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New surveys show public, journalists agree on how to regain trust in media

The public and the press agree news should offer facts and context, but many Americans view news stories as opinion

CHICAGO, June 11, 2018—The public and the press share the same ideas about what the role of the media should be, but there is dissatisfaction on the part of the public and misunderstanding on the part of journalists when it comes to Americans' consumption of and attitudes toward news, according to a report released today by the [Media Insight Project](#), a collaboration between the [American Press Institute](#) and [The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research](#).

At a time when trust in the news industry has become a major issue, twin surveys of 2,019 adults and 1,127 journalists highlight the dynamics – including familiarity, news literacy, and transparency – that affect the current trust crisis and what can be done to improve it.

The public and the press see eye-to-eye on a key element of journalism: above all, they want verified facts. Eighty-seven percent of the public and 99 percent of journalists agree that it is highly important that facts are verified. At the same time, a majority of the public (63 percent) wants those facts supplemented by some background and analysis. However, when asked about the composition of news today, the largest proportion of the public (42 percent) considers it to be mostly commentary and opinion.

There is also a disconnect between the public and journalists in terms of knowledge and expectations. For example, while 58 percent of the public accurately understands what anonymous sourcing is, only 35 percent of people believe their preferred news source does an adequate job explaining its use of anonymous sources. And while 63 percent of adults say they actively seek out news, just 28 percent of journalists think most people are active news consumers.

At the same time, the results show that there are opportunities to bridge this communication gap by increasing transparency, clarity, and explanation of sources.

To increase trust, 68 percent of the public and 66 percent of journalists alike indicate that journalists should offer more information about sources.

“Even though the public doesn’t fully grasp many concepts of journalism, they are deeper and more active consumers than journalists think,” said Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute. “The news industry needs to understand that the public wants to understand the media better. Journalists can earn back more trust through initiatives to increase transparency, eliminate jargon, and let the public participate in news.”

Americans and the News Media: Key trends at a glance

THE PUBLIC AND JOURNALISTS SHARE SOME EXPECTATIONS
63% OF PEOPLE PREFER NEWS COVERAGE WITH MOSTLY FACTS AND SOME ANALYSIS AND 66% OF JOURNALISTS EXPECT THIS IS WHAT THE PUBLIC WANTS
BUT THE PUBLIC DOESN'T SEE WHAT IT EXPECTS
42% THINK NEWS THEY SEE VEERS TOO FAR INTO COMMENTARY 35% HAVE A VERY OR SOMEWHAT NEGATIVE VIEW OF NEWS ORGANIZATIONS IN GENERAL
PEOPLE ARE CONFUSED OVER SOME BASIC NEWS CONCEPTS
50% ARE NOT SURE WHAT AN “OP-ED” IS 43% DO NOT KNOW WHAT THE TERM “ATTRIBUTION” MEANS 42% DO NOT UNDERSTAND HOW ANONYMOUS SOURCING WORKS
THE PUBLIC AND JOURNALISTS AGREE ON WAYS TO INCREASE TRUST
68% OF PEOPLE SAY THE MEDIA SHOULD OFFER MORE INFORMATION ABOUT SOURCES AND 66% OF JOURNALISTS AGREE 48% OF PEOPLE SAY JOURNALISTS SHOULD EXPLAIN HOW A STORY WAS REPORTED AND 42% OF JOURNALISTS AGREE 44% OF PEOPLE SAY NEWS ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD EXPLAIN THEIR POLICIES BETTER AND 48% OF JOURNALISTS AGREE

Among the study’s key findings:

- **Generally, the public and journalists agree on what kind of journalism they want — verified facts, supplemented by some background and analysis.** The public (87 percent) and journalists (99 percent) agree that most of all the press should verify the facts. When asked what kind of news is most useful, a majority of the public says news reporting that mostly provides facts but also combines some background and analysis to give audiences context.

