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To cite this article: Andrew Daniller, Douglas Allen, Ashley Tallevi & Diana C. Mutz (2017): Measuring Trust in the Press in a Changing Media Environment, Communication Methods and Measures, DOI: [10.1080/19312458.2016.1271113](https://doi.org/10.1080/19312458.2016.1271113)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19312458.2016.1271113>

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 Published online: 13 Jan 2017.

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Measuring Trust in the Press in a Changing Media Environment

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ABSTRACT

The only long term trend data on trust in the American press comes from the General Social Survey (GSS). The erosion of trust in the press as measured by the GSS indicator is indisputable, but its implications for the functioning of American democracy depend on what, precisely, is being measured. In this study we use an experimental design embedded in a representative national probability sample to shed light on what people are thinking of when they say they trust or distrust the American press. Are they thinking about the sources they themselves use for news? The sources that are most popular with the population at large? An average of all possible media sources? We find that individuals express much greater trust in the press when they are asked to consider specific news sources than when they are asked to evaluate a generic news media. Our results suggest that an accessibility bias combined with the proliferation of news sources in recent years may lead individuals to think of distrusted sources when asked to answer generic media trust questions. We therefore argue that different measurement strategies are needed to successfully address trust in the press in the current news environment.

The only long-term trend data on trust in the American press comes from the General Social Survey (GSS). The erosion of trust in the press as measured by the GSS indicator is indisputable, but its implications for the functioning of American democracy depend on what, precisely, is being measured. In this study we use an experimental design embedded in a representative national probability sample to shed light on what people are thinking of when they say they trust or distrust the American press. Are they thinking about the sources they themselves use for news? The sources that are most popular with the population at large? An average of all possible media sources? The implications of the observed decline depend critically on what the referent is assumed to be in these survey questions.

Answering survey questions about confidence in the press

The widely cited GSS question used to measure trust in the media reads, “I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?” Respondents are then asked to evaluate several institutions, including “the press.”

When the GSS survey question was written more than four decades ago, it was designed to prompt collective consideration of a few mainstream sources of news, primarily because they were the only sources available to much of the American public. Conversely, the fragmented media environment of today presents a wide range of options, including network news, political talk shows, cable news programs, print newspapers and online sources. So, one must ask, when today’s respondents answer the same question on confidence in “the press,” what are the referents that come to mind?

Experimental studies of the survey response suggest that when surveys ask about vague, collective referents rather than specific targets, this increases the probability that respondents will draw on what is top of mind (e.g., Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2001; Iyengar, 1990; Payne, Jacoby, & Lambert, 2005; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Asking respondents about a collective referent such as “the press” or “the media” generally encourages more negative assessments because negatively-valenced information is typically more accessible than positive information (e.g., Taylor & Fiske, 1978; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988; Tourangeau et al., 2000).¹ The best-known example of this difference is Americans’ negative views of Congress as a collective relative to their more positive evaluations of individual members of Congress (Fenno, 1975). What comes to mind for many when asked about confidence in Congress is the most obnoxious member of congress or a recent debacle that made this institution seem incompetent rather than its finer moments as a collective body.

Evaluating vague, collective referents more negatively than specific ones is not unique to politics; there is a well-established literature documenting the difference in evaluations of collective vs. specific referents in a range of settings (see Gunther, 1992; Major, 1982; Perloff, 2002; Tyler & Cook, 1984). For example, people collectively assess their own doctors more positively than they assess doctors in general (Jacobs & Shapiro, 1994), and they systematically evaluate their own economic position more positively than they evaluate the condition of the nation as whole (Mutz & Flemming, 1999).

The unspecified referent asked about in the standard GSS question—precisely because it does not specify any source—presents the greatest opportunity for the salience of negativity to influence judgments of the news media. The accessibility bias suggests that asking about pre-specified news sources of any kind, whether one’s own or what one believes others are watching and reading, will generally lead to higher levels of confidence in the press. To the extent that these concerns are validated by empirical evidence, they suggest a reevaluation of both absolute levels of current trust in the American media, as well as possible reinterpretations of the over-time decline in confidence in the press.

