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UROP Grant Proposal

Project Title: Trust in Journalism: A Pilot Study Exploring the Public's Trust of News Media

Summary

There is a demand for news. Recent massive lay-offs and funding crises raise concerns about a public shift in trust for journalists. Studies show that public distrust of journalism has been an unanswered problem since the 80s. Journalism has gone through many changes, trying new avenues and using new technology as it comes. In the age of the internet, journalists find themselves in their most trying times yet. Some say journalism is dying, and others say that it is simply refusing to change to meet the new demands. Although research is ongoing to address these problems, more research is needed to explain the cause behind recent trends in public relations with journalists. My research will fill that need.

Over 2 to 3 months, I will be heading a pilot study that will add data from a unique perspective to the growing pool of social research aimed at studying and understanding the public's negative attitude shifts regarding journalism. There are three primary steps to my research project. **(1)** I will conduct a small-scale social experiment to gather my data, **(2)** the data will be analyzed for any kind of pattern using survey results and participant responses, **(3)** the most relevant data will be summarized in a research project that I will present during the 21st International Conference on Journalism and Mass Communication.

The goal behind my experiment and research is to offer a unique perspective into the data of subjects I interview, and to apply their responses towards answering the question of why the public is distrustful of journalism. My data will be unique because I am not giving a simple

census survey; I will be combining survey results with participant responses and classifying their answers into a quantitative-style dataset. With this approach, I seek to offer a unique window into the current research going into public relations with news media.

Background

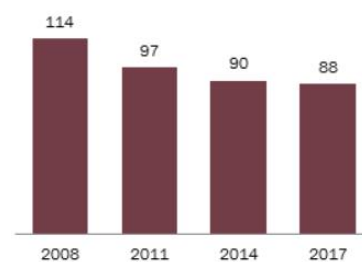
News and news media are constantly changing how they operate. After the waves of sensationalism took over the news media in the 80s, (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001; Wang 2012) the public has grown increasingly distrustful of news outlets and journalists (Slattery et al., 2001; McNair, 2018). News has also become much more polarized (Fink, 2019), and this is one area journalistic researchers traditionally cite as a reason for rising public suspicion. Some research points to corruption or government intrusion as marks for the public's increasing distrust of journalism (Dragomir, 2017), especially in European countries.

Amidst the growing public distrust, newspapers are losing funding, and journalists and anchors alike are being laid off their jobs (Grieco, 2018). Numbers from the Pew Research Center list a 23% drop from 2008 to 2017 in newsroom jobs (see **figure 1**). More than 27,000 jobs were lost due to budget cuts and lack of funding. Some blame the internet, but there is little evidence to support these claims. So why is journalism suffering scrutiny and distrust more now than ever before?

Researchers have been trying to answer this question for years. One journalist investigated the trend of

Figure 1 Statistics from the Pew Research Center on decreasing numbers of employees (Greico, 2018)

Number of U.S. newsroom employees in news industries, in thousands



Note: The OES survey is designed to produce estimates by combining data collected over a three-year period. Newsroom employees include news analysts, reporters and correspondents; editors; photographers; and television, video and motion picture camera operators and editors. News industries include newspaper publishers; radio broadcasting; television broadcasting; cable and other subscription programming; and other information services, the best match for digital-native news publishers.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics data.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

public distrust in 1997 and determined that people were tired of “Gotcha Journalism” (Aronson, 1997). Fake news is another key term for researchers in this field, as it is one of the more researched topics in journalism (Richardson, 2017; Iggers, 1999). By no means are these new terms or problems, and they certainly aren’t localized to one country. Citizens across Europe are criticizing their own media, even bashing it as fake news (Brants, de Vreese, Möller, & van Praag, 2010; Slaček, Zajc, & Mance, 2016). While the people are within their right to question their news and act as gatekeepers of it, the often-overlooked effect this onslaught has on journalism and news outlets is severe. With fewer people buying newspapers and fewer people supporting their news outlets, more journalists are losing their jobs and more publications are being forced to cut workers off (Greico, 2018).

