

MDI ALERT

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WHO TRUSTS TV NEWS?

Over the past 7-8 years, conservatives have led an orchestrated campaign to label the major news sources as biased and to accuse them of lying about Trump and alleged misdeeds by him and his supporters. At the same time social media has emerged as a major source of "news" for younger folks and here, too, there are deep concerns about the accuracy of much of the content.

Further complicating matters, the various TV news sources differ sharply in their coverage of the news as well as how they present their information and/or commentaries to the public. For example, an average TV station provides about 6-7 hours of local news to its viewers per day and much of this content is about local or regional happenings while relatively little involves the often vicious infighting between liberals and conservatives that is so common on the cable news channels. On cable it is common to see anchors and others berating the integrity of a rival news channel, frequently to the point of ridiculing the "enemy" channel; again, nothing like this happens on local TV news. Other features of cable news include guests who are interviewed about what are often very controversial subjects, and spokespersons for the rival political parties who are frequently ambushed by the reporters with "gotcha" questions that stir up heated confrontations. Such clashes are rare events on local TV.

As for formats, most local newscasts are a half-hour in length and involve teams of anchors as well as weather, sports and local scene reporters. They are well known to the viewers who may bond with the on-screen personalities they see on a daily basis. As for cable, most are one-hour presentations that feature a single host who interviews guests and otherwise opines on the events that are unfolding, while national broadcast network newscasts are usually half-hour affairs with a single host. The appeal of the single host plays an important role in both cable and national broadcast news.

A number of researchers have explored the issue of "trust" in news reporting and increasingly, they are finding that when the question is asked broadly, meaning without reference to a particular news program or source, many people claim that they do not trust the news they are seeing. But this may not be as dire as some claim. A new study by TVB, conducted by Dynata with a sample of 9,000 adults immediately after the recent presidential election, demonstrates this point. The online study was done only in a number of swing states that were bombarded with ads and appearances by the competing candidates and their supporters, which makes it even more interesting. Asked to rate the various news sources based on their "honesty," 72% of local news viewers agreed that this was somewhat or very true of local news, while public TV rated almost as high (68%) and broadcast network news came in at 67%; cable news scored only 63%,

topping local newspaper by two points (61%). As for the rest of the list, radio rated 60%, magazines 53%, podcasts 47%, social media 41% and email came in dead last with 39%.

Notably, the cable findings are not as bad as they could be, considering the degree of vitriol and ranting that are so common on the two most oppositional channels, MSNBC and Fox News. However, it's clear that while many Fox viewers regard MSNBC hosts as a pack of liars and most MSNBC viewers feel the same way about Fox; when asked about cable news in general, these feelings tended to cancel each other out. Accordingly, cable news didn't get as bad a rating as some may feel is warranted. This isn't really surprising as studies that ask about individual cable channel audiences usually report that most diehard conservatives shun MSNBC in favor of Fox while it's the other way around for MSNBC aficionados. So, members of either political persuasion might give cable news a positive trust score because they are referring to the channels they favor, not the "others."

The TVB/Dynata study also provided some interesting information on the profile of people who claimed to trust the news media and in each case the findings were based on those who use each medium. As shown in the accompanying table, the disparity in age between traditional news sources and newer ones such as social media and podcasts is evident. While there were relatively small differences between the three forms of TV news by age, 18-34 users were considerably above average in favoring podcasts and social media as "trustworthy." In the case of social media, the difference between 18-34 users and those aged 55+ was about three-to-one in favor of the younger group.

We also looked at the findings of this study by political orientation and here there were some surprises. For example, adults leaning towards the Democratic party topped their opposite numbers by notable margins for broadcast network and local news, but when it came to cable, the difference was much greater among independents, whom many believe were the key swing voters in states that opted for Trump over Harris.

We believe that there is a strong case to be made for local TV station news regarding the audience trust issue. Many viewers watch or sample news from all three TV sources (broadcast network, cable and local news) and many get their fill of the political name calling and bickering from the national news shows. Local station news, with its welcome regional orientation and general civility, plus more on-screen personalities to relate to, must seem like a quiet oasis of normalcy to many viewers and is thus a much appreciated respite from what many see as TV's daily news wars. Whether this results in greater commercial attentiveness or advertiser claims credibility remains to be documented; perhaps we will soon see some research from TVision regarding attentiveness to help continue this discussion. One final point; national advertisers might bear in mind that their commercials in national news shows generally appear in content used heavily by rival brands, but this is not always so with local news where many of the spots are for local advertisers. So, another reason for considering a national local news buy is advertising exclusivity. For many brands your ad message will be the only one in your competitive set that these viewers will see for a day or so.

ADULTS IN NINE SWING STATES WHO TRUST THE NEWS

November 2024

	Local B'cast. News	B'cast. Net. News	Cable	Radio	Podcasts	Social Media
% Users Who Trust¹	72	67	63	60	47	41
Relative Trust Indices By:						
Age²						
18-34	100	103	103	103	123	146
35-54	104	104	103	108	117	115
55+	97	94	94	92	70	54
Political Orientation²						
Democrat	114	124	114	105	96	105
Republican	89	78	91	98	111	100
Independent	93	93	64	93	89	85

¹Agree somewhat or strongly about trusting this medium.

²The relative indices in this table compare the findings by age or political orientation with the overall average base of 100, i.e., a 110 index means that this particular group was 10% above the norm in trusting a given news source.

Source: TVB/Dynata study.