

Trust and Mistrust in Australian News Media

Authors

Terry Flew

Digital Media Research Centre
Queensland University of Technology

Uwe Dulleck

Centre for Behavioural Economics,
Society & Technology
Queensland University of Technology

Sora Park

News & Media Research Centre
University of Canberra

Caroline Fisher

News & Media Research Centre
University of Canberra

Ozan Isler

Centre for Behavioural Economics,
Society & Technology
Queensland University of Technology

This Report was supported by the Centre for Behavioural Economics, Society & Technology (BEST), Queensland University of Technology, Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology, and the News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra.

Thanks to Qualtrics and Prolific for their assistance with the surveys.

The project received Ethical Exemption from the QUT Human Research Ethics Committee, under Exemption Number 1900001143.

For further information, please contact:

Professor Terry Flew
Z1-501, Creative Industries Precinct
Musk Avenue
Kelvin Grove, Qld. 4059
Australia
Phone: +61 7 3138 8188
Email: t.flew@qut.edu.au.

Published by the BEST Centre, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

ISBN: 978-1-925553-19-2.



Trust and Mistrust in News Media by the QUT Centre for Behavioural Economics, Society & Technology is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Executive Summary

This report finds that Australians are prepared to trust the news generally, and there has not been any dramatic slump in trust in news compared to previous studies. Survey respondents also had a sophisticated understanding of different major news brands. At the same time, news organisations need to take seriously expectations of greater accountability and transparency in their news reporting, particularly where actual or potential conflicts of interests exist.

Other key findings are:

- There are relatively high levels of trust in well-established news brands, particularly the ABC and SBS, whose content is freely available to all Australian news consumers.
- Of the new news brands included in the study, only *Guardian Australia* had established a significant trust reputation comparable to that of established news brands.
- Greater engagement on social media platforms by news organisations will not in itself engender greater trust in news. Trust in news on social media platforms is considerably lower than that found on the websites of news media organisations themselves.
- To rebuild trust, news organisations need to look within their own journalism cultures, rather than focusing primarily upon giving their content greater reach through social media.
- From the audience's perspective, improving trust does not require employing more journalists. Australian news consumers are primarily seeking greater accountability and transparency around the news content that is delivered.
- Perceptions of bias and conflicts of interest are undermining trust in news, and audiences want action on this. Perceptions of bias also need to be openly addressed, and the line between fact and opinion more clearly demarcated.
- Trust in particular news brands was found to have some impact upon the behaviour of prospective house buyers, although with mixed findings.
- News organisations need to take seriously the expectations of greater public accountability that are also being directed at many public institutions, from churches and banks, to digital platforms and political parties.
- Those who say they trust news can identify ways to strengthen that trust further. Those who already mistrust news identified few remedies to regain their trust. This suggests, once trust in news is lost, it is much harder to recover.

It should be noted that this research was conducted prior to the COVID19 pandemic, which has raised new issues about trust in media, government and health experts, both in Australia and worldwide.




Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Table of Contents	4
Trust and Mistrust in Australian News Media	5
A Crisis of Trust in News Media?	5
Trust and Mistrust in News: A Review of Australian Studies	7
Finkelstein Review of Media and Media Regulation	7
Ipsos Global Advisor: Trust in the Media Survey 2019	7
Roy Morgan Research: Media Net Trust Survey 2019.....	8
Edelman Trust Barometer: Australia 2019	8
Digital News Report Australia	8
Trust in News Survey	10
October – November 2019	10
Methodology	10
Survey Findings	12
General Trust in News	12
Trust in News Brands	13
How to Improve Trust in News?	14
Trust in News Experiment	16
December 2019.....	16
Methodology	16
Treatments.....	18
Hypotheses	18
Experiment Findings	19
Hypothesis 1	19
Hypothesis 2	19
Hypothesis 3	19
Conclusions	19
References Cited	21

Trust and Mistrust in Australian News Media

Trust in news media is essential to well-functioning societies. The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has observed that “*our world is suffering from a bad case of ‘Trust Deficit Disorder’ ... people are losing faith in political establishments, polarisation is on the rise and populism is on the march*” (UN Secretary-General, 2018). In Australia, the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee has identified ‘a wealth of evidence showing a worrying decline in the level of public trust’ (Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, 2020).

This Report addresses these questions through a three-stage approach:

-  First, it has undertaken a literature review of attitudes to trust in news media among Australians and considered these alongside international findings as found in various *Digital News Reports*.
-  Second, the researchers worked with Qualtrix to undertake a survey of 1,050 Australians, balanced by levels of education, propensity to travel, and geographical location, to gauge levels of trust in news media, with particular reference to different news media brands, as well as the attributes of trusted – and mistrusted – news media.
-  Third, an experimental survey was undertaken with Prolific to determine the relationship between news stories, news brands, and consumption decisions, based around the propensity to buy a house and the expected market price.

A Crisis of Trust in News Media?

Evidence of a crisis in trust is widespread, and debates about the measures required to rebuild trust have become a central topic globally. The question of mistrust in the institutions of government, business, and the media, has also raised questions about how best to measure trust, and how to identify sources of mistrust so as to identify possible solutions.

The Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and its aftermath exposed extensive wrongdoing by banks and financial institutions in many parts of the world (O’Brien, 2019). Concerns about the crisis of trust dominated the 2019 World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, with issues raised including how declining trust can adversely affect innovation, slow economic growth, and divide societies (World Economic Forum, 2018).

Declining levels of voter turnout points to a decline in commitment to liberal democracies, which has manifested itself more recently in the rise of populist political parties, movements and leaders (Muller, 2016; Moffitt, 2016; Norris & Ingelhart, 2019). The rise of leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States. Political outcomes such as the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom have also been seen as examples of the extent to which populism has become a part of the political mainstream. Evidence of the influence of wealthy political donors over political parties, examples of a ‘revolving door’ between political leadership and careers in corporate and other lobby groups, and


a perception that major political parties are run by self-perpetuating elites, all contribute to this populist groundswell, which is unlikely to disappear soon (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018).

There now exists considerable empirical support for claims of a crisis of trust towards major social institutions. In the United States, the Gallup Confidence in Institutions survey has identified a general decline in trust in U.S. institutions, with only two institutions not experiencing a decline: the military and small business, while sharp declines in trust were recorded with the Congress, churches and organized religion, banks, the Presidency, big business, the healthcare sector, and the media (Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy, 2019). On an international scale, the Edelman Trust Barometer has found evidence of significant mistrust towards business, government, NGOs and the media, particularly in the liberal democracies, and particularly among non-elite respondents (Edelman, 2019).



Declining public trust toward social institutions (e.g. business, government, banks, media and NGOs) can adversely affect innovation, slow economic growth and divide societies.

