

Necessary Embrace



The public and the news media

“Keeping up with the news isn’t as much fun as it used to be.”

Evans Witt

Just how bleak is the picture for the American news media? If the import of these headlines is correct, the outlook is quite dark indeed. And look at these statistics:

- The average weekday readership of newspapers dropped from 79 million in 1998 to 76.4 million in 2001, according to the Newspaper Association of America, while the adult population rose from 134.9 million to 140.6 million. That continues a trend dating back to at least 1964.

- The average Nielsen rating for one of the Big Three nightly news shows on ABC, CBS or NBC dropped from 9.4 to 6.9 from 1990 to 2001. [Each ratings point represents 1% of the number of households with televisions in the United States, which is currently estimated at 105.5 million.]

- Advertising revenues contracted at a startling rate for news outlets in all media through 2000 and 2001, slicing the profit margins that had been consistent and sometimes rich.

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It's possible that these statistics—as depressing as they seem—are merely the symptoms of even worse problems. Even more important than trends in readership, ratings and revenue is the fact that the media depend, quite literally, on the public's continued belief in their presentation of the news as fact. If the public stops believing the news, no amount of marketing, packaging and spiffy new sets to surround the television anchors will save them.

Are things that bad? In a word, no. A fair reading of the public's attitudes shows a complex picture, full of challenges for the media. But the public still wants them to be there every day, providing an accurate summary of what is happening.

One has to look no further than the events of September 11 and their aftermath to understand the role the media play in this country. Americans turned to their TV sets that morning and stayed glued to them for days. Newsstand sales of news magazines shot up.

In the words of Tim J. McGuire, president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, "We all learned again that day just how important journalism is to us, but more importantly, to the readers of American newspapers. Our readers needed our newspapers. They clung to them as we haven't seen them cling in years."

Not only did Americans become avid consumers of the news; their opinions of the media improved quickly and dramatically. This is not to say that the improvement will hold over time, but it is to say that the public finds the news media still central to daily life, particularly in a crisis.

Now, it is also fair to say that people are not happy with many recent trends in the news. There are many things about the media that the public is unhappy with—and so are many journalists. But assessments of the media in terms

of ratings, profits and ad sales reflect a limited, Wall Street-centered view that is far from what the public thinks.

First and foremost, most Americans still believe most of what they see on the local television news or read in their local newspapers. A Knight Foundation survey in 1999 found that 70% of Americans believed all, almost all, or most of what they saw on their local television news. And 67% believed all, almost all, or most of what they read in their local paper.

The credibility of the news media has, however, declined and declined significantly over the years. A survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, using a slightly different question, found that believability declined from 80% of the public in 1985 to 61% in 2000. A similar decline took place in national television news. Just over 60% in the Pew poll said they believed what they saw on the national news on ABC, CBS or NBC.

But the credibility story might not be as simple as these numbers would seem to indicate. In a recent telephone survey for the Consumers Union WebWatch Project, a national sample of internet users was asked, "How much of the time do you think you can trust [this type of organization] to provide information that is accurate and not misleading—just about always, most of the time, only some of the time or almost never?" Newspapers and television news were trusted by 58%, which might seem low but was comparable with, for example, the 54% who trusted charities and the 47% who trusted the federal government in Washington.

It appears that the credibility of and trust in American media have declined in the past three decades as the credibility of and trust in *all* major American institutions have taken a beating. The more the public has seen of what really goes on inside major institutions—thanks to the news media—the less they like what they see.

The question is whether the decline for the media has stopped. There is some reason to believe it has. One of the lasting impacts of September 11 was that the horrible reality relayed by the television pictures was imminently and unfortunately believable. The great power of images on television was never clearer than that awful Tuesday morning.

Generations work in the media's favor when it comes to credibility: while news interest is down among the young, they tend to be more believing than the old. In the Knight Foundation national survey, 73% of respondents ages 18 to 30 found the local TV news mostly believable, versus only 64% of those over 65. For local newspapers, 73% of the younger folks expressed substantial trust, while only 57% of the older folks did.

Television, the most frequently used news source, also was more credible, albeit slightly, than newspapers, both in the broad sweep of the national survey and city by city. The Knight Foundation's surveys in 26 cities across the country asked the same credibility questions about local newspaper and television news in 1999, and in no city was the newspaper more credible than the local television news.

