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Center for the People & the Press

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PROJECTS

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Amid Criticism, Support for Media's 'Watchdog' Role Stands Out

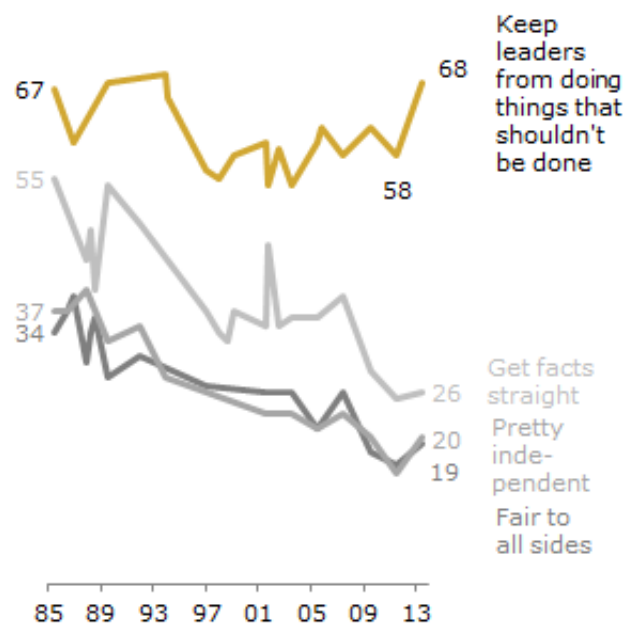
OVERVIEW

Public evaluations of news organizations' performance on key measures such as accuracy, fairness and independence remain mired near all-time lows. But there is a bright spot among these otherwise gloomy ratings: broad majorities continue to say the press acts as a watchdog by preventing political leaders from doing things that should not be done, a view that is as widely held today as at any point over the past three decades.

In the wake of revelations about government activities, including the NSA surveillance program and the IRS targeting of political groups, nearly seven-in-ten (68%) say press criticism of political leaders keeps them from doing things that should not be done, while just 21% say press criticism keeps leaders from doing their job. Support for the media's watchdog role has risen 10 points since 2011 even as other press ratings have shown little sign of improvement.

More See Press Serving as Political Watchdog

News organizations ...



PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 17-21, 2013.

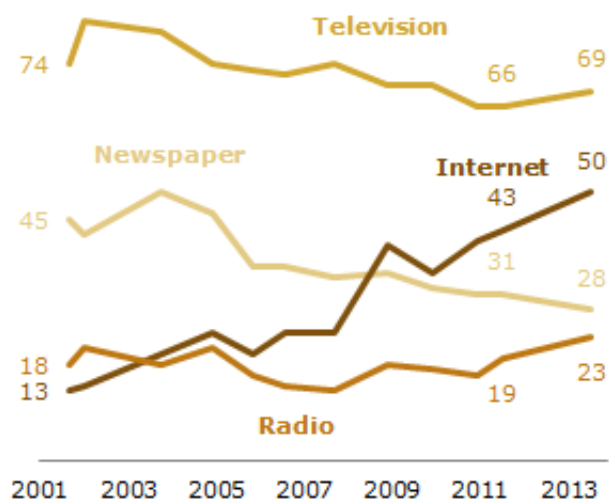
About equal majorities of Republicans (69%), independents (69%) and Democrats (67%) view news organizations as a check on political leaders and there has been a significant rise in this view across nearly all demographic and political groups. Young people especially have become more likely to say news organizations keep political leaders from doing things that should not be done, a shift in opinion that has taken place concurrently with **rising concerns about civil liberties**.

Outside of its role as a watchdog, the press receives broadly negative ratings from the public on core performance measures. Two-thirds (67%) say that news reports are often inaccurate, and even greater percentages say that news organizations tend to favor one side (76%) and are often influenced by powerful people and organizations (75%). Ratings of news organizations have declined steadily since Pew Research first began tracking attitudes in 1985, and many current ratings stand near all-time lows reached in 2011.

The Pew Research Center's biennial media attitudes survey, conducted July 17-21, 2013, among 1,480 adults, finds that 50% of the public now cites the internet as a main source for national and international news, up from 43% in 2011. Television (69%) remains the public's top source for news. Far fewer cite newspapers (28%) or radio (23%) as their main source. (Respondents were allowed to name up to two sources.)

