

What's the Story?

By Richard Morin

In two important ways, “Trust In Government... To Do What?,” which appeared in the July/August 2002 issue of *Public Perspective*, was exactly right. There was little reason to believe that the astonishing spike up in public trust in government immediately after September 11 was permanent, or that it extended to all facets of government.

But author Gary Langer was wrong when he suggested that journalists for major newspapers consistently had mischaracterized the permanence and the breadth of this initial increase.

I find his claims particularly puzzling because a fair reading of each of the stories cited by him reveals that these reporters had already learned the lessons he offers in his piece. In the ways that he believes reporters should have been skeptical and cautious, they were—months before his *Public Perspective* piece was published.

At issue was how major news organizations reported the post-September 11 increase in the proportion of Americans who expressed trust in the federal government “to do what is right” all or most of the time.

The Washington Post first reported that trust had increased from 30% in 2000 to 64% in late September after the terrorist attacks. Other news organizations reported the *Post*'s result, including ABC News; Cokie Roberts cited it on air the Sunday after the poll was released. Gallup confirmed the finding in a poll a few weeks later that showed 60% trusted government to do the right thing.

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“The finding quickly turned into a talisman,” Langer wrote. “‘The world has changed,’ went the post-September 11 buzz, and trust in government was the proof.”

But did the media misbehave, really?

One story cited was by Susan Page of *USA Today*, which, wrote Langer, “put the *Post* data under the headline, ‘Suddenly, “Era of Big Government” is Not Over.’”

The story, however, was not about public attitudes toward government, big or small. Rather, Page reported on the real growth of federal spending and the bureaucracy as a consequence of September 11 and the economic downturn.

The third and fourth paragraphs summarized the evidence that supported the headline:

Two challenges—the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington and the economic downturn they deepened—are prompting the biggest expansion in federal powers and the most free-handed new spending of federal dollars in decades.

Since the attacks nearly 3 weeks ago, President Bush has created a Cabinet-level council to coordinate homeland defense. Congress, with little debate, approved \$40 billion in emergency spending and a \$15 billion bailout for airlines. The government is poised to create a new federal authority to regulate airport security. Expanded powers of law enforcement agencies to screen emails, track financial transactions and detain immigrants are being debated.

The *Post* survey finding did make one fleeting appearance—in the twenty-first paragraph, immediately followed

by a quote from Harvard's Elaine Kamarck urging caution in interpreting the finding. A talisman? Hardly—more of an ornamental afterthought.

Langer also briefly quoted from a story by Martin Fletcher that appeared in *The Times of London*: “‘Big government’ is suddenly back in fashion in America.”

But he also might have quoted the very next paragraph, which read, “Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, George Bush, the most conservative president since Ronald Reagan, has presided over an extraordinary spending spree and expansion of federal powers in response to his traumatized nation's clamour for protection.”

Fletcher then went on to make many of the same points that Page made in *USA Today*. Once again, the poll numbers were noted in passing and hardly held out to be proof of anything.

Also questionable was the treatment of a special report that ran in *The Economist*. “As late as January 10,” Langer wrote, “*The Economist* invested more than 2,500 words in the subject, saying that the ‘astounding’ rise in trust was ‘the most noticeable change to have occurred in America after September 11.’”

It's true—those words did appear early in the piece. But *The Economist* was using them merely to set up its target. A few paragraphs later, the writer announced the real news:

“Yet four months later, politics as normal is back.... [I]t is as if the attacks and the change in public sentiments never happened.” Further on, the author concluded that “the striking thing is how little has changed, not how much.... [F]ew things will do more to reduce trust in government than a year's worth of bickering.” Many paragraphs of examples followed.

In short, *The Economist* story was not about permanence but impermanence—and about the dearth of evidence that Americans or their politicians had suddenly abandoned their skepticism of big government after September 11, with the one exception of “the area of national security itself.” Langer might just as easily have praised *The Economist* article or at least noted its core conclusions, since they were identical to his own.

Langer also wrote, “The Scripps-Howard News Service reported, ‘Cynicism is out and trust in government is back up to levels not seen since before the height of the Vietnam War.’”

But reporter Kevin Diaz went on to note: “For some analysts, the events since September 11 have trained the public eye on the best side of government service: its mission to protect.... It’s less clear whether the nation’s surge of national pride extends to trusting government on all matters of domestic policy”—again, exactly the same argument Langer made.

It’s true, as Langer wrote, that *The New York Times* devoted 1,700 words to government trust after September 11. But it’s also true that *Times* writer Alexander Stille raised appropriate cautions in the third paragraph about the permanency of the shift, quoting Francis Fukuyama, professor of international affairs at Johns Hopkins University, as cautioning, “[T]he fact that the numbers keep moving around shows that it can be quite ephemeral.”

In his second paragraph, Stille reported that a majority of Americans in the latest *Times* poll still favored smaller government—a finding Langer also cited, to question a fundamental change in the public’s attitudes toward government.

The bottom line: while Langer does make useful points elsewhere in the

piece, it must be noted out of fairness that both the fragility of the initial spike in government trust and the context-specific nature of the increase were part of the *zeitgeist* from the moment the first stories on those findings were published. ●

Gary Langer responds: *My topic last summer was not media criticism, nor was my intent to throw stones; my subject was the influence of social context on trend data. I quoted briefly from these articles to show that they had all reported that a dramatic change in public trust in government had been observed. Whether they did so as an ornamental afterthought, in passing, or as meaningful supporting evidence is a matter of interpretation, but also beside the point I was making.*

That some of them equivocated by speculating that the change was unreal or impermanent doesn’t help; this only paints public opinion as mercurial, rather than as considered judgement. Indeed, the point of my piece was not to suggest that this change was unreal or fleeting, but to take it as real and explore what it meant.

The media cannot be expected spontaneously to evaluate the impact of social context on trend data. I wrote to underscore the need for our profession to recognize and examine it—a lesson admittedly already well-familiar to veterans such as Rich Morin.

Have an opinion? Perhaps a reply to something appearing in Public Perspective? Direct submissions to the editor at pubper@ropercenter.uconn.edu. Submissions should be no more than 750 words. Authors will be contacted prior to publication.



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