From Grand Forks, North Dakota, where the local TV news had an 86% to 81% edge, to Miami, where the advantage was 67% to 61%, the local TV news always rated higher. In a number of locations, there was no significant difference. In only one city out of the 26 (Long Beach, California) did the newspaper have a higher number in the raw percentages, but the percentages were so close there was no significant difference between the media in that poll.

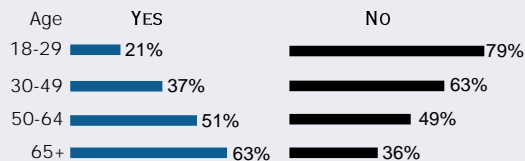
The edge of television news on this measure seems to infuriate some observers. After all, aren't television stories shorter (and shallower) than newspaper stories? Isn't local TV all about the anchor's hair? Put another

Figure 1

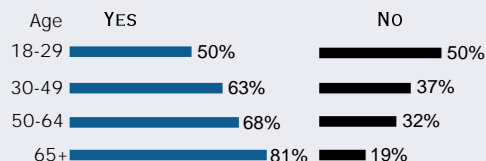
The Younger They Are, the Less They Read and Watch

Questions:

Just thinking about yesterday, did you get a chance to read a daily newspaper, or not?



Did you watch the news or a news program on television yesterday, or not?



Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Pew Internet and American Life Project, March 1-31, 2002.

way, does this mean quality in the news doesn't make a difference?

The answer to the last question is no, although the evidence is skimpy and frustrating. The work of the Project for Excellence in Journalism shows a correlation between the quality of local TV news and profitability, and Professor Phil Meyer at the University of North Carolina is working to create data on a link between quality and economic success at newspapers.

But the debate about credibility, quality, and economics comes at a bad time for the media. The dot-com meltdown, followed by a meltdown in advertising revenues, has put every news media outlet under pressure.

"The economic horizon looks brighter today than it did this time last year. The recession is lifting and, after 9/11, the public's reliance on newspapers is revitalized," said incoming ASNE president Diane McFarlin,

but recovery shouldn't be taken lightly. There is much to be reconciled and rehabilitated in the wake of cutbacks in the nation's newsrooms. Now that the dust has settled, we have 2,000 fewer journalists covering our communities, while the debate over the appropriate measures of profit and public service rages on.

In addition to possible stability on the credibility measures, there are other positive aspects of the public's

current view of the press: journalists are viewed as professionals and as people whose work helps keep the government and the society on the right path.

But there are negatives in Americans' view of the media as well. Several studies say the public finds many errors in news reports, along with a hesitancy to own up to the mistakes. The public also perceives the media as biased—although bias toward the left and the right are both seen.

Putting it briefly, keeping up with the news isn't as much fun as it used to be. The news is less attractive and more confrontational as the drumbeat of scandal stories—O.J. Simpson, Monica Lewinsky, and such—has contributed to the well-discussed tabloidization of the major news outlets (a trend that is said to be in response to public demand, but which has failed to help the ratings). And the proliferation of news channels and the internet has created more news sources to sort through.

How much less fun? Asked in a 2000 Pew Research Center poll how much they enjoyed keeping up with the news, Americans split. Forty-five percent said a lot, 40% said some, and 15% said not much or not at all. In June 1985, it was more fun: 54% said a lot, 34% some, and 11% not much.

There is one perception and one reality that are dangerous for the news media, if not confronted and resolved.

The dangerous perception is that Americans see the media as out of touch with what is going on in their communities and what is important in their lives. A majority—53%—in the 2000 Pew

Center poll agreed that "The people who decide what to put on TV news or in the newspapers are out of touch with people like me." And one in five agreed strongly. Forty-four percent disagreed with that statement.

This perception is dangerous because it raises the specter of irrelevance. If what the local TV news provides each night or what the local newspaper prints each day is not relevant to the reader or the viewer, both readers and viewers will simply go elsewhere. If you do not need to read the news for your daily life, there are other ways to spend your time. Even a local monopoly newspaper is no protection at all from people simply deciding to stop reading the paper.

This perception could be devastating if journalists are unaware of it. However, the good news is that journalists in a Pew Research Center poll conducted from November 20, 1998 to February 11, 1999 were not only aware of the criticism; they agreed with it.

