



The State of Research on Trust in News

A Review and Roadmap for the Alliance for Trust in Media

March 2024



Alliance for Trust In Media



About us

Trust in news media is at a near-catastrophic low. Without a baseline for truth, citizens cannot agree on a common set of facts, and without shared facts, democracy cannot function. The Alliance for Trust in Media helps to bring Americans back to a shared reality. We help newsrooms learn how to win back the trust of audiences, while also helping Americans navigate an increasingly chaotic information environment.

The Alliance works in two ways. Our researchers partner with local newsrooms to rigorously document practices that actually work to restore trust. By the end of 2025, we expect to develop a novel data-driven, evidence-based playbook that newsrooms can use to deepen their relationship with the audiences they serve and to reach new audiences outside their core.

At the same time, our trainers help companies increase their staff's media literacy, with a focus on sharing practical, non-partisan tools for distinguishing reliable information from unreliable and for curating a balanced news feed. That means less workplace polarization, sharper critical thinking, and dramatically more cohesive and productive teams.

About the authors



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4 in 10 Americans have **no trust in the news media to “fully, accurately, and fairly” report the news, according to Gallup in 2023.**

It's the lowest level of trust on record.

Introduction

The public's trust in the news media has been steadily eroding for decades. According to surveys from Gallup, whereas three-quarters of Americans in the 1970s reported trusting the news media to "fully, accurately, and fairly" report the news, that percentage fell to less than a third in 2023, matching the lowest level on record.¹ While such declines are particularly pronounced in the US, where perceptions of the news media have polarized along partisan lines,² levels of trust in news have fallen elsewhere in the world as well. Surveys of audiences across the globe from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism show decreases in many media markets over the past decade,³ as does the Edelman Trust Barometer.⁴ Declining trust in the news media is not a uniquely American concern but rather related to a range of broader currents shaping the public's relationship with news and journalism.

What accounts for these declines, and how might news media respond? The answer to these questions is complex, and a great deal of scholarship has been devoted to tackling the subject over the past several years. As a major international comparative study of the drivers behind declines in trust in news concluded after a three-year study,⁵ **there is no single trust-in-news problem nor a silver bullet that will reliably regain the public's trust.** Rather, newsrooms must consider whose trust they seek to build, in what context, and to what end, and seek to match their approach to the relevant objective. What is not captured in conventional survey measures of trust may be just as important as what these alarming indicators do indicate about the public's growing resistance to news.

Purpose of this document

In constructing this overview of research on trust in news, we seek to organize the past several decades of academic research on this subject to better inform publishers, journalists, and philanthropic supporters, as well as academics who seek to understand these trends and make informed judgments about how best to intervene. We begin by examining (1) how the subjects of "trust" and "news" have generally been defined in prior research and the relevant dimensions of each concept that have been the focus of these studies. Next we consider (2) what this literature suggests are the most likely explanations for the decline in trust in news and (3) what approaches hold the most promise for restoring trust where warranted. We supplement our review in this last section with an examination of more than 400 trust-building initiatives tracked by the training and engagement organization Trusting News.⁶

In assembling this document, we reviewed a wide-ranging, interdisciplinary field that spans communication and journalism studies, political science, psychology, economics, and other areas. While we aim for this document to offer a comprehensive overview, in places we have highlighted a small number of key studies as exemplars of a much larger literature. We encourage those interested to consult a much wider library of research literature we have assembled as part of this undertaking, which will be made available on the **Alliance for Trust in Media website.**

Key takeaways

1 Trust in news is a multidimensional concept.

It is based not only on people's direct experiences accessing and consuming news but also on emotional and relational factors that shape how the public thinks about news media in general and journalism specifically.

2 Declines in trust are driven by political factors combined with changes in how people access information and how newsrooms deliver it.

Declines are linked to a broader erosion in trust toward other elite institutions in society, but international comparative research shows polarization is only one part of the problem.

3 Current initiatives around building trust tend to be focused on making changes to editorial products or increasing transparency.

These kinds of initiatives may make for better journalism, but they require audiences to pay close attention to content in ways that may be unrealistic. Fewer initiatives have been attempted around engagement, especially beyond social media, or focused on addressing deficits in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

4 While research on trust in news has helped to identify factors explaining its decline, evidence around what works to rebuild it remains limited.

More systematic efforts are needed to conduct rigorous field experiments and share empirical findings across organizations. Conducting such experiments is a primary mission of the Alliance for Trust in Media. But because these challenges to trust are collective, industry-wide coordination is needed to mount an effective solution.



Defining trust in news: What it means and how it works

Despite considerable attention paid to declines in trust in news media, these terms are often used in varying ways. Most do agree that “trust” fundamentally involves some form of vulnerability: the willingness to place oneself at risk. Here the risk is around being misled, misinformed, or manipulated. Precisely how audiences make this calculation has been the subject of a great deal of research and disagreement, with considerable scholarship devoted to detailing various dimensions and criteria upon which audiences may determine trustworthiness.

