

Trends In Public Support For Journalists And The Media

By

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Introduction

The low level of evaluation of the media by the American public is well documented by two ongoing, annual Gallup surveys, the Governance Survey and the Confidence In Institutions Survey. These surveys also document that the decline in trust and confidence in the media is accompanied by drops in trust and confidence in other American institutions and in government itself.

In the 2016 Governance Survey, Gallup found only 32 percent of the U.S. adult population had a great deal or fair amount of confidence in the mass media when it comes to reporting news fully, accurately and fairly. This was the lowest level ever reported.¹ Confidence in the three branches of the federal government took a slight upturn but remained low historically.²

The 2016 Confidence In Institutions Survey found that those expressed a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in newspapers was only 20, another historical low.³ Confidence in

¹http://www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx?g_source=confidence%20in%20media&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles

²http://www.gallup.com/poll/195635/americans-confidence-government-takes-positive-turn.aspx?g_source=Politics&g_medium=newsfeed&g_campaign=tiles

³http://www.gallup.com/poll/192665/americans-confidence-newspapers-new-low.aspx?g_source=newspapers&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles

television news was 21 percent, also another new low.⁴ Overall confidence in U.S. institutions remained at historically low levels, the survey showed.⁵

The reports from these Gallup surveys leave unanswered a number of questions. Are the two Gallup surveys unusual, or do other surveys of American public opinion show the same picture? Do the declines in public confidence in the media deviate from the overall trend for other institutions in any way, or do these simply reflect general patterns that are largely out of the control of the media institutions? If the declines in public evaluations of the media deviate from general patterns in any way, what might explain those deviations?

This paper addresses those three questions.

Confidence in the Institutions

The media are political institutions in society, and public support for political institutions has been a central concern in the political science literature across time. Listhaug and Wiberg (1995) took the position that confidence in institutions is a middle-range indicator of support for or acceptance of the legitimacy of the political system. They differentiate between confidence in government institutions and confidence in private institutions. Examples of the former are the armed forces, the educational system, the legal system, the police, parliament and the civil service. Examples of non-governmental institutions are the church, trade unions, major companies and the press. Using survey data from the European Value Systems Study Group, which included measures of each of these institutions, they found empirical support via factor

⁴http://www.gallup.com/poll/155585/Americans-Confidence-Television-News-Drops-New-Low.aspx?g_source=television&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles

⁵http://www.gallup.com/poll/192581/americans-confidence-institutions-stays-low.aspx?g_source=confidence%20in%20institutions&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles

analysis for this distinction. Norris (1999) saw confidence in institutions as one of the dimensions of a broader concept of political support. Norris and Inglehart (2010) describe confidence in political institutions as an indicator of regime support.

The trend of confidence in political institutions, particularly the decline in political trust has been studied by many political scientists (Citrin, 1974; Lipset and Schneider, 1983; Putnam, 1995; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995; Newton and Norris, 2000). By examining the data conducted by the American National Election Studies from 1952 to 1980, Lipset and Schneider (1983) concluded that a general declining confidence trend can be identified across institutions. They also tracked the trend of the public attitude toward industries and firms and suggested that this problem is not primarily attitudinal because there's no evidence of any serious downturn in people's evaluation of their own political competence or any loss of faith in the structure and norms of the political system as a whole. In fact, people's hostility appears to be directed at the performance of these institutions and their leaders.

Gronke and Cook (2007) confirmed what Lipset and Schneider (1983) suggested for the 1970s and 1980s by further investigating the data from the General Social Survey from 1973 to 2004. They found that Americans' confidence in the news media did shift to a much more negative assessment from the early 1970s to the late 1990s. Also the public confidence in the press is found to be strongly predicted by a measure of generalized confidence in other institutions, that is, it is connected to other institutions closely rather than operating from outside the social and political order. The confidence in the press is not a mere extension of how citizens judge institutions in general, as other variables such as education, age, income, partisanship, ideology and strength of partisanship also have independent effects upon confidence in the press

over the impact of generalized confidence. They also noted that though the press as a whole is increasingly being judged negatively, Americans do not disdain the news, and there is still much to be done to understand fully how the public views and evaluates the news media as a political institution.

English (2007), Becker and Vlad (2009), and Becker, Vlad and English (2010) have examined the relationship between confidence in the media and press freedom using data from the Gallup World Poll. At the zero-order, the researchers found that there is no relationship between the two concepts. Based on analyses of surveys conducted in approximately 100 countries in 2007, 2008 and 2009, however, the researchers found that public beliefs about the openness of the society mask a real relationship between confidence in the media and press freedom. In each of the three years, confidence in the media relative to confidence in other institutions in society was found to be negatively associated with press freedom when the society is open. When the society is closed, however, confidence in the media relative to confidence in other institutions is positively related to press freedom.

Perception of a Media Bias

Scholars have examined the media in their own right. Research on media credibility, for example, has a long tradition in the field of mass communication (American Society of News Editors, 1985; Eveland and Shah, 2003; Gunther, 1992). Interest in the topic was revitalized by the innovative work of Vallone, Ross and Lepper (1985). These researchers showed six segments of nationally televised news programs about the 1982 Beirut massacre to 144 Sanford students six weeks after the event took place. They found that both Pro-Arab and Pro-Israeli partisans rated the programs and those who produced them as biased toward the other side. The researchers

termed this a hostile media phenomenon, arguing that the students evaluated the media reports based on their own views, rather than the content itself. They also found that those respondents with greater knowledge were more likely to report the media reports to be biased.

Gunther (1992) argued that media professionals had overstated the case when they said that the integrity of reporters is the factor that almost entirely determines media credibility. To test this, he reanalyzed survey data gathered by the American Society of News Editors during December 1984 and January 1985 that asked respondents to rate the credibility of news coverage of many social groups and institutions. Gunther found evidence that audience involvement in an issue, situation, or group predicted more variance in respondents' credibility judgments of media than media attributes or demographic variables.

Watts, Domke, Shah and Fan (1999) used computer-assisted content analysis procedures to examine the balance in coverage of presidential candidates during the 1988, 1992 and 1996 elections. They then linked these findings to public perception of media bias and press coverage of the topic of media balance. The content analyses showed remarkable balance in candidate media coverage in the 1988 and 1996 campaigns and a slight bias favoring the Democratic candidate in 1992. The authors argued that the rising public perception that news media content had a liberal bias is largely due to criticisms driven by conservative elites and reported in news coverage.

Gunther and Chia (2001) explored the relationship among personal opinion, perceived news slant and perceived public opinion by studying the media coverage of a controversial issue, the use of primates in laboratory research. Participants in the study were asked about their personal opinions, their perceptions of general media coverage and public opinion. Those in

favor of using primates in laboratory research perceived more public support for such research than those who opposed it, so the researchers concluded that people see public opinion as much like their own. They also found that while the majority of respondents perceived news coverage to be unfavorable toward primate research, those who supported such research judged news coverage to be significantly more unfavorable than those who opposed it. This results supported the relative hostile media perception that people on both sides of the issue would find news coverage relatively disagreeable to their own point of view. This perception in turn affected the perceived public opinion (persuasive press inference), since perceptions of more unfavorable news coverage corresponded to perceptions of more public opposition to primate research after the personal opinion was controlled. Gunther and Christen (2002) further confirmed the contrary effect of persona opinion and perceived news coverage on estimates of public opinion.

Using national data from a panel of respondents, Eveland and Shah (2003) examined the role of interpersonal contexts in perceptions of media bias. They found that the individuals' perceptions of media bias were at least partly shaped through their interactions with like-minded others, and that the phenomenon is amplified among Republicans.

Kiousis (2001) explored perceptions of news credibility for television, newspaper and online news by conducting a survey among a randomly selected sample of residents in Austin, Texas, and asking their attitudes toward those three media channels. It appears that people are generally skeptical of news emanating from all three media channels but do rate newspapers with the highest credibility, followed by online news and television news, respectively. Also people's perception of news credibility is positively correlated across all three media. He also found

moderate impact of interpersonal discussions of news and media use on opinions about news credibility.

Gunther and Schmitt (2004) found that the media are singled out for hostile assessments and that those negative effects disappeared if the same content was labeled as coming from nonmedia sources. Participants in the field experiment were selected from one pro-genetically modified foods group and from one anti-GMF group. Each participant was assigned to a packet that contained a story about biotechnology and GMF. The content was randomly labeled as a newspaper article or a student essay. The participants systematically perceived the information attributed to the newspaper as hostile and persuasive in an unfavorable direction, while they found the so-called student essay as favorable to their own point of view.

Schmitt, Gunther and Liebhart (2004) did additional analyses of these same data to identify mechanisms that explain the hostile media effect. Out of the three processes of data selection and interpretation tested in the analysis (selective recall, selective categorization and different standards), only selective categorization appeared to be an explanation for the hostile media effect.

Gunther and Liebhart (2006) further refined the analysis of this phenomenon by testing the influence of the source (journalist vs. student) and reach (media organization vs. classroom composition). They found that a message associated with a large audience, such as a newspaper article, is more likely to generate a contrast bias, while a message in a low-reach context seemed to lead to an assimilation bias.

