

Media: More Voices, Less Credibility

This chapter is based on surveys taken by the **Pew Research Center for the People & the Press**, sometimes in concert with the Project for Excellence in Journalism, a Washington, D.C.-based research organization that will become a part of the Pew Research Center in 2006. The chapter was written by the staff of the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

3

Media

More Voices, Less Credibility

When the first President Bush ran for reelection in 1992, most Americans got their news from the broadcast networks, talk radio was about the only place one could go for hard-edged political discussion, and “the web” was a term associated mainly with spiders. A dozen years later, as the second President Bush begins his second term, the nation’s news universe has been completely transformed.

Changing demographics, lifestyles, business trends and, most of all, technologies have fundamentally altered the way we get the news. No single source today is nearly as dominant as network news was in the early 1990s. News consumers can choose from an expanding menu of options — print and electronic, network and cable, digital and analog. This has led to declining audiences for many traditional news sources and has changed the nature of competition among news outlets, from a set-piece battle among a handful of rivals to an all-out scramble for survival.

As the media landscape has shifted, so too have the public's news tastes and preferences. Sitting down with the news on a set schedule has become a thing of the past for many time-pressured Americans; instead, they graze on the news throughout the day. More people are turning away from traditional news outlets, with their decorous, just-the-facts aspirations to objectivity, toward noisier hybrid formats that aggressively fuse news with opinion or entertainment, or both. Young people, in particular, are bypassing mainstream sources in favor of alternatives they find on the internet or late-night television.

At the same time, public discontent with the news media has increased dramatically. Americans find the mainstream media much less credible than they did in the mid-1980s. They are even more critical of the way the press collects and reports the news. More ominously, the public also questions the news media's core values and morality. A short-lived upswing in the media's image in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, served only to cast these negative attitudes into sharp relief.

Today's vast array of news choices gives Americans an opportunity to do more than just vent their displeasure with the news media — they can also turn to news outlets that reflect their own ideology and political beliefs. The latest news consumption survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press showed a striking rise in the politicization of cable TV news audiences.

THE NEWS IN AMERICA

Changing Trends in News Consumption

	1993	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004
REGULARLY WATCH ...	%	%	%	%	%	%
Local TV news	77	65	64	56	57	59
Nightly network news	60	42	38	30	32	34
Network TV magazines	52	36	37	31	24	22
Network morning news	—	—	23	20	22	22
Cable (in detail)						
Fox News Channel	—	—	17	17	22	25
CNN	35	26	23	21	25	22
MSNBC	—	—	8	11	15	11
CNBC	—	—	12	13	13	10
C-SPAN	11	6	4	4	5	5
Other sources						
Newspaper ¹	58	50	48	47	41	42
Radio ¹	47	44	49	43	41	40
Online news ²	—	2 ³	13	23	25	29

1 Figures based on use "yesterday," from Feb. 1994.

2 Online news at least three days per week

3 From June 1995

Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, April-May 2004

This pattern is most apparent with the fast-growing Fox News Channel. Since 2000, Fox's audience has increased by nearly half, and much of that growth has come among Republicans and conservatives. At the same time, CNN, Fox's principal rival, has a more Democratic-leaning audience than in the past. Such sorting out by partisan affiliation is not occurring among readers of daily newspapers and viewers of network newscasts; those media sources have retained a broad audience mix that, while smaller than it used to be, still roughly matches the partisan leanings of the population as a whole.

Cable Audience More Politicized

	PUBLIC	REPUBLICAN	DEMOCRATIC	INDEPENDENT
REGULARLY WATCH ...	%	%	%	%
Fox News Channel	25	35	21	22
CNN	22	19	28	22
MSNBC	11	10	12	12
CNBC	10	9	12	9
NBC Nightly News	17	15	18	19
CBS Evening News	16	13	19	17
ABC World News	16	15	20	12
Newspaper ¹	42	45	46	39

¹ Figures based on use "yesterday."

Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, April-May 2004

Gap in Most-Trusted News Sources*

REPUBLICANS	DEMOCRATS	INDEPENDENTS
Fox News (29)	CNN (45)	60 Minutes (29)
CNN (26)	60 Minutes (42)	CNN (28)
60 Minutes (25)	C-SPAN (36)	C-SPAN (26)
Wall St. Journal (23)	ABC News (34)	U.S. News (26)
C-SPAN (22)	CBS News (34)	NBC News (24)
Local TV news (21)	NPR (33)	NewsHour (24)

* Percent who believe all or most of what the organization reports, based on those able to rate the organization.

Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, May 2004

However, opinions of the credibility of the news media, in all its forms, also have become more politically polarized. For years, the credibility ratings of mainstream news organizations have been in decline. Now this skepticism is taking on an increasingly partisan cast; Republicans give most news outlets far lower ratings for credibility than do Democrats.

