

Don't believe the hype

What declining public trust means
for media and marketers



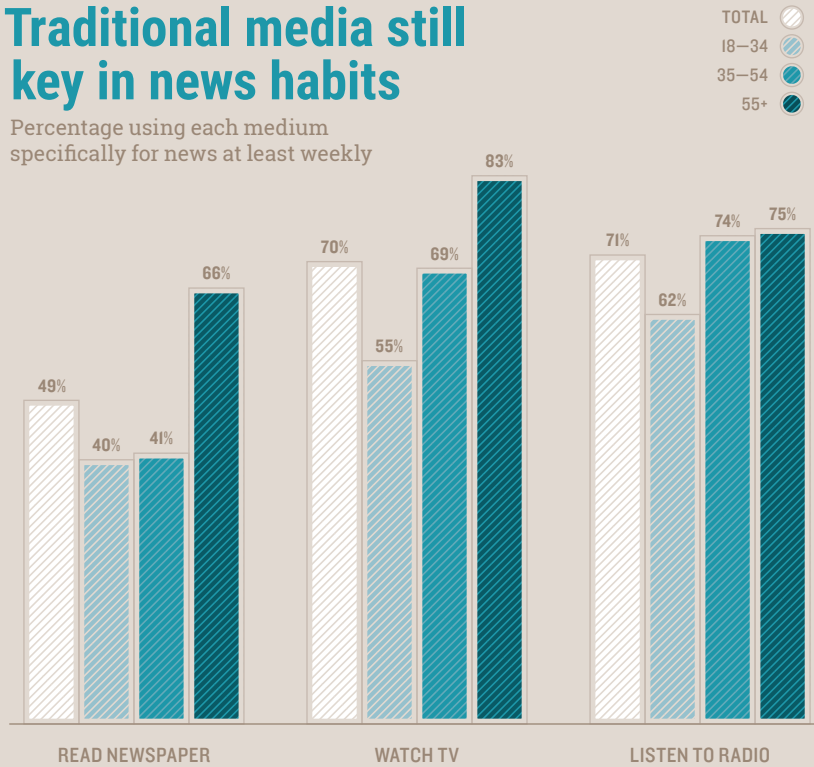
2017 WAS THE YEAR OF FAKE NEWS: it sprang into the public consciousness in late 2016 and dominated headlines throughout the year. And it, and the accompanying loss of public trust in mainstream media, prompted renewed focus on the state of the media landscape, amid concerns that the news media have lost their way.

The simplest narrative is that the public have been duped by fake news and social media, causing them to trust all media less. But few discussions of public trust look beyond the headlines to focus on the public themselves, and how changing attitudes and behaviours are driving these shifts. So we at Fuse Insights developed a study to understand more about the space.

Canada, of course, isn't immune to concerns about the state of news media. Edelman's Trust Barometer¹ shows trust in the media slipping by 10 percentage points from 2016 to 2017. Our own research suggests only a fifth of Canadians trust the media in general, and the majority (56%) of respondents use Facebook for news at least weekly. But closer inspection of the results paints a more nuanced picture, shedding light on the evolving nature of consumer attention and trust, with implications for publishers but also brands and marketers.

Traditional media still key in news habits

Percentage using each medium specifically for news at least weekly



74%
Follow the news & current affairs

53%
Say they're very well informed about news and what's going on in the world

19%
Trust the media in general

News is still important

The first major finding from the research is that news still matters to the public. Surveying a cross-section of the Canadian public, 83% of respondents agreed that it's important people stay up to date with what's going on in the world, reflecting results we've seen in previous research. Three quarters said that they specifically follow news and current affairs; just over half of those surveyed regard themselves as very well informed about news and what's going on in the world.

And traditional media retain an important place in these news habits. Half of those surveyed read a newspaper in print every week, and 70% watch TV news. There's a slight age skew of course, but 40% of 18 to 34 year olds read a newspaper in print at least weekly; and 55% watch the news on TV.