The question of defining the *object* of trust—how the public thinks about news media—is no more straightforward. Some scholars have advocated for greater specificity around measures of trust in news that differentiate, for example, between public trust in news media in general and trust in a particular news outlet or even an individual piece of news content.⁷ One person may hold multiple views at once about varying forms of media in their country. However, studies also show that many people seem to view the news media as a single category, or at least seemingly generalize

across mainstream sources when considering what is or is not trustworthy.⁸

Despite ambiguity around defining both “trust” and “news,” the topic has been studied extensively.⁹ Our aim is not to catalog the entirety of this sprawling literature but rather to underscore two aspects around how trust in news is generally understood. First, we highlight the “what” of trust in news research: existing studies underscore the importance of people’s prior direct experiences using media but also broader preconceptions and external cues they draw on that shape these attitudes, including informational shortcuts often referred to as “heuristics.” Second, we zoom out further and consider the “how” of trust in news research: the extent to which trust may be rooted in more than merely cognitive-rational evaluations of information quality but also factors such as social relationships and emotions that shape feelings about news media.

Preconceptions, direct experiences, and external cues

Within the news industry, the study of trust can be traced back to several influential readership studies, including by Philip Meyer and others in the 1980s.¹⁰ These early studies were particularly focused around defining attributes of information “credibility,” based largely on surveys of audiences that asked about the news they consumed. While much of this early work focused on the growing use of television as an increasingly important pathway for news, these studies were also influenced by a larger related literature on source credibility that grew out of a series of influential experiments in the 1950s led by Carl Hovland and colleagues examining predictors of source credibility, including at the interpersonal level.¹¹

Research on perceptions of information credibility has continued to develop over the decades since. More recent scholarship has focused on the way audiences often draw on heuristics as “mental shortcuts,” in contrast to more deliberate evaluations of trustworthiness that require extensive cognitive attention.¹² Such work experienced a resurgence as the internet led to more scrutiny about the complex environments in which people were increasingly making evaluations about what is trustworthy—environments in which people experience information overload.¹³ This line of research has helped highlight that the “how” of trust may be broader in scope than merely a reaction to previous experiences using media. These additional factors may include deep-seated preconceptions about news media as well as ideas shaped by external cues about news from trusted figures—whether family,¹⁴ friends,¹⁵ or political figures.¹⁶ To be clear, many people hold strong attitudes about subjects and phenomena with which they may have little to no direct experience. To use a metaphor from the book *Avoiding the News*,¹⁷ how people think about news media is akin to how people think about a polarizing food such as oysters. Many people may *know* they do not like them and want nothing to do with them, but they may not be able to tell you exactly why. If they do, they may be just as likely to refer to things they associate with oysters as they are to actual experiences they may have had eating them. The point is, perceived trustworthiness depends on more than experiences with news content.

Broader dimensions of trust

In light of the importance of preconceptions and cues in shaping trust toward news, scholarship has at times also focused on a host of related factors associated with the public’s relationship with



news. These include both relational and affective dimensions of trust, or, in other words, the role played by social influences and emotions.

Research on the social forces that shape trust in news has tended to focus on the degree to which trust is established and sustained through a give-and-take on a human level between the public and the press: relationship-building that is rooted in mutual reciprocity and respect.¹⁸ Highlighting these deeper relational qualities of trust underscores that trust-building requires more than simple informational shortcuts and credibility cues. It is conferred socially, built upon established relationships with other trusted social messengers,¹⁹ and it is made durable through resource-intensive efforts around listening, engaging, and establishing an authentic connection with individuals and communities. These insights have been central to considerable recent scholarship that emphasizes community-centered journalism as a foundation for building trust, particularly with marginalized communities, where distrust toward journalism is particularly ingrained, rooted in long-running histories of harm and exclusion.²⁰

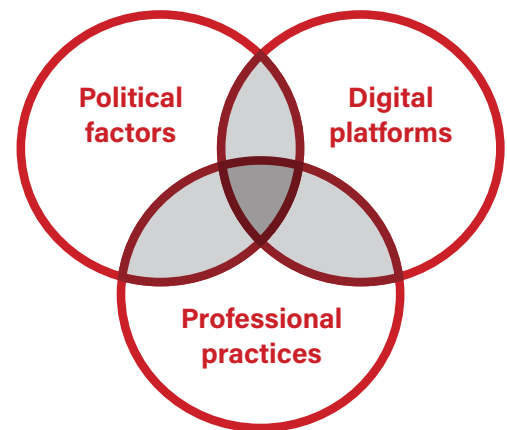
As growing numbers of scholars have coalesced around the importance of these relational factors in shaping trust, they have paid renewed attention to the emotional qualities that underlie many people's relationship to news. While scholarship on mood management,²¹ and more recently news avoidance,²² has tended to emphasize the importance of how people *feel* about news as critical to understanding media habits, so too has scholarship on trust in news at times emphasized the importance of emotional dimensions around news use. Perceptions of trustworthiness may be based not only on evaluations of whether news outlets provide useful, relevant, accurate, and fair information, but also on whether sources of information serve other emotional needs.²³ That is, even as studies show that audiences tend to engage more with negative news,²⁴ they also tend to see such news as making them feel bad, contributing to rising cynicism about the political systems to which they belong.²⁵ That in turn may lead audiences to see journalists as part of the problem rather than the solution to entrenched societal problems.²⁶



