

Hacking Elections: Disinformation and the Role of the Media



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March 7, 2019

The Washington Post

Democracy Awakens in Action

Edition: [U.S. & World](#) | [Regional](#)

May 1, 2019

UNPRESIDENTED

ENDING CRISIS, TRUMP HASTILY DEPARTS WHITE HOUSE

On May 1, barely six months after the midterm elections, Donald Trump appears to have abandoned the White House and abdicated his role as president. He issued no formal statement, though four White House aides — who spoke on the condition of anonymity — claim they found a napkin on the president's desk in the Oval Office on the evening of April 30, scrawled in red ink with the following message: "Blame Crooked Hillary & Hfior & the Fake News Media."



Celebrations break out worldwide as Trump era ends

Worldwide, impromptu street parties popped up in major cities and small towns as people realized the American president had fled. As news spread of what appeared to be the first U.S. presidential resignation since Richard Nixon,

What is Disinformation?

What is Disinformation?

- Fake news
- Misinformation
- Disinformation

Fake News

A politically loaded term;
not terribly useful



Misinformation

- **Unintentional or inadvertent** spread of inaccurate information
- Lack of malicious intent

Misinformation

- Satire and parody contain false information, but are presented as entertainment

Trump Boys Forge Father's Signature On Letters They Wrote Excusing Them From Any More Testifying

2/07/18 12:55pm



WASHINGTON—Hastily scrawling with crayons and markers, Donald Trump Jr. and Eric Trump were reportedly forging their father's signature Wednesday on letters they had written excusing them from any further testifying as part of Special Counsel Robert

Misinformation

- Satire and parody contain false information, but are presented as entertainment
- Reliable news outlets make errors that are subsequently corrected

 **ABC News** 
@ABC Follow

CORRECTION of ABC News Special Report: Flynn prepared to testify that President-elect Donald Trump directed him to make contact with the Russians *during the transition* -- initially as a way to work together to fight ISIS in Syria, confidant now says.
abcn.ws/2ixWHDL

Correction: During a live Special Report, ABC News reported that a confidant of Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn said Flynn was prepared to testify that then-candidate Donald Trump instructed him to contact Russian officials during the campaign. That source later clarified that during the campaign, Trump assigned Flynn and a small circle of other senior advisers to find ways to repair relations with Russia and other hot spots. It was shortly after the election, that President-elect Trump directed Flynn to contact Russian officials on topics that included working jointly against ISIS.

7:53 PM - 1 Dec 2017

2,871 Retweets 3,238 Likes

Disinformation

- **Deliberate** spread of inaccurate information
- Intent can be to influence politics directly or simply to make a profit

