



THE MADISON PROJECT

# THE TRUST IMPERATIVE: REIMAGINING THE NATIONAL NEWS COUNCIL

*A Blueprint for Restoring Credibility  
and Accountability in American Journalism*

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**The Trust Imperative:  
Reimagining the National News Council**

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# INTRODUCTION: JOURNALISM AT A TURNING POINT

The United States is undergoing a period of profound social, political, and technological transformation. This change is felt not only in the country's institutions, but also across the media landscape. Once gatekeepers of public debate, the news media are now subject to questioning and critique not only from officials and partisans, but from a public whose trust can no longer be taken for granted. In our era of fractured information, with an endless array of sources and new forms of dissemination, the definitions of "journalist," "news," and "accountability" are being fundamentally remade.

This is not just a "moment of crisis," but a moment of reckoning – a test of whether journalism, as a profession and set of ideals, can persist amid polarized politics, rapidly evolving technology, and generational shifts in expectations and habits of information consumption.

In September 2025, Gallup reported that Americans' confidence in the mass media has edged down to a new low. When Gallup began measuring trust in the news media in the 1970s, between 68% and 72% of Americans expressed confidence in reporting. However, by the next reading in 1997, public confidence had fallen to 53%. Media trust remained just above 50% until it dropped to 44% in 2004, and it has not risen to the majority level since then.

Its latest national survey data indicate that fewer than three in 10 Americans – 28% – now place trust in newspapers, television, and radio to report the news fully, fairly, and accurately. Additionally, this decline is evident across all major voting groups, including Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. Generational divides also underscore the erosion; older adults hold significantly more faith in the news media than younger Americans.

Gallup's conclusion deserves close attention: "[T]he challenge for news organizations is not only to deliver fair and accurate reporting but also to regain credibility across an increasingly polarized and skeptical public."

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– Gallup



# THE LANDSCAPE OF PUBLIC TRUST AND CHANGING JOURNALISM

Americans are renegotiating their relationship with the news in real time. The Pew Research Center (August 2025) shows:



79% of Americans still consider someone who writes for a newspaper or news website a journalist



46% extend that legitimacy to news podcast hosts

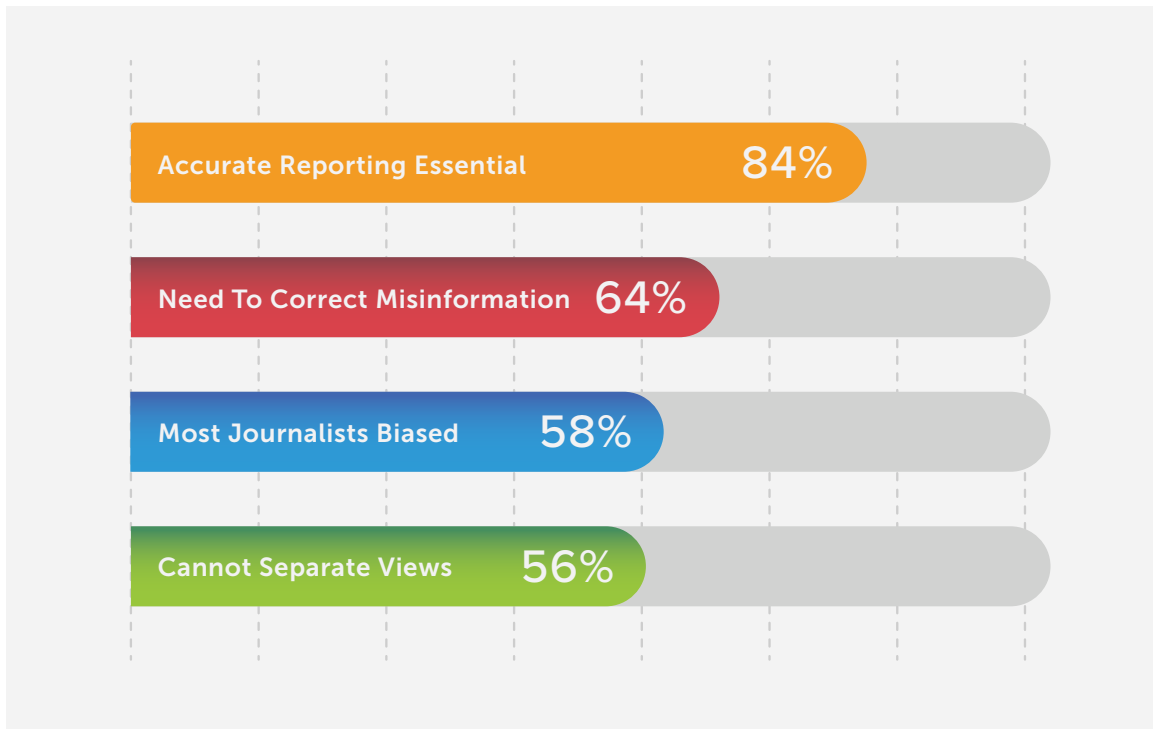


Only 26% view those who post news on social media as bona fide journalists

This represents not just a fragmentation of audience, but a deep ambiguity about *who is to be held accountable*. Individuals young and old differ sharply: Younger Americans, though more likely to view “new media” figures as journalists, are also less likely than their elders to care if their news comes from credentialed professionals.

