



Journalism's Long Road Back

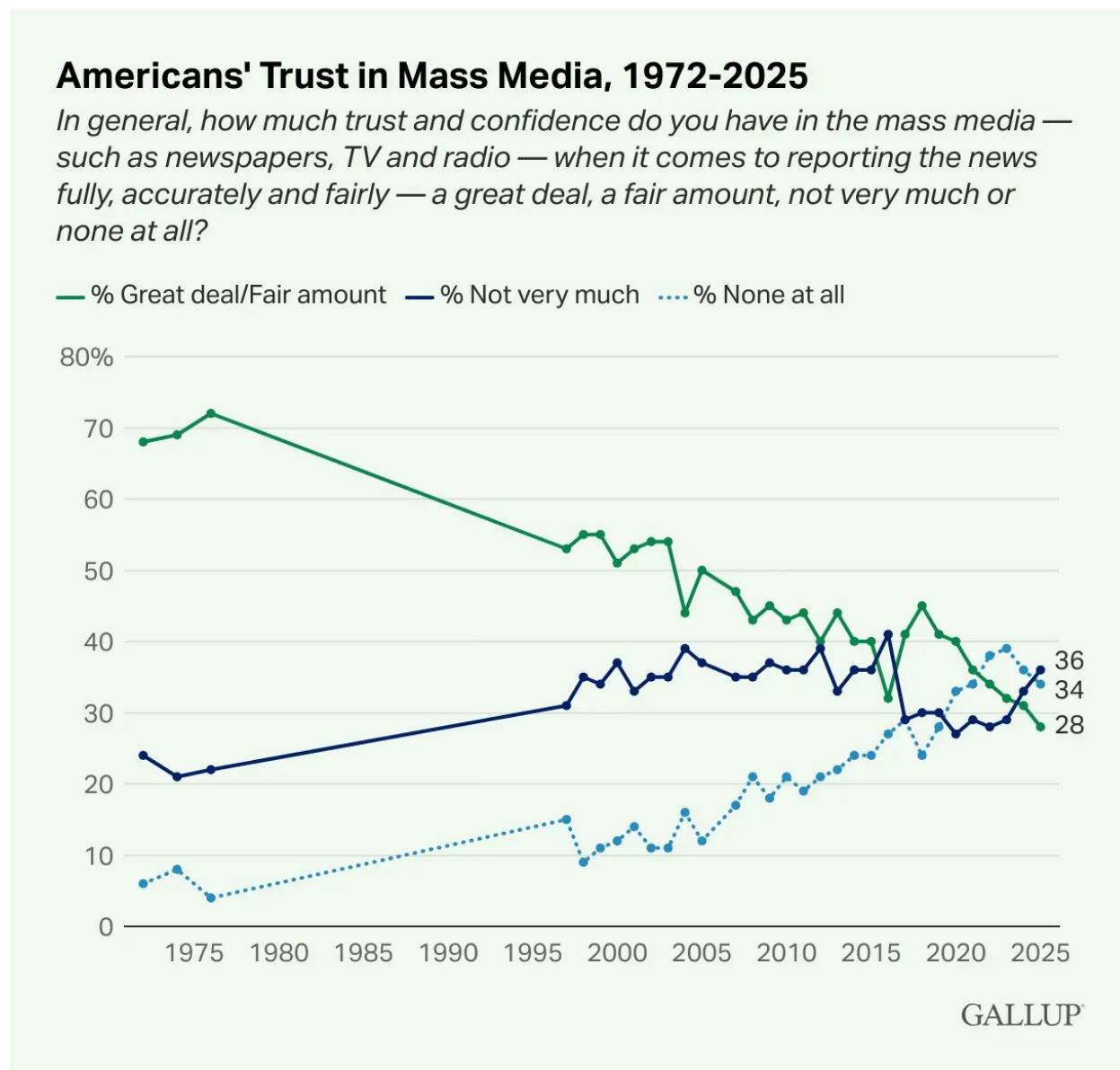
Can Trust in Journalism Be Rebuilt?

