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(Final Draft)

Quantifying Public Trust in Journalism Through Online Survey

ABSTRACT

Journalism acts to deliver news and facts to the general public. The industry is focused on building trust with the consumer. Journalistic research lacks clear public opinions on trust. This study sought to evaluate and quantify a small pocket of the public's trust of journalists through a survey-based pilot study. A survey was submitted to several social media pages in Facebook and Discord, and 76 responses were recorded. Participants were required to fill in information in their own words as well as make their own ratings of journalists and news media on a 1-5 scale. The hypothesis of this study was that older populations would have generally lower ratings of journalists and their reasons would be politically motivated. A secondary hypothesis stated that a journalist's assumed standing and affiliation would affect their trust score. This study was completed online through an anonymous survey, and the results partially agree with the hypothesis, although there were a few unexpected trends. After gathering the data, I used a method of language sorting to take participants free response answers and place them into scientifically quantified data sets. There are few other ways to organize free response data, as participants could put down whatever they wanted in the survey. In the end it was found that online populations who completed the survey rated their trust of journalists lowest, with 18% of their answers being the lowest possible rating for trust. The primary reasons for this distrust varied, but most free response answers centered around the following keywords: *lies*, *slant*, and *sensationalism*. No other statistically significant patterns were observed.

INTRODUCTION

Journalists are considered public servants though they don't receive taxpayer money. Recently though, the profession has been suffering from funding cuts (Grieco, 2018) and claims of political bias (Fink, 2019). There are also increasing public discussions on the news industry's continuing shifts towards sensational topics over factual news (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001). The institutions of news and journalism are caught in a firestorm of demands and accusations, and the profession is undergoing an identity crisis (Schudson, 2013). Without any sort of concrete data to justify changes, most publications refuse to change.

Though research on public trust in journalism has been conducted (Slaček, Zajc, & Mance, 2016; Newman & Fletcher, 2017) few have given conclusive answers or results on the common trends seen in the public's evaluation of journalism. The study reported here focuses on public trends through a free answer format and combining the answers with the quantitative evaluations of trust in the format of an online survey.

Previous research has focused on mass amounts of data via general censuses. Though my survey uses similar strategies, the inclusion of free answer style questions has better shown several trends in the participant population's answers. The study results focus on both qualitative and quantitative data. My objectives for this study were to discover common trends for why my participants trust/distrust journalists, connect their age with those trends, and chart some common variables connected to the public perception of journalists.

METHODS

Before creating the survey, I first conducted background research on the topic of trust and journalism. I found that several sources cited keywords such as *bias* and *sensationalism* as

primary reasons for distrust of the news industry (Fink, 2019; Slattery et al. 2001). I included questions about how a journalist's appearance (when seen during interviews etc.) and background (affiliation, TV or radio, news company etc.) would affect trust levels. I also included a question asking if my participants believed that news has become too biased.

I made the survey online using Google Surveys. I chose the questions based on what I thought would best gather data relevant to the experiment. I put the survey out on the social media platforms of Facebook and Discord, which offered contrasting populations. While Facebook generally has a slightly older user base, Discord offers a younger population. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 81. Because I used social media, I do have a bias towards internet-savvy populations and people who have access to these platforms or who use them.

I let the survey gather results for three days before closing it. I finished with 76 responses. Most questions were multiple choice or yes/no style, but two key questions were short answer. The short answer questions asked: "Please list the biggest problem in the news industry today" and "Where do you primarily get your news from?"

While Google Surveys was able to quantify the multiple-choice questions into visual forms (graphs and charts) the free responses were listed in order of response. I combed all 76 responses to create usable datasets out of my participants responses. To do this, I searched for similar keywords like 'Fox News' and 'Fox,' and lumped them into general datasets. Unless specifically written otherwise, answers that listed common news channels like Fox or CNN were quantified into the 'TV' dataset. Some participants said things like, 'CNN online' and I put this in the 'Internet' dataset. There were several responses that listed multiple sources for where they got news, and these responses were categorized as 'Mixed Preference.' Similarly, some listed

that they didn't care where they got news or didn't really follow the news. These responses were categorized in 'No Preference.'

