Trust, newspapers and journalists: a review of evidence

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Abstract:

The Brexit vote and its aftermath sharpened existing concerns about how far the information delivered by news media may be relied upon. Survey data on public trust in journalists exist but they are disparate and fragmentary. This article reviews datasets relating to national newspaper journalists and journalism and seeks to collate those with more fragmentary evidence. On this basis it finds that it is impossible to identify a long-term trend in trust, upwards or downwards. Nor, with rare exceptions, do trust levels appear to respond to particular events in the public domain. However, there are good grounds for saying that in recent years trust in national newspaper journalists to tell the truth has been consistently low or even very low, relative to trust in other journalists, in people in most other walks of life and in newspaper journalists in other countries. There is also strong evidence of a hierarchy of trust, with journalists at red-top newspapers trusted least. The article finds that the strongest explanation consistent with the data is the most obvious: that many people do not trust these newspaper journalists to tell the truth because many journalists have been seen not to do so. This should be a matter of concern for journalists in a changing market.

Introduction

The arguments relating to UK membership of the European Union have heightened interest in the question of trust in journalism in Britain. Press reporting in particular has been clearly partisan, not only before the referendum but since then; has it also been accurate? Were the public supplied with sufficient reliable information before they voted, and have they been since? Such questions mirror more general, international concerns about the supply of information in democracies, relating to the phenomena labelled 'post-truth' and 'fake news' and to

the known manipulation of social media. Levels of trust in professional journalism therefore deserve our attention, and in the United Kingdom various data are available. Notably, two polling organisations, YouGov (2016) and Ipsos MORI (2016) have published datasets, while the European Commission's Eurobarometer series (2016) also offers relevant data. Besides these, more fragmentary evidence can be drawn from other sources. This article reviews and considers such data where they relate to trust in newspaper journalists or in newspaper journalism in the United Kingdom.

YouGov

Since March 2003, on 19 irregularly-distributed occasions, YouGov has asked respondents the question:

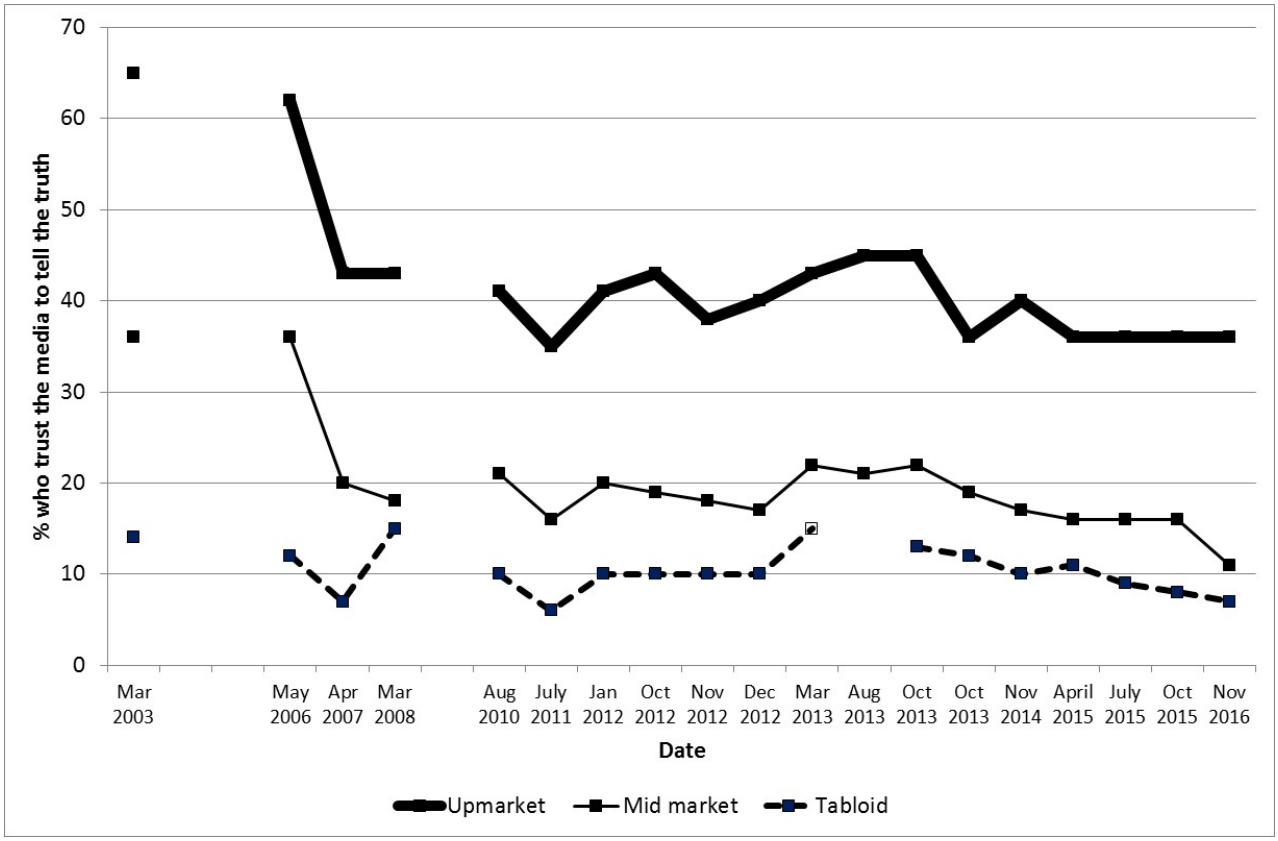
'How much do you trust the following to tell the truth?'