For journalists and news providers to change for the public, they must first know why the public distrusts them. The exact reason has eluded researchers for decades, and this is a core point to my research. Finding an answer is ultimately the goal of my research and has been the goal of many researchers before. There can be no advancement without concrete evidence, and evidence that can be backed up.

Because the ‘public’ can be anything and have countless opinions, the research often leads to inconclusive results. I hypothesize that the smaller scale of my research will lead to more grounded data that can be more easily and more realistically applied to journalistic institutions. Combined with the research that has been going on for years prior, these institutions may finally be able to begin changing themselves to work more effectively with the public (Lewis, 2017).

There is tremendous social significance in this research. It is important not only for journalists and editors, but for the public as well. The experiments and research I will do will add

to a growing pool of knowledge necessary to discover the causes behind the growing public distrust of journalism. I seek to take a direct approach. I want to talk candidly with the people I'll be gathering data on as opposed to simply gathering data from a census. My research will add a new angle and yield different results purely based on my experimental approach. The rationale behind my approach is simple; I want to contribute to ongoing research, but I want to do so in a new way.

Project Objectives

Objective 1-Gather and analyze data with a self-run social experiment.

Objective 2-Present results to other scholars during the 21st International Conference of Journalism and Communication on June 4th and CU Denver's 2019 RaCAS.

Project Description

Data Collection and Analysis

This pilot study will be conducted in two cities in Colorado. As of now, we are set to begin research in Arvada and Denver. The experiments will be conducted in the Spring, ideally in the afternoon hours on weekends. In Arvada, we will set up a table outside of a popular supermarket (Walmart) located off Sheridan Boulevard and ask for volunteers to fill out our short survey and answer our other questions. We chose to set up outside of a supermarket to reach a large number of people. More foot traffic means more participants in the experiment. We recognize that restricting ourselves to this area, and the city in general leaves room for bias to

occur (urban vs rural). Our experiment and reporting will focus purely on the urban side. This bias is realized and will be noted in both the research project and my presentation.

In Denver, we intend to set up downtown on 16th Street Mall. Once more, this spot was chosen because of the high density of people. Though I am working with the University of Colorado, Denver, I have chosen not to conduct my experiments on the campus. Conducting this experiment on a college campus would yield slanted results because of age, political identity, and access to technology. The same could be said of going anywhere else that is primarily filled with people of a specific demographic. Therefore, we chose public areas close to large groups of people.

PUBLIC TRUST IN JOURNALISM SURVEY

1. Do you follow the news?
☐ Yes
☐ No
2. On a scale of 1-5 how would you rate your trust of journalists and their work?
☐ [1] Very Low ☐ [2] Low ☐ [3] Average ☐ [4] High ☐ [5] Very High
3. On the line below, please list the primary source of how you get your news.

4. Do you see a difference between the quality and content of TV news and print news?
☐ Yes
☐ No
5. Do you think news has become too politically biased?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Indifferent

Please fill out the following information to end the survey (if any questions make you uncomfortable, you may leave them blank):

Preferred Gender: _____

Age: _____

Race/Ethnicity: _____

Do you have a college degree?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Currently in college
☐ Prefer not to answer

Figure 2 The survey participants will take before answering our questions

During the experiment, we will present who we are and what we're doing before giving the survey and asking the extended questions. The survey questions can be seen in **figure 2**. These questions have been reviewed by teachers and staff working in the English and Communications departments of the University of Colorado, Denver. I will ask the participants questions based on their responses to the survey questions. These questions will vary based on response, but they will stay relevant to the data.

This section of the experiment is what makes my research unique. The verbal discourse is the primary focus of the experiment, and it is what will set this data apart from conventional research in the field. Most studies on public opinion and trust are done via census. According to prior research, the general public often sees journalists as disconnected from what they report on, and what they write about (Iggers, 1999). This research inspired my team and I to collect data from each participant both on paper and verbally. This research is unique because not all of our data will be presentable in a numeric format. "Trust" is generally not a numerically testable trait, and therefore we will classify trust and verbal responses through linguistic and grammatical analysis and synthesis. Through this process, only the most relevant data will remain, and outliers can be more easily highlighted.

