

Schar School – ‘Trust on Trial’ Reaches a Verdict: How Can the Public Believe Its Institutions? Diligence.



Screenshot by Judith Wilde/Schar School of Policy and Government

Buzz McClain, Communications Manager, [Schar School of Policy and Government](#)

Just days before Election Day, a panel of political academics, insiders, and pundits examined the question that the Trump administration has raised countless times in four years: Can statements of fact by public institutions be trusted?

The 90-minute virtual discussion on Thursday, October 29, assuredly moderated by longtime communications consultant Richard Levick, chief executive officer of the Washington-based firm LEVICK, was co-sponsored by the [Schar School of Policy and Government](#), [CommPRO](#), and the [Museum of Public Relations](#).

[Watch a full recording of the discussion.](#)

“Accept that we are all vulnerable [to exposure to falsehoods,]” suggested [Jennifer N. Victor](#), an associate professor at the Schar School. “Pay attention to your ‘media diet,’ follow those media sources that are using ethical and evidence-based practices. Consume with a sense of dispassion.”

“Some people are happier with being wrong than they are with the hard truth because it feeds into their own sense of self-worth,” said Howard University political science professor Michael K. Fauntroy. One problem with having so many options for news sources, he said, was that consumers “go to our comfort zones to get the information that we get, and if we’re lucky we’re getting information based on truth. And if we’re not, we’re going off that into a whole different place.”

The media, said Michael Zeldin, CNN legal contributor, has been “weaponized in ways it wasn’t previously. A newspaper used to talk to a very local audience, and now it’s a national audience.” The scale of influence has contributed to the erosion of confidence, he suggested.

The demands of the press on itself also have been a factor in the erosion of confidence, said longtime conservative political analyst Alice Stewart. “In the last 10 to 20 years [media outlets] have fallen victim to the demands of 24-hour news cycles, and fallen victim to quantity over quality. You used to have days where there was one reporter to work on one story all day long and they could fact check and triple check something. Now the demand for a news reporter, or even a news team, to crank out several stories a day” makes such checking difficult at best.

As for the Commander in Chief to be the lead deceiver, Stewart acknowledged that “people look at who Donald Trump is, and people know exactly what they’re getting. The fact that he has such strong support amongst what they call his ‘base’ is

because they look at him as a fighter and someone who stands up for them. The fact that he is able to give them a steady dose day in and day out, multiple times a day, communicating his message on social media makes them feel as though they are communicating with him, talking directly to them.”

Andrew McCabe, the former deputy director of the FBI who was dismissed by the Trump administration and is now a Distinguished Visiting Professor at the Schar School, said that direct communication is “a danger.”

“I think that’s the danger of having a president who is really the perfect communicator for the times that we live in. The perfect communicator for a population that only wants to hear what they already agree with,” McCabe said. “He is incredibly effective at talking to a relatively narrow band of the population, but when he has that sort of influence over people through really nothing more than Twitter, he uses that influence to destabilize our Democratic processes, to sow doubt and chaos and fear into the fundamental principles of Democratic government.”

Victor, who studies social networking, said a solution to trusting public institutions—or even believing other citizens—is to “build a bridge...even if it’s as simple as validating someone else’s feelings. Find a point of connection with them in which you *can* validate something that they’re expressing.”

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