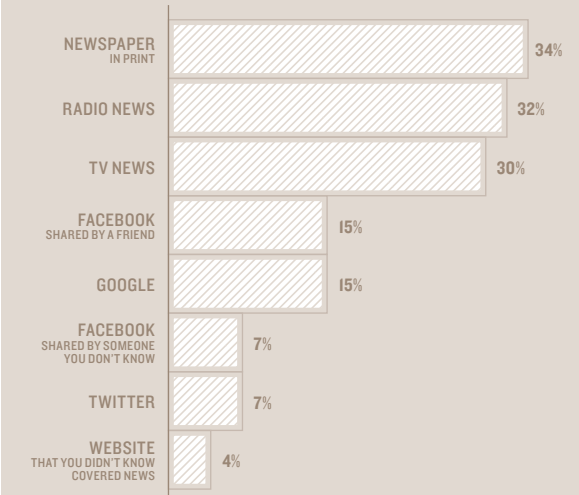
The implications for brands

Media is of course not the only sector affected by a less trusting public; brands too must adapt to the evolving nature of trust and attention. Only 14% of those polled said that they trust brands and companies in general; a third said that they trust companies and brands less than they did in the past.

For marketers, the implications are clear. With more demands for consumers' attention than ever before, engagement can't be taken for granted, but must be earned – what are you offering consumers that makes them want to spend time with your brand and its messaging? And with consumers now sceptical by default, are you earning and justifying their trust?

Only 1 in 3 trust newspaper reporting, but traditional media are most trusted sources

Percentage who would trust a news story in each source



...but trust is in short supply

Despite the importance they place on news, Canadians are not very trusting of the news media. Only 19% of those polled said they trust the media in general; more damning, only a third (34%) would trust a news story they read in a newspaper. Similar proportions (32% and 30% respectively) would trust a news story they heard on the radio, or saw in a TV news program.

These remain the most trusted sources – only a fifth of Twitter users would trust a news story they found there; and only 15% of respondents would trust a news story shared by a friend on Facebook – but clearly trust in media is not what it once was.



We're seeing a more discerning & conscious consideration of whether to trust.

Trust in business, government & even NGOs has fallen.

Fake news: it's not the whole story

The most important finding of the research concerns the cause of this lack of trust. Fake news is ubiquitous in the public consciousness, with more than two thirds of those polled aware of it. But belief that fake news alone explains the erosion of public trust in media is misguided. Only a quarter of those polled said that they definitely worry about fake news; and when asked why trust in media is declining, respondents' answers stretched far beyond fake news to encompass falling journalistic standards, sensationalism and the chase for clicks.

Instead, the research highlights two significant trends that underpin this declining trust in media – and in brands.

Aware but unconcerned

2/3 of Canadians have definitely heard of fake news, but only 1 in 4 'absolutely' worries about it



HAVE HEARD OF FAKE NEWS



WORRY ABOUT FAKE NEWS



HAVE SEEN FAKE NEWS

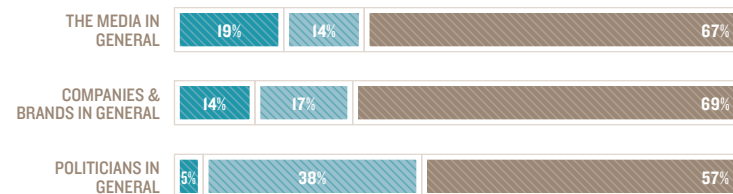


WATCH OUT FOR FAKE NEWS

Skepticism: the new norm

only a fifth of consumers trust the media, but 2/3 have no firm opinion one way or the other

● TRUST
● MISTRUST
● NOT SURE



The decline of implicit trust

The first is a widespread shift away from implicit trust, affecting far more than just media. Trust in business, government and even NGOs has fallen in the last year. Only 14% of those polled trust companies and brands in general, 19% trust the media, and 5% trust politicians. But this isn't the same as inherent distrust: 17% said they mistrust companies, 14% explicitly mistrust the media and 38% mistrust politicians. Instead we're seeing a more discerning and conscious consideration of whether to trust a particular brand, institution or individual – people have to be convinced that something is trustworthy or not.

