

The Divide Between Journalists and the Audience: Perceptions of Journalism Credibility at a Statewide Level

by

Raymond McCaffrey, Bobbie J. Foster, Christi Welter, and Janine Parry

University of Arkansas

Abstract

This two-part study examined the perception of journalism ethical standards by both the public and media professionals on a statewide level. In part one of the study, a statewide poll found that only 14% of Arkansas residents rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as high or very high. The results are about 9 percentage points below the findings of a national Gallup poll in 2015 in which the public ranked the ethical standards of journalists. In contrast, part two of the study revealed that 75% of Arkansas media professionals surveyed rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as high or very high. Still, 85% of the media professionals also said they thought ethical violations were damaging their profession. Journalists were split about the most common ethical complaint from readers and viewers – 45% said bias, 45% said inaccuracy, and 10% said fairness. Asked what medium they thought was the source of the most ethical violations, 20% blamed broadcast (TV); 25% blamed the Internet; 40% blamed social media; 5% blamed social media and broadcast; 5% blamed social media and the Internet; and 5% blamed social media, broadcast, and the Internet. The responses of these journalists were consistent with the theory of paradigm repair, which posits that journalists engage in discursive strategies to defend their profession in the face of ethical scandals, such as ignoring these ethics offenses or shifting the blame to other sources, such as new technology.

Keywords: Journalism ethics, credibility, paradigm repair.

Introduction

The evolution of journalism in the United States was centered on the profession's ability to establish a sense of credibility and trust with the public. That effort helped drive the establishment in the early 20th century of the first state and national journalism ethics codes, which advocated such enduring standards such as accuracy, impartiality, and fair play (Flint, 1925). For much of the 20th century, journalists worked to preserve credibility in an environment governed by a communications model in which the sender and receiver of information were distinct entities (McQuail, 2005). This preservation was helped by the ability of news outlets to maintain a dominant role in their relationship with the audience and serve as so-called

gatekeepers of information (Singer, 2006). That dominance began to erode with the advent of the Internet in the 1990s as audience members became both consumers and producers of information through blogs, personal web sites, or content-sharing forums (Bruns, 2008, Singer, 2006).

Print media also took to the Internet in the 1990s, as newspapers began offering online editions and broadcast news outlets eventually developed competing websites (Bressers, 2006; Deuze, 2004). Yet, those same media outlets have struggled to retain credibility as they compete with an overwhelming variety of alternate online information sources (Zelizer, 2008). By 2016, 62% of Americans would report that they got their news via social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and Tumblr, essentially a jump of 13 percentage points in just four years (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). That finding came after newspaper circulation dropped another 7% and viewership of late night local news dropped 5% in 2015 (Mitchell & Holcomb, 2016).

The credibility of the mainstream media has been increasingly under assault as the news industry has scrambled to revamp in the Internet age. Only 23% of the respondents to a 2016 Gallup Poll rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as high or very high compared to 32% in 1981, around the dawn of CNN and the 24/7 news cycle (Honesty/Ethics in Professions, n.d.). The Pew Research Center has reported that the positive "believability" ratings for a broad range of media sources, including print, radio, broadcast and cable TV, continues to decline, dropping by 15 percentage points in a decade's time, from 71% in 2002 to 56% in 2012 ("Further decline in credibility ratings for most news organizations," 2012). Research suggests that perceived credibility of newspapers by the public can be adversely affected by dubious journalistic practices, such as when readers believe journalists are overreliant on anonymous sources (Sternadori & Thorson, 2009). Similarly, perceived credibility of the media has been shown to decline in relation to the frequency and severity of errors by news sources (Maier, 2005).

Once, CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite was considered "the most trusted man in America" (Martin, 2009). In August 2008, about a year before Cronkite died, the *New York Times* asked whether comedian Jon Stewart, who played a fake TV news anchor as host of *The Daily Show*, had actually become the "most trusted man in America" (Kakutani, 2008). In that story, the *Times* referenced a 2007 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press poll to determine America's most admired journalist showed Stewart in a tie for fourth place with then CBS anchor Dan Rather, NBC anchors Tom Brokaw and Brian Williams, and CNN's Anderson Cooper (The Pew Research Center, 2007).