Eighteen categories of people were most frequently suggested, such as family doctors, teachers, the local MP, police officers and estate agents. Newspaper journalists were included, divided into three groups:

– 'journalists on "upmarket" papers (e.g. Times, Telegraph, Guardian)',
– 'journalists on "mid-market" papers (e.g. Mail, Express)',
– 'journalists on red-top tabloid newspapers (e.g. Sun, Mirror)'.

All of the suggested titles in brackets are national newspapers. Figure 1 shows the outcomes for the three groups when the percentages responding 'a great deal' and 'a fair amount' were combined.

FIGURE 1



On this evidence, trust has declined in all three sectors (though rather less for tabloids), but this apparent trend deserves closer attention. A feature of the graph is that the earliest responses, from 2003 and 2006, though similar to one another, are strikingly different from the rest and are followed by a sharp fall in 2007. Since it seems that neither the question nor the methodology changed it is reasonable to ask whether something in the news might have affected attitudes in this period. The 2003 survey was carried out in the same month (March) as the invasion of Iraq by US and British forces. It might be argued that as a consequence of that invasion people's trust in newspaper journalists may have been at an unusually high level, remaining high through May 2006 and then falling away in April 2007. The implication of this would be that the figures seen in 2003 and 2006 might be higher than the norm, which in turn would cast the overall declines in trust shown in the graph in a different light. If this was correct, in other words, it could be argued that YouGov began asking these questions at a moment when trust was at unusually high levels, creating an impression of steep decline when the reality might be that from 2007 trust levels were returning to earlier, lower levels. We will return to this point after assessing other evidence.

A second, general point may be made about these data. This period saw a number of significant public events which might be deemed capable of affecting trust in journalists, notably:

– the first two phone-hacking convictions (January 2007);
– the Madeleine McCann affair (May 2007 onwards);
– the exposure by newspapers of MPs' expenses records (May 2009);
– the revelation that News of the World journalists hacked the phone of murdered teenager Milly Dowler (July 2011);
– the Leveson Inquiry (2011-12);
– the Jimmy Savile scandal (October 2012) and
– the publication of the Leveson Report (November 2012).

In only two instances does it seem reasonable to relate changes in trust levels to such events. The Milly Dowler revelation can surely be linked to the almost-uniform dips in the three lines in mid-2011. This suggests, interestingly, that trust in all three sections of the national newspaper market may have been undermined by the actions of the News of the World. A less distinct dip of late 2012 may be associated with one or both of two events that came close together: the publication of the Leveson Report and the Jimmy Savile scandal. In both the cases any effect was short term, with trust levels recovering soon afterwards.