The current media landscape is starkly different than in 2001, when 45% said newspapers were their main source for news and just 13% cited the internet. The percentage turning to television for news has changed little over this same period of time.

Main Source for News



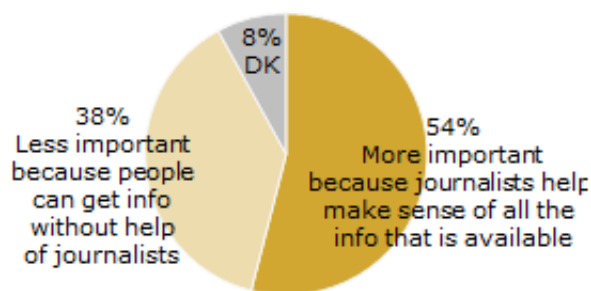
PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 17-21, 2013. Q46.
Respondents were allowed to name up to two sources.

In the current news environment, a slim majority says that journalists are more important than in the past because they help make sense of all the information that is available (54%), while 38% say that journalists are less important than in the past because people can get information without their help.

Young people under 30 are as likely as older Americans to say that journalists are more important these days to help make sense of the amount of news and information available. And there is little difference in views on this question by those who have different main sources for news. Most who cite television (59%), radio (56%), newspapers (55%) or the internet (51%) as their main source for news agree that journalists are more important than in the past to help make sense of available news and information.

Journalists More Important in Today’s News Environment

With amount of news these days, journalists are ...



	More important %	Less important %	Same/ DK %
Total	54	38	8=100
18-29	55	37	8=100
30-49	55	39	6=100
50-64	54	38	8=100
65+	52	36	12=100
Republican	51	39	10=100
Democrat	60	33	7=100
Independent	54	38	8=100
<i>Main news source</i>			
Television	59	33	8=100
Internet	51	42	7=100
Newspapers	55	37	9=100
Radio	56	38	6=100

PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 17-21, 2013. Q64. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

While most say journalists play a more important role in helping people navigate the news, their contributions to society more generally are seen as far less significant – especially when compared with other professions. Another recent survey by the Pew Research Center found that just 28% say journalists contribute “a lot” to society’s well-being, down from 38% in 2009. The public gives far better ratings to the contributions of the military (78%), teachers (72%) and doctors (66%).

Rise in Percentage Seeing Press as Watchdog

By more than three-to-one, the public says that news organizations' criticism of political leaders keeps them from doing things that should not be done (68%), rather than keeping leaders from doing their job (21%). In addition, more say that news organizations protect (48%) rather than hurt (35%) democracy. In 2011, the public was divided over whether the press protected or hurt democracy (42%-42%), and Americans were 10 points less likely to view the press as an effective watchdog.

The increase in regard for the press's watchdog role has taken place across nearly all demographic groups. Young people, in particular, have become much more likely to say the press prevents misbehavior by political leaders. In 2011, a slim 56% majority of those 18-29 said press criticism prevented political leaders from doing things that should not be done; today, three-quarters (75%) say this.

Republicans, Democrats and independents have all become about 10 points more likely to view the press as an effective watchdog. Nearly identical majorities of Republicans (69%), independents (69%) and Democrats (67%) say news organizations' criticism of political leaders keeps them from doing things that should not be done.

News Organizations Seen as Watchdog, Protecting Democracy

<i>News organizations' criticism of political leaders</i>	2011 %	2013 %	Change
Keeps leaders from doing things that should not be done	58	68	+10
Keeps leaders from doing their job	25	21	-4
Don't know	17	10	
	100	100	
<i>News orgs generally ...</i>			
Protect democracy	42	48	+6
Hurt democracy	42	35	-7
Neither	11	11	0
Don't know	5	6	
	100	100	

PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 17-21, 2013. Q49 & Q55dF1. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

More Young People Now See News Organizations in Watchdog Role

<i>% saying press criticism keeps political leaders from doing things that should not be done</i>	2011 %	2013 %	Change
Total	58	68	+10
18-29	56	75	+19
30-49	57	71	+14
50-64	59	63	+4
65+	60	64	+4
College grad+	66	74	+8
Some college	55	66	+11
HS or less	54	66	+12
Republican	59	69	+10
Democrat	58	67	+9
Independent	58	69	+11
<i>Among Reps/Rep-leaners</i>			
Tea Party	64	74	+10
Non-Tea Party	59	67	+8

PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 17-21, 2013. Q49.