Why trust in news has declined

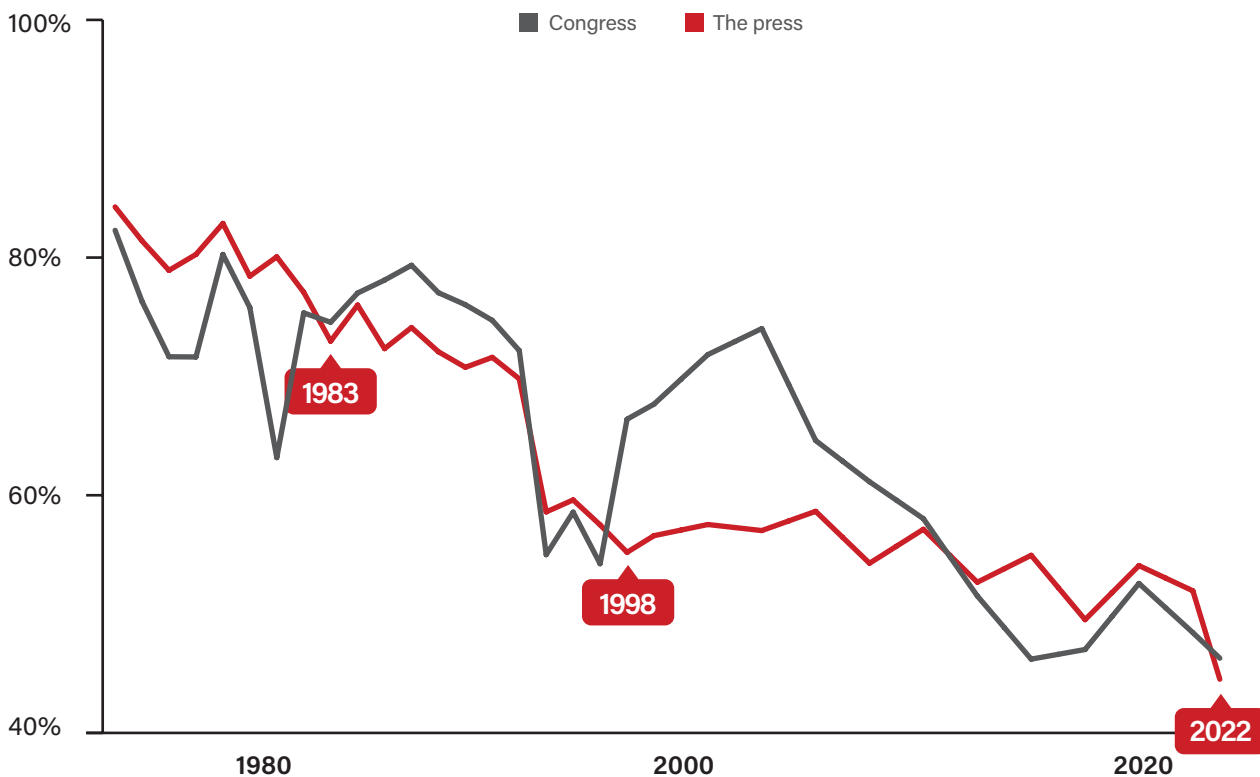
Now that we have covered what the concept of trust in news entails, in this next section, we review a separate line of research, which has investigated varying explanations for declining levels of trust in news around the globe. We categorize this work according to three distinct areas: politics, platforms, and professional practices of journalism. These factors are intertwined and interrelated with one another, and below we consider them one by one.

Factors in declining levels of trust in media



An intertwined 'trust nexus'

Percentage of Americans with a "great deal" or "only some" confidence in US institutions over time



Note: Data was only collected every other year after 1994.

Source: The General Social Survey (GSS), 1973-2022. The GSS is a long-running survey sponsored by NORC at the University of Chicago and supported by the National Science Foundation.

