

No Comment:

The Importance of Transparency in American Journalism

A Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism research-based examination of the growing refusal by public officials and organizations to engage with the press, the public's evolving perceptions, and what newsrooms can do about it.

May 2026

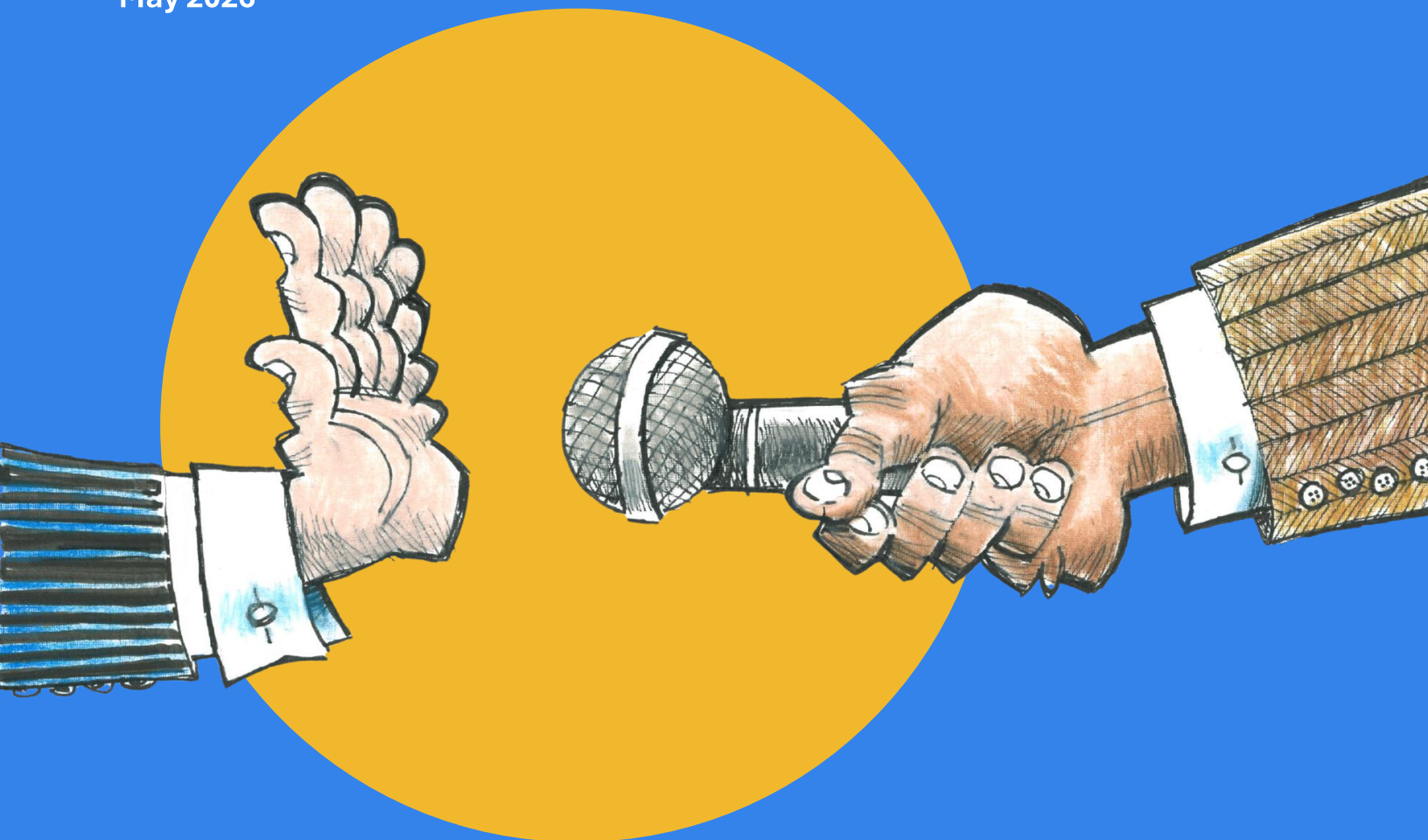


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Executive Summary

The relationship between American newsmakers, the American press, and the consumer is breaking.

It is not a new fracture, but this research confirms it has reached a critical and increasingly visible stage. The issue is being felt by journalists on the front lines of daily coverage and is increasingly recognized by the news-consuming public.

This study from the Reynolds Journalism Institute (RJI), conducted in partnership with the SmithGeiger Group in the first three months of 2026, examines the magnitude and meaning of source hostility and silence in American journalism today. The research surveyed two distinct groups:

1. More than **1,000 members of the American news-consuming public** aged 18 to 64
2. more than **200 current and former journalism** industry professionals

Together, their responses paint a picture of a press ecosystem under sustained strain from those who are expected to be accountable to it.

The findings address three interconnected questions:

1

How hostile toward the press have public officials and organizations become?

2

What happens to public trust and story credibility when a newsmaker refuses to respond?

3

And what can the journalism industry do, in its practices, its language, and its transparency, to maintain credibility and trust in a climate of increasing silence?



Executive Summary

Key Findings:

Across both the general public and journalism professionals, several findings stand out as essential to understanding the current moment:

Source refusal is now the norm, not the exception.

76% of journalism professionals report having experienced a refusal to speak from a politician, government official, or organization in the past three years. Among current reporters specifically, that number rises to nine in ten.

The public is watching

62% of general news consumers say hostility toward the press from public figures and organizations has increased over the past five years. Among journalism professionals, that figure rises to 95%, a gap that speaks to the severity of the problem for those living it and the degree to which it is beginning to penetrate public awareness.

The public interprets “no comment” primarily as an act of concealment

When news consumers see or hear the phrase in a news story, **60%** will question the story in some way with **39%** believing the person or organization is hiding something, and **35%** saying it makes them trust the official less. Most importantly **20%** of consumers will trust a story less if it has “no comment” featured.

The concern for our democracy is real, and generationally inflected.

60% of the general public and **98%** of journalism professionals see increasing hostility toward the press as a threat to democracy. Among younger adults, that civic concern is especially pronounced: **68%** of those aged 18 to 24 see it as a threat. The impacts of no comment and broader press hostility are clear.

Transparency is the antidote that both audiences and journalists want.

73% of the public and **84%** of industry professionals agree that journalists should be more transparent about their efforts to reach sources. Importantly, this research evaluated different transparency approaches specifically in outreach to newsmakers. Among the tested transparency mechanisms, a verifiable outreach log showing when, how, and whom a reporter contacted was the public’s and professionals preferred credibility tool.

How the story is written matters.

Video testing demonstrated that framing a non-response as “the story will be updated when we hear back” outperforms the traditional “no comment” formulation on every credibility measure, including favorability, perceived transparency, and belief in reporter effort. This finding is consistent and emerges regardless of the order in which audiences encountered the two versions.

“It’s clear that saying someone ‘had no comment’ doesn’t cut it anymore,” said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI. “We need a new approach that shows the public how hard reporters are working to collect the facts.”
— **Randy Picht, Reynolds Journalism Institute**

RJI and SmithGeiger present these findings as both a diagnostic and a guide. The seriousness and impact documented here is real but so is the path forward.

Purpose

Understanding Source Hostility And Silence

The Reynolds Journalism Institute has tracked the health of American journalism across multiple dimensions for years. Its 2024 study, *The Burnout Crisis in Journalism*, documented the internal toll that a changing and increasingly hostile news environment is taking on the people who work in the industry. That research made clear that the challenges facing American journalism were not only economic or technological, they were relational and manageable.