By

Mark McGee

Trust in Journalism

Let's do a little recap from what I wrote last year. Look carefully at this Gallup Poll:



Notice that American's trust in the mass media began a massive slide in the mid-1970s. The number of people who trusted the media a great deal or fair amount fell drastically. The number of people who had little to no trust in the media grew steadily. This happened after decades of journalists slowly building trust among its audience prior to the 1970s.

Local journalism could be a key to rebuilding the public's trust in the news media. Here's the good news:

“... many Americans express positive feelings about their local news media.” Pew Research

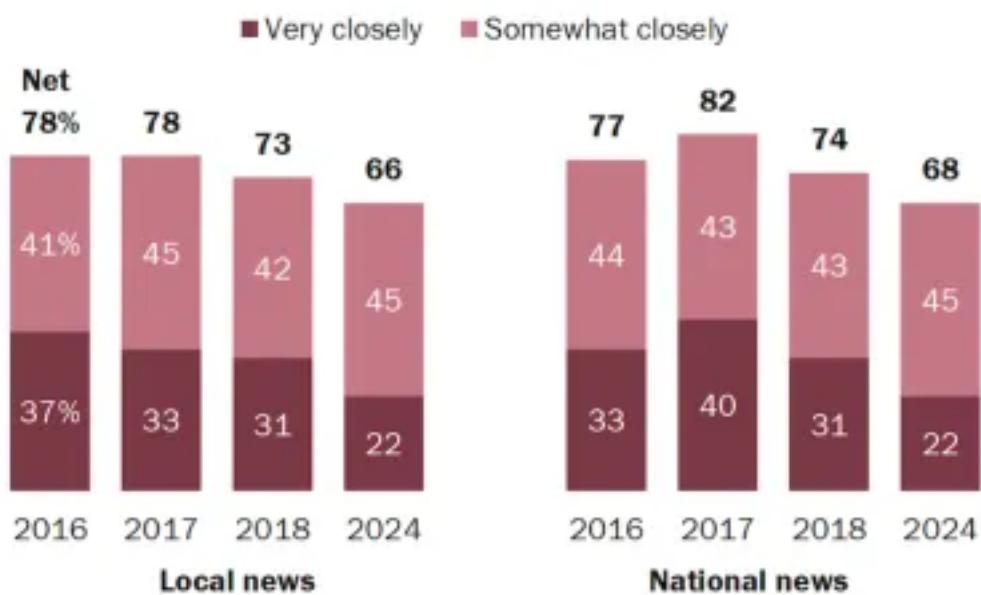
Here's the bad news:

“The share of Americans who say they follow local news very closely now stands at 22% – a decline of 15 percentage points since 2016, when 37% of U.S. adults said the same.” Pew Research (May 2024)

According to a Pew-Knight Initiative released in 2024 showed that fewer Americans are watching local and national news closely —

Fewer Americans are closely following local and national news

% of U.S. adults who follow local news/national news ...



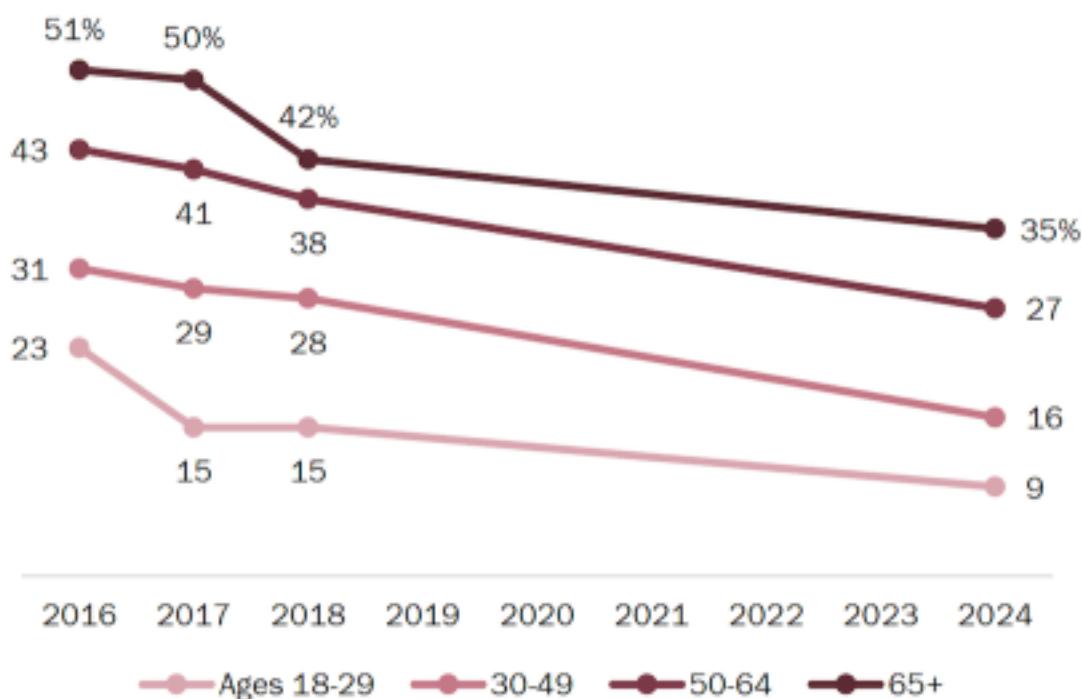
Source: Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 22-28, 2024.
"Americans' Changing Relationship With Local News"