To assess how the level of involvement or partisanship, in addition to perceived reach of the message and characteristics of the source, impacted the perception of media bias, Gunther,

Miller and Liebhart (2009) selected a group of members of Native American tribes and one of people highly sympathetic to Native American interests. Their common characteristic was that they opposed the genetic modification of wild rice. The participants were exposed to neutral information compiled from various news stories on the GM rice topic. The information was attributed randomly to sources that would be seen as allied to Native American interests generally or not. The findings support the argument that audience members process media information in a qualitatively different way than other messages and that members of partisan groups are very sensitive to the mass communication environment.

Expectations

As noted, this paper focuses on three questions. First, we wanted to know if the Gallup Governance and Confidence In Institutions surveys are unusual, or if other surveys of American public opinion show the same picture? Second, we wanted to know if the declines in public confidence in the media deviate from the overall trend for other institutions in any way, or do these simply reflect general patterns that are largely out of the control of the media institutions? Third, we wanted to know if the declines in public evaluations of the media deviate from general patterns in any way, what might explain those deviations?

Our expectation was that the Gallup surveys would be replicated by other survey work and not reflect a firm-limited finding. We expected that a certain amount of the variance in evaluations of the media over time would be explained by overall declines in assessments of other institutions in society. But we also expected that specific forces affecting the media, such as falling revenue and decreasing staff sizes, would result in a poorer media product that would result in more critical assessments by the public.

Methodological Overview

The Gallup Governance Survey and the Gallup Confidence In Institutions Survey together are the longest running gauges of public opinion on the media, and the data they produce are the most cited and analyzed. The surveys have employed a sampling methodology across time that has met scientific standards and has evolved as survey sampling has changed to reflect economic changes in the industry and changes in society.

The surveys also have used a standard question across time.

The Governance Survey asks:

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media—such as newspapers, TV and radio—when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly—a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?

The Confidence In Institutions Survey has used this question:

I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, personally have in each one—a great deal, quite a lot, some or very little. Included on the list is newspapers and television news.

We began our investigation by attempting to learn what other questions have been asked by other survey organizations or even by Gallup that would put the responses to these two surveys into context. We wanted to know if the Gallup findings were consistent with what other organizations were reporting and what other questions might tell us about public assessments of the media.

We also searched for additional data on public assessments of other institutions in society so we could determine how assessments of the media might deviate from the overall trends.

Finally, we gathered data about media investments in newsgathering that might help explain any deviations in media assessments from the overall assessments of media institutions, if such deviations existed.

Databases

We searched the following survey research archives to find relevant survey data: The Roper Center at the University of Connecticut and Cornell University, the Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C., the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan, the Odum Institute at the University of North Carolina, and Polling the Nations, a commercial online database of public opinion poll questions.

We used the following key words in our search: “mass media,” “news organization,” ”journalism,” ”news sources,” “news practice,” “use of news,” ”newspaper,” ”radio,” ”television news,” and ”internet news.”

We then created a database that included for each match the title of the survey or source, survey firm or sponsor (if available), year, population, and sample size, the search term, and the question asked. We excluded questions asked about the public’s opinions about or consumption of specific news reports or stories.

As a second step, we identified questions asked on at least five years by the same firm and for which at least some data were available for 2000 or later.

Survey Data Sources

Using these criteria, we identified the following data sources:

Gallup Governance Survey: Starting in 1972, Gallup asked a series of questions about governance that are repeated, often on an annual basis. As part of these surveys, respondents are

asked how much trust and confidence they have in the executive branch, in the judicial branch and in the legislative branch of the federal government, and how much confidence they have in the state and local government. In addition, they are asked how much trust and confidence they have in mass media – such as newspaper, television and radio – when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly.

Gallup Confidence In Institution Survey: Starting in 1973, Gallup has asked a series of questions, often annually, about confidence in institutions in the U.S. In 1973, respondents were told: “I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Would you tell me how much respect and confidence you, yourself, have in each one--a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little?” The word “respect” was dropped in 1975. The question has remained the same since. The list of institutions about which the respondent was asked has varied quite widely over the years, but it has contained a core set of institutions. Included in that core are: the church or organized religion, the military, U.S. Supreme Court, banks, public schools, newspapers, Congress, television news, organized labor, the presidency, and the police. The items have been randomized in some surveys but not in all.

Gallup Business and Industry Survey: Starting in 2001 Gallup began asking the public about its overall opinion of various business and industry sectors in the United States. Respondents were asked: “For each of the following business sectors in the United States, please say whether your overall view of it is very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative or very negative.” These business and industry sectors included accounting, advertising and public relations industry, airline industry, automobile industry, banking, computer industry, education, electric and gas utilities, farming and agriculture, grocery industry, healthcare

industry, Internet industry, the legal field, movie industry, oil and gas industry, pharmaceutical industry, publishing industry, real estate industry, restaurant industry, retail industry, sports industry, telephone industry, television and radio industry, travel industry and the federal government.

Gallup Honesty and Ethical Standards Survey: Since 1976 Gallup has been asking the public about its evaluation of the honesty and ethical standards of people in different fields. Respondents were asked: “Please tell me how would you rate the honesty and ethical standards of people in different fields –very high, high, average, low, or very low?” The list of occupations about which the respondents were asked has varied over the years, but it has contained a core set of occupations, including journalists, TV reporters, advertising practitioners, bankers, business executives, car salespeople, clergy, college teachers, engineers, lawyers, members of Congress, medical doctors, police officers and senators.

Pew Political Survey: Since 1985 the Pew Research Center has included in its surveys questions about the public’s overall opinions of some organizations and institutions in the United States. Included were the federal government in Washington, the state governments, the local governments, labor unions, Congress, the military, business corporations, U.S. Supreme Court and news media. The responses were categorized into “very favorable,” “mostly favorable,” “very unfavorable,” “mostly unfavorable,” “never heard of,” and “can’t rate.”

Pew Biennial Media Consumption Survey: Since 1996 the Pew Research Center has conducted a biennial media consumption survey and asked people about their habits of consuming news. Before 1996 the Times Mirror Center, the forerunner of the Pew Research Center, asked some of the same questions. Specifically, respondents were asked about whether

they read newspapers, watch any TV news programs or listen to news on the radio regularly.

Respondents also were asked to report the time spent on those media, whether they enjoy keeping up with the news, and the different types of news they are likely to follow.

The General Social Survey: Since 1973 the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago has included on the General Social Survey (GSS) questions about confidence in institutions in the U.S., including banks and financial institutions, major companies, organized religion, education, executive branch of federal government, organized labor, press, medicine, television, U.S. Supreme Court, scientific community, Congress and the military. In addition, the GSS included questions about news sources and news consumption.

State of the First Amendment Survey: Each year since 1997 the Newseum Institute's First Amendment Center has conducted a survey covering various topics including perceptions of news media bias and press freedom. Respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with the statements such as: "Overall, the news media tries to report the news without bias;" "It is important for our democracy that the news media act as a watchdog on government;" and, "Journalists should be allowed to keep a news source confidential." In terms of press freedom, the surveys asked: "Overall, do you think the Press in America has too much freedom to do what it wants, too little freedom to do what it wants, or is the amount of freedom the press has about right?"

News Investment Data Sources

No direct measures of media investment in news are available. As a substitute, we used data on size, gender, and minority status of the newsroom staff of daily newspapers from the annual survey of the American Society of News Editors. We used data on television newsroom

staff size from the surveys of Robert Papper for Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA).

We used data on percent of local television revenue from news from RTDNA, Newspaper advertising revenue from the Newspaper Association of America, local television advertising from the Pew Research Center State of the News Media 2015 database, the number of newspapers and newspaper circulation from Editor and Publisher, the number of employees in media organizations generally from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the annual salaries paid to entry-level employees in media organizations from the Annual Survey of Journalism and Mass Communication Graduates conducted at the University of Georgia.

Data File

We created a data matrix that contained the actual survey responses, by response category, for each of these surveys. We inputted the data in the form of percentage. The data were organized by year, so that the row in the data matrix reflected the year of the survey, and each of the data points was in a column. In those few cases where we had multiple surveys for the same year by the same survey company using the same question, we selected the survey field data that closely matched those of other surveys in the series.

We inputted the additional data on investment into this data matrix as well.

Findings: Public Evaluations Of Media

Our search of the databases turned up 167 questions that had been asked at least once that met our search criteria. The earliest of these was a question in 1958 on media consumption asked by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center in a survey on consumer attitudes and behavior. We did not include subsequent single-item media use questions in the count of 167.

The first questions on evaluation of the media were asked in the Governance Survey by Gallup in 1972. Most of the questions were asked only a small number of times. We found 44 questions that were asked at least five times, meeting our second criterion for inclusion.