Buffeted by rising public criticism and increasing competition, journalists are confronting something of a crisis of confidence. A survey last year by the Pew Research Center, in collaboration with the Project for Excellence in Journalism, found journalists voicing widespread dissatisfaction with the state of their profession, as growing majorities said that bottom-line pressures had undermined the quality of coverage.

There is evidence that these concerns are justified. The State of the News Media, a comprehensive report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, showed that most sectors of the news media have experienced cutbacks in newsgathering resources in recent years. Radio newsroom staffing plummeted 57% between 1994 and 2001, and the number of network news correspondents has declined by more than a third since the mid-1980s.

This chapter looks at changes over the past two decades in how Americans get the news and what they think about the news.

“Sitting down with the news on a set schedule has become a thing of the past for many time-pressured Americans.”

News and Everyday Life

The public has less of a news habit than it did a decade ago. While the vast majority of Americans still get the news in some form on a daily basis, the percentage has declined, from 90% in 1994 to 82% last year. By contrast, other reported daily activities have remained stable.

The percentage of Americans who watch TV news on a typical day, read the newspaper or listen to radio news decreased significantly from 1994 to 2004. The number watching TV news on an average day fell from 72% in 1994 to 55% in 2002, before rebounding a bit in the latest survey.

The long-term decline in news consumption does not appear to be a consequence of rising dissatisfaction with the news media. Most Americans continue to say they enjoy keeping up with the news; in fact, somewhat more say that now than did so four years ago. But many people — especially young people — say they are too busy to follow the news.

Equally important, many people say they lack the informational background to keep up with the news. Fully 42% of Americans say they do not have the background to keep up with the news, a figure that rises to 50% among those with only a high school education.

News and Daily Life

	JAN. 1994	APRIL 1998	APRIL 2000	APRIL 2002	APRIL 2004
DID YESTERDAY	%	%	%	%	%
Watched TV news	72	59	56	55	60
Read newspaper	49	48	47	41	42
Listened to radio news	47	49	43	41	40
Any news yesterday ¹	90	85	83	80	82
Went online from home	—	17	23 ⁵	34	38
Went online from work ²	—	12	13 ⁵	20	20
Total online yesterday ²	4 ³	25	30 ⁵	43	47
Online news yesterday	—	—	—	—	24
Watched non-news TV	69	64 ⁴	57	59	63
Read a magazine	33	29	26	23	25
Read a book	31	35 ⁴	35 ⁶	34	35
Watched movie at home	—	—	—	23	24
Made personal phone call	63	67	—	63	66
E-mailed friend/relative	—	—	—	27	28
Ate family meal together	64	67	—	63	65
Prayed	56	—	—	66	66
Exercised/ran/sports	26	36	—	39	38
Shopped	23	30	—	27	28

1 For trending purposes, this measure includes only TV, newspaper and radio news sources.

2 Based on weekdays

3 From June 1995

4 From November 1997

5 From Pew Internet & American Life Project, April 2000

6 From September 1999

Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press

Young Adults' News Time Down Sharply Over Past Decade

	AVERAGE MINUTES "YESTERDAY"*						'94-'04 DIFF.
	JAN. 1994	APRIL 1996	APRIL 1998	APRIL 2000	APRIL 2002	APRIL 2004	
18-24	51	37	47	36	31	35	-16
25-29	62	53	50	50	48	45	-17
30-34	65	59	52	45	54	59	-6
35-49	74	64	62	57	57	66	-8
50-64	83	79	69	64	71	76	-7
65+	90	89	96	80	81	85	-5

* All averages are estimated, based on time spent watching TV news, reading newspapers and listening to news on the radio. Online news is not included.

Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press

Generational Divide in TV News

WATCH REGULARLY ...	18-29	30-49	50-64	65+	DIFF.*
NIGHTLY NETWORK NEWS	%	%	%	%	
2004	18	26	43	56	+38
2002	19	23	45	53	+34
CABLE TV NEWS					
2004	29	37	40	46	+17
2002	23	31	41	38	+15

* Represents the percentage point gap between the youngest and oldest viewers.

Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press

While other news sources struggle with diminished audiences, the internet has continued to grow. As many as half of all Americans go online from work or home on a typical day and about a quarter go online daily for news. In addition, online users who go online for other purposes — to shop, to email, or merely to browse the internet — are coming across the news inadvertently while they are online. Nearly three quarters of internet users get the news in this fashion, up from 55% in 1999.

