

The Case for Tearing it Down

Article by Ethan Zuckerman

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Is it sometimes better to demolish an institution rather than trying to reform it? The scholar and media activist Ethan Zuckerman explains why people have lost trust in institutions, how some destructive political forces weaponise mistrust, and in which situations activists might have to choose insurrection over the institution.

***Green European Journal:* You started working on your book *Mistrust: Why Losing Faith in Institutions Provides the Tools to Transform Them* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2021) almost a decade ago, but you trace the roots of public mistrust back to at least the 1970s. Could you explain what has happened?**

Ethan Zuckerman: I should be clear that most of the data in my book comes from a small set of high-income nations, as these are the ones with the best public opinion data, and primarily the United States and the United Kingdom. The big pattern in the US is that the government used to be highly trusted: in the 1960s, almost 80 per cent of Americans expressed high trust in government. But there was a real collapse in trust in the 1970s. The same happened in the United Kingdom. In the post-war economy, income and opportunity were spread relatively equally through society, but in the 1970s this process suddenly stalled, giving way to high unemployment and stagflation (which refers to economic stagnation and high inflation at the same time). This change caused a real shift in people's confidence in the government. In the US, this was accompanied by some major, government-level scandals. With Watergate, people learned that the US President was spying on political opponents, and it became clear that the US was involved in Vietnam under false pretences.

Later, in the 1980s, confidence in government returned, but then it waivered again in the 1990s. And since then, in the US, confidence has never risen above 50 per cent, except for a limited period after 11 September 2001, when people rallied around the flag. But overall, the trend shows steep decline: by 2010, fewer than 15 per cent of people said they trust the government all or most of the time. This number has remained consistently low through the Obama and Trump administrations and appears to be staying at that level under Biden.

Is it just governments that have seen waning levels of trust?

In the US, we have also seen declining confidence in banks, churches, newspapers, television, labour unions, and in the police. In almost every area of society since the 1980s, there has been a noticeable shift. In many cases, there is an identifiable trigger. For churches, loss of confidence followed scandals about abuse, while for banks the financial crisis of 2008 was the trigger. Confidence is often lost for a specific reason and very difficult to build back.

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How is this pervasive mistrust manifested in our society?

When we talk about trust, we tend to talk about three different forms. People tend to have high levels of trust in friends and family. And this is something that, for instance, social media takes advantage of. One of the reasons why social media is so effective as a recommendation mechanism is that it refers to friends and family whom you tend to trust.

Then there is what you might call trust in strangers. So, if you lost your wallet, what are the chances that it would be returned to you? That is a good metric for social trust in a society, which varies greatly across societies. In Japan, most people say: “Of course, my wallet would be returned to me,” whereas in Brazil only 2 per cent of people would feel confident of getting it back. People actually went out and tested this. It turns out that human beings are almost always more trustworthy than we think they are.

But there is a disconnection between these numbers and the third form of trust: trust in institutions. Japan has fairly low institutional trust right now, although it has high social trust, while China is the opposite: people would never expect to get their wallet back, but they have quite high levels of trust in institutions. We do not necessarily know whether and how these two are related. Trust in institutions seems to have little to do with whether you trust other human beings. It probably has more to do with whether you trust your system of government and whether that system of government is creating positive returns for you.

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Which political forces do you see channelling mistrust today?

There has always been a group of people who tend not to trust the government, and there have always been politicians who have run as outsiders. These people argue that due to their special, outsider position, they are not corrupted by the system. Thus, they promise to clean things up and get rid of corruption. This has been a popular stance for many, many decades.

Yet when these people take power, they usually say the institutions have finally become trustworthy again. But Donald Trump did something different. He came into power and said that all of Washington was against him: the intelligence community, the FBI, and even his own party, the “Republicans in name only”. In this situation, he claimed, only he could be trusted. I see that as the weaponisation of mistrust. Weaponised mistrust can work for

particular charismatic politicians, who can take mistrust and say: “You cannot trust the system as the whole, only me.” It works well for Vladimir Putin, and for Viktor Orbán.