The Gallup Governance Survey and Confidence In Institutions Survey are, as noted above, most often cited. The results of the Governance Survey are shown in Chart 1. The results of the Confidence In Institutions Survey are shown in Chart 2. Chart 1 documents the dramatic decline in trust and confidence in the mass media from 68 percent with a great deal or fair amount of trust and confidence in 1972 to 32 percent in 2016. Chart 2 shows that the percentage of citizens with a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in newspapers dropped from 39 percent in 1973 to 20 percent in 2016. The percent with a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in newspapers did increase mostly from 1994 to 2000, but that increase was followed by a decrease in confidence. Those with a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in television news dropped from 46 percent in 1993 to 21 percent in 2016.

The General Social Survey began its battery of questions on confidence in institutions in 1973 and included the measures of confidence in the press and in television. Those trends are shown in Chart 3. The percentage of respondents saying they had a great deal of confidence in the press in 1973 was 23 percent. That figure dropped to 8 percent in 2014. There is no evidence in Chart 3 of the increase in confidence in the press from 1994 to 2000 shown in Chart 2. The percent with a great deal of confidence in television in the General Social Survey dropped from 18 percent in 1973 to 10 percent in 2014.

Gallup has another survey of long duration that asks respondents to evaluate the honesty and ethical standards of people in various occupations. Journalists were first included on the list

of evaluated occupations in 1976, and that year 33 percent of the respondents said they would rate the honest and ethical standards of journalists very high or high. As Chart 4 shows, that figure dropped to 24 percent in 2012, the last time the question was asked. Gallup began asking about newspaper reporters and television reporters in addition to journalists in 1981, when 30 percent of those surveyed ranked newspaper journalists as very high or high, and 36 percent evaluated television journalists very high or high. Chart 5 shows that those figures dropped to 21 and 20 percent respectively in 2013.

Gallup has another series, the Honesty and Ethical Standards Survey begun in 2001, that rates industries or what Gallup calls business sectors. The question asks the respondent if she or he has a positive or negative view of the listed industries. Publishing and radio-television have been included each year. As Chart 6 shows, the percentage of the population with a very positive or somewhat positive view of the publishing industry has dropped from 47 percent to 39 percent from 2001 to 2016. The percentage with a similar view of radio-television has been stable, with 42 percent giving that rating in 2001 and 40 percent using those terms in 2016.

The Pew Research Center also has asked respondents to evaluate institutions on a favorability scale. In nine of the annual surveys, the news media was one of the listed institutions. In 1997, as Chart 7 shows, 50 percent of the respondents rated the news media as very favorable or mostly favorable. That figure dropped to 40 percent in 2008, the last year news media was included in the survey.

Pew also has asked over the years respondents if news organizations get the facts straight or if stories and reports are often inaccurate. The data in Chart 8 show that the percent thinking the news organizations get the facts straight dropped from 55 in 1985 to 26 in 2013. Pew found

that 25 percent of its survey respondents in 1989 said that there was a great deal of political bias in news coverage. As Chart 9 shows, that figure jumped to 37 percent in 2012. Pew has asked a number of other repeating questions of a similar vein. For example, the percentage of respondents in Chart 10 who say journalists are highly professional has declined from 72 percent in 1985 to 60 percent in 2013. Gallup found in 2001 that 40 percent of its respondents reported that the political views of the news media were just about right as opposed to too liberal or too conservative. In 2014, as Chart 11 shows, that figure had dropped to 34.

Chart 12 shows the dramatic decline in the percentage of the population that reported reading a newspaper every day from 1972 to 2014, based on the General Social Survey. In 1972, 68 percent of the respondents reported every day readership. In 2014, the figure was 25 percent. Similarly, Pew reports that the percent of respondents who read a newspaper, watched a television news program, or listened to a radio news program regularly declined in each case from 1990 to 2012, though the drop for newspapers was most pronounced, as Chart 13 shows.

The conclusion is quite clear. The decline in public support for the news media shown in the Gallup Governance Survey and the Gallup Confidence In Institutions Survey is replicated in surveys by other organizations and by other Gallup surveys.

Findings: Public Evaluations Of Institutions Generally

One of the difficulties in assessing the significance of the downward trends in public assessments of journalists and the media is the documented decline in public trust and confidence in a wide range of institutions, including those of government.

This trend is reflected in Chart 14, which is based on data from the Gallup Governance Survey. Consistent with the trend shown for the media in Chart 1, trust and confidence in the

executive and legislative branches of the federal government also have declined markedly. The drop for the executive branch was from 73 percent of the public expressing a great deal or fair amount of confidence in 1972 to 51 percent in 2016. For the legislative branch, the drop was from 71 percent to 35 percent. Support for the judicial branch of the federal government declined more modestly from 66 percent to 61 percent.

This pattern is repeated in Chart 15, which shows data from the Gallup Confidence In Institutions Survey. The comparable data for newspapers and television news are in Chart 2. Of the 11 institutions listed, all but two show declines in confidence. The first exception is confidence in the military, which increased from 58 percent with a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in 1975 to 73 percent in 2016. The second exception is for police, where the percent with a great deal or quite a lot of confidence increased modestly from 52 percent in 1993 to 56 percent in 2016. Confidence in all three branches of the federal government declined, as did confidence in banks, big business and even the church.

Findings from the General Social Survey question on confidence in institutions mirror those from the Gallup Confidence In Institutions Survey, as Chart 16 shows. The parallel data for the two media items in the General Social Survey are in Chart 3. The General Social Survey shows declines for 9 of the 11 institutions in Chart 16, with the military and the scientific community being the only institutions bucking the trend. For the scientific community, the change was slight. The percent of citizens with a great deal of confidence in the military in 1973 was 32, and that number increased to 50 percent in 2014. All three branches of government showed declines in the General Social Survey, as in the Gallup Confidence In Institutions Survey.

Finally, Chart 17 documents the general decline in public assessment of occupations, based on data from the business sector survey of Honesty and Ethical Standards. The parallel data for the assessment of journalists are in Chart 4 and Chart 5. The percentage of the public with very high or high ratings of the honesty or ethical standards of seven of the 12 occupations declined, though in some cases only slightly. For two, there was no change from the initial asking of the question until the most recent asking. For three—police officers, medical doctors and pharmacists--there was an increase. Public ratings of the honesty and ethical standards of members of Congress dropped from 15 percent in 1976 to 7 percent in 2014. For U.S. Senators, the drop was from 19 percent to 14 percent.

It is clear from these charts that the decline in assessments of media organizations and journalists has to be understood in the context of an overall societal shift toward more critical assessments of institutions and occupations. Media organizations and journalists may be able to counter those trends, as some institutions and occupations have done, but the performance of journalists and news media should be understood in the context of the overall shifts surrounding them.

To see the assessments of the media organizations and of journalists in this broader context, we standardized the scores for these organizations and for journalists based on the scores for other organizations and occupations across the time period of the three Gallup surveys and of the General Social Survey. We chose these surveys because of the longevity of the data series and because of the variability in objects of public assessment. In the case of the Governance Survey and the General Social Survey, where data were consistent across years with only minor exception, we created averages that reflected the number of institutions evaluated each year. In

the case of the Confidence In Institutions and Gallup Honesty and Ethical Standards surveys, where great variability exists in what was assessed, we selected the set of objects for inclusion based on their availability for the years for which the media measures were available.

The simplest of these data sets, the Governance Survey, can be used to elaborate on the technique. Each year we summed the evaluations for the legislative, judicial and executive branches of the federal government and for the media. We then computed the average of these four evaluations for each year. Next we took the raw score, that is, the percent with a great deal and fair amount of trust and confidence in each of these four and subtracted from each the mean score for the four institutions for that year. Chart 18 shows the average deviation score for the four measures in the Governance Survey across the 1972 to 2016 period. The legislative branch of the federal government, the executive branch of the federal government, and the mass media all score below the mean. The judicial branch scores above the mean across those years. The news media item has the lowest score of the set. When we plot out those deviation scores across time in Chart 19, however, we see that the media were evaluated less negatively relative to the three government bodies in recent years.

Chart 20 shows this same analysis for the Confidence In Institutions Survey. On average, newspapers and television news score below the average for all institutions evaluated. As Chart 21 shows, however, the public is less critical of the media in recent years than it was a few years ago.

Chart 22 shows this pattern for the General Social Survey. Newspapers and television are evaluated quite negatively relative to the other institutions. Chart 23 shows that there has been slight improvement in recent years.

Chart 24 shows that journalists are evaluated quite critically relative to other occupations in the Gallup Honesty and Ethical Standards Survey. Car sales persons and advertising practitioners are worse. Chart 25 shows that the 2012 evaluation of journalists was better than the 2000 evaluation.

Across all four of these measures, the picture is a complex one in which the media organizations and journalists are viewed critically relative to other institutions and occupations. Of course, that relative assessment could change with the addition or subtraction of comparison points. In contrast with the picture of negative assessments of the media and the journalists from the analysis of the general trends, these standardized trends suggest a more positive picture in which the media criticism is moderating somewhat relative to other institutions and occupations in the more recent years.

Findings: Correlations Of Media Evaluations

We began our examination of correlates of media evaluations by looking for measures of the evaluations with the largest number of data points. The General Social Survey measured confidence in the press and in television 28 times. The Gallup Confidence In Institutions measured confidence in newspapers and in television news 24 times. We focused our analyses on these two surveys.

