

Trust in the media has tanked. Are we entering a ‘post-news’ era?

By Simon Montlake, *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 03, 2024

Growing up in the pre-internet era, Mosheh Oinounou got his news the old-fashioned way.

“We’d wait in the morning for the [*Chicago*] *Tribune* to land on the driveway and see what happened in the world,” he says. There was also news on the radio and TV, where Mr. Oinounou built his career as a producer for CBS, Fox, and Bloomberg.

5 Today, that world of stable news diets—with its finite set of media sources that reached many U.S. households one way or another—has been swept away by an online tsunami of information. Half of U.S. adults now get their news, at least in part, from social media. That has sharply cut into revenues for newspapers and other publishers of news content, as digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Google have sucked up most of the advertising dollars that for decades had
10 underwritten most journalism. In 2006, U.S. newspapers took in \$49 billion in advertising revenues. By 2022, that amount had fallen to less than \$10 billion.

These digital platforms are not only shaping how and when Americans get their news—they’re increasingly steering them away from it altogether, by deprioritizing news in their algorithmic feeds. Ironically, while today’s news consumers have greater access than ever before to a broad
15 spectrum of information and viewpoints, much of it for free, many citizens are choosing a daily diet of podcasts, videos, and other digital content that circumvents more serious “hard news” altogether.

Some of today’s news-avoiders say it’s the media’s own fault. Many people no longer trust journalists to report the news accurately and fairly, says Benjamin Toff, an assistant professor of journalism at the University of Minnesota and co-author of *Avoiding the News: Reluctant Audiences*
20 *for Journalism*. [...]

This decline in trust in a free press and the demise of traditional news habits are likely to have major consequences. For the journalism industry, it’s created a kind of death spiral. Around 3,000 newspapers have closed since 2005; more than 200 counties across America now have no local news providers. As news outlets shutter or lay off reporters and editors in an effort to cut costs, it
25 becomes even harder to win back the trust of their audiences.

But more broadly, the lack of shared news can lead to a citizenry no longer able to engage with one another based on a common set of facts and ideas. Democracies rely on informed voters with some sort of baseline knowledge on which to base their choices. Disengagement with news typically goes hand in hand with disengagement with politics, voting, and civic life.

30 Of course, the digital disruption of journalism doesn’t mean that all news reporting is about to vanish. A handful of large media organizations with relatively affluent subscribers may continue to survive, along with public broadcasters and national news networks tethered to (and subsidized by) entertainment divisions.

But their relative success may only deepen the divide between the small subset of voters who are
35 well informed about public affairs and those on the outside looking in—or looking away.

“Not only is [fact-based news] becoming more scarce, as in there are fewer journalists, fewer news organizations out there, but also the reliable, high-quality news media is going behind paywalls,” says Professor Pickard, author of *Democracy Without Journalism? Confronting the Misinformation Society*. [...]

40 In the fragmented digital realm, where opinion and amateur video often muscle out evidence-based journalism, expertise no longer holds weight, says Jeffrey Dvorkin, a former ombudsperson at NPR and author of *Trusting the News in a Digital Era*. Conspiracy theories thrive in such spaces, as does disinformation by Russia and other foreign powers.

This fragmentation has undercut the authority of traditional news sources. It “becomes a kind of
45 rallying point for people to say, ‘Well, I don’t trust anybody. I don’t trust governments; I don’t trust the media; I don’t trust churches; I don’t trust universities. I trust what I feel is important to me,’” says Mr. Dvorkin. “They look for ideas and expressions that confirm their own feelings rather than inform them.” [...]