



Can Journalists Stop The 'Trust' Slide?

Maybe

By

Mark McGee

I asked this question in a previous part of my series — “Is there any way to stop the downward slide of public trust in journalism?” My answer was a definite ‘maybe.’

The reason I answered that way is because journalists are going to have to face some hard facts and make even harder decisions before a distrusting public changes its mind about the media.

1. Will journalists admit they face a massive problem with public trust?
2. Will journalists admit they are a major reason for that problem?
3. Will journalists publicly admit that they are a major reason for the problem?
4. Will journalists make the necessary changes to rebuild public trust?
5. Will journalists admit to the public that they are making those changes?
6. Will journalists be transparent in demonstrating to the public how they are making those changes and how they plan to stay the course after changes are made?

If the answer to any of those questions is ‘no,’ I do not see a way for journalism to regain public trust. That’s one reason my answer was ‘maybe.’ It depends on journalists, professors of journalism, and news managers rebuilding the trust lost among news consumers during the last 50 years.

How bad is the problem?

“Americans’ confidence in the mass media has edged down to a new low, with just 28% expressing a “great deal” or “fair amount” of trust in newspapers, television and radio to report the news fully, accurately and fairly. This is down from 31% last year and 40% five years ago.

Meanwhile, seven in 10 U.S. adults now say they have “not very much” confidence (36%) or “none at all” (34%).

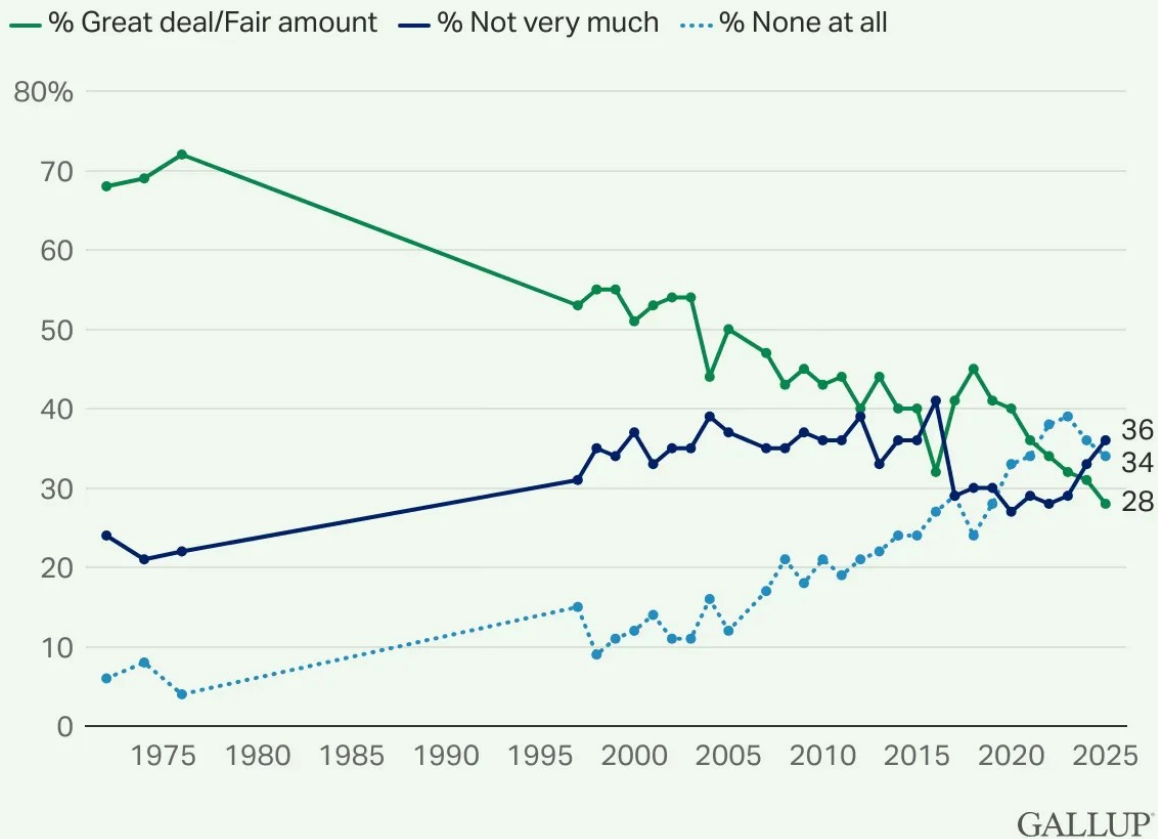
When Gallup began measuring trust in the news media in the 1970s, between 68% and 72% of Americans expressed confidence in reporting. However, by the next reading in 1997, public confidence had fallen to