An important dimension of this growing problem is mistrust of the media. In the U.S, trust in newspapers went from 39 per cent in 1973 to 27 per cent in 2017, and trust in television news from 36 per cent in 1996 to 24 per cent in 2017 (Gallup, 2018; Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy, 2019). Whereas once online news may have been seen as a plausible alternative to the mainstream media, trust in news on the Internet is lower than trust in other media. Gallup found trust in news on the Internet to be as low as 16 per cent in 2017 (Gallup, 2018).



Trust in news on the Internet is lower than trust in other media.

Growing concentration of ownership, events such as the 2011 News of the World phone hacking scandal, and the sense that journalists are themselves political ‘insiders’ contribute to mistrust of the media, tapped into by populist politicians such as Trump who accuse journalists and media outlets of peddling ‘fake news’. While digital and social media were once looked to as providing salvation from the mainstream media, the crises emerging at Facebook and other digital media platforms suggest that these companies are beset by many of the old problems that faced the media giants of the 20th century, as well as a set of new ones (Gillespie, 2018).

Professor Stephen Coleman, a specialist in political communication at the University of Leeds, has made the point that, trust in news is integrally linked to trust in government and social institutions more generally (Coleman, 2012). This is for two reasons. Firstly, citizens rely upon news media to accurately provide information and expose them to a diverse range of opinions, enabling them to make decisions and choices and to engage with political and civic culture based upon the widest and most accurate range of information available. Second, trust in media is about the sense that news

producers and consumers have ‘shared expectations and values that constitute an ethically coherent and culturally convincing foundation for evaluating news performance’ (Coleman, 2012, p. 37).

With the news media in profound transition, as both audiences and advertisers migrate to digital platforms and as content is increasingly distributed through social media, trust in media is increasingly bound up not only with questions of journalistic standards and professional ethics, but also with questions around whether a common baseline continues to apply around what the public expects from the media. Issues around a sustainable economic future for news in Australia have been extensively discussed by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission in its Digital Platforms Inquiry (Australian Competition & Consumer Commission, 2019). But the decline in trust in news media also presents profound challenges for the future of liberal democracies and civic culture, both in Australia (Evans et al., 2019), and more generally (Rosenfeld, 2019).

Trust and Mistrust in News: A Review of Australian Studies

The question of trust in Australian news media has been the subject of several studies, by academics and policy makers, and through public opinion surveys.

Finkelstein Review of Media and Media Regulation

The Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Media and Media Regulation (Finkelstein Review), published in 2012, found evidence of low levels of trust, and high levels of mistrust, of Australian news media. It cited several surveys from the 1990s to the present indicating public concern about sensationalism and inaccurate news reporting, journalistic bias, and unethical behaviour (Finkelstein, 2012, pp. 104-106). It identified particular concerns about bias in newspaper reporting on political issues, but also noted that public trust in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) was consistently higher than that for other news media.

The question of trust in news has been the subject of recent surveys by Ipsos Global, Roy Morgan Research, and as part of the Edelman Trust Barometer. It has also featured in the annual *Digital News Report*, conducted since 2015 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, with the Australian survey undertaken by the News and Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra.

Ipsos Global Advisor: Trust in the Media Survey 2019

The Ipsos Global Survey, published in June 2019, found that Australians had a net positive trust score (more people having ‘a great deal’ or ‘a fair amount’ of trust than ‘not very much trust’ or ‘no trust at all’) for newspapers and magazines (+12%), television and radio (+14%) and online news websites and platforms (+14%). In all cases, this was significantly above the global average, which was -5% (i.e. 5% more people mistrusted than trusted all news sources), which they developed from a 27-country survey.

At the same time, this survey also identified that the number of those trusting the news less than was previously the case was greater than those who trusted the news more. This was the case for newspapers and magazines (28% trusting news less compared to 14% trusting news more), television and radio (27% trusting news less compared to 14% trusting news more), and websites and online

platforms (26% trusting news less compared to 9% trusting news more). In all cases, the Australian figures were consistent with the global averages: -14% for newspapers and magazines vs. the global average of -16%; -13% for television and radio vs. the global average of -16%; and -9% for websites and online platforms vs. the global average of -12%.

Roy Morgan Research: Media Net Trust Survey 2019

Roy Morgan Research has undertaken a regular survey of 1200 Australians to ask which media they trust and mistrust, with the difference between trust/mistrust producing a Net Trust Score (NTS). In 2019, it found improvement in Net Trust Scores, although across all media the level of mistrust exceeded trust. For print newspapers the NTS was -1% in 2019 (-3% in 2018), magazines NTS was -1% in 2019 (-5% in 2018), television NTS was -5% in 2019 (-17% in 2018), and social media was -33% in 2019 (-49% in 2018). It found that the ABC was the most trusted news brand, with only 7 per cent of those surveyed mistrusting it, followed by the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). The most mistrusted news source was Facebook, although perceptions of Facebook as a news source improved in 2019 as compared to 2018.

Edelman Trust Barometer: Australia 2019

The Edelman Trust Barometer has found over a number of years and across a range of countries that of the four types of institutions – business, government, the media, and NGOs – there is lower trust in government and the media. It has also found that trust is lower among the general population than among what it terms the ‘informed public’ as measured by levels of education and income. In its 2019 survey, Edelman found that trust in media improved, with 40 per cent of those surveyed trusting the media, compared to 31 per cent in 2018. This places Australia in the bottom third of the 26 countries surveyed, where trust in media (40%) is lower than that for government (42%), business (52%) and NGOs (56%).

Digital News Report Australia

The *Digital News Report Australia* is an annual survey of news consumption and related issues undertaken by the News and Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra. It has been undertaken since 2015, and forms part of the global *Digital News Report* led by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford (Fisher et al., 2019; Park et al., 2018; Watkins et al., 2015, 2016, 2017). The latter report surveys digital news consumption based on a YouGov survey of over 75,000 online news consumers in 40 countries, and the *Digital News Report Australia* draws upon this methodology for surveys of about 2,000 Australian news consumers.

At a global level, mistrust in news has been consistent and slightly increasing from 24% in 2016 to 27% in 2019. On the other hand, trust in news has fluctuated across the years. Trust in news is related to news, consumers’ interest in news and their political engagement. Those who access news directly via brands rather than through incidental exposure on social media tend to have higher trust in news. Those who trust news tend to avoid news less and are less worn out by news. Those who access news via social media have lower trust in news. These trends imply that digital platforms such as social media have a negative impact on news trust.