Political factors

The downward trend of trust in news mirrors declining trust in political institutions across the globe—a parallel that some scholars have referred to as the "trust nexus."²⁷ While not every country has seen such an erosion of confidence, this phenomenon has been particularly striking in the US and several European nations,²⁸ where the relationship between attitudes toward the news media and attitudes toward government appears to have only grown stronger over time. As one recent

study in Germany found, declining trust in news tends to be associated not only with alienation from establishment politics but also with support for populist movements with the potential to disrupt liberal democratic institutions more generally.²⁹

Such findings can be attributed to an array of factors, all of which depend to some degree on individual country contexts; however, widening partisan polarization is a particularly acute factor in the US.³⁰ Studies show American conservatives are more likely to question the news media's

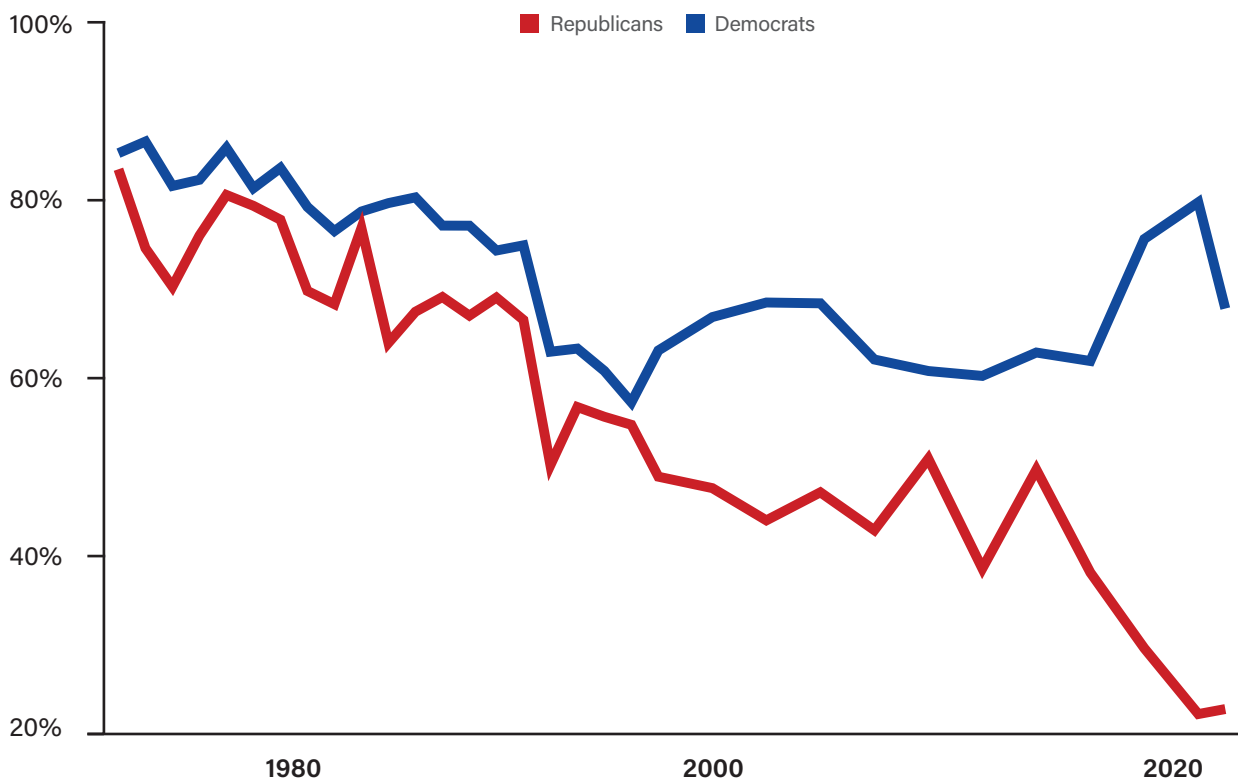
watchdog role over the government³¹ and more generally view news skeptically.³² They are also most likely to view government cynically: less than 10% of Republicans express that they trust government to do what is right most or all of the time.³³ As partisan attachments have become a defining feature of American politics, standing in for a variety of fundamental social identities,³⁴ these affiliations increasingly shape attitudes toward news media as well. Multiple decades of elite rhetoric on the right seeking to discredit journalism as purposefully and hopelessly biased³⁵

have arguably reinforced the notion that the “mainstream media” cannot be trusted.³⁶

The US, however, is somewhat unique in its degree of partisan polarization. Studies have not found a clear link in other areas of the world between declining levels of trust in news and partisan polarization, nor between trust and political parallelism in media.³⁷ In other words, although partisan polarization is clearly closely tied to attitudes toward news media in the US, it cannot independently account for the totality of these trends.

Confidence in the press by partisanship

Percentage of Democrats and Republicans with a “great deal” or “only some” confidence in the press



Note: Data was only collected every other year after 1994.

Source: The General Social Survey (GSS), 1973-2022. The GSS is a long-running survey sponsored by NORC at the University of Chicago and supported by the National Science Foundation.



