

# “You’re Fake News!”

The 2017 Poynter Media Trust Survey



# “You’re Fake News!”<sup>†</sup>

## Findings from the Poynter Media Trust Survey

Andrew Guess	Brendan Nyhan	Jason Reifler
Dept. of Politics	Dept. of Government	Dept. of Politics
Princeton University	Dartmouth College	University of Exeter

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### **Executive summary**

During the Trump presidency, the United States has witnessed unprecedented attacks on the press from the highest office in the land. It is essential to understand how these attacks have affected attitudes toward the press. This report presents results of a public opinion and behavioral study designed to gauge the public’s support for the media in these difficult times. Encouragingly, we find that the public supports the press, albeit weakly. However, this result masks dramatic polarization in media attitudes. Specifically, we show that Republicans and Trump supporters have far more negative attitudes toward the press than Democrats and Trump opponents, especially among respondents with high levels of political knowledge. Republicans and Trump supporters are also far more likely to endorse extreme claims about media fabrication, to describe journalists as an enemy of the people, and to support restrictions on press freedom. These differences in media attitudes are reflected in polarized information diets on our behavioral measures, though to a lesser extent than people’s self-reports of the outlets they read suggest. Finally, we show that exposure to anti-media messages, including an attack by Trump on “fake news,” have relatively limited effects on attitudes toward the press.

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# The need to study media attitudes in the Trump era

During his campaign, President Trump took an aggressive stance against the press that he has continued from the White House. The President regularly derides accurate reporting as “fake news” and has called journalists an “enemy of the people” and threatened to revoke broadcast licenses. These attacks on journalism violate presidential norms and are seen by many as threats not only to public support for the media, but to American democracy itself. In this report, we use several different approaches to examine how the Trump presidency is affecting attitudes toward the media.

This report summarizes an original public opinion survey of 2,100 Americans conducted in early November 2017. Many of the questions we used in this survey come from prior survey research, allowing us to track aggregate change in media attitudes over time. We also directly examine the websites that participants visited during the study to see how their actual behavior corresponds to the media attitudes and consumption patterns they report in surveys. (Technical details about the study are provided in the Appendix.)