The survey has consistently posed questions to respondents around trust in news:

- 2015 The report found 39% of respondents agreed that they “trusted most news most of the time”, but 31% disagreed, indicating a significant lack of trust in most news. At the same time, 53% agreed that they can trust the news that they use themselves most of the time.
- 2016 Trust in news was the primary focus in the 2016 survey. It found that 43% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘I think you can trust most news most of the time’, and that 26% of participants disagreed. This placed Australia below countries such as Canada, the UK and Ireland, but above the US in terms of trust in news. General trust in news (43%) was higher than trust in news organisations (39%) and trust in journalists (32%). It also examined the trend towards personalisation of news, finding that those aged 18-24 were twice as likely to be comfortable with the algorithmic selection of news through digital platforms and social media than those aged 55+. Exposure to a plurality of viewpoints was a key factor behind a preference for news from digital platforms, although concerns also existed about missing out on important information, as well as privacy concerns.
- 2017 The 2017 study showed that consumers tend to trust the news they consume (48%) more so than they trust news in general (42%). It also found that the more news sources they access, the higher the trust in both general trust in news and trust in news they consume, indicating that diversity in news sources is positively related to the trust level of the news consumer. It also found that those who rely on social media (32%) and online sources (37%) as their main source of news are less likely to trust news, whereas those who rely on traditional news sources such as newspapers (52%), TV (50%) and radio (48%) as their main source of news continue to have the highest general trust in news. It also identified news avoidance as a growing phenomenon, particularly among those who primarily access news from social media.
- 2018 The report found that general trust in news had risen from 42% to 50%, but that trust in news on social media remained low at 24%. Trust was highest in established news brands such as public broadcasters and print newspapers. Those who accessed news online brands directly via websites also had higher levels of trust in news. With subscriptions and other non-advertising-based sources of revenue becoming more important to news organisations, the Report also found that Australian news consumers who pay for news were more likely to trust news, indicating a willingness to support quality news. The Report observed that the majority of news users identified ‘poor quality’ journalism as the main type of ‘fake news’ they experienced. Given that those who said they had experienced fake news and were concerned about it were also more likely to donate to support news companies, there is an opportunity here for news organisations to continue to improve the quality of their reporting with a view to encouraging more people to pay for it.
- 2019 The 2019 *Digital News Report Australia* Report found that trust in news has fallen globally (42%), including in Australia (44%). It also showed that mistrust in social media has risen from 45% in 2018 to 49% in 2019, and trust in social media had fallen from 24% to 18%. It found news avoidance, political polarization, and the circulation of misinformation and ‘fake news’ to be major issues, it emphasized that building trust will be critical for the future of successful news brands, as news consumers who are concerned about the quality of news are more likely to pay for it, and are more likely to trust news in general.

Trust in News Survey

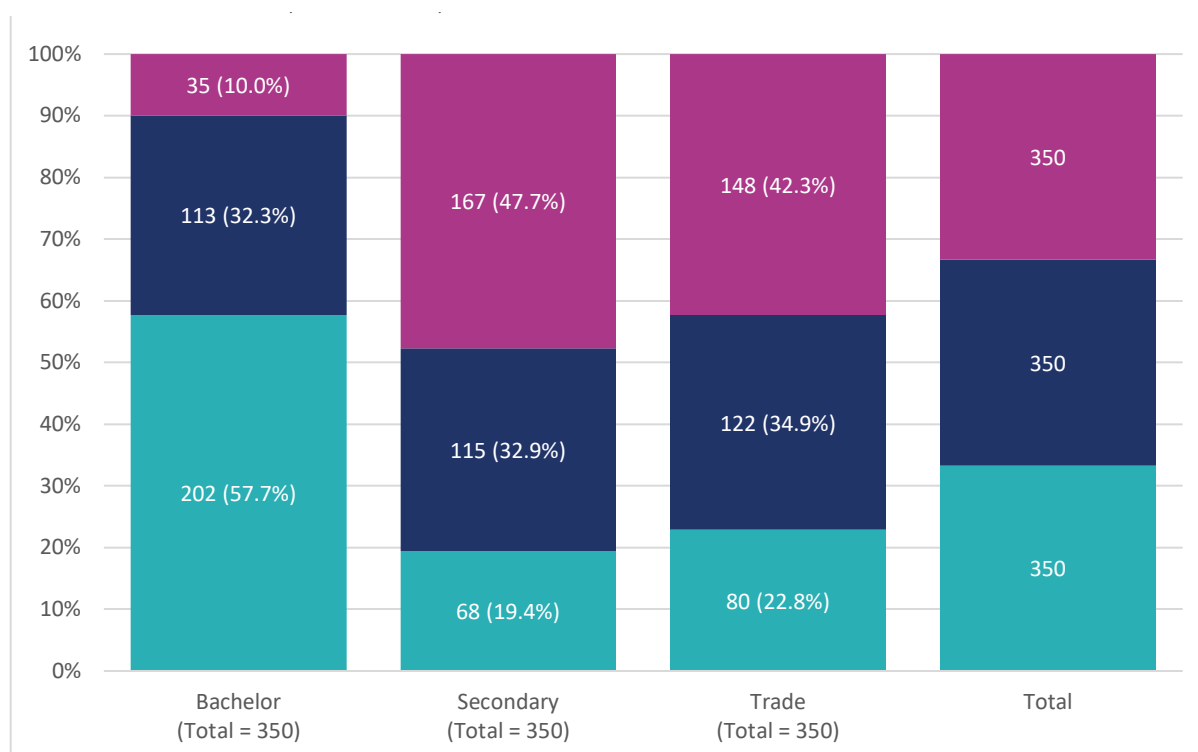
October – November 2019

Methodology

Using Qualtrics panels (www.qualtrics.com), our research team surveyed 1,050 Australians to gauge their degree of trust in news media, with reference to news brands.

Using quotas, the sample was evenly distributed among groups with different levels of education (bachelors' degree or higher; trade/technical degree or diploma; secondary/high school education for 12 years or less) and different levels of international travel experience (those who have travelled overseas in the last 12 months; those who have travelled overseas, but not in the last 12 months; and those who have never travelled overseas). Those who had a bachelor's degree or higher had travelled overseas in the last 12 months (58%) more than those with a Secondary/high school (19%) or those with Trade/Technical Certificate or Diploma (23%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Education and international travel



Note: Bachelor = bachelor's degree or higher; Secondary = high school education for 12 years or less; Trade = Trade/technical degree or diploma

Other distinctive aspects of the Trust in News Survey sample were:

Gender



Females constituted 67.1% of respondents, as compared to males 32.7% and those who preferred not to say 0.2%.

Region



Responses by city or region were: 53% capital cities; 35% regional (i.e. in significant population centres outside capital cities); and 12% rural.

State



Most respondents were from Victoria, New South Wales, or Queensland. These three states accounted for 75% of respondents, in line with the distribution of the Australian population in these states (78%).

Country of Birth

Responses by country of birth were; Australia (79%), followed by United Kingdom (4%), New Zealand (2%), Philippines (2%), and India (2%). As those born outside of Australia constituted 29 per cent of the population in 2018, this does point towards a sampling bias towards Australian-born.