In general, the link between movements in public sentiment and specific, journalism-related events seems weak at best. For example, in the period of the Leveson Inquiry itself (October 2011-November 2012), when it might be thought that sustained public scrutiny would corrode trust, the levels of trust seem to have risen a little. If we look at the responses of April 2007, which showed sharp drops in trust, especially for upmarket and mid-market journalists, no particular event suggests itself as an explanation. The first phone-hacking convictions occurred in January of that year but these are unlikely to account for the change since they did not receive much media attention. Nor can the Madeleine McCann affair have played a part, since her disappearance took place after the YouGov survey was carried out. From this it seems reasonable to conclude that, with rare exceptions, movements on the graph tend to reflect general moods or feelings among respondents rather than the impact of particular events.

Finally in this context it is worth noting how distinct the three groups appear. Nowhere do the lines cross and though the red-top and mid-market lines are fairly close, at least from 2007 onward, the mid-market and upmarket lines are consistently separated by a gap of around 20 percentage points. Again, we will return to this.

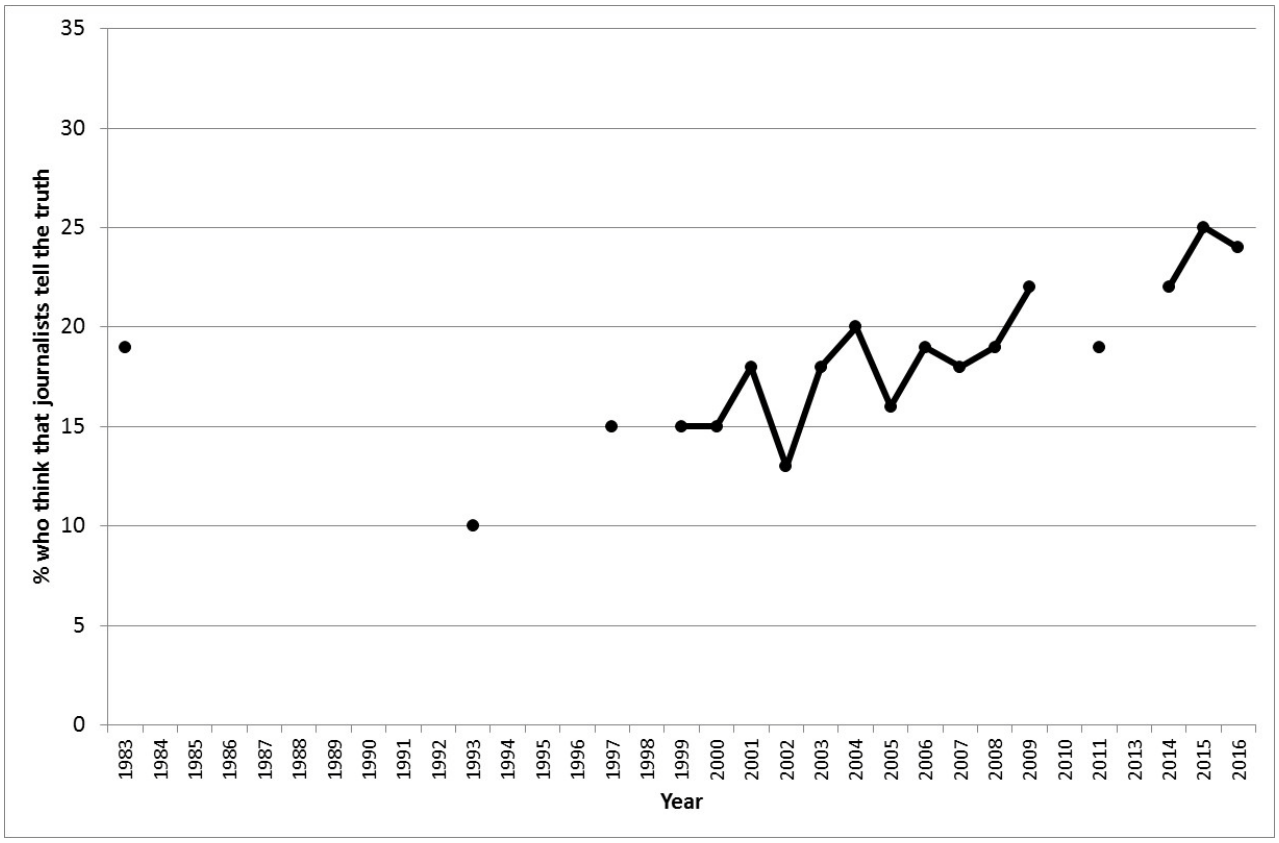
Ipsos MORI

In 19 surveys since 1983, and with some regularity since 1999, Ipsos MORI has asked the question:

'Now I will read out a list of different types of people. For each, would you tell me whether you generally trust them to tell the truth or not?'

Three options were offered: 'tell the truth'; 'not tell the truth' and don't know. Between ten and 20 categories of people were suggested, including once again doctors, teachers and the police as well as journalists, but in this instance no distinction was made between different types of journalist. Journalists, including broadcast journalists, were grouped in a single category. This graph shows those who said they trusted journalists to tell the truth.

FIGURE 2



Taking just this evidence, and in contrast to what is suggested by the YouGov data, it might be suggested that over the 33 years trust in journalists to tell the truth has shown a slow increase over the years.

Once again it is difficult to relate changes in trust levels to particular events, with the possible exception of a dip in 2011 which followed the Milly Dowler revelations.

Strikingly, the dataset does not show relatively high trust levels in 2003-7, as seen in the YouGov data: Ipsos MORI, in other words, made no findings suggesting high trust levels at the time of the Iraq War. Given this absence of support for what may seem anomalous data, therefore, it appears prudent for the purposes of this discussion to exclude from further consideration the YouGov findings relating to 2003 and 2006.

Eurobarometer

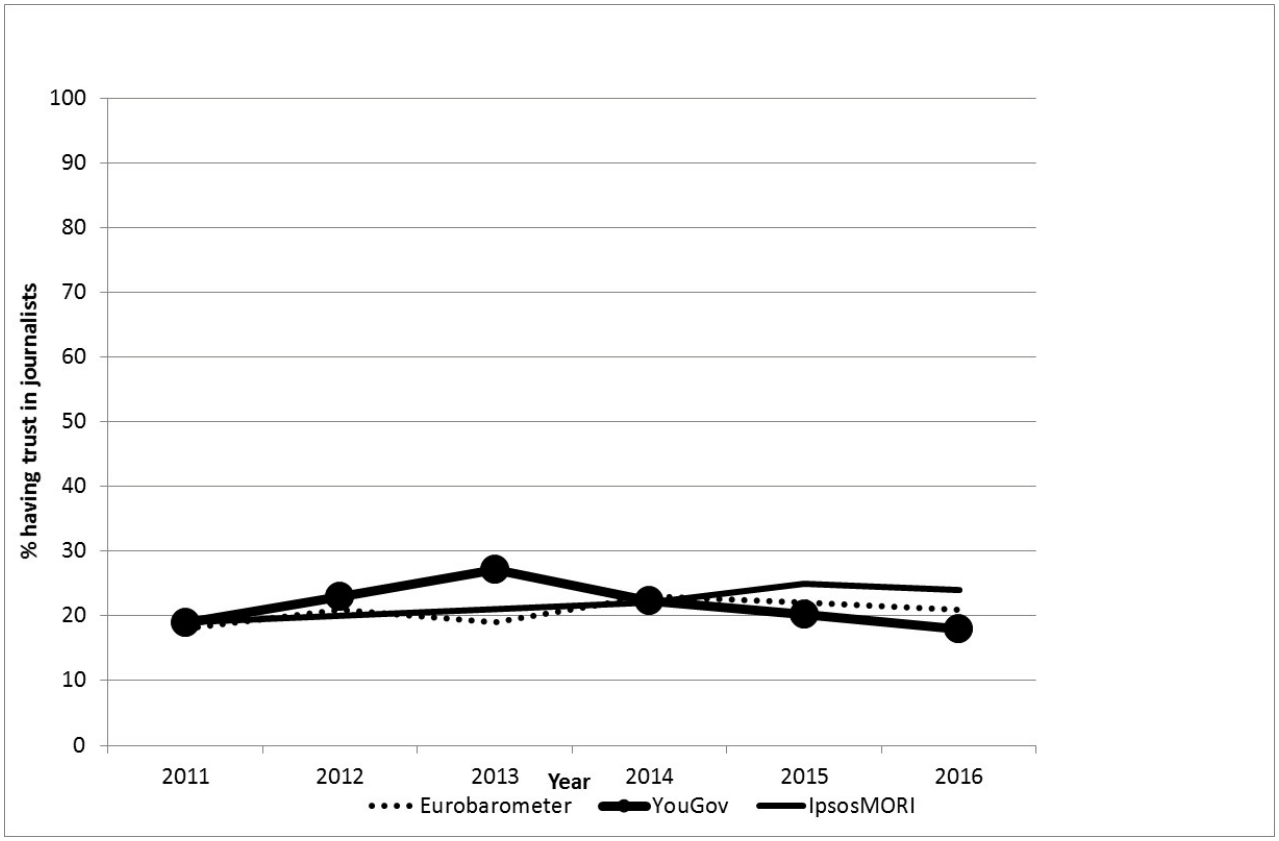
If the gently-downwards YouGov and the gently-upwards Ipsos MORI findings appear difficult to reconcile with one another in some respects, we receive some assistance from the regular Eurobarometer studies currently conducted on behalf of the European Commission in 33 countries. Since 2011[1] these have included questions relating to trust in media, as follows:

'I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain media and institutions. For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it.'

The categories put to respondents have been radio, television, 'internet', 'social media' and 'the written press'. The UK responses in relation to the written press are given below, as the darkest of the lines. For the purposes of this discussion the graph also includes the data for the same six years from Ipsos MORI and a line representing the average of the responses in the three different categories of the YouGov data. (Though the three datasets are not perfectly comparable, for these purposes they may be considered sufficiently so.)

[1] These data are published in alternate numbers of the Standard Eurobarometer series under 'Media use in the European Union: report', as follows: 76 (p.17), 78 (p.19), 80 (p.27), 82 (p.27), 84 (p.27) 86 (p.28),

FIGURE 3



As can be seen, over this period the three lines show a certain consistency, weaving in and out of one another around the 20 per cent mark. It seems reasonable to conclude, on the basis of this evidence from these three distinct sources, that trust in journalists in the UK has been roughly stable since 2011 (the year of the Milly Dowler revelation). There is no strong evidence, in other words, to show that, within this six-year span, trust either increased or decreased significantly. As for the years before 2011, given the different outcomes of the YouGov and Ipsos MORI surveys and the absence of Eurobarometer data, it is not safe to speak of either a long-term increase or a decrease. In short, the data indicates that trust in newspaper journalists has been roughly stable in recent years. If this is a consolation to journalists and their employers, however, it should be a small one, for the level at which trust stands, around 20 per cent, must be considered low if not very low.

How can we know what is low? Three forms of comparison suggest themselves:

– with other kinds of journalists or media in the UK;
– with written press in other countries;
– with other groups and professions in the UK.

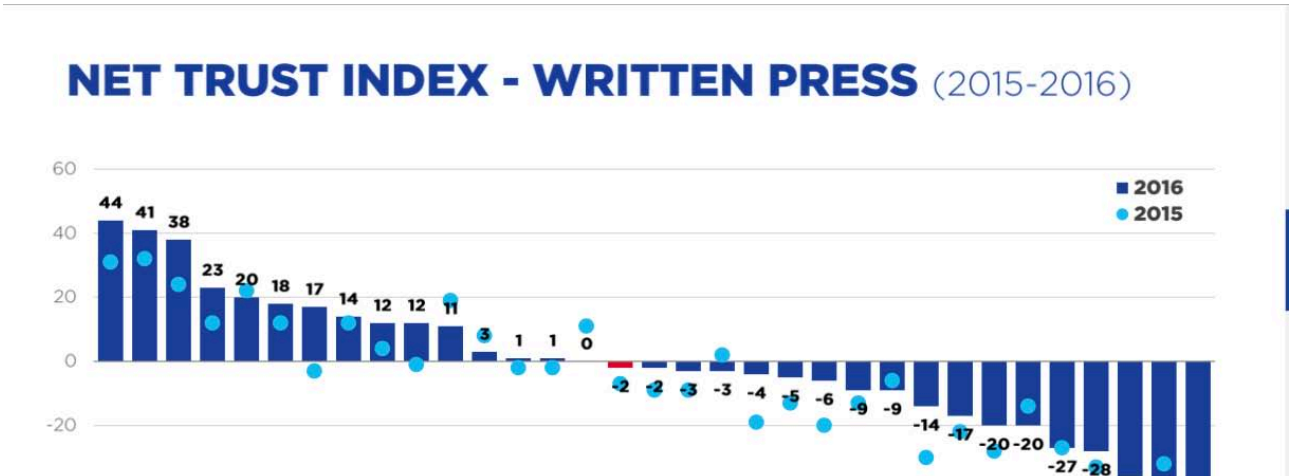
In each case national newspaper journalists fare badly.