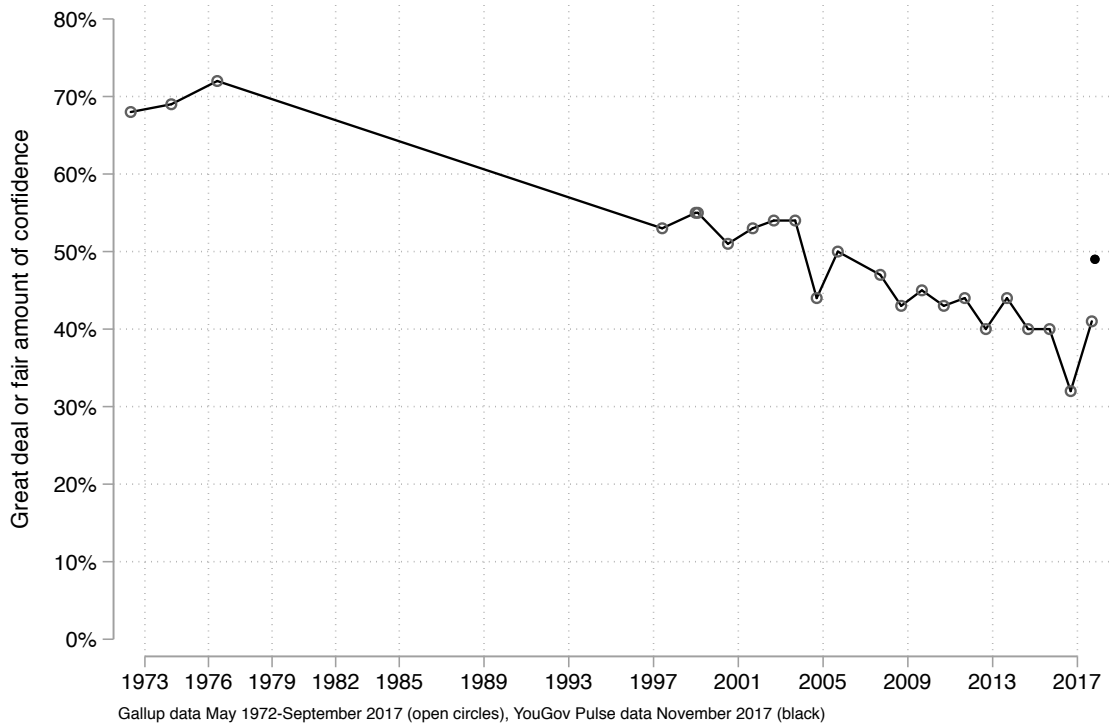
## Results

### Survey measures of media attitudes

Overall, we find that the public supports the press and the media, but somewhat weakly. For example, the public is very evenly split on whether it has trust and confidence in the mass media or not. Specifically, 12% of the public say they have a “great deal” of trust and confidence and an additional 37% have a “fair amount,” while 39% of the public report having “not very much” trust and confidence and 13% say they have “none at all.” When we ask about confidence in the people running the press, only 20% of the public has “a great deal” of confidence, compared to 50% that has “only some” and 30% that has “hardly any.” The public as a whole does not see the news media as unbiased — fully 69% believe that the media “tend to favor one side.” However, that does not mean that the public sees no value in the media. An identically sized majority (69%) believe that news organizations “keep political leaders from doing things that shouldn’t be done.”

By some measures, our data indicate that Americans now have more *positive* views of the press than those measured in previous surveys — seemingly a reflection of the newfound

Figure 1: Trust and confidence in the press



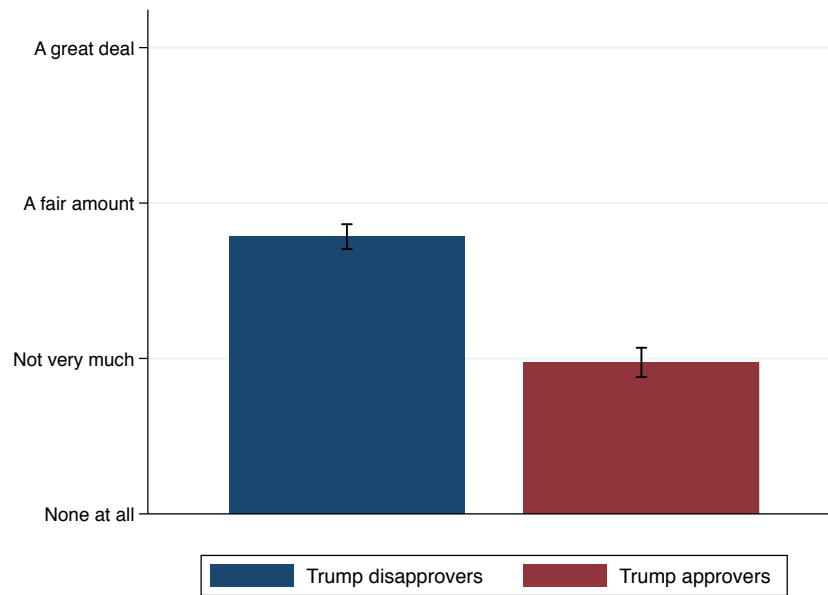
interest in the watchdog role of the press among Democrats and others who view the Trump administration negatively. Gallup found, for instance, that the percentage of Americans expressing “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of confidence in the mass media to report the news “fully, accurately and fairly” rose from 32% in September 2016 to 41% in September 2017. As noted above, our survey estimate is 49% for this same question. Figure 1 shows that these values represent a return to a level of support not seen since after the 2001 terrorist attacks.

However, these polling results conceal substantial differences by party in views of the media. As Figure 2 indicates, trust and confidence in media reporting varies dramatically by party identification and approval of President Trump’s job performance. For example, 74% of Democrats, including respondents who lean Democratic, express “a great deal” (19%) or “a fair amount” (55%) of confidence in media reporting compared to just 19% of Republicans.

These differences are consistent with prior data showing a widening partisan gap in perceptions of the media over time. In particular, as Figure 3 indicates, this shift has been driven