Indigenous

Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people constituted 5% of respondents, as compared to 3% of the population in the 2016 Census.

Survey Findings

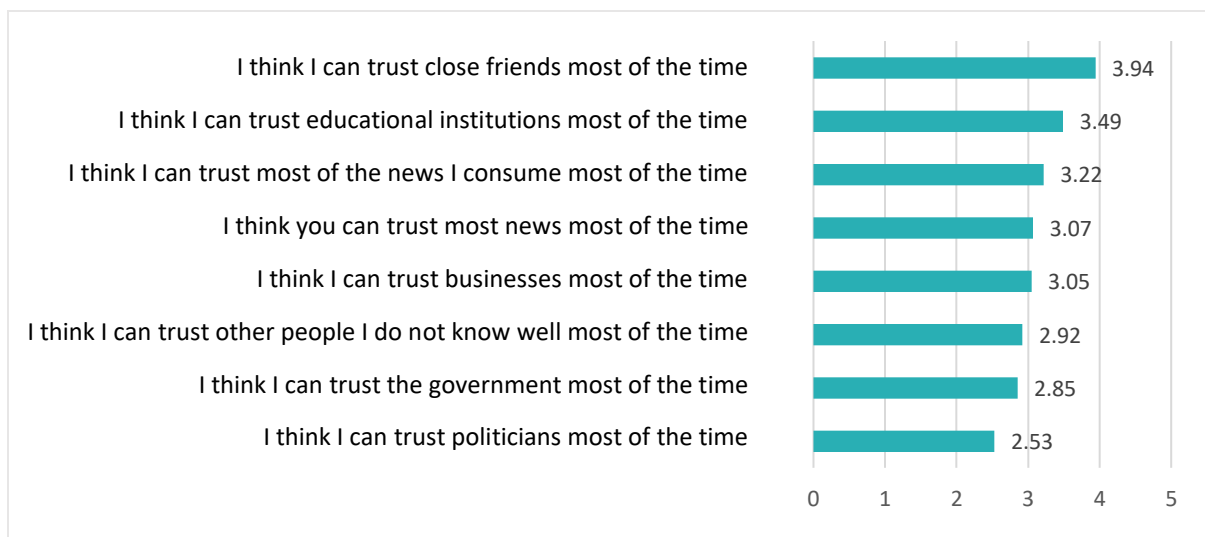
General Trust in News

Participants answered a series of questions on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = tend to disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = tend to agree, and 5 = strongly agree. Participants could also respond with Don't Know and No Opinion.

The first finding was that, in general terms, respondents tended to exhibit 'neutral' degree of trust in news on average, and a higher than 'neutral' level of trust in the news they consumed most of the time. The statement 'I think you can trust most news most of the time' had a mean response of 3.05, whereas the statement 'I think I can trust most of the news I consume most of the time' had a higher mean response of 3.22.

In terms of sources of news, we found that the highest levels of trust were in news from Australian media (3.42) as compared to overseas media (3.13). Respondents had a higher degree of trust in news from search engines and news aggregators (3.21) than from social media platforms (2.61). The latter figure is notably low, suggesting trust issues for platforms such as Facebook and Twitter with regards to news. An important question in considering trust in news is whether people who trust or mistrust news have an attitude of trust or mistrust in other social institutions. Survey respondents were asked about their trust in government, business, educational institutions and politicians, as well as trust in friends and strangers. Their responses, with responses to the separate question of trust in news, are shown below in rank order from lowest to highest (Figure 2):

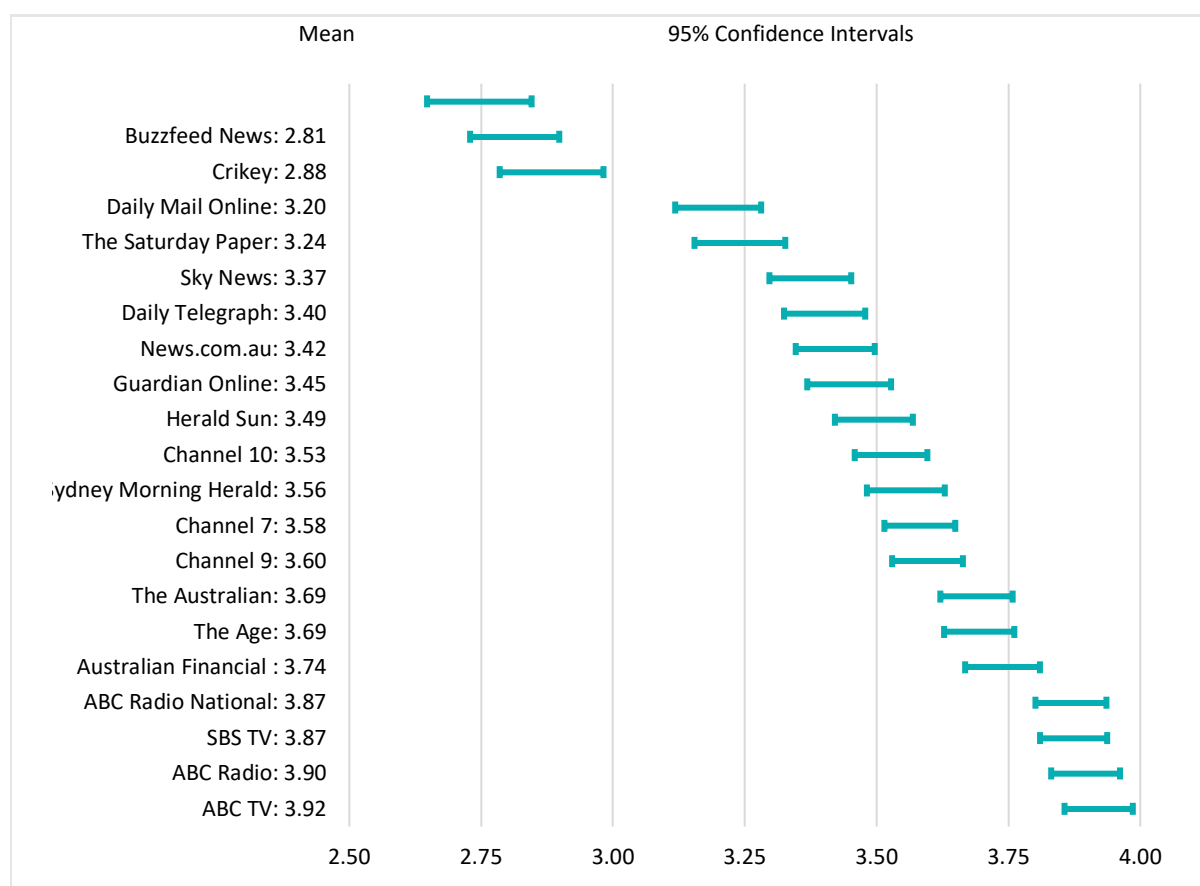
Figure 2. Trust in institutions



Trust in News Brands

Moving from questions of trust in news in general to trust in individual news brands, respondents were surveyed on their degree of trust in 22 Australian news brands. They responded on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 = not trustworthy and 5 = highly trustworthy. Responses are shown below, from the most to the least trusted (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Trust in news brands



The results clearly show a high level of trust in the public service media (ABC and SBS), followed by print publications perceived to be high quality, such as *The Age*, *Australian Financial Review* and *The Australian*. The three commercial news services sit in a close range of 3.53 – 3.60, and ‘tabloid’ newspapers such as *Herald-Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* are slightly lower than the quality mastheads.

