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'Who shared it?': How Americans decide what news to trust on social media

This research was conducted by the Media Insight Project — an initiative of the American Press Institute and the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research

Introduction

When Americans encounter news on social media, how much they trust the content is determined less by who creates the news than by who shares it, according to a new experimental study from the Media Insight Project, a collaboration between the American Press Institute and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Whether readers trust the sharer, indeed, matters more than who produces the article —or even whether the article is produced by a real news organization or a fictional one, the study finds.

As social platforms such as Facebook or Twitter become major thoroughfares for news, the news organization that does the original reporting still matters. But the study

Who shares an article on social media influences whether people trust it, research shows 🐦

demonstrates that who shares an article on a social media site like Facebook has an even bigger influence on whether people trust what they see.

The experimental results show that people who see an article from a trusted sharer, but one written by an unknown media source, have much more trust in the information than people who see the same article that appears to come from a reputable media source shared by a person they do not trust.

The identity of the sharer even has an impact on consumers' impressions of the news brand. The study demonstrates that when people see a post from a trusted person rather than an untrusted person, they feel more likely to recommend the news source to friends, follow the source on social media, and sign up for news alerts from the source.

All of this suggests that a news organization's credibility both as a brand and for individual stories is significantly affected by what kinds of people are sharing it on social media sites such as Facebook. The sharers act as unofficial ambassadors for the brand, and the sharers' credibility can influence readers' opinions about the reporting source.

This new research by the Media Insight Project is part of an effort to study the elements of trust in news at a time of turbulence in the media. The results offer important new insights to publishers whose digital content increasingly is reaching people outside the domain of their own websites and apps. Indeed, the findings suggest that publishers increasingly need to think of their consumers as ambassadors for their brand. The findings also carry implications for people concerned about so-called fake news and for advocates of "news literacy," the spread of consumer critical thinking skills. The findings also have implications for social networks that might be able to alter the presentation of content to give consumers more information about the source of the news.

> "
> *A news organization's credibility both as a brand and for individual stories is significantly affected by what kinds of people are sharing it on social media*
> --

The new findings come from an experiment in which 1,489 Americans were presented with a news feed item closely resembling Facebook. Everyone saw the same content, but the person who shared it and the original reporting source varied. After reading the post and short story, respondents answered questions about the story and their trust in the content, providing evidence about which variables had the greatest effect on attitudes.

Using an experimental design to explore trust in news on social media

In an earlier era, the platform by which people got their news and the news brand were the same thing. As a consumer, you watched the evening news from a particular network or read a particular newspaper. Trust was simply determined by the news outlet's own credibility.

Today, as people increasingly get news on social platforms, news often comes via other people.

In a 2016 Media Insight Project national survey about trust and news, people reported that in social media the news organization brand that originally reported the story influenced whether they trusted the content, more so than who shared it. For example, 66 percent of Americans who received news from Facebook said their trust in the original news source had a lot of effect on their trust in the content, while only 48 percent said the same when it comes to the effect of trusting the person sharing the news.

We wanted to test whether that was really true, or whether people just believed that was the case.

To do so, we designed an online survey experiment. We created a simulated Facebook post about health news and presented it to an online sample of 1,489 U.S. adults who are part of AmeriSpeak, NORC's nationally representative survey panel.

Each person saw a health news post from one of eight public figures who often share information about health, a list that ranged from Oprah and Dr. Oz to the Surgeon General of the United States. Half the people were randomly assigned a sharer they had earlier identified as a person they trusted. The other half were randomly shown a sharer they had earlier said they didn't trust.

Please click on this post and then review the article:

Oprah
October 3 · 🌐

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Type 2 diabetes has reached epidemic proportions, with an estimated 29 million people in the U.S. having the disease and another 86 million considered prediabetic. With an estimated cost...

DailyNewsReview.com

👍 Like   💬 Comment   ➡ Share

Screenshot of social media post used in the experiment

After viewing the post, everyone saw the accompanying health article headlined: "Don't let the scale fool you: Why you could still be at risk for diabetes." This article was originally a piece written by a professor that appeared on The Associated Press (AP) website through an AP partnership. For half the sample, the article was labeled as coming from The AP. For the other half, the article was labeled as coming from a fictional source, something called the DailyNewsReview.com.

Screenshot of DailyNewsReview.com article used in experiment

Screenshot of AP article used in experiment

This experimental design tests how different factors affect people's perceptions of news in social media and is an alternative to simply asking people in a survey about what impacts their views.

Who shared the article has a major impact on various trust indicators

The experiment shows that who shares the article has a major impact on what people think of it.

