The Daily Nun

First research report

Who Shapes What America Knows?

Media, Polarization, and U.S. Democracy

Prepared for Peter Nunley

An AI-assisted research synthesis for curious readers

Intended event cutoff: November 11, 2026

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Ten chapters | Dated ownership map | Glossary | Clickable bibliography

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A guide to this report

This report begins with a familiar experience: recognizing the political argument in a headline without necessarily knowing the institutions, incentives, or evidence behind it. It is written for curious readers, including a high-school community whose members can disagree sharply while still benefiting from better questions. Its purpose is to make those questions easier to investigate, not to assign readers a political identity.

The central question is who influences what Americans hear, see, and believe. The answer requires following several kinds of power. A corporate owner can influence resources and leadership. A newsroom decides what to investigate and how to establish a claim. A platform can influence discovery and circulation without owning the reporting. Audiences choose sources, interpret messages, and share them with others. Keeping these roles distinct makes criticism more precise.

What the evidence supports

- Common ownership can produce common instructions and measurable changes in coverage. The documented Sinclair episode and research on local television acquisitions establish more than a similarity between headlines, while leaving persuasion and broader generalization as separate questions. [1] [2]

- The familiar claim that four companies own 90% of all media lacks a reproducible definition in the sources traced here. Corporate concentration is real, but an ownership map needs a sector, measure, and date. Recent completed mergers and separations make old lists unreliable. [15] [16] [17] [18]

- Platforms influence the information people encounter. That does not mean every change in a feed changes attitudes in the same way. Experiments have found meaningful effects in some settings and small or undetected effects on specified outcomes in others. [42] [43] [44] [54] [35]

- Policy disagreement, dislike of opposing voters, division among political leaders, and perceptions of division are different problems. Media belong among the explanations to examine alongside identity, institutions, geography, and political conditions. [38] [39] [40]

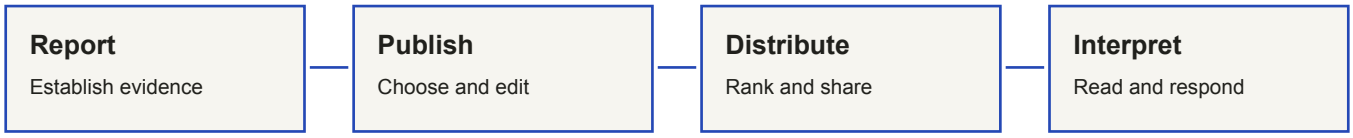
- A democracy can have abundant political commentary and too little reporting on consequential local decisions. Evidence on coverage, voter knowledge, public finance, and local-news availability makes reporting capacity a separate concern from online moderation. [14] [47] [48]

How to use the evidence

The numbered citations are clickable and lead to the underlying source. The bibliography supplies authors, dates, publication details, source types, and access limitations. A survey percentage measures a specified population and question; it is not automatically a measure of accuracy, control, or persuasion. A company statement establishes what the company announced or says its policy is. It does not independently establish that the policy works.

This is an AI-assisted research synthesis prepared for Peter Nunley and The Daily Nun, not original interviews, a new survey, a systematic review, or a meta-analysis. The ten chapters contain roughly 16,500 words before this guide, glossary, and bibliography. The research uses 55 distinct sources; some original studies were accessible only through abstracts and metadata, and those limits are recorded. Legal decisions are discussed as dated holdings, not an exhaustive audit of later litigation.

The intended event cutoff is November 11, 2026; compilation and source checks occurred on November 12. Dated studies retain their original measurement periods. Undated corporate pages are current-access corroboration, not archived proof of their exact contents on the cutoff date. The ownership chapter flags older records and secondary-source cross-checks. Conclusions distinguish established findings, plausible mechanisms, and questions that remain open.



Illustrative roles, not a universal sequence or a measure of influence.

1. When the news sounds the same

In the spring of 2018, a compilation placed broadcasts from different local television stations beside one another. The desks, cities, and anchors changed. The warning they delivered barely did. Sinclair had instructed local anchors to read a promotion criticizing irresponsible journalism and media bias. As the broadcasts played together, a centrally written message became visible beneath the separate station identities. NPR documented the instructions and the company's response: Sinclair denied a political agenda and described the promotions as support for fair, objective reporting. [1]

The central question was larger than whether the script contained a defensible criticism of journalism. Who had decided that these particular people should say these particular words? The anchors appeared as representatives of local institutions. Their employer's message could therefore arrive with the familiarity of a community relationship. That arrangement deserves scrutiny even before asking whether it changed anyone's mind.

The compilation exposed an organizational capacity: one company could distribute a common statement through numerous local outlets. It did not measure viewers' responses, establish the personal beliefs of the anchors, or demonstrate coordination across the entire American press. Those limits matter. An observable exercise of corporate direction becomes less useful as evidence when it is stretched into an explanation of everything people believe.

Three decisions behind a story

A productive investigation separates ownership, reporting, and distribution. Ownership concerns the institution: who appoints leaders, authorizes spending, sets priorities, and can ultimately change the business. Reporting concerns the work used to establish a claim: observations, interviews, records, verification, and the treatment of uncertainty. Distribution concerns the route to an audience: publication, broadcasting, recommendations, search, sharing, and interpretation by other people.

These decisions can belong to different organizations. A newsroom can investigate a public contract, a creator can summarize the findings, and a platform can recommend that summary. The viewer may recognize the creator without knowing who obtained the records. Equally, an outlet can own its website and control its reporting while depending on another business to help readers discover it. A chart of corporate subsidiaries cannot describe that whole relationship.

The distinction also prevents a common error in interpreting similar coverage. Repeated wording can result from a common owner, a distributed news report, a public statement, or accurate quotation of the same document. Consider a hypothetical court ruling. Several independently owned newspapers might quote the same decisive sentence because it is the sentence that explains the result. Similarity alone would provide weak evidence of a shared editorial command.

The Sinclair episode offered more specific evidence: reported corporate instructions. It therefore supported an inference about organizational authority that a comparison of headlines, by itself, would not. The difference is methodological. To evaluate a concern about influence, identify the decision, the decision-maker, and the evidence connecting them before generalizing about the industry.

Ownership can influence content through several routes. A direct instruction is only one. Budget decisions can affect which subjects receive sustained investigation. Appointments can favor particular editorial priorities. Central production can make some material easier to obtain than local reporting. None of these mechanisms requires assuming that every journalist shares an owner's politics or that every managerial decision has a political purpose.

Here is a hypothetical example. A company acquires a small station and reduces the time its reporters can spend at local meetings. A national segment is supplied to fill part of the newscast. The result could be a polished program with less scrutiny of the county government. The national segment might be accurate. The democratic loss could lie in the reporting that no longer occurs.

This is a problem of substitution as well as message. A program has limited time; a newsroom has limited staff. Greater attention to one subject can crowd out another. Asking only whether the material that appears is false can miss the significance of what was displaced. An information system can fail through omissions that leave no misleading sentence to fact-check.

What evidence of an ownership effect looks like

Gregory Martin and Joshua McCrain investigated a wave of local television acquisitions using news programming and viewership data. Relative to other programs in the same markets, acquired stations increased national political coverage at the expense of local politics, shifted coverage rightward, and experienced a small decline in viewership. Their results support a role for supply-side decisions in changing news, rather than an account based entirely on audience demand. [2]

The study goes beyond the visual force of a compilation. It compares changes among organizations, creating a stronger basis for evaluating an ownership effect. Its findings still concern the acquisitions, programs, and period studied. They do not establish a universal effect of every merger, or directly measure every consequence for voters. A careful report preserves those boundaries while taking the evidence seriously.

The distinction between supply and demand is particularly important. An outlet may explain a programming change by saying that audiences want it. That explanation is possible, but it is an empirical claim. Viewership, competing options, and the timing of changes can help assess it. A business decision can also reflect cost savings, executive preferences, or a plan to develop a different audience.

Owners are not the only possible source of pressure. Advertisers, subscribers, donors, governments, organized audiences, and professional peers can influence what an institution finds rewarding or costly. A locally owned publication can face pressure from a dominant local employer. A nonprofit can depend heavily on one donor. A large chain can sometimes provide legal support or specialized expertise that a small newsroom could not finance alone.

These possibilities argue for investigating safeguards rather than treating an ownership category as a complete verdict. Can editors publish findings that inconvenience the owner? Are financial relationships disclosed? Does the newsroom have resources to verify difficult claims? Can staff challenge inaccurate instructions? The answers concern how power operates inside the institution, not only the name on its corporate registration.

Scale can have competing consequences. Shared resources may make expensive reporting possible, while common management may reduce the number of independent decisions. A national specialist can improve a local newsroom's explanation of a complicated issue. A centrally supplied segment can also displace the work that makes the outlet locally distinctive. The relevant comparison is what the arrangement preserves, adds, or removes in practice.

Influence is not the same as total control

An audience is also an active part of the system. People bring prior beliefs, relationships, knowledge, and competing sources to what they watch. They can ignore a message, accept part of it, reject its source, or interpret it differently from the producer's intention. Demonstrating the capacity to broadcast a statement therefore cannot substitute for evidence of persuasion.

Political effects can take several forms besides conversion. A message might direct attention toward a particular issue, supply language for an existing belief, encourage participation, or change expectations about an institution. It might influence people who then become sources for others. Establishing one of these pathways requires evidence suited to that pathway. A large potential audience does not reveal which effect occurred.

Reach requires its own definitions. A station's availability in an area is different from its actual audience. Watching a program is different from paying attention to a particular segment. Exposure is different from accepting a claim. Each step can matter, but evidence about an earlier step cannot be silently converted into evidence about a later one. This is especially important when a dramatic ownership statistic is presented as though it directly measured control over public opinion.

The same distinction applies inside an organization. A parent company may possess formal authority while editors retain substantial practical discretion. Alternatively, a local brand may suggest independence that its staffing and production arrangements do not support. A sound account looks for evidence of decisions, constraints, and protections in operation. Neither a corporate name nor an independence statement can substitute for that examination.

This report will accordingly ask different questions at different stages. Ownership evidence identifies authority. Content analysis describes what was produced. Exposure evidence examines what people encountered. Experiments and other causal designs investigate whether an experience changed an outcome. These forms of evidence can strengthen one another, but none automatically supplies the missing answers of the others.

That approach also protects criticism from becoming indiscriminate. If every shared phrase is treated as proof of a single hidden command, ordinary reporting practices become impossible to distinguish from actual intervention. If every concern about intervention is dismissed because audiences possess agency, observable exercises of power escape examination. Specific evidence makes it possible to avoid both errors.

The democratic stakes emerge most clearly when returning to local government. A resident needs to know who approved a contract, which institution can change a policy, and what evidence supports an official explanation. An outlet that devotes more attention to national conflict may continue informing that resident about important matters while supplying less of this practical knowledge. The two judgments can coexist.

The Sinclair compilation is therefore an opening scene, not a complete theory. It demonstrates why apparently separate voices can require investigation of shared authority. It also shows why a memorable example must be followed by questions about production, audience, and effect. The purpose is to identify decisions that citizens and researchers can inspect, rather than replace one sweeping narrative with another.

For a democratic public, the most consequential question may be who can make an issue visible in the first place. Some institutions can place the same message across many outlets. A community without sustained reporting may struggle to bring a single consequential decision to public attention. Understanding that inequality requires examining the connection between information and the institutions through which Americans govern themselves.

2. Why information matters to government

In 1972, Florida political candidate Pat Tornillo sought space in the Miami Herald to answer editorials criticizing him. A state right-of-reply statute appeared to support his demand. The dispute reached the Supreme Court, which held in 1974 that compelling the newspaper to publish the reply violated the First Amendment. The decision protected editorial judgment even in the face of concerns about concentrated newspaper power. [5]

The case presents the central question of this chapter: how can a democracy challenge powerful information institutions while protecting their ability to challenge government? The difficulty cannot be resolved by assuming that private ownership makes a publication harmless, or that public importance gives officials unlimited authority over what it prints. Both private influence and state coercion require scrutiny.

Formal powers depend on usable information

The Constitution allocates federal legislative authority to Congress, executive authority to the presidency, and judicial authority to the courts. It provides mechanisms through which these institutions interact, including legislation, appropriations, appointments, and impeachment. Those formal arrangements distribute power, but their practical operation depends partly on information about what officials have done and why. [3]

This last point is an analytical implication of constitutional design. An oversight power cannot be exercised effectively when relevant conduct remains undiscovered. Voters cannot assign responsibility accurately if coverage describes a dispute without explaining which institution had authority. An official can possess a legal obligation while facing little practical pressure to fulfill it if failures are difficult for the public to observe.

Consider a hypothetical county contract for emergency communications equipment. The important questions include who approved the purchase, whether competing bids were considered, what requirements the equipment had to satisfy, and whether the delivered system works. A national commentator's opinion about the president might provide none of that information. Political attention and practical knowledge of government are different accomplishments.