The news for me

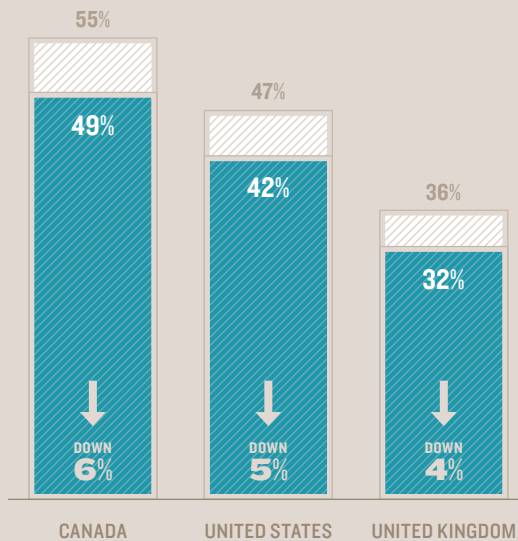
The second trend concerns the relationship of news publisher and consumer. In April 1930, a now-famous BBC radio news broadcast stated "there is no news" and abruptly ended – epitomising the publisher as curator of what's important to know in the world. We're further than ever from that ideal: today the proliferation of sources, improvements in reporting, and the need for ad impressions drive a never-ending stream of fresh content, 24 hours a day.

Trust in media is falling in other markets

In the UK, trust in the media has fallen by 4% since 2016, in the US, by 5%

2016 
2018 

SOURCE: EDELMAN TRUST BAROMETER 2018*



This forces consumers to make choices. There aren't enough hours in the day to follow every single news event or every available source, so they must choose what news stories to pay attention to. What's more, because there are numerous contradictory versions of every single event and subject, consumers must choose which version to believe.

So the essential dynamic of news consumption has shifted. Publishers no longer dictate to consumers what's important to know; instead, people must choose for themselves what news they want to know about, and what they want to believe. And the knock-on effect is to make people more sceptical and less trusting across the board: by definition, choosing what to trust means accepting that not everything is trustworthy.

Further afield

While the research was conducted in Canada, the findings and implications about news and trust are just as relevant elsewhere.

The most extreme example of the evolution of news is perhaps the US. The average household receives around 200 TV channels²; and the 20+ national TV channels offer people an unrivalled spectrum of interpretation of every news story and event. Overlaid on the polarised political landscape, it's no surprise that public trust in the news has fallen precipitously, and that 'fake news' has gained traction as a political tool.

In the UK, too, the same ingredients are present. Healthy competition in the news industry only accentuates the deepening political divides around developments such as Brexit. Brits, like their American and Canadian counterparts, have become selective in what to pay attention to and what to trust – and more dismissive of other views and sources.



Engagement
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The state of trust

Fake news may have focused attention on the state of news media, but the reasons for people losing trust in the media have been developing for years, and reach beyond bogus headlines and hoax stories. Consumers now have more sources at their fingertips, presenting more different views of the world, than ever before. They are forced to pick and choose what is most relevant to them, and which interpretation of the news they should trust, and the direct effect is to make them less trusting in general of all news media.

For publishers and broadcasters, this marks a significant change in the news model. In the past, established publishers could take their consumers' attention and trust for granted, relying on their brands and journalistic standards to retain a loyal, engaged audience. But no longer. In the face of unprecedented competition for their attention, consumers are being increasingly selective in deciding what matters, what's important and what to believe. And they're smart and sceptical enough to question everything they see and read, whether it's in a newspaper, on TV or online.

In short, trust and even attention can no longer be taken for granted. Instead, the onus is on individual publishers and broadcasters to justify attention and engagement, and earn the public's trust.

We surveyed 800 Anglophone internet-using Canadians, nationally representative by age, gender and region, with no further quotas or filters applied to the sample.

OTHER SOURCES

1. Edelman Trust Barometer 2017, Canada results. <https://www.edelman.com/trust2017/trust-in-canada/>
2. Nielsen research, 2014: <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2014/changing-channels-americans-view-just-17-channels-despite-record-number-to-choose-from.html>
3. Edelman Trust Barometer, 2018. <https://www.edelman.com/trust-barometer>



fuse insights 

Fuse Insights is a boutique research agency that helps organisations get more out of their data and market research. We focus on understanding consumers and what makes them tick, and apply our own extensive client-side experience to turn that understanding into business outcomes for our clients.

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