One interpretation of these findings is that declining confidence in the institution of the press may be indicative of the public losing faith in national and international markets to serve their economic interests.³⁸ Another potentially related explanation is that growing disenchantment from politics more generally—what Yanna Krupnikov and John Barry Ryan term “the other divide”³⁹—could be intertwined with both partisan polarization *and* disconnection from news media and the institution of journalism. After all, studies have shown that many audiences struggle to see the relevance of news to the concerns in their everyday lives,⁴⁰ especially among those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.⁴¹ Indeed, a number of studies have shown that alienation from politics in general is an important predictor of whether individuals also lack trust toward the news media in general.⁴² While partisan polarization in the US may divide audiences on the right and left, it may also alienate those on the periphery of politics altogether who do not see themselves or their interests reflected in news. To the extent that audiences view the news media as complicit in partisan bickering rather than responsive to concerns in their lives, they are unlikely to see the press as a trusted partner and advocate for the public interest.

Platform factors

In addition to political factors that may shape the way the public views the news media, research has also consistently found a positive albeit modest association between media trust and media use.⁴³ That suggests a potentially important relationship between changes in how people access news and eroding levels of trust. Indeed, in an analysis of eight years of survey data across 46 global media markets, one study found a significant correspondence between declines in trust in news and declining use of broadcast television as a pathway for accessing news.⁴⁴ Likewise, this analysis found the reverse of this pattern with the use of social media to access news—that is, trust declined as social media use grew.

There are multiple explanations for why such relationships might exist. For one, the *type* of media one uses may dictate trust in news, and people may simply be more likely to encounter a wider variety of sources of information while using digital platforms. In fact, contrary to popular concerns about so-called digital media algorithms creating “filter bubbles,”⁴⁵ the use of digital platforms tends to be associated with exposure to more sources of information, not less,⁴⁶ particularly through incidental exposure.⁴⁷ Scholars suggest that the

proliferation of online media reflects a broader transition from a low-choice to high-choice media environment, affording audiences more content to consume and therefore avoid as well.⁴⁸

As noted above, low trust in mainstream media correlates with greater consumption of alternative news media,⁴⁹ with social media platforms viewed critically as particularly to blame for the widening problem of mis- and disinformation.⁵⁰ Hence, the proliferation of both alternative and unreliable news online could contribute to shaping not only the way people understand the role of the press in society but also the reference categories they have in mind when asked in surveys about news and journalism.⁵¹ Indeed, the specific examples of news that audiences may be most likely to encounter on digital platforms may well be misaligned with the forms of journalism most likely to engender trust, with studies often suggesting that algorithms tend to reward sensationalism, divisiveness, and more politically extreme viewpoints.⁵²

Second, journalists and publishers argue that social media platforms help to amplify critical discourses about news and journalism—a concern supported by surveys that show higher levels of exposure to news media criticism among those who regularly use digital platforms.⁵³ Indeed, studies examining the discourse on platforms have shown that these digital spaces tend to include considerable criticism of mainstream news coverage.⁵⁴ Other studies have pointed to the role that digital media platforms may play in equipping political figures and activists with the ability to communicate directly with the public and shape reactions to news by intervening in the distribution and flow of information.⁵⁵ Some scholars have even suggested that declining trust in news may simply be a natural byproduct of an increasingly pluralistic media landscape in which conventional gatekeepers are no longer

viewed as authoritative deciders over what is deemed impartial truth⁵⁶—although the notion of abandoning conventional ideals of objectivity in response to these forces has also been met with fierce resistance by others.⁵⁷

Third, platforms are often blamed for undermining the public's connections to individual news organizations, which has in turn made it less and less likely that members of the public develop familiarity with any individual outlet. As News Corp. Chief Executive Robert Thomson argued in 2017, platforms have steadily “eroded the integrity of content by undermining its provenance.”⁵⁸ There is evidence to support this argument. Studies have shown that people are less likely to recall the individual brands of news organizations they clicked on when they navigate to news via social media platforms or a search engine.⁵⁹ Additionally, recent scholarship has documented a growing phenomenon of audiences adopting a generalized skepticism toward *all* sources of information they encounter online.⁶⁰ These attitudes are thought to be a direct consequence of the changing media environment and growing centrality of digital platforms as intermediaries for how the public accesses and discovers sources of information.⁶¹

Professional practices

In addition to factors associated with the political environment and the evolving digital media landscape, a third area of research has specifically examined how changing journalistic practices may also contribute to declines in trust. As the composition and quality of the information environment have changed in recent decades—in response to market forces intertwined with political and technological changes—shifting attitudes toward news can be understood at least in part as a response to a higher volume of what audiences perceive as lower-quality news. While

journalists may resist such notions, it would be foolhardy to dismiss them. While studies show that more sophisticated news audiences do regularly differentiate between sources of news and may therefore trust some journalistic organizations (for example, a local news site),⁶² scholarship also suggests that when survey respondents are asked to report their general assessment of the news media's trustworthiness, they tend to average across all mainstream sources in their country.⁶³ In other words, while critiques about declining journalistic quality may not extend to *all* news outlets equally, declines in the aggregate appear robust and may well be the consequence of what many see as the proliferation of low-quality news across the industry.