Shifting Demographic Tides

More generally, there is evidence that the major events of recent years — from September 11 to the war in Iraq and the presidential election — have stemmed the decline in the public's news interest. Most Americans say they are spending more time with the news now than in 2000, though people are still devoting less time to the news than they did a decade ago.

But young people are conspicuous exceptions to this trend. Those ages 18 to 24 are not spending any more time with the news than they did in 2000 — despite the events of the last four years — and are spending much less time than they did a decade ago.

In that regard, traditional news outlets are confronting a potentially devastating demographic tide. Young people read newspapers and watch TV news — network and cable — at far lower rates than their elders. And the situation is not much better among the not so young. Just 26% of people in their 30s and 40s regularly tune in to the nightly network news, far below the number of older Americans who regularly watch network evening news.

Campaign News:

Broadcast Fading, Internet Rising

The 2004 presidential campaign provided a window on the continuing evolution in the public's news consumption. Television long has been the public's primary source for campaign news, and that remains the case today. But in the last four years alone, there have been significant changes in the composition of the TV news audience.

Pew's political news survey, conducted in January during the early stage of the campaign, showed that both local and network TV news lost considerable ground compared with 2000, while cable news made modest gains. Among several key demographic groups — young people, college graduates and wealthy Americans — cable emerged as the leading source for campaign news.

But a more important story from last year's campaign was the emergence of the internet as a major source of election news and information. The campaign news survey showed that online news had achieved parity with such traditional election news mainstays as public television broadcasts, Sunday morning news programs and weekly newsmagazines.

A Pew post-election survey confirmed the growing importance of the internet, even as it also showed a broader uptick in political news consumption. Compared with 2000, more voters said they relied on television, newspapers and radio as the main source for campaign news — reflecting the heightened interest in the 2004 campaign compared with the election of four years earlier.

Where Americans Learn About The Candidates and Campaign

	JAN. 2000	JAN. 2004	CHANGE
REGULARLY LEARN SOMETHING FROM ...	%	%	
Local TV news	48	42	-6
Cable news networks	34	38	+4
Nightly network news	45	35	-10
Daily newspaper	40	31	-9
TV newsmagazines	29	25	-4
Morning TV shows	18	20	+2
Talk radio	15	17	+2
Cable political talk	14	14	0
National Public Radio	12	14	+2
Sunday political TV	15	13	-2
Internet	9	13	+4
Public TV shows	12	11	-1
Web sites of news orgs.	—	11	—
Newsmagazines	15	10	-5
News pages of ISPs*	—	10	—
Late-night TV shows	9	9	0
C-SPAN	9	8	-1
Comedy TV shows	6	8	+2
Religious radio	7	5	-2
Online newsmagazines	—	2	—

* Internet service providers such as AOL and Yahoo

Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, December 2003-January 2004

How Did You Get Most of Your Election News?

	NOV. 1992	NOV. 1996	NOV. 2000	NOV. 2004
MAIN SOURCE OF CAMPAIGN NEWS*				
	%	%	%	%
Television	82	72	70	76
Newspapers	57	60	39	46
Radio	12	19	15	22
Magazines	9	11	4	6
Internet	n/a	3	11	21
GOT ANY CAMPAIGN NEWS FROM INTERNET				
Yes	—	10	30	41
No/don't know	—	90	70	59
		100	100	100

* Numbers add to more than 100% because voters could list up to two primary sources.
Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, post-election surveys of voters

Young People and Campaign News

AGES 18-29	JAN. 2000	JAN. 2004	CHANGE
REGULARLY LEARN SOMETHING FROM ...			
	%	%	
Cable news	38	37	-1
Local news	42	29	-13
TV newsmagazines	18	26	+8
Network news	39	23	-16
Daily newspaper	32	23	-9
Comedy TV shows	9	21	+12
Internet	13	20	+7
Morning TV shows	16	18	+2
Cable political talk	15	17	+2
Talk radio	16	16	0
Late-night TV shows	13	13	0
C-SPAN	12	11	-1
National Public Radio	12	11	-1
Sunday political TV	13	10	-3
Newsmagazines	15	9	-6
Public TV shows	11	7	-4
Religious radio	5	3	-2

Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, December 2003-January 2004

The internet's gains were relatively bigger than those of other media, with the number citing it as a main source of campaign news doubling between 2000 and 2004. More impressive, by the end of the campaign, 41% of voters said they got at least some campaign news from the internet — up fourfold from 1996.

The internet is not the only source that made notable gains among young people. The percentage of 18-to-29-year-olds who said they learned about the campaign from comedy shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show* doubled between 2000 and 2004. For young people, programs like *The Daily Show* are now nearly as important sources of campaign news as network news and newspapers.