Hypotheses

To examine the implications of accessibility bias for assessing trust in the press, we formulated four specific hypotheses varying the referents that serve as the target for the trust question. First, we hypothesized that questions with unspecified referents, such as the GSS or similar questions that do not specify judgment of specific media sources, will produce the most negative evaluations of the press. Given that such measures are very susceptible to what happens to be top of mind at the moment, and that negative examples of press behavior are likely to be most salient, lower assessments are extremely likely.

H1: Unspecified referents will produce systematically lower levels of trust in the press than in conditions asking about specific sources, that is, all other conditions combined.

In contrast, assessing the specific news sources that one regularly uses should produce exceptionally high media trust ratings. After all, if one does not trust a source, one is unlikely to use it (see Goldman & Mutz, 2011). Thus, people’s own media sources are expected to be the most trusted of all because they are selected by the individual for this purpose.

H2: Trust in the specified referents for own media will produce systematically higher levels of confidence in the press than in all other conditions combined.

¹The systematic bias toward attention to and memory of negative information is well documented. Further, strongly negative events generate more emotional reactions and greater arousal, thus they tend to be more accessible in memory than positive examples.

During the era in which mainstream media were the only sources of news in the United States, media trust ratings were relatively high. Likewise, we expect that people asked directly about these specific mainstream sources will rate them relatively positively compared to how they rate the kind of sources likely to be evoked when sources are not specified. Thus, our third hypothesis is that, contrary to what has been suggested elsewhere, measures with unspecified referents will not register as high a level of confidence in the press as specified mainstream sources. In other words, the unspecified referent/GSS-type items have not been tapping the same thing as assessments of mainstream, professionally neutral news sources.

H3: Questions about trust in the press using a general, unspecified referent will be more negative than assessments in which mainstream news sources are specified as the referent.

Because of the widespread “third-person” perception that others are not as savvy as one’s self when selecting which news sources to trust, our fourth and final hypothesis is that when asked about confidence in the specific sources that people assume others use most often for news, levels of press confidence will be significantly lower than when asked about their own sources.

H4: Trust in the specified referents named for others’ main sources of news will produce lower levels of trust than when the referents are for one’s own media.

Research design

To test the four hypotheses described above, we conducted a survey-experiment using a representative sample of the U.S. adult population. Participants in all conditions were asked the same questions regarding their trust and confidence in the news media, but each condition varied the media referent. Although a range of measures have been used to capture media trust (see, for instance, Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Kohring & Matthes, 2007), only a few studies have tracked this concept over time as the GSS has. To ensure reliable measurement, we adapted five questions from these surveys, including the American National Election Studies (ANES), the General Social Survey (GSS), and the Pew Center for the People and the Press’s (PCPP) (see Appendix A).

Each participant was randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. The *Unspecified Referent* condition simply asked about confidence in the press in the same way that the GSS and other surveys have done so in the past, that is, without specifying the news media to which the question refers. In this sense, the *Unspecified Referent* condition serves as a “control” condition by setting a benchmark for expectations based on the most widely used current measure.

In the condition labeled “Own Media,” respondents were first asked to list the sources of news that they themselves used most frequently, including up to three sources. These specific news sources were later automatically inserted into the text of questions asking about confidence in the media. In the “Others’ Media” condition, respondents were first asked to name up to three newspapers, television, or radio programs, or websites from which Americans most frequently get their news. Later, those participants were asked specifically about confidence in the press with respect to the specific sources they had named for “Other’s Media”.

In the “Mainstream Media” condition, we asked respondents about the three major national network news programs. We chose these sources because all definitions of “mainstream” that have been offered by scholars to date include these particular programs; they are also widely considered by the public to be “mainstream;” and they are familiar enough to most people that they are able to assess them even if they are not regular viewers (see Ladd, 2012). Thus, respondents in the Mainstream Media condition were asked, “Please think about the major national television news programs, ABC’s World News Tonight, NBC’s Nightly News, and CBS’s Evening News while answering the following questions,” before proceeding to the same media trust questions answered in the other three conditions.

