

THE U.S. NEWS MEDIA: IS IT NEWS OR OPINIONATED ENTERTAINMENT? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

This paper traces the functions and effects of the mass media from a sociological perspective and how the media may be instrumental in building trust and credibility in the social institutions of a culture. Using a survey, the author describes respondents' levels of interest in the news media, and correlated levels of trust in the U.S. government, its legal system, its economy, and its news media.

Key Words

Media credibility, Mass media as institution, Media functions, News and social media, Opinion formation

Résumé

Cet article retrace les fonctions et les effets des médias de masse d'un point de vue sociologique et la manière dont les médias peuvent contribuer à établir la confiance et la crédibilité dans les institutions sociales d'une culture. Sur la base d'une enquête, l'auteur décrit les niveaux d'intérêt des répondants pour les médias d'information et les niveaux corrélés de confiance dans le gouvernement américain, son système juridique, son économie et ses médias d'information.

Mots-clés

Crédibilité des médias, Médias en tant qu'institution, Fonctions médiatiques, Nouvelles et médias sociaux, Formation d'opinion

INTRODUCTION

Political figures, consumer products, and social institutions do not become credible or trustworthy instantly. While love may happen, at first sight, relationships, friendships, and trust are cultivated gradually, over long periods. At the same time, political credibility and trust do not erode overnight. The pivotal role played by credibility in the process of persuasion was argued in the early writings of Aristotle and has been revisited continuously by scholars in social psychology, sociology, political science, philology, and communication.

For a social order to function, its people must trust its institutions. To develop this argument, this paper will first offer an operational definition of trust and its three key elements- the source, the message, and the medium. It will then proceed to discuss the functions and dysfunctions of the mass media. Using a survey (N=126), the final section explores the level of trust in the American news media among Hispanic-American college students. Not unlike much of the American population, the level of trust in the social institutions and the media is low among the surveyed sample.

1. WHAT IS ‘TRUST’?

Trust is different from faith or confidence as defined in the field of psychology and sociology. Faith requires no fact checking. It is accepted as untestable truth. Having confidence in a person or an institution requires some degree of reliability in past behaviors on which one may place one’s confidence. These differ from the trust, which requires conditionality and solidarity. To a certain degree, both faith and trust imply the impossibility of checking the intentions or character of the party. Confidence and trust rely on exchange systems; confidence requires ‘structurally determined situations’ while trust is an ‘unconditional exchange’ (Seligman, 1997, p. 171).

Nearly six decades ago, Carl Hovland and his associates at Yale advanced the theory that messages from credible sources produced stronger attitude changes and associated levels of trust corresponded to the “speaker’s expertise and trustworthiness” (Hovland et al. 1953).

Social psychologist, Coleman (1990, p. 98), argued that trust was based on rational choices and “interaction between trustor and trustee. If a trustee is trustworthy, the person who places trust is better off than if the trust was not placed, if the trustee is untrustworthy, the trustor is worse off than if the trust were not placed.” Thus, trust in news media requires ethical and professional behavior from journalists (Fukuyama, 1995). Silverstone (1999) asserted that for economies and societies to function, it was necessary for people to trust other people, the media created a platform from which political, and business actors could build trust.

1.1 Source Credibility

Although newspapers have editorial sections where the editors and columnists write opinion pieces, the audiences expect media sources (reporter, anchorperson) to remain fair and unbiased, accurate and trustworthy, and to tell the whole story covering diverse points of view. Under no circumstances should the reporters’ own opinions surface as part of the coverage. Once reporters deviate from this strict demand, they come to be perceived as opinion pundits and cease to be impartial messengers.