Figure 2: Trust and confidence in the press by political preference

(a) By Trump approval



(b) By party

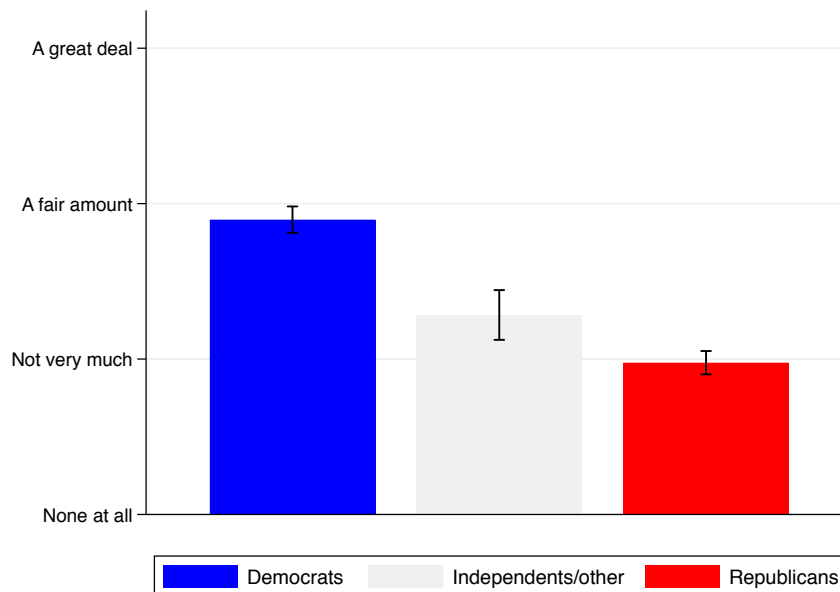
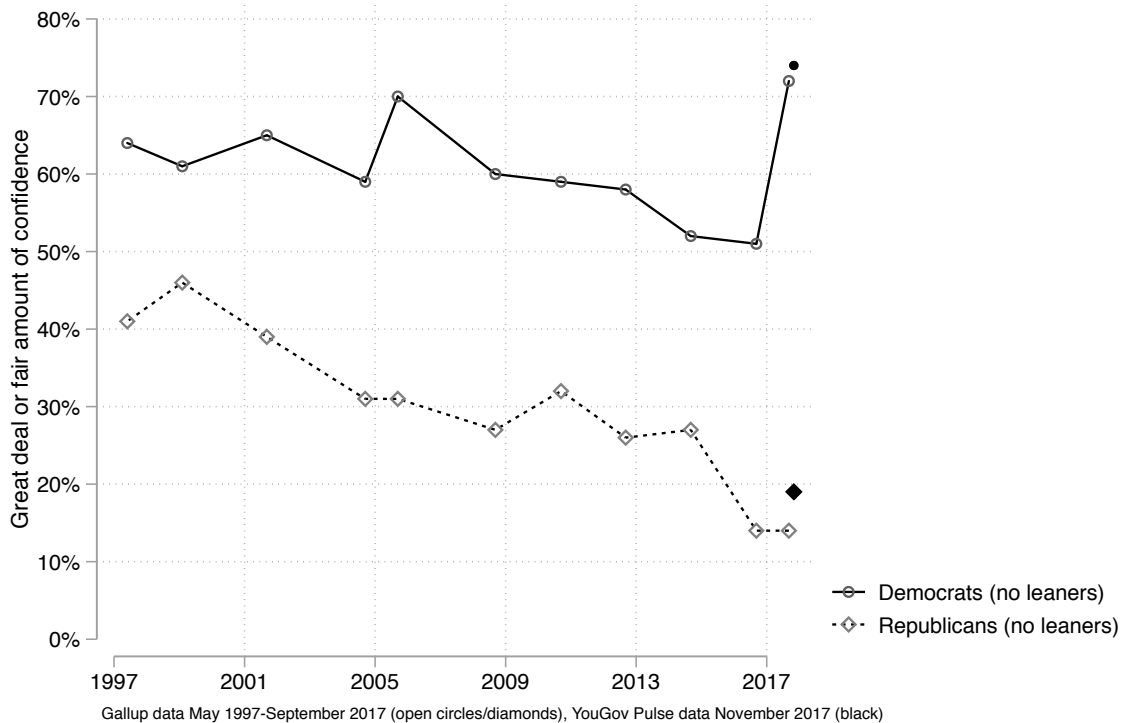