A reporter could obtain records and examine explanations. An auditor could evaluate compliance and value. Legislators might hold a hearing. A court could resolve a legal dispute. Residents could organize around the findings or judge the responsible officials at the next election. These institutions perform different functions, and a news allegation is not a judicial determination. Information can nevertheless connect their work.

Federalism creates another need for precision. Americans encounter federal, state, and local institutions with different responsibilities. Authority can also be shared or constrained by other levels of government. The Tenth Amendment reserves powers not delegated to the United States, or prohibited to the states, to the states or the people. Specific policy authority requires examining the applicable law rather than relying on a generic national political label. [4]

If a housing decision concerns a city zoning process, directing all attention toward presidential personalities can obscure where action is possible. If a local official claims a federal rule compelled a decision, reporting can examine that claim. If several institutions contributed, assigning all blame to one may be misleading. Good civic information explains both the decision and the chain of responsibility.

Representation requires more than knowing who won. Citizens need some way to assess what an officeholder did with the authority obtained. Party labels can convey useful information, but they cannot answer every question about performance, conflicts, competence, and implementation. Journalism can

supply evidence that matters within a party as well as between parties, including conduct by officials an audience otherwise supports.

Policy disagreement also requires distinguishing a goal from an observed result. An official might favor a popular objective while implementing it ineffectively. A program might produce benefits alongside costs its supporters emphasize less often. Coverage that reports only competing declarations leaves readers without the evidence needed to judge performance. Explaining a decision means asking what it was intended to accomplish, what happened, and how confidently the outcome can be attributed to that decision.

James Snyder and David Strömberg studied the relationship between press coverage, voter knowledge, congressional behavior, and spending. They used variation in the fit between newspaper markets and political districts associated with redistricting. Reduced coverage was linked to less knowledge about representatives and differences in their behavior and federal spending. The design supports an accountability role for reporting within the setting studied, rather than a claim about every newsroom or policy outcome. [14]

One implication is that journalism can matter without persuading large numbers of people to change parties. Reporting may help voters distinguish among representatives, notice performance, or identify a problem before it becomes a national controversy. It may also affect what officials expect to remain hidden. These are different democratic functions from maximizing immediate audience engagement.

Freedom of the press and the power to publish

The First Amendment protects speech and the press alongside religion, assembly, and petition. Its protections limit government interference with public expression; they do not certify the reliability of every speaker. A publication can exercise freedom irresponsibly while remaining protected against an official's demand for favorable treatment. Criticism of its conduct and government control over its content are separate questions. [4]

Tornillo illustrates why those questions can conflict. A reply requirement might appear to expand public access, particularly when a newspaper has substantial local influence. Yet allowing officials to decide what a paper must carry can alter editorial choices and consume resources the paper would otherwise allocate differently. Protecting that discretion also protects the possibility of publishing material the government would prefer to suppress.

Broadcasting developed under a different regulatory history. In Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC in 1969, the Supreme Court upheld challenged applications of the fairness doctrine and related rules. The Court's reasoning addressed the scarcity and allocation of broadcast frequencies. It distinguished the doctrine from the statutory provision concerning candidate access. This was a decision about the broadcasting regime before the Court, rather than a universal rule for every information service. [6]

The contrast with Tornillo shows why the phrase media regulation is too broad to settle a policy dispute. A newspaper, a licensed broadcaster, a cable distributor, and an online platform have different functions and legal histories. A proposal must identify which function it regulates and what constitutional interests are implicated. The public importance of an institution does not remove the need for that analysis.

In Moody v. NetChoice in 2024, the Court vacated lower-court judgments and returned challenges to Florida and Texas platform laws for further analysis. It also explained that selection and presentation of third-party speech can involve protected editorial discretion. The disposition did not settle every possible application of the laws or immunize every platform function from regulation. Its relevance here is the constitutional significance of curating expression. [7]

This report treats that as a dated judicial decision, not a claim that every subsequent legal question was resolved. An argument about a specific platform practice must still examine the practice and applicable law. Content selection, personal-data use, advertising disclosures, and business competition raise overlapping but distinct concerns. A broad slogan about free speech cannot supply a complete answer to all of them.

Accountability without an official version of truth

Protecting editorial freedom leaves substantial room for evaluating performance. Readers can inspect sourcing, corrections, financial disclosures, and the difference between reporting and opinion. Competing journalists can investigate one another's claims. Institutions can provide explanations of consequential decisions. These practices help distribute scrutiny rather than assign final authority over political truth to the officials being covered.

Ordinary citizens cannot personally reproduce every investigation or become specialists in every policy field. Democratic information therefore involves a division of labor. The practical aim is to identify institutions whose methods are inspectable and whose conclusions remain open to challenge. Expertise can justify provisional confidence without demanding unconditional loyalty. A reader should be able to ask how a conclusion was reached and what evidence would cause the institution to revise it.

The same standards should apply when a favored source makes an unwelcome error. Independence has little democratic value if it becomes immunity from criticism. A useful correction identifies the faulty claim, supplies the evidence, and makes the change visible. General declarations that a publication is biased can be less informative than showing precisely where its account departs from the record.

Trust is consequently an imperfect measure of democratic success. An investigation may appropriately reduce confidence in an official or organization by establishing misconduct. Conversely, a reassuring but inaccurate account can preserve confidence that is not warranted. The objective is a relationship between evidence and judgment, including the ability to revise a view when the record changes.

Citizens also require opportunities to act on information. Publication can inform a hearing, a public meeting, a petition, an election, or a legal challenge. It cannot guarantee that an institution responds, or that every reader has equal resources to participate. The value of journalism therefore depends partly on the wider system of rights, access, and institutional responsiveness surrounding it.

This perspective gives checks and balances a practical meaning. Formal authority is one component. Independent discovery, public explanation, and meaningful opportunities for challenge are others. A government can retain its constitutional organization while citizens struggle to understand its decisions. A loud political conversation can leave these basic needs unmet. The next chapter examines how historical changes in media altered the conditions under which those needs are served.

3. How America's media system developed

In September 1792, James Madison used an essay in Philadelphia's National Gazette to discuss political parties. The Library of Congress preserves the newspaper item within an exhibition tracing the formation of American political factions. The same exhibition documents conflicts over the Alien and Sedition Acts and the imprisonment of newspaper publishers and writers for seditious writings. Political argument and battles over publication belonged to the early republic itself. [12]

The central historical question is therefore not when an entirely neutral media system suddenly became political. It is how changing institutions, technologies, and incentives reshaped the relationships among publishers, audiences, owners, and government. Looking especially at developments since the 1980s helps explain the current system without inventing an earlier age in which every American shared equal access to reliable public knowledge.

From partisan publication to broadcast scarcity

The early newspaper example establishes that publication could participate directly in political organization. It also shows why press freedom and partisan conflict developed together. A government capable of suppressing hostile publishers can constrain the opposition's access to public discussion. An openly partisan publisher can simultaneously contribute to that discussion and present a selective account. Neither observation cancels the other.

Over time, the scale and cost of news institutions changed. A printed publication needed a way to finance production and reach readers. Radio and television introduced different infrastructure and access requirements. These material arrangements shaped which organizations could participate, how audiences could be assembled, and what kinds of coordination became practical. The history concerns systems of production and distribution as well as the tone of political argument.

The Supreme Court's account in Red Lion describes the disorder surrounding frequency allocation before federal regulation in 1927 and the subsequent licensing framework. Scarcity and interference made broadcasting a different problem from simply allowing everyone to transmit over the same frequencies. The Court used that history in explaining the regulatory treatment of broadcast licensees and the fairness doctrine. [6]

An important distinction follows. Public regulation of access to a scarce communications resource and government authority to dictate political content are related questions, but they are not identical. A system needs rules that make transmission possible. Whether particular content obligations improve public discussion requires an additional justification. The controversies over broadcasting repeatedly tested where that boundary should lie.

By the time of Tornillo in 1974, concentration and access were already central issues in disputes about newspapers. The case presented arguments that large publishers possessed exceptional influence and that ordinary citizens faced barriers to answering them. The Court nevertheless rejected Florida's compulsory reply requirement. The conflict between access and editorial independence therefore predates today's social platforms. [5]

The 1980s: more channels, different audiences

The expansion of cable and other programming choices changed the possibilities for assembling an audience. A service could specialize in a subject or cultivate a particular style instead of trying to attract everyone watching at a scheduled hour. Talk programming could build a relationship around a host's interpretation and an audience's recurring interests. These are explanations of the format's opportunities, not claims that specialization inevitably produces falsehood or hostility.

A narrower audience can support valuable work. Specialized coverage can serve communities or subjects a broad service neglects. It can also reduce incidental encounters with information outside an existing preference. When choosing becomes easier, people who want political reporting can pursue more of it, while people who prefer other material can avoid more of it. Increased choice can change differences among audiences as well as their average experience.

The financing of that relationship deserves attention. A service paid through advertising must attract an audience advertisers value. A subscription service must retain people willing to pay. A donor-supported service must sustain contributions. Each arrangement can reward useful expertise, and each can create pressure to avoid alienating important supporters. These are possible incentive mechanisms, rather than evidence that a particular outlet has surrendered its independence. They become consequential when examining whether an institution can publish findings its own audience would prefer not to hear.

Markus Prior examined this mechanism in research published in 2005, using a representative survey of 2,358 U.S. residents. The study associated expanded media choice with wider differences in political knowledge and turnout between people who preferred news and those who preferred entertainment. Its

design and historical setting do not establish that every contemporary user responds identically, but it challenges an equation between greater information availability and a uniformly better-informed public. [13]

Regulatory change also mattered. In its 1987 Syracuse Peace Council decision, the FCC concluded that the fairness doctrine conflicted with the First Amendment and the public interest, and vacated its previous orders involving WTVH. The memorandum was adopted on August 4 and released on August 6. Those constitutional conclusions were the Commission's reasoning; they should not be recast as a new Supreme Court holding that broadcasting could never carry public obligations. [11]

The doctrine had concerned coverage of controversial issues and opportunities for contrasting views. Candidate equal-opportunity requirements concern a different matter. The rule reproduced at 47 CFR 73.1941 addresses qualifying candidate uses of broadcast facilities and contains exemptions for specified bona fide news appearances. It does not require equal airtime for every political opinion expressed in ordinary news coverage. [10]

The repeal can therefore be described precisely without making it a complete explanation for everything that followed. Removing an obligation can change incentives and risks for broadcasters. It does not independently establish how much later political division that change caused. Technology, audience preferences, party strategies, business arrangements, and other developments also require investigation. A sequence of events is the beginning of a causal argument, not its completion.

What the 1996 law actually changed

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 changed acquisition opportunities directly. Section 202 instructed the FCC to eliminate national limits on the number of AM or FM stations one entity could own or control. It retained local radio limits organized by market size. In the largest listed category, markets with at least 45 commercial stations, the law permitted ownership of up to eight, with no more than five in the same service. [8]

For television, the statute directed elimination of a national station-number restriction and an increase in the then national audience-reach limit to 35 percent. It also required consideration of local ownership restrictions and other changes. These were provisions of the 1996 enactment, not a statement that 35 percent is the applicable limit in every later year. A claim that the Act simply removed all broadcast ownership limits would misdescribe its text. [8]

Those details matter because law defines which combinations businesses can pursue. A decision to relax a national numerical limit creates possibilities for a larger portfolio even while local constraints remain. Whether a particular acquisition improves service, reduces staffing, changes editorial authority, or weakens competition depends on what the organizations do under the new conditions. Legal permission and demonstrated social effect are separate stages of the inquiry.

The internet lowers one barrier and creates new dependencies

Digital publication made it easier for individuals and small organizations to distribute material without obtaining a broadcast license or persuading an established editor to print it. The analytical consequence is a shift in the location of scarcity. When many more people can publish, finding and reaching an audience becomes a different challenge. Discovery, reputation, search, recommendations, and existing relationships can become important points of dependence.

The 1996 legislation also added Section 230 to federal law. Its central provision generally prevents a provider or user of an interactive computer service from being treated as the publisher or speaker of information supplied by another content provider. The statute also addresses certain moderation decisions and contains exceptions. It should not be described as a general requirement of political neutrality or an exemption from every law. [9]

Economically, digital services can separate activities once bundled within a publication. As a hypothetical illustration, a resident might obtain weather, entertainment recommendations, property listings, and local

reporting from different services. The public value of the reporting can remain substantial even if the other activities no longer help finance it. Producing more information overall does not automatically finance each socially valuable kind of information.

Feedback also changes the incentives of publication. An institution able to observe immediate audience reactions can experiment with headlines, presentation, and subject selection. That can improve communication and reveal neglected interests. It can also encourage emphasis on outcomes that are easiest to count. The value of sustained scrutiny may unfold over months, while the response to a provocative item is visible quickly.

An audience can reward both careful work and familiar interpretations. Those rewards need not coincide in every story. A publisher may therefore face a choice between investigating an uncertain subject and repeating a reliable attraction. The point is not to presume bad faith. It is to examine whether the surrounding business model supplies enough support for work whose benefits are difficult to monetize immediately, particularly reporting about institutions with small but consequential local responsibilities.

