

The following press release and op-eds were created by University of Texas undergraduates as part of the Texas Media & Society Undergraduate Fellows Program at the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life. As part of this program, undergraduates worked with faculty and graduate students to learn more about the state of the media, analyze the survey data, and write up the results. Their work is presented below.

Press Release

Newsrooms, Public Face Challenges Navigating Social Media Landscape

Cameron Lang, Levi Mulloy, and Kelly Nwonuma

Analysis of the Texas Media & Society Survey finds that while 89% of Americans come across unfamiliar news sources, almost a quarter of Americans are not checking the accuracy of their news. Additionally, the survey reveals that a journalist's social media presence affects their credibility in the eyes of the public.

The Texas Media & Society Survey contacted just over 1,000 citizens from across the U.S. and just over 1,000 Texas residents. The survey focuses on public opinion related to journalism, politics, media consumption, and social media. The random sampling technique used allows the findings to be generalized to the entire U.S. and Texas populations.

The survey shows that 73% of Americans are on social media, and of this group, 92% of respondents say they are exposed to unfamiliar news outlets. Even though respondents who do not use social media are less likely to come across unfamiliar news sources, there is still a large portion of people who come across new outlets. Of the respondents who do not use social media, 84% say that they come across unfamiliar news outlets.

“In today’s news environment it is easier than ever for new outlets to reach a wider audience,” said Levi Mulloy, undergraduate at The University of Texas.

According to the Texas Media & Society Survey, most Americans are checking the accuracy of their news at least “some of the time”. However, survey results show 23% of Americans are not checking the accuracy of their news at all. Texans surveyed are more likely than non-Texans to check the accuracy of the news they encounter, with 84% checking the accuracy at least some of the time. This is compared to 77% of non-Texans checking the accuracy of their news.

The survey asked respondents about how they feel about journalists’ behavior on social media. From the survey, only 9% of Americans responded that a journalist posting their opinion about news on social media would strengthen their credibility. Sixteen percent of Texans surveyed responded that sharing personal opinions would strengthen a journalist’s credibility.

“While many journalism schools and newsrooms encourage journalists to post about their lives on social media in order to build relationships with the public, 25 to 30% of survey respondents said those behaviors lessen journalists’ credibility,” said undergraduate journalism student at The University of Texas, Cameron Lang.

Op-Ed

Corporate Disclosure More Important For the Media than Journalist Disclosure

Alishan Alibhai, Grace Thomas, and Victoria Grefer

The 2016 presidential campaign has surprisingly produced two role models for distrust in the media. Hillary Clinton has a rocky relationship with the media, and strategically avoids press conferences. Yet disdain for media is not unique to Clinton. Donald Trump also frequently warns the American populace that the media can misrepresent the news. His recent accusation that The Washington Post inaccurately reports on Amazon.com because of Jeff Bezos' role in both companies is a case in point. These allegations open up an interesting discussion: should the news media disclose who owns them in their reporting? Should journalists disclose aspects of their identity when it relates to what they are reporting?

With political tensions as fraught as they are, we believe that voters should question the role of money in politics and media, rather than fixate on the personalities that report the news. Fortunately, much of the American public grants journalists the just application of the right to privacy while holding corporations to a higher standard.

The Texas Media and Society Survey results show that Americans value knowing who owns the news more than who actually reports it. In a post-Citizens United world, where campaign spending law does not distinguish between corporations and individuals, we find it surprisingly hopeful that Americans do. Survey respondents expressed skepticism about who fills the coffers of the news media.

When asked if news organizations should disclose which companies own them when reporting on those companies, a whopping 71.6% of the American population agreed. However, this hardly reflects the populace's view on disclosure in general.

When it comes to journalists, respondents were less in favor of disclosure. Only 26.8% of Americans believed that journalists should disclose their partisan affiliation if they report on politics. The percentage of Americans preferring journalist disclosure shrunk even more when it came to the more personal aspects of identity; only 17.1% of Americans believed journalists should disclose their sexual orientation when they report on same-sex marriage.

Those who reported that they pay attention to political news very or somewhat closely consistently demand more media disclosure than those people who do not follow politics closely. An overwhelming 82.2% of people who follow political news want corporate affiliation disclosure, whereas only 59.4% of those who do not follow politics do.

