

Mixed Messages: Contradictory Images of the U.S. News Media - A Time-Lapse Study in a Year of Crises

Based on two large and representative surveys of adult Americans in December 2019 and May 2020, this study investigates the state and development of the U.S. news media's images during severe crisis times, the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic and racial unrest after the violent death of George Floyd. Our analyses show that both positive and negative public images of the news media nevertheless remain stable—with a slight preponderance of favorable perceptions, such as that the news media are useful, fair and deserving protection, over reproaches such as “fake news,” “enemy of the people” and even asking President Trump to close some media outlets. Strikingly, these positive and negative images overlap, particularly among younger respondents. However, the public becomes more polarized about them in the six months of crisis between the two surveys. Once party affiliation and political philosophy of the respondents are taken into account, socio-demographics such as gender, household income, race and ethnicity virtually disappear as important determinants of the news media's images. Only age and formal education remain somewhat relevant.

Introduction

In the midst of volatile public criticism of the U.S. news media, laced with “enemy of the people” and “fake news” accusations, this time-sequence study assesses the image of the news media in December 2019 and May 2020. We investigate a wide range of opinions about news media and their reputation as well as the degree to which the public favors their protection from outside influences vs. greater regulation and control. Two online surveys, constructed to represent the adult population of the U.S., allowed for comparisons during a Presidential campaign year, both before and during the first year of the global Covid-19 pandemic and at the beginning of nationwide demonstrations on racial injustice, ignited by the killing of George Floyd.

Studies of the news media's image have been a longstanding ritual for pollsters, scholars and media critics (see, e.g., the overview in Wilnat, Weaver & Shi, 2019, p. 3 ff.). Surveys have taken the measure of public opinion about the news media as a social institution and its role in providing reliable news and information--as a prerequisite for an informed public debate in a democracy. Obviously, since the 1970s, however, audience evaluations of the news, their media and reporters as a general trend have become more and more negative (see, e.g., Becker & Chen, 2016).

In spring of 2020, an international comparison shows that Americans even hold a more negative image of their news media than the citizens of many other countries. In a 40-country study—fairly representative of the world--only 29% of U.S. respondents said they trusted “most news most of the time,” compared to an average of 38% in the 40 countries as a whole. The U.S. actually ranks 30th among the 40 countries (Newman, 2020). And, for more than four decades,

1 it has been clear that political orientations of the audience are more strongly
2 related to evaluations of the news media than standard socio-demographic
3 characteristics, such as age, gender or education (see the overviews in Becker
4 & Chen, 2016, and Wilnat, Weaver & Shi, 2019).

5 Several reasons for both the decline of the public image of the news media
6 and for its politization have been discussed: In the 1970s, news media began to
7 relax their priority for a rather formulistic “objective” coverage in favor of
8 more interpretative analysis, investigative and enterprise reporting as well as
9 advocacy (see, e.g. Schudson, 2019). Concurrently, political criticism of “the
10 press” or “the media” (as privileged in the First Amendment) was equated with
11 the term “mainstream media,” often in a derisive manner to allege manipulative
12 and unfair reporting. Simultaneously, mainstream or legacy news media were
13 assailed by conservative critics for having a liberal bias, a charge reinforced by
14 the rise of conservative media outlets like Fox.

15 In addition, traditional media have suffered from a general decline of trust
16 and confidence as have various American institutions—albeit a little less
17 pronounced than most others: For instance, news media have outscored
18 Congress while being regarded as less trustworthy than medicine and education
19 (see, e.g., Becker & Chen, 2016). And of course, any contemporary study of
20 media images must also consider the volatile and continuous criticism leveled
21 by former president Donald Trump in speeches, rallies, press conferences,
22 interviews and Tweets. Finally, the internet enables citizens to select between
23 many more news sources than ever before. These sources do not only offer the
24 information to their users that confirms their attitudes and beliefs, but often
25 also attack the traditional news media as biased and full of fake news
26 (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 1 f.).