Figure 3: Trust and confidence in the press by party over time

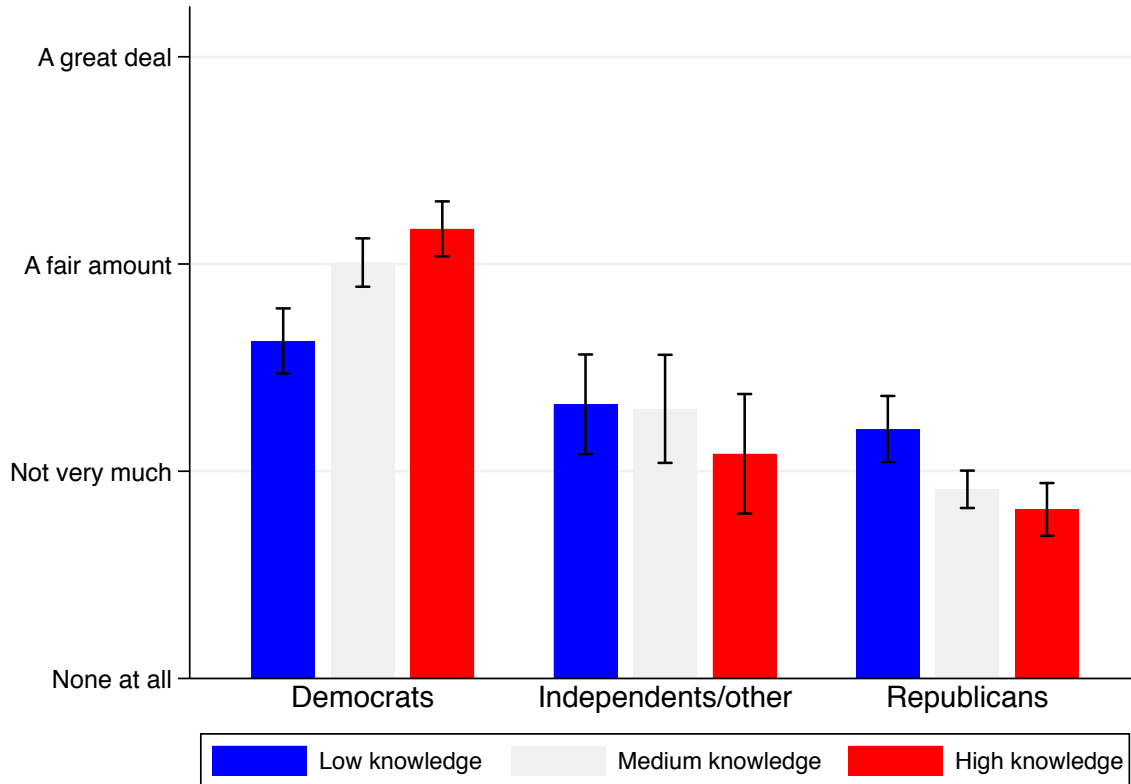


by a surge in Democratic trust and confidence in the press since President Trump’s election.

Within the parties, however, attitudes toward the media vary substantially. Perhaps most notably, the relationship between political knowledge and attitudes toward the media *reverses* between the two parties — see Figure 4 below. Democrats with high levels of political knowledge (those who score in the top 25% of Americans on an objective battery of factual questions) have more positive views of the press than those with low levels of political knowledge (approximately the bottom 25%). For Republicans, however, the relationship is precisely the opposite — those with high political knowledge have more negative views of the press than those with low political knowledge. The polarization in media attitudes between Republicans and Democrats is perhaps most stark when showing that the low-knowledge group of Republicans that has the *highest* trust and confidence in the press falls below the low-knowledge group of Democrats that has the *lowest* trust and confidence.

These differences in media attitudes by political affiliation become especially worrisome

Figure 4: Trust and confidence in the press by political knowledge



when considering more extreme forms of negative beliefs about the press. Almost half of Americans — 44% — indicate that they believe the news media fabricates stories about President Trump more than once in a while (24% “about half of the time, 14% “most of the time,” 6% “all of the time”), including 77% of Trump approvers and 74% of Republicans.

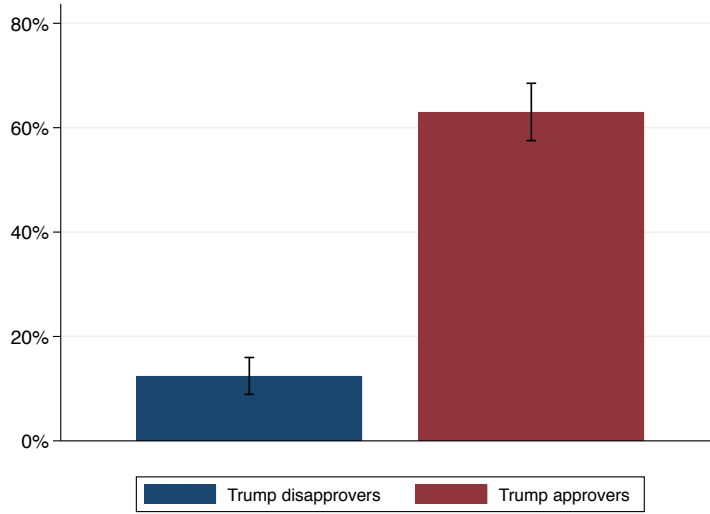
Even more strikingly, a substantial minority of Americans indicate that they agree with a claim that President Trump made in a tweet that the media are an “enemy of the people” (31%) and “keep political leaders from doing their job” (31%). Figure 5 shows that these hostile views are dramatically overrepresented among Trump supporters (63% and 64%, respectively).