When people see news from a person they trust, they are more likely to think it got the facts right, contains diverse points of view, and is well reported than if the same article is shared by someone they are skeptical of.

A trusted sharer results in more trust for the article

People who see a social media post from someone they trust evaluate the article more positively
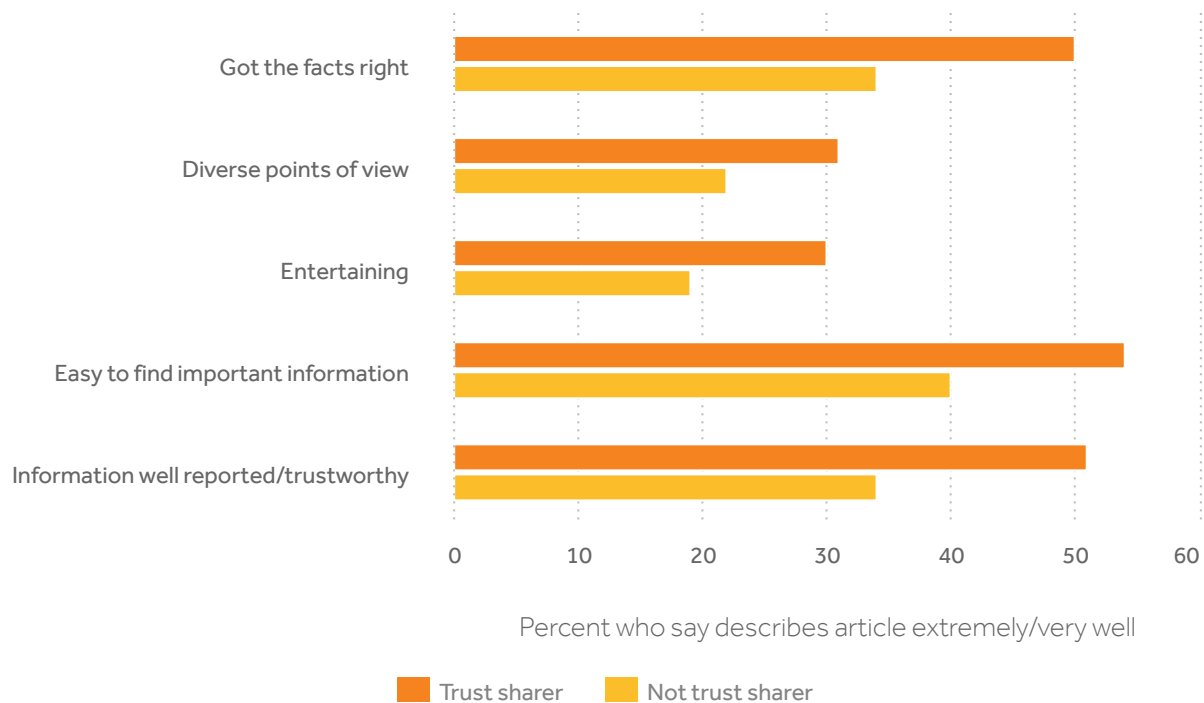
Percent who say describes article extremely/very well

■ Trust sharer   ■ Not trust sharer

Data Source: Question: How well does each of the following statements describe the article shared in this social media post?

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For instance, 51 percent of people say the health article on diabetes is well reported when it is shared by a public figure they trust. Just a third (34 percent) feel that way when the same article is shared by someone they don't trust.

The numbers are nearly identical for whether the story got the facts right. Fifty percent of readers think the health article got the facts right when the person who shared it happens to be someone they trust. Just 34 percent say the same when they are skeptical of the sharer.

The sharer even influences whether people think the article, which presents two perspectives, contains diverse points of view. More people are likely to say an article contains multiple points of view when it comes from a trusted source (31 percent) than when it comes from a less-trusted public figure (22 percent).

Who shared the article also influences, but to a lesser extent, whether people are likely to pass on the article to their own friends. If the article was shared by a trusted source, 38 percent of people say they are likely to share it. If shared by a public figure they don't trust, 24 percent of people still say they are likely to re-share the content anyway.

The sharer tends to have a greater significance on attitudes than the news organization that reported the article in the first place. The reporting source still matters, according to the experiment, just not as much as who shared the article.

> **"**
> *Who shared the article also influences ... whether people are likely to pass on the article to their own friends.*
> **"**

For instance, when the story is passed on by a trusted figure and the article is attributed to The AP, 52 percent of people think the article got the facts right. When the article is still attributed to The AP but the person passing it on is less trusted, only 32 percent say the facts were right.