PEW-KNIGHT INITIATIVE

It's also important to note that younger people have even 'less' interest in local news than their parents and grandparents —

Older adults are more likely to follow local news very closely, although attention is waning across all groups

*% of U.S. adults who follow local news **very closely***



Source: Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 22-28, 2024.
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Unfortunately for local journalists the public often ‘lumps’ them in with national journalists. The research numbers tell the sad story. That’s another reason I believe rebuilding public trust in the local news media won’t be easy or quick.

The ‘trust slide’ during the last half-century has been so severe that the majority of Americans aren’t even following the news media anymore. How can journalism recover from this? The mistrust/distrust is so deeply rooted that it may take generations to bring the numbers up to where they were in the 1960’s and 70’s.

The Danger of Change

I know what it's like to be trusted by the public. I also know what it's like to be distrusted by corrupt politicians, business leaders, law enforcement officials, and criminals. That's the way it should be for journalists. If corrupt leaders in your community like your coverage about them, take a hard look at yourself as a journalist. Do they think you're on their side because of the way you report news? Do you ever ask tough questions? Do you ever ask tough follow-up questions? Do you do any 'original' reporting or do you just follow the crowd and go for the easy stories handed to you in press conferences and press releases? Do you do the hard and sometimes dangerous work of investigative reporting to bring political and governmental corruption into the 'light' for all to see? If not, you may be part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

That's one of the reasons I've written this series about younger journalists wanting to change ethical standards in journalism. They are going in the **WRONG** direction from what the public wants, and that's dangerous to the future of journalism and our Republic.

If you're a journalist or communication's specialist who would like to rebuild trust with the public, you 'may' have to distance yourself from the national news media. As long as the public thinks you're connected in any way to bad journalism, the harder it will be for people to accept you as a trustworthy news source.

I realize my words may sound harsh to some journalists, but I'd be lying to say it's not so. All of the respected research projects about public trust in the media I've seen during the past several decades have come up with the same findings. Even leaders in journalism are admitting the problem:

“There is a growing disconnect between how journalists see themselves and how people see journalists. Instead of perceiving journalists as watchdogs acting in the public’s best interest, people increasingly see journalists as elites who are acting in their own interests. Indeed, there’s been an explosion of research focused on news distrust over the past decade, and the consistent findings are that people increasingly feel compelled to discount the journalism they encounter because they believe it to be politically biased, economically compromised, or simply produced by out-of-touch elites. People believe journalists knowingly attempt to sensationalize the news to make more money or misrepresent the news to suit either a liberal or conservative perspective.”