Finally, and most disturbingly, one in four Americans (25%) endorses draconian limitations on press freedom that would overturn landmark Supreme Court precedent against prior



Figure 5: Extreme negative attitudes toward the media

(a) “Enemy of the American people”



(b) “Keep political leaders from doing their job”

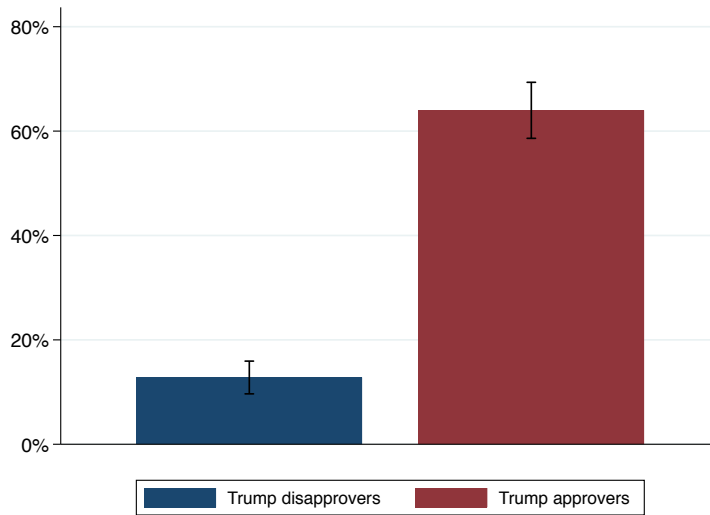
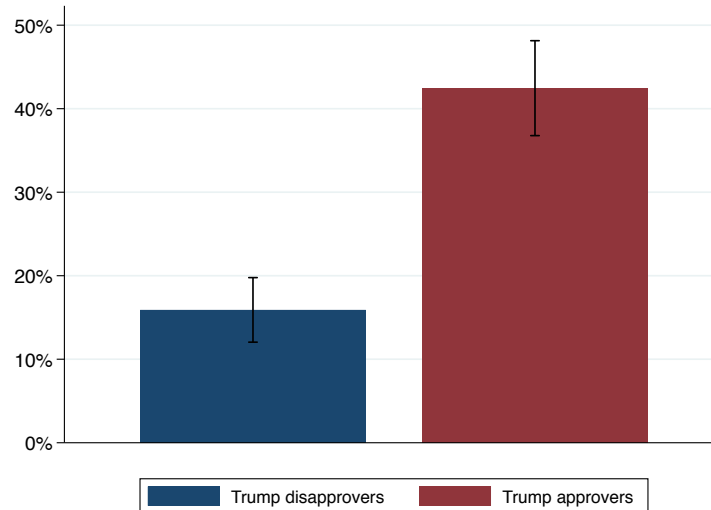


Figure 6: Government should be able to block news stories



restraint (*Near v. Minnesota*). Specifically, 25% of Americans say that the government should “be able to stop a news media outlet from publishing a story that government officials say is biased or inaccurate,” including 42% of Trump supporters (see Figure 6).

## Behavioral measures of news consumption

Survey researchers have long known that how people answer questions about their behavior may differ from their actual behavior. In many instances, researchers simply have to accept this limitation. Our survey is different in this regard. In addition to asking respondents questions about their attitudes toward the press, we are also able to directly examine what types of news and media our respondents visit on the internet (see Appendix for more details). As a result, we have a unique opportunity to compare the answers that people give in surveys about what news they consume (as well as their attitudes toward the press) with their actual behavior.