The historical result is a layered system. A larger number of people can contribute material while a smaller number of organizations control important institutions or routes to audiences. Shared production can lower costs while reducing independent choices. A niche publication can expand representation while narrowing the range of information its audience encounters. These combinations make a simple story of either liberation or decline inadequate.

The democratic question is what remains possible within those arrangements: independent investigation, correction, discovery, participation, and effective scrutiny of power. History shows that the rules and business models have changed before. It also warns that no single reform, technology, or ownership label can guarantee all of those functions. Examining present ownership requires keeping that institutional history in view.

4. Who owns the media?

The question sounds as if it should produce a short list of names. Instead, it produces a second question: what counts as media? A movie studio, a local radio station, an investigative nonprofit, a newspaper subscription business, a video-sharing service and a connected television platform can all affect public attention. They do not produce the same product, sell access in the same way or compete for exactly the same audience. Combining their logos into one diagram can reveal corporate connections, but it cannot by itself measure a market.

This is the central difficulty with the claim that four companies own 90% of all media. This investigation did not establish a reproducible, current statistical foundation for that sentence. It did establish a traceable earlier version involving six corporations, along with evidence of substantial corporate ownership and important recent mergers. Those are different findings. Rejecting an undefined percentage does not mean rejecting the concern about concentrated power. [15] [16] [18]

Following the claim backward

An accessible stop on the claim's journey is Ashley Lutz's 2012 Business Insider article, whose headline says six corporations control 90% of American media. It attributes an infographic to Jason at Frugal Dad. The article itself warns that the graphic was already from the previous year and had missed significant transactions. That warning is unusually revealing: an image that appears to offer a stable map of an industry was circulating with acknowledged errors while being used to support an enormous aggregate claim. [15]

The article does not supply a transparent calculation in which a defined list of American media properties forms the denominator, a consistent ownership rule determines the numerator and a measurement date anchors both. Its warning is evidence that the ownership list needed updating. It is not evidence that the 90%

figure was correctly measured in the first place. Nor does an updated list of six, five or four corporate parents repair a missing denominator. This report can trace a recognizable six-company version to that accessible article and its attribution. It cannot establish who first changed it into the four-company version or certify the earliest appearance of every variant. [15]

Consider four possible meanings of a media share. A share of advertising revenue measures commercial receipts in a defined advertising market. A share of audience time measures attention, usually within a particular population and medium. A share of outlets counts properties, treating a small station and a large national network according to a counting rule. A share of original reporting measures something harder still: the actual production of information that others reuse. Each can answer an important question. None can substitute for the others without explanation.

There is a further problem with the word "control." Owning a company usually carries different rights from owning a minority stake, licensing a show, selling advertisements around someone else's reporting, carrying a television channel or recommending a creator's video. A distributor may strongly influence an outlet's revenue without owning its newsroom. An owner may set budgets and appoint leaders without dictating every article. An investigation should identify the mechanism it is testing instead of treating every commercial relationship as identical editorial command.

An ownership map with dates

The following table is an illustrative map, not a ranking or a calculation of any company's share of all media. It mixes corporate parents with clearly labeled operating entities because that distinction is itself important. Dated closing announcements establish completed transactions; corporate portfolio pages corroborate named holdings. The table does not enumerate every subsidiary, shareholder, local affiliate, newspaper chain, public broadcaster or independent outlet. Read the record date, especially for the Disney row. The research cutoff is November 11, 2026; undated pages were checked on November 12 and are identified as current-access corroboration, not archived proof of their contents on the previous day.

Organization or corporate group	Relevant examples and role	Dated evidence and caution
Skydance, following Paramount's acquisition of Warner Bros. Discovery	CBS News and CNN; Paramount, Warner Bros., HBO and streaming businesses	Closing announced October 6, 2026. These are completed common-parent holdings, not a pending deal. [16]
Comcast / NBCUniversal	NBC, NBC News, Telemundo, Peacock and Universal film businesses	Current NBCUniversal portfolio identifies Comcast as parent. Do not automatically put the spun-off Versant brands in this row. [20]
Versant Media Group	CNBC, MS NOW, USA Network, Golf Channel and other cable/digital brands	November 3, 2026 earnings release dates separation from Comcast to January 2, 2026. MS NOW is the current brand relevant to older MSNBC references. [17]
The Walt Disney Company	ABC Network, Disney+, studios and sports operations including ESPN	Fiscal 2025 Form 10-K, year ended September 27, 2025. This row illustrates the dated corporate portfolio; it is not a complete re-audit of every 2026 asset or minority stake. [25]

Organization or corporate group	Relevant examples and role	Dated evidence and caution
Fox Corporation	Fox News Media, Fox broadcast/local television, Tubi and Roku	November 6, 2026 closing announcement confirms acquisition of Roku. A content business and a distribution platform can share a parent. [18]
News Corp	Dow Jones, New York Post, HarperCollins and other publishing businesses	Current portfolio page. News Corp is a separate corporate entity from Fox Corporation; shared family connections do not make the names interchangeable. [19]
The New York Times Company	The Times publishing and journalism operation	Current company description; an example outside the old six-company entertainment graphic, not a claim about complete shareholder control. [22]
iHeartMedia	Broadcast radio, radio networks, podcasts and digital audio	Current company station directory and portfolio. Its promotional audience-reach claims are not adopted as shares of all media. [21]
Alphabet / Google	YouTube and Google distribution and advertising services	Alphabet restructuring documented in 2015; basic current corporate relationship cross-checked in a secondary reference. This is not ownership of every creator's video. [26] [27]
Meta Platforms	Facebook and Instagram	Pew's October 19, 2026 fact sheet identifies both as Meta-owned. User posts and external news articles are not all Meta-owned reporting. [30]
TikTok USDS Joint Venture	U.S. TikTok operation and specified data, algorithm and moderation responsibilities	January 23, 2026 formation page; global interoperability and certain commercial functions remain separately described. ByteDance retains a minority equity interest in this U.S. venture. [23]
X within the xAI / SpaceX corporate grouping	Social distribution, creator commentary and information circulation	SpaceX's February 2, 2026 statement says it acquired xAI and describes integration with its real-time information platform. This is a company statement, not a full beneficial-ownership audit. [24]

Several observations follow directly from these records. Paramount's acquisition of Warner Bros. Discovery was announced as completed on October 6, 2026, and the combined company was named Skydance. A current discussion should therefore not assume that CBS News and CNN necessarily sit under separate corporate parents because an older chart puts them there. The company's forecasts of better competition, financial savings or creative opportunity remain its own claims; the closing itself does not establish those hoped-for benefits. [16]

Conversely, separation can make an old chart overstate a connection. Versant's November 2026 release dates its separation from Comcast to January 2. NBCUniversal's current portfolio identifies NBC News and

Peacock, while Versant identifies CNBC and MS NOW. Repeating an older Comcast cable-network list without noticing the separation would misdescribe the corporate relationship. A spin-off creates a different ownership structure, though it does not by itself prove stronger journalism, a more diverse audience or less partisan programming. [17] [20]

Fox's completed acquisition of Roku offers a different kind of connection: ownership across content and a connected-TV distribution platform. The relevant democratic questions concern incentives, access and treatment of rivals. Will a distributor favor related products? What commitments govern that conduct? What do audience and competition data show? The company promises to preserve an open ecosystem. That commitment is worth recording and testing over time, rather than accepting as proof that no conflict can arise or assuming in advance that every rival will be excluded. [18]

Ownership is more than a logo

The TikTok example demonstrates why a national label can be inadequate. Its U.S. joint-venture announcement describes particular responsibilities for user data, algorithm security and moderation, while assigning global interoperability and some commercial activities to other TikTok entities. It says ByteDance retains 19.9% of the joint venture's equity. That percentage has an explicit denominator: the U.S. venture's equity, not global TikTok, all short-video content or American media generally. A smaller stake and a different operating arrangement can matter without answering every question about technical dependence, licensing or influence. [23]

The same care applies to familiar technology companies. Alphabet's creation separated a holding-company identity from Google's consumer-facing identity, while YouTube retained its own brand. A person watching a video may recognize the creator, recognize YouTube and never think about the parent company. That layering creates several places where power can operate: the creator's editorial choices, the platform's recommendation system, its advertising rules and the parent's investment decisions. Corporate ownership explains one layer; it does not erase the others. [26] [27] [32]

Newspapers and radio require their own maps. News Corp's publishing portfolio is not identical to Fox's broadcast and streaming portfolio. The New York Times Company's reporting operation is not a subsidiary of the entertainment groups in the old infographic. iHeartMedia's portfolio concerns radio, networks, audio advertising and podcasts. A single entertainment-industry ownership image cannot establish the concentration of local newspaper reporting or radio listening in a specific city. The correct next step is to examine that sector and location, using a consistent set of competitors and measures. [19] [21] [22]

Ownership can also matter through financial structure. A business that must service debt may cut spending, seek higher margins or sell properties. A wealthy owner may finance expensive reporting, impose a personal preference, or do both in different areas. A publicly traded company can face commercial pressures even when no individual owner gives a political instruction. These are plausible mechanisms to investigate; identifying a business model is the beginning of a causal explanation, not evidence that a particular decision occurred for that reason.

For democratic accountability, ask what the structure makes possible and what the record shows was actually done. Who appoints the editor? Who decides how many reporters cover a statehouse? Can managers require a message to run across stations? Is a distribution deal capable of threatening an outlet's survival? What formal or informal protections let journalists challenge those pressures? Those questions connect ownership to observable decisions. They are more demanding than counting logos, but they produce explanations that can be checked.

What the table can and cannot settle

An ownership table is not an editorial-bias scorecard. Two outlets under one parent may maintain different staffs, audiences and editorial practices. Outlets with different owners may reuse the same wire report, react to the same event or copy one another's formats. Identical wording can be evidence of a corporate directive in a documented case; it can also arise from syndication, attribution to a shared source or routine repetition of an official statement. The mechanism and context determine what an example establishes.

Nor should the number of available websites be mistaken for the number of independently funded reporting operations. A city can have many social accounts repeating the work of one shrinking newsroom. A platform can offer millions of videos while important government meetings go uncovered. Equally, a person can publish valuable original reporting outside a large corporate chain. The meaningful question is whether citizens can obtain reliable, sufficiently independent information about institutions they can influence, not whether the internet contains many pages.

The conclusion is therefore specific. Large corporations own important portions of entertainment, broadcasting, publishing and digital distribution. Recent completed transactions and separations change that landscape. The reviewed evidence does not justify turning these facts into an undefined four-companies-own-90% statistic. A useful investigation keeps the concern about concentrated power and improves the measurement: name the market, name the properties, distinguish ownership from distribution, state the date and test the consequences. Democracy needs that precision because the remedies for a local reporting shortage, a national merger and a recommendation-system problem are different.

5. From broadcasting to narrowcasting

What changes when a news business can succeed by serving a particular audience rather than a broad public?

In 2005, political scientist Markus Prior examined a puzzle that sounds familiar today. Cable television and the internet had made more political information available, yet greater availability did not automatically produce a more knowledgeable public. His research suggested that expanded choice helped people follow their preferences: people interested in news could learn more, while people who preferred entertainment could more easily avoid news. The resulting gap concerned political knowledge and participation, not simply disagreement between liberals and conservatives. [13]

That distinction changes how we investigate media division. One person may carefully follow local reporting, another may watch partisan commentary, and another may encounter almost no public-affairs coverage. Describing all three as members of an ideological information bubble would miss consequential differences in what they actually do.

Narrowcasting means designing content for a particular audience. The audience might be defined by language, profession, location, cultural interests, or politics. A service can succeed with a specialized audience rather than appealing to a large cross-section of the country. Political narrowcasting is one version of this broader strategy.

There are good democratic reasons for some specialization. A publication serving a small town can investigate a problem a national network overlooks. A disability publication can provide expertise absent from general-interest coverage. A specialist legal reporter can explain a ruling more carefully than a broad news summary. Reaching fewer people is not itself evidence of lower quality or public value.

The question is what happens when an outlet's financial and social relationships depend on maintaining a particular interpretation of politics. Specialized service can become an incentive to tell an audience what it

already expects. Whether that happens depends on the organization, its funding, its methods, and the audience's willingness to accept unwelcome findings.

Consider a hypothetical dispute over a school curriculum. One program concentrates on parental authority and interviews families who feel excluded. Another concentrates on teachers' professional judgment and interviews educators who feel misrepresented. Both concerns could be real. Selection becomes misleading if either program hides evidence necessary to understand the decision, falsely describes the policy, or presents its chosen interviewees as the entire community.

The division need not begin with fabrication. It can arise through topic selection, repetition, guest selection, and the questions left unanswered. Two audiences may receive accurate fragments that support different impressions of the whole. A fact check of individual sentences may therefore be necessary without fully explaining the divergence.

People also choose sources for reasons beyond ideological agreement. A presenter may be understandable, entertaining, culturally familiar, or respectful of an audience's experiences. A publication may have earned trust by covering a neglected problem. Repeatedly choosing it can be sensible, even though relying on it exclusively may eventually narrow the reader's understanding.