1.2 Message credibility

People's overwhelming disregard for advertising and political messages is a fair indicator of people's general mistrust in advertising messages and campaign slogans. Credibility encompasses both objective and subjective components of the believability of a source or a message. Credibility has two elements: trustworthiness and expertise. Both have objective and subjective dimensions. Once the credibility of a source becomes suspect, its messages become suspect. Finberg (2002) asserts that credibility is hard to earn and even harder to regain once lost. For example, it may be a while before consumers will accept advertising messages originating from VW auto group or Wells Fargo Bank. In a similar vein, people are cynical about the news media because the media are cynical about themselves (Capella & Jamieson, 1997). Mistrust in the media is compounded by elements such as media's failure to report and erroneous reporting (Major & Atwood, 1997). When such incidents occur, the media themselves cover such carelessness and mistakes, reducing people's trust in the media (Watts et al. 1999). The sole currency of a message is the integrity of its source, i.e., the reporter. The only currency that media have is their credibility. When one medium makes a mistake, it affects the credibility of the rest of the news media (Shepard, 2017).

1.3 Credibility of the media

A medium (newspaper, radio, television, the Internet) is just that- a medium. It delivers a message. The credibility of a medium is tied to the credibility of the messages. As such, messages become a matter of credibility of a medium. Media credibility is an interaction of source, message, and receiver (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). During and immediately after World War I, newspapers were perceived as more credible than radio. It was in the early 1960s when television began to be viewed as more credible than other news media (Westley & Severin, 1964). Newhagen and Nass (1989) suggested that people considered newspapers as institutions and broadcasters as individuals, thus using different criteria when determining the credibility of print media (newspapers) vs. broadcast media (radio and television). Thus, the news from the newspapers was institution based, and news from radio or television was personality based. With increasing popularity of the Internet, scholars have focused their attention on the newest medium (and the social media) and found that the Internet is seen as more credible than traditional media (Johnson & Kaye, 1998). However, many users of the Internet are unaware that most information posted online does not go through the strict processes of fact-checking and verification characteristic of traditional media (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000), nor do people always rank the more credible media as their preferred source for news (Westley & Severin, 1964). As scandalous yellow journalism put the credibility of newspapers in jeopardy, television is in part responsible for the deterioration of U.S. social capital (Putnam, 1995). As Engel (2017) argues, the 2016 presidential election put the American media credibility into the spotlight. The most trusted news media in the U.S. are the BBC and *The Economist*. ABC News, with the biggest audience, has to preface its newscasts as "The News You Can Trust." Americans say they get most of their political news from local TV, Facebook, and major networks like CNN and Fox News (Engel, 2017).

1.4 The decline of trust in media

To trust implies having confidence in the integrity of someone, something, or some institution. As such, a trustor expects honesty, fairness, and transparency from the trustee. There was a time when people could expect such behaviors from their leaders, financial institutions, manufactures, and the news media. However, leading to the 2016 presidential election in the U.S., Americans' trust in the media "to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly" declined to a record low since the beginning of Gallup's polling history. Only 32% of the polled said they had a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media. This was an 8% drop in one year (Swift, 2016).

Gallup began such surveys in 1972. Confidence and trust of Americans in their news media reached its peak in 1976 (72 percent) when the media offered investigative journalistic coverage of the Vietnam War and the Watergate mishap.

Two significant changes took place during the Reagan years. Firstly, reporters and journalists were no longer permitted entry to places where American troops were actively involved. The journalists and reporters were required to be briefed and vetted by the Pentagon before going to war zones and were only allowed in places deemed safe by commanding officers. All text and images were to be cleared by field officers before journalists could file their stories (Croteau & Hoynes, 1999).

Secondly, media ownership drastically changed. The Federal Radio Act of 1927, the formation of the Federal Communication Commission in 1934, and the TV Licensing Freeze in 1948 were originally created to guarantee public access to clear radio and TV signals, necessary for accessing basic news and information, and to create a marketplace that permitted easy entry and access without monopolistic controls by large corporations. However, ensuing deregulation of media industries by President Ronald Reagan allowed larger corporations to acquire unlimited number of newspapers, magazines, radio stations, and television stations in any geographical market in the U.S. The result was as expected – media oligopolies and virtual control of all news and information by large corporations operating with the mission that the bottom line is the top priority.