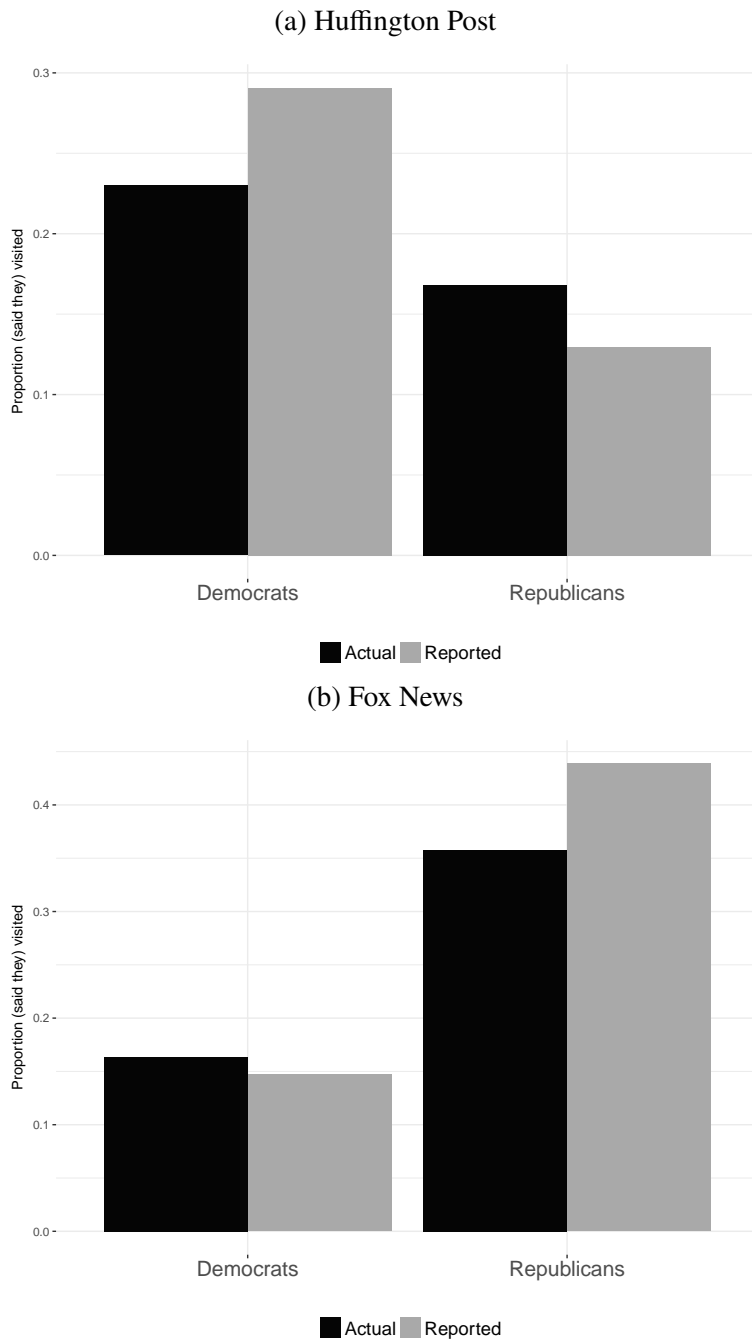
To measure the correspondence between survey measures and behavior, we first examine the correlation between self-reported use of several key online news outlets (CNN, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*) and actual browser visits to those sites. We find these quantities are correlated but not as strongly as one might expect (the correlation  $r$  between

self-reported usage and number of pages visited is only 0.18 – 0.20 for those three sites). For instance, people who self-report visiting CNN read approximately eleven more articles from the site on average during the study period of October 25–November 21, 2017 than those who do not (conditional on respondent demographics). We also observe an association between expressed levels of trust in specific news outlets (CNN, Fox, and *The New York Times*) and consumption of news from those outlets, but it is weaker than the association with self-reports ( $r = 0.10 - 0.14$ ). Conditional on respondent demographics, for example, someone who says they trust CNN a great deal consumed nine more articles on average during our study period compared to someone who says they have no trust in CNN at all.

Interestingly, we observe substantial partisan differentials in who says they consume news from ideologically aligned media outlets versus who we observe actually doing so. Figure 7 shows, for example, that Democrats seem to overreport visiting the Huffington Post and Republicans tend to underreport doing so. The converse is true for Fox News — Republicans tend to overreport visiting the Fox News website while Democrats seem to underreport. These results are consistent with the notion that fears about “echo chambers” may be overstated; people’s self-reported media habits may be more polarized due to consistency pressure than what they actually do in practice. (It is also possible, however, that this differential is the result of partisans reading attitude-consistent websites on mobile devices that we do not observe.)

Nonetheless, we do observe substantial partisan differences in attention to an important real-world story that developed during the study period — the controversy over allegations of inappropriate behavior against Roy Moore, a U.S. Senate candidate from Alabama who is the Republican nominee in a special election. Conditional on demographic characteristics, Democrats on average read 0.7 more articles about Moore in the *Washington Post*, the publication that broke the story, than Republicans did. This gap in exposure reflects ongoing partisan differences in the *Post* news audience; Republicans consumed approximately five fewer *Post* articles than Democrats in the portion of the study period we observe prior to the Moore controversy. Similarly, Republicans were three percentage points more likely to have read Breitbart coverage of the Moore controversy and on average read 0.2 more articles from the site compared to Democrats.