27 Our December 2019 study was launched to assess the state of public
28 opinion about trust in the news media prior to the 2020 Presidential campaign.
29 Then, the U.S. was three years into the Trump Administration, and the media
30 had become increasingly controversial as the President made broadside
31 criticisms of media organizations and individual reporters in what he called
32 “the fake news media”—especially after the release of the Muller report on
33 Russian interference in U.S. elections and the impeachment of the President by
34 the House of Representatives.

35 But just as our work on the December 2019 survey was being completed
36 early in 2020, the rise of the coronavirus pandemic made us question the
37 stability of these findings and whether this global phenomenon (when people
38 were staying home and likely more attentive to media) would cause significant
39 shifts. Studies had, in fact, indicated that people were spending more time, e.g.,
40 watching TV news (Cole, 2020; Harris Poll, 2020; Newman, 2020). And the
41 internationally comparative survey in April 2020, including the U.S., claimed
42 that trust in traditional news media seemed to have increased (Newman, 2020).
43 So, our study was repeated several months into the pandemic—with a late-May
44 2020 reprise of the original survey and amid another crisis, nationwide unrest
45 about racial justice, following the violent death of George Floyd.

1 At that time, as the coronavirus pandemic commanded public attention--
2 and with mandatory sheltering in place and the shutdown of the parts of the
3 economy—the hostility between the news media and the President did not
4 abate, but rather became more visible, clearly to be observed in Trump’s
5 regular Coronavirus Task Force news conferences and frequent anti-media
6 Tweets. Thus, the rationale for repeating the earlier survey was to determine
7 whether changing conditions were influencing perceptions of trust in the news
8 media and other elements of their public image.

9 Our analyses of the two surveys reported here consider a range of
10 audience evaluations. Two hypotheses are tested, and a general research
11 question is explored. Both hypotheses are derived from previous studies (see
12 above) and the historical context of our two surveys, namely:

13
14 *H1: News media are evaluated more positively in May 2020 than in December*
15 *2019, and,*

16 *H2: Political orientations are more important predictors of the news media’s*
17 *image than socio-demographic characteristics.*

18
19 H1 is guided by greater public dependency on the media for crucial
20 information about the pandemic, and H2 reflects the continued politization of
21 the media by the White House and other critics. On the larger research question
22 to seek out potential determinants of the media’s image and reputation, we ask:

23
24 *RQ: How do specific socio-demographics and political orientations relate to the*
25 *news media’s image?*

26 27 28 **Method**

29 30 **The Surveys**

31
32 On behalf of the authors and in association with Northwestern University,
33 Evanston, Illinois, Harris Poll conducted two surveys online within the United
34 States via its Harris On Demand omnibus survey--with 2,007 adults aged 18
35 and over, on December 9-11, 2019, and on May 27-29, 2020 (N = 2,019). In
36 both surveys, participants were selected from those members of a respondents
37 panel who have agreed to participate in the omnibus surveys. To ensure
38 representativeness, Harris employs a two-stage approach. In Stage 1, the
39 outgoing sample is balanced demographically and monitored to assess sample
40 targets while in field. In Stage 2, Harris weights the collected data. Sampling
41 and weighting targets were derived from the March 2019 Census Current
42 Population Survey (CPS). Target variables included are age, sex, race/
43 ethnicity, education, region and household income.

1 **Measurement: Images of News Media**

2
3 In both surveys, the image of the U.S. news media was gauged by a
4 battery of 14 positive and negative opinions about them that respondents could
5 more or less agree with. The question read: “How much do you agree or
6 disagree with each of the following statements about the news and news
7 media?” Possible responses were: “Strongly disagree,” “Somewhat disagree,”
8 “Somewhat agree” or “Strongly agree”:

- 9
- 10 • In general, the news media in this country report the news fairly and
 - 11 impartially
 - 12 • News media should be protected from pressure from the government or
 - 13 big business interests
 - 14 • It’s essential that journalists be completely neutral in their reporting
 - 15 • It’s all right for journalists to have a “point of view” in their reporting as
 - 16 long as they make it clear that they are giving their own opinion or
 - 17 interpretation of the news
 - 18 • The news media often take a too negative view of events
 - 19 • In general, the news media are keeping me up to date about what’s going
 - 20 on
 - 21 • In general, the news media help me understand the news of the day
 - 22 • News media are the enemy of the people
 - 23 • News media report fake news
 - 24 • The president should have the authority to close news outlets engaged in
 - 25 bad behavior
 - 26 • News media and reporters are necessary to keep the Trump
 - 27 administration honest
 - 28 • Reporters should be shielded from prosecution by the Trump
 - 29 administration
 - 30 • The news media treat President Trump unfairly
 - 31 • President Trump should close down news media, like CNN, the
 - 32 *Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*.

33
34 Of course, these opinions about the news media as an institution and their
35 reporters as individuals are related to one another. To discover patterns of their
36 relationships, we conducted a factor analysis (principal component) of all the
37 statements, after recoding the responses to them into a scale ranging from 1
38 (“Strongly disagree”) to 4 (“Strongly agree”). This analysis produced two
39 major factors for both surveys: one capturing positive opinions, the other one
40 indicating hostility toward the news media.

41 The first or positive factor in the December study explained 33% of the
42 variance of how opinions about U.S. news media correlate with one another,
43 while in the May study it was 37%. The following six positive opinions about
44 news media and their reporters contribute the most to this factor in both waves
45 of our survey (rotated varimax loadings greater than .50)—in descending order

1 (in parenthesis the mean score of each statement in December 2019, followed
2 by it in May 2020):

- 3
- 4 • In general, the news media help me understand the news of the day
5 (2.9, 2.9)
 - 6 • In general, the news media are keeping me up to date about what’s
7 going on (2.9, 3.0)
 - 8 • In general, the news media in this country report the news fairly and
9 impartially (2.6, 2.6)
 - 10 • News media and reporters are necessary to keep the Trump
11 administration honest (2.9, 2.9)
 - 12 • Reporters should be shielded from prosecution by the Trump
13 administration (2.8, 2.8)
 - 14 • News media should be protected from pressure from the government
15 or big business interests (3.2, 3.1).

16

17 These six statements obviously express an image of the U.S. news media
18 as both personally and societally useful as well as fair in their reporting. In
19 addition, they include a protective attitude toward media and their reporters. It
20 is also clear that the average level of agreement with any one of them is quite
21 stable, changing very little—if at all—between December and May. An additive
22 index, ‘Useful and fair news media,’ constructed of the six opinions, yields an
23 impressive Cronbach’s alpha—as a measure of internal consistency—of .85
24 December and .86 in May. The range of this index is 6 to 24, and its mean in
25 December is 17.2, with a standard deviation of 4.4 (N = 2,007). In May, its
26 mean is 17.1, with a standard deviation of 4.5 (N = 2,019).

27 The second or negative factor accounts for 19% of the variance in
28 December and 16% in May. It contains five statements with loadings greater
29 than .50 (after varimax rotation)—in descending order (in parenthesis the mean
30 score of each statement in December, followed by it in May). These include:

- 31
- 32 • President Trump should close down news media, like CNN, the
33 *Washington Post*, and *The New York Times* (1.9, 1.9)
 - 34 • The president should have the authority to close news outlets engaged
35 in bad behavior (2.1, 2.2)
 - 36 • News media are the enemy of the people (2.3, 2.2)
 - 37 • The news media treat President Trump unfairly (2.5, 2.5)
 - 38 • News media report fake news (2.8, 2.7).

39

40 These five statements obviously summarize *hostility* against U.S. news
41 media—they are believed to report “fake news” and are regarded as “the
42 enemy of the people,” and therefore, respondents grant President Trump the
43 authority to close some media outlets, critical of him. Again, there is little
44 change between the two waves of our survey. Cronbach’s alpha of an additive
45 index, ‘Hostility toward the news media,’ again indicates a great internal
46 consistency: It is .84 in December and .85 in May. The index ranges from 5 to

20 with a mean of 11.6 and a standard deviation of 4.3 in December (N = 2,006), and 11.5 and 4.3, respectively, in May (N = 2,019).

