



THE MADISON PROJECT

Media Outlets: The Bedrock of Our Democracy

By **Curtis LeGeyt**, President and CEO
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Our nation is at a crucial crossroads where the trust, integrity, and authenticity of journalism is at stake. Whether one is a journalist, policymaker, media executive, or advocate, it is imperative to dedicate oneself to upholding the ideals of our First Amendment.

I applaud all who do, and I stand with them. And we must stand together, because – put simply – the challenges have never been greater while the stakes have never been higher.

The credibility of responsible fact-based journalism is under daily attack, and meanwhile our society is under siege by the relentless tide of misinformation online.

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This creates a double-edged sword where the simple fact of reporting the truth can often be perceived (or at least characterized) as taking a side or having a bias.

Let’s take stock of what we are up against. Nearly 70% of Americans report they have come across fake news on social media. According to the Pew Research Center, an overwhelming majority of Americans believe that “false

information online” is a major threat to our democracy. Yet, this is where our young people consume their news. And it is where our most marginalized communities – from rural America to immigrants and communities of color – are disproportionately impacted.

This problem is only worsening. As Axios recently reported, “The rise of cheap and easy-to-use AI tools, the lack of legal guardrails for their deployment, and relaxed content moderation policies at tech companies are creating the conditions for a perfect misinformation storm,” which could drive democracies to the tipping point.

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We know that this misinformation, and the resulting distrust, have dire consequences. We experience it in our daily lives, whether it’s in our communities, amongst our friends and coworkers, or at a Thanksgiving dinner. How many of these simmering disagreements could have been prevented if we had worked from a common set of facts?

We see it in our national politics. According to Morning Consult, just 37% of Americans believe the upcoming 2024 election will be both honest and open, and nearly two-thirds believe that disinformation will influence the outcome.

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The conflicts abroad are constant reminders that the threat of disinformation is equally damaging beyond our borders, and in many cases a tool of war. In the immediate aftermath of the horrific terrorist attacks on Israel in October 2023, so-called “breaking news” claimed there were additional air assaults – but in actuality, it was footage of fireworks celebrations and clips from a video game. The amount of fake photos and videos accessible on social media reached an unprecedented level in a matter of minutes.

To underscore the significance of the problem, Wendy McMahon, president and CEO of CBS News, stated that of the thousands of videos that CBS sifted through to report on the attacks, only 10% of them were usable or authentic. Thankfully, CBS and other responsible broadcasters are doing the hard work of thoroughly reviewing footage before airing it on their stations. Our broadcast network journalists also were quickly on the ground, putting their own lives at risk, to bring the facts back to viewers at home. The social media and Big Tech companies are doing no such thing!

Years into tech’s experiment to hold up crowd-sourced social media content as a more “democratized” form of news gathering, it is safe to say that it can never replace

what journalists do, which is to provide the facts that calm the storms.

Journalists across the world put themselves in harm's way to cover the news, hold governments to account, shine a light on private actors' wrongdoing, and seek justice. This has never been a more important task.

Whether it is local or national – broadcast, print, or digital – media outlets are the bedrock of our democracy, and the public must be able to rely on them.

If journalists aren't working every day to push back on these challenges, no one is. We all need to up our game and be relentless to ensure that future generations can access and easily identify factual news and information – the very information that keeps us safe and helps us make informed decisions.

This may seem daunting. But the simple, undeniable truth is that trusted journalism is the antidote to misinformation. Given the divisiveness in Congress and potential tsunami of political attacks that will accompany the upcoming election season, America's leadership may

need to come from our newsrooms delivered in the form of facts.

Throughout history, our free press has endured through chaos and strife to victory and triumph.

Media outlets are the custodians of this truth, entrusted with the critical mission of reporting the facts, uncovering corruption, and amplifying the voices of our diverse communities.

Working together, we will ensure that the strength and freedom of the press are unwavering.

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Curtis LeGeyt is the president and CEO of the National Association of Broadcasters, where he serves as the chief advocate for America's free, local television and radio broadcasters.

This paper is adapted from keynote remarks Mr. LeGeyt delivered at The Media Institute's "Free Speech America" Gala on Oct. 19, 2023, the event at which The Madison Project was officially launched. His remarks capture the spirit of The Madison Project and reflect its philosophy that trusted media outlets are the bastions of a free press – the bedrock of our democracy – which must be defended and enabled to flourish if this noble experiment in governance is to endure.

January 2024

The Madison Project: Free Speech and Press in American Democracy is a timely and much-needed assessment of the impact of free speech and press on the future of democracy, at a time when democracy itself has come perilously close to the brink in America. The Madison Project will offer distinctive insights, assess challenges and threats to free speech and free press, and chart a course forward to maintain these essential freedoms as the bulwark of our democracy.

The Madison Project is underwritten by organizations with an interest in media and communications, the First Amendment, and the preservation of American democracy. Support for The Madison Project is provided in part by **Verizon, LG Electronics, and Wiley Rein LLP.**

For more information about The Madison Project and sponsorship opportunities, visit <https://www.mediainstitute.org/the-madison-project/> or contact Richard T. Kaplar at kaplar@mediainstitute.org.

The Media Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation specializing in communications policy and the First Amendment. Visit the Institute online at www.mediainstitute.org.



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