Indeed, more people think the story is accurate if the sharer is trusted but the article is attributed to a fictional news source (49 percent), than do if it is attributed to AP but they are skeptical of the sharer (32 percent).

Trust in the person who posts a story on social media also impacts engagement with the news source. When people see a post from a trusted figure, they are more likely to say they would share the article and follow the person who shared the article. They are also more likely when they see a post from a trusted person to report they would engage with the *news source* of the article, saying they would recommend the source to friends, follow the source on social media, and sign up for news alerts from the source.

A trusted sharer results
in more engagement

People who see an article shared by someone they trust are more likely to engage with it, and to engage with the source that created the article
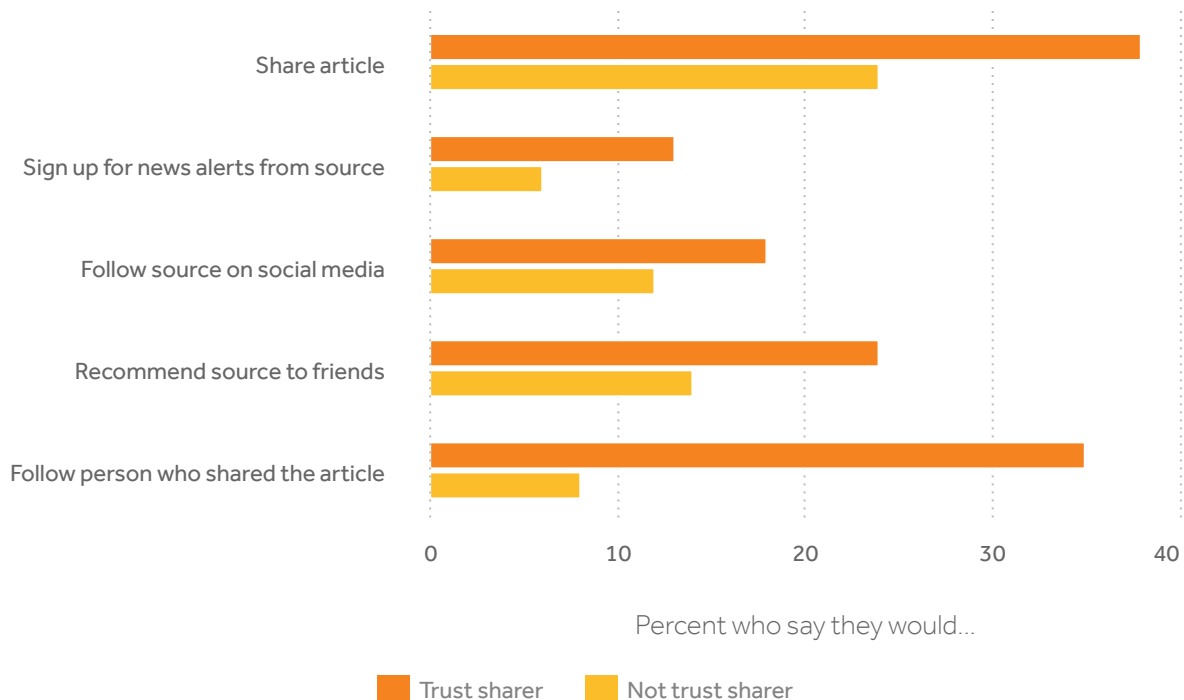
Percent who say they would...

■ Trust sharer   ■ Not trust sharer

Data Source: Question: Now that you have read the article shared in this social media post, do you think you would do any of the following, or do you think you would not do these things?

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About half of the people in our experiment could recall who had shared the post, but only about 2 in 10 could remember the source of the article. The fact that people are fundamentally more aware of who shared the article than who wrote it may be a significant foundation for this effect.