For testing H2 (political orientations are more important for the news media's image than socio-demographic characteristics) and for answering our research question (how specific socio-demographics and political orientations relate the news media's image), two groups of independent variables are used: (a) the standard socio-demographics gender, age, formal education, household income and race/ethnicity as well as (b) the respondents' political orientations: party affiliation and political philosophy.

Measurement: Socio-demographics

Gender was coded in the surveys as male (48% in both of our samples) and female (52%). *Age* was gauged in years—in December 2019 with a mean of 47.4 years and a standard deviation of 17.9. In the May-2020 survey, the average age was 47.5, with a standard deviation of 18.2. *Formal education* was measured by: "What is the highest level of education you have completed or the highest degree you have received?" Less than high school was coded as 1; Completed some high school, 2; High school graduate or equivalent, 3; Completed some college, but no degree/Associate degree/Job-specific training programs after high school, 4; College graduate, (e.g., B.A., A.B., B.S.)/Completed some graduate school, but no degree, 5; and Completed graduate school (e.g., M.S., M. D., Ph.D.), 6. The means of the resulting scale, between 1 and 6, were 4.0 in December and 4.1 in May, their standard deviations 1.2 each.

As an indication of wealth or poverty, the respondent's *household income* was assessed by: "Which of the following categories best describes your total household income before taxes?" We recoded Less than \$ 15,000 as \$ 12,000; \$ 15,000 to \$ 24,999 as \$ 20,000; \$ 25,000 to \$ 34,999 as \$ 30,000; \$ 35,000 to \$ 49,999 as \$ 42,500; \$ 50,000 to \$ 74,000 as \$ 62,500; \$75,000 to \$ 9,999 as \$ 87,500; \$ 100,000 to \$ 124,999 as \$ 112,500; \$ 125,000 to \$ 149,999 as \$ 137,500; \$ 150,000 to \$ 199,999 as \$ 175,000; \$ 200,000 to \$ 249,999 as \$ 225,000 and \$ 250,000 or more as \$ 300,000. The mean of this scale in December 2019 was \$ 88,100, with a standard deviation of \$ 87.500. In May 2020 it was \$ 90.800, with a standard deviation of \$ 68.000.

Race/ethnicity was gauged by two questions. One of them was "Do you consider yourself..." The possible responses occurred with the same percentages in both samples: White (68%); Black or African American (12%); Asian or Pacific Islander (7%); Native American or Alaskan (3%) and Other Race (10%). For our analysis, we constructed two dummy variables, one for "White" and one for "Black or African American," each coded as 1, and with the other responses coded as 0, respectively. A second question read: "Are you of Hispanic origin, such as Latin American, Mexican, Puerto Rican or Cuban?" In both of our surveys, 16% of the respondents said "Yes." Again, we created a dummy variable, "Hispanic," by coding this answer as 1 and the rest as 0.

1 **Measurement: Political Orientations**

2

3 Two measures for political orientations were available in our surveys:
 4 party affiliation and political philosophy. The question for *party affiliation*
 5 read: “Regardless of how you may vote, what do you usually consider
 6 yourself?” The possible answers were Republican (31% in both samples);
 7 Independent (27% in our first survey, 25% in the second); Democrat (37% in
 8 December, 39% in May) and Other (6% in both surveys). For our analysis, two
 9 dummy variables were constructed: “Republican” and “Democrat,” each coded
 10 as 1 and the rest as 0, respectively.

11 To gauge *political philosophy*, we had asked: “How would you describe
 12 your own political philosophy?” Possible answers were Conservative (27% in
 13 the first sample, 29% in the second); Moderate (45% in the first survey, 46% in
 14 the second) and Liberal (25% in both surveys). For our analyses, again, we
 15 constructed two dummy variables: “Conservative” and “Liberal,” each coded
 16 as 1, the rest as 0.