During the early Democratic primaries, *The Daily Show* achieved a symbolic milestone when ratings showed that more young men tuned into that late-night comedy show than to any of the three network evening news broadcasts.

Signs of Engagement

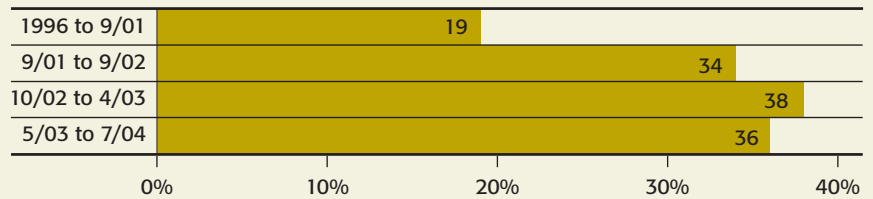
Despite the trend toward niche news and smaller news audiences, the major news stories of the past few years — September 11, the war in Iraq and the presidential election — have attracted considerable public interest. Moreover, there has been a notable increase in the percentage of Americans who say they follow international news closely most of the time, not just when important developments occur.

In 2004, a 52% majority said they follow overseas news most of the time, rather than only when major developments occur. That represents a significant change from surveys conducted in 1998, 2000 and 2002, when most Americans said they focused on overseas news only during times of crisis.

But nearly all of the increased interest in overseas news is attributable to the high levels of public attention to the war in Iraq and the war on terror. International news stories that do not directly affect Americans or the United States continue to draw little attention. The humanitarian crisis in Sudan, recent turmoil in Haiti and political instability in Venezuela are examples of significant stories that have failed to draw much public interest.

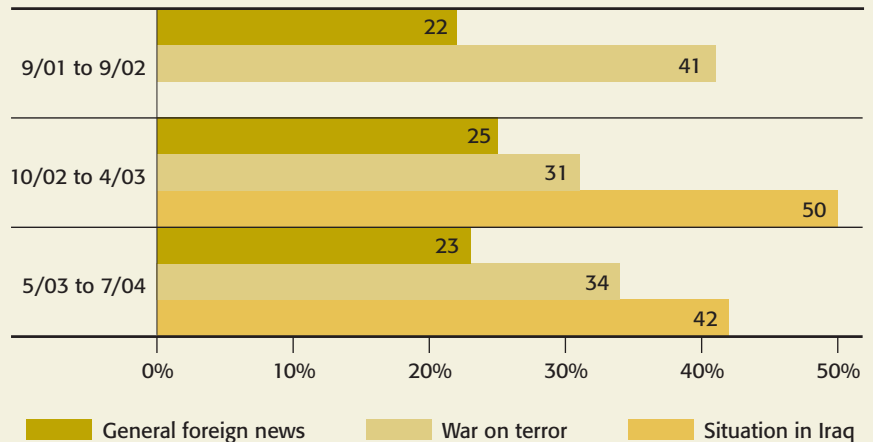
Interest in Foreign News Is Up Since 9/11 ...

AVERAGE PERCENT FOLLOWING FOREIGN NEWS STORIES "VERY CLOSELY"



... But It's Focused on Iraq and Terrorism

AVERAGE PERCENT FOLLOWING NEWS STORIES IN EACH CATEGORY "VERY CLOSELY"

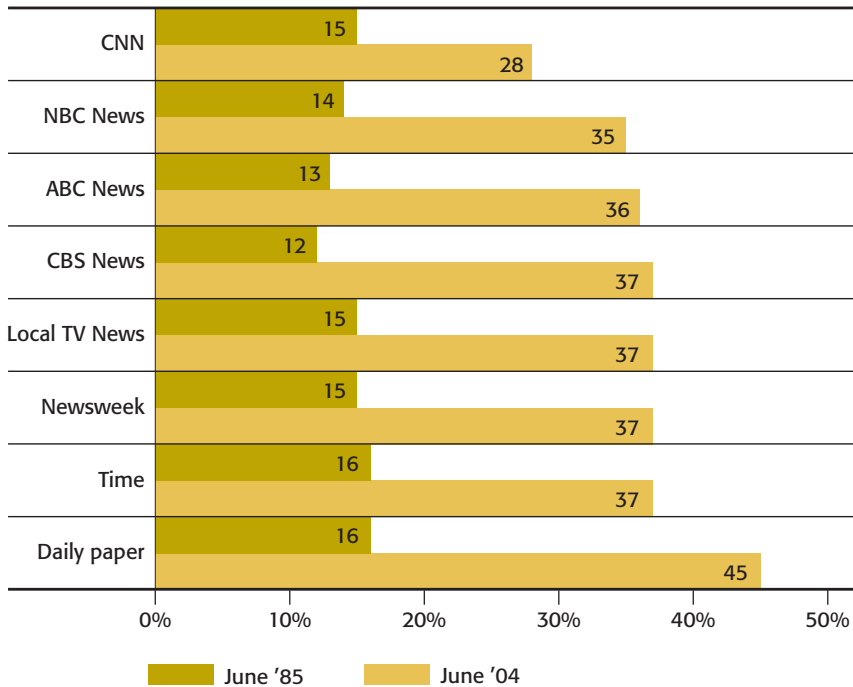


Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, August 2004

“There has been a notable increase in the percentage of Americans who say they follow international news closely most of the time, not just when important developments occur.”

