

Newsrooms and Engagement in Fresno, Kansas City, and Macon

Caroline Murray, Alex Curry, Gina Masullo Chen, and Natalie (Talia) Jomini Stroud

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SUMMARY

This project was led by the [News Co/Lab](#) at Arizona State University in collaboration with the Center for Media Engagement at The University of Texas at Austin. Together, we designed and tested an online survey tool that news organizations can use to improve transparency, engagement, and mutual understanding with the communities they serve.

The News Co/Lab, at ASU's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, envisioned, co-created, and promoted the survey online with the help from newsrooms at *The Fresno Bee*, *The Kansas City Star*, and *The Telegraph* in Macon, Georgia.

The Center for Media Engagement at UT Austin's Moody College of Communication researched previous surveys and co-created the survey instrument with News Co/Lab partners at the Cronkite School. The collaboration also included feedback from the [Media Education Lab at the University of Rhode Island](#), [American Press Institute](#), Google Surveys, and those who commented on blog posts of a [draft of the survey questions](#). Center for Media Engagement researchers programmed the survey using Qualtrics, collected and analyzed survey results, and produced this preliminary report.

We surveyed employees at three regional news organizations—*The Fresno Bee*, *The Kansas City Star*, and *The Telegraph*—to gauge journalists' attitudes about how their newsrooms connect with their audiences. The newsroom survey participants were 19 journalists from *The Fresno Bee*, 61 from *The Kansas City Star*, and 8 from *The Telegraph*.

The following results stand out from the surveys with the newsrooms:

- Journalists, on average, rated themselves as very credible, trustworthy, and unbiased.
- While journalists believe their reporting is fair and factual, the results indicate they see room for improvement in explaining their job to the public and engaging them in their reporting.
- Journalists don't think their newsrooms currently play a large part in helping their communities navigate the online news landscape.

PERCEPTIONS OF CREDIBILITY OF THEIR NEWSROOM

Employees at the local outlets rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale how well news organizations did on nine statements related to credibility and trust with the audience. The statement that received the highest average was “Cares about getting the facts right.” The two statements that received the lowest were related to explaining the journalistic process (“Tells the community who our journalists are and what they do” and “Explains to the community how and why we decide what stories to cover.”)

Table 1. Average ratings for nine statements related to credibility and trust

	Journalists' Average Responses
Is concerned with our community's interests.	4.36
Is focused on helping people in our community.	4.12
Cares about getting the facts right.	4.80
Explains to the community how and why we decide what stories to cover.	2.70
Is fair in our reporting.	4.58
Knows the community well.	4.14
Provides all the related information readers need to fully understand news stories.	3.86
Invites the community to suggest story ideas or help with reporting.	3.40
Tells the community who our journalists are and what they do.	2.88

Journalists were also asked to evaluate how well seven adjectives related to credibility and trust applied to their newsrooms. The lowest average was 1.98 for “biased” and the highest average was 4.60 for “credible.”

Table 2. Average ratings for seven adjectives related to credibility and trust

	Journalists' Average Responses
Fair	4.42
Biased	1.98
Accurate	4.55
Trustworthy	4.57
Credible	4.60

Transparent	3.66
Engaging	3.92

HOW JOURNALISM WORKS

Journalists generally agreed that it was both a part of their job personally, as well as their newsrooms' missions as a whole, to help people understand how the news works. Overall, the journalists also expressed confidence in their ability to explain how the news works to members of the community. About half of the journalists in each survey said they were somewhat effective at explaining how the news works and another quarter in each survey said they were very effective. They also reported being asked about how journalism works by members of their community on average just slightly less than once a week.

However, journalists at the three regional news outlets expressed uncertainty about their role in helping curb the misidentification of news online. The journalists were shown a series of statements related to online news behavior, and asked to rate their newspaper's performance on a 1 (*not well at all*) to 5 (*extremely well*) scale. Statements included "Helps our community understand factual information online" and "Helps our community know how it can share online news and information." Responses to these statements ranged between a score of 2 (*slightly well*) to 3 (*moderately well*).

These results show that journalists don't necessarily see their newsroom as a primary resource in helping their community navigate the online news space.

Table 3. Average ratings for four statements related to online news behavior

	Journalists' Average Responses
Helps our community find credible news online.	3.57
Helps our community create factual information online.	2.88
Helps our community understand factual information online.	3.32
Helps our community know how it can share online news and information.	2.93

INCREASING TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT

The journalists were shown a series of statements, all related to building trust with the public. They rated how important each were on a scale of 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*extremely important*). All of the statements were rated on average as being at least somewhat important. The statement with the highest average was to "Explain any controversial decisions made during reporting." Table 4 shows these averages.

Table 4. Average ratings for seven statements related to transparency and trust

	Journalists' Average Responses
Explain how the reporting for a story was done.	3.63
Offer more information about the sources or evidence cited in a story.	3.83
Explain more about the news organization and its policies.	3.77
Offer more information about the background and experience of reporters.	3.41
Explain why stories were chosen in the first place.	3.53
Explain any controversial decisions made during reporting.	4.00

Journalists in the three local newsrooms were also asked how much emphasis their newspaper placed on certain engagement tactics on a scale of 1 (*no emphasis*) to 4 (*a great deal of emphasis*). No average exceeded a rating of 3 (*some emphasis*), perhaps indicating that journalists think their newsrooms could engage better with their communities.

Table 5. Average ratings for four engagement practices

	Journalists' Average Responses
Asking the community to submit news tips.	2.59
Asking the community to submit pictures or videos.	2.36
Asking the community to tell us which issues are important to them.	2.57
Telling our community how it can get involved in the topics we cover.	2.30

CONCLUSION

Journalists believe their newsrooms are credible and committed to the facts, but they also think they could be doing more to increase transparency and community engagement.

Journalists report that they as individuals are asked about how journalism works about once a week and that they at least somewhat effective at explaining the process. At the same time, in other areas of the survey, journalists seemed to acknowledge there is room for improvement in explaining their newsrooms' mission. Although they rated transparency measures like "Explain more about the news organization and its policies" as being important to a journalist's job, journalists didn't necessarily believe their newsroom was adequately explaining who their journalists are and how they decide what stories to cover.

When asked about different engagement practices, journalists didn't profess that their newsroom was placing "a great deal of emphasis" on any of the tactics, suggesting they also think their newsroom could be doing more to connect with the community and involve them in their reporting.

In addition, the journalists expressed that they felt like their newsroom didn't play a substantial role in making sure their community understands factual information online, finds credible news online, or how to create and share factual information online.

METHODOLOGY

The surveys were created on Qualtrics online platform, and *The Fresno Bee*, *The Kansas City Star*, and *The Telegraph* distributed the surveys to their newsrooms. Newsrooms employees were encouraged to complete the surveys, but not required to do so. Table 6 shows demographics of the employees who participated.

Table 6. Demographics of survey participants for the newsroom surveys

	N=51
Gender	
Male	55.8%
Female	44.2
Race/Ethnicity	
White	72.7%
Black/African American	3.9
Asian/Pacific Islander	5.2
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	6.5
Native American/Alaska Native	0.0
Other/Multiracial	6.5
Prefer Not to Respond	5.2
Age	
18-29	30.1%
30-49	30.1
50-64	38.4
65+	1.4
Job Description	
Editor	18.2%
Photographer/visual journalist	9.1
Reporter	57.1
Columnist	3.9
Social media editor or manager	1.3
Other/year	10.4
Average number of years in journalism	19.82