17

18 **Analysis**

19

20 To find out about how socio-demographics and political orientations
 21 contribute to the news media’s images, we use hierarchical multiple
 22 regressions--with our indices ‘Useful and fair news media’ and ‘Hostility
 23 toward the news media’ as dependent variables, separately for December and
 24 May. The two groups of independent variables were entered successively: A
 25 first regression controlled for the relationships between our seven socio-
 26 demographics--but also for the respective other index, i.e., ‘Useful and fair
 27 news media’ for ‘Hostility toward the news media’ as the dependent variable,
 28 and vice versa. By controlling them for each other, we made sure that our
 29 independent variables explain each of the two indices “purely,” i.e., taking a
 30 potential overlap between them into account (see also below). In a second
 31 regression, the four political orientations were added as independent variables.
 32 To detect possible multicollinearity between the independent variables, its
 33 tolerance in all our regressions was set at less than .20.

34 Beta coefficients estimate how strongly each of the potential determinants
 35 contributes independently to our two categories of opinions about the news
 36 media. In principle, betas range from minus 1.0 to plus 1.0. Plus indicates a
 37 positive relationship between the predictor and the dependent variable. Minus
 38 means a negative, inverted one. And the closer the coefficient is to plus or
 39 minus 1.0, the stronger the relationship. Since our samples are so large (more
 40 than 2,000 respondents each), very small betas, down even to (-).04, are
 41 statistically significant at least at the 5-percent level. This is why our findings
 42 section uses a second, but still fairly lenient, criterion for the relevance of a
 43 predictor: its explanatory value. To be interpreted, it should explain at least one
 44 percent of the variance of the dependent variable. To determine this value, we
 45 used the partial r ’s of our betas. They were supposed to be at least (-).10 to
 46 indicate relevant betas.

Results

1
2
3 Praise for the news media as useful and fair as well as support for their
4 protection from external influences are the subjects of our index ‘Useful and
5 fair news media.’ The image that it represents is a little more common among
6 Americans than animosity, expressed by the index ‘Hostility toward the news
7 media’: On scales of 1 to 4, the six items of the positive index yield an average
8 of 2.9 of agreement, the five items of the negative index show a somewhat
9 lower average, 2.3—both virtually the same over time in our two surveys.
10 Also, as mentioned above, the mean scores of the two indices and their
11 standard deviations did not really change either. So, our first hypothesis (news
12 media are evaluated more positively in May 2020 than in December 2019) is
13 rejected.

14 Our RQ read: “How do specific socio-demographics and political
15 orientations relate the news media’s image?” For December 2019, the first step
16 of our hierarchical regressions reveals that, of all our socio-demographics, only
17 age and education are at least somewhat relevant predictors (with a partial r
18 at least .10, betas **bold** in Tables 1 and 2): So, at first, the news media’s image
19 seems a little more positive, the younger our respondents are and the more
20 educated. But both relationships disappear as important once we add political
21 orientations as independent variables—in our second regression. Then, party
22 affiliation and political philosophy become definitely more relevant
23 determinants of a useful and fair image of the news media than do socio-
24 demographics: Democrats think more positively about the news media than do
25 conservatives (Table 1).

26
27 *Table 1.* December 2019: Determinants of regarding news media as useful and
28 fair and of a hostility against them, respectively: Results of hierarchical linear
29 regressions

	Index ‘Useful and fair news media’		Index ‘Hostility toward news media’	
Independent variables	Socio- demo- graphics	Socio-demo- graphics + political orientations	Socio- demo- graphics	Socio- demo- graphics + political orientations
Socio-demographics	beta	beta	beta	beta
Gender: male	.05*	.07**	.09**	.06**
Age	-.10**	-.05	-.15**	-.17**
Education	.11**	.08**	-.14**	-.13*
Household income	.01	.00	.06*	.05*
Race/ethnicity:				
• white	-.03	-.01	.10**	.05