First, comparison with other kinds of journalists or media in the UK: up to late 2014 YouGov also asked people whether they trusted BBC and ITV journalists. Taking the data from 2007 onwards, and excluding the short-term impact of the Savile scandal, the answers show trust in television journalists remaining at a significantly higher level than trust in newspaper journalists, though there appears to have been a slow overall decline. Roughly speaking, about half of respondents said they trusted ITV journalists, while about 60 per cent said they trusted BBC journalists. In November 2016 YouGov added a question about 'journalists on local newspapers': 36 per cent said they trusted them to tell the truth. The average YouGov figure for national newspaper journalists in that month was 18 per cent.

Eurobarometer not only asks about trust in the written press but also about trust in radio and television: the 2016 returns show that 45 per cent of UK respondents said they tended to trust television, and 51 per cent tended to trust radio. This compared with 21 per cent for the written press. (It also asks about the internet and social media, and the UK trust figures for these were 27 and 15 per cent respectively.) Ipsos MORI, meanwhile, includes in its survey a question about trust in television news presenters: that figure has never fallen below 60 per cent.

The second comparison is with trust in written press in other countries, for which Eurobarometer has data that can be illustrated using a graphic from the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) publication *Trust in Media 2017*. It shows the net figure when percentages expressing distrust are subtracted from those expressing trust, across 33 countries (EU members plus countries that are formal candidates for membership and Turkey):

FIGURE 4



This was the third year running that the UK written press occupied last place in this table.

On the evidence of these two comparisons it seems clear that UK newspaper journalists in general are less trusted than their broadcast counterparts in the UK by a substantial margin, and that the written press in the UK is also significantly less trusted than its counterparts in 32 other European countries, including all other EU countries.

How do journalists fare when compared with other groups and professions in the UK? In the YouGov data the latest (November 2016) average levels of trust for the three categories of newspaper journalist was 18 per cent. Family doctors, by contrast, tend to enjoy more than 80 per cent trust, school teachers more than 70 per cent, judges more than 60 per cent and senior police officers more than 50 per cent. 'My local MP' is trusted by around 35 per cent. Politicians of various parties score roughly the same as newspaper journalists do on average – around 20 per cent – while estate agents are in the mid-teens. The Ipsos MORI data tell a similar story, with the recent scores for doctors, teachers, judges and the police a little higher than in the YouGov data, and politicians in general roughly in the high teens, so below journalists in general. Ipsos MORI has only recently started asking about estate agents, and the 2016 response placed them higher than journalists, on 30 per cent.

In summary, therefore, these three comparisons tell us that trust in UK national newspaper journalists may safely be described as low or very low.

Other evidence

Data from other sources, though fragmentary, tends to confirm a general impression of public lack of confidence. In 2013 the survey *British Social Attitudes 30* (NatCen Social Research, 2013, p.xvi) carried a table showing perceptions of how well major institutions were run, with responses given on six occasions going back to 1983. The answers in relation to the press showed that between 1994 and 2012 confidence that the press was well-run had fallen from 47 per cent to 27 per cent. Confidence in the running of the BBC, by contrast, stood at 63 per cent. In the same year, the anti-corruption organisation Transparency International asked 114,000 people in 107 countries which of 12 institutions in their countries they considered most corrupt (2013, p.17). Only in Britain, Egypt, New Zealand and Australia were the media perceived to be the most corrupt institutions. In Britain 69 per cent of

respondents said the media were the most corrupt, up from 39 per cent three years earlier.