Mistrust of the Media Has Risen Sharply

PERCENT WHO SAY THEY BELIEVE LITTLE OR ALMOST NOTHING OF WHAT THEY SEE OR HEAR IN PRINT OR ON TV*



Note: Answers based on people who say they are able to rate the media.
Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, June 2004

* The words "little or" were added to this headline to more accurately describe the survey findings. [May 13, 2005]

The presidential campaign also attracted greater public attention than any election since 1992. This reflects the widely shared sense of the high stakes in the election. In June, 63% of Americans said it "really mattered" who won the election, while just 32% said things would not really change regardless of who won. That represented a dramatic change from the 2000 election. During the summer of 2000, just 45% of the public thought it really mattered who won the election.

Opinions of the News Media

If there is a bottom line in opinions about the press, it is believability. Trust is the lifeblood of the media's relationship with the people, and mainstream news organizations have seen their credibility ratings steadily erode over the past two decades. In 1985, only about one in seven Americans gave major news organizations low marks for credibility; now that proportion stands at roughly one in three, or even higher. This erosion of trust has affected virtually all news organizations, and has occurred among virtually all demographic groups.

The decline in credibility of daily newspapers is particularly striking. Two decades ago, just 16% of Americans said they could believe little or nothing of what they read in their daily paper; in the most recent survey, that number nearly tripled, to 45%.

As the credibility of leading news organizations has fallen, so too has overall confidence in the news media. Since the 1970s, the press has suffered much steeper declines in public confidence than have other major institutions.

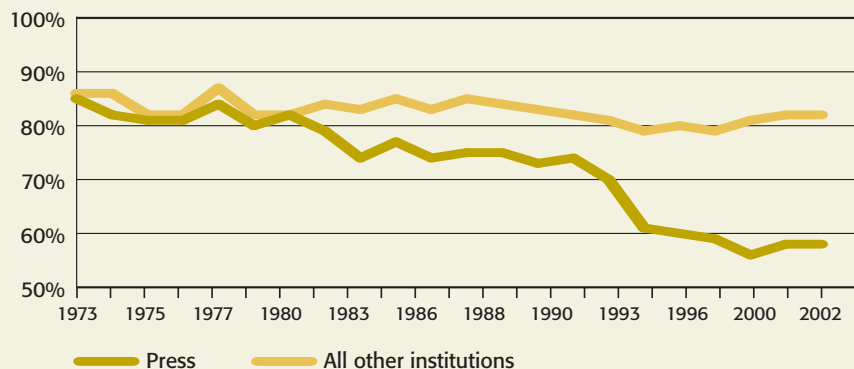
The General Social Survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, has measured confidence in 13 institutions since 1973. For about the first decade of this survey, ratings for the press mirrored those of other major institutions. But in the 1980s, ratings for the press began to lag, and since 1990 they have been in a precipitous decline. In 1990, 74% of respondents said they had a great deal or some confidence in the press. By 2000 that number had dwindled to 58%. This has not been the case for other institutions tested in the nationwide NORC surveys.

Credibility Ratings More Partisan

In recent years, the news media's credibility crisis has been exacerbated by a growing partisan divide in how much people believe them. Pew's measures of trust in leading news outlets have consistently found some partisan differences in perceptions of credibility. But the gap is now wider than ever.

In a May 2004 survey, only about half as many Republicans as Democrats express a great deal of trust in the broadcast networks, National Public Radio, *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* and top print outlets such as *The New York Times*, *Time* and *Newsweek*.

Americans Have a Great Deal of or Some Confidence in ...



This graph compares the percent saying they had "a great deal" or "some confidence" in the press vs. the mean average percentage saying they have a great deal of confidence in all other institutions tested. Included in that group are banks, companies, religion, education, the executive branch, labor, medicine, television, the Supreme Court, science, Congress and the military.
Source: General Social Survey

“In recent years, the news media’s credibility crisis has been exacerbated by a growing partisan divide in how much people believe them.”