The same process was used to organize the second set of free response questions that asked about the biggest problems in news. Answers like, 'they're all bought out' were quantified into 'Corruption' while answers like, 'liberal agenda' were quantified into 'Bias.' After this process was completed for both sections of critical free response questions, visual representations of the data were made

RESULTS

My survey got 76 responses over three days. I got 76 unique responses for the problems in news media and quantified them into manageable datasets. Participants ranged from 18 years old to 81 years old, some already had college degrees, others didn't, and some are currently in college. The majority of respondents were white (**figure 1**). The final results of quantitative trust had most participants rating their trust of journalists as 'average' (**figure 2**).

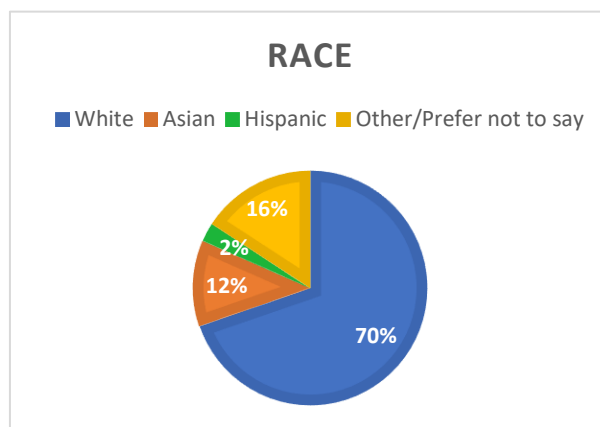


Figure 1 76 responses for identified race in the online survey

76 responses

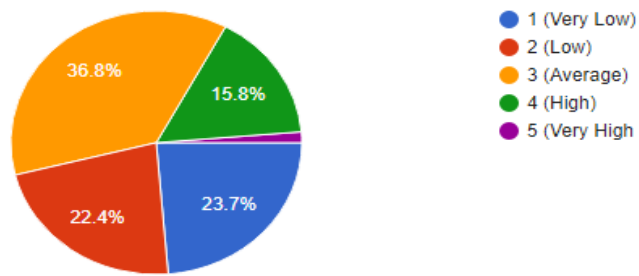


Figure 2 76 numerical ratings of trust on a 1-5 scale

Most responses were ‘average’ followed by ‘very low’ and ‘low.’ The highest percentage of low ratings came from participants that were 50 years old or older, while the greatest number of average ratings came from those aged 18-25 (**table 1**).

n=18-25 years old	n=26-36 years old	n=36-49 years old	n=50+ years old	n=No Listed Age	TOTAL
V. Low Ratings: 2	V. Low Ratings: 1	V. Low Ratings: 1	V. Low Ratings: 14	V. Low Ratings: N/A	18
Low Ratings: 5	Low Ratings: 1	Low Ratings: 3	Low Ratings: 6	Low Ratings: 2	17
Average Ratings: 10	Average Ratings: 1	Average Ratings: 3	Average Ratings: 10	Average Ratings: 4	28
High Ratings: 4	High Ratings: N/A	High Ratings: N/A	High Ratings: 7	High Ratings: 1	12
V. High Ratings: N/A	V. High Ratings: N/A	V. High Ratings: N/A	V. High Ratings: 1	V. High Ratings: N/A	1

Table 1 Numerical trust distributions by age

Though participants got their news from a multitude of different sources, they could be broken down and categorized into 6 subgroups (**figure 3**). As expected, Internet and Television were the highest listed sources of news, followed by a Mixed Preference. Print (newspapers) and radio had only a few participants list them as their primary source of news.