The conclusion of that poll, as seen in the headline accompanying its news release, was "Today's Journalists Less Prominent." Less than ten years later, the contrast was even more glaring. The careers of Rather and Williams were in tatters after both had lost their network anchor jobs after major ethical scandals. Rather retired from CBS after a 60 Minutes II segment he anchored in 2004 was the subject of intense criticism after it was determined that it hinged on unauthenticated documents that alleged that President George W. Bush had once used connections to serve stateside in the National Guard instead of going to war in Vietnam (Koblin, 2015b). Williams was reassigned to MSNBC after it was determined he was less than truthful in alleging that he had been on a military helicopter that had been shot down in Iraq (Steel, 2015).

Meanwhile, the fake news anchor was still held in the highest regard. In 2015, when Stewart decided to leave *The Daily Show*, his final episode was his second highest rated ever and the *Times* declared that “his influence has been significant” in the culture (Koblin, 2015a).

Literature Review: News Credibility and Paradigm Repair

Major journalism ethics scandals such the one involving former NBC news anchor Brian Williams share common elements, including accusations of fabrication, internal investigations, public responses, and the disciplining of the culprits (Foreman, 2010). Moreover, the greater journalist community often engages in a broader public discourse that has been defined as “paradigm repair” (Carlson, 2009).

Paradigm repair involves the process that media professionals engage in when they feel a need for the restoration of their profession’s public standing after damaging ethical scandals (Steiner, Guo, McCaffrey, & Hills, 2013). The theory was inspired by physicist Thomas S. Kuhn, who wrote in 1963 about the importance of “shared paradigms” in scientific fields” (Kuhn, 2012, p 11). Those paradigms involve a commitment to common rules, Kuhn wrote in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn, 2012, p 12). In journalism, the evolution of a shared paradigm can be seen with the success of the penny press newspapers and the revelation that a mass audience was more drawn to a form of objective reporting than partisan journalism (Cohen-Almagor, 2008). Indeed, paradigms, Kuhn wrote, “gain their status because they are more successful than their competitors” (Kuhn, 2012, p 24). Members of a given profession learn these common rules in various ways, such as via textbooks, the classroom, and professional practice (Kuhn, 2012, p 43). Journalism’s professionalism movement at the start of the 20th century was all about institutionalizing this evolving paradigm, beginning with the establishment of journalism schools and then professional ethics codes (Flint, 1925).

This shared paradigm also translated to an agreement among professionals concerning the ingredients for sound journalism and the proper way to produce it, according to Berkowitz (2011). When this paradigm is threatened, particularly in cases of prominent ethical scandals, journalists often move to defend or repair it, collectively serving as an “interpretive community” that engages in a public discourse that also serves to reassert core journalistic values (p. 127). Though members of the media can ignore threats to the journalistic paradigm, they may also seek to repair it (Steiner, Guo, & Hills, 2013). A common tactic includes the scapegoating of those involved in ethics scandals, such as when the tabloids tried to pass the blame to the paparazzi after Princess Diana’s died in an automobile accident while her driver tried to evade the media (Berkowitz, 2000). Multiple repair tactics can be in play at the same time, such as when the *New York Times* at once was accountable but sought to pass the blame to reporter Jayson Blair after a scandal involving plagiarism and fabrication, according to Hindman (2005).

The purpose of this study was to assess public perceptions about the ethical standards of journalists and to compare them to corresponding opinions of media professionals on the subject. Since most major media credibility surveys have been done on a national level, this study also attempted to break new ground by honing in on perceptions of journalism ethics by both the public and media on a statewide level. Consequently, this study asked: How do Arkansas residents and media professionals alike perceive the honesty and ethical standards of journalists?