- **But many Americans think what they see in the news media looks like opinion mongering.** The largest proportion, 42 percent, think most of the news reporting they see is opinion and commentary posing as news reporting – and another 17 percent say news coverage includes too much analysis. Just a third say most of the reporting they see is striking the right balance.
- **There is also substantial confusion on major concepts.** On a battery of nine core journalism terms, a majority of Americans are very familiar with only three of them. Just 28 percent of adults feel comfortable that they know what an op-ed is; 30 percent feel confident they know what attribution means in journalism; less than half know the difference between an editorial and a news story. Only 18 percent say they know the term “native advertising.”
- **As low as these numbers are, journalists expect even worse.** For example, 15 percent expect the public to know what an op-ed is, and just nine percent say the public knows what attribution means.
- **Anonymous sourcing deserves more explanation.** A majority of Americans, 58 percent, accurately describe what anonymous sourcing in journalism involves. Just 35 percent say even their favorite news organizations do a good job of explaining it.
- **Trust in preferred news organizations is rising.** And while 56 percent of Americans think journalism is on the wrong track – and 44 percent trust it less than they did a year ago – those numbers look strikingly different when you ask people about the news organizations they use most often. When asked about their favorite news organization, fully 32 percent of Americans trust it more than they did a year ago.

“This study examines the issue of trust in the news media from two perspectives – the public and journalists,” said Trevor Tompson, director of The AP-NORC Center. “The results show that while there are some disconnects between the public and the press, there is agreement on important ways to rebuild trust.”

About the report

The two surveys in this study were conducted by the Media Insight Project, an initiative of the American Press Institute and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. The general population survey of 2,019 adults using NORC’s AmeriSpeak® Panel was conducted from March 21 through April 17, 2018, via the web and telephone. The survey of 1,127 journalists was conducted from March 1 through April 12, 2018, via the web. The study was designed to reach a representative sample

of newsroom personnel with editorial or reporting responsibilities. To reach this target population, we drew a sample across different types of outlets and job titles, using a database of media contacts maintained by Cision Media Research. The sample was drawn along three dimensions – job title, outlet type, and whether the outlet was a national or local organization. Poststratification weighting variables to adjust for nonresponse included media outlet and whether the outlet the respondent worked for was considered a national or local organization. The overall margin of sampling error for the general population survey is +/- 3.0 percentage points, and for the survey of journalists it is +/- 3.5 percentage points.

Details about the Media Insight Project can be found at: www.mediainsight.org.

A full description of the study methodology for the surveys can be found at the end of the report.

The proper description of the survey's authorship is as follows: This study was conducted jointly by the [American Press Institute](http://www.pressinstitute.org) and [The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research](http://www.norc.uchicago.edu).

About the Media Insight Project

The Media Insight Project is a collaboration between the American Press Institute and The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research with the objective of conducting high-quality, innovative research meant to inform the news industry and the public about various important issues facing journalism and the news business. The Media Insight Project brings together the expertise of both organizations and their respective partners, and involves collaborations among key staff at the American Press Institute, NORC at the University of Chicago, and The Associated Press.

<http://www.mediainsight.org/>

About the American Press Institute

The American Press Institute (API) advances an innovative and sustainable local news industry by helping publishers understand and engage audiences, grow revenue, improve public-service journalism, and succeed at organizational change. API is a national 501(c)3 nonprofit educational organization affiliated with the News Media Alliance. It works with and draws on the best ideas from technology, business and publishing.

<http://www.pressinstitute.org>



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About The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research

The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research taps into the power of social science research and the highest-quality journalism to bring key information to people across the nation and throughout the world.

www.apnorc.org

The Associated Press (AP) is the essential global news network, delivering fast, unbiased news from every corner of the world to all media platforms and formats. Founded in 1846, AP today is the most trusted source of independent news and information. On any given day, more than half the world's population sees news from AP.

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NORC at the University of Chicago is an objective and non-partisan research institution that delivers reliable data and rigorous analysis to guide critical programmatic, business, and policy decisions. Since 1941, NORC has conducted groundbreaking studies, created and applied innovative methods and tools, and advanced principles of scientific integrity and collaboration. Today, government, corporate, and nonprofit clients around the world partner with NORC to transform increasingly complex information into useful knowledge.

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The two organizations have established The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research to conduct, analyze, and distribute social science research in the public interest on newsworthy topics, and to use the power of journalism to tell the stories that research reveals.

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