• African American	.08**	.01	.01	.06*
• Hispanic	.10**	.06*	.09**	.09**
Index ‘Hostility toward news media’/Index ‘Useful and fair news media’	-.31**	-.15**	-.30**	-.14**
Political orientations				
Republican		-.01		.20**
Democrat		.20**		-.11**
Conservative		-.19**		.13**
Liberal		.10**		-.11**
Adjusted R square	.13	.23	.16	.28
Minimum N	1,959	1,959	1,959	1,959

*p < .05; ** p < .01; **bold:** betas with a partial r > .10**

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When it comes to *negative* perceptions of the news media--as the enemy of the people, as unfair or needing regulation and control by President Trump--, in December 2019 it is again the young, but now also the *less* educated respondents who share this hostility toward the news media a little more than other respondents. Even after controlling for political orientations, these relationships remain. But more importantly, Republicans and conservatives dislike the news media more than Democrats and liberals do.

10

What is different six months later, in May 2020? First, we know already that the friendly and hostile media images, noted in our two indices, remain virtually the same in the two surveys. Again, political orientations show a very similar pattern of contributing to these indices six months apart. Also, among our socio-demographics, those with a greater formal education (now even after controlling for political orientations) regard the news media as useful and fair. As before, being younger means less animosity. And also again, young Americans simultaneously evaluate the news media a little less positively—but only as long political orientations are not included in our analysis. Opposed to our findings for December, however, a higher education does not play a role anymore for weakening hostility toward the news media (Table 2).

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1 *Table 2.* May 2020: Determinants of regarding news media as useful and fair
 2 and of a hostility against them, respectively: Results of hierarchical linear
 3 regressions

	Index 'Useful and fair news media'		Index 'Hostility toward news media'	
Independent variables	Socio- demo- graphics	Socio- demo- graphics + political orientations	Socio- demo- graphics	Socio-demo- graphics + political orientations
Socio-demographics	beta	beta	beta	beta
Gender: male	.02	.04	.09**	.05*
Age	-.11**	-.08**	-.13**	-.17**
Education	.12**	.09**	-.00	.01
Household income	.05*	.05*	.05*	.02
Race/ethnicity:				
• white	.08**	.10**	.09**	.02
• African American	.07**	.03	.02	.04
• Hispanic	.06**	.04	.02	.02
Index 'Hostility toward news media'/Index 'Useful and fair news media'	-.43**	-.28**	-.44**	-.26**
Political orientations				
Republican		-.00		.22**
Democrat		.24**		-.13**
Conservative		-.10**		.14**
Liberal		.08**		-.05*
Adjusted R square	.21	.29	.21	.34
Minimum N	1,969	1,969	1,969	1,969

4 *p < .05; **p < .01; **bold:** betas with a partial r > .10**.

5
 6 In both surveys--and for both positive and negative images--, race or ethnicity
 7 play virtually no relevant role. The same applies to one's household income. Also,
 8 both in December and May, gender does not emerge as an important predictor in
 9 our regressions either. But whenever party affiliation and political philosophy are
 10 entered into our analyses, the adjusted R square of the regressions increases
 11 considerably, both in December and May. It indicates how much more of our
 12 index 'Useful and fair news media,' but also of 'Hostility toward the news media,'
 13 is explained after including political orientations of our respondents. Thus, all in
 14 all, our second hypothesis (political orientations are more relevant than socio-
 15 demographic characteristics) is supported.

16 Interestingly, the two presumably antagonistic images of the news media
 17 are not as exclusive for the respondents as our factor analysis suggests. Of

1 course, the two indices correlate negatively with each other--but not
 2 impressively: in December with a Pearson's r of $-.30^{**}$, in May, more
 3 strongly, with an r of $-.42^{**}$. In other words, they become somewhat more
 4 distinct from each other. But this distinction shrinks at both periods analyzed
 5 here once the respondents' political leanings are introduced in our regressions
 6 as additional determinants of the news media's images (Tables 1 and 2).