This study takes the understanding of sentiments and feelings towards the press a step further. Where the burnout research asked what journalists were feeling, this research asks what journalists are experiencing and what the public sees when they watch journalists navigate those experiences. The subject is specifically the growing refusal by public officials, government agencies, politicians, and organizations to speak to the press, answer questions, or engage with the accountability function that journalism serves in a democratic society. The impact is clear, but most importantly this research also focuses on potential solutions.

"Journalists have been relying on the same 'no comment' phrasing for decades without knowing much about how audiences were perceiving that information. We wanted to change that, and we found pretty definitively that you can't separate the 'no comment' crisis from the trust and hostility crises that journalists are dealing with every day. That means finding a way to communicate this information to the public is even more important than we realized."

— Randy Picht, Reynolds Journalism Institute

The decision to conduct this research grew directly from conversations with newsroom leaders and working journalists across the country who described a substantive shift in the nature of news source relationships. The feeling is that silence is becoming a strategy. Non-responses were being used not merely to avoid difficult questions but to potentially delegitimize the entire act of asking. Hostility is being deployed as a communication tool, and it is making reporting harder. The sentiment is it impacts public trust, and research is showing trust erosion among news consumers in America. The question was how much, and what can be done about it?

RJI and SmithGeiger designed this study to test several things simultaneously:

The **scope and prevalence of source refusals** as experienced by journalism professionals

The degree to which the general public perceives and responds to **official hostility toward the press**

The **impact of non-responses on story credibility and trust** in both sources and reporters

The **value of specific transparency practices** that newsrooms can adopt to maintain their standing with audiences even when sources refuse to cooperate.

The research also tested, for the first time in this context, two specific journalistic framings of source non-response through actual video stimuli, giving us behavioral along with hypothetical approaches in understanding what works and what does not in communicating accountability and transparency to news audiences.

Methodology

RJI and SmithGeiger conducted this research from **January to March 2026** using two distinct survey samples, each designed to answer different but complementary question sets about source hostility and silence in American journalism.

The General Public Sample

The public survey was conducted with 1,021 adults between the ages of 18 and 64 who consume news at least once per week on any platform. The sample was designed to be nationally representative across gender, age, and geography, with specific demographic targets set for race and ethnicity to reflect U.S. Census proportions. Respondents were recruited through national online panels and completed the survey in approximately 20 minutes.

The public sample was designed to capture the full spectrum of news consumption habits and political orientations. The resulting sample is roughly gender-balanced (49% male, 50% female, 1% non-binary), spans all five age cohorts from 18 to 64 with approximately equal representation, and includes respondents from all four U.S. Census regions. Politically, the sample spans the full spectrum, with meaningful representation of Conservative Republicans, Moderate Republicans, Independents, Moderate Democrats, and Progressive Democrats, allowing for robust cross-tabulation of findings by political affiliation.

All public-sample respondents are full completes. Quality control measures were employed throughout, including attention check questions and logic validation.

The Industry Sample

The industry survey was conducted with 201 current and former journalism professionals completing a meaningful portion of the study. It includes reporters, editors, news managers, general managers, digital and print journalists, journalism faculty, and journalism students. Outreach for the industry sample included direct contact through the Reynolds Journalism Institute's professional networks, the University of Missouri School of Journalism alumni database, journalism professional organizations, and direct email outreach to newsrooms nationwide.

Partial completes from the industry sample were retained in this analysis. Because recruitment of journalism professionals is substantially more difficult than general panel recruitment, and because the industry respondents who did not complete the full survey still provided valuable data on the first portions of the instrument, we made the decision, consistent with best practices for professional samples in applied research, to retain these respondents for questions they did answer. Of the 201 industry respondents, 92 are full completes and 108 are partial completes. Where industry specific data is reported, the effective sample size for each question is noted.

The industry sample completed the State of Journalism section at full participation, with both completes and partials showing nearly identical response patterns on the questions they both answered, validating the decision to combine them for those measures.



The Video Test

In addition to the attitudinal survey, this study employed a behavioral credibility test using actual news video stimuli. Respondents in the public sample were shown two short news videos sourced from local television broadcasts around the country. Video A used the standard journalistic formulation of source non-response (a variant of “no comment”) while Video B used a proactive accountability framing, communicating that the reporter would update the story when and if the source responded. All respondents saw both videos, with exposure order randomized to allow for the detection of order effects.



Open-End Qualitative Component

Throughout the survey, respondents in both samples were invited to respond to AI-moderated open-end questions probing the reasoning behind their quantitative answers. These qualitative responses, collected across eight question batteries covering news coverage challenges, trust in journalism, perceptions of hostility, feelings about source refusals, and advice for both journalists and public figures, produced several thousand verbatim responses. Direct quotations from those responses appear throughout this report to texture and ground the quantitative findings in respondents' own words.

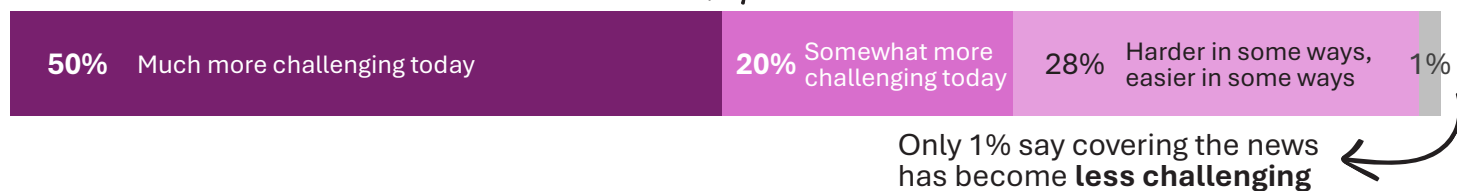
The State Of Journalism In 2026

Before examining the specific dynamics of source hostility and non-response, this study sought to establish the broader professional and emotional environment in which American journalism is operating. What the data reveals is a profession that is simultaneously proud of its purpose and burdened by its circumstances, alongside a public that is more divided in its assessment of journalism than at any recent point in the modern era of measurement.

Covering the News Has Gotten Harder

Among journalism industry professionals, the verdict on the current state of news coverage is nearly unambiguous. Seventy percent say that covering the news has become more challenging since they began their careers; 50% describe it as “much more challenging” today.

70% say covering news is **more challenging**



The open-end responses make clear this is not simple professional dissatisfaction. Journalists described a shifting working environment. The closing of communication, and as a result accountability to the public is consistently brought up by industry professionals. As one journalism professional put it: *“State level authorities seem to just ignore reporters most of the time, but sometimes they are openly belligerent. Both the current and former mayors of Houston have been aggressively hostile - on camera and behind the scenes - to local reporters covering legitimate stories that served the public interest.”* Another described the current moment with particular precision: *“It is frustrating that politicians are in a position to ignore us.”*

Officials have also built alternative distribution channels that make answering to the press and to journalists seem optional rather than necessary. *“I think largely it's due to the proliferation of alternative methods of media that are biased and somewhat poisoning the proverbial well,”* one professional wrote regarding the cause of declining trust. At the end of the day many perceive it as about control; *“I think office holders want to control the narrative.”* This issue isn't new but the shifting perceptions of the public regarding news sources and its impact on trust is new and moving in the wrong direction for the industry.



No Comment

What It Means, What It Does, What To Do About It

At the center of this study is a phrase that appears in news stories every day and that almost everyone has encountered: “no comment.” In its many variations, including declined to respond, did not return messages, and had no comment when reached, **this phrase is the journalistic record of the moment when a source may be choosing silence over accountability.** Understanding what the public thinks when they see it is essential to understanding how journalism can do its job even when its sources are not cooperating.

