



Press contact: Eric Young, [young-eric@norc.org](mailto:young-eric@norc.org), (301) 634-9536 or 703-217-6814 (cell)

## Most of the Public Doesn't Fully Embrace Key Principles of Journalism

*Newly released Media Insight Project study reveals a new way to look at the trust in news crisis and highlights how trust in media is tied to moral values rather than just political ideology.*

**CHICAGO, April 14, 2021** – A new study finds that many Americans are skeptical of what journalists consider their core mission, and people's moral values -- not political bias -- may be key to understanding the trust crisis facing the news industry.

Only 11% of Americans unreservedly endorse five core journalism principles tested in a study released today by the [Media Insight Project](#), a collaboration between the [American Press Institute](#) and [The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research](#).

The public skepticism toward these five principles (oversight, transparency, factualism, social criticism, and giving voice to the less powerful) goes beyond traditional partisan politics. The results of the study show people's views toward the media are connected with deeper feelings they have about basic moral values and which of those values they view as most important.

"This study opens up a new way of thinking about trust in the news media, and it offers fresh ideas for how to address the problem," said Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute. "The findings show journalists may be able to win the trust of skeptical audiences by reexamining some basic notions of what is important and what basic values are emphasized in news coverage."

Support for key journalism values does not break cleanly around party or ideology. The findings of the study indicate it may be more linked to differences in five key moral instincts or values (care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity), which cut across demographics and ideology.

For example, people who most value loyalty and authority are much less likely than others to endorse the idea that there should be a watchdog over those in power. Americans who most value care and fairness, meanwhile, are more likely to think society should amplify the voices of the less powerful.

The study also tested way that journalists can rebuild trust. The findings provide evidence that when stories are rewritten to broaden their moral appeal by including additional values, they become more interesting to a wider audience.

**Key Findings Include:**

- **One journalism principle — Factualism — generally wins more public support than the others tested.** The idea that the more facts we have in society the more likely we are to know the truth was fully embraced by 67% of Americans. By contrast, the fewest Americans (29%) support criticism, the idea that shining a spotlight on problems is the best way for society to solve them.
- **The trust crisis may be more rooted in people’s moral values than their politics.** We found the participants in our study fell into four distinct clusters based on similar moral values and attitudes toward core principles of journalism. Only one of those clusters leans clearly partisan -- a liberal, mostly Democrat cluster of people who strongly endorsed journalism values. The other three groups are composed of a mix of party affiliations and ideologies. These other three groups have varying degrees of hesitation about some core journalism principles.
- **The one group of Americans that showed the strongest support for the core journalism principles we tested was the smallest.** This group--call them Journalism Supporters--makes up only 2 in 10 of those surveyed. That number suggests that some of the traditional framing journalists bring to stories — and many of the traditional marketing appeals journalism organizations use that trumpet traditional journalism values — will only reach so far in rebuilding trust or winning new subscribers.
- **People who put more emphasis on authority and loyalty tend to be more skeptical about fundamental journalism principles.** These people--whom we will call Upholders -- put a high value on respect for leaders and groups. They worry that some of the things journalists believe in can be intrusive and get in the way of officials doing their jobs. This group would like to see more stories about what works, not just what is going wrong. Upholders however, actively seek out and consume a lot of news. Most of them (60%) also think the news they consume is accurate. At the same time, they show some deep reservations about the press and its values. Only 33% believe the news media in general are trustworthy. Even fewer (15%) think the press cares about them, or is moral (13%). Ideologically, Upholders are evenly split between conservatives and moderates (43%); another 13% call themselves liberal. Politically, half are Republicans, 3 in 10 are Democrats, and 2 in 10 are independents.
- **Another group, people who care deeply about all five moral values, are generally supportive of journalism principles, but that support is not unqualified.** This group, whom we call The Moralists, score higher than any other group on all five moral values. They are also a political and ideological mix, predominantly moderate and slightly more Democrat than Republican. It is also the most diverse group by age and race. And while the majority of Moralists think the news is trustworthy (51%) and accurate (74%), Moralists share some deep suspicions about the press.
- **The study also points to ways journalists can rebuild trust.** If stories are rewritten to broaden their moral appeal by highlighting additional values, they become more interesting to people in all groups--both those more trusting of media and those more skeptical. We took some basic

news stories and wrote each of them two different ways. In some instances, the revised stories that highlighted additional moral angles were more appealing to all types of people. For example, significantly more people considered a revised version of a story about election security to be balanced (62% vs. 44%). More also considered the revised story trustworthy (78% vs. 70%). And even people who already trust the press tended to like stories more when those stories were revised to broaden their appeal.