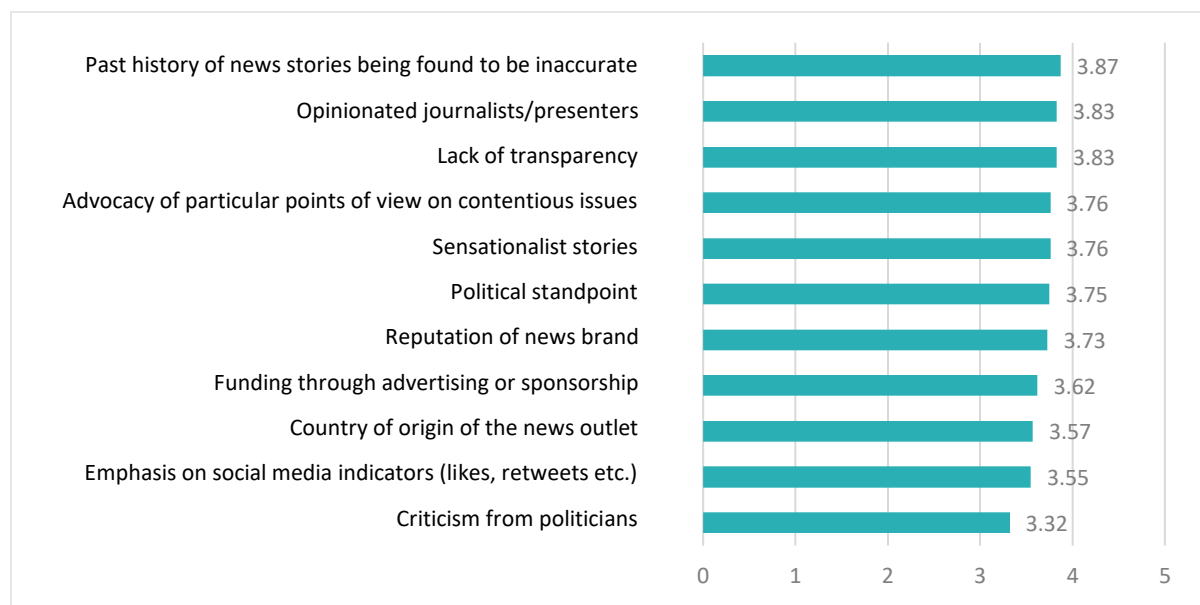
The newest entrants into the Australian news media market have the lowest trust scores, although this may relate to familiarity with the publication. *Guardian Online* has the highest trust score of 3.45, followed by *news.com.au* (3.42), *The Saturday Paper* (3.24) and *Daily Mail Online* (3.20). Somewhat discouragingly in terms of promoting diversity and new players, the lowest trust scores were for *Crikey* (2.88), *Buzzfeed News* (2.81) and *Junkee* (2.75).

When asked if they would trust news brands that they were not familiar with, far more people responded they would trust them the same (47%) or less (30%) rather than more (4%). 19% of respondents answered Don’t Know.

How to Improve Trust in News?

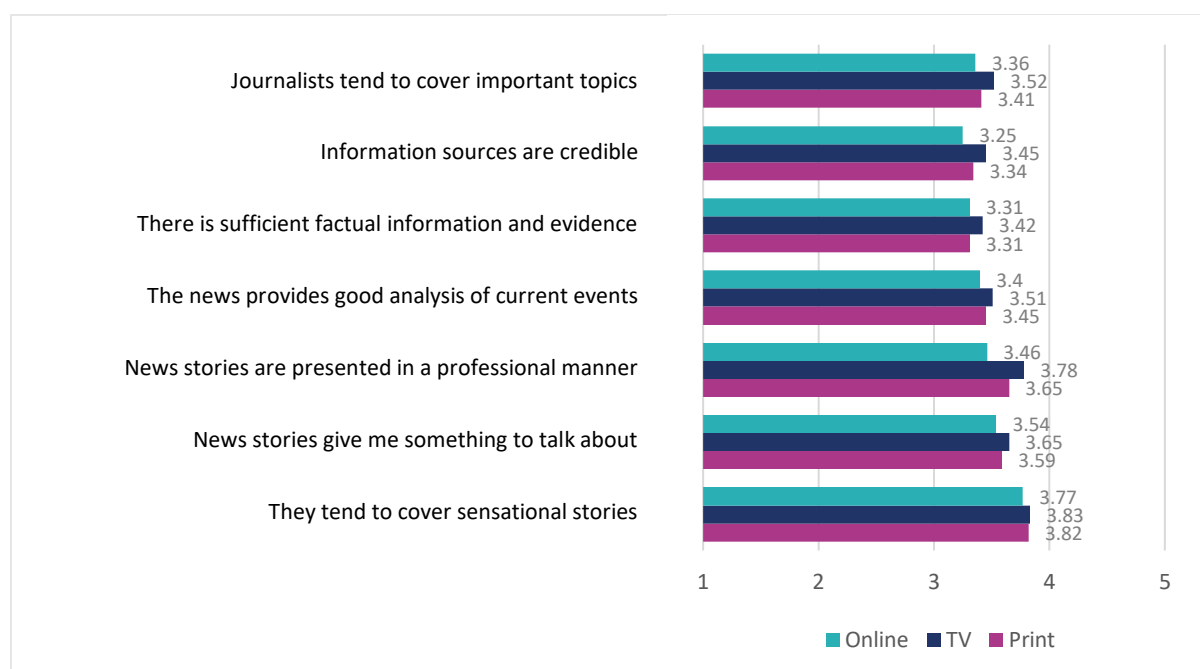
The major criticisms that people had of Australian news sources generally were that they tended towards sensationalism, the blurring of fact and opinion, reputations for past inaccuracy, and a lack of transparency in reporting (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Factors that promote mistrust in a news source



Television news had the best reputation in terms of covering important topics, credibility, and the professionalism of its presenters. At the same time, it was seen as being the most likely of the three sources (print, TV and online) to be sensationalist in its coverage of news (Figure 5).