Columbia Journalism Review

“Trust in journalism has eroded dramatically in recent years, leaving news organizations grappling with skepticism from audiences across the political spectrum. This crisis is driven by interwoven factors: the rise of social media, the proliferation of all kinds of information and misinformation, the collapse of traditional business models, and increasing political polarization ... the media’s role in an increasingly polarized political environment has deepened distrust. News organizations are not immune to market forces that encourage them to cater to specific political constituencies and ignore coverage that does not fit with the biases of those constituencies. Over time, partisan news has flourished, and mainstream outlets have struggled to maintain broad credibility even while striving for objectivity. The result is a media landscape in which trust is fractured. Many consumers feel that if a news source aligns with their views, it is reliable; if it does not, it must be dishonest. This binary perception undermines what journalism took as its traditional role: to inform the public with accuracy, fairness, and accountability.” Newsweek

What's Next?

“Confidence in the mass media is historically low, with fewer than three in 10 Americans now placing trust in newspapers, television and radio to report the news fully, fairly and accurately. The decline is evident across all major partisan groups, though Republicans’ confidence is now in the single digits, while independents remain largely skeptical. Democrats, who traditionally have been most positive toward the media, now register only a slim majority.

Generational divides further underscore the erosion, with older adults holding significantly more faith than younger Americans in the media. Given younger Democrats’ relatively low confidence in the media, overall trust could decrease further in the future, unless Republican trust rebounds.

With confidence fractured along partisan and generational lines, the challenge for news organizations is not only to deliver fair and accurate

reporting but also to regain credibility across an increasingly polarized and skeptical public." Gallup

As you can see, I am not alone in my concerns about the future of journalism. So, what's next? Look around at the news and information landscape. It's full of social media, podcasts, and YouTube channels; along with opinion programming mixed with a little news that is often reported 'out-of-context.' Politicians often lie and, unfortunately, so do many in the press (news media). If this continues to get worse, is there any hope for real journalism to come to life again? Maybe — but it will take a lot of time, strong commitment, and internal fortitude on the part of journalists and their managers to make the necessary shift in how the public perceives journalism.

As to the possibility of the national news media changing, I found it interesting last October when Bari Weiss, Co-founder and Editor of The Free Press, announced that Paramount was purchasing The Free Press and that she would become the new 'editor-in-chief of CBS News.' That's in addition to her duties at TFP. That announcement caused many subscribers of The Free Press to cast serious doubts on both the future of TFP and Weiss' ability to make substantial changes at CBS News. You can read more from her own words about The Future of the Free Press.

Remembering The Days Of Trust

I became a journalist in the 1960's when the majority of the public trusted the news they read in newspapers, saw on television, and heard on radio. I was one of the lucky journalists to have begun my career at that time. However, by the time my days in television news came to an end four decades later, things seemed to be in an almost 'free fall' in the area of journalistic ethics.

That 'fall' was not sudden nor unexpected, which is why I began teaching the basic principles of real journalism in newsrooms more than 40 years ago. I was aware of the polling that Gallup, Pew Research, and other companies were doing on the public view of the news media. Even though the numbers weren't terrible in the 1980's (public trust was still in the majority), I could see that the trust issue was going in the wrong direction. That led me to make what I believe is an important decision for a news manager.

News Managers as 'Teachers'

The job of being a 'news manager' is more than hiring and firing people and attending department head meetings. It includes inspiring journalists to do a better job of serving the public every day. That often includes helping them improve in areas where they may lack strength. I started holding weekly 'classes' where my journalists and I would go through the basics of journalism and mass communications.

At some stations it worked best to hold the class before the morning news meeting. At other stations it was best to do it following the last newscast of the evening. I also took a few minutes in the morning and afternoon news meetings with producers and anchors to discuss ways we could improve our news coverage as journalists. I also taught journalists as I approved scripts, and worked closely with news crews as they edited their stories. I even went out with photographers and reporters to help them with coverage, and sometimes covered stories and did live shots to demonstrate what I was teaching.

What was the outcome? I saw a definite improvement in many areas of our news coverage. We became better as a team of journalists heading in the same direction. The story ideas, reporting, and writing improved. I think the years of emphasizing real journalism also played a role in the growing size of our audience at different stations.

News managers can also do some 'private' teaching in their offices. I'm talking about 'teaching' young journalists rather than 'yelling' at them. I often asked young journalists privately where they wanted to be in five years, then told them I would help them reach their goal if they really wanted to work for the opportunity. I meant what I told them. I wanted to see journalists succeed. I don't know if that attitude can 'fix' the problem we face today, but it might be worth a try.