Although people say they place more importance on the original reporting source, the experiment shows they are more influenced by the sharer
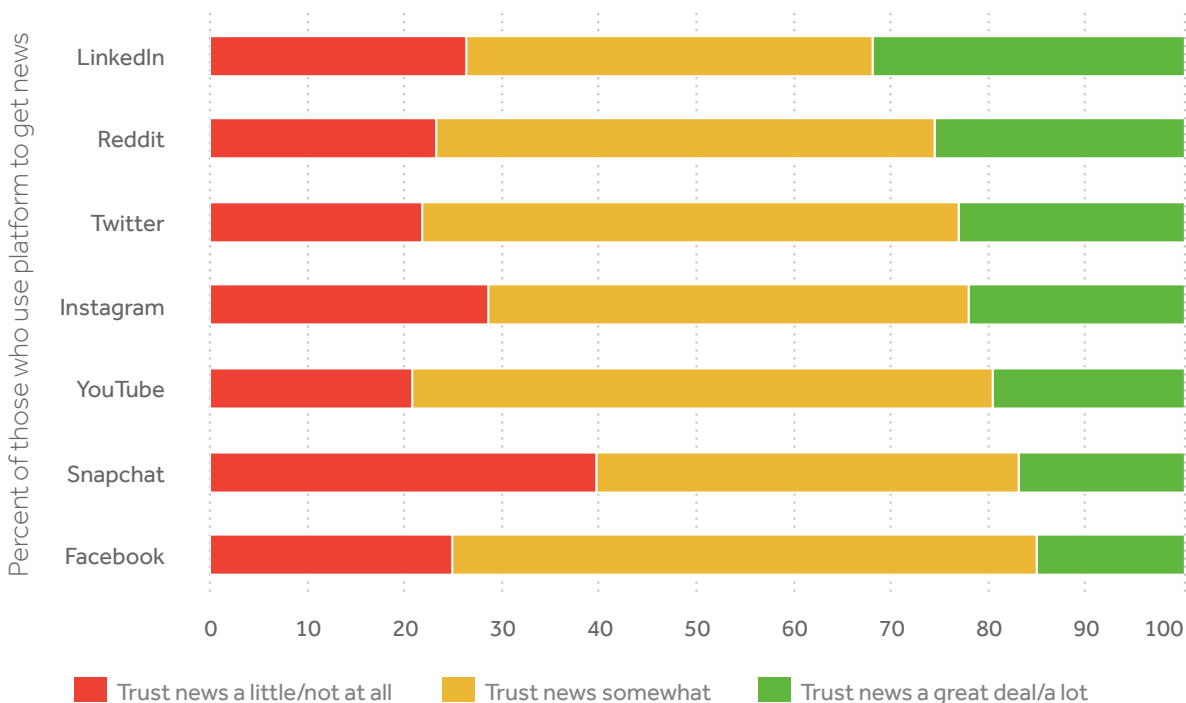
About half of Americans (51 percent) say they get news from social media, according to our 2016 Media Insight study. Among those who get news on social media, Facebook is by far the most used platform, and other popular platforms for news include YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram.

Despite the popularity of Facebook, few say they trust the news they get there. Just 12 percent say they trust what they see on Facebook a great deal or a lot, while 48 percent say they trust it somewhat and 20 percent trust it very little or not at all. The public has similar skepticism in news on other social media platforms.

Most people who use social media to get news do not have a lot of trust in the content

Percent of those who use platform to get news

LinkedIn			
Reddit			
Twitter			
Instagram			
YouTube			
Snapchat			
Facebook			

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

■ Trust news a little/not at all   ■ Trust news somewhat   ■ Trust news a great deal/a lot

Data Source: Question: In general, how much do you trust the news and information you see on [SELECTED SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM]?
Source: A New Understanding: What Makes People Trust and Rely on News. 2016.

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When evaluating news on Facebook, 66 percent said in the survey that whether they trust the original reporting source highly affects whether they trust a piece of news or reporting. Nearly half (48 percent) say whether they trust the person who posted the article influences whether they trust that piece of information. Sixteen percent say whether or not a lot of people have liked it or shared it affects them a lot. The trends are similar for Twitter and YouTube.

But our new experiment tells a different story. These results show that, in fact, a highly trusted or distrusted sharer has a greater effect on reader trust. The discrepancy suggests that people are often not aware of how much they are influenced by the identity of the sharer.

As detailed earlier, the experiment shows that when people see a post from a trusted person rather than a distrusted person, they are more likely to say it was easy to find important information, the information was well reported and trustworthy, and it got the facts right. Trust in the sharer also makes it more likely that people will believe the article provided diverse points of view and was entertaining.

The results from the experiment are consistent with the beliefs of several participants who took part in focus groups that were conducted in 2016 during the first phase of the research into

People are fundamentally more aware of who shared an article than who wrote it 🐦

trust in news. When discussing news on Facebook, one participant said that who shares the post is critical. "I look who shared it. If I have a friend that's a creep I might not believe it. If a friend is in a certain field, then I might believe what they post."

Likewise, people acknowledge the importance of who shares the article when asked directly about it during the survey experiments. Of those who saw news from a trusted person, 51 percent said they are more likely to trust the information because of who shared it.

The identity of the media outlet can impact how people evaluate a story on social media if they have a negative opinion of the source

The identity of the media outlet reporting a story can impact how people view the article if people have an explicit mistrust of that media outlet. The results of the experiment indicate that people's assessment of an article does not change much when they see the content branded as a known and trusted media outlet such as The AP or when they see if from an unknown, made-up news organization. However, when someone holds a particularly negative view of the reporting source, it has a similar effect to seeing the article shared by a distrusted person.