No matter the forum, Americans overwhelmingly identify honesty, intelligence, and topical expertise as criteria for anyone providing news. Fully 84% say accurate reporting is essential, and 64% want news purveyors to correct misinformation from public figures. Yet, skepticism endures: 58% see “most journalists” as biased, and 56% say reporters cannot separate their views from their reporting.

## CRITERIA FOR ANYONE PROVIDING NEWS



Quotes from focus groups illustrate the broad range of expectations – and frustrations. As one participant in her 20s reflected, “Anyone can do it, in a way ... there’s a lot of people ... just starting their own channels ... it can feel like a journalist isn’t as important...” Others say trust in news is now “hit or miss”: “There are a handful we trust ... but others are all about clicks, eyeballs, money – they don’t necessarily mind tweaking the truth.”

What’s clear is this: Americans want news – credible, accurate, fair, and authentic – but doubt that these standards are consistently met. For news organizations and those who wish to defend the value of journalism, meeting skepticism with humility and action is the only sustainable path.

# LEARNING FROM THE PAST: THE EARLY NATIONAL NEWS COUNCIL

Concerns about media credibility and accountability are not new. In 1973, amidst the turmoil of Watergate and a tide of popular skepticism, the National News Council (NNC) was formed as a private, nonprofit organization, inspired by the landmark 1973 report, *A Free and Responsive Press*. The Council's aim: to serve as an independent, national forum for examining complaints about the news media and defending freedom of the press.

Chaired by visionaries like CBS News President Richard S. Salant, guided by experienced staff such as Bill Arthur, and espoused by legal and journalism heavyweights, the NNC spent 11 years receiving citizen complaints, evaluating standards, and trying to navigate the press-public divide. Yet, despite promising beginnings, the NNC ultimately dissolved in 1984 due to chronic industry indifference and reliance on just a few foundation grants.

Nevertheless, the history was instructive. Salant believed the need was enduring: "The press ... will reach the same conclusion" about the necessity of an independent, public-facing review. Patrick Brogan's book autopsy, *Spiked*, highlighted failure modes: "If a news council is ever reestablished, it will have to solve its financial problems first.... [It] must not, I believe, depend upon the goodwill of the press."



## KEY LESSONS:

*A COUNCIL MUST BE FINANCIALLY SUSTAINABLE, WITH NO SINGLE SECTOR DICTATING ITS FUTURE.*

*TRUE CREDIBILITY DEPENDS ON VISIBILITY, ACTIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT, AND A WILLINGNESS TO CRITIQUE EVEN ITS OWN BENEFACTORS.*

*BROAD BUY-IN FROM BOTH THE PRESS AND THE PUBLIC IS ESSENTIAL.*

*SELECTION OF COUNCIL MEMBERS MUST BALANCE JOURNALISM PROFESSIONALS WITH RESPECTED FIGURES FROM ACADEMIA, LAW, AND CIVIC LIFE, ENSURING TRANSPARENCY AND REGULAR ROTATION.*



*Key Lessons* ←



## THE MODERN IMPERATIVE: WHY A NEWS COUNCIL 2.0 IS NEEDED

Today's media are pulled in competing directions: They face ever-louder demands for transparency and correction, as well as accusations of bias and sensationalism. The accelerating news cycle, economic pressure for "clicks," and proliferation of non-traditional news sources mean *that everyone is an editor – yet no one is clearly accountable.*

While the original NNC could not resolve every complaint, it modeled a forum where the public and press could engage constructively, shielded from both political retribution and runaway lawsuits. Now, with public trust at historic lows and debates roiling over "fake news," government regulation, and social media virality, its core idea – public accountability without government interference – matters more than ever.

# WHAT SHOULD A NATIONAL NEWS COUNCIL 2.0 DO?

01

## **Embrace a modern, broad definition of “journalism.”**

All regular sources of public information, whether under the banner of legacy newsrooms, digital-only startups, podcasts, newsletters, or social media operations, should operate under shared, transparent accountability standards.

02

## **Set robust expectations for opinion and accuracy.**

The press must take stands and offer insights, but always base these on verifiable facts. Opinion journalism must be clearly distinguished from – and never be a cover for – distortion. Where uncertainty or controversy exists (e.g., scientific research, legal disputes), news organizations should explain the limits and potential errors of their reporting.

03

## **Protect the public’s right to challenge reporting – and to be heard.**

A Council must be accessible to individuals, organizations, and whistleblowers. It must require complainants to seek satisfaction from the original news provider before escalating, but offer a fair, swift, and alternative forum to litigation when disputes persist.

04

## **Strive for transparency in sources and corrections.**

While the use of anonymous or confidential sources is sometimes essential, organizations must demonstrate that such sources are not being exploited for unchecked misinformation. If significant corrections are required, they must be issued promptly and in a manner as prominent as the original error.

05

### **Operate independently and credibly.**

Council findings should never be weaponized by government agencies or be the basis for license renewal decisions (as with the FCC). Instead, the Council's true role is that of a public conscience and educator.