Researchers have focused on several specific areas of problematic journalistic practices. In recent years, much of this work has centered on the lack of representation in newsrooms and related longstanding deficiencies in reporting around historically marginalized communities with whom many news organizations have fraught relationships.⁶⁴ Considerable research has documented such communities' frustration with what many see as bias, misrepresentation of their perspectives, and less care being taken with

accuracy.⁶⁵ Analogous critiques are often raised among politically engaged right-wing audiences who have become increasingly vocal over time.⁶⁶ That said, concerns about slanted news are not limited to marginalized or ideological audiences. When a Knight/Gallup survey in 2020 asked respondents about bias in news, defined as attempts to persuade audiences to adhere to an outlet's ideological editorial outlook, 83% of Americans reported that they saw a fair amount or more.⁶⁷

There is, however, some reason for optimism. Even as the public may hold divergent views about what impartial journalism ought to look like, there remains some consensus around its importance. The same Knight/Gallup survey in 2020 found that an overwhelming majority of the public also say they believe the news media plays a critical role in a democratic society. Most say they want journalists to provide accurate and fair news reports to keep a society informed and to hold the powerful accountable. Similar studies have found high levels of belief in the importance of watchdog journalism across many different journalistic cultures and media systems,⁶⁸ as well as a preference for impartiality at least in the abstract.⁶⁹





What we know about how trust can be restored

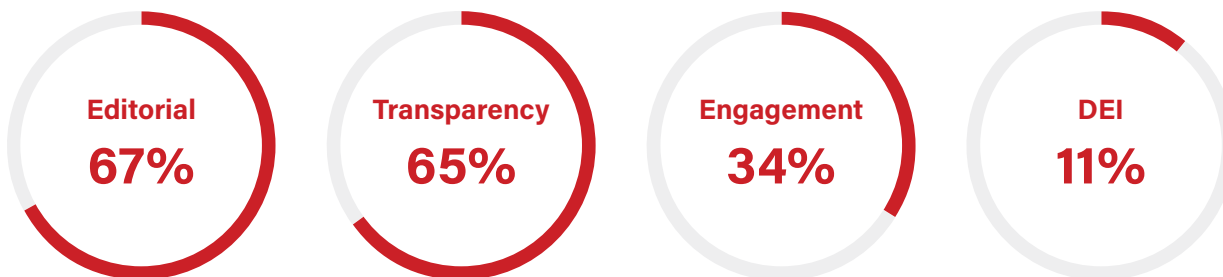
In light of the research on factors driving declining levels of trust in news, in this section we consider the evidence about the effectiveness of various initiatives and strategies designed to respond to these challenges. To organize this research, we group these efforts into four overlapping categories of initiatives: those focused on *editorial products and practices* (such as publishing explanatory notes), those focused on increasing *transparency* (such as efforts that detail policies, procedures, and decision-making), those focused on *audience engagement* outside of conventional editorial products, and those focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)

in coverage, including efforts addressing staffing and newsroom management.

To accompany this summary, we also categorized a list of more than 400 trust-building initiatives tracked by the training project Trusting News, an organization incubated by the Reynolds Journalism Institute in 2016 and now sponsored by the American Press Institute. Our analysis of these initiatives, most of which occurred between 2018 and 2023, shows that the vast majority tend to be focused on changes to editorial products or transparency about journalistic standards and practices—worthy and important efforts in their

Current newsroom approaches to trust-building

Percentage of initiatives tracked by Trusting News categorized in four areas



Note: Excluding duplicates, the Trusting News database includes a total of 437 separate initiatives from 195 different newsrooms. Individual initiatives could be assigned to multiple categories; therefore percentages across the categories do not sum to 100%.

Source: TrustingNews.org

own right but ones that presuppose a level of attention from audiences that may not reflect the public's current (and growing) indifference toward news. Fewer initiatives have been attempted in recent years around engagement or DEI issues. While there is growing scholarship focused on these initiatives, there is even less empirical evidence around whether such efforts effectively increase trust—much less among whom and under what circumstances.