The two GSS measures were correlated .60 with each other, using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient, which has a range from -1.00 to + 1.00. The two Gallup measures were correlated .47. In the 12 years in which both surveys measured these two institutions, the GSS press item was correlated only .21 with the Gallup newspaper item. The GSS television item was correlated only .22 with the Gallup television news item. So the

measures offer some differences in terms of wording and time periods and some independence from each other, making them appropriate for the analysis of correlates.

Chart 26 shows the relationship between the size of the daily newspaper newsroom based on the American Society of News Editors annual survey going back to 1978 and the deviation scores for the Confidence In Institutions measures going back to 1993 and the GSS measures going back to 1973. The Confidence In Institutions data go back to 1993 rather than 1973 because television news was added that year. The newsroom staff size is probably the best possible measure of newspaper investment in the news product, and the ASNE data show a dramatic decline in staff size starting in 2002.

Confidence in newspapers also dropped dramatically during this time period, even in comparison with declines at other institutions, as measured by the deviation score, but confidence in newspapers began to recover in 2004 compared to other institutions, and confidence in newspapers has moved in the positive direction (closer to the average decline) erratically since. The General Social Survey measures of confidence show the decline in confidence going back a longer period of time, even when newsroom size was slightly growing or constant. And the GSS measure does not show the dramatic decline against the mean after 2001. The GSS measure does show an improvement in assessment of the press in recent years, mirroring roughly the improvement shown in the Gallup measure. Both the Gallup and GSS measures produce 23 years in which there is overlap in data with ASNE, and the correlations show almost no relationship, with .06 for the Gallup data and -.11 for the GSS data.

Chart 27 plots the median television newsroom size, based on Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA) data, against the Gallup measure of confidence in television news

and the General Social Survey measure of confidence in television. For both of the confidence measures, deviation scores are once again used. The RTDNA data are the most comparable to the ASNE data. The RTDNA data show increases in local newsroom size, though unevenly, since 2000. These are matched slightly by both the Gallup deviation scores and the GSS scores, but the fit is far from perfect. The Gallup data match with the RTDNA data for 15 years, and the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient is $-.14$. The GSS measures match only 7 years, and the correlation coefficient is $.33$.

We repeated these analyses using the Bureau of Labor Statistics data on total publishing employment numbers and total television employment numbers. The relationships were slightly positive for newspapers, meaning there was a slight relationship between positive movement in the deviation score and employment level. For television, the relationship was actually negative.

We also looked at salary levels paid to entry level employees and measures of industry revenue. None of these is clearly and consistently correlated with the deviation scores.

Finally, we redid the analyses using the unstandardized measures of confidence from both the Gallup Trust In Institutions Survey and the General Social Survey. The picture does not become clearer. The Gallup Confidence In Institutions measure of newspaper confidence is modestly correlated with newsroom size, with a correlation of $.43$ over 33 comparison points. For the General Social Survey measure, however, the correlation is $.09$ for 23 data points. With the Gallup confidence measure, the correlation with confidence in television news is $-.46$, while it is $.13$ with the GSS measure.

One relationship that is clear from these analyses is between the confidence measures and actual use of the media. Confidence in newspapers based on the Gallup measure (unstandardized)

is correlated .80 with daily readership of a newspaper from the General Social Survey and with regular readership from the Pew Biennial Media Consumption Survey. Chart 28 shows the relationship. If the GSS measure is used, these correlations are .86 and .49 respectively. For the Gallup measure of confidence in television news, the correlation is .81 with regular television news viewing, based on the Pew survey, as shown in Chart 29. For the GSS measure of confidence in television generally, the correlation with regular television news viewing is .33. The picture is much the same if deviation scores are used, though the relations are more moderate.

Conclusions

The data analysis leads to the following conclusions.

The public is very critical of the journalists and of the news media. It hardly matters what question is asked. The actual performance of those in journalism and of their organizations is viewed critically by citizens.

The public has become more critical of journalists and of news organizations over time. Trust and confidence have decreased, as has the sense that journalists are ethical.

Journalists and the news media are not alone in being evaluated critically. The public also has negative assessments of other institutions, and particularly of governmental institutions. The public is particularly critical of Congress and the executive branch of the federal government. And that assessment has gotten more negative across time.

Not all occupations and institutions are evaluated negatively, and not all are more critically assessed now than in the past. The public highly evaluates doctors and pharmacists and

believes they are more ethical now than in the past. Confidence in the military is high and has increased over time.

In comparison with other occupations and institutions, journalists and the news media actually have experienced smaller declines in public assessments than the average in recent years. So, while the public remains critical and has become more critical, its level of criticism has declined relative to criticism of other occupations and institutions.

The pattern of change in the way the public assesses journalists and news media is not linked across time to what would seem to be likely predictors of those changes. Newspapers in particular have cut staff. Revenue is down. Salaries are static. But these do not predict the declines in public assessment.

Use of the news media is in sharp decline, paralleling the declines in assessment of journalists and their organizations. It is not possible to say that one of these precedes the other, given the data at hand. It could be that the public makes less use of products it does not evaluate highly, or it could be it has decided it does not evaluate products it no longer uses.

What can be done—if anything—to reverse the trends in use and assessment isn't clear from these analyses. What is clear is that a democracy cannot function if its citizens do not have information about the world in which they live. So we have a crisis, and we need to find ways to address it. Those ways probably include both improvements in the assessments on the part of the public of journalists and of their organizations and exploration of alternatives to traditional journalism and traditional media organizations as a means of delivering news to citizens.

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Chart 1 Gallup Trust and Confidence in Mass Media

% "Great deal" and "Fair amount"

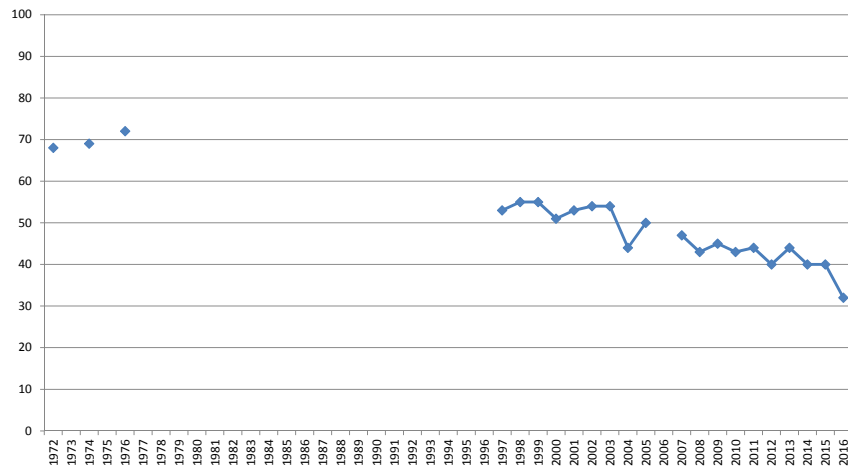


Chart 2 Gallup Confidence in Newspaper and Television News

% "Great deal" and "Quite a lot"

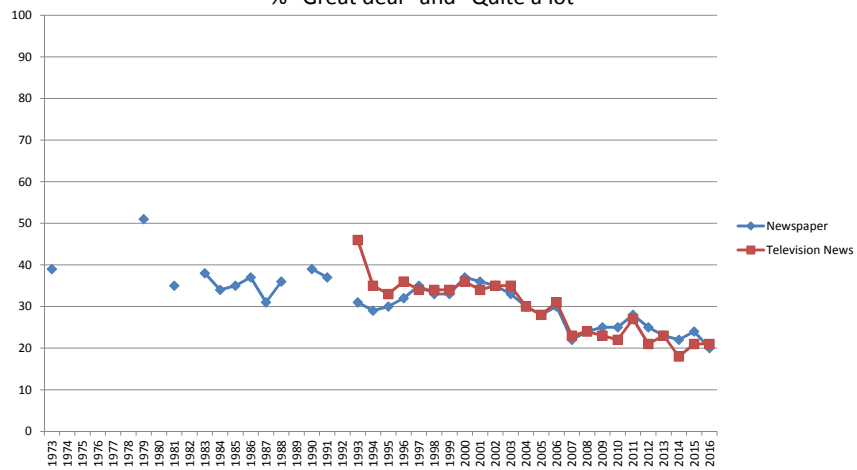


Chart 3

General Social Survey Confidence in Press and TV

% "Great Deal"