Moreover, this study was interested in analyzing the responses of these journalists through the lens of prevailing theories that seek to explain journalists' response in the face of ethical challenges to the profession, such as paradigm repair. Consequently, this study asked: What did responses from media professionals about the state of journalism ethics reveal about a broader discursive strategy by journalists to defend their profession?

Research Methods

This two-part study examined the perception of journalism ethical standards on a statewide level by both the public and media professionals. In part one of the study, Arkansas residents were asked in a statewide poll to rate the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as either: very high, high, average, low, or very low. The question was designed to replicate the query asked regularly about journalism ethics on the national Gallup Poll for about the last 40 years.

The researchers in this study collaborated with pollsters who agreed to place the question on an established, longstanding poll of statewide residents about a number of topics including approval ratings of elected officials, projected voting preferences in upcoming elections, and stances on prevailing issues such as gay marriage, immigration, gun control, abortion, and healthcare. Respondents were also asked about media consumption, specifically the frequency with which they read a daily newspaper and watched a local TV news show.

Overall, 747 adult Arkansas residents were randomly surveyed by telephone in October of 2014. The rate of cooperation was 20% for those contacted by landline and 19% by cell phone. The margin of error for the total sample was +/- 3.6 percentage points. Moreover, a subset of 568 respondents identified themselves as a "very likely voter," and the margin of error for that sample pool was +/- 4.1 percentage points.

In part two of the study, Arkansas journalists were asked in a survey the same question posed to residents in the state- namely to rate the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as very high, high, average, low, or very low. The survey also included four follow-up questions designed in part to determine the extent that journalists may be employing tactics such as paradigm repair in the face of ethical challenges to the profession (see Appendix A). These tactics include ignoring ethical problems or shifting the blame elsewhere, such as other journalistic mediums or to new technologies. Consequently, the survey also asked journalist whether they felt that current journalistic ethical violations were damaging the journalism industry; what were the most common ethical complaints they have received from readers or viewers; and what medium did they think was the source of most of that criticism: print, broadcast (TV), the Internet, or social media. The survey also included room for respondents to add "additional comments."

The surveys were distributed randomly in June 2016 at the annual conference of the Arkansas Press Association, which lists 123 newspapers in the state as members ("APA Members," n.d.). The paper survey was handed out directly to respondents at the beginning of a presentation concerning journalism ethics, and the answer sheets were individually collected at the conclusion of the session. Overall, 21 respondents filled out the survey. One survey was discarded because the respondent did not self-identify as a journalist.

Findings: Part One

In part one of the study, a statewide poll found that 14% of Arkansas residents rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as high or very high (see Table 1). The results are about 13 percentage points below the findings of a national Gallup poll in 2015 in which the public ranked the honesty and ethical standards of journalists at an all-time low. Overall, about 4% of Arkansas respondents rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as very high, about 10% as high, about 39% as average, about 21% as low, about 15% as very low, and about 12% answered don't know or refused to answer. The poll found that about 13% of Arkansas residents who identified themselves as registered and likely voters rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as high or very high. Overall, about 5% of those registered and likely voters rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as high, about 8% as very high, about 37% as average, about 23% as low, about 17% as very low, and about 10% answered don't know or refused to answer.

Asked about how many days in the past week they had read a daily newspaper, 27% said 0 days; 23% said one to three days; 8% said four to six days; and 36% said seven days; and 7% answered don't know or refused to answer. Asked how many days in the past week they had watched the local TV news shows in the late evening, 16% said 0 days; 12% said one to three days; 15% said four to six days; 51% said seven days; and 6% said answered don't know or refused to answer. Of registered and likely voters asked about how many days in the past week they had read a daily newspaper, 25% said 0 days; 22% said one to three days; 9% said four to six days; 41% said seven days, and 3% answered don't know or refused to answer. Of the registered and likely voters asked how many days in the past week they had watched the local TV news shows in the late evening, 15% said 0 days; 12% said one to three days; 16% said four to six days; 55% said seven days; and 2% answered don't know or refused to answer.

