Why Americans Distrust the Media

By Alex Berezow — September 11, 2018

In the past decade, has your trust in the news media changed? If you're like most Americans, it has fallen, perhaps substantially.

According to a new bombshell report released by Gallup and the Knight Foundation, 94% of Republicans have lost some trust in the media. They aren't alone; 75% of independents and even 42% of Democrats say the same thing. Overall, nearly 7 in 10 adults report a loss of faith in the news. What is going on?
In a word, inaccuracy. The conventional wisdom says perceived media bias is behind Americans' distrust of the media, but that is only part of the picture. Americans seem to be much more bothered by inaccurate information rather than the political opinions held by the talking heads. (See chart. Note that this was an open-ended question in which respondents could list as many things that came to their mind.)

Relatively few people some concerned about news sources being too partisan. For example, only 14% were bothered by a news outlet's perceived connections to a political party. Furthermore, only
7% mentioned a liberal or anti-conservative bias as one of their gripes.

Contrast that to inaccuracy or "fake news." A whopping 45% of Americans listed that as a concern. Biased or unfair reporting was mentioned by 42%, but this criticism seems to focus on stories being one-sided. In other words, when Americans use the word "biased," what they are actually saying is, "not the whole story." That's very different from believing that news sources are inherently biased simply due to their holding opinions that the viewer/reader may not agree with.

**The Difference Between Bias and Inaccuracy**

Bias is a sneaky thing. Everybody has some sort of bias but few people realize it. As a microbiologist, I'm far more inclined to think that stories about, say, infectious disease are far more important than stories about volcano eruptions. A geologist would likely disagree with me. That doesn't mean that either of us is wrong; both topics are important, particularly if you live near a volcano.

So, bias in and of itself isn't necessarily a bad thing. It is a natural consequence of a person's worldview and value system. Bias becomes unacceptable when it causes us to exclude facts or other people's viewpoints. If all I ever talked about was the danger posed by infectious disease -- and I refused to even acknowledge that volcanoes pose a threat -- then I've crossed over from bias to inaccuracy. I have allowed my worldview to cloud the bigger picture.

Another survey in the same report supports this analysis. The respondents were asked how important various factors were in the trustworthiness of a news source. (See truncated chart.)
As shown, 89% of people believe it is "very important" for a news outlet to be accurate. Another 86% believed it was very important for media sources to correct their mistakes, and 78% said fairness was very important. Only 58% said being "neutral" was very important.

### How to Fix the News

How can Americans' faith be restored in the media? The #1 answer was the correction of mistakes. If a media outlet completely blows a news story, the best move is to fess up. As the cliché goes, the cover-up is worse than the crime. Americans are forgiving, if a media outlet admits to its mistakes. The #2 answer was similar: Americans would prefer news outlets to verify facts rather than report quickly.

The takeaway lesson is that, when it comes to the media, Americans care less about partisanship and more about dedication to "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Unfortunately, Americans believe -- quite justifiably, in my opinion -- that the media is not delivering. Let's hope that changes.

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