Editorial initiatives

More than two-thirds of the initiatives tracked by Trusting News involve changes in news organizations' own editorial products or policies. Many are often closely related to transparency initiatives. They run the gamut from efforts that offer readers more prominent cues and heuristics in the form of content labels—for example, the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* experimented with adding clearer "Opinion" labels above its editorial content accompanied with explainers describing how such pieces differed from news coverage—

to other efforts that provide background about reporting processes, such as an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reporter describing how and why she uses open public records to get important information about government processes. Other efforts invite the public to serve as assignment editors: for example, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* used the hiring of a new investigative journalist to encourage readers to share ideas for new investigations in their communities. Still others involve first-person essays that humanize the journalists delivering the news, such as a reporter addressing her own fears about gun violence in the wake of the Uvalde mass shooting in a newsletter from public media's America Amplified. These and other editorial efforts are often geared toward helping readers better decipher news coverage and the journalistic processes that underlie how news is made in order to make these stories more relevant and understandable, and the intentions behind the coverage less opaque.

There is limited empirical evidence around whether these kinds of editorial efforts are effective at cultivating trust—although the absence of such

evidence does not mean such efforts are misguided. One of the challenges in studying their impact is that audiences cannot be reliably expected to pay close attention to such content. While some studies have highlighted the impact of website design or content labels in cueing credibility,⁷⁰ others have considered how editorial focus such as an emphasis on relevant local coverage can increase trust.⁷¹ Fewer studies have successfully isolated the impact of particular editorial signals geared toward engendering trust. One exception is from the Center for Media Engagement, which showed in 2017 small but significant effects associated with various editorial efforts including the use of expanded bylines featuring reporters' pictures and biographies, "Behind the Story" sidebars that detail how and why articles were published, and information about news organizations' involvement with The Trust Project, an industry consortium that signals adherence to shared professional and ethical standards.⁷² This same study, however, found that less than half of respondents noticed these initiatives even when asked to read stories in an artificial environment of an online survey. While sustained exposure to such efforts over time could increase their impact, only the most engaged readers are likely to come across these editorial initiatives.

Transparency initiatives

Closely intertwined with editorial initiatives are newsroom efforts designed to make policies, structures, and decision-making more open and transparent. Not all such transparency initiatives are purely editorial in their nature so much as about changes in the standards and practices and procedures that shape the way journalism is produced—even if publicizing those efforts in effect often involves editorial outputs.⁷³ Some are more subtle efforts, such as providing the public with easy access to reporter contact information (an example Trusting News highlighted from



Michigan Radio) or an organization's adherence to codes of conduct, guiding principles, and mission statements. These are often tucked away on websites and may not be readily apparent to readers. A subset of transparency efforts focus specifically on matters of ownership and funding—just 9% of transparency initiatives categorized. Examples include NPR reporting on its own job cuts and restructuring, as well as including an editor's note that described the firewall that separated the organization's executive leadership from the newsroom. In another example, when a video went viral highlighting a Sinclair Broadcasting script about "fake news" that appeared across a large number of television stations, Cedar Rapids' ABC affiliate KCRG used that controversy to publish an explainer describing its own ethics policy, ownership structure, and local editorial authority.

While only a limited portion of transparency initiatives focus on ownership and funding, there is considerable evidence that the public



is particularly concerned about such matters.⁷⁴ Surveys and studies often highlight concern over journalists' perceived ulterior motives, whether commercial or ideological in nature.⁷⁵ To the extent that many people hold strong preconceptions about what goes on inside of newsrooms—persistent notions of “imagined journalists” as one recent study put it⁷⁶—efforts to demystify the process of assembling and reporting the news may help to reassure a skeptical public about why reporting and editing decisions are made. Even those whose distrust is rooted in longstanding concern over treatment of marginalized communities often blame owners and publishers over rank-and-file journalists.⁷⁷

Even so, studies have documented sometimes inconsistent effects associated with disclosure about reporting practices. One study conducted with *USA Today* and the *Tennessean* found that adding an “Explain Your Process” infobox alongside stories can lead to higher levels of perceived trustworthiness, although effects were

relatively small and similar infoboxes directing readers to additional stories that “demonstrate balance” were associated with no conclusive effects on trust.⁷⁸ A separate study involving articles published by the *Indianapolis Star* found differences in effects depending on the topic of the story.⁷⁹ Like editorial initiatives, the success of transparency efforts likely depends upon audiences consistently noticing them and accepting that the intentions behind them are well-meaning and genuine.

Engagement initiatives

A third type of trust-building initiatives, which accounts for about a third of the efforts tracked by Trusting News, involves some form of engagement with the public that goes beyond conventional editorial or transparency initiatives. Examples of such outreach include listening sessions and events such as the growing trend of news organizations hosting “public newsrooms” in an effort to establish more regular and open lines of dialogue between journalists and the communities they cover.⁸⁰ Trusting News highlighted one such example in New Hampshire Latino News partnering with community organizations around election events to hear from local voters about what specific forms of information they were looking for as they considered their political choices. Other efforts target particular communities for more sustained dialogue over time. Connecticut newspaper *The Day*, for example, at one point established a “trust committee” to engage with local community members who identified as conservative or right-leaning about their specific concerns about the newspaper’s coverage.