There is little difference in overall attitudes toward an article branded to be from The AP (one of the largest media organizations in the world) and the same article from DailyNewsReview.com (a made-up and unknown site). However, the survey experiment included an earlier question asking about trust in The AP, and people's views about The AP are related to their beliefs about the article.
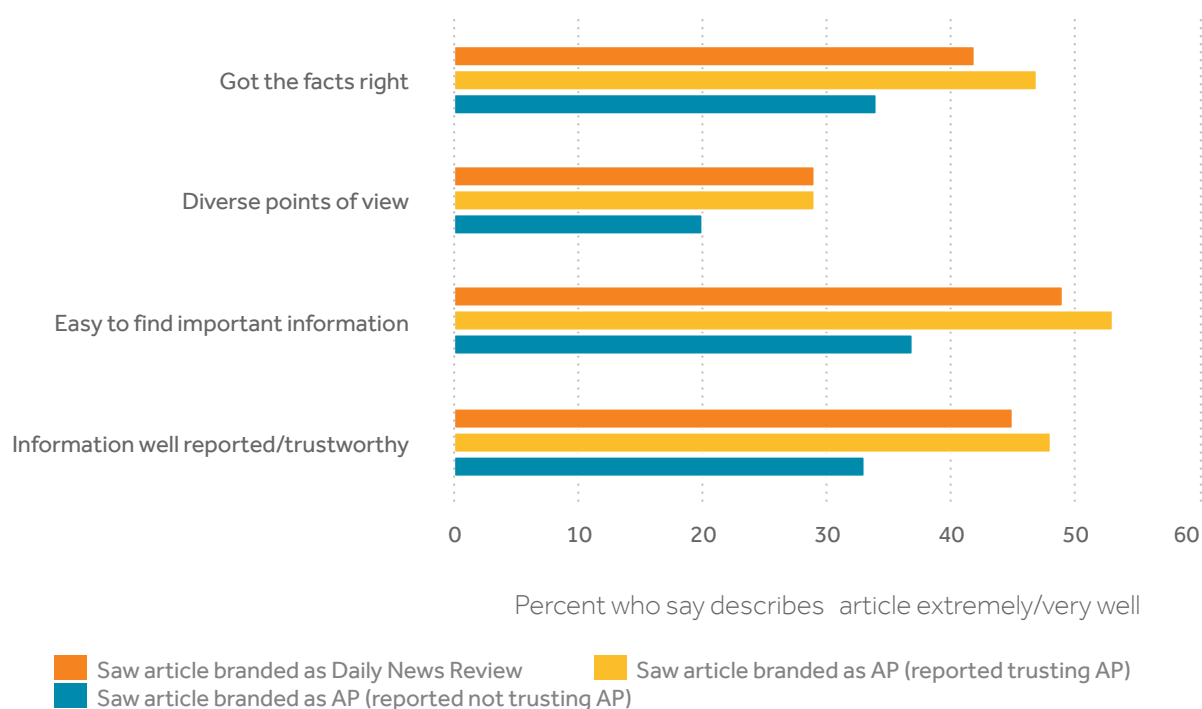
People who report trusting The AP and who saw the story branded to be from that source have similar assessments of the article as do those who saw the article from the unknown news source. However, people who report not trusting The AP have significantly more negative beliefs about the article when it was presented as from The AP than do either those who saw the article from the unknown news source or those who trust The AP.

Lack of trust in a source does have a significant effect

Even though there is little difference between an unknown source and a trusted reporting source