Findings: Part Two

In part two of the study, 75% of the journalists surveyed rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as high or very high (see Table 1). More specifically, 25% of the journalists rated the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as very high, 50% as high, 15% as average, 0% as low, 5% as very low, and 5% answered don't know.

Asked to describe their job, 10 respondents said they were editors, five said they were reporters, and five said they worked as both editors and reporters. Asked whether they felt the current rate of journalistic ethical violations were damaging the journalism industry, 85% answered yes and 15% answered no (see Table 2). Asked what were the most common ethical complaints they receive from readers or viewers, 45% answered bias, 45% answered inaccuracy and 10% answered fairness (see Table 3). Asked what medium they thought was the cause of the most ethical violations, 20% blamed broadcast (TV); 25% blamed the Internet; 40% blamed social media; 5% blamed social media and broadcast (TV); 5% blamed social media and the Internet; and 5% blamed social media, broadcast (TV), and the Internet (see Table 4). Only one respondent wrote additional comments, saying: "Standards for ethics should not change based on platforms."

Discussion: Perceived Credibility and Paradigm Repair

The responses of these journalists were consistent with the theory of paradigm repair, which posits that journalists in the face of ethical scandals have been found to engage in discursive strategies to defend their profession, such as ignoring ethics offenses in their field or shifting the blame to other sources, such as new technology. Though public opinion of journalistic credibility is at what could be called a shockingly low level in Arkansas, 75% of journalists surveyed in that same state ranked the honesty and ethical standards of journalists as high or very high compared to about 14% of residents. On one level, it could be said that this disconnect suggests that media professionals' high rating of ethical standards by journalists in the face of public criticism is simply an instance of ignoring the problem, a hallmark of paradigm repair. And yet 85% of these same journalists acknowledged that there was a credibility problem, indicating that they felt the current rate of journalistic ethical violations were damaging the journalism industry. They also were acutely aware of what the ethical issues at hand were - most of them answered that either bias or inaccuracy were the ethical lapses that drew the most complaints by readers or viewers. And yet when asked what medium was the cause of the most journalistic ethical violations, not one of these respondents - all of them newspaper editors or reporters - pointed the finger at their own medium: print. Instead, using a common strategy of paradigm repair, they shifted the blame - in this case to other journalistic platforms: broadcast (TV), the Internet, and social media.

Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research

This study was able to break new ground by narrowing research regarding public perception of media ethics from a national to a statewide level. This study established that public perception of media ethics by Arkansas residents is appreciably lower than the level reflected in national polls, though it's unclear why. Arkansas has unique characteristics: It is a relatively small, southern state - a state that is unquestionably red, where voters have voted Republican in the last Presidential election and have elected both a new governor and U.S. senator from the GOP party. In the same 2014 poll in which residents were asked to rate the ethical standards of journalists, more registered and likely voters identified themselves as Democrats than Republicans - 33% versus 31%. Yet the majority of those same respondents said they planned to vote for Republican candidates in election races for governor, U.S. Senate, Congress, and the state legislature - and in some cases the margins of preference for Republican candidates over the Democrat was as high as 14%. Moreover, 47% of registered and likely voters indicated they would vote for a Republican candidate in the 2016 Presidential election compared to 38% who favored former Arkansas First Lady Hillary Clinton. Almost half - 49% - of registered and likely voters identified themselves as conservative, 31% as moderate, and 14% as liberal. Of the overall respondents, 44% identified themselves as conservative, 30% as moderate, and 14% as liberal. The majority of respondents (51%) opposed a measure to allow "the sale, distribution, and manufacture of alcohol in every Arkansas county." Moreover, 62% of the respondents favored less strict or no change in gun control laws, 40% favored laws that would make it more difficult for a woman to get an abortion, and 21% supported gay marriage, while 29% supported the deportation of all "undocumented immigrants."