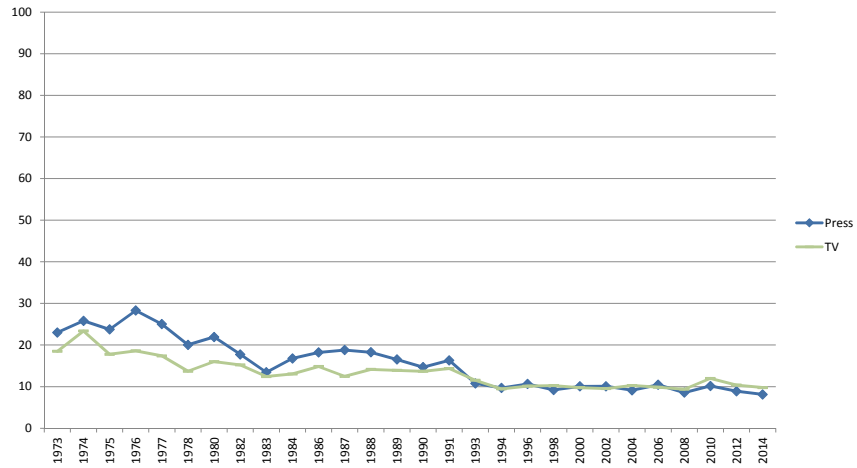


Chart 4

Gallup Honesty and Ethical Standard Evaluation – Journalists

% "Very high" and "High"

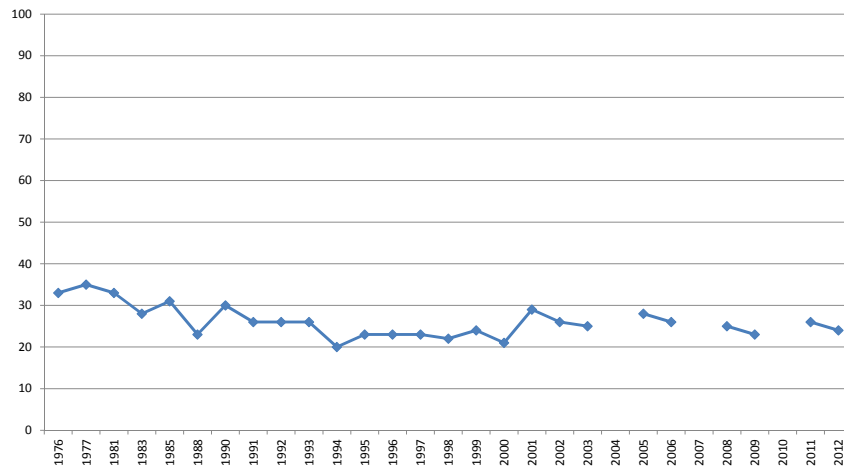


Chart 5

Gallup Honesty and Ethical Standard Evaluation – TV Reporters and Newspaper Reporters

% “Very high” and High”

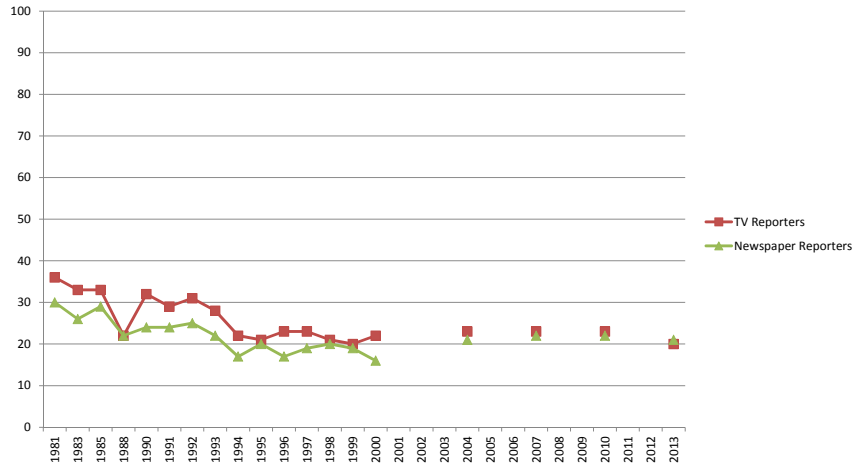


Chart 6

Gallup Industry Evaluations – Radio and Television Industry, Publishing Industry

% “Very positive” and “Somewhat positive”

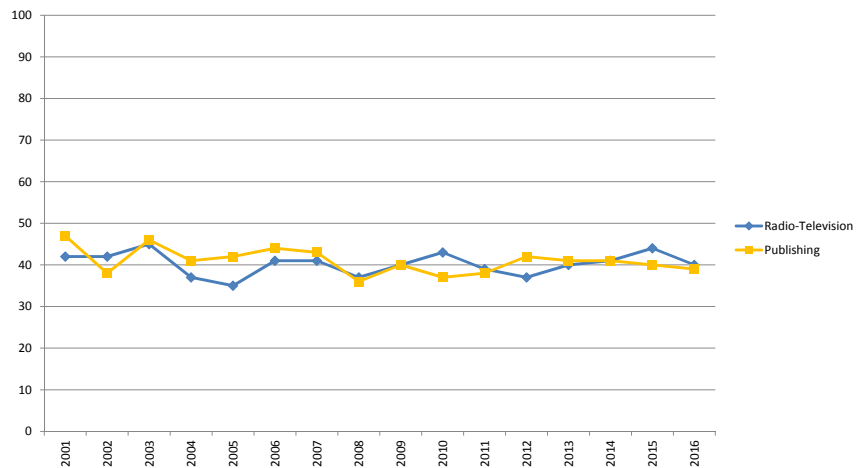


Chart 7

Pew Overall Opinion of News Media

% "Favorable" and "Mostly favorable"

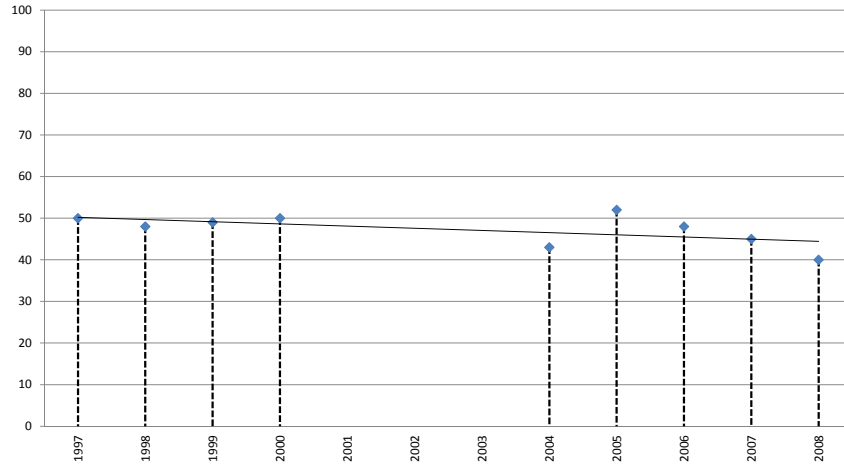


Chart 8

Pew Evaluation of News Reporting

% "News organizations get the facts straight"

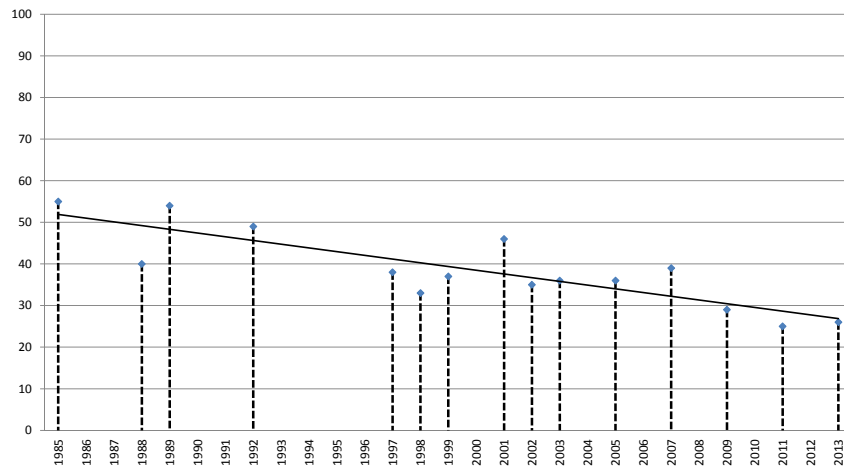


Chart 9

Pew Evaluation of Political Bias in News Coverage

% "Great deal"

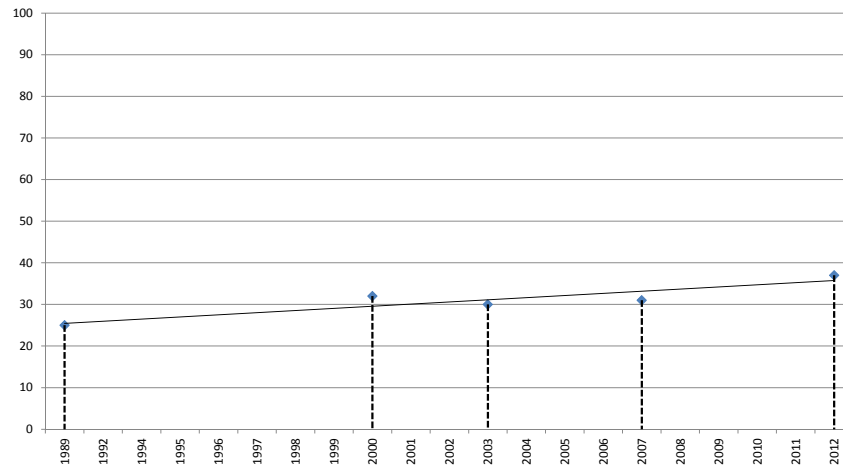


Chart 10

Pew Evaluation of Journalists

% "Highly professional"