Traditionally, profits for radio and television networks came from entertainment programs and the news divisions lost money. The consolidation of media ownership resulted in severe cutbacks in news staff that affected news coverage and quality. Declining readership of newspapers, loss of the three major networks' viewers to cable, and the revenue losses coupled with the popularity of 24/7 news and social media have impacted the viability and sustainability of the conventional news operations. Even though most 'trained' journalists, whether traditional or digital, practice the journalist's code of ethics by fact checking and source verification. However, terms such as fake news and alternative facts have cast a shadow of doubt over most of the news outlets. Paradoxically, deregulation harmed diversity, localism, and competition in media, and accelerated the decline in media credibility to the extent that the mass media are no longer viewed as a credible institution that was expected to perform certain functions in American society. The rise of social media and the big data (Amazon, Facebook, Google) have allowed for greater transparency, it has also affected the media credibility (Anderson & Rainie, 2012). Li & Suh (2015) hold that both medium and message credibility are key ingredients in the perception of online information.

2. FUNCTIONALISM

Functionalism, as a theoretical framework emerged out of an interest to understand the *effects* of mass communication on social order. The movement began with political scientist, Harold Lasswell (1948, p. 37), who proposed that the mass media had three important social functions. The first was *surveillance* of the environment by keeping an eye on the political system and the social institutions and playing the role of a watchdog; the second was *correlation* of parts of society, and building cohesion within the parts and segments of a society; the third was *cultural transmission*, i.e., information about the past events and previous generations.

To these three, Charles Wright added ‘entertainment’ as a fourth function of the media (Wright, 1959). Merton (1949) added two dimensions to functionalism. He asserted that either media functions can be intended (manifest), or they may be unintended (latent). He also stated that while media serve important functions in a social system, if media were to fall into the wrong hands, the senders of the messages might also use it for dysfunctional purposes (Merton, 1949). For instance, instead of exposing corruption, the media may choose to look the other way and cease to function in their capacity as a surveillance mechanism. Through discriminatory and hateful messages, the media may divide the various minorities and subgroups instead of bringing them together, neglecting the correlation function. By distorting or omitting certain portions from historical events, the media may marginalize certain subgroups out of a national heritage. By offering excessive amounts of graphic violence and poking fun at certain individuals, groups, or ideologies, the entertainment function may have a narcotizing effect making audiences disregard important social issues in favor of mindless entertainment.

The rise of fake news and alternative facts are some of the recent examples of dysfunctional use (abuse) of the media. While certain individuals or organizations may benefit from propagating fake news and offering alternative truths, the results are misinformation, segregated populations, and fabricated histories. The news organizations shift from information to profitability has brought the media credibility to a level where the audiences have become skeptical about the fairness, accuracy, and trustworthiness in the media reporting (Hickey, 2003; Meyer, 2009). While the role of the mass media in a democracy was to bring its citizens the information they needed to make important decisions. People no longer feel that the media can be relied upon for such trustworthy information.

3. A SURVEY OF PUBLIC OPINION IN 2017

Between the years 1998 and 2000, *The Wall Street Journal* held a 42% credibility rating, however, in 2004; it was down to 23%. *USA Today* has historically stayed below 24% and was down to 18% in 2004. According to Pew Research Center that began reporting on media credibility in 2004, the credibility ratings for three major television networks in the year 2003 were; ABC 30%, CBS 33%, and NBC 29%. By the year 2004, the credibility of all three networks dropped below 25%. From the year 2003 to 2004, Gallup also reported a 9% drop in Americans’ confidence in the media’s ability to report the news accurately (Gillespie, 2004).

According to a study by the American Press Institute, for the news consumer, what makes something trustworthy and valuable differs depending on the topic and source, i.e., people tend to use different criteria for evaluating the credibility of national news vs. sports or lifestyle news (American Press Institute, 2016). The same study also reported that Americans follow a wide range of news and information topics. When asked to select the two topics they follow most closely, the most popular choices are domestic issues (25 percent), national politics or government (22 percent), local news (13 percent), and foreign or international news (4 percent) (American Press Institute, 2016).