What “No Comment” Means to News Consumers

The study asked respondents directly what they think and feel when they see or hear “no comment” in a news story. The responses reveal a public that interprets the phrase primarily through the lens of suspicion, but that contains significant segments with very different interpretive frames. The dominant reaction is distrust of the source. These are the strongest responses in the battery, and they represent the instinctive accountability reading that journalists might hope the phrase would produce.

39% say their first interpretation is that the person or organization is **hiding something**

35% it makes them **trust the official less**

These open-end responses confirm the quantitative pattern and give it texture. When asked what “no comment” means to them, respondents produced language that was striking in its consistency. For consumers, “no comment” may not be a neutral placeholder but rather a verdict.

“It usually means they’re avoiding the question, hiding information, or unwilling to provide answers.”

“It means they feel pressure from the question, more to lose than gain from answering.”

“That the press wanted the truth and the politician chose not to give it.”

“That [no comment] means the reporter did a good job when an official says no comment. They know they are in the wrong.”

But the normalization response is not small. Twenty-five percent of news consumers say “no comment” is a standard response that doesn’t mean much. And in fact, 20% say it makes them trust the story less, penalizing the reporter rather than the source. Some respondents offered more contextual readings that reflect genuine ambiguity:

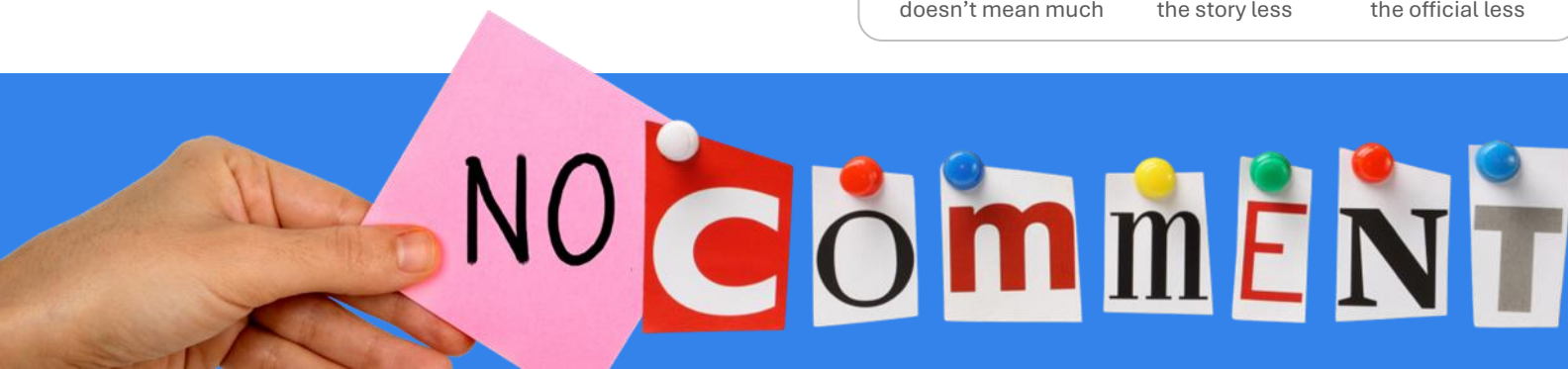
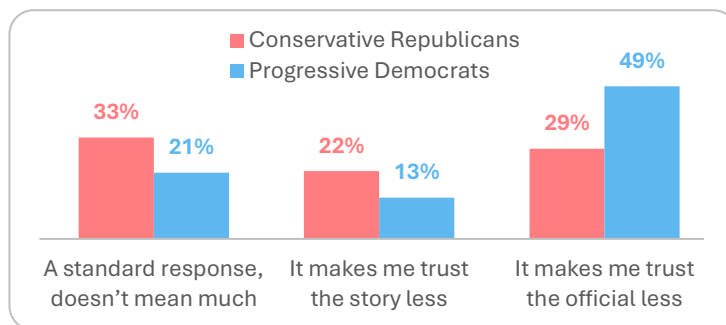
“Depends on the situation or the question.”

“Not ready to speak about it.”

“Either not able to speak due to security, an ongoing investigation, etc.”

Overall, it is clear that many consumers are waiting to be given a reason to care and trust, and as the transparency findings will show, specific framing choices can influence and positively impact their perceptions of reporting and reporters.

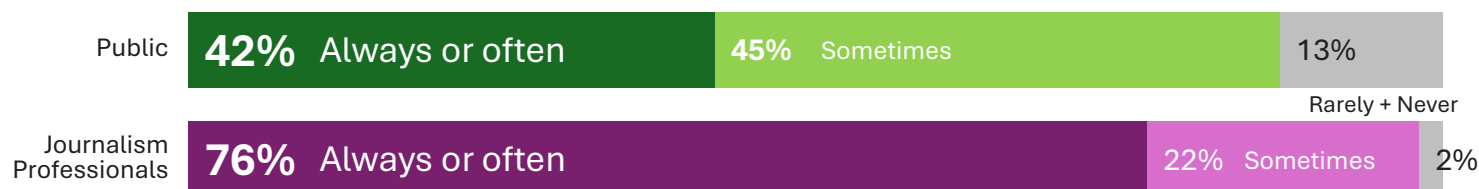
The practical implication is profound: the same phrase lands entirely differently depending on a reader’s political identity. A non-response from a public official, reported without additional context, can serve as a political Rorschach test. What is most often missing is the contextual framing: the evidence of effort, the commitment to follow up, the record of outreach, all of which can shift the evaluation from “What party is asking and what party is refusing?” to “Did the reporter do the work?”



No Comment

How Often Does the Public Notice?

Notice phrases like “no comment” or “declined to respond” in news stories

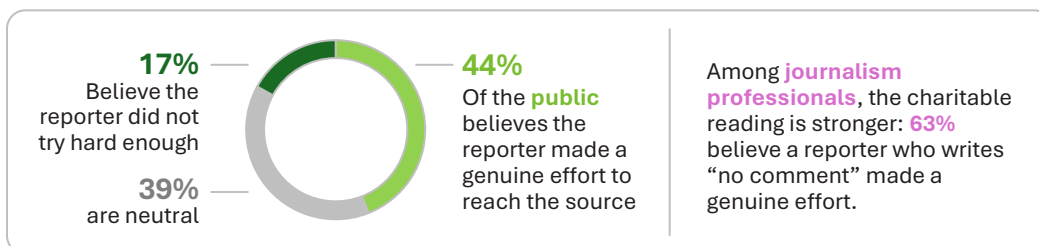


This visibility finding establishes that the “no comment” moment is not invisible to the audience. When a source refuses to respond or has “no comment” and a journalist records that, the public is paying attention. The question, as the remainder of the study explored, is whether journalism is managing that moment in a way that maximizes accountability and credibility?

Does the Public Believe Reporters Are Trying?

One of the most potentially consequential questions in the study asked news consumers what they believe about a reporter’s effort level when a story includes a non-response from a source. The results reveal a cautiously forgiving public that gives reporters the benefit of the doubt, though not unconditionally.

When a reporter writes simply that a source “had no comment,”



The open-end responses reveal a more complicated picture behind the neutral and skeptical groups. Among those who doubt reporter effort, the reasoning is both specific and, from a solutions standpoint, addressable:

“I would like to know how hard they tried to get the information.”