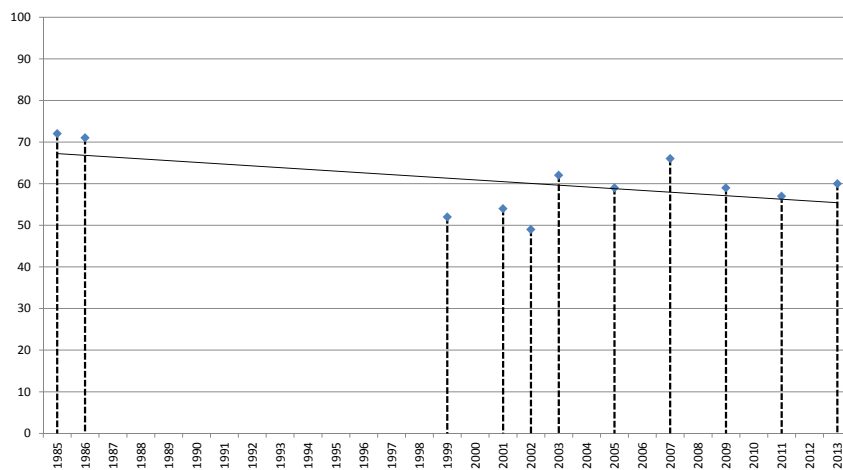


Chart 11
Gallup Political View of News Media

% "Just about right"

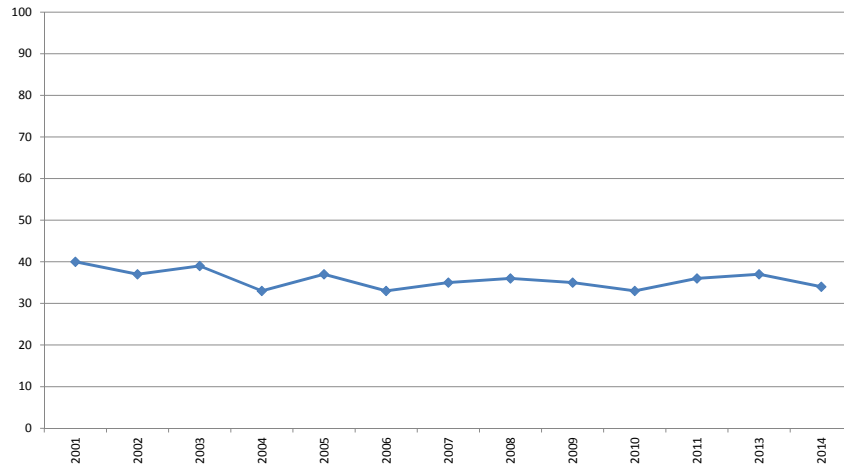


Chart 12
General Social Survey Newspaper Reading

% "Every day"

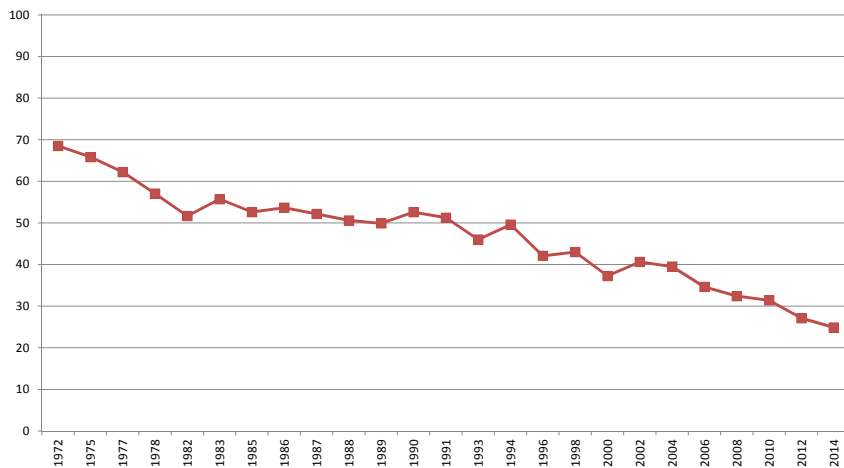


Chart 13

Pew Media Consumption Habits

% Read newspaper/Watch TV news programs/Listen to news on the radio regularly

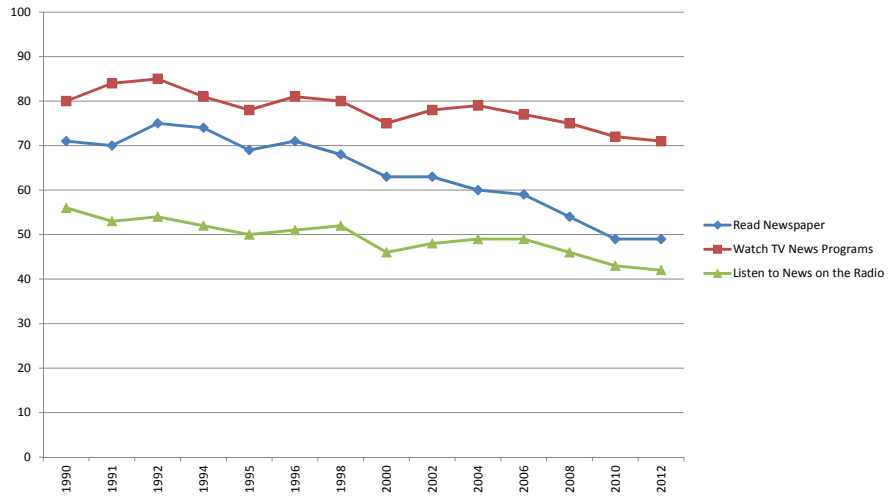


Chart 14

Gallup Trust and Confidence in Federal Government

% "Great deal" and "Fair amount"

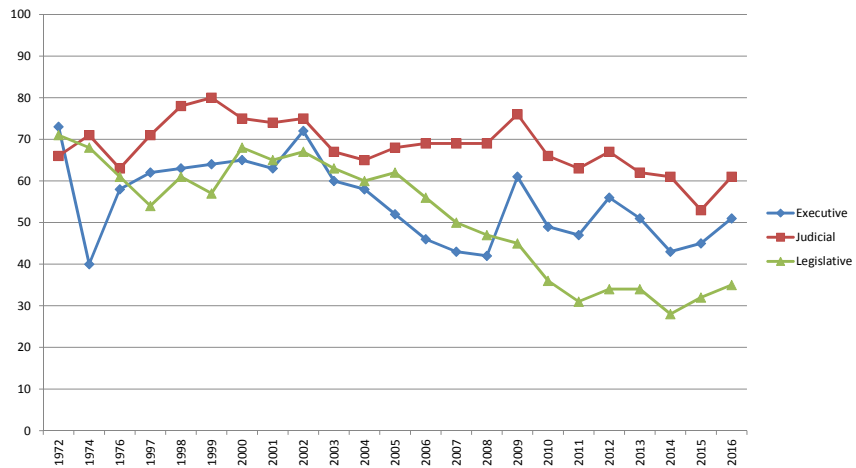


Chart 15

Gallup Confidence in Institutions

% "Great deal" and "Quite a lot"

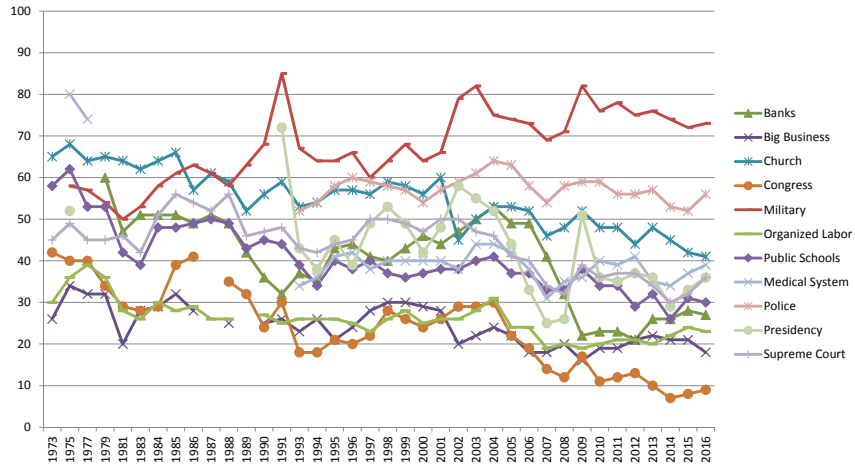


Chart 16

General Social Survey Confidence in Institutions

% "Great deal"