06

### **Educate as well as adjudicate.**

Every decision, process, and public outreach effort should serve as a real-time civics lesson – modeling both high expectations for the press and honest acknowledgment of the limits and difficulties of journalism.

07

### **Create sustainable structures for funding and participation.**

Modern technologies allow a national council to function efficiently with minimal overhead – virtual offices, AI-enabled research, and persistent engagement with the nation's leading journalism schools for academic and intern support. Multiple small donors should be preferred over a few large ones, and public-facing crowdfunding leveraged for both resources and civic buy-in.



# FROM PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE: OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES AND THEIR IMPACT

To ensure these goals are met, the Council should:

- Establish a user-friendly complaint-submission process – open to any party affected by reporting, including members of the public, but with guidance on scope and criteria.
- Institute a vetting process, with initial review by a panel of staff and academic researchers (potentially adopting a model similar to medical peer review or university journalism “ombuds”).
- Mandate proof that the complainant first attempted to resolve the dispute directly with the relevant news entity.
- Send panel complaints that meet threshold standards to Council members for full examination – including both lay and expert voices.
- Make decisions and recommendations public, and deliver explanations in accessible, jargon-free language, widely distributed via digital, broadcast, and social channels.
- Tolerate no government or regulatory body’s use of findings for licensing, enforcement, or punitive purposes, protecting the Council’s independence.
- Conduct annual reviews of operations and effectiveness, with findings published and open to external comment.

# A HYPOTHETICAL CASE: THE NEW NATIONAL NEWS COUNCIL'S PROCESS IN ACTION

Imagine: A regional news site investigates alleged financial irregularities in city contracting, publishing urgently and relying heavily on unnamed sources. The official in question claims the coverage contains distortions and vital context is missing. The official secures a retraction from two other outlets, but not the main site, and files a complaint with the National News Council.

Here's how the case unfolds:

- ▶ The Council intake team screens the complaint for merit and confirms an initial attempt at resolution.
- ▶ The site in question is asked to provide a full editorial account and relevant documentation.
- ▶ Council staff, including graduate journalism interns, research the coverage and subsequent developments.
- ▶ A sub-panel of the Council – composed of journalists, a former judge, and a media law scholar – reviews all evidence, interviews relevant parties, and consults community input.
- ▶ The Council issues a ruling: If it finds egregious misstating or inadequate context, it can recommend a prominent, detailed correction, perhaps even a new story; if the reporting stands, it can clarify standards for the public.
- ▶ The full process, findings, and standards invoked are shared on the Council's website and disseminated via mass and social media.

# LOOKING FORWARD: OVERCOMING CHALLENGES AND SEIZING OPPORTUNITY

Launching and sustaining a National News Council 2.0 will not be easy. Some media organizations may resist oversight; critics may deride the Council as powerless, or alternately, as a threat to press freedom. But, as the Pew data and the Council's history show, *improving public trust in journalism is a long game* – one that will only succeed if new bodies genuinely add value for both the press and the public.

Benefits of the Council can include:

- Serving as a trusted, independent resource for aggrieved news consumers and wrongly accused journalists alike.
- Bringing to light not just failings, but also best practices – providing positive incentives for ethical journalism.
- Facilitating constructive criticism from outside typical media echo chambers.
- Lowering “litigation risk” and providing alternatives to both government regulation and online hostility.

Council members must embrace a “less is more” operating philosophy, focusing on high public value and not bureaucratic growth. They should rotate regularly, publish annual transparency reports, and engage in partnerships with universities and civic groups – promoting media literacy alongside accountability.

# CONCLUSION: TOWARD A STRONGER, MORE TRUSTED PRESS

Trust in journalism, never automatic, is today both more elusive and more essential than ever. As the United States navigates this complex inflection point, a re-imagined National News Council – transparent, adaptive, and inclusive – can anchor the profession’s public responsibility, demonstrate an ongoing commitment to improvement, and help rebuild and sustain the bedrock of democracy.

By modeling courage, humility, and openness, a revitalized Council won’t solve every challenge. But it can help journalism in all its forms prove that it deserves the privileges of a free press, and deliver to the public the trust, engagement, and clarity that democracy requires.



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THE MADISON PROJECT

**The Madison Project: Free Speech and Press in American Democracy** is a timely and much-needed assessment of the impact of free speech and press on the future of democracy, at a time when democracy itself has come perilously close to the brink in America. The Madison Project offers distinctive insights, assesses challenges and threats to free speech and free press, and charts a course forward to maintain these essential freedoms as the bulwark of our democracy.

The Madison Project is underwritten by organizations with an interest in media and communications, the First Amendment, and the preservation of American democracy. Initial support for The Madison Project has been provided by **Verizon**, **LG Electronics**, and **Wiley Rein LLP**.

For more information about The Madison Project and sponsorship opportunities, visit <https://www.mediainstitute.org/the-madison-project/>, scan the QR code, or contact Richard T. Kaplar at [kaplar@mediainstitute.org](mailto:kaplar@mediainstitute.org).



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