Partisanship and Credibility*

	REP.	DEM.	GAP
BELIEVE ALL OR MOST OF WHAT THE ORGANIZATION SAYS	%	%	
Broadcast & cable outlets:			
CNN	26	45	+19
CBS News	15	34	+19
NPR	15	33	+18
NewsHour	12	30	+18
60 Minutes	25	42	+17
ABC News	17	34	+17
MSNBC	14	29	+15
C-SPAN	23	36	+13
NBC News	16	29	+13
Local TV news			
Local TV news	21	29	+8
Fox News Channel	29	24	-5
Print Outlets:			
Associated Press	12	29	+17
New York Times	14	31	+17
Time	15	30	+15
Newsweek	12	26	+14
USA Today	14	25	+11
Daily newspaper	16	23	+7
Wall Street Journal	23	29	+6

* Percentages based on those who could rate each.

Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, June 2004

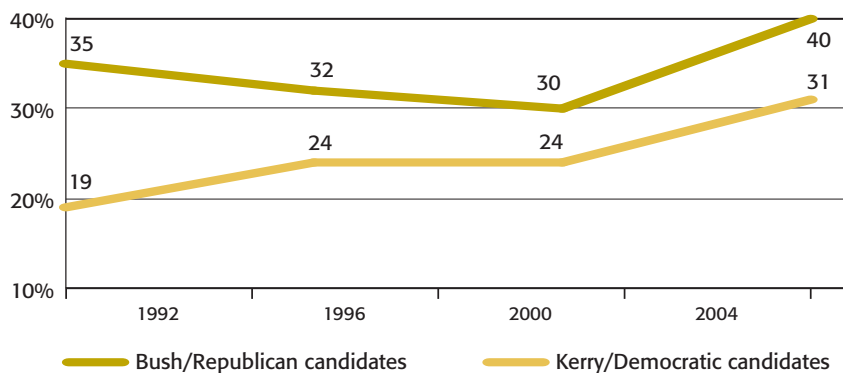
Four years ago, Republicans gave leading news outlets much higher marks for credibility. In nearly every case — with Fox News Channel a notable exception — those ratings have fallen significantly. Over the same period, credibility ratings among Democrats and independents have been much more stable.

Views of the Campaign

Pew's post-election survey showed that voters have become more critical of press coverage of the campaign. And while there are significant partisan differences here as well, increasing numbers in both parties — as well as independents — view the coverage as unfair.

Four in 10 voters said coverage of the Bush campaign was unfair, up from 30% four years ago. A smaller but growing minority also thought coverage of Kerry's campaign was unfair; 31% said that, compared with 24% who faulted the coverage of Al Gore's campaign in 2000.

Is the Press Unfair to Candidates?



Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2004 post-election survey

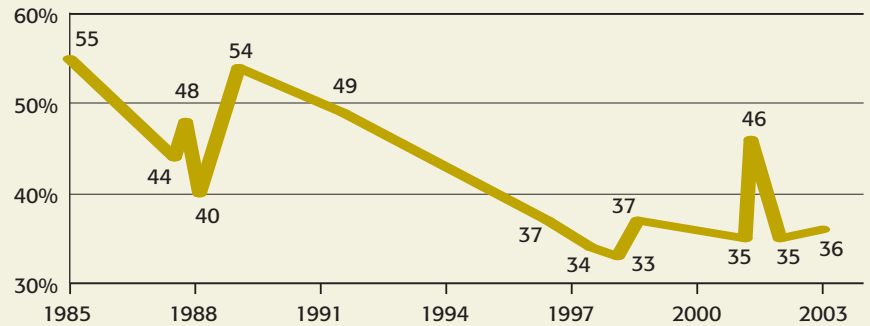
Press Performance Criticized

On the most fundamental issues relating to press performance, from accuracy to a willingness to acknowledge mistakes, Americans judge the news media far more critically than they did a generation ago. And these negative perceptions generally cut across ideological and partisan lines.

In 1985, a solid majority (55%) believed that news organizations usually got the facts straight in their stories, while 34% disagreed. By 2003 these figures were reversed, as a 56% majority saw most reporting as inaccurate. The notable exception in this downward trend on this measure came in the fall of 2001, shortly after the 9/11 attacks, when opinions of the news media and several other major institutions briefly improved.

When the press does make mistakes, most Americans believe that news organizations cover them up rather than come clean. In 2003, a 62% majority said news organizations try to cover up mistakes, up from 55% in 1985. Given these attitudes, it was probably not surprising that the 2003 scandal at *The New York Times* involving a reporter who fabricated news stories did not negatively affect public views of the press — the *Times* flap merely confirmed what many already suspected. Most Americans said that what occurred at the *Times* happens frequently, or at least occasionally, at all news organizations.