HOME

ELECTION

Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement

TOPICS: Pope Francis Endorses Donald Trump

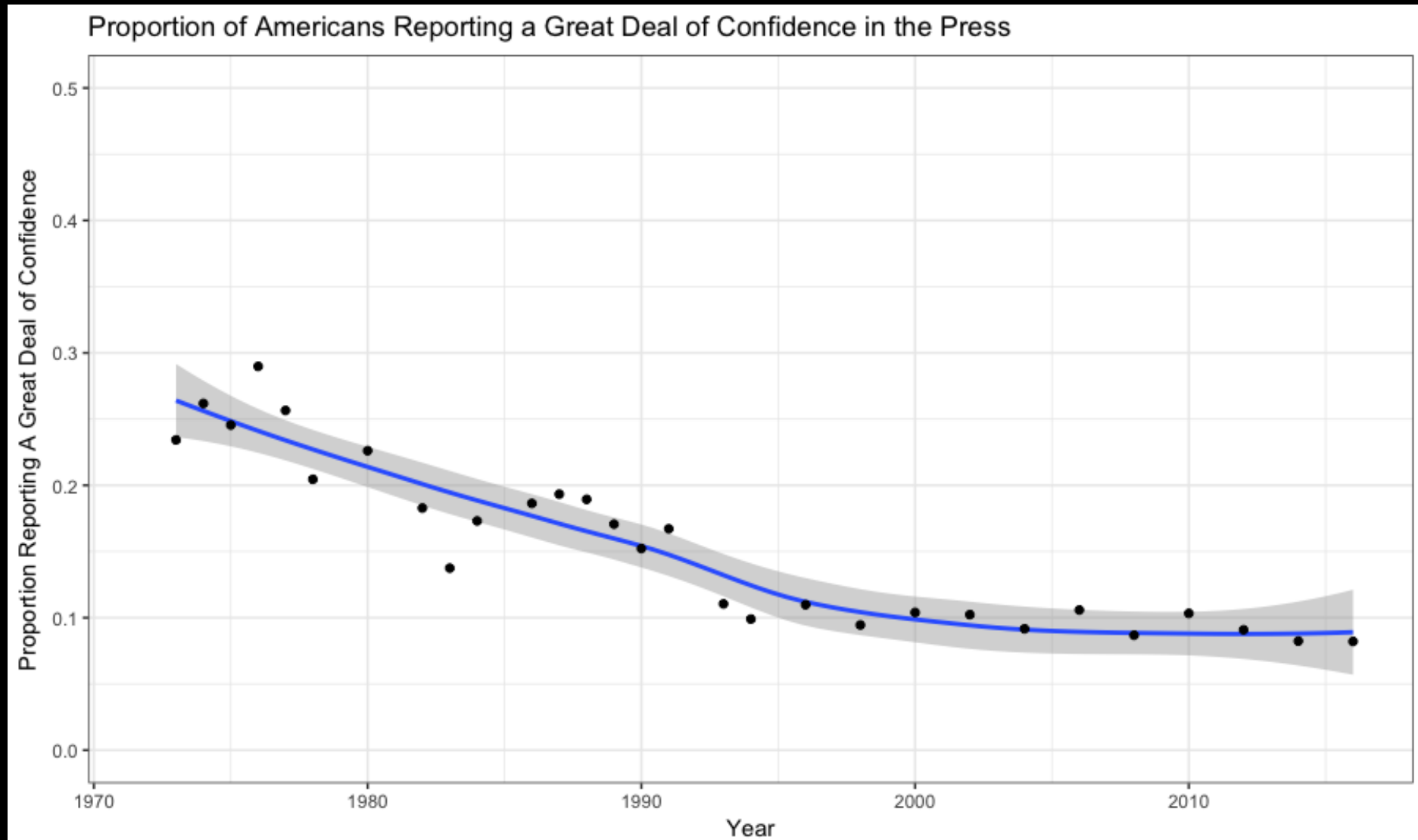


Source: [Tampa Bay Times](#)

Why Is This a Problem Right Now?

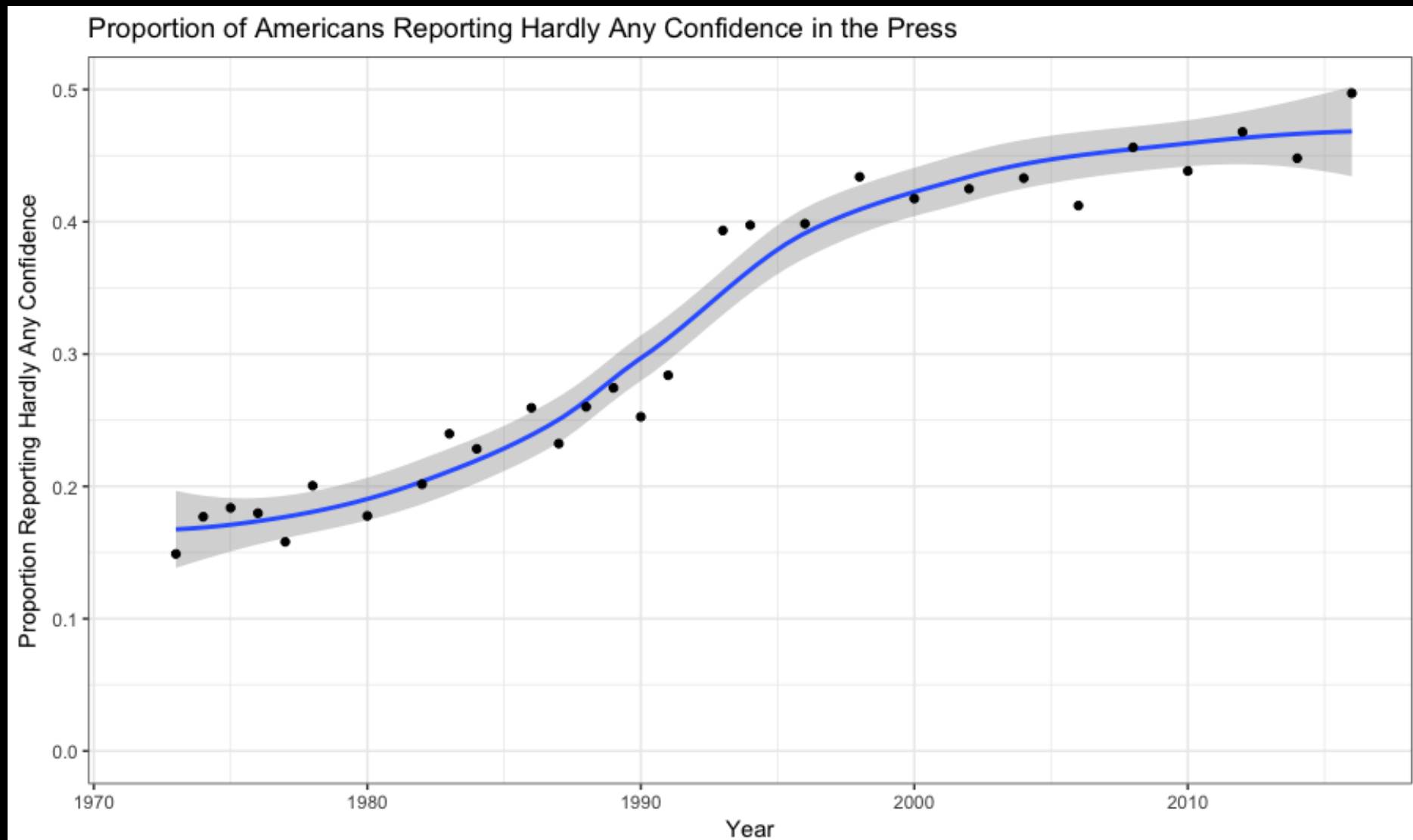
1. Declining trust
2. More sources of information
3. Technology for content creation