To gain a better understanding of what people themselves used as news sources, as well as what they thought others used, we also analyzed the specific sources volunteered by respondents to ascertain the kinds of media they had in mind when answering questions in the Own Media and Others' Media conditions (see Appendix B for details).

To analyze the data, we used analysis of variance with planned comparisons to test for differences between the means as outlined in our four hypotheses. This approach protected against inflated error rates based on multiple paired group comparisons. In order to increase the efficiency of our analyses, we included an index of generalized social trust from the pretest as a covariate because it is well known to predict trust in media (see Appendix A).

Results

There are clearly large differences in Media Trust by these experimental conditions; our analysis of variance produced a large, statistically significant omnibus F-test ($F_{(3,834)} = 61.71$; $p < .001$). To test our specific hypotheses, we used planned comparisons as outlined in our hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 suggested that people consistently rate “the media” and “the press” far more negatively than specific media sources. To test this hypothesis, a planned contrast compared the condition with the GSS referent to the average of all three other conditions. As shown on the left side of [Figure 1](#), this hypothesis was confirmed ($F_{(1,834)} = 88.82$, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that respondents who were randomly assigned to evaluate their Own Media as the referent would generate systematically more positive evaluations of media than all other conditions. As shown on the right side of [Figure 1](#), our findings confirm this prediction ($F_{(1,834)} = 95.67$, $p < .001$). In one sense this should not be at all surprising; people choose certain media over others because they like them and trust them. But in another sense the finding is quite important because it suggests that widely voiced concerns about lack of trust in media as a source of political information may be misguided; Americans do, indeed, have access to media sources that they trust a great deal for information.

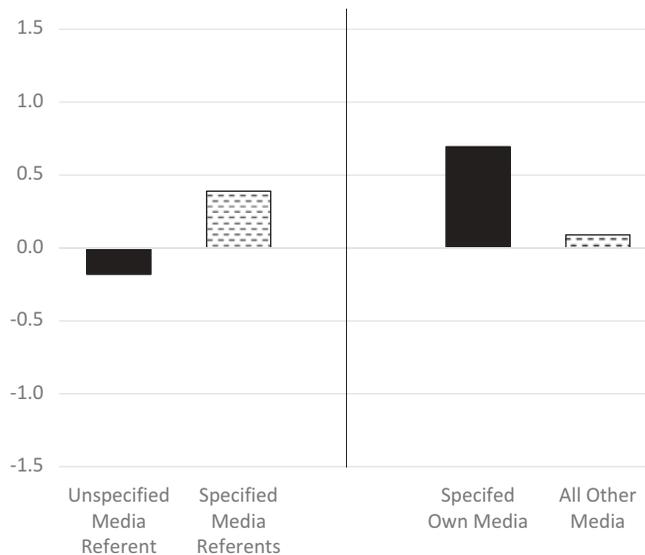


Figure 1. Test of unspecified referent vs. specified referents (Hypothesis 1) and specified own media vs. all other media (Hypothesis 2).

Note: Values indicated represent mean levels of Media Trust for respondents in each condition. Scores are standardized, with higher values indicating greater confidence in the news media. Y-axis represents just over two standard deviations around mean (0) of the index.

To get a qualitative sense of just how positively people felt about the press in the Own Media condition, we broke our index down by the specific questions asked so we could examine the qualitative labels associated with their responses. In the Own Media condition, over 80% of people claimed that their news media get the facts straight, 86% said they have a mostly or very favorable view of these news sources, and 79% said they trust their news sources most of the time or just about always. These results confirm that people have a great deal of confidence in the sources they use regularly, thus there is no reason to believe that they operate in a political vacuum when it comes to holding political leaders accountable.