“Stories often feel one-sided because they lack direct quotes or counter-arguments from the individuals involved, making the reporting seem incomplete.”

“I believe some reporters don't bother due to time constraints or their story appears to lean to one side or the other, which is what they want.”

That last response names the specific concern that the transparency practices in this study are positioned to counter. The doubt is not that reporting is hard. It is that **the audience has no way to distinguish diligent effort from insufficient effort**; no-comment language, by itself, provides no evidence either way.

When the reporter commits to following up by writing that the story “will be updated” when a response is received, **credibility improves across the board.**

The “will update” commitment functions as a forward-looking accountability pledge that the simple “no comment” phrase does not provide.

53%

believe the reporter will follow through

vs. 15% who are skeptical

No Comment

When Is Refusing to Respond Acceptable?

The study asked the public directly: how often is it acceptable for politicians, public figures, and organizations to ignore or refuse to respond to questions from legitimate journalists? The response should give pause to anyone who believes public sentiment unambiguously supports press access.

22% of the **general public** say it is never acceptable for a public official to refuse to answer a journalist's questions

21% say it is always or often acceptable

33% say it is sometimes acceptable

Among those who said non-refusal is sometimes or often acceptable, the cited reasons were consistent and, importantly, bounded: active legal proceedings, classified information, national security concerns, and ongoing investigations.

79% Among **journalism professionals** say official non-response is rarely or never acceptable

2% say it is always or often acceptable

Among journalism professionals, the tolerance for refusal is substantially lower.

The industry's own framing of the acceptable exceptions closely mirrors the public's:

"Certain military matters, ongoing legal proceedings, police investigations, etc. I'm not saying that we, the media, should not ask. But I believe that's a reason that at a certain point we accept someone cannot speak."

One industry respondent captured the professional consensus:

"I changed my answer: it is never okay. Now that I think it through, even if something is unethically reported, public figures should respond to say that."

Several noted the asymmetry of power that makes refusal especially corrosive:

"They always have the right to ignore or refuse - it's their decision and the public can react accordingly. But it's rarely appropriate imo [in my opinion]."

Refusals are rarely or never acceptable

23%

**Conservative
Republicans**

**Progressive
Democrats**

71%

Independents **50%**

The political dimension of this finding has direct operational implications. This distribution means that a significant portion of the Republican audience for any given news story has already decided, that an official's refusal to speak is a legitimate choice. Meeting that audience requires something more than recording the refusal, it requires making the effort to seek a response visible and verifiable. The benefit is that all audiences appreciate this approach.

Bias as Justification for Silence

The study tested a specific and increasingly prevalent defense of non-response: the argument that officials are entitled to refuse to speak to news organizations they perceive as politically biased against them. This is the explicit logic behind numerous high-profile media boycotts by.

The public is genuinely ambivalent about this argument. When asked whether it is acceptable for a politician to refuse to respond to questions from a news organization they perceive as having a strong political bias, 51% say it is sometimes, often, or always acceptable, 39% say it is rarely or never acceptable, and 10% are unsure.

Trust in Journalism

A Deeply Divided Public

Perhaps no finding in this study is more important to understand than the state of public trust in journalism.

33%

of the public reports having **minimal or no trust** in journalism and reporting

40%

of the public holds **only “some trust”**

28%

Express a **high level of trust** or complete trust

The public open-end responses on why trust is low reveal a sense of how perception is creating a reality for consumers. Regardless of political perception, audiences from one side of the aisle or the other see issues:

“Too many leftist journalists who are too liberal-to-neutral about what’s going on.”

“All liberal journalists like to twist and make up stories for entrapment just to stir division.”

“I think it is because oligarchs are buying up news stations both local and national.”

“News networks are being bought by right-wing billionaires.”

“They [THE PRESS] lie and don’t always tell the truth and leave important information put.”
– **News Consumer**

The common thread regardless of political spectrum is a shared structural suspicion: that **journalism has been shaped by interests other than the public’s**. While the specific named interest differs, the underlying distrust is the same.

A third cluster in the trust open-ends is less ideological and more experiential. Consumers are expressing a generalized sense of information anxiety, a sense that the news coverage they are receiving is incomplete in ways they cannot quite name but persistently feel.

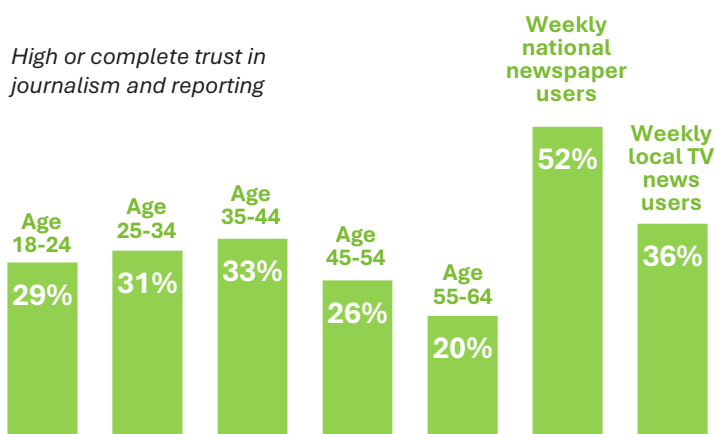
“I feel like I’m not getting the whole story.”

“Everyone spins the news to fit their nerve so it’s not always the full truth.”

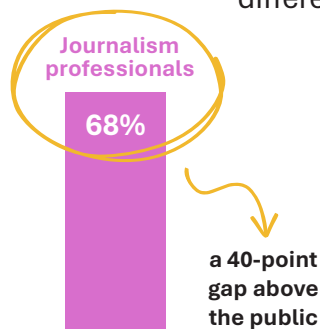
“They’re not telling the full truth about anything. The things we should know about are being withheld.”

While there is a sense of trust concern overall, the level of trust in reporting varies across groups.

High or complete trust in journalism and reporting



By comparison, journalism professionals tell a dramatically different story about their own trust.



This professional confidence in the craft is not naïve though: **96% of Journalism professionals** feel that over the past 5 years public trust in reporting and journalism has decreased (74% feel it has decreased significantly).

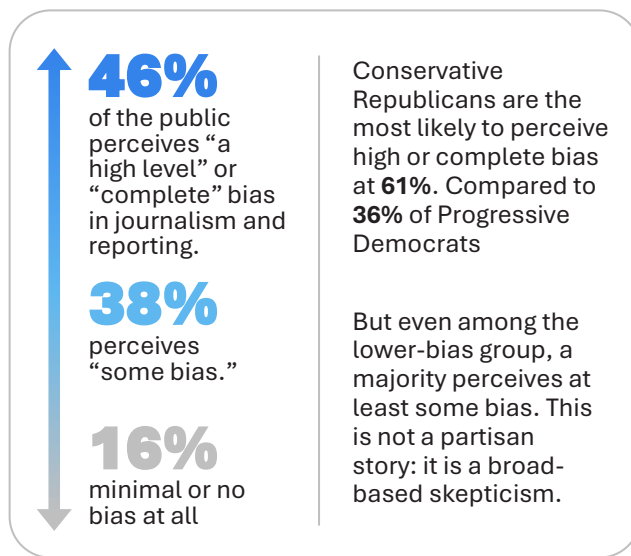
Bias and Its Consequences

Public perceptions of bias in journalism are both widespread and consequential.

Bias perception is functionally important because of what it predicts. Among those who perceive high or complete bias, **41% believe at least some reporters write with an agenda** and deliberately avoid seeking newsmaker responses, nearly double the rate among those who perceive low or minimal bias (21%).