A majority, both at local and national news organizations, agreed that, "Journalists have become out of touch with their audiences." Fifty-seven percent of the national journalists and 51% of the local journalists agreed. And since they recognize the problem, it is possible—not likely, perhaps, but at least possible—that journalists can and will make the effort to reconnect with their readers and viewers.

From the local daily paper to network news, journalists have been trying dif-

ferent approaches to connect more easily with the viewers and readers. The “News You Can Use” segments and increased medical coverage fall into this category. The debate continues over whether such approaches make news more accessible or simply replace hard news with something of lesser value.

Why did ABC seriously consider ousting the award-winning news show *Nightline* from its late-night spot in favor of David Letterman? It wasn’t low ratings; it was age—and not anchor Ted Koppel’s age, but the average age of the viewers. Letterman’s entertainment attracts a younger audience than Koppel’s news. Since advertisers are fixated on the young, the television network saw a chance to grab more ad dollars and more profit.

The public humiliation and rejection that made up the ABC-CBS-Letterman-Koppel routine reflect a grim reality that frightens American news executives. Although, as we have seen, people under 30 place more stock in the credibility of the news than their elders, they do not seem to pay much attention to it, either from the printed word or the network television screen. Only 21% said they read a newspaper the previous day. That’s far below the

63% of those age 65 and over who had done so (see Figure 1).

And only 50% said they had watched a television news show, again below the 81% of those over 65 who had.

Is this a trend? Yes, indeed it is. The percentage of those ages 18 to 29 in the National Opinion Research Center’s General Social Survey who said they read a newspaper every day dropped from 47% in 1972 to 18% in 2000.

One prominent media researcher looked at these and other numbers and suggested that by 2010 only 9% of 18 to 29 year olds will be reading a newspaper daily. That projection is bad enough, but the further assumption is that not only will this trend continue, but the young people who aren’t paying attention to the news now will not start doing so as they grow older.

Of course, that will not literally be true. As Generation X ages, they will marry, have children, buy houses and develop more ties to their communities. All of those life changes will push them toward more interest in what is going on around them—even as they deprive them of the time to pay too much attention to it. But young people are not developing the need for news early, and that is trouble for the news media in the years to come.

Much more has been said about young people and the news and about the news industry’s efforts to reach out to this new generation. But the negatives remain negative.

One further finding offers a ray of hope in the generational argument: among those online, there was little difference in how they used the web

for news (see Figure 2). Seven in ten in every age group had gone online for news, and just about one in four had done so the previous day. Those under age 30 were slightly less likely to have done so, but not by much. In short, this table does not look like the others.

So maybe, just maybe, young people are finding their news in different places, different media, than the older folks. This conclusion has to be taken as a very tentative one, since other readings—such as basic interest in the news—are still quite low among younger citizens. But it bears watching.

Where does this leave the news media and the public? The picture is not simple, and no headline can summarize it completely.

The good ol’ days, with three nightly national television broadcasts and then a local newspaper or two as the public’s sources of news, are gone forever. In their place is the fragmented and challenging marketplace of many channels for news. The economic models and structures of the media are under severe pressure, even as the journalist’s job gets harder. Journalists must understand how much harder it is for the public to sort through the clutter to find the news they need every day. The public continues to say it simply wants journalists to do their jobs, and to do them well.

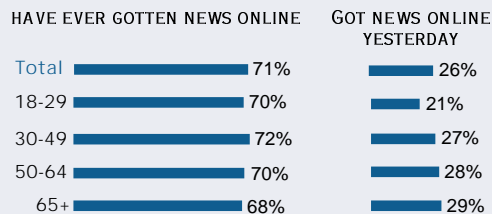
The American public needs the media, and most of them do turn to the news every day. In times of crisis, Americans make crystal clear the central role the news media play in a democracy. They are not very happy with how the media are doing their job, but they do want journalists to be the fair and trusted editors, lifting from the rest of us the burden of deciding what to report of the day’s events carefully and accurately. The link between the public and the media is renewed each and every day. ●

Figure 2

News Consumption Same for All Ages Online

Question:

Do you ever get news online? [If yes] Did you happen to do this yesterday, or not?



Note: Asked of internet users.

Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Pew Internet and American Life Project, March 1-31, 2002.