The trend is echoed for education. The more formal education a person has, the more likely he or she is to demand media disclosure. In fact, there is more than a 15% difference between people with graduate level or higher education (86.9%) and people who have not earned a GED (60.7%) in wanting corporation disclosure from the news media. Even when examining journalist disclosure of their partisanship and sexual orientation, those with more education and who pay more attention to political news demand more disclosure than those with less education, although the majority of all groups respond that journalists should not have to disclose this information.

The survey yielded interesting results about corporate and journalist disclosure along ideological lines. Unsurprisingly, both liberals and conservatives had a large and nearly identical interest in knowing what companies owned news organizations, with 77.2% of liberals and 77.4% of conservatives answering in the affirmative. It seems that corporate disclosure remains insulated from differences in political ideologies.

The ideological divide became more apparent, however, when it came to issues of a journalist's identity. When asked about partisan disclosure, 36.0% of conservatives wanted journalists to reveal their affiliation, while 24.9% of liberals felt the same. The issue of sexual orientation painted an even more distinct picture: 23.0% of conservatives believed journalists should disclose how they identify sexually compared to 14.2% of liberals.

This pattern may be because some believe that journalists' identities affects their reporting. As it's fairly unlikely that gay journalists would oppose same-sex marriage, a conservative audience may have less interest in hearing their commentary, which would explain their higher tendency to favor disclosure. Conversely, liberals may be less concerned with a journalist's sexual orientation because it is less indicative of holding liberal stances on same-sex marriage. As for partisanship, perhaps more conservatives want journalist disclosure than liberals because they have been operating under a liberal presidency for the past eight years and thus have become very critical and distrustful of political reporting.

When analyzing gender trends, females are less likely to endorse media and journalist disclosure than males. The gap was smallest with respect to requiring news media organizations to disclose when they report on companies that own them (75.8% males, 69.9% females) and comparatively larger for partisan disclosure (33.0% males, 22.1% females) and sexual orientation disclosure (22.1% males, 12.8% females). Although males value media disclosure more than females, the gender differences lag in the face of corporations having an influence on media outlets. Corporate disclosure tends to be a universal American concern, rather than a gender-specific concern, whereas journalist disclosure receives more male support.

For the sexual orientation findings, the data indicate a divide in how men and women feel about the issue of same-sex marriage; while women place less importance on how an individual identifies, men associate sexual orientation with credibility when it comes to reporting the news. Layered behind this distinction could be subconscious reflections of gender roles and varying views on homosexuality between the sexes, as women have more tolerant attitudes towards LGBT individuals. According to the Pew Research Center, 65% of women in the U.S. agree that homosexuality should be accepted, as opposed to only 55% percent of American men. Men also tend to value partisanship disclosure more than women do. Perhaps, because of the male-dominated make-up of the political sphere, men feel more entitled to information regarding journalists' partisan affiliation—a space in which men currently and historically have held significant power.

During an election year and in the shadow of court decisions that dictate corporations' ever-increasing influence on our political system, it is crucial that the U.S. population remains highly critical of how corporate funds impact the media's presentation of the news and political affairs. This, we believe, is more important than focusing on minute details of the personal identities of journalists. While facts about a journalist's personal life can offer perspective and even entertainment, it's little more than tabloid gossip in comparison to the news they have an obligation to report. We are encouraged that the American public, according to the survey, agrees.

Op-Ed

Media as the Enemy: Divisions in Perception of Bias in the News

Abby Newell, Madeline Hoadley, and Garret Krist

Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has frequently blamed the 'liberal' news media for the current state of American politics. Trump's insistence that the mainstream media covers him unfairly reinforces a popular perception that the media have a bias in favor of liberal ideology. In the Inaugural Texas Media & Society Survey, about a third of our survey respondents agree with Trump that the news media tend to lean left.ⁱ Our survey also suggests that perceptions of the news are more nuanced than Trump's disapproval of the media as a whole.

For instance, our results indicate that perceptions of media bias vary greatly by age. Younger people tend to perceive less liberal bias in the news media compared to older Americans.ⁱⁱ Further, young Americans were more likely, on average, to think that the news media tend to have neither a liberal nor conservative bias than older age groups.ⁱⁱⁱ

Older Americans also have unique ideas about the news media and stronger opinions on media bias than the younger generation. They believe that it is much harder for journalists to remove their personal opinions from their reporting.^{iv} Older age groups also tend to prefer a more "hard facts" approach to the news, in which journalists leave out any sort of interjection or analysis.^v

In addition to their differences in perceived bias, younger and older Americans also access different news media sources, which may influence the disparities in perceptions that we see in our analysis. For example, those in the 18- to 29-year-old age group were far more likely to say that they use social networking sites than those over the age of 60.^{vi} Young people's tendency to access news through social networking sites compared to older age groups might also mean they are exposed to more diverse news sources than what traditional media provides older audiences. This may help account for their view of the media that is distinct from older generations.

