: Pew reports



CBS News anchor
Walter Cronkite.

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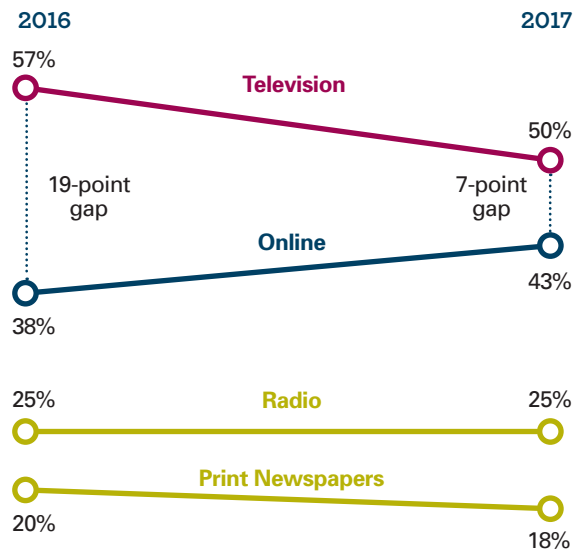
that only 4 percent of respondents who use the web have a lot of trust in the information they get from social media sources, a level of trust that is much lower than the trust they have in national and local news organizations or information coming directly from friends and family.

The internet has loosened our grip on the truth... but it can also provide us with tools to seek the truth.

The Pew study also found that the gap is narrowing between those who get their news from television and those who get it online. In 2016, 38 percent of respondents said they received

GAP BETWEEN TELEVISION & ONLINE NEWS CONSUMPTION NARROWS FROM 2016

% of U.S. adults who often get news on each platform



Survey conducted August 8-21, 2017.
Pew Research Center

much of their news online, and 57 percent said they received it from television. In 2017, that gap narrowed considerably when 43 percent of Americans said they often got news online, compared to 50 percent who often got it from television.

It would seem logical that the addition of a variety of platforms—and the phenomenon of getting news quickly online from “friends”—would mean that we’re far more informed than ever before. But the opposite may be true. An often-cited 2016 survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania showed that only 25 percent of Americans participating in the survey could name all three branches of government, and one-third could name none.

And the idea that there are many more media “voices” than ever in this country may be misleading. The loosening of federal antitrust laws has led to media consolidation—more and more of the nation’s media outlets are owned by fewer and fewer companies, so the voices of independent news outlets are disappearing. And your hometown daily newspaper—if you still have one—is probably owned by a large corporation based out of town.

POST-TRUTH

Farhad Manjoo, in his book *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society*, argues that the advent of the internet and social media has created echo chambers that spawn the repetition of conspiracy theories, skepticism of history and denial of hard facts. He and other media scholars believe that the ubiquity of social media and, consequently, the lightning speed at which “news”



moves across social media platforms, conspires against the truth. Consumers who seek credible information are becoming increasingly confused about who is a journalist and what is an objective or unbiased media outlet.

And it is natural to be confused: through Facebook, Twitter, and other social media outlets we can all distribute our version of the truth to millions of people with a single keystroke.

This ambiguity about what is “news” and what is the objective truth has led media scholars to coin the term “post-truth,” an adjective that the Oxford Dictionaries named its Word of the Year in 2016. Post-truth, as defined by the dictionaries, is “related to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than [are] appeals to emotions and personal beliefs.”

A HEALTHY DOSE OF SKEPTICISM

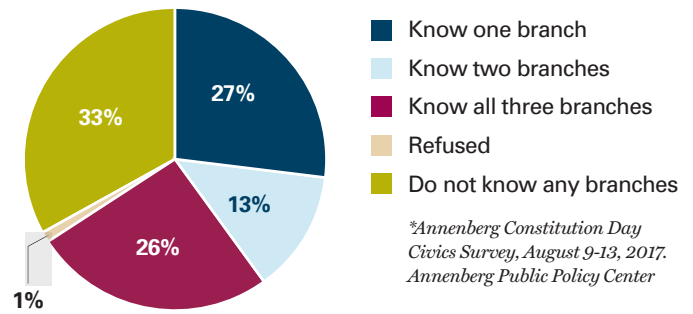
The Virginia-based non-profit American Press Institute (API) has studied ways media outlets can convey they are delivering objective news, and examining how news consumers can separate emotional appeals, inaccurate information, and subjective statements from authentic information.

For instance, the speed at which information travels in social media can breed inaccurate or hyperactive information. For that reason, news

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consumers should be skeptical of superlatives that are likely the result of emotion rather than genuine thought or investigation. Similarly, when reporting breaking news, most unbiased news outlets focus on issues or events and avoid name calling and

% OF PEOPLE WHO CAN NAME THE THREE BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT



labeling. And the writer’s opinions of a subject should never appear in a news story—those are reserved for opinion pieces that are clearly marked as commentary.

With the explosion of social media, API and media scholars have warned news consumers to be particularly skeptical of polls and surveys. Even under the best of circumstances—when polls are attached to respected news organizations—the results of surveys are snapshots of a limited period of time rather than indicators of long-term trends. Social media is full of unreliable polls generated as a result of faulty polling methods that can include small or biased samples, poorly worded questions, and other problems.

But social media can also be a positive tool to evaluate the legitimacy of news and sources. The abundance of online sources makes it easier than ever for people to confirm facts; some Facebook postings may deliver important news and information to users who would normally not seek it out or get it any other way. The internet has loosened our grip on the truth, Manjoo believes, but it can also provide us with tools to seek the truth. ♥

Marilyn Greenwald, PhD, is a professor in the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University. She is the author of four biographies, including Pauline Frederick Reporting: A Pioneering Broadcaster Covers the Cold War, and co-editor of The Big Chill: Investigative Reporting in the Current Media Environment (2000).

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