Figure 7: Self-reports versus consumption



## Effects of attacks on the press and media errors

In addition to the survey questions and behavioral measures discussed above, we also embedded an experiment in our study to examine how media errors and attacks on the press affect attitudes toward the media. More specifically, we randomly assigned each participant to receive one of four different articles. Respondents in the first condition (*media error*) read about how CNN had retracted a story linking a Trump associate to the Trump-Russia investigation and that three people involved in the story had left the company as a result. Participants assigned to receive a *media attack* article were given an article where President Trump attacks coverage of the Russia investigation as “fake news.” Respondents in a *Russia investigation* condition instead read an article stating that the Senate Intelligence Committee was investigating possible links between Russia and the Trump campaign and transition team. Finally, some respondents read a non-political control article entitled “Five sauces for the modern cook.”

Before fielding our survey and experiment, we preregistered our hypotheses, expectations, and research questions at Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP). Our primary expectation for the experiment was that those who received the *media error* and *media attack* conditions would have more negative attitudes toward the media (as a result of reading those articles) than those who read the *Russia investigation* article. Our preliminary analyses do not confirm this expectation. Rather, we find that respondents who were shown the *Russia investigation* article (which we designed to be more neutral) typically responded equally negatively toward the press compared to those who were shown the *media attack* and *media error* articles. A future academic paper will address these results in greater depth, but we briefly summarize them here.

The primary outcome measure in our experiment is a composite scale of media attitudes measured immediately after randomized exposure to the news articles described above. Overall, we find that exposure to the media error and Russia investigation placebo articles both measurably worsened overall attitudes toward the media relative to respondents in the control group. When we consider subscales measuring media trust, perceived media accuracy/fairness, and support for press freedom, we find that only the media attack condition reduces media trust significantly, while the Russia placebo is the only treatment to have a significant effect on the media accuracy/fairness subscale. Encouragingly, none of the treatments affect support for press freedom. Finally, it is important to note that we cannot measurably

distinguish between any of the three non-control conditions (*media error*, *media attack*, and *Russia investigation*), suggesting their effects are generally similar and that the effects of the negative media messages are not significantly greater than the effect of just mentioning the Russia investigation.

These results have several important implications. First, the mere mention of the Russia investigation in a placebo article that includes no specifics about news coverage prompts the expression of more negative views toward the media. Second, the CNN retraction and dismissal of the staff responsible for the story seems to have limited the potential damage caused by its mistake. Third, and most importantly, a direct attack by the President on the media had limited effects on perceptions of the media or support for press freedom.

When we break the data down further by presidential job approval, however, we can observe that the effects of the experiment are quite distinct. None of the messages have a measurable effect on overall media attitudes for respondents who disapprove of Trump. However, the media attack and Russia placebo measures significantly worsen media attitudes for Trump approvers (the media error message does not). These effects are strongest on the media trust and media accuracy/bias subscales.

We illustrate this finding in Figure 8, which shows how respondents' trust and confidence in the media varies by experimental condition and Trump job approval.

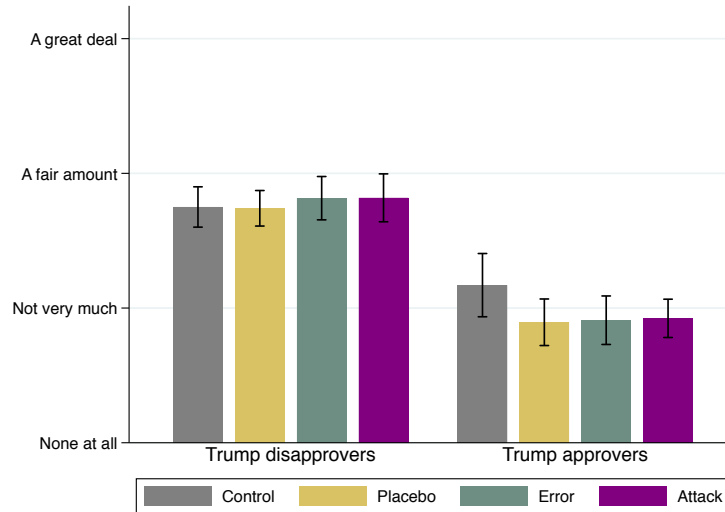
Among Trump disapprovers, views were essentially stable between conditions, but for Trump approvers, the percentage indicating they have a "fair amount" or "great deal" of trust and confidence in the media declined from 30% in the control condition to 14–16% in the *Russia investigation* and *media attack* conditions.

## Discussion

The American news media is experiencing unprecedented attacks from the highest office in the land. Politicians frequently resist unfavorable coverage, but the constant barrage of public attacks on the legitimacy of the press is unprecedented in the modern era. It is therefore essential to measure public support for the media and to assess how attitudes may have changed.