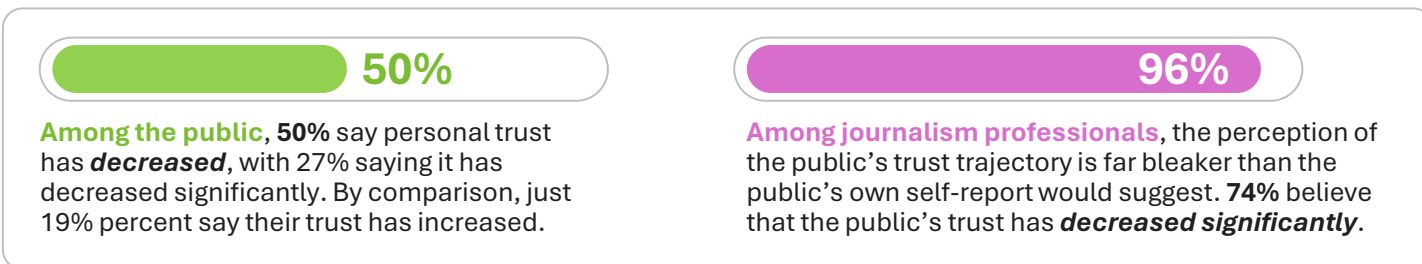
High-bias perceivers are also significantly more likely to agree that the press is increasingly hostile toward public officials than those with low bias perceptions (55% vs. 32%). This perception likely fuels why they are more likely to view official refusals as sometimes or often acceptable. The perception of press bias can be actively used by newsmakers to justify non-responses, and a meaningful portion of the public is accepting that justification.

Among journalism professionals, fewer than one in five (19%) perceive high or complete bias in journalism and reporting. Two-thirds (67%) see only “some” bias, and 15% see minimal bias. The gap between industry and public on high-bias perception is one of the study’s most consequential divergences, because it explains much of the disconnect in how each group interprets what is happening in the press-source relationships.



A Trust Trajectory Moving in the Wrong Direction

Both the public and journalism professionals report that trust in journalism has declined over the past five years, but the magnitude and interpretation of that decline differ sharply between the two groups.



The gap suggests that journalism professionals are, to some degree, catastrophizing the trust collapse, or that the newsroom experience is producing an overestimate of how far the public has actually moved.

Either way, the mismatch has practical consequences. If journalists believe the public has lost faith and trust, they may behave with more defensiveness, with less outreach, and a greater pessimism about transparency efforts in ways that become self-fulfilling. The open-end responses capture this risk with particular clarity. One media professional wrote: “The goal is to discredit the media as an institution so the public goes to the media silos they agree with rather than be exposed to or open to other points of view.” Another: “I don’t believe the majority of news consumers know what to look for or the right questions to ask about who is reporting the news to them.” That last phrase is the most operationally significant: without the public being given clarity and transparency in the reporting process, consumers are left to their own devices and will silo themselves and limit their exposure. This siloing creates an environment ready to accept distrust and the repeating of the pattern begins again.

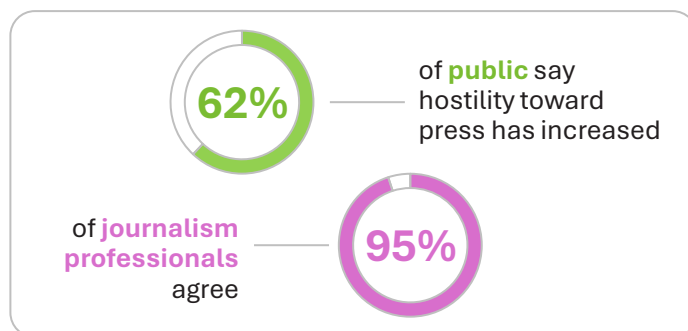
Sentiments Toward The Press

What The Public Sees And Believes

The study's core findings on hostility toward the press reveal a public that is increasingly aware of the tension between newsmakers and journalists and that holds more nuanced, politically inflected views about it than either the journalism community or political commentators might expect.

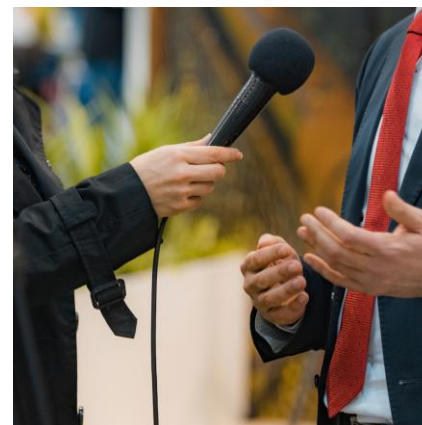
Hostility Is Visible and Widespread

Sixty-two percent of the American news-consuming public say that hostility or resentment from politicians, public figures, government officials, and organizations toward the press has increased over the past five years. Thirty-six percent say it has increased significantly. Only 11% say it has decreased.



When asked to recall specific instances of official hostility toward the press, respondents across both samples produced responses that were less abstract than the closed-end data might suggest. The references were immediate, current, and often named.

The president of the United States was cited directly and repeatedly in both the general public and industry open-ends, with multiple respondents referencing specific incidents: a reporter being called derogatory names at a press event, the removal of established news organizations from press pool access, and the routine labeling of news coverage as fabricated. One journalism professional offered a characterization that captured the industry's experience of the current moment:



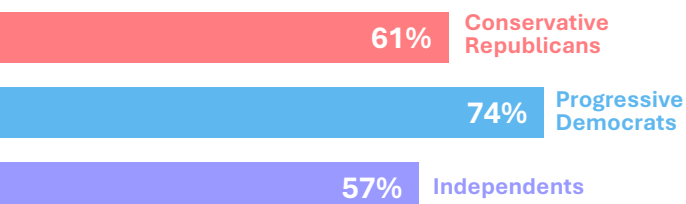
"So many. Led by President Trump, many Republican federal lawmakers and most of the current Cabinet members routinely and publicly denigrate journalists."

Another wrote simply:

"Yeah, I watched today's White House press briefing."

The recognition of increased hostility is not primarily a partisan reading among the **general public**.

Increased perceived hostility towards press in last 5 years



The degree to which each group is troubled by it differs sharply, a distinction that will carry through every major finding in this section.

Among **journalism professionals**, the recognition of increased hostility is essentially universal.

61% describe the increase as **significant**

95%

The industry open-ends locate this hostility not only at the national level but throughout the institutional hierarchy of news coverage.

"Local newsmakers are very much emboldened by the national rhetoric that is anti-media and the isolated cases of well-known journalists caught being biased (i.e., ABC's Terry Moran and various lawsuits by Trump)."

"Just this week a university spokesperson was hostile and argumentative toward our newsroom for not using their full statement in a broadcast."

Whose Hostility?

The Asymmetry Question

The study posed a deliberate symmetry test: two separate questions asked respondents whether public officials are increasingly hostile toward the press and whether the press is increasingly hostile toward public officials. The responses reveal a **fundamental disagreement between journalists and the public about the direction and source of the hostility problem.**

Among the general public

63% OFFICIALS → PRESS

agree that politicians, public figures, and government officials are increasingly hostile toward the press

47% PRESS → OFFICIALS

agree that the press is increasingly hostile toward politicians and public officials

35% agrees with both statements, suggesting they see the hostility as mutual and bidirectional.