53%. Media trust remained just above 50% until it dropped to 44% in 2004, and it has not risen to the majority level since. The highest reading in the past decade was 45% in 2018, which came just two years after confidence had collapsed amid the divisive 2016 presidential campaign.

The latest 28% confidence reading, from a Sept. 2-16 poll, marks the first time the measure has fallen below 30%.” Gallup

Americans' Trust in Mass Media, 1972-2025

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?



Notice that things started going in the wrong direction in the mid-1970's and continued the downward plunge to its current low of 28%. The polling gets even worse when Gallup broke it down by party affiliation.

“Although Democrats and Republicans continue to express different levels of trust in the news media, the percentages with high confidence in reporting are at low points among all party groups.

- Republicans’ confidence, which hasn’t risen above 21% since 2015, has dropped to single digits (8%) for the first time in the trend.
- Independents’ trust has not reached the majority level since 2003, and the latest 27% reading matches last year’s historical low.
- For Democrats, the narrowest of majorities (51%) now express trust in the media, which is a repeat of the low previously seen in 2016.” Gallup

Republicans' Trust in Mass Media, 2001-2025

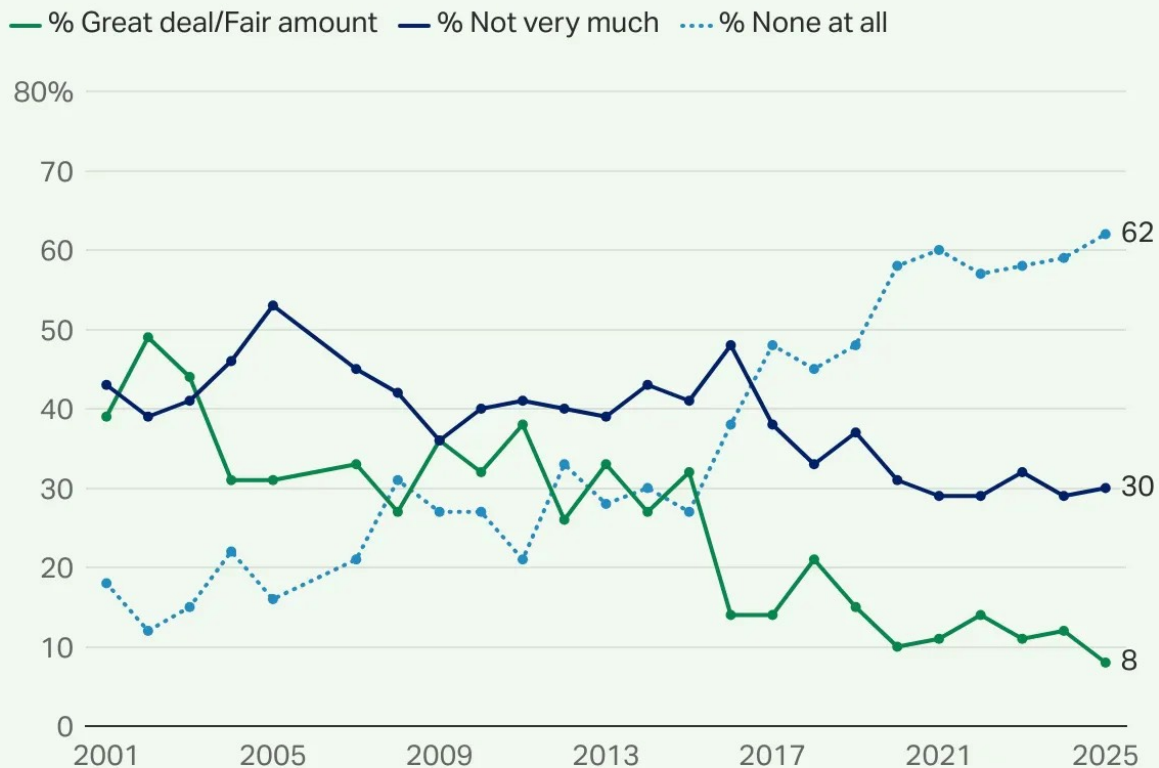
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Use the buttons below to view party trends:

Republicans

Independents

Democrats



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Another reason I answered ‘maybe’ is because of the public’s higher trust in ‘local news’ over ‘national news.’