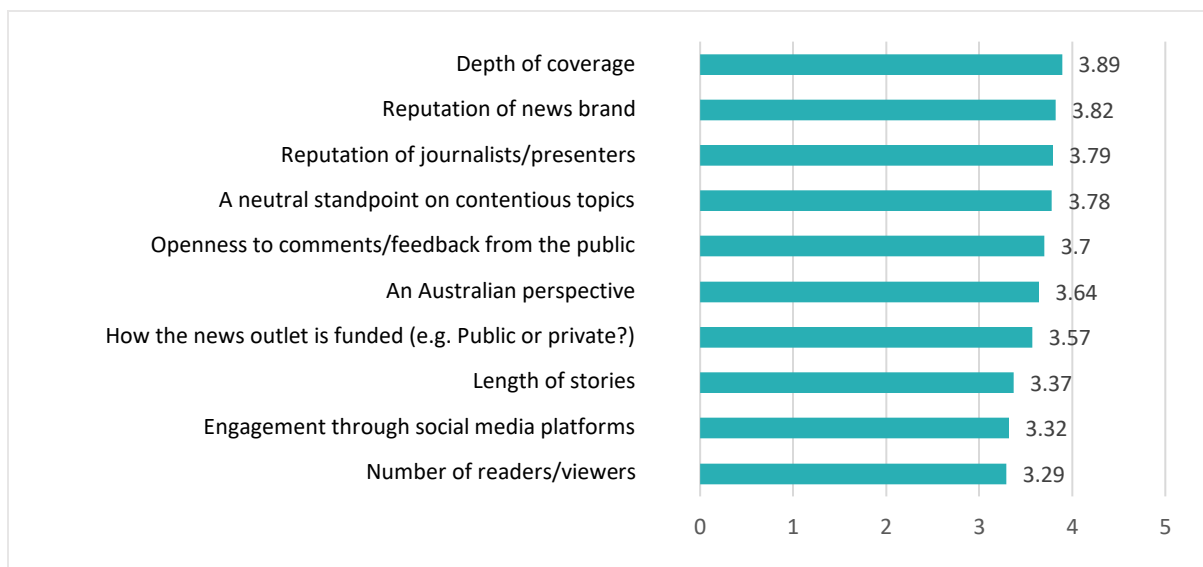
Figure 5. Reputation by type of news



The question of how to advance trust in news was approached in two ways.

First, respondents were asked about the factors that promote trust in a particular news outlet. This identified the key factors as being depth of coverage, trust in news brands, the reputation of journalists reporting on an event, and the perceived neutrality of the news outlet in question. It was notable that a news outlet being open to comments and feedback from the public was highly valued (3.70), whereas engagement through social media platforms was not (3.32). It was also apparent that popularity does not equal trustworthiness, as then number of readers/viewers of a news story was considered the least relevant factor in promoting trust in a news outlet (3.29) (Figure 6).

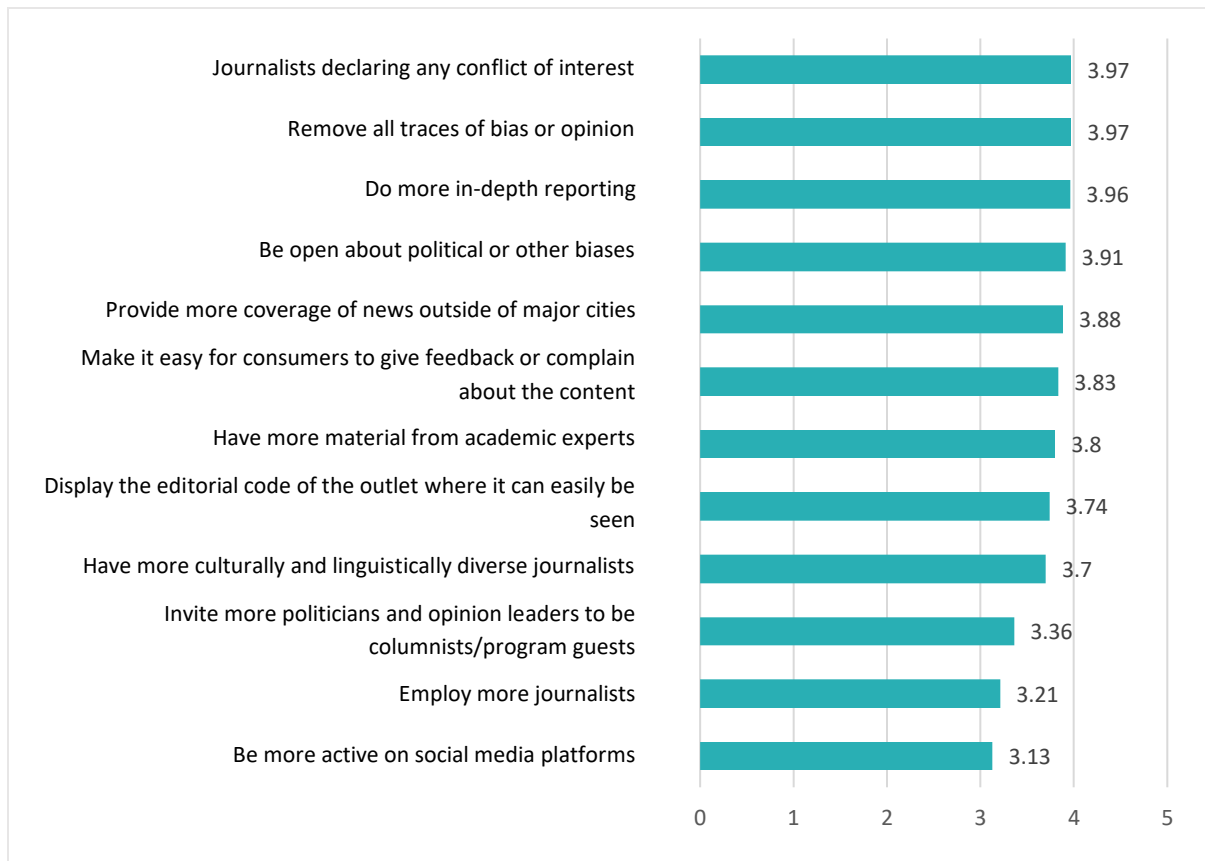
Figure 6. Factors that promote trust in news



A second question related to how respondents felt that trust in a news outlet could be improved. The major issues identified here concerned journalists declaring any conflicts of interest, removing biases or at least being open about them, and more in-depth reporting on stories. Making it easier for consumers to give feedback or make complaints about content was also an important factor, as was providing more coverage of news outside of major cities (Figure 7).