This is why selection and persuasion must be separated. People with existing political commitments may seek compatible coverage. The coverage may subsequently strengthen those commitments, change priorities, or affect behavior. Observing that a partisan audience watches a partisan program does not tell us how much each process contributed.

Owners and editors also make choices that audiences did not request. Their power, documented elsewhere in this report, remains relevant. But an owner-centered explanation cannot simply assume that consumer demand disappears. Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro's research on American daily newspapers found economically significant demand for ideologically congenial news and evidence that newspapers responded to consumer preferences. Owner identity explained less of the measured variation in slant in that historical sample. [28]

That is counterevidence to an account in which owners alone determine every outlet's political orientation. It is not proof that ownership never matters. The study concerned newspapers, a particular historical market, and a measure of slant based on language. Different forms of influence, including decisions about what receives no coverage, may require different evidence.

Financial models create additional pressures. An advertising-supported publisher needs audiences that advertisers value. A subscription publication needs people willing to renew. A donor-supported newsroom needs continuing contributions. Each model can support serious journalism, and each creates dependencies that require safeguards.

Advertising can reward scale, but it does not necessarily reward every possible form of attention. An advertiser may prefer predictable audiences and avoid controversy. A publisher may therefore face competing incentives: attract interest while maintaining relationships with businesses that dislike being associated with inflammatory material. The result depends on which pressures dominate in the particular organization.

Subscriptions can support depth because the publisher receives revenue directly from readers who value its work. They can also make the publication sensitive to the preferences of a relatively cohesive audience. If subscribers treat an inconvenient investigation as betrayal, leaders must decide whether to protect the reporting or protect the relationship. The answer cannot be inferred from the word subscription.

Donations can finance work with little immediate commercial return. Yet a donor's influence can operate through the topics a grant supports, access to leadership, or the organization's expectations about future funding. Editorial separation, transparent funding, and a willingness to investigate powerful supporters provide stronger evidence of independence than a reassuring organizational label.

These arrangements can encourage different forms of narrowcasting. A commercial publisher might target an attractive consumer market. A membership publication might develop a strong shared identity. A nonprofit might focus on subjects funders consider important. None of these arrangements automatically gives audiences a complete account of the public institutions affecting their lives.

Digital measurement makes feedback more immediate. Editors and creators can observe responses to a headline, video, or post. Those responses can reveal that an explanation was useful. They can also reward novelty, anger, reassurance, or the pleasure of seeing an opposing group embarrassed. A measurement of interaction does not, by itself, identify which experience produced it.

Research by Steve Rathje and colleagues found that language referring to political opponents was a particularly strong predictor of social-media engagement in the news-media and congressional-account posts they analyzed. The authors examined Facebook and Twitter material, finding patterns consistent with incentives for expressions of hostility toward political out-groups. This was evidence about engagement patterns, not an experiment demonstrating that every such post increased a reader's political hostility. [29]

The distinction matters for editorial criticism. Anger is not a test of inaccuracy. An accurate investigation can reasonably provoke anger, and calm language can deliver a falsehood. The relevant concern is whether anticipated audience reaction displaces the work of establishing what happened and supplying necessary context.

Audience feedback can also be unrepresentative. The people who comment, pay, complain, or share are easier to observe than quiet readers. A newsroom that treats its loudest followers as a census of its community may systematically misunderstand the people who encounter its coverage. It may also overlook residents who have stopped finding the publication useful.

Common ownership and narrowcasting can coexist. A corporate parent can operate brands aimed at different audiences while sharing advertising systems, technology, or business priorities. Conversely, independent creators can produce remarkably similar material because they face similar distribution incentives. Ownership diversity and diversity of incentives are related questions, but they are not identical measures.

Nor is disagreement among outlets sufficient evidence of a healthy information system. Several competing commentators may interpret the same investigation while none finances additional reporting. The audience receives numerous opinions but depends on a small amount of original evidence. Diversity of commentary and diversity of evidence-gathering institutions should be examined separately.

For democracy, the practical issue is whether targeted coverage helps people understand consequential decisions. A publication can serve a community while accurately explaining evidence that challenges it. A partisan commentator can acknowledge uncertainty without abandoning a political philosophy. A specialist outlet can link its subject to the institutions that have authority over it.

The opposite arrangement gives an audience a dependable emotional experience while reducing opportunities to discover that its usual explanation is incomplete. That outcome need not involve a conspiracy or a single instruction. Repeated commercial, professional, and social decisions can create it. To establish that it has happened in a particular case, investigators still need evidence about coverage and organizational conduct.

A useful test therefore asks how an outlet behaves when facts conflict with audience expectations. Does it correct a popular mistake? Does it distinguish criticism from evidence? Does it give readers enough information to understand the strongest relevant counterargument? Does it continue covering the institutions close to home when a national controversy would attract more attention?

Shared information does not require shared conclusions. A business publication and a labor publication may evaluate a workplace rule differently while agreeing on its actual text. A religious publication and a secular publication can disagree about moral priorities while accurately describing what a court decided. That common evidentiary ground makes disagreement intelligible rather than eliminating it.

The audience also has a role in maintaining that ground. Rewarding an outlet for acknowledging an inconvenient finding can reduce the social cost of honesty. Treating every correction as disloyalty creates the opposite incentive. These are possible feedback mechanisms, not claims that responsibility rests equally with every reader, journalist, executive, or platform.

The public benefit of specialization is strongest when a particular audience becomes better equipped to participate in a larger democratic conversation. The risk grows when serving that audience means insulating it from the evidence necessary to understand everyone else. Evaluating the difference requires looking at the work itself.

6. The apps between citizens and information

How do platforms influence public knowledge when they do not own most of the material they distribute?

In January 2025, Meta announced substantial changes to its approach to public discussion. It said its U.S. services would move from third-party fact-checking toward Community Notes, alter aspects of enforcement, and take a more personalized approach to political content. These were changes in a private company's rules that could affect publishers, public figures, creators, and ordinary users at once. Meta presented them as improvements to expression and accuracy; those arguments are corporate claims requiring evaluation. [33]

The announcement illustrates power that an ownership chart alone cannot capture. A platform can influence the route between a newsroom and its audience without owning the newsroom. It can change recommendation, labeling, monetization, or availability while the publisher's name and editorial leadership remain unchanged.

The scale of that role is substantial. In Pew Research Center's survey conducted August 24-30, 2026, 59% of U.S. adults said they obtained news from social media at least sometimes. Regular news use was reported by 40% of adults for Facebook, 34% for YouTube, 23% for Instagram, 20% for TikTok, and 10% for X. These are overlapping shares of American adults, not exclusive portions of a single news market. [30]

Such measures establish reported use, not the accuracy of everything encountered or a platform's persuasive effect. Someone may use several services, consult original documents afterward, or see political information incidentally while looking for entertainment. An app's role must be investigated through the experiences it enables, not inferred from its audience size alone.

Consider one hypothetical route. A reporter obtains a document and writes a story. A publisher edits and releases it. A creator summarizes it in a video. A platform recommends that video, and other users distribute clips. Each stage can add explanation, remove context, or change emphasis. The reader may never encounter the original reporting.

YouTube makes this relationship particularly visible because users can search deliberately, follow channels, or encounter recommended videos. Its September 2021 explanation described recommendations based on multiple signals, including viewing behavior, surveys, likes, and sharing, alongside assessments intended to reduce problematic material. That is a dated company account of its system, not independent evidence that every recommendation was responsible or that the same system remained unchanged in 2026. [32]

The account nevertheless challenges the idea that every recommendation system follows one simple instruction to maximize clicks. Systems can pursue several objectives that conflict. Even when satisfaction is an objective, a platform must decide how to measure it. A response that feels satisfying immediately may not produce a better understanding of an issue.

Facebook and Instagram combine public information with social relationships and entertainment. A post can arrive through a friend, a group, an established publisher, or a recommended account. Those pathways create different reasons for trust. A familiar person sharing a headline may lend it social credibility without having checked the underlying claim.

TikTok's June 2020 explanation described a For You feed informed by user interactions, video information, and account or device settings. The company also acknowledged the possibility of narrowing recommendations and described efforts to introduce variety. These statements document the company's stated approach at that time. They do not establish the exact operation or effectiveness of the system six years later. [34]

A 2026 study of controlled TikTok accounts during the 2024 U.S. election reported asymmetric partisan recommendations. It documented a skew in the tested information environment while explaining that its data could not conclusively identify the internal mechanism. Because the participants were controlled accounts, the audit did not establish changes in real users' beliefs or votes. [37]

X provides another reminder to distinguish distribution from political outcomes. Research published in 2026 examined a seven-week experiment among active American users in July-September 2023. Moving some users from chronological to algorithmic feeds shifted several opinions in a conservative direction, while the reverse switch did not produce comparable changes. Neither switch significantly changed measured affective polarization or party identification. [35]

These studies do not establish that every platform has the same political effects. They show why evidence about a particular system, period, and outcome is more useful than a general claim about algorithms. Ownership, personnel, policies, and available content can change. Earlier findings remain evidence about their study conditions, not automatic descriptions of a later service.

Creators further complicate the picture. Pew's survey conducted August 18-24, 2025 found that 21% of U.S. adults regularly obtained news from news influencers, including 38% of adults aged 18-29. The category referred to individuals with substantial social followings who regularly discuss news or political and social issues. It did not identify one uniform profession or standard of evidence. [31]

A creator can translate difficult material, introduce overlooked subjects, and develop trust with people poorly served by established outlets. Another can circulate unsupported claims. Institutional journalists also vary. The useful questions concern original work, expertise, disclosure, corrections, and whether viewers can inspect the supporting evidence.

The economics can become uneven. A newsroom may pay for months of reporting while a short commentary captures much of the attention. That commentary can introduce valuable audiences to the investigation, but it can also obscure who performed the original work. A healthy relationship makes the evidence and its production visible rather than treating every circulating version as interchangeable.

Recommendation systems operate within feedback relationships. People select accounts and interact with subjects; the system uses such behavior to influence subsequent exposure. The process can amplify an interest that already existed, introduce an unfamiliar subject, or repeatedly present a narrow interpretation. Attributing the entire experience to either unrestricted choice or total algorithmic control overlooks that interaction.

Moderation adds another set of decisions. Removing material affects availability. Excluding it from recommendations affects discovery. Labeling it adds context. Limiting monetization affects financial incentives. These actions can overlap, but their practical effects differ. An investigation should specify which action occurred before judging its justification or consequences.

Content that remains technically available can still receive little distribution. Conversely, removing material does not necessarily eliminate it from public discussion: people may reproduce it elsewhere or report on its removal. The relevant evidence includes the decision, the rule invoked, the affected audience, and the material's circulation before and afterward.

Paid political advertising requires another distinction. Payment, targeting, and delivery can operate differently from organic sharing. A viewer needs to know who financed a message and what it claims. Researchers may need to compare versions presented to different audiences. Transparency can make scrutiny possible without proving that the advertising is accurate or harmless.

Meta's February 19, 2026 election announcement, updated before this report's cutoff, described authorization, sponsor disclaimers, and a seven-year Ad Library record for political and social-issue advertising. Its October 27 update said new such ads were restricted during the final campaign week, while qualifying previously delivered ads could continue. This was a restriction on new ads, not a declaration that all political advertising had stopped. [36]

The announcement also confirmed Community Notes as an established part of the U.S. approach. It is stronger evidence of the company's stated 2026 policy than assuming a 2020 election arrangement still applied. It still does not independently demonstrate enforcement quality, political neutrality, or a particular effect on citizens.

Questions about advertising therefore should be precise. Can the sponsor be identified? Is the version being examined the version voters actually received? Is there enough information to evaluate audience selection? Can an investigator distinguish political advocacy from impersonation, fraud, or an unsupported factual claim? Different problems require different evidence.

An advertising archive can help answer some of those questions while leaving others unresolved. Knowing who paid does not show which argument persuaded a voter. A record of delivery does not show whether viewers understood the message. Transparency creates an opportunity for scrutiny; evaluating political effects requires additional observations and a suitable comparison.

Platform power also operates through dependence. A publisher may own its website but rely heavily on recommendations, search, or social referrals. An unexpected change can alter its audience without any transfer of ownership. A creator may retain control over a recording while depending on a platform's distribution and payment rules for a livelihood.

This power is consequential without being unlimited. Users can leave, publishers can develop direct relationships, and competing services can provide alternatives. Those possibilities do not establish that switching is easy or that an alternative can reproduce an existing audience. The practical strength of an exit option must be investigated rather than presumed.

For democratic accountability, the central issue is whether people can trace a consequential claim through these layers. A short video may be the beginning of informed inquiry if it exposes its evidence. It may be the end of inquiry if its authority depends on preventing inspection. The format alone does not decide which experience occurs.

The platform age has expanded opportunities to publish while concentrating important distribution decisions. It has also made the relationship between institutional rules and individual behavior harder to observe. Understanding that relationship requires separate evidence about what was produced, what was shown, how people responded, and what they subsequently believed or did.

7. What polarization actually means

Which kinds of political division threaten democracy, and how much can media explain?