Got the facts right

Diverse points of view

Easy to find important information

Information well reported/trustworthy

0   10   20   30   40   50   60

Percent who say describes article extremely/very well

■ Saw article branded as Daily News Review   ■ Saw article branded as AP (reported trusting AP)
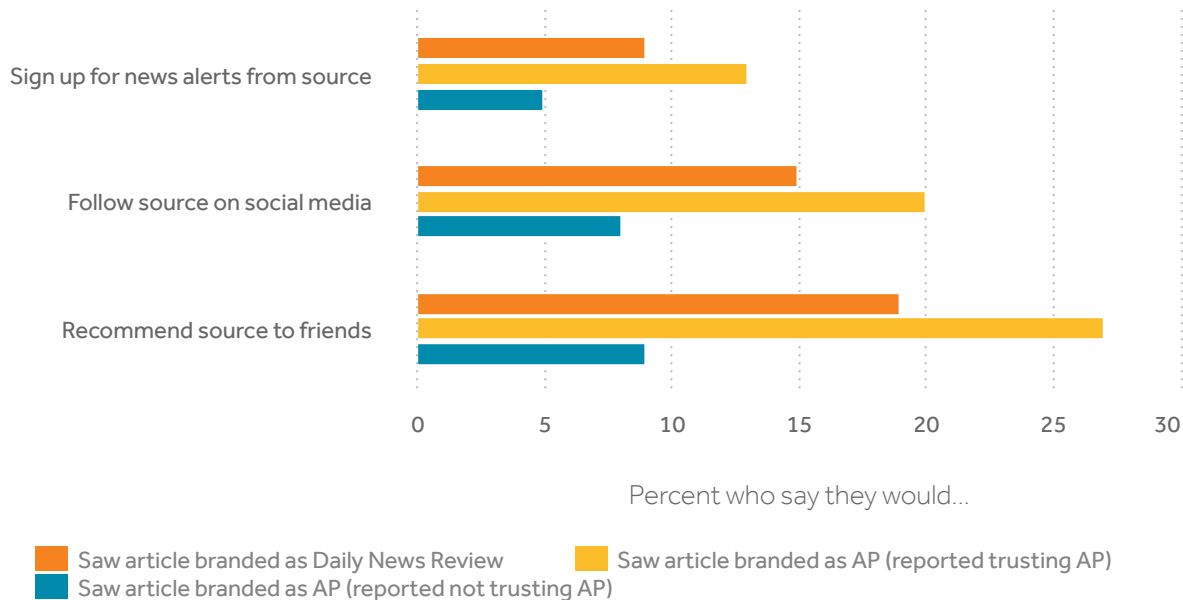■ Saw article branded as AP (reported not trusting AP)

Data Source: Question: How well does each of the following statements describe the article shared in this social media post?

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As you would expect, people who do not trust The AP are also much less likely to say they would follow the source on social media or recommend the source to friends.

Lack of trust in a source reduces the likelihood of engaging with it

Percent who say they would…

- Saw article branded as Daily News Review
- Saw article branded as AP (reported trusting AP)
- Saw article branded as AP (reported not trusting AP)

Data Source: Question: Now that you have read the article shared in this social media post, do you think you would do any of the following, or do you think you would not do these things?

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During the earlier focus groups, some participants talked about how the news source affected their perception of stories on social media. "When it comes to putting something on my Facebook page, I will only post things that come from a source I trust," said one participant.

But these experimental results indicate something slightly different: that people will have reservations about an article when they decidedly know and distrust the source, but not when they just don't know about the source.

The bottom line: A trusted sharer has more significant effects on beliefs about news than a reputable media source

While both the person posting a story and the media outlet can impact how people perceive news on social media, the experiments show that the person posting the article has the greatest effect on opinions toward the article.

In the experiment, there are four possible sharer and news source combinations: 1) trusted sharer and reputable source, 2) trusted sharer and unknown source, 3) untrusted sharer and reputable source, and 4) untrusted sharer and unknown source.
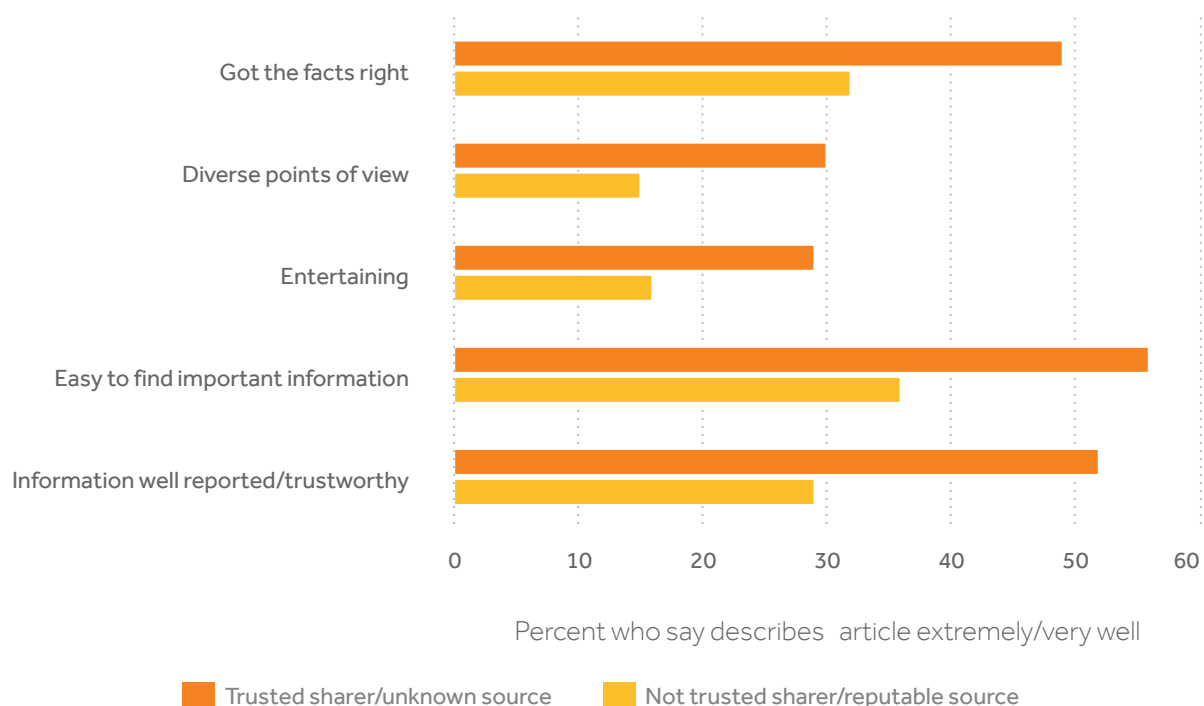
As you would expect, a trusted person sharing an article from a reputable news source leads to the most positive beliefs about an article. And an untrusted person sharing something from an unknown news source leads to generally low credibility.