An alternative interpretation of these findings is that these figures represent citizens being spoon-fed an agreeable partisan diet. However, as shown in the left column of Figure 2, of the sources named by people in the Own Media condition, only 22% were like-minded partisan sources based on comparisons of the partisan sources with respondents' self-reported partisanship (see Appendix B). Another 6% were crosscutting partisan sources. Consistent with other recent assessments of media usage (e.g., Webster & Ksiazek, 2012), 72% of the sources mentioned were non-partisan. When framed in terms of proportions of respondents, just over 12% of respondents in the Own Media condition named only partisan sources, whereas 53% of these respondents named strictly non-partisan sources.

Previous understandings of the GSS press confidence question have been interpreted as indicating levels of trust in the mainstream, institutionalized press. Hypothesis 3 tested this interpretation by comparing levels of trust in the Mainstream and Unspecified Referent/GSS conditions. As predicted, this contrast was significant ($F_{(3,834)} = 31.16$; $p < .001$), suggesting that questions with unspecified referents are not tapping the same thing in respondents' minds as mainstream media. Rather, we find that mainstream sources were trusted significantly more than the unspecified sources (see Figure 3).

Our fourth and final hypothesis predicted that asking about Others' Media would nonetheless prompt people to give significantly more negative ratings of the press than when asked about their Own Media. We expected this to occur because people would have a greater number of partisan sources in mind when making "Other Media" assessments. As shown in Figure 3, the specified Own Media condition produced significantly higher levels of trust in the press than the Others' Media condition ($F_{(1,834)} = 40.03$; $p < .001$).

Further, as illustrated in Figure 2, the percentage of partisan sources named was far higher when people thought about the specific sources they believed *other people* used than when they reported on what they themselves watched and read. Interestingly, this was true both for like-minded partisan sources

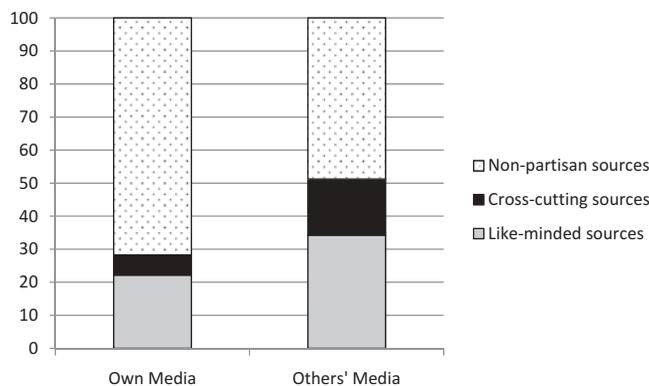


Figure 2. Extent to which partisan sources are mentioned by condition.

Note: Values indicated represent percentages of the sources mentioned by all respondents in each condition that are either non-partisan, cross-cutting partisan, or like-minded partisan sources. The cross-cutting vs. like-minded distinction is made in reference to the partisanship of the respondent reporting own or others' use of a volunteered media source.

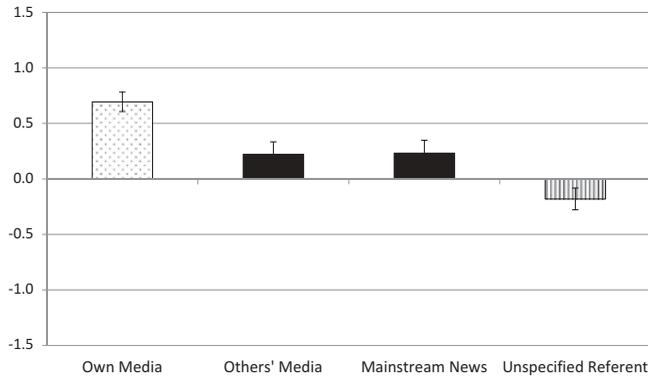


Figure 3. Effects of change in referent on media trust.

Note: Values indicated represent mean levels of Media Trust for respondents in each condition. Scores are standardized, with higher values indicating greater confidence in the news media. Conditions shown sharing a pattern are statistically indistinguishable; different patterns are significantly different from one another. Y-axis represents just over two standard deviations around mean (0) of the index.

and for crosscutting partisan sources. *Non*-partisan sources were significantly more likely to be mentioned in response to the Own Media question than in the Others' Media question ($t = 6.599$; $p < .001$).²

To estimate the extent to which the increased amount of choice in media referents affected the decline in trust captured by the GSS “confidence in the press” question, we also considered the GSS question independent of the larger index. It produced the same results as the multi-item index. In addition to a significant omnibus test (Kruskal-Wallis chi-square = 136.35, $p < .001$), each of these four means is significantly different from all others (Mann-Whitney U tests, $p < .001$ in all cases). Figure 4 illustrates the effects of survey referent on trust in the press using only responses to the GSS “confidence in the press” question.

To evaluate roughly how much of the GSS-documented decline in media trust might be accounted for by increased accessibility bias due to the proliferation of media sources, we took the difference between the trust levels reported by participants in the Mainstream News condition and those in the Unspecified Referent condition (mean difference between Mainstream and Unspecified GSS on 0–1 scale = .14). As a percentage of the total extent of decline in the GSS question over time (from 1973 when $\bar{x} = .54$ to 2014 when $\bar{x} = .32$; total decline = .23), the survey question-induced difference is equal to over 60% of the total decline in media trust observed since 1973 (.14/.23). If we assume that people were primarily assessing their trust in mainstream media in the 1970s—a fairly safe assumption given the media environment during that time period and the dominance of mainstream news—then shifting to answering with respect to the most accessible referents instead could account for over 60% of the overall decline in media trust.

Discussion

Our study's contributions to knowledge center on the measurement and interpretation of survey questions with unspecified referents in a changing media environment. First, we demonstrate that the most widely used survey question measuring confidence in the press is not a good indicator of the extent to which citizens are able to obtain information from news media that they personally use. Our experimental findings demonstrate that high levels of trust in one's own sources of news

²This is consistent with other recent studies (e.g., Dilliplane, 2011, 2014; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012), which show that partisan news consumption is a modest portion of most people's media diets; the public perception is, nonetheless, that it is extremely popular.

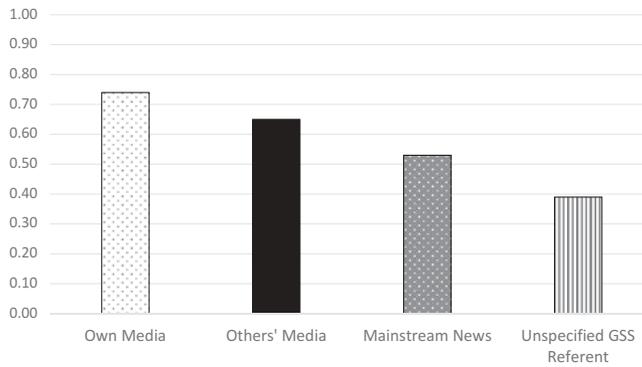


Figure 4. Effects of survey referent on confidence in the press using General Social Survey question only.

Note: Values indicated represent mean levels of Confidence in the Press for respondents in each condition. Scores range from 0–1 on a 3-point scale ranging from hardly any confidence at all in them (0) to some (.5) to a great deal of confidence (1), with higher values indicating greater confidence in the news media (Kruskal-Wallis chi-square = 136.35, $p < .001$). Conditions are all statistically significantly different from one another and thus do not share the same shading patterns (Mann-Whitney U tests, $p < .001$).

comfortably exist alongside extremely negative views of “the media.” Thus, the GSS-documented decline does not necessarily mean that people do not have media they can trust. Likewise, people’s views of specified mainstream media sources, as defined by previous scholars, are far more positive than what is registered by the unspecified referent used in the GSS question. We suggest that this disjuncture is caused by an accessibility bias in the types of media that most easily come to mind when a referent is left unspecified in today’s highly fragmented news environment.

Our results have implications for how, moving forward, one might measure trust in the press over time. If the purpose of tapping trends in confidence in media over long periods of time is, as we presume, to track the strength of this institution in providing citizens with information they can trust, then we would recommend a measure that tracks the sources people actually use for news and information. A measurement strategy akin to our “Own Media” condition, in which respondents are asked to name their three most important news sources, and then the names of these sources are later inserted into the questions about confidence in the media, would best serve this purpose. This approach allows scholars to directly and authoritatively address concerns about whether people trust their news more or less in the future than they do now.

On the other hand, if what is desired is an assessment of people’s perceptions of the collective level of American press performance, including what one believes others consume, then the measurement procedure outlined in the “Others’ Media” condition would provide insight into whether people think the news media in general are performing their collective duties for the public as a whole. A liberal need not watch Fox News regularly to be disillusioned by its existence, nor must a conservative watch MSNBC in order to know that there are sources they do not trust, in addition to many sources they find credible.

This type of measure could be important when considering the collective reputation of the news media, even though it is not relevant to the extent to which individuals feel they have sources they trust. For example, the negative reputation of “the press” as a collective could affect the likelihood of eroding legal protections for journalists.

Both the press and American citizens would be better served by an updated approach to tapping over-time trends in trust in the press. Even when the survey wording for an item remains constant, the meaning of answers to a survey question can still change (see, e.g., Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1979). Implementing the question wording used in either our Own Media or Other’s Media conditions would provide scholars, journalists, and the mass public with measures of media trust

that remain conceptually constant even when there are changes over time in the media environment. Such measures would have the advantage of not being bound by any given time period and the variety of choices that it offers.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank their classmates in the Political Communication seminar for their contributions to this study. Funding for the data collection was provided by the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics: www.iscap.upenn.edu

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Appendix A: Question Wording by Experimental Condition

Prompts Used to Generate Specified Own and Others' Media:

Own Media:

From which newspapers, television or radio programs, or websites do you most frequently get your national news? Please be as specific as possible. You can name up to three specific sources of national news.

Others' Media:

Regardless of your own preferences, which newspapers, television or radio programs, or websites do you believe to be the most popular sources of national news for the American public? Please be as specific as possible. You can name up to three specific sources of national news.

Dependent Variable:

Five item index; individual measures were standardized to mean=0 and sd=1 before taking the mean across all five measures. Responses to the five questions were highly inter-correlated, with a Cronbach's alpha of .89. Factor analysis confirmed that they represented a single underlying construct, so we combined the items into a single Media Trust index. However, for purposes of direct comparison with the GSS over-time trend, we also analyze the GSS question separately.

General Social Survey Wording:

Thinking about [If Own Media Condition: the media where you most frequently get your news – [INSERT LIST Q1 HERE.]/ If Others' Media Condition: the most popular sources of news for Americans—[INSERT LIST FROM Q2 HERE] / If Mainstream News Condition: the ABC, NBC, and CBS national evening news programs /If Unspecified Referent Condition: the news media]: As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

ANES Wording #1:

We'd like you to rate on a scale from 0 to 100 how favorable you feel towards

[If Own Media Condition: the media where you most frequently get your news – [INSERT LIST Q1 HERE.]/ If Others' Media Condition: the most popular sources of news for Americans—[INSERT LIST FROM Q2 HERE] / If Mainstream News Condition: the ABC, NBC, and CBS national evening news programs /If Unspecified Referent Condition: the news media]: Zero means very unfavorable, and 100 means very favorable. Fifty means you do not feel favorable or unfavorable. How would you rate [If Own Media Condition: the media where you most frequently get your news – [INSERT LIST Q1 HERE.]/ If Others' Media Condition: the most popular sources of news for Americans—[INSERT LIST FROM Q2 HERE] / If Mainstream News Condition: the ABC, NBC, and CBS national evening news programs /If Unspecified Referent Condition: the news media]: on this scale? You may use any number from 0 to 100.