People Who Believe News Organizations Usually Get the Facts Straight

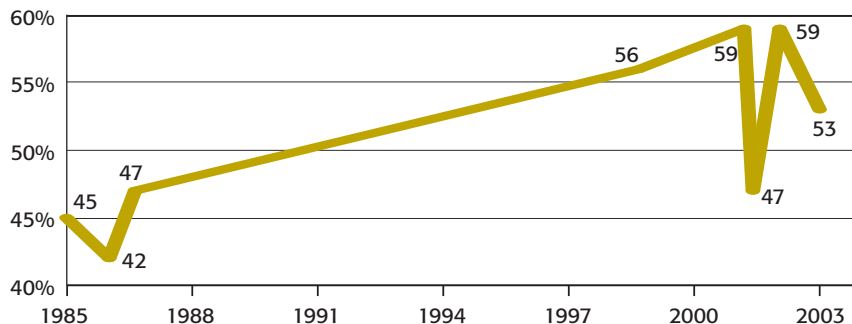


Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, July 2003

The public also thinks the news media lack compassion for the subjects of their stories. A majority of the public — 56% — believes news organizations do not care about the people they report on, up from 48% in 1985. Moreover, two thirds now say news organizations pay too much attention to bad news — an all-time high.

While Americans have become more critical of press practices, many also have lost respect for the basic values of the news media. The number saying the press is immoral, rather than moral, has more than doubled since the mid-1980s, from 13% to 32%. There has been a comparable rise in the percentage who view the press as unprofessional.

Press Is Politically Biased in Its Reporting



Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, July 2003

'Liberal' Charge Endures

Public cynicism about press values and performance also stem from growing perceptions of media bias and lack of fairness. In Pew's 2003 survey, two thirds (66%) said the press tends to favor one side when presenting the news, and seven in ten said news outlets are often influenced by powerful people and organizations. In 1985, barely half (53% each) expressed such negative opinions about media independence.

Most Americans (53%) also believe that news organizations are politically biased, while just 29% say they are careful to remove bias from their reports. There has been some movement in these attitudes in recent years — notably during the temporary upswing in the media's image following September 11 — but bias concerns are higher now than two decades ago.

When it comes to describing the press, twice as many say news organizations are "liberal" (51%) as say they are "conservative" (26%), while 14% say neither phrase applies. This was also the case in surveys conducted in the mid-to-late 1980s and, not surprisingly, there is a significant partisan cast to these perceptions.

Republicans see the press as more liberal than conservative by nearly three to one (65% to 22%). Among independents, the margin is two to one (50% to 25%). And while a third of Democrats say there is a conservative tilt to the American press, a slight plurality (41%) says the press is more liberal than anything else.

Last year's survey of journalists seemed to confirm many of the suspicions of those who see a liberal bias in the news. Most journalists characterized themselves as moderates, but as a group they are far more liberal — and far less conservative — than the general public. Just 7% of the national journalists surveyed called themselves conservatives, compared with 33% of the public. And while 34% of national journalists characterized themselves as liberals, just 20% of Americans describe themselves as liberals.

Journalists generally say they take it as their professional obligation not to let their own political and ideological leanings — liberal, moderate or conservative — shape their coverage. But the relatively small number of conservatives in journalism raises concerns over the potential for liberal group-think in the nation's newsrooms.

Watchdog Role Questioned

Despite the widespread criticism of the press on a number of fronts, the public continues to be largely supportive of the news media's role as a political watchdog. But at a time of war, an increasing number of Americans — particularly Republicans — have become less supportive of tough press scrutiny of the military.