Then there is what we call synthetic mistrust. In this case, you make stuff up, for example you spread the idea that the election was rigged. And those artificial claims can then be weaponised. Trump was able to persuade people that the election was being stolen from him, without any proof. And then, he was able to weaponise this claim and literally move people to storm the US Capitol. Weaponised mistrust is very dangerous because it threatens to burn things down.

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Are there positive examples of mistrust to be found? Mistrust of power and elites has driven much of progressive change throughout history.

Absolutely. A lot of my book wrestles with the arguments of the French political theorist Pierre Rosanvallon. He argues that you need a certain amount of mistrust in a society to have a successful democracy. Every democracy harbours a twin which he calls the *contra-démocratie*. It is a shadow democracy that holds the democracy accountable. If you have a legislature, you also need a judiciary that keeps it in check. When you have an executive, you need the press to follow it and demand transparency. In the US context, perhaps the most visible version of this is policing. You need the public to document and monitor police behaviour, otherwise it can get out of control. There is a certain level of scepticism that a society needs.

However, the risk is that if you get to the point where mistrust is the dominant stance, it may become difficult for the government to take any action at all. A good example is in Nigeria, where there was a very good finance minister, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (now the director-general of the World Trade Organization), who wanted to cut the gasoline subsidy (basically free money for people who are wealthy enough to own automobiles, which is not most Nigerians.) Instead, she argued, one should tax petrol and use those taxes to make the schools and healthcare system better. But when the government introduced the new policy, people took to the streets in protest. Nigerians had so little trust that the government would actually use that money for the school system or the healthcare system that they felt like something was being taken away from them. At this level of mistrust, it is very hard to do anything at all. And that is an extremely dangerous place to be.

You differentiate between the institutionalist and the insurrectionist way of dealing with institutions - the first wants to reform them, the second wants to tear them down.

That is correct. Institutionalists work either within existing institutions or from outside to try to put pressure on them, but they accept the existence of institutions and want to make them better. An insurrectionist says that the institution has failed, it is no longer fit for

purpose, and we need to build something else. I think many insurrectionists believe that they can eliminate institutions altogether. I am pretty sceptical of that. I tend to believe that no matter how revolutionary your plan is, there is a very good chance it will become a new institution. Still, I try to make the case that sometimes insurrectionism is the correct way to go.

There are cases when it is best to tear the systems down entirely and build up new ones in their place. We are starting to see this around policing in the US. There are terrible racial justice issues. Black people are anywhere from two to five times as likely to be killed by the police as their white counterparts, and there are some cities where the police have such a terrible reputation that it is very unlikely that a new police chief is going to change things.

To see improvements, you might actually have to change the whole institution. The city of Minneapolis, where George Floyd was murdered by the police, is considering whether they should abolish their police department and establish a new Department of Public Safety. There are some cases where this has worked before. For example, in Camden in New Jersey, which probably had the highest murder rate in the US, where a terribly dysfunctional police force was shut down and replaced with a force that was countywide instead of citywide, and investment in community policing. Sometimes the right thing to do is to start from scratch.

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When both these dynamics are present or in tension, is the result usually a compromise between them?

Different things can also be pursued simultaneously. In my own work, I spend a lot of time thinking about problems with the internet. There is a feeling that Facebook, YouTube and some of the big platforms have negative effects on society, for example through spreading vaccine misinformation, increasing extremism, and stifling civil discourse. There are very good critiques like Shoshana Zuboff's [surveillance capitalism critique](#), which points out that their business model is inherently toxic and bad for society.

Once you have the critique, you can try to fix the institution by adding fact-checking to your service or kicking off Donald Trump. People are trying all those things, but I think it is also helpful to ask whether Facebook is really the best way to do social media in the first place. My lab at the University of Massachusetts is building very small-scale social media. We are trying to do it with communities of a few hundred or thousand rather than billions of people. The members of these communities themselves would govern this social media.