The respondents are also reflective of a changing media audience. Overall, 27% - or about one in four Arkansas residents surveyed - said they didn't read a daily newspaper at any time in a given week, and 16% didn't watch local TV news shows in the late evening during that same time period. The numbers weren't much better for respondents who identified themselves as

registered and likely voters – 25% said they didn't read a daily newspaper at any time in a given week, and 15% didn't watch local TV news shows in the late evening during that same time period. Those later findings should be disturbing to those who believe the normative mission of journalism includes providing news and information to support an informed electorate. Still, what's not known is how many of those Arkansas respondents get their news and information via other platforms, such as the Internet and social media – and whether, in reality, they are still regularly following mainstream media albeit through newer technological venues.

The poll suggests numerous paths for future research. Future polling of Arkansas residents about journalism ethics would help establish the type of historic baseline that pollsters have already created nationally. Moreover, similar polling in other states across the United States would provide greater insight into regional opinions about the ethical standards of journalists.

This study was also able to compare the attitudes of the public with media professionals as they relate to the ethical performance of journalists. Though the number of journalists surveyed was relatively low in comparison to the public response on the statewide poll, the sharp disconnect between the two groups is certainly worthy of more consideration. A survey with a much higher number of journalist respondents would be instructive. This survey only involved newspaper editors and reporters. Future research should expand the inquiry so that it involves broadcast journalists as well as those who identify as working solely for other platforms, such as Internet-based outlets.

Finally, many questions were raised by both the poll of Arkansas residents and the survey of Arkansas journalists. In addition to polls and surveys, focus groups might be helpful in conducting a more nuanced exploration of the issues. The poll and survey in this study leave more questions than they answer. When Arkansas residents are rating journalists, are they thinking of all media, or just local reporters, or perhaps simply just the national press? Are they focusing on print, broadcast, the Internet, or social media? Similarly, when journalists are rating journalists, are they thinking local or national media - and what journalistic platform are they considering? Moreover, why were the journalists so reticent to assess blame to their own media platform, print? Again, getting answers to those questions would be helpful, either through surveys or more intense focus groups. As the sources of information for consumers become more diffuse, the research into the audience needs to accordingly become more specific and focused.

References

- Arkansas Press Association. (n.d.) APA members. Retrieved from <http://www.arkansaspress.org>
- Pew Research Center. (2012, August 16). Further decline in credibility ratings for most news organizations. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from pewresearch.org
- Gallup.com. *Honesty/Ethics in Professions*. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/>
- Berkowitz, D. (2000). Doing double duty: Paradigm repair and the Princess Diana what-a-story. *Journalism*, 1(2), 125-143.