In addition to age, perceived bias in the media and personal political ideology are deeply intertwined. Conservatives were much more likely to state that the media has a slight or strong liberal bias than liberals or moderates.^{vii} In fact, both liberals and moderates responded similarly in that nearly a third of both believed that the news media have neither a liberal nor conservative bias.^{viii} On the other hand, conservatives were more likely to respond definitively to this question as opposed to saying "I do not know" or "uncertain" compared to their liberal and moderate counterparts.^{ix} Our findings exemplify conservatives' vehement skepticism toward the news media and a shared sentiment with Trump that the liberal media frequently attacks the broader conservative public.

While these findings suggest differences across the public as a whole, age and ideology are not entirely separate. The 18 to 29-year-old age group was more likely to identify as liberal than all other age groups.^x These divisions depict a close relationship between age, ideology, and perceptions of media bias, where cohort and political ideology play a significant part in how the public sees news media.

These differences do not exist in isolation. The 2016 presidential election and Trump's accusations of media bias offer evidence that these perceptions matter to democracy. Despite such a negative view of news media among conservatives, younger people see less bias and are generally less

critical of the current state of news media. Learning from younger Americans and their media habits may in fact be the solution to our seemingly negative perception of media bias. Engaging with news through social media creates a discursive environment where Americans can more easily connect to diverse news sources and audiences. This has the potential to change how the public feels about bias by increasing exposure and ascribing less agency to political elites who denounce the media as a liberal mouthpiece. Perhaps when electing a new president this fall, we can also elect new habits that engage with news media and each other in different ways and in diverse spaces. These changes in our interactions with news media may be the key in offsetting the intense partisan divides seen so clearly this campaign season.

ⁱ 34.7% reported they saw the media as having a slight or strong liberal bias.

ⁱⁱ 21.3% of 18-29 year-olds perceived a strong or slight liberal bias as compared to 31.3% of 30-44 year-olds, 40.3% of 45-59 year-olds, and 42.4% of those over the age of 60; $\chi^2(9) = 35.79, p < .001$.

ⁱⁱⁱ 33.2% of 18-29 year-olds as compared to 21.3% of 45-59 year-olds and 20.8% of those over the age of 60; $\chi^2(9) = 35.79, p < .001$.

^{iv} 64.3% of 60+ year-olds said they somewhat or strongly agree that "Journalists have difficulty removing their personal opinions from their reporting" as compared to 40.1% of 18-29 year-olds, $\chi^2(6) = 43.42, p < .001$.

^v 61.7% of 45-59 year-olds and 69.8% of those over the age of 60 somewhat or strongly agree that "The news media should just present the facts, without any analysis," while 48.3% of 18-29 year olds and 52.2% of 30-44 year olds somewhat or strongly agree $\chi^2(6) = 41.64, p < .001$.

^{vi} 26.5% of 45-59 year-olds and 44.9% of those over the age of 60 said they do not use any social networking sites as compared to 20.5% of 30-44 year-olds and 14.9% of 18-29 year-olds, $\chi^2(3) = 64.74, p < .001$.

^{vii} 62.5% of conservatives thought the media had a slight or strong liberal bias as compared to 22.2% of moderates and 22.6% of liberals, $\chi^2(6) = 163.33, p < .001$.

^{viii} 31.0% of liberals and 33.3% of moderates saw the media as having neither a liberal nor a conservative bias compared to 11.9% of conservatives, $\chi^2(6) = 163.33, p < .001$.

^{ix} 27.3% of liberals and 33.9% of moderates indicated they were uncertain about media bias as compared to 18.6% of conservatives, $\chi^2(6) = 163.33, p < .001$.

^x 45.7% of 18-29 year-olds identified as liberal as compared to 29.9% of 30-45 year-olds, 24.7% of 45-59 year-olds, and 29.1% of those over the age 60, $\chi^2(6) = 46.95, p < .001$.