It is worth noting that the two proposals for which there was the least support in terms of increasing trust were employing more journalists and being more active on social media platforms. This would suggest that the two approaches most likely to feature in the business models of news organisations – hiring more staff and being more active across social media – are those that the Australian public sees as being least significant in increasing trust in news outlets.

Figure 7. Methods to increase in trust in news



Trust in News Experiment

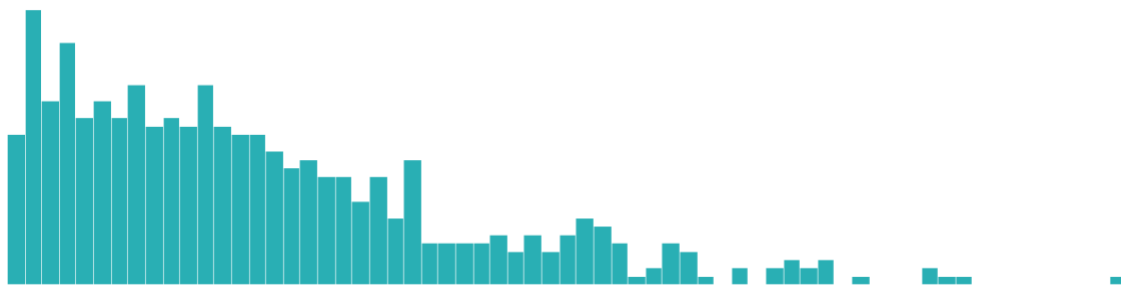
December 2019

Methodology

After studying the survey reported above, we recruited 539 Australian residents from Prolific (www.prolific.co) to participate in an economic experiment for comparing the behavioural effects of receiving news from alternative sources. Specifically, the experiment investigated how news about recent trends in the Australian housing market affect expectations of house prices and tested whether this effect is stronger when the news source is perceived to be more trustworthy.

The Trust in News Experiment sample characteristics were:

Age



Participant ages ranged from 17 to 82, with an average age of 32.

Gender



53.4% of participants were male, 45.5% were female and 1.1% chose "other".

Education



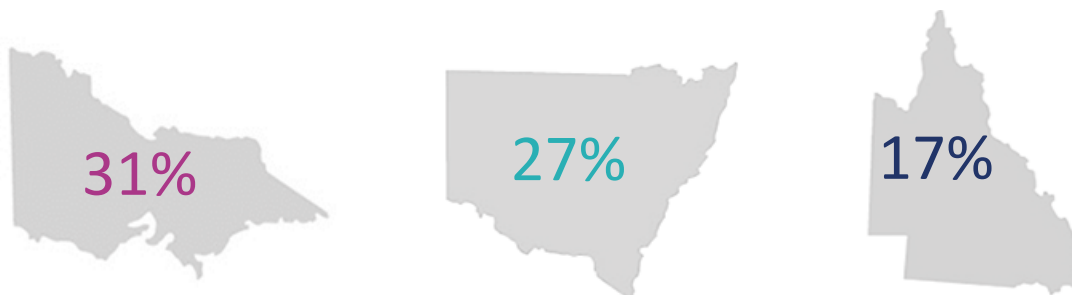
Most participants (59%) hold bachelor's degree or higher, 23% had high school degrees or less, and 18% had a trade certificate.

Region



Participants mostly lived in capital cities (67.3%) as compared to regional (27.3%) or rural home areas (5.4%).

State



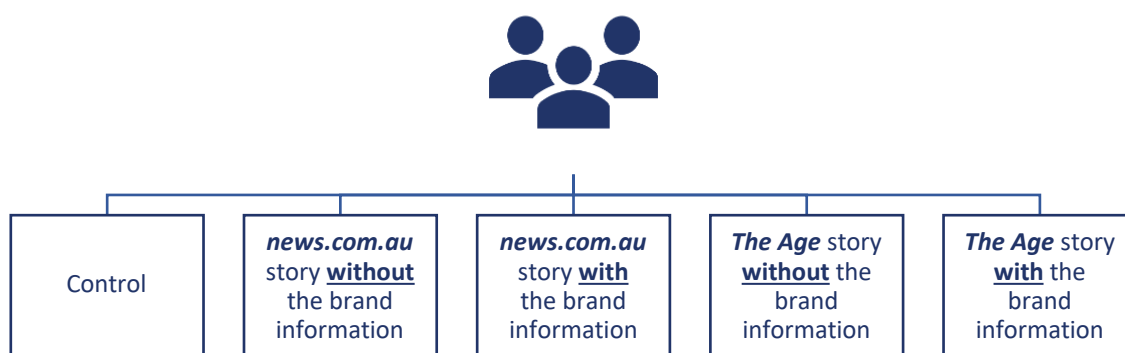
As in the trust in news survey reported above, most participants were from Victoria (31%), New South Wales (27%) or Queensland (17%).

Indigenous

Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people constituted 1% of respondents.

Treatments

Participants first read one of five randomly assigned news stories. They then saw generic advertisements based on publicly available information, including 2018 selling prices, for three apartments, in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Finally, participants were asked to predict the 2019 selling prices of these houses and they were monetarily rewarded for the accuracy of their predictions. The control condition presented a news story about interior decoration while the four experimental conditions presented news stories about the coverage of the March 2019 Australian Bureau of Statistics media release about the recent decline in the Australian housing market. Two of the four conditions included a news story by *The Age*, while other two conditions included a news story by *news.com.au*. This was because we had found in the survey described above that Australians perceived *The Age* as more trustworthy than *news.com.au*. Each news story was shown either with or without the source branding. Hence, our conditions were as follows:



Hypotheses

We expected (1) people to act on information they receive from the media to the extent that they trust the news source, and (2) branding of the news source to cue trustworthiness of the news source. We therefore expected news stories about declining Australian house prices to decrease average predicted prices compared to the control condition, and we further expected this effect to be strongest for those who know they are receiving their information from *The Age*. Accordingly, we preregistered the following three hypotheses:

H₁: *The Age* will be rated as a more trustworthy news outlet than *news.com.au*.

H₂: Reading a news article on declining Australian house prices will lead to lower average 2019 selling price predictions compared to the control condition.

H₃: The most effective condition will be “*The Age* story with brand information”, where the average predicted price will be lower than the other three experimental conditions.

Experiment Findings

Hypothesis 1

We replicated our earlier finding in the trust in news survey that *The Age* (3.62) was perceived as more trustworthy than *news.com.au* (2.96).

Hypothesis 2

As expected, reading news about the declining Australian house prices lowered expectations (i.e., average predicted 2019 prices) in each experimental condition (ranging from \$663,045 to \$676,940) as compared to the control condition (\$739,804). See Table 1.

Hypothesis 3

As predicted, the display of *The Age* brand tended to lower expectations as compared to *The Age* story without the brand (see Table 1) On the other hand, expectations in *The Age* story with branding condition (\$663,441) was not lower than those in either of the *news.com.au* conditions (\$663,045 with branding and \$663,783 without branding).