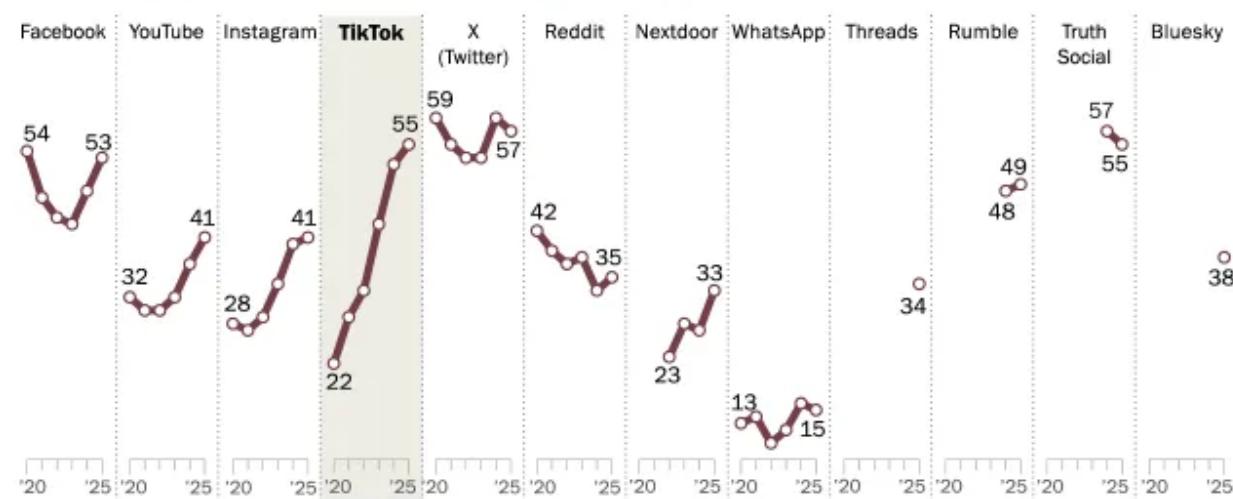
The Future of Journalism

Keep in mind that we've already seen how journalism has and continues to change for the worse. The principles of good journalism don't change, but the 'delivery platforms' do. I invite older journalists who still hold to the basics of real journalism to step into the gap and help younger journalists see what their future could be by 'doing the right thing.'

One reason I mention that is because of the different 'information delivery systems' younger members of the 'public' are using for news. Here's an example of changes from 2020 to 2025:

More than half of U.S. adult TikTok users get news there, up from 22% in 2020

% of each social media site's users who regularly get news there



Note: The other response option was "No, don't regularly get news on this." Only respondents who indicated that they use each site were asked if they regularly get news on it. Social media sites are shown left to right in descending order by the share of U.S. adults who regularly get news there.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 18-24, 2025.

The right thing may be for younger journalists to continue working where they are now and do their best to make a difference in rebuilding public trust. I think they will probably fight an uphill battle in their newsrooms, but they may make some headway over time. Some might also rise to management positions where they will have more influence in impacting public trust in journalism.

The right thing for other young journalists may be to leave their traditional news outlets and work with 'independent' news groups. They might join some of the newer independent news groups that emphasize accuracy and objectivity and are working toward a return to real journalism. They might also work with other like-minded journalists to start 'new' independent news outlets. Finding funding may be one of the harder challenges they'll face, but it could be worth the effort if journalism could eventually make a 'trust' comeback.

Keep in mind what young journalists went through in the early 20th century. They graduated from new schools of journalism that promoted accuracy and objectivity in news coverage, then joined newspapers that were sometimes known for 'yellow journalism.' I'm sure those days were not easy for those young journalists, but look at what they did to turn the public trust around within a few decades. Maybe that could happen again.

The point is to make the right choice, then do whatever it takes to make your choice a reality — as long as the solid principles of journalism are emphasized. Maybe there's a future for real journalism after all.

We'll get into how to make that happen during the coming months in the *Real Journalism Newsletter*.



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee