

A MATTER OF TRUST

A new Gallup Poll shows Americans have more confidence in TV news than print, trust the nightly newsmagazines more than the network newscasts (and the print news magazines), believe CNN—and don't rely on the Internet for news.

BY FRANK NEWPORT AND LYDIA SAAD

TRADITIONAL NEWS MEDIA ARE BESIEGED BY SIGNIFICANT challenges. Most recently, the negative public reaction to this year's coverage of the Monica Lewinsky/White House situation raised significant image and credibility issues. Other challenges derive from longer term trends, most importantly the rise of an astonishingly varied number of new sources of news and information including those that offer news, at best, indirectly and dressed up as entertainment, and those that make no pretense of offering news at all, but instead only provide unfiltered information.

As exhilarating as these challenges to the media might be, the potential downside they present for journalists is enormously disquieting. If Americans increasingly distrust the media, get their news essentially by osmosis through talk shows and infotainment programming, or get it directly from the source through C-SPAN or the Internet, the old style gatekeeper breed of journalist could be poised to follow the slide rule and buggy whip into oblivion.

New survey data, however, go a long way toward assuaging some of the fears held by the guardians of traditional media. A recent Gallup poll shows that Americans continue to rely on and report faith in many of the traditional hard news sources they have long used for news and information. Use of the "new" media as sources for news is much lower, and so is trust in its accuracy. There appears to be, in short, little evidence of a public backlash against the mainstream media based on their coverage of what has happened (or at least what has been alleged to have happened) in the White House, and there is even less evidence that the public has made a wholesale swing toward reliance on non-traditional sources of news.

TWENTY-ONE SOURCES OF NEWS AND INFORMATION WERE used by Gallup in its recent major assessment of the public's use and view of the media. The survey of 1,009 Americans was conducted in March and has a plus-or-minus 3 percent margin of error. It measured the frequency with which each news outlet is used by the public as a source of news and the perception of each source in terms of accuracy and objectivity.

The list ranges from hard news sources (national newspapers, network and local TV news, local newspapers), to media that straddle the line between news and information (C-SPAN and the Internet), to media that blur the distinction between news and entertainment (morning TV news shows, talk radio and infotainment programs).

What the survey found: Americans have generally high levels of trust in many of the major sources of news and information to which they are exposed, but are quite discriminating, and negative, in their views of others. Broadcast news has higher credibility than print. Prime time TV newsmagazines are both popular and highly trusted, as are local television newscasts. And both are more trusted than the networks' nightly newscasts. The direct-to-the-public information sources such as C-SPAN and the Internet have yet to register much of an impression of any kind with the bulk of the American population.

Here are the key findings:

- The highest levels of trust are reserved for electronic news sources: CNN, public television news, local television news and prime time TV newsmagazines. All four of these have "net trust" (trust minus distrust) levels above 50 percent, with about 70 percent

of the public, **overall**, saying they trust their accuracy, compared to about 15 percent who say they don't. Conspicuously missing from the top tier for perceived **credibility** is the nightly network news, with a net trust rating of only 43 percent.

While **CNN** gets the highest trust ratings in the survey local TV newscasts would have to be viewed as the heavyweight champion on the list, in that they receive high trust ratings and, according to the survey, are one of America's two most frequently used sources of news.

Other traditional news sources—local and national newspapers and weekly news magazines—rank significantly lower in terms of their perceived credibility, with the national print news magazines coming in lowest of the group.

When Bill Clinton appeared on Arsenio Hall and MTV in 1992 to promote his presidential campaign, he gave birth to a whole school of thought about the new media. Oprah sells hundreds of thousands of books, Don Imus hosts a radio talk show based on a virtual Who's Who of American politics, the Walt Street Journal breaks stories on its Internet site, Matt Drudge is sued because of the supposed negative impact of allegations published on his Web site, and half-hour infotainment shows dominate the pre-prime time hours in most American TV markets.

None of this seems to matter. These outlets are not used with any great frequency specifically as sources of news and information. Despite its enormous potential, the Internet has at best only a narrow, niche audience that uses it for news. Radio and TV talk shows and the infotainment shows do only slightly better.

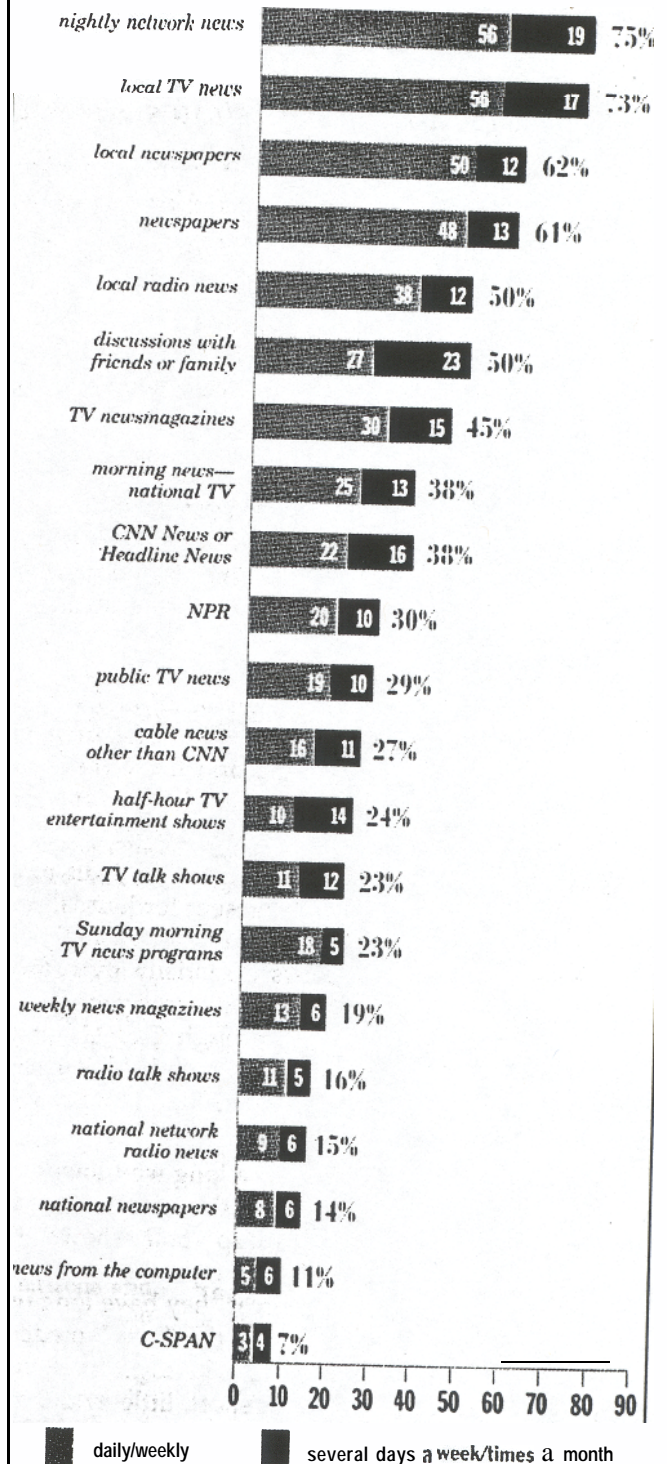
Moreover, all of these sources rate particularly low on trust. In the case of talk shows and the infotainment programs, the lack of **credibility** is overwhelming. Fifty percent or more of those with an opinion say they can't trust the accuracy of what they see or hear there. On the Internet, the "can't trust" figure is 45 percent.

Prime time TV **newsmagazines** constitute a burgeoning source of news and information. These shows will continue to metastasize until they are on every network every night of the week and eventually—as some observers have noted—may well replace the early evening network newscasts altogether.

The public could easily become reliant on these shows as their primary source of news and information, which have among the highest levels of trust of any of the news sources tested, And, sure to **rankle** the editors of the more traditional print news magazines, TV **newsmagazines** are now used much more frequently by the public than Tie, Newsweek and U.S. News & World Report. Not **only** do the **print news** magazines get lower scores for accuracy than their distant cousins on TV, but in fact they score among the lowest on trust.

- "Direct to the audience" sources of news are supposed to **revolutionize** the way we get and use news, eventually obviating the need for journalists

Where Americans Get Their News



to select, edit and interpret what we see and read. TWO such sources were measured by Gallup, and neither has fulfilled the prophecies. Neither C-SPAN nor the Internet is heavily used for news, and C-SPAN, in fact, is the lest used source of any of those tested. The Internet is only marginally more frequently used.

There are, however, differences between the two. C-SPAN is more trusted than the Net, but for a medium that does almost no filtering of the news it presents, it receives only a relatively modest level of trust from those who have an opinion.

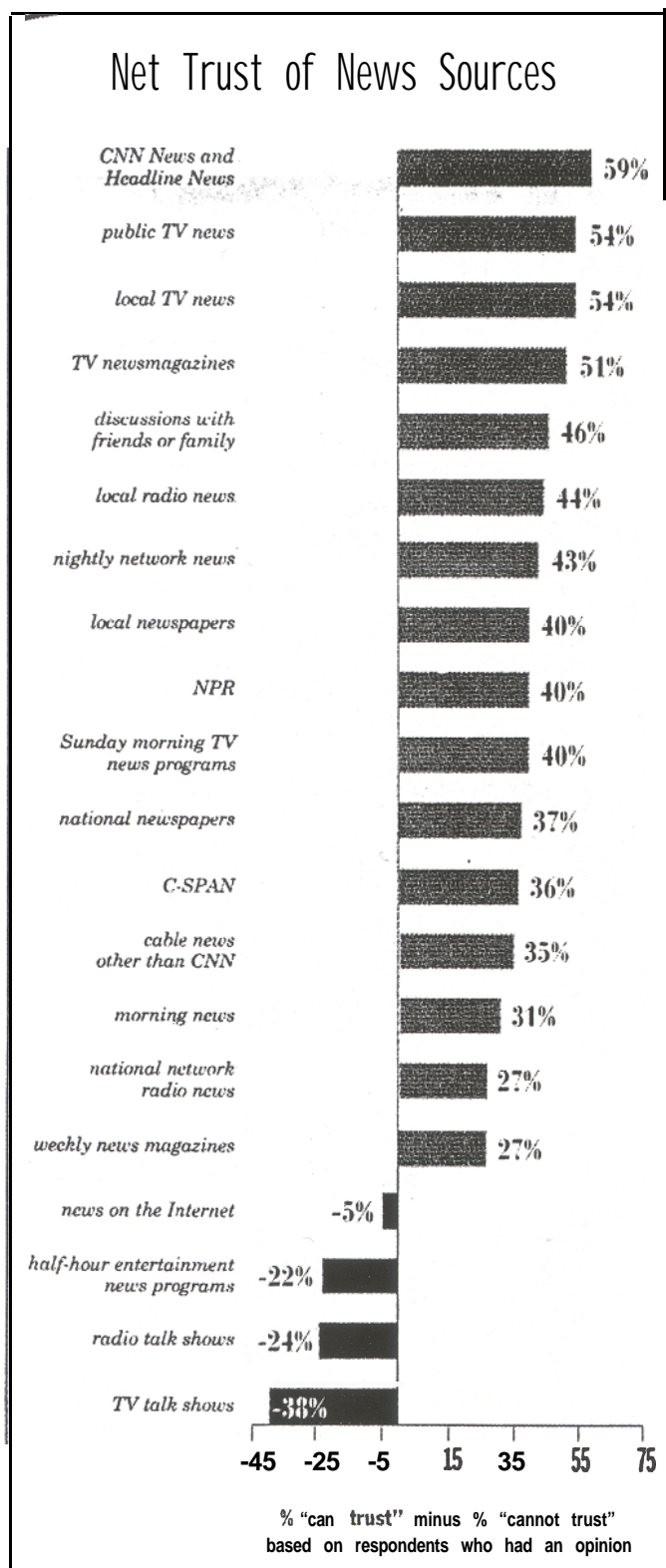
- In the local arena, television news wins out over newspapers in both frequency of use and trust. Americans, particularly young people, say they use local television as a source of news more than they use local newspapers, and the public also has more trust in the accuracy of what it sees on TV newscasts than in what it reads in local newspapers.

