



Alliance for Trust in Media

MINNESOTA
JOURNALISM CENTER

HUBBARD SCHOOL
OF JOURNALISM & MASS COMMUNICATION

 UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Research Brief: *Texas Tribune* ‘Radical Transparency’ Initiative

About the Initiative

How does a news organization build trust with audiences who are the most alienated from news and least likely to encounter their content?



During the 2024 election, the *Texas Tribune* partnered with researchers from the Minnesota Journalism Center in partnership with Alliance for Trust in Media to test the effectiveness of an initiative designed to meet audiences where they are and take their concerns about the news seriously. The hypothesis: if skeptics could converse



directly with the newsroom and get prompt and patient answers to their queries, the exchanges could lead to mutual recognition and, eventually, trust. The initiative was inspired by the approach pioneered by [Heider Garcia](#), a Texas elections administrator who calmed concerns about voter fraud in his community by making himself available to critics, patiently answering their questions, and debunking misinformation whenever it arose.

We recruited two groups of study participants from across the state of Texas and randomly selected half to connect with the Tribune using the texting platform GroundSource. The tool allowed participants in the study to ask questions of Tribune editors during the week prior to the election and immediately following the tallying of the votes. Participants in both the treatment and control groups were surveyed both before and after the intervention to assess whether the initiative made a significant impact on news skeptics’ attitudes toward the Tribune.

Research Questions: What Did We Hope to Learn?

We wanted to understand:

- How does participating in such a transparency initiative affect audiences’ sense of trust and connection with the Texas Tribune?
- How does participating in such a transparency initiative affect people’s understanding of how journalists do their jobs?

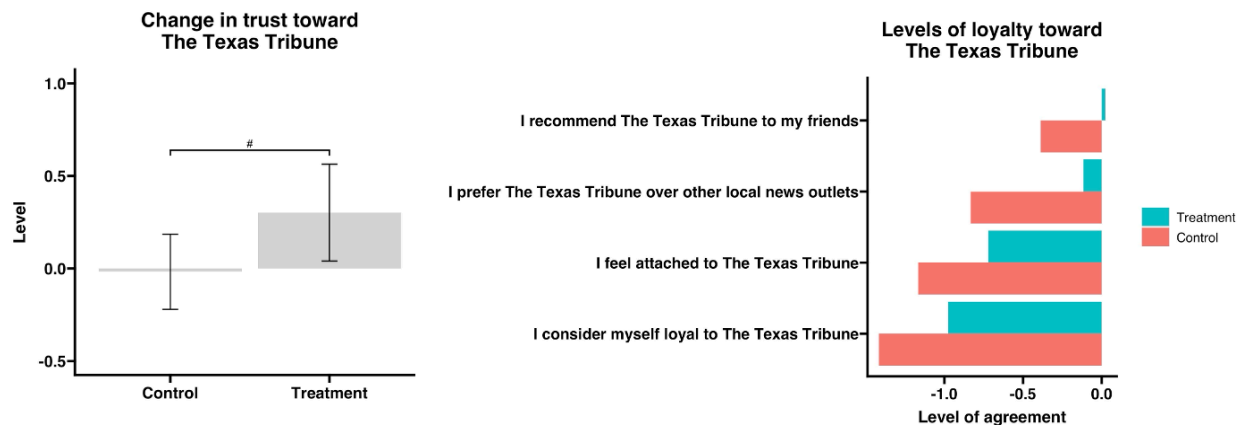
How We Studied the Initiative

We conducted a randomized field experiment to test the impact of participating in the texting experiment.

- Working with a third-party recruitment agency, study participants ($N = 131$) were screened from across the state with a focus on people who infrequently accessed news (44% did so less often than once a week or never) and either did not trust news in general “very much” (85%) or “at all” (15%). Participants varied by age and race, but skewed female (74%). Most did not have a college degree (24%), and most did not identify with either political party (58%). The remainder were evenly balanced between Democrats (21%) and Republicans (20%).
- Half the sample was randomly assigned to a treatment condition, meaning they were invited to join the SMS texting group with the Texas Tribune.
- All were surveyed the week before the election and three weeks after to assess changes in their attitudes toward news and the Tribune specifically.

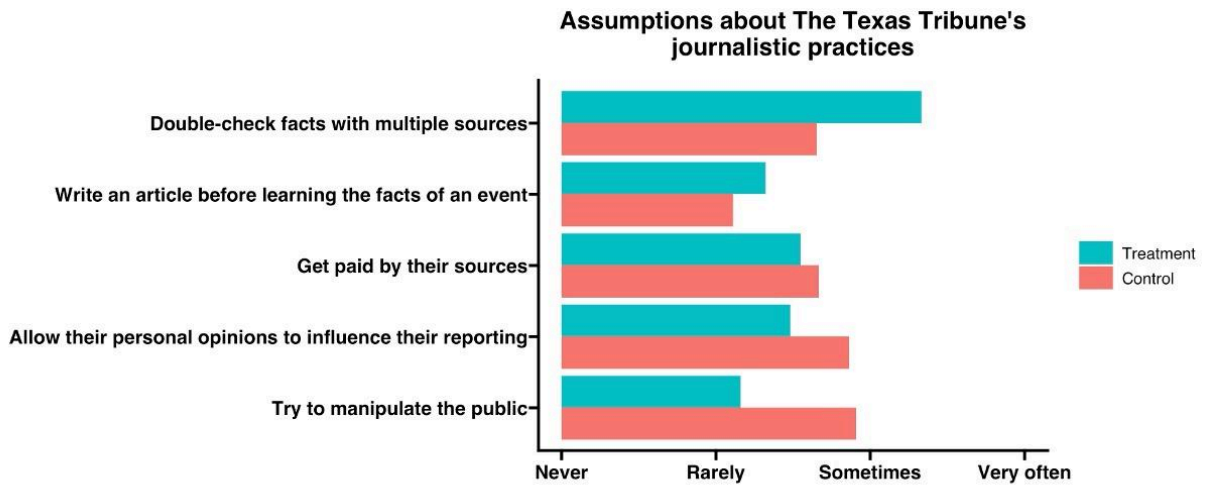
Key Findings

Relative to the control group, participating in the texting experiment was associated with modest but significant **increases in trust toward the Texas Tribune and loyalty to the organization.**



Although most attitudes toward the Tribune remained relatively negative—not surprisingly given that study participants were largely distrusting toward news in general—they were *less* negative among those who participated in the texting initiative compared to those who did not, which suggests the one month initiative had its intended impact on even this highly skeptical group of individuals.

In addition to increases in trust, participating in the texting experiment was also associated with significant improvements in perceptions about the Texas Tribune’s reporting practices. Those invited to participate in the texting initiative were more likely to say they thought Tribune staffers double-checked their facts and were less likely to say they allowed their personal opinions to influence their reporting or tried to manipulate the public.



Implications and Next Steps

- The findings show great promise for text messaging-based engagement initiatives as a strategy for building trust and loyalty with news consumers, even those most skeptical and disconnected from journalism.
- Next steps: we plan to link the survey responses to the data from GroundSource, the text messaging platform used to engage with study participants in the treatment group to be able to better describe the nature of the interactions and how they related to the effectiveness of the initiative. We also plan to analyze the open-ended qualitative responses and additional survey measures to tell a fuller story about participants' experience in the study.