But in the more complicated combinations, you can see whether the person posting the article or the original reporting source most affects attitudes toward an article.

The results illustrate that people who saw the article from a trusted sharer and unknown media source have much more positive opinions of the article than those who saw the story from a distrusted sharer and reputable news source.

DATA   CHART

A trusted sharer affects reader opinions more than the reputation of the news source

Percent who say describes article extremely/very well

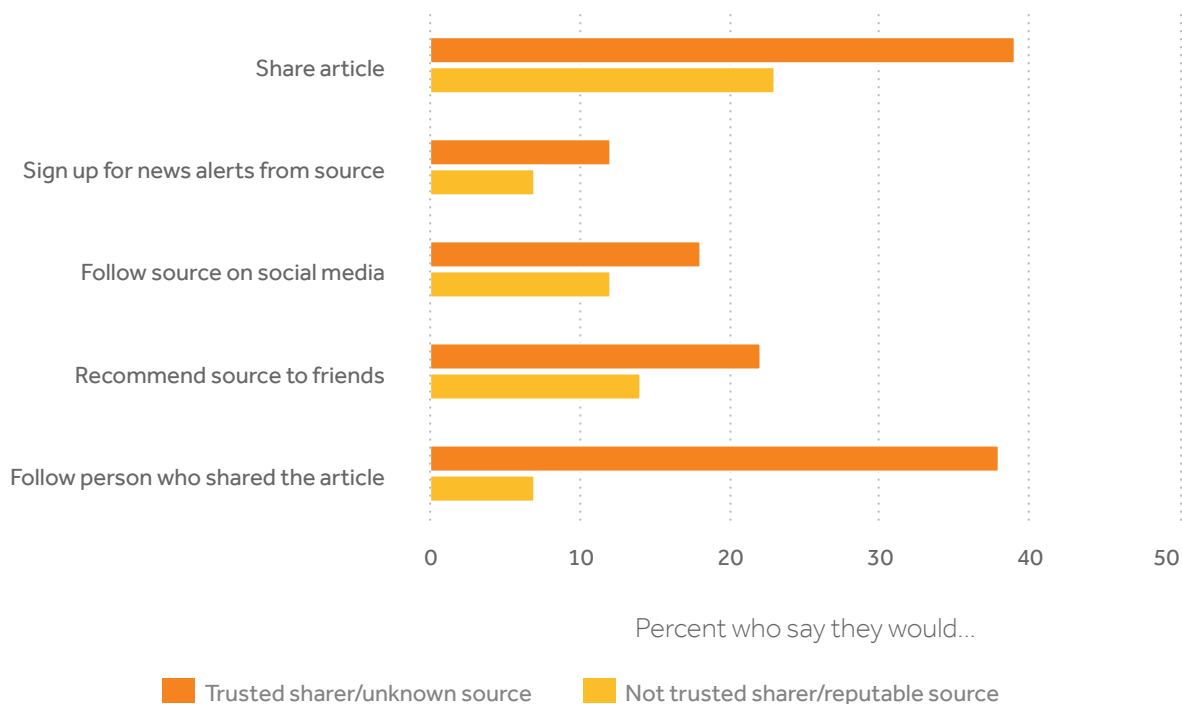■ Trusted sharer/unknown source   ■ Not trusted sharer/reputable source

Data Source: Question: How well does each of the following statements describe the article shared in this social media post?