Among journalism professionals

92% OFFICIALS → PRESS

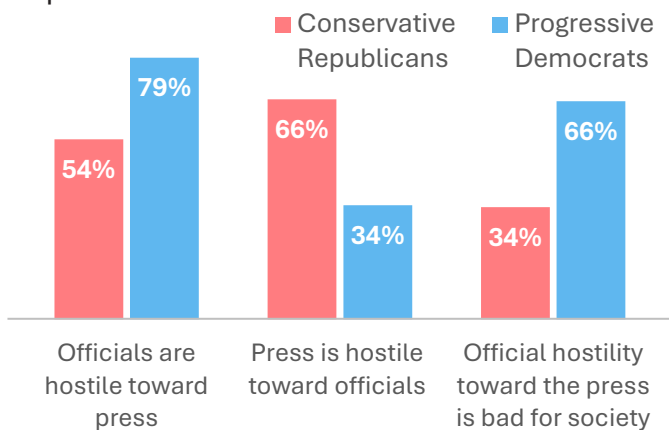
agree that officials are increasingly hostile toward the press

18% PRESS → OFFICIALS

press is increasingly hostile toward officials

A majority actively *disagree* with that characterization

The political breakdown of the symmetry test is revealing and important.



"People are far more reluctant to talk to reporters, even if there's no controversy. Fewer and fewer people are willing to do what was commonplace early in my career. Government people don't want to, cops don't want to, fire department people don't want to. Individual, ordinary, random people don't want to be on the record."

– Major Garrett, chief Washington correspondent for CBS News and host of political podcast "The Takeout"

This pattern, in which political identity shapes not just the evaluation of hostility but the perception of its direction, is a central challenge facing journalism in its effort to communicate accountability to a polarized public. **The press cannot persuade audiences who believe it is the aggressor.**

Several public open-end responses illustrated this with candor:

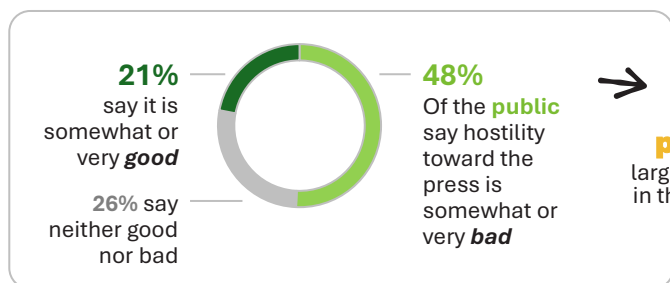
"I think it's the other way around: the press is horribly disrespectful to the Trump administration."

"The Democrats feed into and support the false narrative from reporters, and some Republicans are trying to expose the deception."

These are not fringe views. They represent a meaningful portion of the public that has accepted a narrative in which the press, not the official, is the hostile party.

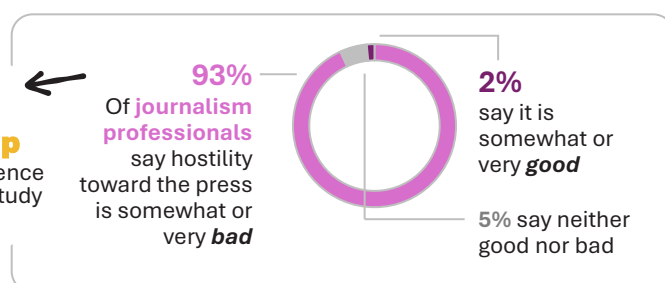
Is Official Hostility Toward the Press Good or Bad for Society?

When asked directly whether increasing official hostility toward the press is good or bad for society, **the public is divided** in ways that reveal the depth of the credibility gap that journalism faces.



→ **45**
largest divergence
in the entire study

Among **journalism professionals**, the societal impact assessment is not ambiguous:



The open-end responses from those who see official hostility as beneficial reveal a coherent, if challenging, logic. The dominant reasoning is not that the press deserves to be attacked but that hostility functions as accountability for what respondents see as a biased institution:

"It shows that people are questioning what is being reported."

"It pressures media to be more accountable and transparent."

"Because the press has gotten out of hand."

"It will force them to tell the truth and start change."

The industry open-ends capture the stakes as professionals understand them:

"The hostility serves to delegitimize journalists, journalism, and news reporting."

"A lack of civic and community information reaching people who need it and rightfully should have access to it because their taxes pay for it."

"They have weaponized distrust in media. It's working."

And from one journalist who named the endpoint of the trajectory directly:

"I think it increases the likelihood that the general public will feel comfortable harassing or physically assaulting members of the press who are doing their jobs."

The age dimension of this finding is of note.

- **Older Americans** (55 to 64) are more likely to recognize increased official hostility and more likely to say it is bad for society (60%).
- **Younger Americans** (18 to 24), despite lower rates of recognizing the trend as a daily pattern, are more likely to frame it as a democracy threat when they do see it.

This generational distribution of concern, with older Americans alarmed by the practical erosion of accountability to the press and younger Americans alarmed by its civic implications, suggests different but potentially complementary communication strategies for reaching across age groups.



What Works

Video Testing And The Case For Proactive Transparency

In an attempt to address and understand how a lack of a comment can impact perceptions, a unique video component was incorporated into the study. A direct comparison of two different ways of communicating source non-response in an actual television news story was presented to respondents. The findings from this test provide journalism with something it rarely has: behavioral evidence, not just stated preferences, about how audiences respond to specific journalistic choices.

The Test Design

Both videos were drawn from a real local television news coverage and edited to represent two distinct approaches to communicating source non-response.

Video A used a conventional “no comment” formulation, the kind of language that appears in news stories daily and that most audiences have encountered many times.

Video B used a proactive accountability framing: language that committed to updating the story when the source responded, positioning the non-response as a temporary rather than final state.

Each of the 1,021 public respondents saw both videos, with exposure order randomized. After each video, they rated it on four dimensions: overall favorability, level of detail, perceived transparency, and belief that the reporter made a genuine effort to reach the source.

Updated Later Wins: Consistently and Regardless of Order

The results are unambiguous in direction. On every tested metric, the proactive accountability framing of **Video B** outperforms the conventional “no comment” framing of **Video A**. Video B’s advantage:

+5 pts on favorability → 62% rated Video B as mostly or very **favorable**, vs. to 57% for Video A

+4 pts on transparency → 68% rated Video B as mostly or completely **transparent**, vs. to 63% for Video A

+3 pts on reporter effort → 63% believed the Video B reporter made a **genuine effort** to reach the source, vs. to 59% for Video A

These margins are modest but consistent, and they survive order effects. A practical implication follows: newsrooms that begin consistently using the proactive framing are not only improving individual stories, they are building audience expectations that will eventually become demands. The short-term credibility gain is real. The long-term audience education effect may be larger.

Video A



Video B



Transparency Mechanisms

What the Public Wants

Beyond the video test, the study asked respondents to rank three specific transparency mechanisms that newsrooms could use to document their efforts when sources refuse to respond:

1

A list of the questions the journalist would have asked if the source had responded

2

A link to a verifiable record of outreach attempts, including times, methods, and contact information

3

And a link to a pattern of past refusals by the source, documenting a history of non-cooperation.

Chosen as the top credibility-building option

39%

A link to a record of outreach attempts

31%

A list of questions the journalist would have asked

30%

A link to past stories showing a pattern of refusal by the source

The **outreach record** was chosen as the top credibility-building option by **39% of respondents**, more than 8-percentage points ahead of either alternative. This finding is consistent across all political groups (Republicans: 40% first choice; Democrats: 43%; Independents: 36%) and across all age groups, with the outreach record performing strongest among the youngest respondents: 46% of 18-to-24-year-olds chose it as their top preference.