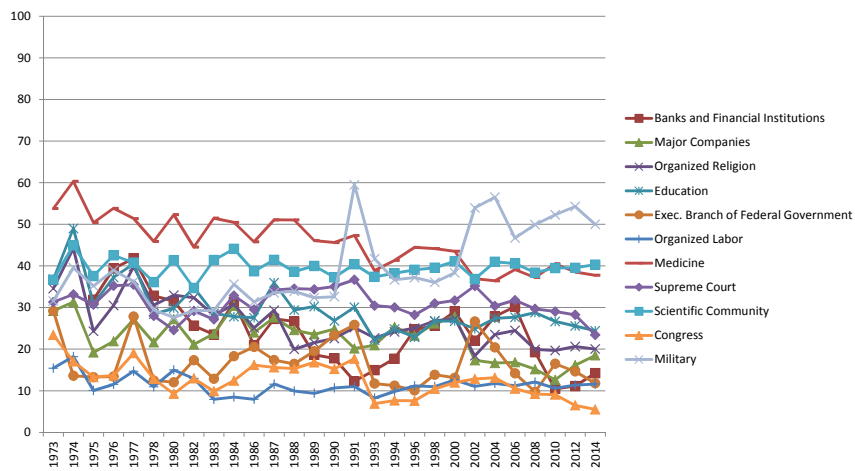


Chart 17
Gallup Honesty and Ethical Standard Evaluation
– 12 Occupations

% "Very high" and "High"

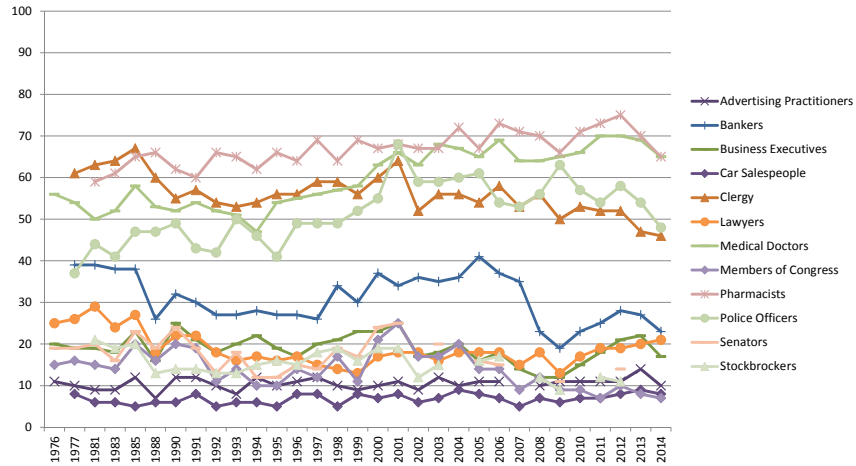


Chart 18
Gallup Trust and Confidence in Mass Media and Government Deviation Score

% "Great deal" and "Fair amount"

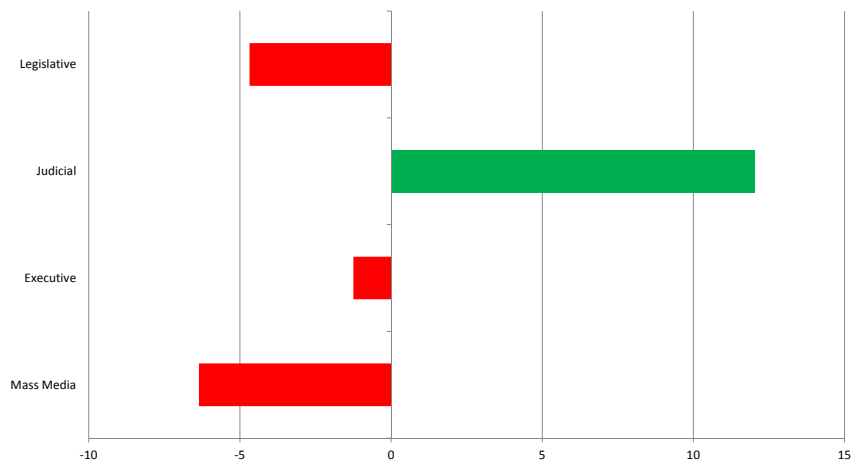


Chart 19

Gallup Trust and Confidence in Mass Media Deviation Score

% "Great deal" and "Fair amount"

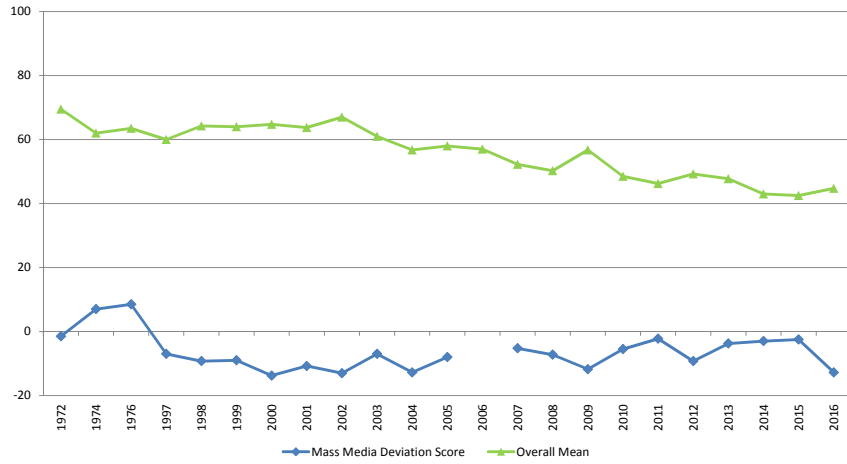


Chart 20

Gallup Confidence in Institutions Deviation Score

% "Great deal" and "Quite a lot"

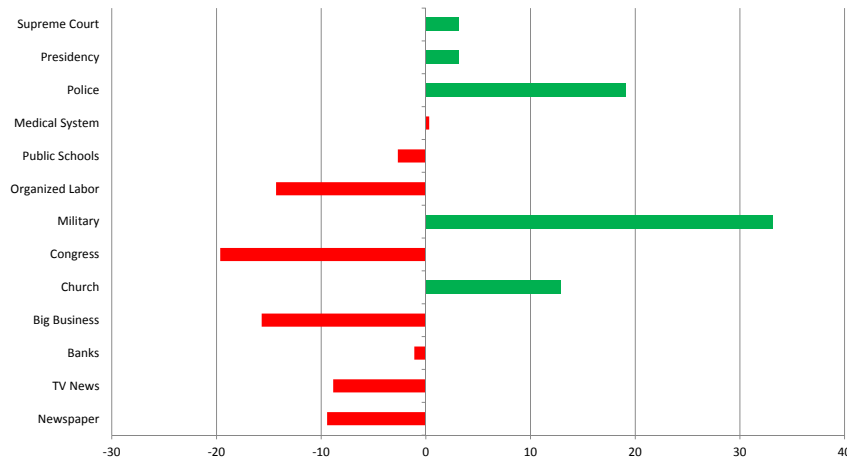


Chart 21 Gallup Confidence in Newspaper and Television News Deviation Score

% "Great deal" and "Quite a lot"

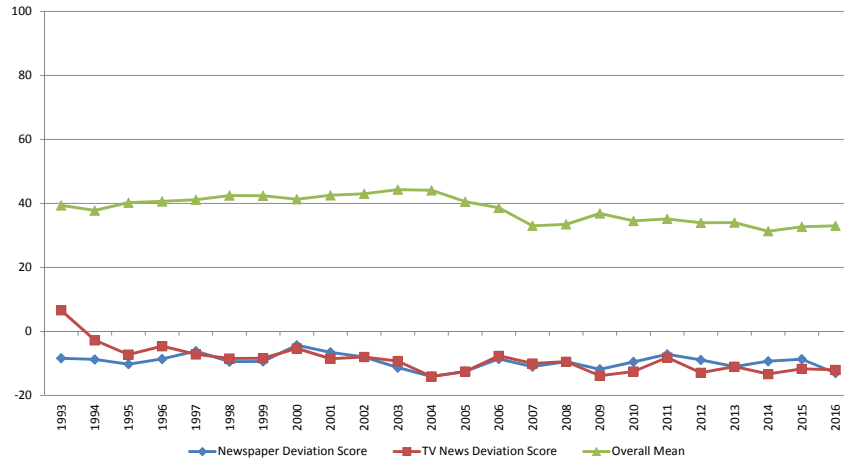


Chart 22 General Social Survey Confidence in Institutions Deviation Score

% "Great Deal"

