



Countering distrust in local news

By Bob Papper and Keren Henderson

July 30, 2024 – The latest Gallup Survey puts Americans' trust in the mass media tied for the lowest level ever recorded. Thirty-two percent say they trust the media "a great deal" or "a fair amount" – putting the 2023 level tied with 2016 as the low point in Gallup results. Gallup started tracking trust in American mass media in 1972, when 68% said they had "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust. And "none at all" came in at 6%. In 2023, "none at all" hit a record high of 39%.

TRUST IN MEDIA HITS RECORD **LOW**

- In 2023, only 32% trust the media, tying the 2016 low point, down from 68% in 1972.
- The percentage with "none at all" trust hit a record high of 39%.
- Nearly 200 TV news directors reported taking measures to improve trust, with larger departments and markets more likely to act.
- This year, over half the TV news directors say they're dealing with trust issues, with FOX affiliate news directors now at the forefront.

TRUST

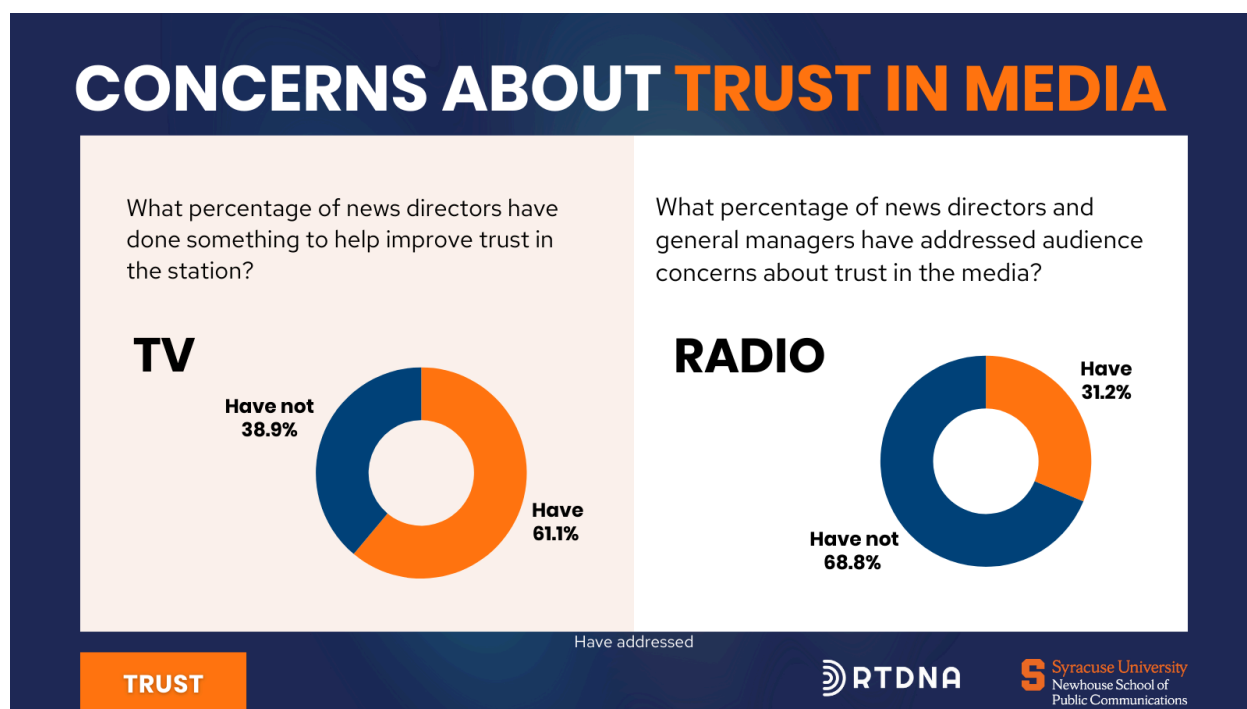


The question asks how much confidence people have in the mass media – such as newspapers, TV and radio – for "reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly." The choices are: a great deal, a fair amount, not very much and none at all.

In a new question last year, the RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey asked news directors what, if anything, they were doing to address concerns about audience trust in their news.

Nearly 200 TV news directors responded to the question with nearly two-thirds of them (61.2%) saying they had done something to help improve trust in their station. The larger the news department, the more likely that the station had done something; and two-thirds of the news directors in markets 150 and larger report having addressed the issue. Markets 151+ came in at 44.7%.