How much are Trump's attacks eroding support for a free and independent press? Encouragingly, our November 2017 survey shows that there are strong pockets of support for the media. In fact, overall trust and confidence in the media has *increased* since Trump took office. However, his attacks on the press have seemingly exacerbated partisan divisions in

Figure 8: Negative message effects on media attitudes



attitudes toward the press. At this point, Republicans have vastly more negative views of the press than do Democrats, including almost half who support restrictions on press freedom. Similarly, almost half of the Americans who approve of Trump’s job performance believe that the government should be able to block news stories it sees as biased or inaccurate. An uncomfortably large minority of both groups support the view that journalists are an enemy of the people, though a large majority rejects this terminology in the population as a whole.

To more directly examine how attacks on the media (and media errors) may affect attitudes about the media, we embedded an experiment in our study. Contrary to our expectations, exposure to experimental treatments emphasizing media errors and Trump’s “fake news” attacks did not significantly worsen attitudes toward the media (compared to people who received a neutral article about the Senate Intelligence Committee investigating possible Trump-Russia connections). However, exposure to all three articles increased respondents’ negative attitudes toward the media relative to a control condition. These effects were concentrated among Trump approvers.

Finally, our comparisons of media attitudes to behavior demonstrate that people consume news from a more diverse set of outlets than survey measures suggest. Media consumption remains polarized, however — for instance, we observe a significant partisan differential in

who read *Washington Post* coverage of the allegations against Roy Moore.

Given these results, the challenge for media outlets is to avoid being drawn into alignment with either of the parties. The surge in Democratic support for the press and attacks on the media from the White House are creating an even more politicized media landscape. Under these circumstances, journalists' role in creating a shared understanding of reality across the political divide is more important than ever.



## **Appendix: Study methodology**

This study was conducted among a representative sample of the U.S. population by the survey company YouGov, which recruits a large panel of opt-in respondents and then uses a weighting and matching algorithm to construct a final sample that mirrors the demographic composition of the U.S. population.

The survey component of the study was fielded in two parts. A total of 2,100 respondents from YouGov’s Pulse panel took part in the Wave 1 survey, which was fielded from November 2–8, 2017. This survey begins with a variety of questions about respondents’ media consumption, demographic characteristics, and political attitudes. Respondents were then randomized with equal probability to read one of four mock news articles: a story about Donald Trump attacking the media’s coverage of the Russia investigation as “fake news,” a story about CNN retracting an erroneous story about the Russia investigation, a placebo story about the Russia investigation that includes no information about the media, and an unrelated article. They were then asked about their views of the press, including their trust and confidence in the media, perceptions of press accuracy/bias, and support for press freedom.

Participants from the previous survey were then invited to take the Wave 2 survey six days after being invited to take Wave 1 (results from this survey are not included in this report but will be provided in a future academic paper). In all, 1,850 respondents completed the Wave 2 survey (88% retention rate) from November 8–18, 2017. This survey asked the same set of questions as Wave 1 measuring trust and confidence in the media, perceptions of press accuracy/bias, and support for press freedom to determine whether randomized exposure to the media attack or media error message had lasting effects on respondents’ views of the media. This study concluded with a question about how many refugees the U.S. should accept. Approximately half of respondents were then randomly selected to receive a prompt encouraging them to seek further information about this issue.

Finally, YouGov provided anonymized laptop and desktop web browsing data that was collected from study participants with their permission. These data cover October 25–November 21, 2017 (one week prior to Wave 1 through several days after Wave 2.)<sup>1</sup>

Our participants closely resemble the U.S. population in both demographics (52% female, 69% white, median age 46, 27% hold a four-year college degree or higher) and political attitudes and affiliations (35% identify as Democrats, 25% identify as Republicans; 35% approve of Donald Trump’s job performance).<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>YouGov also collects mobile browsing data from participants but coverage rates are lower and the data only include domain-level information, not specific page URLs or application usage (e.g., Facebook). As such, we do not consider mobile browsing data here. A forthcoming academic manuscript analyzing the results from this study in more detail will compare the laptop/desktop and mobile browsing data. It will also include several additional days of browsing data that were not available at the time this report was prepared.

<sup>2</sup>All descriptive results from this study are calculated using survey weights to ensure that the data mirror the U.S. population. All experimental results are analyzed without weights, however. Respondent characteristic data are provided from Wave 1 above but are virtually unchanged among Wave 2 participants.



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The Poynter Institute • 801 Third Street South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701  
727-821-9494 • [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org)