The Gallup survey uses a shotgun approach to measure the credibility of the mass media. It asks respondents how much trust and confidence they have in the mass media such as newspapers, TV, and radio in reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly. The choices offered are – a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or none at all. The present study uses a similar format to determine the performance of the media in terms of fulfilling the key functions discussed earlier and the overall perception of the media by the respondents. The study also examines the differences in these perceptions based on gender.

A 34-item, self-administered, paper-and-pencil instrument was given to college students on a public university with nearly 95% Hispanic Americans in a mid-size, border city on U.S.-Mexican border. The questionnaire included items about the respondents' confidence/trust in the social institutions, the U.S. government, the news media, and the economy. It also included items pertaining to political engagement, and interest in international, national, and local news. The instrument used Likert-Scale items for all the items except one. The exception was an open-ended question that asked - *In your opinion, what is the most serious problem that the U.S. is facing now.*

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The survey was conducted two weeks after President Donald J. Trump took office. One hundred and twenty-six respondents completed the questionnaire. The aim of the study was to gauge the respondents' interest local, national, and international news, how they accessed the news, and what levels of credibility the media and other social institutions had with the respondents.

3.1 The sample and trends

The sample comes from a border town with heavy traffic between Mexico and the U.S. providing many employment opportunities with Border Patrol, Immigration, Customs, Homeland Security, the police force, legal services, and the various law enforcement agencies. The local university offers a four-year degree program in Legal Justice that prepares the students for the above professions. Almost every family in the city has one or more of its members working for one of these agencies.

The sample consisted of 69 (54.8%) females and 57 (45.2%) males. Among the sample, 102 (81%) participants were between 20 and 25 years of age, 9 participants (7 %) were under 20 years of age, and the remaining 15 (12%) were above the age of 25. Regarding their political position, 18 (14.3%) of the participants classified themselves as conservative, 63 (50%) as moderate, and 45 (35.7%) as liberal. The sample included 12 foreign students who were not eligible to vote. Among the remaining 114 respondents, 81 (71%) voted in the presidential election, and 33 (29%) did not take part in voting. It is reasonable to state that the

sample consisted of politically engaged individuals. As for their political party affiliation, 69 (54.8%) respondents were Democrats, 27 (21.4%) were Republicans, 15 (11.9%) were independent, and another 15 (11.9%) said they were affiliated with some other political party. The county in which the survey was conducted has traditionally favored the Democratic Party.

Sixty-one (48.4%) respondents felt that the U.S. economy would remain unchanged in the next five years; 32 (25.4%) felt that it was likely to worsen, 33 (26.2%) felt it was likely to improve. A large majority, 75 (60%) of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the image of the U.S. was likely to improve in eyes of the rest of world in the next four years while 51 (40 %) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The respondents' level of trust in the social institutions, the U.S. government, the economy, and the news media was assessed using a five-point Likert-Scale. The items were worded as:

Consider the statement: “I trust” Which of the following may apply to you?

I trust ... completely.

I trust ... for the most part.

I'm not sure

I mistrust ... for the most part.

I have no trust in

The first two categories were grouped as 'Trust', and the last two as 'No Trust'.

The respondents' trust in various social institutions is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Trust in the Social Institutions

Institution	Trust	No Trust	Not Sure	Total
The U.S. Government	57 (45.2%)	36 (28.6%)	33 (26.2%)	126
The Legal System	57 (45.2%)	42 (33.3%)	27 (21.5%)	126
The Politicians	36 (28.6%)	33 (26.2%)	57 (45.2%)	126
The U.S. Economy	33 (26.2%)	33 (26.2%)	60 (47.6%)	126
The News Media	33 (26.2%)	60 (47.6%)	33 (26.2%)	126

Over one-fourth (26.2%) of the respondents have no faith in their politicians or the U.S. economy; nearly 29% do not trust the government. 33.3% of the sample has no faith in the legal system, and over 47% of the participants claim to have no trust in the media. In the present survey, the news media fare as the least trusted among the social institutions.