Critical Ratings of News Organizations' Core Functions

Though the public gives news organizations credit for their role as watchdogs, they offer

much more negative ratings of other aspects central to the press's core mission.

Overwhelming majorities express doubts about news organizations' independence: 76% say news organizations tend to favor one side and 75% say that they are often influenced by powerful people and organizations.

On fundamental questions of accuracy and transparency, most say that the press tries to cover up its mistakes (71%)

News Organizations Criticized for Accuracy, Bias, and News Judgment

Positive	OR	Negative
Keep leaders from doing things that should not be done	68	21
Care about how good a job they do	67	26
Highly professional	60	29
Protect democracy	48	35
Care about the people they report on	31	59
Careful to not be politically biased	30	58
Focus on important stories	28	65
Get the facts straight	26	67
Willing to admit their mistakes	20	71
Pretty independent	20	75
Deal fairly with all sides	19	76

PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 17-21, 2013.

, rather than admit them (20%), and 67% say news stories are often inaccurate while just 26% say news organizations get the facts straight.

Most Americans (58%) describe news organizations as politically biased in their reporting; only 30% say they are careful that their reporting is not biased.

Ratings are no better for the press's news judgment. In determining what news is fit to report on, far more say news organizations focus on unimportant stories (65%) rather than on important ones (28%).

Ratings of the press have become much more negative since Pew Research first began measuring attitudes in 1985. Most of the press ratings tested in this survey are at or near **all-time lows** reached in 2011. In many cases, the decline in ratings has been dramatic. For example, in 1985, more said news organizations got the facts straight (55%) than said they were often inaccurate (44%). Since then there has been a 29-point decline in the percentage saying the press gets the facts straight.

On the positive side, the public maintains respect for the professionalism of news organizations. Two-thirds (67%) say news organizations care about how good a job they do while just 26% say they don't care. In addition, by a 60%-29% margin, more see news organizations as highly professional than as not professional.

Partisan Divide in Press Ratings

As in past media attitudes surveys, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to negatively rate news organizations, offering significantly more critical evaluations of the press on eight of the 11 measures tested.

One fundamental area of partisan disagreement is over the role the press plays in a democracy. Far more Democrats say the press protects democracy (59%) than hurts democracy (27%). By contrast, as many Republicans say news organizations hurt (46%) as help (43%) democracy.

A broad 74% majority of Democrats describe news organizations as highly professional; Republicans are divided on this question: 50% say they are professional, 41% say they are not.

On several other measures Republicans and Democrats both offer negative ratings of the press and differ only in the magnitude of their criticisms.

For example, Republicans are 16 points more likely than Democrats to say news stories are often inaccurate, but this view is shared by a majority of both parties (75% of Republicans, 59% of Democrats).

Similarly, 73% of Republicans say news organizations spend too much time on unimportant stores, while a smaller 57%-majority of Democrats agree.

Views of Journalists' Training, Job Challenges

Amidst broadly negative views of news organizations generally, the public has some positive things to say about journalists themselves.

Republicans More Critical of News Media than Democrats

	Rep %	Dem %	Ind %	R-D diff
Not professional	41	18	32	+23
Hurt democracy	46	27	38	+19
Stories often inaccurate	75	59	71	+16
Too much time on unimportant stories	73	57	67	+16
Don't care about people they report on	66	52	62	+14
Politically biased in reporting	65	51	60	+14
Often influenced by powerful people/orgs	82	70	76	+12
Tend to favor one side	81	69	79	+12
Try to cover up mistakes	76	67	72	+9
Don't care about how good a job they do	28	19	30	+9
Press criticism keeps political leaders from doing their job	20	24	21	-4

PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 17-21, 2013. Q49-Q58.

Nearly eight-in-ten (79%) say it takes a special set of skills and training to be a journalist while just 19% say it does not.

In addition, 65% say the job of a journalist is harder today than it used to be, 28% say it is easier.