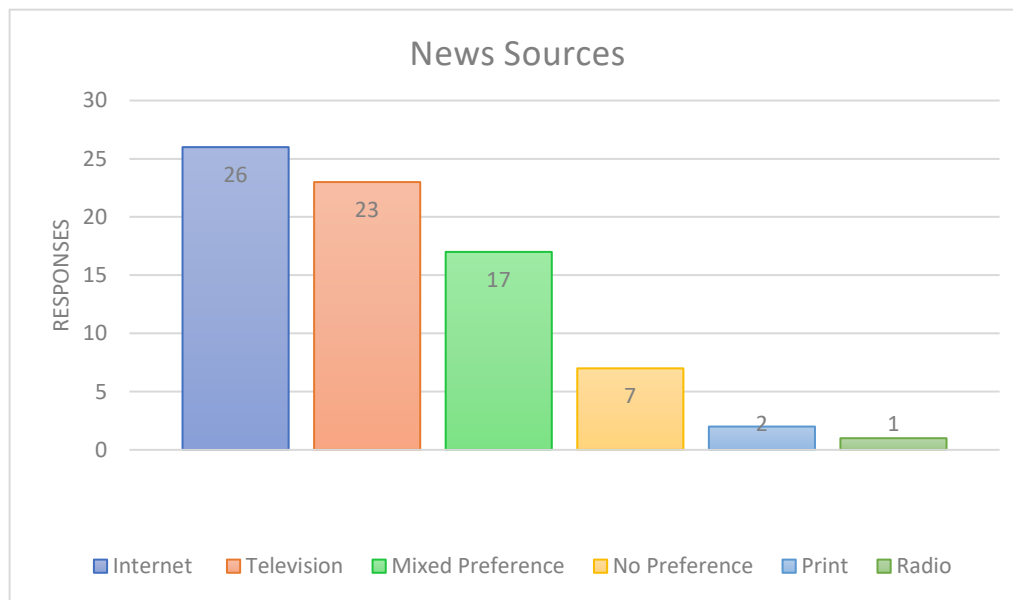


Figure 3 Subgroups created based on 76 user responses

The most important results were found in the free responses, particularly those addressing what the biggest problem in the news industry is. Many of these answers were directly connected with the rating. For example, one person rated their trust of journalists and news media at ‘very low.’ They then went on to say that most news companies are crooked and bought off, and that it shows in the reporting. There is a possible correlation between their answer and their listed rating of trust. Like the source preferences, the free response answers were sorted into subgroups to be more easily quantified and displayed as data. **Figure 4** shows these subgroups and the number of responses that fell into each.

The general trend of the results showed that younger participants were angry with news’ tendencies to focus on nonissues. They commented on the focus on ratings, sensationalism, and

misguided reporting. Older generations centered on corruption and lying more than the younger participants. Their answers tended to focus on political bias, possible corruption, and blatant lying. Most low trust ratings came from the older participants (50+).

A large portion of the participants (53%) said that appearance and affiliation affect levels of trust. When this result is paired with the highest response subgroup of problems (bias/polarization) a possible trend appears. It is possible that distrust of a certain affiliation might lead to distrust of a journalist with that affiliation. When creating the subgroupings for the participant problems, many answers were against one news outlet or another. There were answers stating that ‘news is too biased to the left’ or ‘Fox News is the biggest problem because of their bias,’ and both of these were categorized into the ‘Bias and Polarization’ subgroup.