Men and women differed in their opinions about their trust in the U.S. government and the U.S. news media. Both Chi-square and t-test calculations indicated that women trusted the U.S. government more than men. This was significant at .01. Similarly, Chi-square and t-test revealed that men have a higher level of trust in the media than women do. This too was significant at .01 level. However, there were no significant differences in trust in the legal system, the U.S. economy, and politicians.

The open-ended item that asked respondents to name the biggest problem faced by the U.S. generated eight categories. These perceived problems are presented below in their ranked order.

Table 2. Problems Facing the U.S.

Ranked by Perceived Problem
the Sample

#1	Immigration
#2	Economy
#3	Discrimination
#4	Donald Trump
#5	Education
#6	Women’s rights
#7	Environment
#8	Media

It was hypothesized that there was no difference between men and women in their perception of problems facing the U.S.

The respondents were allowed to list more than one problem. The number of times each problem was listed is tallied in Table 3.

Table 3. Gender and Problems faced by the U.S.

Problem	Men	Women
Discrimination	33	18
Donald Trump	18	9
Immigration	12	36
Economy	12	18
Environment	6	9
Media	9	0
Women’s rights	3	9
Education	3	9

Calculated Chi-square = 35.629, $p < 0.001$.

The difference between men and women regarding the perceived problems are significant. While men consider discrimination and President Donald Trump as the key problems, women identify immigration as the most important problem followed by the economy and discrimination. The data, thus, does not support the null hypothesis. Their perceptions do differ.

Regarding media functions, respondents rated the media’s performance on a scale of one-to-five. The average scores for the four functions are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Media Functions

Media Function	\bar{X}
Entertainment	4.0
Surveillance	3.071
Cultural Transmission	2.5
Cultural Correlation	2.429

The respondents' perception that instead of functioning as a watchdog, or being a cohesive force to unite various sub-groups, or providing an accurate and unbiased picture of past generations and history, the media are focused on providing entertainment and opinionated news coverage. The low scores on Cultural Transmission and Cultural Correlation suggest that there may be more of distortion of historical facts as presented in the media and that the media might be responsible for dividing various subgroups rather than uniting them. In this regard, the media may have become dysfunctional.

Regarding their exposure to, and interest in, the news three (2.4%) of the respondents said they did not have much interest in the news, 87 (69%) said they were the light users of the news media, and 36 (28.6%) reported being heavy users of the news. Concerning their interest in different types of hard news, it appears that the respondents reported as being more interested in the national news. One-fifth of the respondents were not interested in the international news, and nearly one-fourth reported as having no interest in the local news. Table 5 presents these data in a tabular form.

Table 5. Level of Interest in Hard News

	Informed	Somewh at Informed	Not Interested/ Not Informed	Total Responses
International News	17 (17.7%)	60 (62.5%)	19 (19.8%)	96
National News	40 (53.3%)	33 (44%)	2 (2.7%)	75
Local News	16 (18.6%)	49 (57%)	21 (24.4%)	86

Americans rely on many different types of media for news about the topics they follow most closely. No one medium dominates (American Press Institute, 2016). With the popularity of social media and Smartphone as a delivery tool, it is not surprising that the respondents rely more on the new medium instead of the conventional news media such as newspapers, news

magazines, radio or television. Table 6 presents the responses to the participants' choices for accessing the news.

Table 6. How do you access the news?

Medium	1st Choice	2nd Choice
My Smartphone	57	33
Social media	36	42
Television	27	33
Radio	3	9
Newspapers	3	3
Magazines	0	3
Some other medium	0	3
Total	126	126

The respondents use the Smartphone most frequently to access the news and information. However, it is unclear if the respondents access the news feeds from the television networks or from some opinion blogs.