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When looking at how respondents might engage with the news outlet, the sharer has even more positive effects than the news outlet itself. Those who trusted the sharer but saw the unknown outlet were more likely than those who did not trust the sharer and saw the reputable outlet to share the article, follow the sharer, sign up for news alerts from the source, and recommend the source to friends.

A trusted sharer affects engagement more than the reputation of the news source

Percent who say they would...

■ Trusted sharer/unknown source   ■ Not trusted sharer/reputable source

Data Source: Question: Now that you have read the article shared in this social media post, do you think you would do any of the following, or do you think you would not do these things?

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Implications

These findings shed new light on how journalists and news organizations should think about credibility, and how news is perceived on social networks. Among the interesting implications and inferences we offer are these:

- **To publishers and journalists:** Your readers and followers are not just consumers to monetize, instead they may be social ambassadors whose own credibility with their friends affects your brand's reputation. It is the sharer's credibility, more than your own, which determines other people's willingness to believe you and engage with you. This underscores the importance of news organizations creating strong communities of followers who evangelize the organization to others.

- **To news-literacy advocates:** In light of growing concerns about "fake news" spreading on social media, this experiment confirms that people make little distinction between known and unknown (even made-up) sources when it comes to trusting and sharing news. Even 19 percent of people who saw our fictional news source would have been willing to recommend it to a friend.

- **To Facebook and other social networks:** Facebook and other social networks could do more to emphasize and provide information about the original sources for news articles. The fact that only 2 in 10 people in our experiment could recall the news reporting source accurately after seeing a Facebook-style post suggests that basic brand awareness has a long way to go. We found that sharers affect perceptions more than the original news reporting source—but might that change if Facebook made the reporting source label more prominent?

About the study

Experiment methodology

This survey experiment was conducted by the Media Insight Project, an initiative of the American Press Institute (API) and The Associated Press–NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. The survey was conducted from November 9 through December 6, 2016. The survey was funded by API. Staff from API, NORC at the University of Chicago, and AP collaborated on all aspects of the study.

Data were collected using the AmeriSpeak Panel, which is NORC's probability–based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, nonzero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face–to–face).

Interviews for this survey were conducted, with adults age 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from the AmeriSpeak Panel, and 1,489 completed the survey, all via the web. The final stage completion rate is 34.8 percent, the weighted household panel response rate is 32.4 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 95.5 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 10.8 percent.

The overall margin of sampling error is +/− 3.5 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

Respondents were offered a small monetary incentive for completing the survey ($2 or $4 depending on their initial panel recruitment). All interviews were conducted in English by professional interviewers who were carefully trained on the specific survey for this study.

Once the sample was selected and fielded, and all the study data had been collected and made final, a poststratification process was used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any noncoverage or under−and over− sampling resulting from the study−specific sample design. Poststratification variables included age, gender, Census region, race/ethnicity, and education. The weighted data, which reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over, were used for all analyses.

All analyses were conducted using STATA (version 14), which allows for adjustment of standard errors for complex sample designs. All differences reported between subgroups of the U.S. population are at the 95 percent level of statistical significance, meaning that there is only a 5 percent (or less) probability that the observed differences could be attributed to chance variation in sampling. Additionally, bivariate differences between subgroups are only reported when they also remain robust in a multivariate model controlling for other demographic, political, and socioeconomic covariates. A comprehensive listing of all study questions, complete with tabulations of top−level results for each question, is available on the Media Insight Project's website: www.mediainsight.org.

Contributing researchers

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About the Media Insight Project

The Media Insight Project is a collaboration of 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 API, NORC at the University of Chicago, and The Associated Press.

About the American Press Institute

The American Press Institute (API) conducts research and training, convenes thought leaders, and creates tools to help chart a path ahead for journalism in the 21st century. API is an educational nonadvocacy 501(c)3 nonprofit organization affiliated with the Newspaper Association of America. It aims to help the news media—especially local publishers and newspaper media—advance in the digital age.

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.

The Associated Press (AP) is the world's essential news organization, bringing fast, unbiased news to all media platforms and formats.

NORC at the University of Chicago is one of the oldest and most respected, independent research institutions in the world.

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.

The founding principles of the AP–NORC Center include a mandate to preserve carefully and protect the scientific integrity and objectivity of NORC and the journalistic independence of AP. All work conducted by the Center conforms to the highest levels of scientific integrity to prevent any real or perceived bias in the research. All of the work of the Center is subject to review by its advisory committee to help ensure it meets these standards. The Center will publicize the results of all studies and make all datasets and study documentation available to scholars and the public.

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