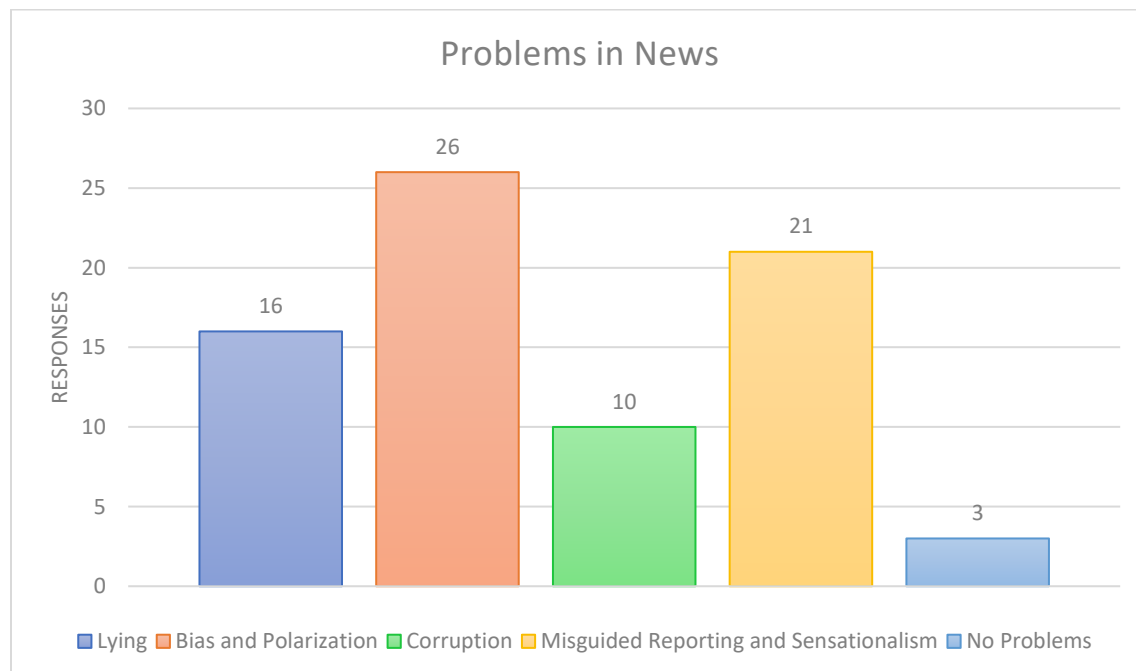


Figure 4 The biggest problems in the news industry according to the 76 free responses

DISCUSSION

A common pattern exists in the data of participants from both major American political parties distrusting journalists for the same reasons. Both sides were echoing the same complaints about modern journalism. What does this mean for the news industry then? If all sides are distrustful, what are they really doing wrong?

Going into this research, I hypothesized that a journalist's appearance and affiliation would have a direct impact on how trusted they were, and I thought that older generations would be more distrustful of journalists. With these results, I can say that only half of my original hypothesis was supported. Though many people did say that appearance matters, the numbers were too spread out to hold statistical significance, and they only slightly favored my hypothesis.

As **table 1** shows though, older populations were more reluctant to trust journalists, and gave them the lowest trust ratings of any of the age groups. Older participants were less trustful of journalists for political reasons, and many believe that the news industry is lying directly to the public. This explains the lower trust scores. Younger participants are more concerned with the content of the news, and the general focus of reporting. They tended to rate news outlets more highly or at least more average. It will be interesting to see how these problems evolve for the younger people. Will their concerns of the media stay the same, or will they shift to more political arguments? Continued research is needed to track these trends.

While this research was revealing, it also could have been improved. My sample population was limited, as I only could allot 3 days to the survey, and it was restricted to two social media platforms. Ideally, I would have wanted to spread the survey across more online forums to get as much feedback as possible, and more diverse feedback. While the study had a

good age range, the participants were primarily white. There was also a bias toward the selected online communities. My survey was only available to those who saw it on Facebook or were part of a chosen Discord server. Though I had participants from all across the United States, I was still very limited in who my research covered.

I sought to provide information on why members of the American public distrusted journalists with this study. I wanted to take the direct quotes of the people I surveyed, rather than simply have them check a box. Through this method, I could directly see what people were saying, and why they distrusted journalists. Though I had to categorize their responses using a simple linguistic method, I found that participants had no trouble saying things exactly how they thought them out. This research was successful in many ways, as it highlighted important trends and possible reasons for distrust, but it is a continuing project. It will be interesting to see how these trends change or stay the same in the future. It will also show the news industry how it will need to adjust for a quickly changing social structure.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

It should be noted that 10-12 responses on the survey were made by people who knew me. They did not know about the project, and we did not discuss their answers at all.

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