“Americans continue to hold local news in higher regard than national news across a variety of metrics, a new poll from Gallup and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation shows, regardless of political party affiliations.” [Knight Foundation](#)

“Many Americans say they have lost trust in national news — but most still believe they can rely on the accuracy of local news.

In 2024, 74% of Americans said they had “a lot of” or “some” trust in their local news organizations, and 85% believed their local news” [Nieman Lab](#)

“Americans also express higher trust in their local media than in national media outlets – something Center surveys have found since 2016.” [Pew Research](#)

“A new study helps explain why Americans continue to trust local news, even as their trust in national media, government and other institutions is falling.

The authors assert that people use “a news outlet’s local orientation as a shortcut to assess its credibility.” If a news source appears local, people are inclined to trust it.” Editor and Publisher

I’ll address some thoughts about that in a few minutes, but first let’s ‘tackle’ several of the national media’s problems.

Tackling #1

Will journalists admit they face a massive problem with public trust?

I hope so, but don't hold your breath — at least not yet. Apparently falling from 76% approval to 28% approval in less than half a century hasn't been enough to grab the serious attention of journalists, journalism professors, news managers, and media owners. If it had, they would have done something about it years ago. Keep in mind that I'm addressing the 'national media' here — local media consideration comes later.

I wonder how low the 'trust' numbers will have to fall before the national news media will do something about this growing problem. 25%? 20%? 15%? 10%? 5%? I wonder.

Most of what I see from the national media right now is ‘the blame game.’ They’re pointing fingers at everyone but themselves. It’s everybody else’s fault, especially people on ‘the other side’ of the political spectrum. The right blames the left. The left blames the right. May I recommend everybody stop for a moment and look at a mirror. Point your finger at the image in the mirror. When journalists begin admitting ‘they’ face a massive problem with public trust, they may find answers to the daunting problem.

Tackling #2

Will journalists admit they are a major reason for that problem?

Again, don't hold your breath. I read a lot of journalism magazines and articles and what I'm reading doesn't include any sense of 'self-blame' or personal responsibility. Again, fingers are pointed in the 'other direction.'

Objectivity is just not something that leaders in journalism seem interested in pursuing, which means the people who work for them won't either. Here's an example from a 'seasoned' journalism leader writing in the Washington Post:

“To better understand the changes happening now, I and former CBS News president Andrew Heyward, a colleague at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism, investigated the values and practices in mainstream newsrooms today, with a grant from the Stanton Foundation. What we found has convinced us that truth-seeking news media must move beyond whatever “objectivity” once meant to

produce more trustworthy news. We interviewed more than 75 news leaders, journalists and other experts in mainstream print, broadcast and digital news media, many of whom also advocate such a change. This appears to be the beginning of another generational shift in American journalism.”

Leonard Downie Jr., a former executive editor of The Washington Post, is a professor at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University.

Is it any wonder that journalism has sunk to such low approval ratings in the last several decades? I’m sharing only a small portion in this series of what journalism leaders are saying and writing about setting aside the long-standing ethical standard of objectivity and fairness. The idea that ‘truth-seeking news media must move beyond whatever ‘objectivity’ once meant to produce more trustworthy news,’ will only cause the public’s trust in the media to plummet even further.

I don't see anything on the horizon where journalists will admit they are a major reason for the problem of a lack of public trust in the mass media. I seriously doubt they will tackle #2. Why would they when they don't believe objectivity is even necessary for covering news stories? How can something be true if it's not objective? It falls back to the old 'my truth-your truth' argument I've written about for years. I guess if a journalist believes something that is false is their 'truth,' they would see no need to be objective in making sure what they believe is 'really' true.