Occasional surveys by the public relations company Edelman tend to confirm the hierarchy of trust in national papers identified by YouGov. In January 2012 Edelman conducted a survey (Full Fact, 2012) in which 2,101 people were shown a list of publications and invited to answer the question:

'How much do you trust that publication to do what is right?'

For television and radio news, 58 per cent said they trusted the broadcasters to do what was right. For 'broadsheets' (YouGov's 'upmarket' papers) the figure was 47 per cent, for mid-market papers 26 per cent, and for 'tabloid' titles (YouGov's red-tops) 14 per cent. A second, similar survey was conducted in 2014 but its results have only been described publicly in summary form (Williams, 2016) as follows: trust in the lower end of the market was 'in a range of 9% to 17%', while for mid-market papers it was 'in the mid-30s' and for the 'heavies' it was the mid-50s.

We should pause here to consider the implications of this perceived hierarchy. In some respects it is what we would expect. The general idea that the national newspaper market is divided in three has been accepted not only in the industry but in British public life at least since the Second World War. Titles in the same sector have been seen as competing principally with one another, rather than with titles in other sectors, partly on the basis of their differing political stances. The three sectors, which have had various labels, have traditionally been understood to be distinguished from one another by factors such as the social class, educational attainments or incomes of their readers, by the language and tone they employ, by some of the subject matter they report, by the format in which they have appeared, and sometimes by price. What is striking here is that the YouGov data very consistently shows, and the fragmentary Edelman data tend to confirm it, that for the public these three categories are also distinguished by different levels of trustworthiness. The respondents are saying, in short, that the lower you go in the market (to adopt YouGov's perspective) the less you can rely on the content to be truthful.

Possible explanations

Having reviewed and summarised available data, it is time to consider the reasons people might have for distrusting journalists. Here we should remind ourselves what the respondents were asked. YouGov put the question, *'How much do you trust the following to tell the truth?'* We have been looking at the figures for those who, in relation to the three categories of journalists, answered either 'a fair amount' or 'a great deal'. Ipsos MORI asked simply, *'Now I will read out a list of different types of people. For each, would you tell me whether you generally trust them to tell the truth or not?'* Included on their list were 'journalists'. Eurobarometer asked: *'For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it.'* The relevant category was 'the written press'. Two of these three, therefore, refer directly to trusting people to tell the truth, while the third refers more generally to trust.[2] As we have seen, over the past six years these approaches have produced outcomes that appear similar: a trust level of around 20 per cent. On this evidence it seems reasonable to conclude that, unless other pressing explanations suggest themselves, the respondents are probably saying what they mean – in other words many people simply do not believe that journalists may be relied upon to speak or write the truth. What other explanations might there be? Here are four possibilities.

First, the job of journalists is to challenge and be sceptical, to ask awkward questions and sometimes to show popular personalities in an unpopular light. This may lead some people to conclude that the mindset of journalists is untrusting and that therefore they themselves are less worthy of trust. There is undoubted weight in this argument, and it is likely that it accounts for some part of the strong public distrust we have seen. However, it must surely be true in principle of all of the types of journalist we have discussed, including broadcast and regional journalists and those working in the written press in other countries. They have the same mission to challenge. Yet UK newspaper journalists are trusted far less than the others. By the same token it is no less true, surely, of journalists working at the Daily Telegraph and the Guardian than of those working at the Sun and the Daily Mail, yet the evidence suggests that those at the latter papers are trusted far less. In short, if there is a general distrust of journalists that derives from the character of the job, it cannot be said to account for the especially low levels of trust in UK written journalists,

[2] The possible significance of this distinction is not explored here. It does not appear to have a noticeable effect on the responses.

and in mid-market and red-top journalists in particular. With these categories, other, more powerful factors must be at work.