An experiment published in 2018 offered frequent Twitter users incentives to encounter messages from the opposing political side. Republican participants exposed to a liberal-message bot became more conservative on the policy measures studied. Democratic participants showed a smaller change in a liberal direction that was not statistically significant. The intervention did not produce the straightforward moderation its design might lead an observer to expect. [40]

The finding does not establish that all contact across political disagreement is harmful. The study involved particular users, a month-long exposure arrangement, and particular kinds of messages. Reading a stream of political statements differs from discussing a shared local concern with someone whose character one already knows. Context is part of the intervention.

It also matters which outcome changed. Polarization is often used as if it described one condition, but the term can refer to several kinds of separation. Before blaming media for increasing it, an investigator should specify what is being measured and why that measure matters.

Issue polarization concerns positions on public questions. People can become further apart on taxation, immigration, abortion, environmental policy, or the powers government should exercise. The amount of disagreement depends on the issue and on how the question is asked. A conflict over one policy does not establish that every political belief has become equally extreme.

Affective polarization concerns feelings toward political groups and their members: hostility, distrust, aversion, or fear. Two people can hold relatively similar preferences on several policies and still dislike one another because of party identification. Others may disagree strongly on policy while recognizing each other's rights and personal integrity.

Elite polarization concerns leaders, parties, and governing institutions. A legislature can become more divided between parties even when many voters hold mixed views. Perceived polarization concerns how divided people believe others are. These measures can move differently, so a change in one should not be treated as proof of a change in all.

A major review by Shanto Iyengar and colleagues examined the social-identity roots of affective polarization and its consequences beyond conventional political disputes. Its framework helps explain why party identification can influence judgments of people whose actual policy positions remain unknown. [38]

The social meaning of a party label can become much broader than a view about a particular law. It may suggest a kind of person, community, or way of life. Criticism of a party can then feel like criticism of an identity, while an opposing party's victory can be experienced as a threat to the status of a group.

This does not make every perceived threat imaginary. Public decisions can affect rights, resources, and security. The analytical task is to distinguish documented consequences from assumptions about everyone associated with the opposing side. Strong moral criticism of a policy does not require inventing the character of millions of strangers.

Pew's survey conducted June 27-July 4, 2022 documented increasingly negative judgments of opposing partisans. It also found that 27% of U.S. adults held unfavorable views of both major parties, showing frustration that extended beyond loyalty to one side. These were public attitudes, not measurements of anyone's actual morality or a demonstration that media caused the judgments. [41]

The same source showed that negative judgments were not identical across every trait. A responsible account can report hostility in both parties while preserving differences in its form and extent. Consistent standards do not require equal blame, equal quantities of misconduct, or mathematically matching criticisms.

Media can contribute by selecting the examples through which audiences encounter a political group. A genuine but unusual statement can receive extensive attention. If viewers repeatedly encounter selected examples without information about their prevalence or institutional importance, they may mistake an extreme sample for the whole population. Fabrication is unnecessary for that distortion to occur.

The target of the coverage matters. An obscure social account, a congressional leader, and a presidential candidate possess different kinds of authority. A publication that treats all provocative remarks as equivalent can confuse the audience about who actually influences government. Holding powerful people accountable requires attention proportionate to their position and conduct.

Selection can also change which disagreements feel central. Two audiences might hold mixed views about numerous issues while repeatedly hearing that one conflict defines membership in their political community. That is a plausible pathway connecting coverage to identity. Establishing its contribution in a particular case requires more than observing that political conflict and partisan media coexist.

The causal problem runs in both directions. Existing identity can guide source choice, and source choice can subsequently reinforce identity. Politicians may learn from audience responses which conflicts attract attention. Journalists may cover the resulting statements because leaders made them. A cycle can emerge without any participant controlling the entire system.

Research that measures only one link should not claim to explain the entire cycle. A content analysis can reveal what a program emphasized. A survey can describe associations between exposure and hostility. An experiment can identify effects of a specified change. None automatically establishes the long-term influence of every institution involved.

Measurement can also change the apparent diagnosis. Asking how warmly someone feels toward opposing voters differs from asking whether an opposing candidate should win. Someone might dislike a party's leaders while maintaining friendships with its voters. Another might express tolerance in a survey yet support procedural advantages for a preferred side. Researchers need measures appropriate to the claim.

That is why a decline in one hostility measure should not be treated as a complete democratic repair. Cooperation, factual knowledge, recognition of opponents' rights, and willingness to accept lawful outcomes are related but distinct. A useful report tells readers which of these was actually examined, rather than allowing a familiar label to do the explanatory work.

Historical evidence also complicates an explanation centered entirely on direct social-media use. Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro found greater increases in their polarization measures among older demographic groups less likely to use the internet and social media than among younger groups. Their 2017 study challenges a simple explanation in which the most direct digital users necessarily experience the greatest increase. [39]

It does not rule out indirect pathways. A message can begin on a platform, reach television coverage, and influence people who never use the original service. Political leaders and journalists can respond to highly active online communities. Those possibilities remain hypotheses to investigate; invoking indirect influence cannot substitute for evidence that it occurred.

Institutions also shape political incentives. Electoral rules, party organization, legislative procedures, and the allocation of authority can influence the rewards for compromise or confrontation. A politician trying to win an internal party contest may face different pressures from one trying to persuade a competitive general-election audience. Whether media intensify these pressures is distinct from whether media created them.

Institutional explanations should be examined with the same care as technological ones. Saying a rule creates incentives does not establish that every official responds identically. Candidates, movements, local circumstances, and public expectations vary. A convincing account specifies the decision being explained and compares the proposed mechanism with plausible alternatives.

Geography can shape both political experiences and opportunities for contact. Residents of different communities may encounter different industries, housing pressures, public services, and social networks. These differences can generate substantive disagreements even when people share reliable factual information. It would be misleading to attribute every conflict to a defective news feed.

At the same time, geographical distance does not make political interpretation inevitable. Communities contain disagreements, and individuals participate in multiple relationships. Treating rural residents, city residents, religious groups, or generations as internally uniform would reproduce the same sampling problem that makes partisan stereotypes unreliable.

Economic insecurity, racial and religious conflict, cultural change, and unequal access to institutions can also contribute to political division. Their relative importance varies across questions and periods. They belong among explanations to test, rather than serving as a list that automatically proves a particular account. Media may report, frame, exaggerate, obscure, or help organize responses to these conditions.

The democratic goal therefore requires more thought than reducing every measured difference. An investigation that exposes wrongdoing may increase conflict while improving accountability. A movement challenging an exclusionary arrangement may need forceful argument. A demand for politeness can become a means of avoiding the substance of a complaint.

Nor does reducing hostility automatically improve public knowledge. People can become friendlier while retaining inaccurate beliefs. They can become better informed about a serious abuse while becoming more distrustful of the responsible institution. Evaluating an intervention requires distinguishing knowledge, interpersonal feeling, policy judgment, participation, and commitment to democratic rules.

Media criticism should preserve those distinctions. A source that challenges a comfortable belief may be serving the reader. A source that supplies a satisfying villain may be misleading the reader, even when the villain's selected statement is genuine. The difference rests on evidence, proportionality, and context rather than whether the reader enjoys the experience.

For this report, the most consequential division is one that makes legitimate political competition difficult to sustain. People need ways to disagree, organize, criticize, and replace officials while accepting that opponents retain rights. That standard permits sharp disagreement and serious moral judgment. It asks whether political conflict remains answerable to evidence and institutions through which decisions can be contested.

The next chapter turns to research that attempts to identify media effects more directly. The questions established here remain essential: which people, which intervention, which period, and which outcome? Without those details, polarization becomes a word capable of supporting almost any argument and explaining very little.

8. What research can establish

In September 2020, a group of Facebook users entered an unusual election-season experiment. Researchers reduced the material they received from sources classified as politically like-minded. The intervention continued through the presidential election and into December. This was an opportunity to test a familiar idea: if an echo chamber contributes to political division, making it less enclosed should improve political attitudes. The feed changed, but the expected attitudinal transformation did not appear on the measures the researchers had specified in advance. [43]

The result is important precisely because it resists an easy conclusion. It challenges a proposed mechanism and remedy under particular conditions. It does not establish that Facebook has never influenced anyone, that accumulated exposure is harmless, or that every information environment operates in the same way. Understanding the difference requires asking what an experiment actually changes and what its comparison group represents.

The missing alternative

Suppose a survey finds that viewers of a highly partisan program dislike the opposing party more than other people do. That relationship is compatible with several explanations. The program could produce hostility. Hostile people could select the program. Politicians or social networks could influence both the viewing choice and the hostility. Several mechanisms could operate together. The association is useful evidence about a pattern, but it does not identify which explanation accounts for it.

The central causal question concerns an alternative that cannot be observed directly for the same person at the same moment: what would this person believe without that exposure? Researchers construct comparisons to approximate that alternative. The strength of the resulting conclusion depends on how convincing the comparison is, how accurately exposure is measured, and whether the outcome captures what the argument says should change.

A survey can describe what people report thinking or doing. A panel survey follows people over time, helping establish whether a change precedes another change. Behavioral records can reveal what people actually encountered or clicked, reducing some problems with memory. Yet a longer timeline or a more precise record does not automatically remove selection. A person may change sources because their politics are already changing.

Random assignment addresses that difficulty by making treatment and comparison groups similar on average before the intervention. An observational design can also support a causal argument when it identifies plausibly outside variation in exposure. Neither method eliminates every uncertainty. Randomized participants can leave a study, ignore an instruction, or replace lost exposure elsewhere. A natural experiment can fail if the supposedly outside variation is connected to another politically important factor.

Martin and Yurukoglu's cable-news research used channel placement as a source of variation in viewing. A convenient position on a cable lineup can influence exposure without a viewer deliberately choosing more ideological material. Their analysis supported a persuasive effect of Fox News among viewers whose watching changed with placement. Their broader assessments of influence also used a model of viewing preferences and evolving ideology. The statistical comparison and the model should be evaluated separately. [46]

That distinction prevents an important mistake. Evidence that additional exposure changes some viewers' behavior supports media persuasion. It does not mean every viewer responds identically, that a channel's average audience is a randomized sample, or that a model's simulated national outcome was directly observed. Results are strongest when their conclusions remain connected to the population and variation that generated them.

When changing the feed changes little else

The Facebook experiment led by Brendan Nyhan involved 23,377 consenting users and reduced exposure to like-minded sources by roughly one-third. The intervention changed what people saw and reduced exposure to uncivil material. It produced no measurable effects on eight preregistered attitude outcomes, including affective polarization, ideological extremity, and belief in false claims. The study also found that removing like-minded material did not simply replace all of it with clearly opposing material. [43]

This matters because a proposed remedy can fail at different stages. A treatment may not change exposure enough. It may change exposure but leave a long-established attitude intact. People may seek similar material through television, another app, or conversations. The measure may not capture a relevant outcome. These possibilities are hypotheses to investigate, not reasons to dismiss an unwelcome result. The observed result still places limits on the claim that this intervention would substantially change the measured attitudes.

A related experiment led by Andrew Guess assigned consenting Facebook and Instagram users to reverse-chronological feeds during the 2020 election. Platform use decreased and the content mix changed. Some outcomes that might have been expected to improve did not: political and untrustworthy content

increased under chronological ordering. Over the three-month study, the intervention did not significantly change issue polarization, affective polarization, political knowledge, or several other key attitudes. [42]

The practical implication is narrower than either side of a familiar argument might prefer. Personalized ranking materially shaped the experience. Replacing it with a chronological order did not deliver a general political cure. A chronological feed is still a selection process: it privileges recency and the accounts already followed. Offering that option can increase user control without guaranteeing that every resulting information diet will be more reliable or politically diverse.

Deactivation experiments test a broader change. In research published in 2020, Allcott and colleagues examined leaving Facebook for four weeks before the 2018 midterms. They found reduced political polarization and factual news knowledge, changes in time use, and improved subjective well-being. Leaving the service removed a bundle of experiences, including social interaction and entertainment. Its effects cannot be attributed exclusively to the ranking of political news. [44]

The later Facebook and Instagram deactivation study, published in 2024, examined six weeks before the 2020 election. It found effects close to zero on issue and affective polarization, election legitimacy, candidate favorability, and turnout. Some other outcomes changed, including an index of political participation driven mainly by activity online. The researchers also distinguished secondary findings from results meeting their preregistered significance threshold. [54]

The difference between the deactivation studies should remain visible. Different election environments, participants, measures, time periods, and replacement activities may matter. The available evidence does not allow a confident allocation of the discrepancy among all those explanations. Selecting one experiment as the permanent answer would hide uncertainty. Presenting both helps define the conditions under which a proposed effect has and has not been established.

