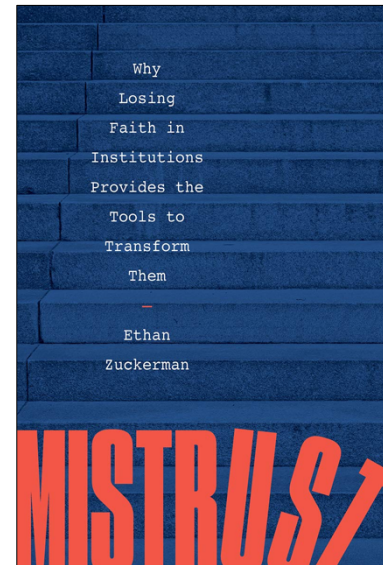


Ethan Zuckerman, **Mistrust: Why Losing Faith in Institutions Provides the Tools to Transform Them**, New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2021, 304 pp., \$26.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
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How did disengagement—civic apathy, lack of participation, and in-existent hope in social change—become the norm? This question guides Ethan Zuckerman, associate professor at University of Massachusetts Amherst’s College of Information & Computer Sciences and director of the Institute for Digital Public Infrastructure, in ***Mistrust: Why Losing Faith in Institutions Provides the Tools to Transform Them***, which aims to understand the origins of mistrust and how it can be leveraged to produce genuine societal transformations. Zuckerman, who directed MIT’s Center for Civic Media from 2011 until its closure in 2020, is one of the leading voices in the field of civic media and has written extensively on online governance, digital infrastructure, and the use of media for social change. This expertise is visible in *Mistrust*, where he provides a thorough exploration of the causes and consequences of losing trust in institutions, and how this sentiment can lead to positively changing them.



The author’s analysis stems from the premise that our society’s authoritarian tendencies (best illustrated to him by Donald Trump’s electoral win in 2016) are explained by a crisis of mistrust, where people feel they are powerless against rigid, exclusionary structures they can do nothing to affect. In this light, he introduces a distinction between “institutionalists,” whose strategy is to make changes within the system, and “insurrectionists,” who aim to overthrow and upheave existing systems (p. 89). While Zuckerman recognizes both approaches as valid, insurrectionists are the main concern of his book. He understands insurrectionist action through a multi-“lever” approach: Insurrectionists can pursue social change through changing the law, participating in markets, creating code, and making interventions in cultural norms (chapter 4). Zuckerman illustrates these “levers” elegantly through concise case studies that provide richness to his explanations. For example, he describes Elon Musk, whose company, Tesla, produces electric cars, as “an activist masquerading as a CEO to use the full power of the market lever to make change” (p. 92). Likewise, he argues that WhatsApp’s inclusion of encryption is an example of insurrectionist action through changes in code, as this modification can prevent governments from intercepting communications. In that sense, a strength of *Mistrust* is Zuckerman’s inclusive approach to the definition of insurrectionism. While he considers civic actors traditionally surveyed by civic media literature, such as activists and nonprofits, he also introduces companies and businesspeople as insurrectionists.

Despite his understanding of many Silicon Valley enterprises as insurrectionists, Zuckerman does not fall short of providing a complex account of “disruption,” which, he argues, must be understood among its socioeconomic effects (p. 157). He analyzes disruption in chapter 7, where he considers both capitalist and noncapitalist initiatives, and cases in which technology was central and others in which it was not:

For example, Zuckerman considers the introduction of Uber (p. 141) and the collective action by the Association for the Empowerment of Workers and Peasants in India toward the right-to-work as disruptions (p. 147). Far from romanticizing these political transformations, he warns against technologically-focused approaches of disruption, arguing that innovators must consider the deep cultural, social, and economic impacts of their transformations.

Zuckerman's study engages with a broad constellation of intellectuals, explaining their contributions concisely and in an accessible manner. For example, he poaches the concept of "counter-democracy" from French historian Pierre Rosanvallon (p. 127). Zuckerman employs this concept to elaborate on strategies throughout which people outside the system can surveil, influence, and pressure democratic institutions that might not be otherwise accountable to the public. This deployment of concepts by other authors presupposes no specific training or readings from his audience, not only making *Mistrust* accessible as a rigorous piece of literature for scholars but also as a source of ideas for activists, civic media practitioners, and other lay audiences.

In addition to his thorough exploration of insurrectionist strategy, Zuckerman dedicates chapter 8 to providing a nuanced and careful defense of decentralization. He bases his argument on two main cases, Bitnation and e-Estonia. He introduces Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies as fundamental pieces of forming "nations" in the digital sphere by focusing on a case where the system was hacked and coders reversed this transaction, creating different "digital nations" in which this reversion was considered "legal" and allowing users to choose in which "digital nation" they would prefer to operate (p. 163). e-Estonia is presented as a "competing" structure, where the nation of Estonia offers a subset of its public services to "e-residents," who can make use of them through the Internet (p. 164). Zuckerman is interested in decentralization as it "proposes that we build a world where we are unconstrained, where we choose from a world of competing institutions the ones that are the most fair or the most fit for purpose" (p. 166).

However, Zuckerman's account of decentralization is not naive. For example, he argues that decentralized governance arrangements, such as Bitcoin, have extremely high energy costs and do not allow for socially valuable functions, such as taxation. Nevertheless, he considers they can have positive uses in cases such as social media. Zuckerman argues that it would be better to have a plurality of social networks, each governed by its own values, instead of a centralized system where a few private platforms make content moderation decisions (p. 175). He highlights Mastodon as an especially interesting project that manages to achieve this vision by creating a "federated network" that provides a space for communities that are not accepted by mainstream platforms. Zuckerman acknowledges that this may lead to uncomfortable outcomes: He mentions that Mastodon has provided space for hateful communities, but he stresses that each Mastodon server can establish their own rules (p. 177). However, the reader may wonder about other practical affordances that decentralization offers to hateful or abusive communities beyond freedom of speech, which could be further addressed.

The case-study focus of *Mistrust* allows Zuckerman to draw complex insights, adequately engaging with its common framework of mistrust. Likewise, the author employs categories frequent in civic media literature, such as notions of civic efficacy (pp. 104, 185). This concern with efficacy makes the book a powerful tool for understanding why protests have seen surges worldwide while political apathy is on the

rise, as well as other contemporary issues related to the study of civic action. A valuable book on the dynamics of civic transformation, *Mistrust* will deeply interest scholars of civic media and political communications, as well as activists, media practitioners, and anyone interested in how to transform the institutions that define our collective existence.