- Berkowitz, D. A. (2011) Repairing the journalistic paradigm. In D. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Cultural Meanings of News : A Text-Reader*, (pp. 179-182) Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Bressers, B. (2006). Promise and reality: the integration of print and online versions of major metropolitan newspapers. *International Journal on Media Management*, 8 (3), 134-145.
- Bruns, A. (2008). *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second life, and Beyond : from production to produsage*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Carlson, M. (2009) The reality of a fake image News norms, photojournalistic craft, and Brian Walski's fabricated photograph. *Journalism Practice*, 3(2), 125-139.
- Carlson, M. (2012). 'Where once stood titans': Second-order paradigm repair and the vanishing US newspaper. *Journalism*, 13(3), 267-283.
- Cohen-Almagor, R. (2008). The limits of objective reporting. *Journal of Language & Politics*, 7(1), 136-155.
- Coronel, S., Coll, S., & Kravitz, D. (2015, April 5). Rolling Stones's investigation: A failure that was avoidable. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Retrieved from <http://cjr.org>
- Deuze, M. (2004). What is multimedia journalism? *Journalism Studies*, 5 (2), 139-152.
- Flint, L. N. (1925). *The conscience of the newspaper; a case book in the principles and problems of journalism*. New York, London,: D. Appleton and Company.
- Foreman, G. (2010). *The ethical journalist: making responsible decisions in the pursuit of news*. Chichester, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Gottfried, J. & Shearer, E. (2016, May 26). News use across social media platforms. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from pewresearch.org.
- Hindman, E. B. (2005). Jayson Blair, The New York Times, and paradigm repair. *Journal of Communication*, 55(2), 225-241.
- Kakutani, M. (2008, Aug. 15). Is Jon Stewart the most trusted man in America? *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Koblin, J. (2015a, August 7). Jon Stewart signs off with second-most-watched episode in 'The Daily Show' history. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Koblin, J. (2015b, October 14). In 'Truth,' a news team tells its side of a '60 Minutes II' scandal. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Kuhn, T. S. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- McQuail, D. (2005). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (5th ed.). London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- Maier, S. R. (2005). Accuracy matters: a cross-market assessment of newspaper error and credibility. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82(3), 533-551.
- Martin, D. (2009, July 17). Walter Cronkite, 92, dies; trusted voice of TV news. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Mitchell, A. & Holcomb, J. (2016, June 15). State of the news media 2016. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from pewresearch.org.
- Singer, J.B. (2006) Stepping back from the gate: online newspaper editors and the co-production of content in campaign 2004. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 83 (2), 265-280
- Steel, E. (2015, September 29). Williams back on air after 7 months. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Steiner, L., Guo, J., McCaffrey, R., & Hills, P. (2013). The Wire and repair of the journalistic paradigm. *Journalism*, 14(6), 703-720.
- Sternadori, M. M., & Thorson, E. (2009). Anonymous sources harm credibility of all stories. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 30(4), 54-66.
- The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press – *Today's journalists less prominent, fewer widely admired than 20 years ago*, March 8, 2007.
- Zelizer, B. (2008). Rethinking myth as news and storytelling. In Wahl-Jorgensen, K. and Hanitzsch, T. (Eds.) *The handbook of journalism studies*. (pp. 29-41). New York: Routledge.

APPENDIX A

1) Please tell us how you would rate the honesty and ethical standards of journalists:

(Circle One) Very High High Average Low Very Low Don't Know

2) Do you think complaints about ethical violations are damaging the journalism industry?

(Circle One) Yes No

3) Most of the ethical lapses that readers/viewers complain about relate to:

(Circle One) Bias Inaccuracy Fairness

4) What medium do you think is the cause of most ethical violations?

(Circle One) Print Broadcast (TV) Internet Social Media

5) My job involves: (Circle One) editing reporting

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

TABLE 1

Rating of Honesty and Ethical Standards of Journalists

| Honesty and Ethical Standards of Journalists | Public | Journalists |
|---|---------------|--------------------|
| High | 4% | 25% |
| Very High | 10% | 50% |
| Average | 39% | 15% |
| Low | 21% | 0% |
| Very Low | 15% | 5% |
| Don't Know or Refused to Answer | 12% | 5% |

TABLE 2

Ethical Violations and Damage to the Journalism Industry

| Are Complaints About Ethical Violations Damaging the Journalism Industry? | Journalists |
|--|--------------------|
| Yes | 85% |
| No | 15% |

TABLE 3

Types of Ethical Lapses That Draw Reader/Viewer Complaints

| Most of the ethical lapses that readers/viewers complain about relate to: | Journalists |
|---|--------------------|
| Bias | 45% |
| Inaccuracy | 45% |
| Fairness | 10% |

TABLE 4

Medium That Is The Cause of Most Journalistic Ethical Violations

| What Medium Do You Think Is The Cause Of The Most Ethical Violations? | Journalists |
|--|--------------------|
| Print | 0% |
| Broadcast (TV) | 20% |
| Internet | 25% |
| Social Media | 40% |
| Broadcast and Social Media | 5% |
| Internet and Social Media | 5% |
| Broadcast, Internet, and Social Media | 5% |