Table 1. Predicted 2019 house prices

Experimental condition	<i>n</i>	Sydney	Melbourne	Brisbane	Average*
Control (C)	109	\$768	\$985	\$466	\$740 [726,753]
<i>news.com.au</i> without brand (T1)	109	\$667	\$902	\$422	\$664 [654,674]
<i>news.com.au</i> with brand (T2)	104	\$667	\$907	\$415	\$663 [653,673]
<i>The Age</i> without brand (T3)	106	\$686	\$919	\$426	\$677 [665,689]
<i>The Age</i> with brand (T4)	111	\$669	\$910	\$412	\$663 [654,673]

Note. Prices denoted in thousands of Australian dollars. * 95% confidence intervals shown in square brackets.

Conclusions

This study of consumer attitudes to trust and mistrust of Australian news media has generated findings that have some degree of consistency with other studies, both in Australia and internationally. At the same time, there are important new findings about the relationship between news brands and trust, and the propensity of news delivered through different news brands to impact upon consumer behaviour.

One of the main messages from the survey data is that Australians are prepared to trust the news generally. There has not been the kind of dramatic slump in trust in news that has been identified in other countries by surveys such as the Edelman Trust Barometer. Survey respondents had a reasonably sophisticated understanding of different major news brands and were not inclined to generalise about the news media, or journalists, more generally.

A second finding was that of the new news brands included in the study, only *The Guardian Online* had established a significant trust reputation comparable to that of established news brands. This may reflect lack of awareness of these brands, but also reflects high levels of trust in well-established news brands, particularly the ABC and SBS, whose content is freely available to all Australian news consumers.

A third clear message is that greater engagement on social media platforms by news organisations will not in itself engender greater trust in news. Trust in news on social media platforms is considerably lower than that found on the websites of news media organisations themselves, and whatever the other benefits for news organisations from their presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and elsewhere, they do not impact upon trust in these news brands. As the relationship between digital platforms and news publishers has become more fraught in recent years – as evidenced by submissions to the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry – it would appear that news organisations need to look within their own cultures to rebuild trust, rather than focusing primarily upon giving their content greater reach through social media.

A fourth finding is that Australian news consumers are primarily seeking greater accountability and transparency around the news content that is delivered. In particular, perceptions of bias need to be openly addressed, and the line between fact and opinion more clearly demarcated. From the audience's perspective, improving trust does not require employing more journalists. Perceptions of bias and conflicts of interest are undermining trust in news, and audiences want action on this. The Australian public does not spend a lot of time worrying about the business models for how news is produced or received. Rather, it requires that news organisations take seriously expectations of greater public accountability that are also being directed at many public institutions, from churches and banks, to digital platforms and political parties. In the eyes of people who mistrust the news, there appears to be less that can be done to address their mistrust. They are sceptical of news and are likely to remain so. This implies once trust is lost, it is much harder to recover.

Fifth, our experimental study of the impact of trust upon the behaviour of potential house buyers found some evidence of trust in news brands being a factor in their decisions. We replicated our initial finding that Australians are more likely to trust a news story in *The Age* than in *news.com.au*, and found support for our prediction that negative news about house prices would adversely affect house buying decisions. We also found confirmatory evidence that effect of receiving news from a trustworthy source is stronger when the source brand information is made visible.

While this report makes an original contribution to scholarship about audience solutions to trust in news, it has its limitations. Firstly, it is limited to Australian news consumers and therefore necessarily reflects conditions within the local news media landscape which limits its generalisability. Further comparative studies would be needed in order to better test the findings. Second, we did not test for political affiliation, and its role in shaping trust in particular news brands. It may be that trust in news brands is politically polarised, as has been found in the United States, although the high levels of trust in the ABC and SBS would not appear to support this. Third, this study suggests that a distinction between 'trustees' and 'mistrusters' of social institutions more generally, and this is a topic that warrants further study. Finally, the experimental survey undertaken involves hypothetical rather than actual purchasing decision, so that the findings are suggestive but not conclusive.

References Cited

- Australian Competition & Consumer Commission. (2019). *Digital Platforms Inquiry: Final Report*. ACCC.
- Coleman, S. (2012). Believing the News: From sinking trust to atrophied efficacy. *European Journal of Communication*, 27(1), 35–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323112438806>
- Eatwell, R., & Goodwin, M. (2018). *National Populism: The revolt against liberal democracy*. Penguin.
- Edelman. (2019). *2019 Edelman Trust Barometer*. <https://www.edelman.com/trust-barometer>
- Evans, M., Halupka, M., & Stokes, G. (2019). Trust and Democracy in Australia. In *From Turnbull to Morrison: Understanding the Trust Divide*. Melbourne University Press.
- Finkelstein, R., & Ricketson, M. (2012). *Report of the Independent Inquiry into Media and Media Regulation*. Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Fisher, C., Park, S., Lee, J. Y., Fuller, G., & Sang, Y. (2019). *Digital News Report: Australia 2019*. News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra.
- Gallup. (2018). *Confidence in Institutions*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>
- Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media*. Harvard University Press.
- Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy. (2019). *Crisis in Democracy: Renewing Trust in America* (Aspen Institute). <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/crisis-in-democracy-renewing-trust-in-america>
- Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019). *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge University Press.
- O'Brien, J. (2019). *Trust, Accountability and Purpose: The Regulation of Corporate Governance*. Cambridge University Press.
- Park, S., Fisher, C., Fuller, G., & Lee, J. Y. (2018). *Digital News Report: Australia 2018*. News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra.
- Rosenfeld, S. (2019). *Democracy and Truth: A Short History*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Watkins, J., Park, S., Blood, R. W., Deas, M., Dunne Breen, M., Fisher, C., Fuller, G., Jee, Y. L., Papandrea, F., & Ricketson, M. (2016). *Digital news report: Australia 2016*. News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. http://www.presscouncil.org.au/uploads/52321/ufiles/Fact_Sheets/digital-news-report-australia-2016.pdf
- Watkins, J., Park, S., Blood, R. W., Dunne Breen, M., Fuller, G., Papandrea, F., & Ricketson, M. (2015). *Digital news report: Australia 2015*. News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. <http://apo.org.au/system/files/55257/apo-nid55257-42606.pdf>
- Watkins, J., Park, S., Fisher, C., Blood, W., Fuller, G., Haussegger, V., Jensen, M., Lee, J. Y., & Papandrea, F. (2017). *Digital News Report: Australia 2017*. News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra.
- World Economic Forum. (2018). *Our Shared Digital Future: Building an Inclusive, Trustworthy and Sustainable Digital Society*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/press/2018/12/world-economic-forum-report-addresses-crisis-of-trust-slowing-growth-in-our-digital-world/>