The respondents' levels of interest and trust in the print media, i.e., the national newspapers and news magazines, network television (ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS), and cable television (CNN, Fox News, MSNBC) are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7: Attitudes and Opinions Regarding the News Media

	Newspapers	Magazines	A BC	C BS	N BC	P BS	C NN	F OX	MSN BC
Trust it	15	18	27	36	36	39	21	17	41
Favors Liberal viewpoint	0	0	56	58	48	27	12	5	40
Favors Conservative viewpoint	0	0	3	6	6	0	20	62	18
No faith in it as a news provider	32	42	0	0	3	0	13	33	7
I almost never read/watch it.	39	64	18	15	23	47	40	7	19
No opinion	40	2	22	11	10	42	23	2	3

Respondents seem to think that the network television, MSNBC, and PBS carry a liberal bias while Fox and CNN lean towards conservative views. Nearly one-fourth of the respondents have little or no faith in FOX news channel or national newspapers. Nearly one-third have no faith in news magazines. Slightly over 50% of the participants never read news magazines, and 31 % do not read newspapers.

Among the reported sample, women were politically more engaged than men were. A greater portion of the women voted in the 2016 Presidential elections than did men. (Chi-square = 11.344; p-value 3.441. This is significant at $< .01$)

Regarding their party affiliations, proportionately more women claim to be Democrats than men are. Conversely, more men claim to be Republicans than women are. (Chi-square = 20.908; p-value < 0.0001 . This is significant at $p < .01$)

Regarding their outlook on the image of the U.S. in the next four years, 24 (42%) men agreed, and 33 (58%) disagreed; 51 (74%) women agreed and 18 (26%) disagreed. The calculated Chi-square = 13.108, p-value: 0.000294. The difference is significant at $p < .01$. Women are more optimistic about the future image of the U.S. in the coming four years.

Small sample size disallowed any comparisons among the Republican and Democrats, or politically active and non-voters, light and heavy users of the media, or those who claim to be conservative vs. liberal in their opinions towards the credibility of the institutions and the media.

It is, however, evident that the respondents' trust and faith in the institutions and the media are at historically low levels. Not only are younger people accessing unchecked and unverified news on social media, they admit to being disinterested, uninformed, or only mildly informed.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is reasonable to say that the Hispanic-American college students who are 25 years of age or younger rely on Smartphone and social media to access the news and information. As such, they have abandoned traditional print, broadcast, and cable media. According to the present sample, the function fulfilled by the media is that of entertainment. Newsfeeds on the internet, social media, and blogs are unchecked variations of the facts (alternative facts and fake news) and news events coated with opinions of the likes of Bill O'Reilly, Rachel Maddow, and Rush Limbaugh offer opinionated entertainment. There appears to be a dire shortage of programs providing investigative reports on matters that would be considered serious, national or international issues, i.e., the hard news. Soft news topics such as noisy neighbors, road rage, and heroes of American gymnastics hardly classify as investigative news journalism. However, such is more readily and frequently available on the television networks. Even serious television news programs such as *60 Minutes* and *20/20* structure their stories as fictional narratives with doses of good guys, bad guys, and conflict. Serious issues are dramatized to look like exciting entertainment. News reporting is reduced to storytelling (Postman, 1985). Resultantly, contemporary news anchors have failed to attain the credibility once associated with journalists such as Edward R. Murrow, Eric Sevareid, Walter Cronkite, Dan Rather, Connie Chung, Peter Jennings, Barbara Walters, and Tom Brokaw.

When the audiences lose interest in the news, and the news media turn national issues into entertainment, it is an indication that a nation may have become indifferent to its past or future. George Santayana warned us against such indifference to history by saying that those who failed to learn from the mistakes of their predecessors were destined to repeat them. U.S.

involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq is reminiscent of the Vietnam War. The recent failed coup in Turkey reminds one of the Bay of Pigs incident and American plans for staging a regime change.

The author is aware of the limitations of the study due to its small sample. Thus, the findings are not generalizable. However, the findings do concur with similar studies conducted by other researchers, the Pew Foundation, and the Gallup Corporation. There is a need for further studies in assessing the decline in the credibility of the media and the social impact of such a change. There is also a need for refinement of the instruments to measure credibility and trust.

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