Another field experiment offers a further complication. Ro'ee Levy randomly offered Facebook participants subscriptions to conservative or liberal news outlets. Counter-attitudinal exposure reduced negative attitudes toward the opposing party, while the study found no evidence that outlet leanings changed political opinions. The research also examined how subscribing translated into actual delivery and browsing. Receiving a more favorable view of opposing citizens and changing a policy preference were different outcomes. [45]

How to read a finding without enlarging it

These studies show why the word “polarization” can conceal several research questions. An intervention may affect the warmth people feel toward another party without changing their preferred tax rate. It may alter knowledge without changing turnout. It may change how often people discuss politics without changing their party label. A summary that collapses these outcomes into “politics changed” or “nothing happened” discards much of the useful information.

Statistical significance also needs translation. A nonsignificant result is not proof of an exactly zero effect. The confidence interval and study design determine which effects remain plausible. A precise estimate near zero can rule out meaningful changes of certain sizes under the tested conditions. A noisy estimate can leave substantial uncertainty. Both may appear in a headline as “no effect,” although they provide different amounts of information.

Likewise, statistical significance does not establish that an effect is large, durable, or widely generalizable. A small average shift might matter in a close political contest, but that electoral implication requires additional assumptions. A large effect in a selected population may not apply to people who use the service infrequently. A result appearing shortly after exposure may fade. Claims about persistence require follow-up rather than a forceful adjective.

Researchers must also decide what they mean by exposure. A post appearing on a screen is different from a person reading it, understanding it, remembering it, or accepting it. A share can signal approval, ridicule, criticism, or a desire to bookmark something. Measuring one stage accurately does not allow the researcher to assume all later stages occurred. Good research states which stage the data actually capture.

The same caution applies to classifications. A source's political leaning, an article's factual accuracy, a speaker's hostility, and a user's party identification are different characteristics. Automated categories can enable large studies while introducing errors or obscuring distinctions. It matters whether a classifier labels an entire publication, a particular post, or the audience that tends to share it. These choices can affect what a measured “echo chamber” contains.

Large datasets can make patterns visible, but scale cannot repair an unsuitable comparison. Millions of observations collected from an unrepresentative group can estimate that group's behavior very precisely. They do not automatically describe the country. Conversely, a smaller randomized experiment can be valuable for identifying an effect while leaving uncertainty about its reach. Precision, causal identification, and representativeness are separate strengths.

Platform cooperation introduces another tradeoff. It can permit interventions and exposure measurements unavailable to outside researchers. It can also restrict accessible questions, variables, or replication opportunities. An independent study faces other limitations, including difficulty observing complete feeds or participation through mobile devices. Disclosure of research access, funding, publication control, and data restrictions lets readers evaluate these constraints without assuming that institutional cooperation either guarantees or invalidates a finding.

The useful approach is cumulative. Compare methods, populations, platforms, interventions, and outcomes. Look for replication and for conditions under which effects differ. Ask whether a result tests the proposed explanation or merely describes a correlated pattern. A study of a 2020 election feed cannot settle every question about a redesigned platform in 2026. It can still provide strong evidence against particular claims about that earlier intervention.

The research supports treating media influence as real, conditional, and measurable. It also supports skepticism toward explanations that attribute every political division to one technology. Citizens benefit from evidence that tells them which changes affect exposure, which affect judgment, and which have yet to demonstrate the promised political result. That discipline becomes especially important when the consequences involve the accountability of government itself.

9. What happens to democratic accountability

In October 2026, Medill's Local News Initiative described 238 American counties as news deserts: places without a locally based source of professional local reporting. More than 1,400 other counties had only one source remaining. Its annual inventory recorded 170 newspapers closing or merging over the preceding year. These are categories of institutions and geographic coverage, not measurements of how often every resident encounters news. They reveal a potential gap between the abundance of information online and the reporting available about a community. [48]

The distinction is important. A resident can receive national political videos throughout the day while lacking a reporter who routinely examines the county budget. The resident may know the latest argument between prominent politicians but not why a public contract was renewed or which office can change a local rule. Political attention and practical knowledge of government do not necessarily grow together.

The value of someone regularly asking

Much accountability reporting begins before an obvious scandal exists. A journalist attends meetings, asks how an expenditure changed, compares explanations with records, and follows a decision after its announcement. None of these activities requires a dramatic revelation on every visit. Their value includes making public decisions observable and giving officials reason to expect that an unusual choice may eventually be examined.

This is a proposed mechanism, not a claim that every official behaves badly without a reporter. Public employees, auditors, courts, residents, and legislative bodies also scrutinize government. Journalism adds a form of independent attention whose priorities need not be set by the institution under examination. Its contribution is strongest when evidence becomes accessible to people who can act through those other institutions.

Snyder and Strömberg studied the fit between newspaper markets and congressional districts, using variation associated with redistricting to investigate press coverage. They linked lower coverage of representatives to weaker voter knowledge and differences in representatives' behavior and federal spending. The research traced several stages of accountability rather than measuring whether an article made people like another party. It supports the importance of information connecting voters to particular officials. [14]

The mechanism is understandable without imagining that everyone reads every investigation. A local story may alert a civic organization, another journalist, an auditor, or an opposing candidate. Those intermediaries can carry the information farther. A source serving a modest audience may therefore contribute to accountability through institutions and conversations beyond its circulation. Establishing the extent of those spillovers requires evidence; the possibility alone does not quantify their size.

Local reporting can also affect how outsiders evaluate a government. Gao, Lee, and Murphy examined newspaper closures and municipal public finance. Their published abstract reports increased borrowing costs after closures and associations with indicators of weaker monitoring, including higher government wages and deficits and more costly financing practices. The authors interpret their identification as causal rather than a simple reflection of deteriorating economic conditions. This is a finding from a particular research design, not a prediction for every closure. [47]

Borrowing costs provide a different lens from partisan attitudes. Lenders need information about the institutions issuing debt. Residents bear the consequences of public financing choices through budgets and services. If monitoring becomes weaker, the cost can arise even among people who never followed the newspaper's political coverage. The democratic concern includes the performance and financial transparency of government, not only what citizens say about their opponents.

That does not make every newspaper financially healthy or every acquisition harmful. A merger could eliminate a competing newsroom, preserve reporting that otherwise would disappear, or combine administrative functions while changing editorial capacity in more complicated ways. The relevant observations include reporters retained, subjects covered, records requested, and communities served. A familiar masthead surviving on a website is not sufficient evidence that the previous reporting capacity survives with it.

National argument and local silence

When coverage shifts toward national conflict, local officials can become harder to evaluate on their own record. A resident may choose a candidate mainly through national party identity because there is little accessible information about local performance. This is an inference about a potential pathway, not proof that every voter or community responds that way. Testing it requires comparing information, choices, and political conditions rather than assuming the explanation from a closure alone.

An information deficit can also make a well-organized interested party unusually influential. A company, agency, campaign, or advocacy organization may have the staff to issue statements and maintain a steady

stream of material. If independent reporting weakens, those statements can become easier to publish than to investigate. The content may contain accurate information while leaving questions unanswered. Access to facts and capacity to challenge their framing are different resources.

The absence of an investigation is difficult to measure. A false article can be identified and examined after publication. A story nobody had time to pursue leaves fewer traces. Researchers can count outlets and jobs, but the number of missed public-interest stories is not directly visible. This makes inventories valuable while requiring caution about what a newsroom count can establish concerning actual coverage quality.

Medill's 2026 update also changed how it classified ethnic and foreign-language outlets, incorporating them into their respective media categories. That methodological change matters for year-to-year comparisons. Its inventory identified digital startups and philanthropic support alongside continuing losses. The report therefore describes a changing ecosystem rather than a simple disappearance of every alternative. New organizations can perform important work without fully replacing the places, beats, and institutional capacity lost elsewhere. [48]

Trust creates another accountability problem. Gallup's survey conducted September 2-16, 2025 found that 28% of U.S. adults expressed a great deal or fair amount of confidence in newspapers, television, and radio to report news fully, accurately, and fairly. That reading was the low point in the trend Gallup described. Gallup's next survey, conducted September 1-17, 2026, found 33% of U.S. adults giving the same answer, up from 28%. The 2026 interviews were with 1,000 adults. For that national adult sample, Gallup reports a margin of sampling error of ±4 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The same article says 33% answered "not very much" and 33% answered "none at all." In the 2026 survey, 22% of Republicans (up from 8%), 31% of independents, and 50% of Democrats expressed a great deal or fair amount of confidence. Gallup said the interviews ended before a White House access dispute that began September 18, 2026, so the result does not reflect it. These figures measure a reported attitude with particular question wording. They are not an audit of how many stories are accurate. [49] [55]

The distinction prevents circular reasoning. Distrust can reflect real errors, editorial priorities, perceived disrespect, political persuasion, or different interpretations of which institutions a broad question includes. A survey identifies the distribution of a reported attitude; explaining its causes requires other evidence. Nor should higher confidence always be the objective. An accurate investigation may appropriately reduce trust in an institution whose misconduct had been hidden.

The more useful goal is warranted trust: confidence that can increase or decrease in response to evidence. A newsroom supports that goal by making its methods inspectable, correcting consequential errors, distinguishing findings from allegations, and showing what remains uncertain. Audiences support it by judging practices and particular claims rather than deciding that an institution must always be right or always be lying.

Misinformation and missing information require different responses. Removing a false claim does not produce an investigation of a neglected public program. Funding a reporter does not guarantee that a viral rumor will be corrected promptly. A community can face both problems. Treating the entire information crisis as a moderation dispute risks overlooking the institutions needed to establish reliable information in the first place.

Funding independence and institutional survival

Nonprofit, cooperative, commercial, and public-service models provide different ways to finance that work. Each creates dependencies. Advertisers, subscribers, donors, grantmakers, and public institutions can all exert pressure or shape priorities. An organization's legal form does not establish the independence of every editorial decision. Useful safeguards include diversified funding, clear editorial authority, disclosure of material support, and procedures that permit reporting inconvenient to influential supporters.

Public broadcasting requires particular care because the funding arrangements changed materially before this report's cutoff. The Rescissions Act of 2025, approved July 24, rescinded specified appropriations for the

Corporation for Public Broadcasting for fiscal years 2026 and 2027. The statute supports that precise budgetary statement. It should not be described as a law closing every local station or prohibiting people from supporting public media. [50]

On January 5, 2026, CPB announced that its board had voted to dissolve the organization and described an orderly wind-down, including distribution of remaining funds and preservation of archives. Its statement explicitly distinguished the corporation's ending from the continued work of local stations, producers, journalists, and educators. This establishes a board decision and closure process, not an independently verified date on which every legal winding-up step was complete. [51]

CPB, national program organizations such as NPR and PBS, and locally operated stations should therefore not be treated as one interchangeable institution. A central funding mechanism can end while separate organizations continue operating, though with changed resources and risks. Claims about a particular station's closure or survival need station-specific evidence. The loss of a funding stream is consequential without supporting a claim that an entire system disappeared at once.

The distinction also clarifies arguments about public support. Funding can help sustain services where a commercial model is difficult, while political control over money can threaten independence. A private donation may replace some lost resources while creating a different dependency. Evaluating a replacement requires asking who benefits, who remains underserved, how long funding lasts, and whether the newsroom can scrutinize its supporters.

Independent publishers face their own vulnerabilities. Local ownership can support accountability through close relationships and knowledge of a community. It can also expose a small organization to pressure from a dominant employer, advertiser, or local political network. National ownership may provide resources while reducing local autonomy. These are institutional tradeoffs to investigate, not reasons to assign credibility solely from the owner's size or location.

Democratic accountability is strongest when information can travel across several independent paths. Records are accessible; reporters can investigate; residents can understand which institution acted; competing sources can challenge errors; and officials expect scrutiny. A loud political conversation can coexist with weakness in these functions. Preserving the ability to discover and contest consequential decisions requires attention to the production of reporting as well as the circulation of opinion.

10. What could improve the system?

In July 2024, the Supreme Court returned two major disputes over social-platform regulation to lower courts. The cases involved Florida and Texas laws restricting moderation practices. The Court required a more complete analysis of the laws' applications and explained how the selection and presentation of others' speech can involve protected editorial judgment. The decision illustrates the difficulty facing reform: a powerful private information system can warrant scrutiny while government attempts to control its expression raise constitutional problems. [7]

The objective should be to improve citizens' access to reliable information and meaningful scrutiny while protecting their ability to disagree. That objective cannot be reduced to maximizing trust, eliminating conflict, preserving existing companies, or producing an officially balanced political feed. Different proposed reforms address different failures. Each should identify a specific mechanism, the people affected, an outcome that can be evaluated, and the costs or risks it introduces.

Competition and the capacity to report

Competition policy should begin with the market being examined. A newspaper merger may affect local reporting and advertising. A platform transaction may affect distribution, data, access to audiences, or opportunities for creators. An entertainment conglomerate's share of film production does not by itself measure its control over local government reporting. Defining the activity prevents a broad concern about concentration from becoming an undefined percentage that cannot guide a practical remedy.

Review should also look beyond the survival of brand names. Two familiar outlets can remain visible after their reporting operations are combined. Administrative consolidation might reduce costs without the same effect on coverage. The distinction requires evidence about actual reporting resources, independent editorial authority, terms offered to workers and suppliers, and the availability of alternatives. The appropriate questions depend on the legal framework and transaction rather than a presumption that every large company operates identically.