This year, over half the TV news directors say they're dealing with trust. Interestingly, a year ago, FOX affiliate news directors lagged well behind most of the others; this year, they're at the forefront.



We've divided the responses into six broad categories. First – as it was last year, at 33.7% – is transparency. News directors in their own words:

- Adding transparency in scripts on why we made the decisions we did
- Become more transparent in reporting. More fact checks and truth tests
- More transparency, local reports debunking internet rumors and false news
- Process storytelling to explain how we get (or don't get) answers
- Tell more transparent stories and do more transparent journalism. Show viewers our work, who we spoke with, where we got the facts

Number two on the list, at 19.1%, involved station promos and promotional campaigns:

- Embarking on complete news rebrand, emphasizing positive news stories and reducing crime and negative coverage
- Promos about trust and distance from national news
- Trust your local news promos
- We have a promotion which guarantees at least 100 local stories/week, and on Mondays, we audit the previous week's coverage and report to our audience the actual number of stories

Right behind that, at 16.9%, came training and work to avoid mistakes:

- Ongoing staff training to make sure we are fair/balanced/accurate with our content
- Quarterly standards/content reviews

At 13.5% came accountability and responding to viewers and callers:

- Answer almost all emails, process writing, admit mistakes
- Doing more stories that come from our audience and being specific that a person asked this question, and we're getting the answers to that question for them
- Listen to callers – let them know their voices are heard
- We respond directly and promptly to any issues raised by users and viewers

At 6.7% they said they're doing just fine:

- Continue providing strong, local, balanced reporting
- I don't feel we have audience trust issues.

Other, at 10.1%, covered a variety of things that just didn't seem to fit elsewhere:

- Reinforced daily how important our role is and the trust the audience has in our content

Doing the RTDNA Survey requires calling and emailing a lot of stations. We suggest that news directors send emails and make calls to their own station. Even during standard business hours, it's frequently difficult to reach anyone, and even locating a phone number or email address for a lot of stations isn't easy. Many web-listed phone numbers and email addresses haven't worked in years. There are stations we've never been able to reach a person at, not even once. If you were a viewer contacting someone in the newsroom, how would you go about it?

Radio

Only 31.3% of radio news directors and general managers say they have addressed audience concerns about trust in media.

Most responses, 47.8%, emphasized the importance of consistently doing a good job. Respondents often expressed the importance of consistently doing a good job by starting with the phrase "continue" to do a good job. In their own words:

- Being consistently accurate
- Continue to be honest
- Great reporting. Great stories, no opinions, just fact
- Held polls and surveys to make sure we are covering the areas and topics the audience wants
- We just try to be very consistent in making sure that we're timely and factual

Next, at 27.8%, came transparency and trying to explain to the audience what the station does and why it does it:

- Air community discussion on media literacy and misinformation
- Continue to promote our regular efforts, focusing on how stories are edited, fact checked, etc
- Increased attention to naming sources for all information and facts, increased amount of editing, adding more context on many stories
- Media literacy video series, efforts to better explain reporting processes
- More audience engagement around controversial topics and more newsletters
- Transparency about our reporting, meeting with community groups to talk about what we do
- Transparency in news sources, making public file more visible and accessible, candid conversations with listeners

Ten percent involved station promotion or a campaign on trust:

- Air promos highlighting local news coverage and our business of calling just balls and strikes
- Increased staffing, increased focus on promoting "fair, unbiased" on-air

- Specifically doing imaging spots about trust
- We run a series of ongoing promos focusing on local news and trust

Just 6.7% said trust wasn't an issue or anything they needed to deal with (and, honestly, quite a few of the first group appeared to feel that way, too):

- Staying with local feel good news!
- Stopped running network national news services

The last 2.2% stressed making timely corrections if they made a mistake:

Miscellaneous answers filled the remaining 5.6%

About the Authors

Bob Papper is Research Professor of Broadcast and Digital Journalism at Syracuse University and has worked extensively in radio and TV news.

Keren Henderson is Associate Professor of Broadcast and Digital Journalism at Syracuse University.

This research was supported by the S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and the Radio Television Digital News Association.

About the Survey

The RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2023 among all 1,876 operating, non-satellite television stations and a random sample of 4,764 radio stations. The television response rate is different for every question, but Valid responses came from as many as 1,387 television stations (73.9%) and 631 radio news directors and general managers representing 1,902 radio stations. Some data sets (e.g. the number of TV stations originating local news, getting news from others and women TV news directors) are based on a complete census and are not projected from a smaller sample.