The open-end responses explaining why respondents preferred the outreach record are among the study's most revealing qualitative data points. The language respondents used was precise and consistent:

"It shows the amount of effort made to get the comment."

"I can see on my own that they did it."

"Because it would assure everyone there was at least an attempt."

"If it's their effort you want to see, it's the most straightforward."

"It helps show tangible evidence."

"To show the journalist's good faith."

The phrase **"I can see on my own" is the key**. The public does not want to be told the reporter tried. They want a record they can evaluate themselves. The outreach log transfers the evidentiary function from the reporter's assertion to the audience's judgment, and that transfer is precisely what generates the credibility. This finding holds even among low-trust consumers who are skeptical of journalism generally: the desire for visible evidence of effort is the one credibility bridge that crosses the trust divide.

The question-list option (31%) (what the reporter would have asked) and the refusal-pattern option (30%) (a history of the source's non-cooperation) each garnered similar levels as top choices. The refusal-pattern option shows the most political variance: it appeals most to respondents who already distrust the source and functions as confirmation of an existing belief rather than a credibility signal for the skeptical. It is less effective as a persuasion tool precisely because it requires the audience to accept a premise about the official before evaluating the story.

The Impact Of Hostility

Democracy, Accountability, And What Comes Next

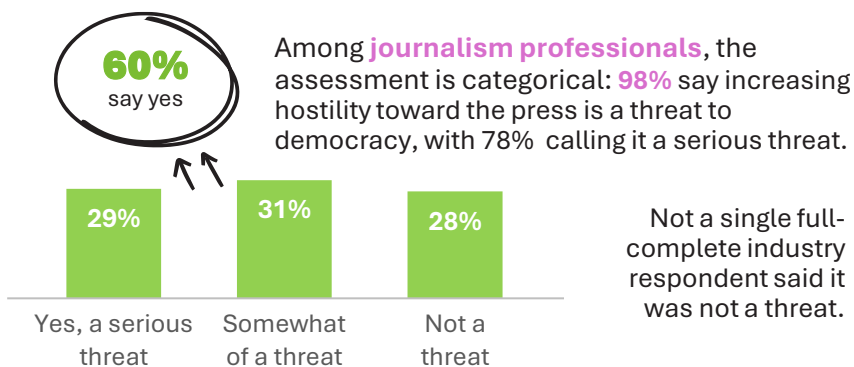
The study's final substantive section asked respondents to step back from the specifics of "no comment" and source refusal and consider the larger consequences of what is happening to the relationship between the press and those who are supposed to be accountable to it.

Is This a Threat to Democracy?

The study asked directly:

Do you believe that increasing hostility or resentment toward the press is a threat to democracy?

The public answer is a majority yes, though divided.



The **public** open-end responses to the democracy question produced some of the study's most substantive civic reasoning. Many respondents connected press hostility directly to the erosion of democratic function:

"All I know is what I learned in history class in high school, which is that a free press is indicative of a Democratic society."

"The current government has labeled journalists as the enemy so they can avoid any public oversight."

"Journalism is the first draft of history. Without accurate information, all the regular people who contribute to making history can't make good decisions."

Others named the chilling effect on journalism itself. The concern here is not only that hostility silences journalists. It is that hostility changes what questions.

"When a reporter feels too intimidated to ask pertinent questions, society suffers from a lack of transparency. I'm afraid reporters are only going to ask soft questions and accept vague or duplicitous information."

Among **journalism professionals**, the democracy concern connects directly to the lived consequences of source hostility. Industry open-end responses described the practical erosion of accountability in operational terms:

"It hinders us from holding public officials accountable to the public."

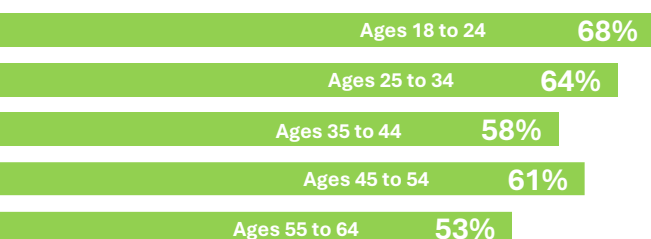
"They slow-walk FOIA requests, deny them, and this lack of transparency dramatically impacts the content that could be created or is created."

"The criticism about fake news makes it so nothing is considered a fact, nothing is true."

One journalist captured the self-reinforcing logic of the current moment with particular clarity:

"It also creates an environment that enables people in the public to feel they too can be hostile, even threatening, to journalists. This creates a tinderbox that is not helpful to anyone other than the politician trying to get attention."

Frame press hostility as a democracy threat



The generational pattern that emerged in earlier sections continues here. Younger Americans (18 to 24) are more likely than older Americans (55 to 64) to frame press hostility as a democracy threat, even though older Americans are more likely to recognize the trend as a day-to-day pattern. Younger audiences have absorbed a civic frame for understanding press freedom that their older counterparts may process more practically. Both framings are valuable for journalism to understand and speak to.

Transparency as the Path Forward

The one finding in this study that transcends all the divides, political, generational, and professional, is the **demand for greater transparency from the journalism profession.**

The consistency of this demand across groups that otherwise have varying beliefs is a critical finding. Low-trust news consumers are more likely to want more transparency from journalists than high-trust news consumers, meaning that transparency is not just a reward for the already-converted but a potential bridge to the skeptical.

Agree that journalists should be more transparent about their efforts to reach sources

General Public **73%**

Journalism Professionals **84%**

Low-trust news consumers **77%**

High-trust news consumers **68%**

The **industry** open-end data on what that transparency should look like constitutes an unprompted professional consensus that maps almost precisely onto what the quantitative findings identify as effective. One respondent offered a formulation that should be considered as a newsroom standard.

“Journalists need to be as transparent as possible about the work they do and how they do it and include as much detail about how they went about reporting a story as is reasonable.”

“Think process journalism. If you walk people through the steps you took to get comment, it will be good for the public to see, and it will be more difficult for the source to hide from answering further questions later.”

“Show your work to the viewers/readers so they understand you made an effort to get all the answers.”

“The U.S. military used to have a standard for response to questions: ‘maximum disclosure with minimum delay.’ We should say what we know and say what we don’t know. And disclose our efforts to find out.”

– Journalism Professional

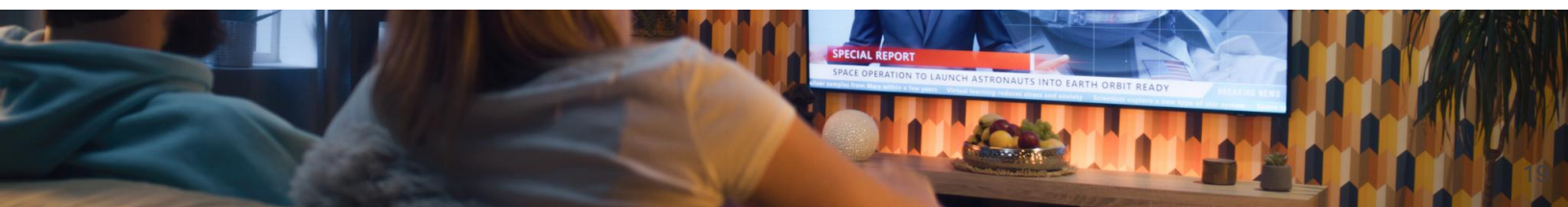
Several industry respondents went beyond general principle to propose specific implementation mechanisms.