Sorry to be a 'Debbie downer,' but those are the facts that I see so far. Too many journalists seem happy to live in a world with little to no logic.

Tackling #3

Will journalists publicly admit that they are a major reason for the problem?

Not until they admit it to themselves and their fellow journalists. Again, I don't see it happening any time soon. The national news media is headed in the opposite direction. From what I've seen so far, I'm afraid it will only get worse.

Tackling #4

Will journalists make the necessary changes to rebuild public trust?

Only if they answer 'yes' to #1 - #3. Unless, and until that happens, we'll see public trust continue sliding downward. Maybe that doesn't bother today's journalists (especially those in the national media), but it bothers me and should bother you.

Tackling #5

Will journalists admit to the public that they are making those changes?

They will have to if they ever make the necessary changes. The public is not going to trust the mass media unless the media openly admits to what they've done wrong for decades. The media first has to 'really' change, then 'prove' they've made changes that they plan to stick to for years to come.

Tackling #6

Will journalists be transparent in demonstrating to the public how they are making those changes and how they plan to stay the course after changes are made?

They will have to in order to demonstrate to the public that they've turned the 'trust' corner. The public has endured a national news media that has let them down repeatedly year after year, decade after decade, for generations. In order for the public to trust the news media again, the media will have to be honest about their failings and transparent in how they change course.

Lessons From History

Well, you're asking yourself, do you have any good news to share? So far everything I've written seems pretty 'doom and gloom.'

Here's a reminder of what the first dean of the school of journalism at the University of Missouri wrote in 1908. Notice his emphasis on 'public trust' and 'fairness:'

"I believe that the public journal is a public trust; that all connected with it are, to the full measure of their responsibility, trustees for the public; that acceptance of a lesser service than the public service is betrayal of this trust.

I believe that clear thinking and clear statement, accuracy and fairness are fundamental to good journalism." Dean Walter Williams

I can only imagine the tension that many ‘yellow journalists’ must have had with the new breed of ‘professional journalists’ graduating from journalism schools and joining the ranks of newspapers across the country more than a century ago. The idea that journalists were ‘trustees for the public’ and that any lesser service to the public was a ‘betrayal of this trust’ may have caused hard feelings between younger and older newspaper reporters and editors at that time.

Here’s how one leading newspaper organization viewed news coverage within just a decade of the first journalism school graduates joining the growing profession:

1923 — “Fairness: Reporting must be impartial, balanced, and free from prejudice. Accuracy: Facts must be reported truthfully, without distortion or sensationalism.” American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE)

It's great to see that newspaper editors eventually embraced the change from yellow journalism to professional journalism. It is that emphasis that modern journalism needs to embrace again. So much of the thinking that comes from the speech and writing of today's national journalists is what might be called 'muddled thinking' and 'unclear and illogical statements.' Accuracy and fairness are often not even a consideration in how the modern national 'press mess' reports events of the day.

We can watch a live news conference, congressional hearing, or interview, then be amazed at how members of the national media report the events out of context and with a definite 'leaning' in one direction or another. National news conferences and interviews are often edited so badly that the journalist's bias is obvious to almost anyone watching or reading it. News managers should at least demand that journalists correct the biased editing and personally apologize to the public about their biased work. Warnings, suspensions, or firings should also be on the table for journalists who purposely edit stories in a dishonest way.

Though I wasn't alive at the end of the 19th century or beginning of the 20th century, I've read enough documents to confirm that the 'press' was a mess back then. Sensational news, often called 'yellow journalism,' was what sold newspapers. That included sensational headlines, exaggerated stories, unreliable reporting filled with lies and half-truths, and slanted editorials — much like today's national media. Many newspapers were affiliated with specific political parties and openly partisan in their 'news coverage' — much like today's national media. Yes, it was a mess and the public was fed up with it back then — much like today. History tends to repeat itself and that's what we're seeing a century later. We have another 'press mess' on our hands nationally.

The one possibly 'bright' spot is local news. I've been pleased to see more balanced journalism in certain parts of the country in recent months. I'm still trying to ascertain how much of local news is working toward 'Real Journalism,' but it's nice to see or read it from time to time.

Coming Up

So, what are we going to do about it? What can be done about it? I'll share some thoughts that may surprise and even upset some journalists in the next part of our special series.



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