There are genuine tradeoffs. Blocking an acquisition could preserve an independent decision-maker but leave a financially weak business without its proposed financing. Permitting it could stabilize operations while reducing competition or newsroom autonomy. Claimed efficiencies need examination: will savings support additional reporting, maintain a service, lower prices, or primarily increase financial returns? A prediction should not be treated as an accomplished public benefit merely because it appears in a merger announcement.

Journalism support addresses a related but distinct problem. A community may not generate enough revenue to finance reporting that benefits people beyond the paying audience. Subscriptions, memberships, donations, shared reporting services, and public support can each contribute. The relevant measure is whether people gain sustained, original coverage of consequential institutions. Preserving a corporation or subsidizing distribution is not necessarily the same as increasing the capacity to investigate.

Support programs need safeguards appropriate to the source of money. Public mechanisms could use transparent eligibility standards and independent administration to reduce favoritism. Philanthropic arrangements could disclose funders and protect editorial decisions from donor veto. Community financing could broaden participation while making the burden affordable. Every model has administrative costs, and those costs should be considered when designing programs for organizations with small staffs.

The recent CPB experience demonstrates that public funding is politically vulnerable rather than automatically permanent. Restoring or redesigning support would require political and legal action, not simply invoking the old system as though its appropriations remained unchanged. Conversely, losing a central funding stream does not establish that private giving can never sustain valuable work. Evaluation should distinguish immediate survival, long-term stability, and coverage of places with limited fundraising capacity. [50] [51]

Transparency, research access, and freedom of expression

Platform transparency can improve the evidence available for these choices. Useful disclosure would answer practical questions: what information reaches which audiences, how paid promotion differs from organic distribution, how major policy changes affect exposure, and how often consequential moderation decisions are reversed. A large release of technical material is not automatically meaningful transparency. Information must be interpretable and connected to questions independent observers can actually test.

Researchers do not need unrestricted access to everyone's private activity. Carefully governed data access can limit personal information, restrict permitted uses, and establish security obligations while enabling analysis of exposure and outcomes. These protections impose costs and can constrain replication. The design challenge is to make scrutiny possible without turning research access into another route for surveillance or allowing companies unlimited authority to suppress unwelcome findings.

The mixed experimental record strengthens the case for such access. A platform option that changes exposure may leave a measured attitude unchanged; another intervention may improve one outcome while

worsening another. Independent analysis can reveal those differences. A public demand for data should therefore specify the questions and protections involved rather than assume that revealing source code alone explains the behavior of a large, continuously changing information system.

Legal distinctions are equally important. In *Moody v. NetChoice*, the Court vacated the judgments and remanded because the lower courts had not properly analyzed the full scope of the facial challenges. It also explained that major feed-curation functions can involve protected editorial discretion. The decision did not hold that every platform function is immune from regulation, or conclusively resolve the constitutionality of every application of the challenged laws. [7]

That leaves room for arguments about particular business practices, disclosures, competition, privacy, and government conduct. It also means a proposal to force an officially preferred mixture of political viewpoints faces a serious constitutional problem. The fact that a communication service is influential does not eliminate the need to identify the power government would exercise over it and the expression that power could affect.

Another 2024 case, *Murthy v. Missouri*, concerned alleged government pressure on platforms. The Supreme Court held that the plaintiffs had not established standing for the prospective injunction they sought. They had not adequately demonstrated the required connection among government defendants, likely future platform restrictions, their own injuries, and the relief requested. The Court did not decide a general merits question establishing that all government contacts with platforms are lawful or that coercion could never violate the First Amendment. [52]

These holdings should not be enlarged into slogans. Government can communicate information and advocate positions; specific circumstances can raise questions about coercion and state responsibility. Determining the legal boundary requires evidence about particular actions, relationships, and injuries. A good information policy preserves the ability to scrutinize government pressure while also recognizing that private platforms can have independent reasons for their decisions.

User choice provides another possible improvement, with limited promises. Options for ordering a feed, selecting sources, understanding recommendations, or controlling recurring topics can make a service more intelligible and responsive. The 2020 chronological-feed experiment cautions against promising that one ordering option will reliably reduce polarization or improve every information outcome. Increased control can be valuable even when the political effects remain uncertain. [42]

Moderation procedures also can be improved without pretending that every dispute has an uncontested answer. Clear rules, proportionate enforcement, meaningful appeals, and explanations for consequential actions can expose inconsistency and error. Evaluation should distinguish removal of lawful speech, failure to address prohibited material, mistaken labels, and distribution choices. Combining them into one total can conceal whether a reform improves one problem while worsening another.

Skills, incentives, and judgments that can change

Media-literacy education is useful when it teaches inspectable actions. Readers can locate an original document, distinguish a report from commentary, check a statistic's date and denominator, compare independent accounts, and identify the evidence that would change their view. These habits support a claim-by-claim assessment. Generalized suspicion offers little guidance when every source is treated as equally untrustworthy regardless of its methods.

An experiment by Guess and colleagues tested a digital-literacy intervention in the United States and India. It improved discernment between mainstream and false headlines in some samples, with differences in durability and generalization. Participants also lowered their ratings of mainstream material, though less than for false headlines. The finding supports a potentially useful intervention while warning that increased skepticism and improved discrimination are not identical outcomes. [53]

Programs should therefore measure what they hope to improve. Can people identify evidence, find the original source, recognize uncertainty, and revise a judgment? Do those skills persist outside an immediate exercise? Does the intervention help people distinguish stronger from weaker information, or simply reduce

confidence in everything? Evaluation across different communities is necessary before treating one successful sample as evidence of universal effectiveness.

Individual practices cannot replace institutions. A person can pause before sharing a striking claim but cannot personally maintain every local reporting beat or independently audit a platform's complete distribution system. Structural reform cannot eliminate personal judgment either. Well-funded reporting still needs readers capable of assessing evidence and officials who can be held accountable through functioning public institutions. These forms of responsibility complement one another.

For a reader, a manageable routine begins with consequential claims rather than trying to verify every sentence encountered online. Identify the original source, check what its evidence measures, and look for a serious competing explanation. For a publication, the corresponding routine involves visible sourcing, corrections, clear separation of reporting and opinion, and an ability to acknowledge uncertainty. Both routines make disagreement easier to evaluate.

No single reform follows automatically from the evidence reviewed here. Concentration, distribution power, reporting capacity, hostility, misinformation, and government pressure are related problems with different mechanisms. A measure useful against one may have limited effects on another. Honest evaluation includes unsuccessful interventions and unintended consequences alongside promising findings. It also keeps factual conclusions separate from judgments about how much public support or private control a society should accept.

The strongest democratic standard is whether people can discover what powerful institutions do, understand who is responsible, inspect relevant evidence, and challenge unsupported claims. Meeting that standard requires independent reporting, accountable distribution systems, protected expression, and citizens willing to revise their views. The aim is a public life in which disagreement can survive scrutiny and power cannot depend on remaining unseen.

Glossary

Accountability: The ability to discover what officials or institutions did, evaluate their conduct, and impose consequences through legitimate procedures.

Affective polarization: Hostility, distrust, or aversion toward an opposing political group and its members, distinct from disagreement about policy.

Algorithmic ranking: Rules or models that order available content using signals and objectives selected by a service.

Audience self-selection: People choosing sources partly because of existing interests, identities, or preferences; an important alternative to assuming persuasion.

Broadcasting: Distributing programming to a broad audience. Licensed over-the-air broadcasting has a different legal history from online publication.

Causal effect: A change attributable to an intervention or exposure relative to a credible alternative, rather than a mere association.

Confidence interval: A statistical range conveying uncertainty around an estimate under a model and its assumptions; it does not remove design limitations.

Content analysis: Systematic examination of produced material, such as topics, wording, or tone. It does not alone establish an effect on audiences.

Counterfactual: The alternative outcome that would have occurred without the intervention; researchers construct comparisons because both outcomes cannot be observed together.

Denominator: The population or total against which a percentage is calculated. Different denominators can make similar-looking percentages describe different things.

Distribution: The routes that bring material to audiences, including broadcasting, search, recommendations, subscriptions, and personal sharing.

Editorial discretion: Judgment about what to investigate, publish, select, organize, or omit; relevant to both journalistic practice and constitutional disputes.

Elite polarization: Separation between political leaders, parties, or governing institutions, which may differ from divisions among ordinary voters.

Exposure: Encountering content under a specified measurement rule. Appearance on a screen does not establish attention, comprehension, or agreement.

External validity: How well a finding applies beyond the particular people, setting, intervention, and period studied.

Fairness doctrine: A former broadcast policy concerning controversial public issues and contrasting views; distinct from candidate equal-opportunity requirements.

Issue polarization: Separation in policy positions, which can vary across issues rather than describing one uniform degree of political extremity.

Market concentration: The distribution of a defined activity among firms. A useful measure requires a market, a unit, and a date.

Narrowcasting: Designing material for a particular audience rather than a broad public; specialization can serve valuable needs or reinforce insularity.

Natural experiment: An observational comparison using plausibly outside variation to investigate causation; its credibility depends on the identifying assumptions.

News desert: A place lacking local professional reporting under a study's definition. Definitions and coverage categories must be checked before comparing totals.

Preregistration: Recording planned hypotheses and analyses before observing results, helping distinguish planned tests from later exploratory findings.

Random assignment: Allocating participants to conditions by chance to make comparison groups similar on average before an intervention.

Statistical significance: A result evaluated against a specified statistical threshold; it does not by itself show importance, persistence, or universal applicability.

Vertical integration: Common ownership across different stages of an activity, such as producing content and operating a distribution platform.

Warranted trust: Confidence that responds to evidence and inspectable methods, rather than unconditional loyalty to an institution or speaker.

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Type: Corporate portfolio page. Illustrative corporate portfolio, not market-share or complete beneficial-ownership evidence. Undated current page is not an archived November 11 snapshot. Stable IDs: O05.

[20] NBCUniversal. Undated; accessed November 12, 2026. About NBCUniversal. NBCUniversal. Open source

Type: Corporate portfolio page. Undated page is current-access corroboration, not an archived cutoff-date snapshot. No company audience or leadership marketing claims adopted. Stable IDs: O06.

[21] iHeartMedia. Undated; accessed November 12, 2026. iHeartMedia corporate overview and radio-station directory. iHeartMedia. Open source

Type: Corporate portfolio and advertising page. Company reach and ranking claims are promotional and are not treated as shares of all media. Current page includes October/November 2026 material; not a complete ownership registry. Stable IDs: O07.

[22] The New York Times Company. Undated; accessed November 12, 2026. About Us. The New York Times Company. Open source

Type: Corporate publisher description. Company statements about journalism quality are not adopted as independent evaluations; this page does not establish a complete shareholder-control map. Stable IDs: O08.

[23] TikTok USDS Joint Venture. January 23, 2026. TikTok USDS Joint Venture LLC Established in Compliance with U.S. Regulatory Requirements. TikTok USDS Joint Venture newsroom. Open source

Type: Corporate formation announcement. Statement of corporate structure and allocated authority, not independent proof of security effectiveness or political neutrality. Page fetched November 15, 2026 is dated January 23, 2026. That HTML did not contain January 22. An earlier ledger distinguished an index date from an article date; this edition uses the date printed on the page. Stable IDs: O09.

[24] Elon Musk / SpaceX. February 2, 2026. xAI Joins SpaceX to Accelerate Humanity's Future. SpaceX updates. Open source

Type: Corporate acquisition statement. This live updates page also contains later material; only dated February2 section and relevant corporate navigation used. Technical forecasts and promotional claims not adopted. Stable IDs: O10.

[25] The Walt Disney Company. Fiscal year ended September 27, 2025. Fiscal Year 2025 Annual Financial Report / Form 10-K. The Walt Disney Company; copy hosted by AnnualReports.com. Open source

Type: Corporate annual report / SEC filing, mirrored copy. This is an explicitly dated fiscal2025 record, not proof that every asset or minority share remained unchanged throughout2026. Report avoids exact ESPN equity shares or complete current asset inventory. Stable IDs: O11.

[26] Larry Page. August 10, 2015. G is for Google. Google official blog. Open source

Type: Corporate restructuring announcement. Historical announcement; not itself a current financial or shareholder-control audit. Stable IDs: O12.

[27] Wikipedia contributors. Current-access reference; accessed November 12, 2026. Alphabet Inc. Wikipedia. Open source

Type: Secondary reference used for basic current corporate cross-check. Editable secondary source. Financial figures, shareholder stakes and other statistics are not used from it. Google2015primaryannouncementandYouTubecorporatedocumentationprovideadditionalcontext. Stable IDs: O13.

[28] Matthew Gentzkow; Jesse M. Shapiro. 2010; working paper issued November 2006, revised August 2007. What Drives Media Slant? Evidence from U.S. Daily Newspapers. Econometrica 78(1), 35-71 (2010); NBER Working Paper 12707. Open source

Type: Original economic research; NBER working-paper record and abstract verified. The findings concern a historical newspaper market, a linguistic measure, and a particular empirical model. They do not measure all omissions or establish that owners lack influence in other media or periods. The working-paper abstract was checked rather than every method in the published version. Verified through November 11, 2026. Stable IDs: M02.