ANES Wording #2:

How much of the time do you think you can trust [If Own Media Condition: the media where you most frequently get your news – [INSERT LIST Q1 HERE.]/ If Others' Media Condition: the most popular sources of news for Americans—[INSERT LIST FROM Q2 HERE] / If Mainstream News Condition: the ABC, NBC, and CBS national evening news programs /If Unspecified Referent Condition: the news media]: to report the news fairly? Just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never?

Pew Center Wording #1:

Is your overall opinion of [If Own Media Condition: the media where you most frequently get your news – [INSERT LIST Q1 HERE.]/ If Others' Media Condition: the most popular sources of news for Americans—[INSERT LIST FROM Q2 HERE] / If Mainstream News Condition: the ABC, NBC, and CBS national evening news programs /If Unspecified Referent Condition: the news media] very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?

Pew Center Wording #2:

In general, do you think [If Own Media Condition: the media where you most frequently get your news – [INSERT LIST Q1 HERE.]/ If Others' Media Condition: the most popular sources of news for Americans—[INSERT LIST FROM Q2 HERE] / If Mainstream News Condition: the ABC, NBC, and CBS national evening news programs /If Unspecified Referent Condition: the news media] get the facts straight, or do you think that their stories and reports are often inaccurate?

Social Trust index (covariate): Question wording from the GSS

- (1) Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?
- (2) Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance, or would they try to be fair?
- (3) Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?

Party Identification: Question wording from the GSS

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a REPUBLICAN, a DEMOCRAT, an INDEPENDENT, or what?

Appendix B: Coding of Open-ended Media Sources

Coding Mainstream versus Non-Mainstream sources: Based on the definition offered by Ladd (2012), Table B1 summarizes the types of news sources included in each of these categories.

Table B1: Categorization of Mainstream News Outlets

	Non-Mainstream	Mainstream
TV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cable news networks • Programming produced by entertainment divisions of the broadcast networks • Cable entertainment networks such as ESPN 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any network news program or talk show, including the evening news programs
Print	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tabloid and weekly newspapers • Specialized news magazines such as <i>The Weekly Standard</i> or <i>The Nation</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily broadsheet newspapers • General interest weekly news magazines
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Websites, including both news websites and social media websites • Talk radio networks and programs 	

We used this definition to code respondents' answers to the Own Media and Other's Media Questions. In addition to coding whether a source was "mainstream" as defined above, we also coded the number of sources that were equivalent to our Mainstream Media manipulation; that is, any of the network evening news programs. Any answer referring to one or all of the three broadcast networks and/or one of the network evening newscasts, was dubbed "Network TV news."

In the Own Media condition, 59 percent of people named at least one source that was considered mainstream, and 34 percent mentioned network news in particular. Whether these numbers are high or low is debatable. But importantly, they are statistically indistinguishable from the corresponding percentages of mainstream sources in the Others' Media condition (Network news sources in Own Media versus Others' Media conditions, $t = .744$, $p = .457$; Mainstream sources mentioned in Own Media versus Others' Media conditions, $t = .368$, $p = .713$). In other words, people were equally likely to mention mainstream sources whether they were talking about what they personally watch and read or what they think others watch and read.

Coding Like-Minded/Cross-Cutting and Non-partisan News Sources: Although opinions on partisan leanings in sources inevitably differ, we followed the procedure and conclusions developed by Dilliplane (2011), which relied on a combination of audience perceptions from independent survey data and media sources that consistently labeled a source's partisan leanings in a specific direction. To incorporate a wider variety of sources, we incorporated additional data from the 2008 National Annenberg Election Study Rolling Cross-Sectional Survey (NAES).

After coding each news source for whether it leaned Republican, leaned Democratic, or was neutral, we combined this information with the self-reported partisanship of the respondent who named the source in order to determine whether a respondent had named a like-minded or cross-cutting partisan news source. When respondents espoused or leaned toward a party identification consistent with their source, the source was coded as liked-minded, and vice-versa for cross-cutting sources.