Still, local papers have a significant leg up over other print sources of news. Almost two-thirds of Americans read a local newspaper for news and information at least several times a week, compared to only 14 percent who say they frequently get their news from a national newspaper and only 19 percent who cite weekly news magazines. Although they are among the most prestigious news outlets in journalism, public reliance on publications such as the New York Times, Tie and Newsweek is low-and on par with talk radio and infotainment shows.

Several electronic mass media sources of news and information are more trusted than the oldest source of news of all, word-of-mouth, described in the Gallup research as "discussions with your friends or family" Only 64 percent of Americans say they can trust what they hear from friends and family while 18 percent say they can't. This net trust level is below that of CNN, public television news, local television news and prime time TV newsmagazines, suggesting that the news anchors Americans see on TV are considered more reliable as sources of accurate information than personal acquaintances.

IS THERE AN INCOMPATIBILITY BETWEEN THE HIGH LEVELS of expressed trust in many frequently used sources of news and information and the more critical reaction generated by these same sources in terms of their coverage of the White House crisis earlier this year?

Yes and no. Some of the complaining as measured in Gallup polls earlier this year seemed to focus on the amount of Monica/Paula/Kathleen coverage, which is not necessarily inconsistent with positive impressions about its accuracy. In fact, Gallup polling has suggested all year that Americans do not overwhelmingly believe Bill Clinton is innocent. It would seem that Americans don't think the news media are barking up the wrong tree in the White House crisis as much as it thinks that



the media should not be barking up any of these types of trees at all.

The Gallup survey also touched on the issue of an alleged liberal bias in news coverage. There is, to our knowledge, no systematic or universally agreed upon way to determine the presence or absence of bias in news coverage. The survey asked Americans to evaluate the major news sources as “fair and impartial,” as having a liberal bias or as having a conservative bias.