Declining Trust



Source: General Social Surveys

Declining Trust



Source: General Social Surveys

Declining Trust

Declining trust in the press implies that we no longer have commonly accepted sources of news and information

- I have sources of information that I personally trust, and you have sources that you personally trust
- However, I don't trust your sources and you don't trust mine
- So, why would we agree on what's true/accurate?

More Sources of Information



More Sources of Information



More Sources of Information

Not all new sources are necessarily reliable. Do citizens have the tools to determine which sources they can trust?

Technology for Content Creation

Image and video manipulation tools are:

- High quality
- Easy to use
- Readily available

Technology for Content Creation



Technology for Content Creation

“Deepfake” videos use advanced algorithms for machine learning to digitally alter individual frames of video and make it appear as though a person is doing or saying something completely different from what they actually said or did

Technology for Content Creation

Recently:

- Video of Nancy Pelosi edited to make her look drunk/seriously ill
- Partially as a response, deepfake video of Mark Zuckerberg released to challenge Facebook's policies

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How long until this technology is directly inserted into the 2020 presidential election?

Implications for Elections

Multiple distinct threats to electoral integrity:

- False information about candidates and parties intended to persuade voters to change their votes
- False information about voting procedures intended to prevent citizens from voting or invalidate their votes
- False information about elections designed to undermine confidence in democracy

Possible Solutions?

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- Hoping for better behavior?

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- ~~Hoping for better behavior~~

Possible Solutions?

- ~~Hoping for better behavior~~
- Improved fact-checking?

Fact-Checking

Psychological factors that contribute to the spread of disinformation also make it hard to combat false beliefs

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- “Belief echoes”

There are practical barriers to effective fact-checking, as well

Possible Solutions?

- ~~Hoping for better behavior~~
- Improved fact-checking
 - Can be part of the answer, but not sufficient

Possible Solutions?

- ~~Hoping for better behavior~~
- Improved fact-checking
- Regulatory solutions?

Regulatory Solutions

Changing our regulatory approach to digital media is practical, if politically difficult

- Specifically, social media companies need to bear greater responsibility for disinformation promoted through their networks

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Changing our regulatory approach to digital media is practical, if politically difficult

- Specifically, social media companies need to bear greater responsibility for disinformation promoted through their networks
- Mid-twentieth century regulation of AT&T and of radio/TV broadcasters can help point us in the right direction

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- Improved fact-checking
- Regulatory solutions
- Media literacy and election literacy efforts to help citizens navigate an increasingly difficult environment

Thank You!