- **To woo subscribers, the media will need to vary its messaging beyond traditional appeals about journalism being a watchdog.** The survey also tested different messages asking respondents to financially support a local news organization. The findings suggest people's moral leanings definitely influence what kind of messaging about journalism they find appealing. People who most emphasize care or fairness, for instance, were more motivated by a message that highlighted the outlet's commitment to protecting the most vulnerable through their news coverage. People who emphasized authority and loyalty preferred a message about the outlet's long-term service to the local community.

"Although the public might not fully embrace core principles of journalism, there are clear signs of hope for the media in this report," said Trevor Tompson, director of The AP-NORC Center. "A better understanding of how Americans' moral values are connected to their views of news can help journalists identify how they can frame their stories to appeal to a broader audience."

### **About the report**

This study was conducted by the Media Insight Project, an initiative of the American Press Institute (API) and The Associated Press NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. The study was funded by API. Staff from API and The AP-NORC Center collaborated on all aspects of the study.

The study featured two surveys. Interviews for the first survey were conducted between November 22<sup>nd</sup> and December 15, 2019, with 2,727 adults age 18 and older representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The first survey included both probability-based sample and non-probability based sample.

For the second survey, 2,124 probability-based respondents who completed the first survey and did not skip key survey questions were invited to complete it. The second survey was conducted between August 18 and August 24, 2020, with 1,155 adults age 18 and older.

The probability interviews were all conducted using AmeriSpeak®, NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. The non-probability sample was provided by Dynata based on quotas related to age, race and ethnicity, and gender.

The overall margin of error for the sample for the first survey is +/- 2.3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.



The overall margin of error for the sample for the second survey is +/- 4.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

Details about the Media Insight Project can be found at: [www.mediainsight.org](http://www.mediainsight.org).

A full description of the study methodology for the surveys can be found at the end of the report.

The proper description of the survey's authorship is as follows: This study was conducted jointly by the [American Press Institute](http://www.pressinstitute.org) and [The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research](http://www.apnorc.org).

### **About the Media Insight Project**

The Media Insight Project is a collaboration between the American Press Institute and The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research with the objective of conducting high-quality, innovative research meant to inform the news industry and the public about various important issues facing journalism and the news business. The Media Insight Project brings together the expertise of both organizations and their respective partners, and involves collaborations among key staff at the American Press Institute, NORC at the University of Chicago, and The Associated Press.

<http://www.mediainsight.org/>

### **About the American Press Institute**

The American Press Institute advances an innovative and sustainable local news industry by helping publishers understand and engage audiences, grow revenue, improve public-service journalism, and succeed at organizational change. API is a national 501(c)3 nonprofit educational organization affiliated with the News Media Alliance. It works with and draws on the best ideas from technology, business and publishing.

<http://www.pressinstitute.org>

### **About The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research**

The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research taps into the power of social science research and the highest-quality journalism to bring key information to people across the nation and throughout the world.

[www.apnorc.org](http://www.apnorc.org)

The Associated Press (AP) is the essential global news network, delivering fast, unbiased news from every corner of the world to all media platforms and formats. Founded in 1846, AP today is the most trusted source of independent news and information. On any given day, more than half the world's population sees news from AP.

[www.ap.org](http://www.ap.org)



NORC at the University of Chicago conducts research and analysis that decision-makers trust. As a nonpartisan research organization and a pioneer in measuring and understanding the world, we have studied almost every aspect of the human experience and every major news event for more than eight decades. Today, we partner with government, corporate, and nonprofit clients around the world to provide the objectivity and expertise necessary to inform the critical decisions facing society.

[www.norc.org](http://www.norc.org)

The two organizations have established The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research to conduct, analyze, and distribute social science research in the public interest on newsworthy topics, and to use the power of journalism to tell the stories that research reveals.

###

Contacts: For more information, contact Eric Young for NORC at [young-eric@norc.org](mailto:young-eric@norc.org) or (703) 217-6814 (cell).