A significant proportion of these engagement efforts are conducted via social media platforms—32% of engagement efforts tracked

32%

of “engagement” initiatives involve the use of social media platforms.

9%

of “transparency” initiatives involve highlighting aspects of ownership and funding.

49%

of the small number of initiatives identified pertaining to DEI are specifically (and narrowly) about editorial policies concerning mugshots and coverage of crime.

by Trusting News. They may include Facebook Live videos, Twitter threads that take readers behind the scenes, or Q&As via subreddits and Instagram. These social media efforts may deepen connections with certain audiences and reach segments of the public, such as younger audiences, who are unlikely to consume news via traditional channels, but they come with trade-offs. They require publishers to contend with ever-shifting platform algorithms and priorities while adopting specific communication styles that govern the way information gets presented in these digital spaces.⁸¹ In so doing, there is some danger of further blurring lines between professionally produced journalism and other sources of information that appear in these venues, which many already associate with low-quality or deceptive content.⁸² To the extent that independent, professionally produced journalism already struggles to differentiate its unique qualities from other content in these spaces, platform-centric efforts around engagement may have considerable limits as a strategy for trust-building. Empirical evidence one way or another, however, remains lacking as no known study has yet to establish a clear link between such efforts and increases (or decreases) in audience trust.

There is, however, some promising evidence to suggest that engagement efforts in general can and do increase trust. A recent randomized experiment involving 20 news organizations over a six-month period showed that using Harken, a digital tool that allows members of the public to submit and vote on questions that newsrooms ought to investigate, led to small but significant increases in those organizations' web traffic, subscriptions, and audience evaluations.⁸³ While hardly a panacea, the study offers the first and so far only causal evidence that engaged journalism initiatives can in fact alter the way communities view the newsrooms that seek to serve them.

Diversity initiatives in staffing, leadership, and newsroom practices

The smallest proportion of current trust-building initiatives tracked (11%) involve addressing persistent inequalities in newsroom staffing and management—half of which (49%) specifically involve changes in editorial policies around coverage of crime and the publication of mugshots.⁸⁴ News organizations vary in the degree to which they draw attention to their DEI-related trust-building efforts or what they look like. Seattle NBC affiliate KING 5, for example, used the occasion of George Floyd’s murder to air an open conversation between newscasters about experiences with discrimination and interracial friendship. ProPublica, in another example, ran a detailed explainer to accompany an investigative story for why they published a disturbing video alongside a story about a suspect who died while in police custody. Similarly, LAist published sidebars to explain its use of certain language choices. Others have made changes to editorial staffing or leadership without much fanfare in the hopes that diversifying their news organizations’ management will lead to more inclusive and fair coverage, which will in turn foster trust among long-distrusting communities.

Whether any of these kinds of efforts actually increase trust—or worse, potentially undermine it among those who see such efforts as misaligned with their own ideological views—is poorly understood. In one narrow example, a recent study did find that using “person-centered language” (as in a “person with substance use disorder” instead of the more stigmatizing term “drug abuser”) led to slightly higher levels of trust on average, suggesting that subtle changes in language use can increase perceptions of trustworthiness.⁸⁵ In other cases, ingrained biases among the



public often extend to perceptions of journalistic credibility as well. For example, repeated experiments have shown that male newscasters often continue to be viewed—among both men and women—as more credible than women.⁸⁶ These effects have been shown to be linked to the longstanding lack of representation of women journalists on the airwaves.⁸⁷ Apart from gender, other studies have highlighted similar complexities around the impact of newsroom DEI efforts. While members of marginalized communities often describe seeking out news from voices they believe better understand their lived experiences, they are also often wary of tokenism and skeptical about the underlying intent of such efforts.⁸⁸

Looking ahead: What we want to know

This document offers a broad overview of the latest research on trust in news, what it means, why it is declining, and what we know about how to respond to these challenges. As highlighted above, many gaps remain in our understanding around what works and does not work. That is where future research stands to make its greatest impact. While controlled studies in lab-like settings have variously shown potential for editorial and transparency initiatives, these efforts often presuppose a level of attention to the practice of journalism that is rare except among already committed audiences. Likewise, while engagement efforts or changes to DEI initiatives have been shown to increase trust among some audiences, less is known about how generalizable these approaches may be.

In short, if the news media is to make more substantial strides in responding to the steady erosion of its standing with the public, a more rigorous, coordinated, and broad-based effort is needed—one that involves partnerships between newsrooms and researchers to document and share findings around the effectiveness of trust-building initiatives. While there may be no silver bullet to solve the problem of growing skepticism toward professional journalism, the studies reviewed here demonstrate several areas that hold definite promise. Ultimately their success depends upon identifying *whose* trust newsrooms seek to gain and to *what end*. The impact of these efforts can and should be measured so that future investments in pursuit of the public's trust can be guided not by intuition and wishful thinking but by the best available evidence the industry can muster.

Notes

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