These views are shared broadly across demographic groups. Comparable majorities of Republicans and Democrats say it takes special skills to be a journalist (79% and 82%, respectively) and that journalism is a harder job today than it used to be (68%, 70%).

Public Views Journalists as Having a Special Set of Skills and Training

	July 2013
	%
Takes a special set of skills and training to be a journalist	79
Doesn't take a special set of skills and training	19
Don't know	2
	100
<i>Job of journalist is ...</i>	
Harder than it used to be	65
Easier than it used to be	28
About the same (vol.)	3
Don't know	4
	100

PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 17-21, 2013. Q61F1, Q63F2. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Most See News Organizations in Ideological Terms

Overall, about seven-in-ten (72%) see news organizations in ideological terms. A 46%-plurality says news organizations are best described as liberal, another 26% say they are conservative. Just 19% say news organizations are best described as neither liberal nor conservative.

The balance of opinion on this question has changed little in recent years, with a plurality consistently describing news organizations as liberal, and about a quarter saying they are conservative.

Not surprisingly, there are wide partisan divides in perceptions of news organizations' ideology. By a 65%-17% margin, more Republicans say news organizations are liberal than conservative. By contrast, Democrats are divided: about as many say

Most Republicans See a "Liberal" News Media

<i>News orgs best described as ...</i>	Conserv-			
	Liberal	ative	Neither	DK
	%	%	%	%
Total	46	26	19	9=100
Republican	65	17	12	6=100
Democrat	36	37	20	7=100
Independent	47	23	20	10=100
<i>Among Reps/ Rep leaners</i>				
Tea Party	78	12	9	2=100
Non-Tea Party	56	20	16	7=100

PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 17-21, 2013. Q55iF2. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

the press is liberal (36%) as conservative (37%). By about two-to-one (47%-23%), more independents say news organizations are better described as liberal than conservative.

There is a modest difference of opinion within the Republican Party on this question: 78% of Republicans and Republican leaners who agree with the Tea Party describe news organizations as liberal, compared with 56% of Republicans who do not agree with the Tea Party.

Views of the Press by Online and Offline News Consumers

Those who cite the internet as a main source for news offer more critical ratings of the press on several key measures than those who do not go online for news.

Online News Consumers See More Bias, Less Integrity from News Organizations

<i>Which better describes news organizations?</i>	Online a main news source %	Online a news source %	Online not a news source %	Main-offline diff
Politically biased in their reporting	65	56	46	+19
Not politically biased	26	33	36	-10
Focus on unimportant stories	73	60	55	+18
Focus on important stories	21	35	34	-13
Are often influenced by powerful people/orgs	81	77	64	+17
Are pretty independent	16	18	27	-11
Tend to favor one side	83	73	67	+16
Deal fairly with all sides	15	20	25	-10
Try to cover up mistakes	68	68	78	-10
Willing to admit mistakes	24	23	13	+11
Minimum N	339	154	226	

PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 17-21, 2013. Q51, Q52, Q55bF1, Q55cF1, Q55hF2. Don't know responses not shown.

Those who use the internet as a main source for news are more likely to say news organizations are politically biased (65%) rather than not politically biased (26%). By contrast, those who do not use the internet to get news are much more divided: 46% say

the press is politically biased, 36% say they are not.

Those who get most of their news online are 18 points more likely than those who don't use the internet for news to say the press spends too much time on unimportant stories. Internet news users also are 17 points more likely to say that news organizations are often influenced by powerful people and 16 points more likely to say the press tend to favor one side.

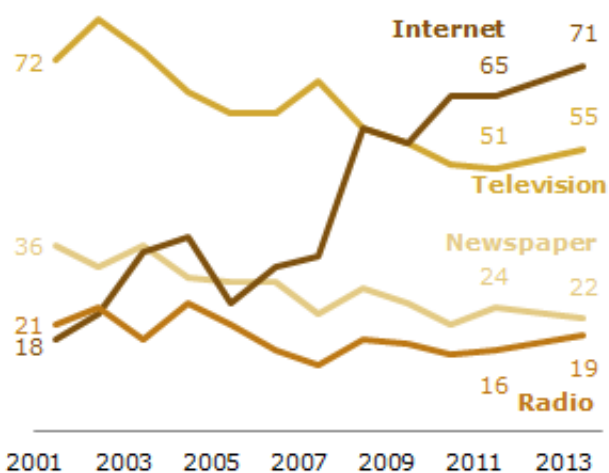
One exception to this pattern is on the question of press transparency: 78% of those who do not use the internet for news say the press tries to cover up its mistakes. Those using the internet as their main source for news are 10 points less likely to take this view (68%).