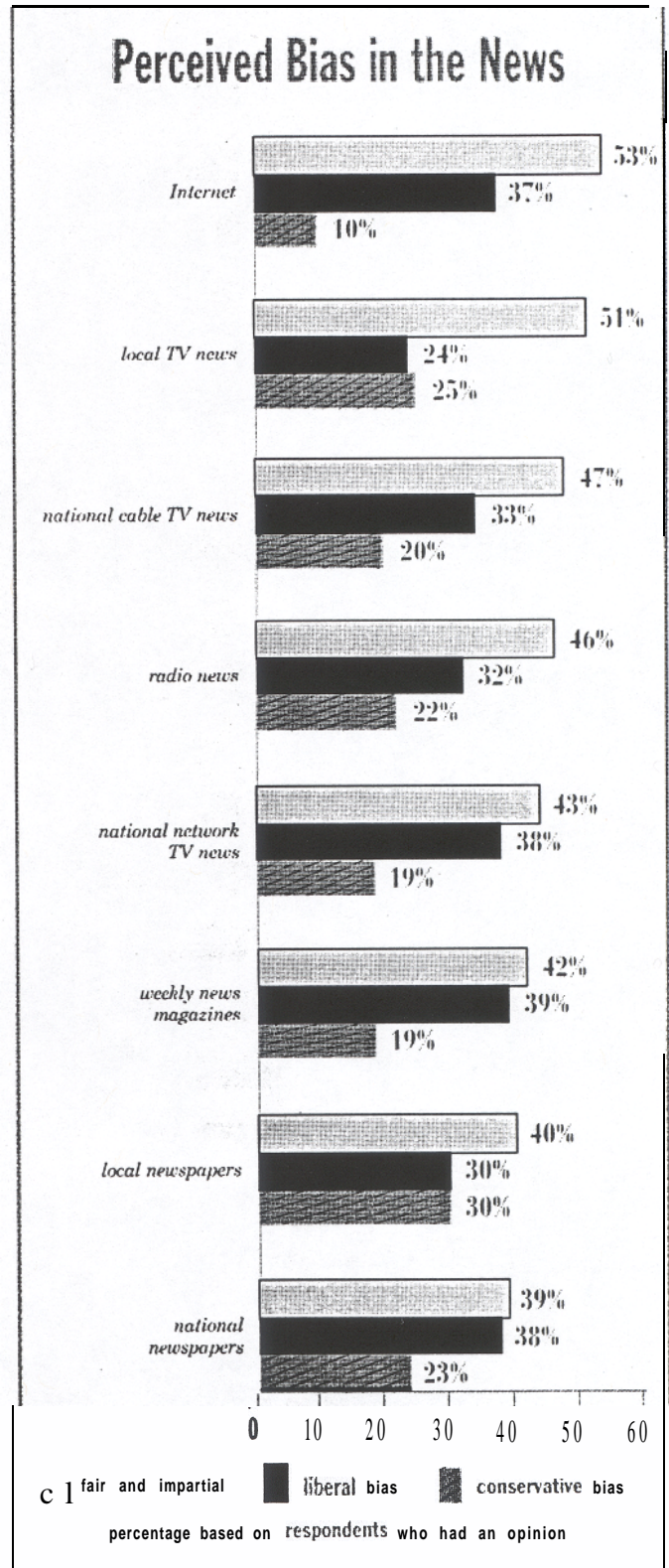
The results: More Americans perceive bias of one stripe or another than believe the various media are fair and impartial—the ratio being about 55 percent to 45 percent across all media. Additionally, the plurality who do sense a bias tend to think that news is too liberal rather than too conservative, although this tendency is not pronounced. There seem to be four dynamics that drive these findings:

1) One person’s poison is another’s cup of tea, meaning that bias is strongly related to personal ideology; 2) while conservatives tend to see liberal bias and liberals tend to see conservative bias, this tendency is much stronger among the conservatives surveyed; 3) self-identified conservatives outnumber liberals by about three-to-two in the Gallup media survey—thus their perceptions of bias carry more weight; and 4) the large group of moderates in America tend to perceive somewhat more of a liberal bias than a conservative bias.

The perception of a liberal bias is strongest—but still not overwhelming—for national news sources. At the local level those who see either left- or right-wing bias in print or TV essentially cancel each other out. In other words, the direction of the perceived bias for local news sources (both newspapers and TV news) is split almost exactly the same—down the middle. Conservatives, in particular, are significantly less apt to say that local television news has a liberal bias than any of the other news sources tested.

Of additional interest is the fact that the one medium that distributes every conceivable type of news and information, from every conceivable perspective—the Internet—has the highest “net liberal” bias of any major news source tested.

Although each major news event—O. J. Simpson, the White House crises, the death of Princess Diana—seems to bring with it new criticisms of the news media, it appears that the American public still has a good deal of trust in what it sees and reads in the daily news. Although new ways of disseminating news will continue to develop in the years ahead, the public currently seems most content with the old-fashioned way of getting their news. And, electronic news media dominate as trustworthy sources of news for the average American.



Frank Newport is editor in chief of The Gallup Poll. Lydia Saad is The Gallup Poll's managing editor.