I am not even talking about dethroning Facebook; just about having an alternative. Like in the case of news media. We have multiple for-profit media outlets, some of which are publicly traded, but there are also strong public broadcasters, especially in Europe. And these public broadcasters have a crucial role to play in society. No matter how crazy things get, on the private broadcasters there is a certain amount of regulatory oversight. And

generally speaking, there is a decent chance that what you are listening to there is believable and fact-checked.

Imagine something similar around social networks. There is the commercial Facebook, but there are also spaces out there that operate more like public media. They are supported voluntarily or with taxpayer money. And they complement existing spaces.

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You mention vaccine misinformation. Has mistrust, or its instrumentalisation, had an impact on how the Covid-19 pandemic has been dealt with and the public response?

The pandemic has become very severe in the US, and it has been aggravated by the fact that vaccination, mask-wearing or, frankly, taking any precautions has become a political issue. It is both fascinating and terrifying. You can make a reasonable guess about whether someone is vaccinated simply by looking at whether their state voted for or against Trump. States that voted heavily for Trump have much higher Covid-19 death rates at this point. I think it is very hard even for Americans to understand how people could be willing to take that level of risk with their own health. But it is very consistent with this idea of not trusting government, authority, or science.

There is a history of vaccine resistance in the US, but it is mostly on the Left – usually among people who eat organic food, do yoga, and believe in alternate health practices. What has been very surprising here is this idea that taking any precautions about the disease is a violation of someone's liberty or freedom. It started with the idea that the disease was a way of chasing Trump out of power.

I think we are at a moment when challenging reality itself becomes part of the political discourse. And at that point, things get very tricky. In most functioning democracies, we have a common set of facts, and we have different interpretations of them. The Left says that the economy is suffering because we fail to spend enough on the welfare state, the Right says it is because the taxes are too high on corporations. That is a normal political debate. But now, we have different sets of facts. In the universe that I live in, the coronavirus is still a very big thing. But I have neighbours who live in a world in which the coronavirus is a conspiracy. Those different sets of facts do not allow us to have a debate anymore.

So it is clear that handling crises effectively requires trust. How can we rebuild it?

We can look at how institutions try to gain trust. We know that simply standing up and

saying “trust us, we are good people” does not work very well. Instead, what does seem to work fairly well is inviting participation – if people have the chance to become part of your institution and to see how it operates, that appears to go a long way towards increasing trust. There is, for example, an Italian project called Monithons, which monitors EU-funded projects, such as senior centres or transportation projects, by visiting them and documenting the use of funds. Italians are generally very sceptical of EU funding, they think that the money is being wasted or pocketed by someone. But people who visited these projects came out with a great deal more confidence in how EU funds are being spent. You can see similar models in the US. For example, in the election process, when people are invited to help monitor and run elections. There they learn that it is actually very difficult to stuff a ballot box.

Unfortunately, these days many governments are run by experts so it is much harder for individuals to participate. Governments need to think about spaces of meaningful participation in critical civic processes. It is not enough to just invite them to come and cheer. You have to say: “we want you to come and take a close look and tell us how this could be better”. Whether it is an institution or a political party, I think genuine participation and critical participation has to be part of the equation.

Sure, it is hard to prove through citizen participation whether a vaccine works or not, but in Taiwan, for instance, citizens were asked to help each other find masks and build tools to show where people can buy masks or certain medication. People participated and that actually seemed to increase the confidence within the system. Taiwan had very low trust in government as recently as 10 or 11 years ago. They had massive protests led by students and different anti-China factions. This led up to the 2014 Sunflower Revolution, in which an anti-China government came into power. This government managed to increase public confidence due to its very positive handling of the Covid-19 crisis. So it is quite possible to regain trust when you fundamentally change institutions and encourage participation.



Ethan Zuckerman is an associate professor of public policy, communication, and information, as well as director of the University of Massachusetts Amherst Initiative for Digital Public Infrastructure. He is the author of *Mistrust: Why Losing Faith in Institutions Provides the Tools to Transform Them* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2021). In 2005, Zuckerman co-founded Global Voices, which showcases news and opinions from citizen media in more than 150 nations and 30 languages.

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