Internet Leading Source of News for Those Under 50

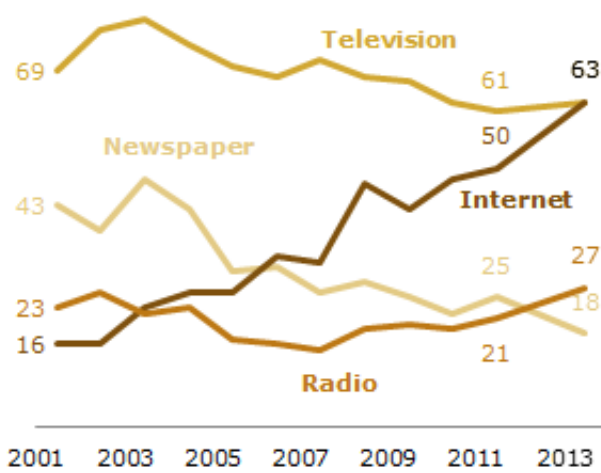
The internet is now the main source for national and international news for those under the age of 50. Overall, 71% of those 18-29 cite the internet as a main news source, more than the percentage that cites television (55%). Among those 30-49, 63% say the internet is where they go to get most of their news, up 13 points from 2011 and, for the first time, the percentage of this group citing the internet as their main source matches the percentage who say television is their top news source. (Respondents were allowed to name up to two sources).

Main Source for National and International News

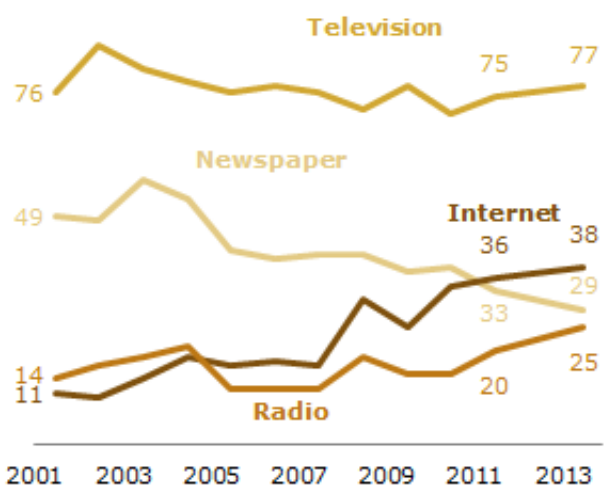
18-29



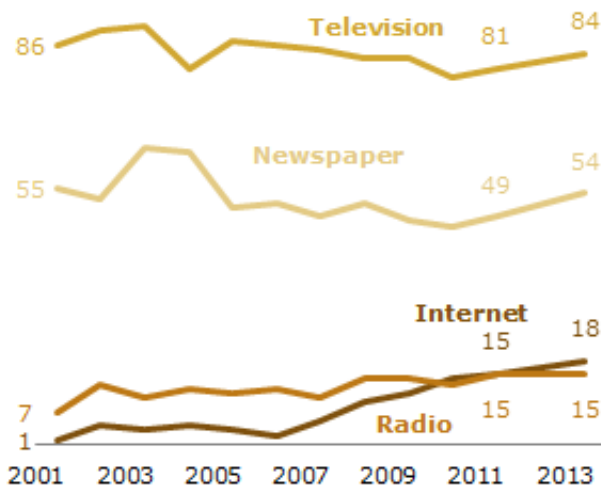
30-49



50-64



65+



PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 17-21, 2013. Respondents were allowed to name up to two sources. Q46 & Q47.

For those ages 50 and older, television remains the dominant source for news. About three-quarters (77%) of those 50-64 say television is a main source for news, compared with 38% who cite the internet. For those ages 65 and older, 84% turn to television for most of their news, 54% rely on newspapers and just 18% say the internet is a top news source. For both those ages 50-64 and 65 and older, there has been no significant increase in the percentages citing the internet as a main source for news since 2011.