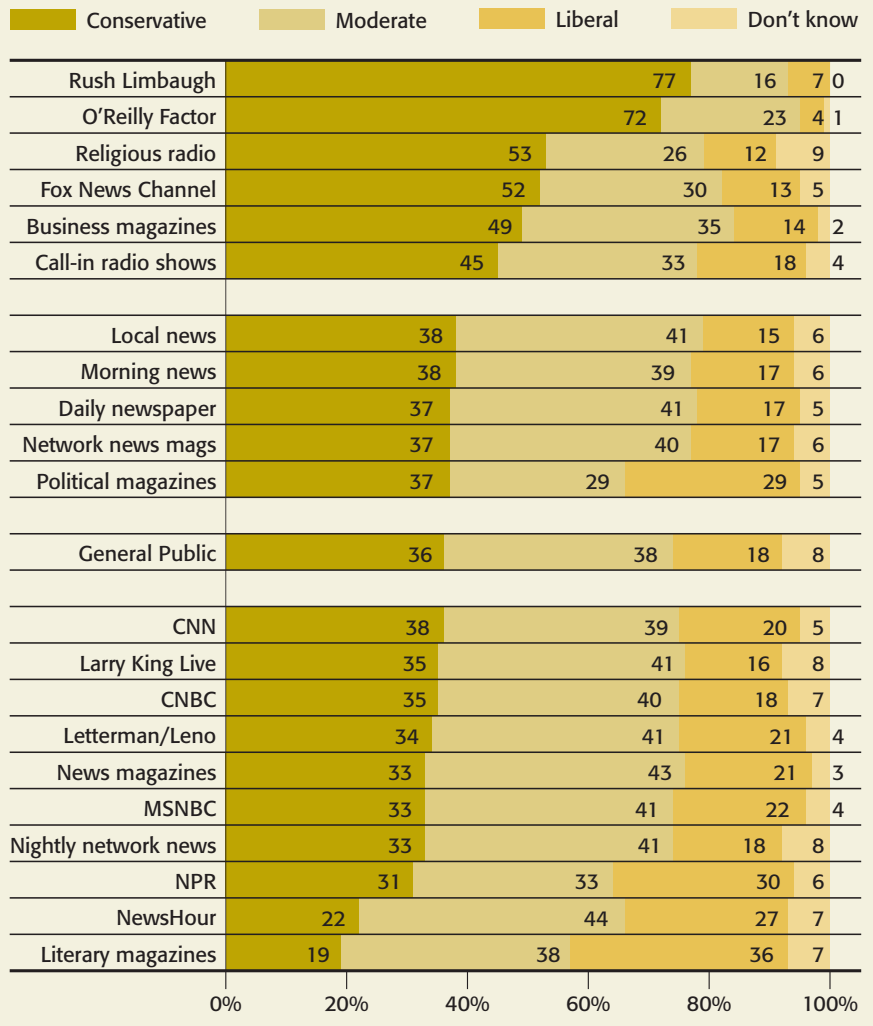
In 2003, the public was divided over whether press criticism of the military keeps the nation prepared militarily or undermines the country's defenses. This marked a major shift in public opinion from the early 1990s. Shortly after the Persian Gulf War in 1991, 59% of the public said that press criticism of the military was a good thing. The change has come mostly from Republicans: In 1991, just 34% said press criticism of the military weakened defenses, but 12 years later that number had grown to 63%.

Criticism of Military Less Accepted

	JULY 1985	MAR 1991	NOV 2001	JULY 2002	JULY 2003
MEDIA CRITICISM OF THE MILITARY ...	%	%	%	%	%
Weakens defenses	31	28	37	40	43
Keeps nation prepared	51	59	49	49	45
Don't know	18	13	14	11	12
	100	100	100	100	100

Audience Ideology Profile

OF THOSE WHO REGULARLY WATCH, READ OR LISTEN TO THE FOLLOWING MEDIA, THIS IS THE PERCENTAGE WHO ARE ...



Source: Pew Center for the People & the Press, April-May 2001

Looking Forward: Greater Politicization?

Discontent with the press is as old as America itself and, in any era, some of the complaints about news organizations can be chalked up to a shoot-the-messenger syndrome — when Americans do not like what they hear or see in the news, the press becomes an easy target.

Today, however, the criticisms have taken on a harder political edge than in the recent past. And while the public's sources of information are more bountiful than ever, many are more partisan — from talk radio and cable news to opinionated blogs. The question now is whether the increasing political self-segregation of the cable news audience will extend to the audiences for other news media sources as well.

The evidence here is mixed. The core audiences for several news and opinion outlets such as *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Rush Limbaugh's* show are increasingly dominated by conservatives. But the audiences for many other major news organizations remain fairly balanced ideologically; indeed, their ideological composition generally reflects that of the general public. These include regular readers of newspapers and political magazines, and regular viewers of local news and morning news programs. In addition, the regular CNN audience does not stand out ideologically, although it is somewhat more Democratic than in the past.

As far as the internet is concerned, the "blogosphere" is awash in highly contentious opinion sites. A survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project immediately after the 2004 election found that 9% of internet users had read political blogs "frequently" or "sometimes" during the campaign, suggesting that by the end of the year, blogs were a small but rapidly growing new medium for political information.

The public is still a long way from fully embracing "opinion news" — news that reflects one's own beliefs and preferences and tends to filter out dissenting views. This new hybrid — which is actually as old as the pamphleteers of the early days of American journalism — has gained a foothold in cable TV, talk radio and the internet, but has not spread more broadly throughout the media universe. And so a battle of sorts is raging within news organizations between the older norm of objectivity and the newer tug of opinion journalism. It's not clear which approach will prevail, or whether the two will coexist. One thing is certain: The fate of the news, as always, will rest with its audience.