[29] Steve Rathje; Jay J. Van Bavel; Sander van der Linden. 2021. Out-group animosity drives engagement on social media. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Open source

Type: Original peer-reviewed observational research; original abstract verified through Europe PMC. Associations between post language and engagement do not establish that the posts caused hostility in readers, nor that all audiences or platforms respond identically. Original abstract verified in the Europe PMC indexed record; full published analysis not independently reproduced. Verified through November 11, 2026. Stable IDs: M03.

[30] Christopher St. Aubin; Joanne Haner. 2026-10-19. Social Media and News Fact Sheet. Pew Research Center. Open source

Type: Transparent survey research and fact sheet. Self-reported news use is not measured attention, content accuracy, political persuasion, or an exclusive market share. Individuals can use several platforms, so platform percentages cannot be added to obtain a total audience. Current page read through gstack browse before the November 11, 2026 cutoff. Stable IDs: M04.

[31] Luxuan Wang; Naomi Forman-Katz. 2025-11-04. News Influencers Fact Sheet. Pew Research Center. Open source

Type: Transparent survey research and fact sheet. Self-reported use does not establish accuracy, persuasion, or homogeneous standards among creators. Figures describe the August 2025 survey, not a new 2026 estimate. Page read through gstack browse; verified through November 11, 2026. Stable IDs: M05.

[32] Cristos Goodrow. 2021-09-15. On YouTube's recommendation system. YouTube Official Blog. Open source

Type: Corporate statement; official explanation. Interested company account, not an independent audit. Dated September 2021; the report explicitly does not treat it as a verified description of the exact 2026 system or of effectiveness. Body read through gstack browse; verified through November 11, 2026. Stable IDs: M06.

[33] Joel Kaplan. 2025-01-07; updated 2025-05-29. More Speech and Fewer Mistakes. Meta. Open source

Type: Corporate statement; policy announcement. The company's rationale and anticipated benefits are attributed claims, not independently established effects. An announcement is not by itself proof of complete implementation; M10 supplies later 2026 policy context. Full body read through gstack browse; verified through November 11, 2026. Stable IDs: M07.

[34] TikTok. 2020-06-18. How TikTok recommends videos #ForYou. TikTok Newsroom. Open source

Type: Corporate statement; official explanation. Dated June 2020 corporate explanation, not an independent audit or a verified description of the exact 2026 system. Describing a safeguard does not demonstrate effectiveness. Full body read through gstack browse; verified through November 11, 2026. Stable IDs: M08.

[35] Germain Gauthier; Roland Hodler; Philine Widmer; Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2026-02-18. The political effects of X's feed algorithm. Nature 652, 416-423. Open source

Type: Original peer-reviewed randomized field experiment. Voluntary, compensated active-user sample and a limited intervention period. Exposure was studied in 2023, despite 2026 publication; findings do not describe every user, later ownership or algorithms, long-term effects, or votes. Turning an algorithm off need not undo prior exposure. Original abstract, introduction, and design sections read through gstack browse; verified through November 11, 2026. Stable IDs: M09.

[36] Meta. 2026-02-19; updates 2026-06-01 and 2026-10-27. How Meta Is Preparing for the 2026 US Midterm Elections. Meta. Open source

Type: Corporate statement; dated election-policy announcement and updates. Stated policy and company reports of operation do not independently establish enforcement consistency, neutrality, or political effects. The restriction concerns new ads, not a complete political-ad ban. Full body and dated updates read through gstack browse; no updates after November 11, 2026 used. Stable IDs: M10.

[37] Hazem Ibrahim; HyunSeok Daniel Jang; Nouar Aldahoul; Aaron R. Kaufman; Talal Rahwan; Yasir Zaki. 2026-05-06. Systematic partisan content skews in TikTok during the 2024 US elections. Nature 654, 1004-1011. Open source

Type: Original peer-reviewed controlled-account platform audit. Audit accounts are not human voters; observed recommendation patterns do not establish effects on attitudes or votes. Internal rules, available content, and other mechanisms cannot be conclusively separated. Study period April 30-November 11, 2024, despite publication in 2026. Original abstract, introduction, and initial methods sections read through gstack browse; verified through November 11, 2026. Stable IDs: M11.

[38] Shanto Iyengar; Yphtach Lelkes; Matthew Levendusky; Neil Malhotra; Sean J. Westwood. 2019. The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States. Annual Review of Political Science 22, 129-146. Open source

Type: Peer-reviewed research review; original abstract verified through Crossref. A synthesis of research, not a single causal experiment identifying the entire source of polarization. The original abstract was checked through Crossref; complete review text and all underlying studies were not independently reanalyzed. Verified through November 11, 2026. Stable IDs: M12.

[39] Levi Boxell; Matthew Gentzkow; Jesse M. Shapiro. 2017. Greater Internet use is not associated with faster growth in political polarization among US demographic groups. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Open source

Type: Original peer-reviewed observational demographic analysis; original abstract verified through Europe PMC. Group-level comparisons are not randomized individual exposure effects. They do not exclude indirect influence through television, politicians, or other institutions. The chapter states the comparative result and publication year without supplying an unverified exact field period. Original abstract checked in the Europe PMC indexed record; complete methods not reanalyzed. Verified through November 11, 2026. Stable IDs: M13.

[40] Christopher A. Bail; Lisa P. Argyle; Taylor W. Brown; John P. Bumpus; Haohan Chen; M. B. Fallin Hunzaker; Jaemin Lee; Marcus Mann; Friedolin Merhout; Alexander Volfovsky. 2018. Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Open source

Type: Original peer-reviewed randomized field experiment; original abstract verified through Europe PMC. A specific sample, exposure arrangement, message stream, and short-term outcome; it does not show that all cross-party contact is harmful. Publication year is distinguished from an exact field date not verified in the accessed abstract. Original abstract checked in the Europe PMC indexed record; full text could not be reliably retrieved. Verified through November 11, 2026. Stable IDs: M14.

[41] Pew Research Center. 2022-08-09. As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two-Party System. Pew Research Center. Open source

Type: Transparent public-opinion survey research. Reported perceptions are not measurements of opponents' actual morality or proof of media causation. This is a 2022 survey, not a current 2026 hostility estimate. Full page read through gstack browse; verified through November 11, 2026. Stable IDs: M15.

[42] Andrew M. Guess; et al. 2023-07-27. How do social media feed algorithms affect attitudes and behavior in an election campaign?. Science. Open source

Type: Peer-reviewed randomized field experiment; original abstract verified through Europe PMC. An intervention on consenting users over three months, not an estimate of all accumulated platform effects. Chronological ordering retains user-selected sources. Original abstract was read; no reanalysis of underlying data was conducted. Stable IDs: E01.

[43] Brendan Nyhan; et al. 2023-07-27. Like-minded sources on Facebook are prevalent but not polarizing. Nature. Open source

Type: Peer-reviewed randomized field experiment and exposure analysis; abstract and main-text methods/findings read. The tested demotion did not remove the entire like-minded information diet. Participants could receive information elsewhere. Results concern the 2020 Facebook environment and specified measures; paper includes a later author correction. Stable IDs: E02.

[44] Hunt Allcott; Luca Braghieri; Sarah Eichmeyer; Matthew Gentzkow. 2020-03. The Welfare Effects of Social Media. American Economic Review 110(3), 629-676. Open source

Type: Peer-reviewed randomized field experiment; publisher abstract read. Deactivation removes a broad bundle of social, entertainment, and informational experiences. It does not separately identify the algorithm's political effect. No claim of universal or permanent effects is made in the chapter. Stable IDs: E03.

[45] Ro'ee Levy. 2021-03. Social Media, News Consumption, and Polarization: Evidence from a Field Experiment. American Economic Review 111(3), 831-870. Open source

Type: Peer-reviewed randomized field experiment; publisher abstract read. The subscription offer and tested outlet choices are specific interventions. Improved attitudes toward an opposing party should not be described as demonstrated changes in policy opinions. Study data-period detail was not extracted from the accessible abstract, so no such date is asserted in the chapter. Stable IDs: E04.

[46] Gregory J. Martin; Ali Yurukoglu. 2017-09. Bias in Cable News: Persuasion and Polarization. American Economic Review 107(9), 2565-2599. Open source

Type: Peer-reviewed quasi-experimental and structural-model research; publisher abstract read. Channel-placement identification assumptions and the scope of affected viewers matter. Model-based aggregate simulations should not be presented as directly observed national outcomes. The numerical effect is omitted in this chapter to avoid compressing a local estimate into a general claim. Stable IDs: E05.

[47] Pengjie Gao; Chang Lee; Dermot Murphy. 2020. Financing dies in darkness? The impact of newspaper closures on public finance. Journal of Financial Economics 135(2), 445-467; publisher-supplied abstract in RePEc. Open source

Type: Peer-reviewed quasi-experimental research; original publisher-supplied abstract read in RePEc. Publisher page and SSRN blocked browser access; RePEc explicitly identifies publisher-supplied bibliographic content and reproduced the original abstract. Full identification and robustness sections were not inspected. The abstract's 5-11-basis-point and per-issue dollar estimates are deliberately omitted from the chapter because sample-period and financing details were not verified. Stable IDs: E06.

[48] Zach Metzger; John Volk. 2026-10-13. The State of Local News 2026. Medill Local News Initiative, Northwestern University. Open source

Type: Original research inventory; executive summary and landscape/methodological discussion read. Counts concern locally based professional sources, not absence of every information source or external broadcast signal. Closures and mergers are combined in the 170 figure. Methodology changed, so simple year-to-year comparisons require attention to classification. Inventory is not itself a causal study of attitudes or governance quality. Stable IDs: E08.

[49] Megan Brenan. 2025-10-02. Trust in Media at New Low of 28% in U.S. Gallup. Open source

Type: Original survey analysis; article and question description read. Measures reported confidence with specific wording, not the measured accuracy of publications. This is the September 2025 reading. Gallup's September 2026 article, cited separately, describes it as the prior low. Stable IDs: E09.

[50] United States Congress. 2025-07-24. Rescissions Act of 2025, Public Law 119-28, section 2(b)(20). U.S. Government Publishing Office. Open source

Type: Enacted federal statute; operative provision read. This provision rescinds specified appropriations. It should not be described as prohibiting public-media operations, directly dissolving every local station, or itself proving every subsequent legal winding-up step. No unverified total-dollar figure is asserted. Stable IDs: E10.

[51] Corporation for Public Broadcasting. 2026-01-05. Corporation for Public Broadcasting Board Votes to Dissolve Organization in Act of Responsible Stewardship to Protect the Future of Public Media. Corporation for Public Broadcasting; original release preserved by Internet Archive. Open source

Type: Primary institutional announcement; complete release read in a January 5, 2026 archival capture. A board announcement establishes the decision and stated process, not independent proof of when all legal dissolution formalities finished. Statements about motives, political attacks, and institutional benefits are CPB's characterizations and are not adopted as independent causal findings. CPB must be distinguished from NPR, PBS, and local stations. Stable IDs: E11.

[52] Supreme Court of the United States. 2024-06-26. Murthy v. Missouri, No. 23-411. U.S. Supreme Court; opinion reproduced by Cornell Legal Information Institute. Open source

Type: Primary judicial opinion; syllabus and majority standing analysis read. A standing decision, not a general merits holding that all government contacts or pressure are constitutional, or that unlawful coercion never occurs. The chapter does not turn the procedural holding into a conclusion about every alleged instance of moderation pressure. Stable IDs: E13.

[53] Andrew M. Guess; Michael Lerner; Benjamin Lyons; Jacob M. Montgomery; Brendan Nyhan; Jason Reifler; Neelanjan Sircar. 2020. A digital media literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false news in the United States and India. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Open source

Type: Peer-reviewed preregistered survey experiments; original abstract read through Europe PMC. Headline discernment is not the same as durable civic behavior. Effects differed by population and persistence. The chapter omits percentage improvements to avoid implying identical baselines or universal effects. Stable IDs: E14.

[54] Hunt Allcott; et al. 2024. The effects of Facebook and Instagram on the 2020 election: A deactivation experiment. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. Open source

Type: Peer-reviewed randomized deactivation experiments; original abstract read through Europe PMC. Not a test of every historical or long-term platform effect. Volunteer samples, a six-week intervention, and replacement activities limit extrapolation. Findings differ from the 2018-election deactivation study; the chapter does not claim the reasons for that difference are conclusively known. Stable IDs: E15.

[55] Lydia Saad. 2026-09-29. U.S. Media Trust: Edges Up From Record Low. Gallup. Open source

Type: Original survey analysis; article and survey-methods note read. Measures reported confidence with specific wording, not the accuracy of publications. The article says the Sept. 1-17, 2026 field period ended before a White House access dispute that began Sept. 18, so the result does not reflect that dispute. The page read on November 15, 2026 did not state a separate 6% great-deal and 27% fair-amount split, so that split is not used. Stable IDs: E16.