9 **Conclusions and Discussion**

11 Two central findings in our study clarify general perceptions of the news
 12 media and reveal more about the role of political leanings in one's opinions:

13 First, in general, the reputation of U.S. news media is not especially
 14 negative, despite impressions to the contrary: Media are at least somewhat
 15 more trusted and liked than distrusted and disliked. Surprisingly, this finding is
 16 virtually the same in December 2019 and in May 2020--in spite of dramatic
 17 events such as the Covid-19 crisis and racial unrest when people were more
 18 attentive to news than is usually the case. Unlike in other countries (see above),
 19 in the U.S., news media and their journalists did not enjoy a better image after
 20 Covid-19 had hit.

21 Our second major finding is that regarding the media as useful and their
 22 reporting as fair does not really strongly exclude negative attitudes toward
 23 them. In other words, the audience shares mixed feelings about the role and
 24 value of U.S. news media. This kind of dialectical thinking, however, is
 25 actually not uncommon in studies of freedom of expression wherein one utters
 26 passion for diverse and independent information while excluding certain
 27 controversial speakers (Strossen, 2018). But during the first half year of 2020,
 28 the two sets of opinions about the news media have become at least somewhat
 29 more distinct for our respondents—some more polarization among them seems
 30 to take place.

31 For explaining what people think about the U.S. news media, socio-
 32 demographics such as gender, household income and race/ethnicity do not play
 33 a relevant role at all. A lower formal education, still connected to more news-
 34 media animosity in December, loses its initial importance six months later. But
 35 in May, higher educated respondents find the news media a little more useful
 36 and fair. As to age, in both of our surveys younger Americans are less hostile
 37 toward the news media, but seemingly also a little less positive about them, i.e.,
 38 generally somewhat less certain in their views than older respondents. In sum,
 39 our results do not support a notion that it is poor old white males who
 40 systematically have a negative view of the U.S. news media.

41 Instead, we can confirm what previous studies have discovered about the
 42 lens through which the public assesses the U.S. news media--that it is mostly
 43 about *politics*. Political orientations are definitely more important than socio-
 44 demographics as predictors of the news media's image. Our findings present a
 45 stark portrait of Democrats/liberals who have positive views of the news media
 46 vs. Republicans/conservatives who do not. The bifurcation between the two

1 camps seems even a little more hardened after a turbulent six months of the
2 pandemic when political polarization, rather than cooperation and unity, was
3 still the norm.

4 The findings in this study are both reassuring and disturbing. They
5 underscore the stability of views of media trust and reputation as they yield
6 important lessons for media organizations, professionals and citizens. While
7 presented here in a neutral fashion, the contradictions between a positive image
8 of the news media and simultaneous demands for regulating them more closely
9 are a clarion call for more media literacy. Many citizens do not seem to know
10 much about freedom of the press, let alone the role and purposes of the news
11 media in a democratic society as essential to an informed citizenry. For
12 instance, inasmuch as no president can close media that “behave badly,” a
13 better civic education seems to be necessary as well.

14 The value in taking the temperature of public attitudes toward the news
15 media provides intelligence about yet another indicator of a polarized society.
16 In a country where many doubt the role of politics in their daily lives (despite
17 evidence to the contrary), it is disturbing that one’s political leanings govern
18 what news and information they receive—and whether these sources are
19 regarded as valuable. While underscoring that media need not to be popular per
20 se, they still do rely on public confidence in and respect for their reporting,
21 trusted for its honesty and integrity. In other words, information media in a
22 democratic state depend on some consensus about trustworthiness--whether
23 one agrees or disagrees with the political developments they report about.
24 Monitoring opinions as this study does, thus informing media consumers about
25 the status and believability of public communication, is vital for an informed
26 citizenry, but also a guide for the news media to construct an agenda to address
27 and improve factors that drive support and to correct the lack thereof.

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