Why Do We Distrust “The Media”?

By Spencer DuMontier

Politics have been dominating American conversations for centuries. Millions of families today tune into presidential debates (or should I say roasting matches), argue about upcoming elections at the Thanksgiving table, and have long, deep discussions about why the president is listed tens of thousands of times in some rather … “interesting” files. It seems like nowadays, the only thing everyone can really agree on is that we are all divided. Partisan politics are present in nearly every adult’s lives.

Trust in the news continues to decrease year after year. What used to be a relatively reliable way to educate yourself on current events, gain insight into conflicts happening halfway across the globe, and learn key information about presidential candidates is now trusted by only 28% of the country. Republicans and Democrats “hold vastly different opinions on most news sources, including the two used by the most Americans: CNN and Fox News.” In 2022, NBC News reported that Fox News is “a purveyor of propaganda and misinformation.” On the contrary, our own President Trump refers to many other media outlets, such as CNN, as “fake news.” This has created a massive divide in our society. Hardly anyone trusts the media anymore, and the selective news we do receive is most likely painting a biased picture.

Similar to the rest of the world, most students at Altamont believe that the media is less trustworthy now than it was in the past; in fact, 66 percent of respondents to a recent *Acta Diurna* poll agree. That same poll showed that most students still trust *their* preferred outlets, with students rating their trust in modern media overall at 6/10. Altamont students consume a diverse selection of media. While about 72 percent of respondents describe themselves as left-leaning, 66 percent watch CNN; 58 percent of respondents watch YouTube for news, and the BBC, the New York Times, and CBS also have wide viewership at Altamont. Political polarization appears slightly less here than in broader America, but it’s still present at Altamont. Roughly 28 percent of respondents say they view people who disagree with them politically in a negative light, while 62 percent say they think neutrally of them, and 10 percent think positively of them.

Acta Diurna poll responses also shed light more specifically on media mistrust. One respondent wrote, “Each side has their own news program with their own spin on the information. No media outlet is non-biased.” Another wrote, “Everything is biased (e.g. CNN = more left, Fox News = more right).”

And with the rise of artificial intelligence, it is becoming even harder to tell what is at least relatively objective and what is slanted. Scrolling through social media, you may see AI advertisements, or even worse, AI-written “news” articles. Another poll response: “With AI, it's hard to tell what's real and what isn't.” It can be difficult to spot human-made, unbiased news versus posts from a cheap Russian bot trying to push Americans towards harmful, extreme ideas or even actions. “AI [can] easily manipulate the impressionable,” wrote another respondent.

We no longer live in a world where parents sit at the breakfast table sipping coffee and reading the daily newspaper. Now, every online outlet is trying to get viewers to click on their headlines, and in the pursuit of clicks, sometimes truth is lost in favor of shock value and entertainment.

James Rumbley, an Altamont Media & Journalism student, sums up a possible partial solution: "As [Neil] Postman wrote, *printed* discourse is the best kind. Local, printed news, while 'inconvenient,' would help fix the trust issue, as it would promote rational thinking and weed out misinformation."

In the big picture, though many have grown more skeptical of the media, some trust remains. At Altamont and across the United States, people are becoming more careful about what they consume and believe. News is no longer something people accept at face value. Anyone is able publish information, meaning multiple versions of a story can exist. It is important for us to find sources we trust and stay up to date on current events. Though it may seem difficult to believe anything in a world so rampant with misinformation, we *can* control what media we consume and how we consume it in our attempt to paint the most accurate picture of reality.