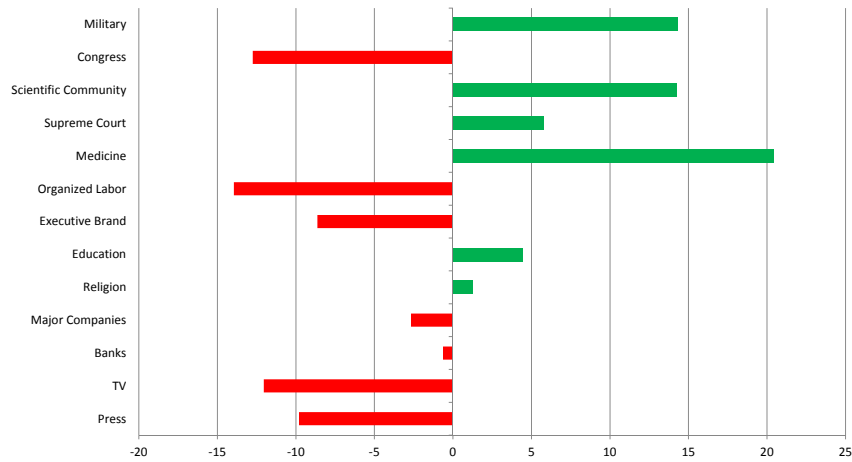


Chart 23
General Social Survey Confidence in Press and TV Deviation Score

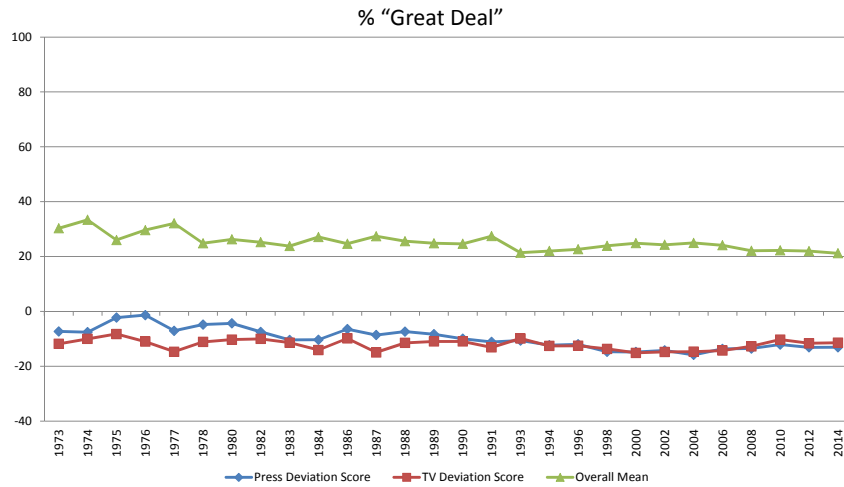


Chart 24
Gallup Honesty and Ethical Standard Evaluation Deviation Score

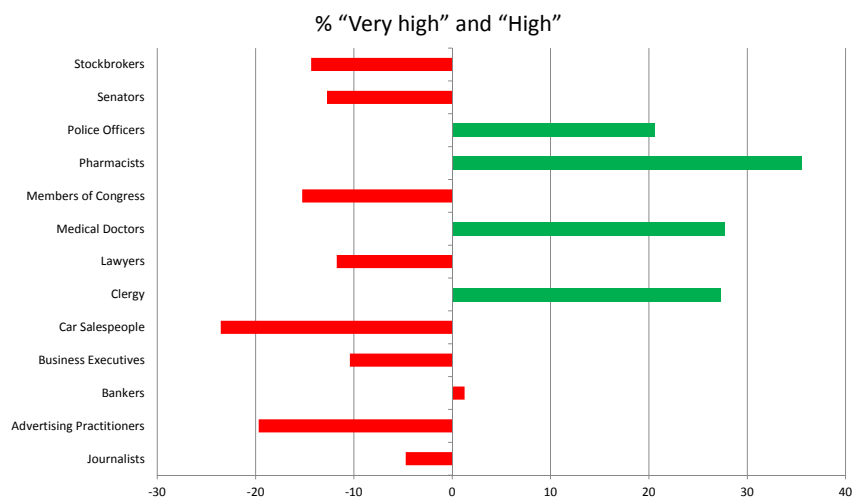


Chart 25 Gallup Honesty and Ethical Standard Evaluation – Journalists

% “Very high” and “High”

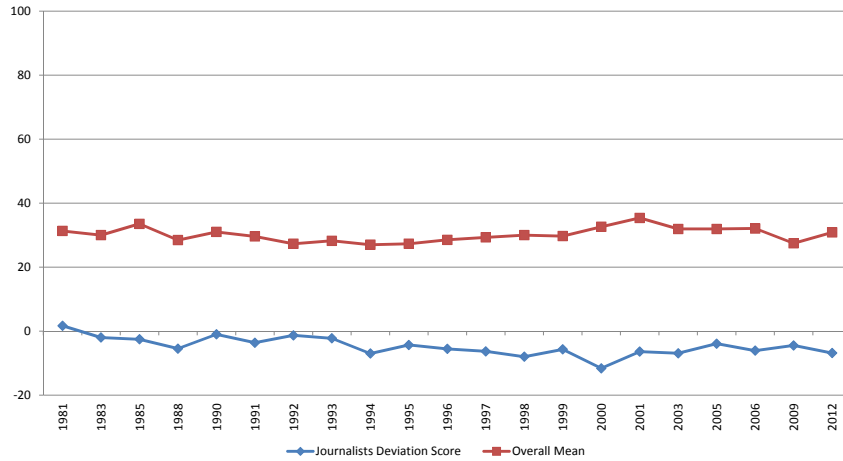


Chart 26 Total Newspaper Newsroom Workforce Correlation with Deviation Score of Media Evaluations

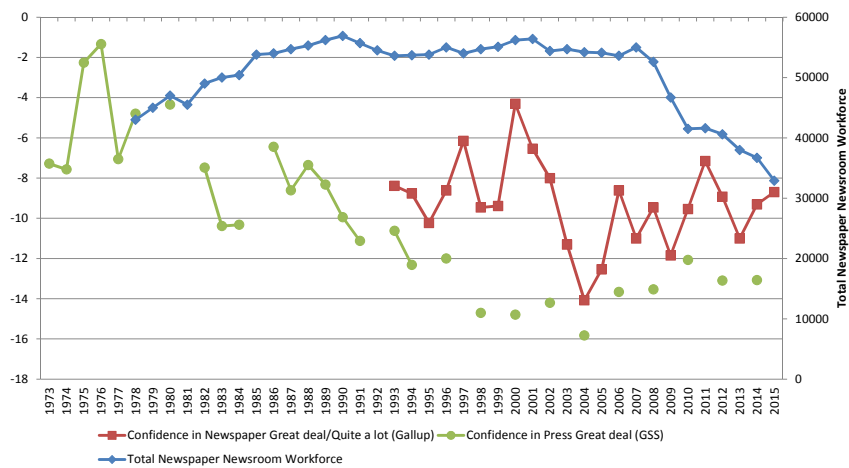


Chart 27
Median Number of TV Local News Staff Correlation
with Deviation Score of Media Evaluations

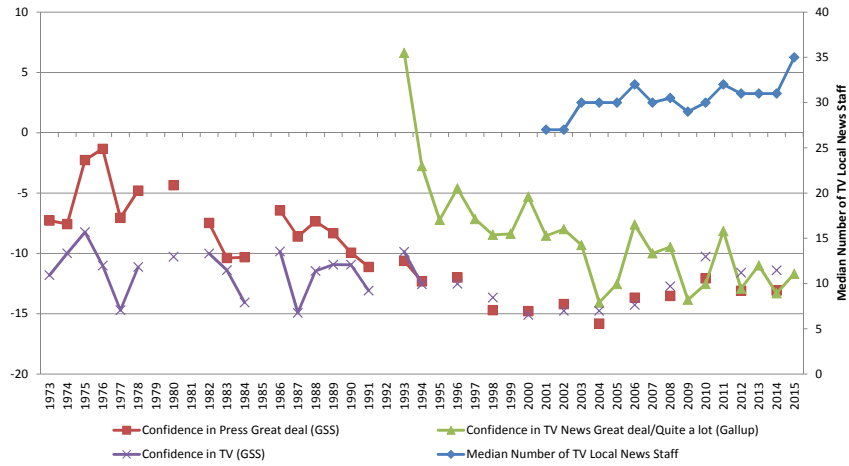


Chart 28
Newspaper Reading Correlation
with Confidence in Newspaper and Press

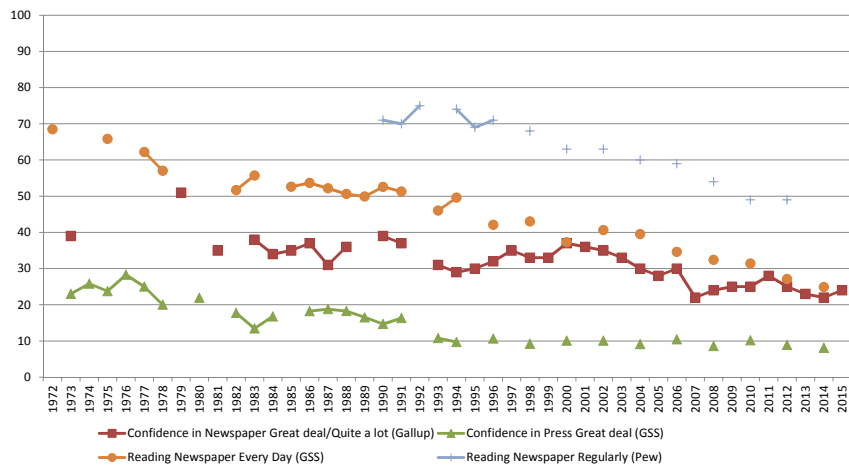


Chart 29

TV News Watching Correlation with Confidence in TV and Television News