For example, say a person lists TV as their primary source of news. A question I would ask there is why they prefer TV over newspaper or online publication. If the participant responded with, "I already pay for cable, why get a newspaper subscription?" I would list that response and then put it under a subsection of similar responses labeled 'Money/Convenience.' The quantitative survey data will be presented in numeric tables while the verbal subsets will be presented in pie charts or bar graphs. A secondary example of this, when talking about trust,

might be, “I think most journalists are bought off,” and I’d classify this free response into a verbal category of ‘Corruption.’

The verbal responses are more freeform types of data than the survey answers. To maintain a scientific voice, these verbal categories will be used to take participants’ freeform qualitative responses and transform them into presentable quantitative data. During the interviews, I will be asking the questions based on my prior experience gained from journalism classes at UC Denver. My partner(s) will focus on collecting the data while I do the questioning.

As previously stated, I will want to gather at least 200 responses with each appearance. We will gather 50 responses in each location using both appearances. First, we will gather 50 responses in Denver as the independent blogger and 50 more in Arvada as the independent blogger (first 100 responses). This process will be mirrored for the professional journalist appearance to account for the next 100 responses. This is our base goal. If we complete this before our set deadlines, more responses will be gathered to bolster our data sets.

Because this is a social experiment, it will be easy for the participants to go off-topic or for responses to be too varied to display numerically. This concern has been taken into account, and I will address it as it appears. When interviewing, I intend to use my experience in journalism to keep the participants on track, and only relevant data will be taken into account. This is the main reason we will conduct a small survey as well as an interpersonal interview. The survey guarantees usable data, while the extended verbal responses will add layers to our data. Any statistical outliers will be omitted from the final data charts but will be mentioned in both the paper and the presentation of my research.

Our short-term goal is 200 responses, but the timeline for the project will be 2-3 months. In this time, we'd like to hit 500-1000 responses if possible, and will vary when we set up in Arvada and Denver to maximize the amount of people we meet.

Presenting my Results

After the data has been collected and categorized correctly through analysis, I will be present it at two different conferences. The first conference (International Conference of Journalism and Communication) will take place in New York City on June 4th. There I will present my findings through posters and digital presentation software for 30 minutes, with 15 minutes allotted for questions from the crowd. I hope to meet other researchers there and discuss my results with them. I will meet with prominent journalists to see if my data or findings are useful or relevant for their work. I am expecting a couple hundred attendees during my first presentation.

I will present the results in the RaCAS event held by CU. There, I will work with peers in both the English and Communications departments to present my data, and I will compare results with others doing similar work in the field. I will discuss the meaning of my results with professors from both departments.

The presentations are an important objective because they will show the significance of my data to wider audiences, both inside and outside of the field of journalism. The whole goal of this research is to fill the knowledge gap of what exactly causes public distrust in journalism, and the results are best used if more scholars in the community are aware of them.

Timeline (Years of 2019-2020)

- April 13th—Project begins with first days of the experiment in Arvada

- April 14th—First field work day in Denver
- April 14th-May 11th—Field work will continue
- May 18th—Field work ends. Data analysis and synthesis begins
- May 18th-May 30th—Data analysis and work on the project paper will be completed. The paper must be done by May 31st for the review process to begin.
- My work will be presented on June 4th, during the 21st International Conference on Journalism and Mass Communication
- After getting feedback from the professionals during the journalism conference, my data will be presented in CU's 2020 RaCAS event

Budget

The money from this grant will be used to cover equipment that will be used during the field work. The bulk of the grant money will be used to compensate my team for their work. Some of the money will be used to cover travel expenses for going to New York for the presentation of the data. About \$200 will go into field work, \$1000 will be used to pay my team, and the remaining \$600 will be used to partially cover travel costs for plane tickets and hotels in New York.

Presentations of Results

The results of this project will be first presented at the 21st International Conference of Journalism and Communication on June 4th in New York City. There I hope to meet other researchers in the field and compare results and plan for future research. I will present my

reviewed research in CU Denver's RaCAS event, where I will work with the English Department and Communications Department to present my results.

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