“Disclose the process in a nerd box in a digital or print story. TV: write a short how this story was reported piece and refer to it out of the TV/video piece.”

“At the least, journalists should have a link in every story that describes the practices the media organization strives to take - such as Reuters’ link to their trust policy. At best, journalists can describe the steps taken to contact sources for a specific story (this may not always be possible given the speed needed to deliver a story). Politicians improve their trust and accountability by engaging with the press and answering questions.”

“Join the trust project (or similar) to learn and implement transparency practices. Talk about using these practices and why via all available platforms.”

These proposals are not aspirational. They are achievable workflow changes that the quantitative data confirms the public will respond to.



Segmenting The Results

The breadth of this study's sample and the depth of its questionnaire create significant opportunities for additional segmentation and cross-analysis beyond the findings reported here. RJI will be conducting further work on several analytical threads that the initial findings have opened up.

The Trust Architecture

The relationship between a respondent's underlying level of trust in journalism and their responses to virtually every other question in the study is one of the most productive analytical frameworks to emerge from the data. **Trust level predicts reporter credibility assessments, views on official non-response, the perceived societal impact of press hostility, and the democracy threat perception, among many other outcomes.** Understanding the trust segments, including who is in them, how stable they are, and what moves people between them, is a research agenda in itself.

The Political Dimension

The study has documented a 32-point gap between Conservative Republicans and Progressive Democrats on whether official hostility toward the press is bad for society, and a 47-point gap on whether source refusals are unacceptable. These are **enormous differences in civic orientation toward a fundamental democratic institution.** Further segmentation of the political findings, especially around the Moderate Republican and Independent groups that consistently occupy the middle ground, will be a priority in the next phase of analysis.

The Generational Story

The counterintuitive age findings in this study deserve dedicated analysis. **Younger Americans are more likely to see press hostility as a democracy threat** even though they recognize it less frequently; **older Americans are more disturbed by the practical erosion of accountability** even though they are more ambivalent about journalism's trustworthiness. The path to rebuilding public support for journalism likely runs differently through different age cohorts.

The Industry Experience

The **industry sample**, while smaller, **offers a depth of professional experience** that warrants its own detailed analysis. The relationship between beat type, newsroom size, and the specific experiences of hostility and non-response is one analytical thread. Another is the comparison between current journalists and those who have left the profession, whose accounts of what drove them away are uniquely valuable for understanding the sustainability of the field.

RJI welcomes partners, including academic institutions, journalism organizations, media companies, and individual researchers, who wish to explore specific aspects of this data in greater depth. Those interested in accessing the data or collaborating on additional analysis are encouraged to contact the Institute directly.

Summary

The research documented in this report tells a consistent and urgent story. American journalism is operating in an environment of increasing official hostility and deliberate silence, and the public is beginning to see it, even if it has not yet fully decided what to make of it.

Journalism professionals are experiencing this environment at a level of intensity that the general public has not yet matched.

3 in 4 working journalists have been refused by a source

9 in 10 current reporters have experienced stonewalling

The **public response** to this situation is neither a simple endorsement of the press nor a simple rejection of it. It is a complicated, politically inflected set of reactions shaped by prior trust levels, bias perceptions, and partisan identities. A substantial minority of the public views official silence as acceptable, sometimes even as a positive check on journalistic overreach. A larger majority, however, **sees the trend as bad for society and, to a certain degree, bad for democracy.** The public open-ends reveal that this majority has begun connecting official hostility to structural democratic risk in language that is concrete and civic:

“If our government is threatening the press, the press may become afraid to report the news that the government does not want us to hear.”

“I’m concerned about censorship.”

“Slowly turn itself into a dictatorship and start to strip away rights from the public.”

These are not hyperbolic responses from activists. They are the words of ordinary news consumers who are watching and drawing conclusions.

Where journalism has the clearest opportunity to act is in how it communicates its own accountability efforts to its audiences. The video test results are unambiguous: **proactive framing of source non-response outperforms passive documentation.** The transparency ranking data is unambiguous: the public wants verifiable evidence of outreach, not just asserted effort. The demand for more transparency is unambiguous: nearly three-in-four news consumers, and more than four-in-five journalism professionals, agree that journalists should be more transparent about their efforts to reach sources.

The industry’s own prescriptions, offered without prompting in the open-end record, converge on the same set of practices. The advice from journalists to journalists was remarkably specific: document the outreach, publish the process, show the work, commit to the follow-up. One respondent offered a formulation that deserves to become a professional standard:

“When people ask how we report a story, we should tell them. If we don’t explain how we gather information, it makes people question our methods based on assumptions.”

That sentence identifies both the problem and the solution with precision that months of quantitative analysis can only confirm.

The burnout crisis documented in RJI’s 2024 research made clear that the toll of a hostile information environment was being paid, first and most directly, by the journalists themselves.

This research makes clear that the impact is spreading: into the relationship between the press and the public, into the transaction of trust that journalism depends on, and into the civic fabric that journalism is supposed to help maintain. Addressing it is not only in journalism’s institutional interest, it is a democratic imperative.

Conclusion

We thank the more than 1,200 respondents who gave their time and perspective to this research. We thank the journalism professionals who shared accounts of professional lives under pressure, and the members of the general public who engaged seriously with questions about trust, accountability, and the role of journalism in democratic society.

The findings presented here are a beginning, not an end. RJI will continue to release data and analysis from this study in the months ahead, with particular attention to the segmentation opportunities that the full dataset makes possible. We will also be developing case studies of newsrooms that are experimenting with the transparency practices this research identifies as credibility-building, and we welcome accounts from news organizations that are already working on these challenges.

The sustainability of journalism, its ability to do the work of accountability in the communities and democratic institutions that depend on it, is the driver of this research. We present these findings not as a verdict but as a resource: for newsroom leaders thinking about how to maintain credibility in a hostile environment, for journalism educators preparing students for the professional reality they will inherit, and for the journalists themselves who are doing this work every day under difficult conditions.

The work of rebuilding trust between journalism and the public will take years and require contributions from many directions. But it will not happen without an honest accounting of where things stand. This research is our contribution to that accounting.



Transparency Statements

About RJI

The Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism (RJI) works with the news industry, professors, students, and others to ensure journalism has a bright future. As part of the Missouri School of Journalism at the University of Missouri, RJI offers fellowships, initiatives, events, and experiments that aim to improve and strengthen journalism and its practices. The Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute was launched in 2004 with a grant from the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation.

About SmithGeiger Group SMITH GEIGER GROUP

The SmithGeiger Group is an international research and consulting company based in Westlake Village, California. For more than 20 years, SmithGeiger has been a leading researcher into local and national news behaviors and consumers and has worked closely with newsrooms nationwide in print, digital, radio, TV, cable, and streaming. SmithGeiger designed and executed the survey for this study, built the flash report data infrastructure, and collaborated with RJI on the analytical framework and strategic interpretation of findings.

About This Study

The survey was designed by the SmithGeiger Group research team drawing on existing literature and prior research on press-source relationships, journalistic transparency, and public trust in media. The questionnaire included multiple-choice questions, multi-response batteries, a three-option ranking task, a behavioral video test, and open-end questions with AI moderation designed to probe the reasoning behind quantitative responses. The survey was pre-tested and refined before being fielded online in March 2026. Partial completes from the industry sample were retained in this analysis where they provided valid responses to the questions being reported. Sample sizes for all industry-sample findings are reported at the question level. All public-sample respondents are full completes.

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