Second, journalists are often partisan, expressing or supporting particular political views, and this may lead those who disagree with them to doubt their accuracy and their commitment to the truth. Again, this is likely to contribute to distrust, and to a degree, given the relatively strong partisanship of most of the UK national press, it may well be a contributory factor to the UK's low standing in the Eurobarometer trust league. But as before it can't explain the low trust levels inside the UK. Strong partisanship is found in all three sectors of the national press, indeed the Guardian and the Daily Telegraph are scarcely less at odds politically than the Daily Mirror and the Sun, and yet trust in the Guardian and Telegraph is much higher. Again, if partisanship has a role depressing trust, it must be a relatively small one.

Third, in our culture, journalists are often portrayed in an unflattering light. In popular television series such as ITV's *Broadchurch* (2013) and HBO's *The Wire* (2008) they have been untrustworthy, unattractive figures, and there is nothing new in this. The same was true of journalists in Anthony Trollope's novels and in Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* (1938). We need to set against this, however, that journalists are also often heroes, as they were in the 1976 film *All The President's Men*, and more recently in *Spotlight* (2015) and *Snowden* (2016), and in the 2009 BBC drama *State of Play* (not to mention the various representations of Clark Kent, Superman). It would be hard to make a case that, on balance, our culture is anti-journalist to such a degree that it is responsible for the low levels of trust we have seen.

Fourth, a case might be made that trust is in decline everywhere, in every aspect of public life, and it is declining especially fast in Britain. This may be correct, but once again it does not explain the differentials identified above. Why would this affect newspaper journalists so much more than, say, judges or police officers? Why print journalists more than television journalists? Why red-top journalists more than those on upmarket papers?

This brings us to the most straightforward explanation, which is that many people in the UK are ready to say that they do not trust national newspaper journalists to tell the truth because their experience, observations, knowledge or intuition tell them that, indeed, journalists in the UK sometimes do not tell the truth. This should be no surprise, since there is no shortage of public evidence of such untruthfulness. The most notorious example is probably the *Sun*'s coverage of the Hillsborough football stadium tragedy in 1989, in which 96 people

died. Under the headline 'The Truth', the paper made very grave allegations against supporters of Liverpool Football Club, all of which were ultimately and very publicly disproved. In the 1990s readers became familiar with the idea that many articles about Diana Princess of Wales were either fabricated or acquired unethically. More recently, almost all of the mid-market and red-top newspapers have been forced to retract or pay damages or compensation after publishing prominent, persistent falsehoods about the family of Madeleine McCann. The same was true in the case of the Bristol schoolteacher Christopher Jefferies, vilified by many newspapers in connection with a murder for which another man was convicted. Then came the phone hacking and bribery scandals, in which denials by newspapers were repeatedly overturned by the facts. The Leveson Inquiry found in 2012 that the press had ignored its responsibilities to the public, behaved as if its own code of practice did not exist, wreaked havoc in the lives of the innocent, disdained the rights of citizens and indulged in outrageous behaviour (Leveson, 2012, p.4). In the recent election and referendum campaigns press partisanship has overflowed into inaccuracy on many occasions.

In short, the findings of this survey of the data broadly confirm what recent history might lead one to expect. In a country where there is abundant evidence of journalists having failed to tell the truth, most people are not ready to trust journalists to do so.

Does it matter?

Trust is complex and is consequently the subject of a substantial literature. No attempt is made here to address the full range of possible applications of trust to journalism and to newspapers; the focus is on trust in journalists to tell the truth as it may be understood from survey data.

In general, truth is important in journalism, at least as an aspiration. Journalism is sometimes described (Harding, 2016, Sullivan, 2015) as presenting the closest approximation to the truth that is possible in the time available. The Editors' Code of Conduct (IPSO, 2017), to which most UK national newspapers claim to adhere, states in its very first clause: 'The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information . . .' The leading political journalist Peter Oborne (2015) put it bluntly: 'Newspapers have what amounts in the end to a constitutional duty to tell their readers the truth.' We may take it that, formally at least, few UK newspaper journalists would dispute that an association with the telling of truth is important if not essential to their profession.

The question thus arises: if these journalists are so little trusted to tell the truth, why do people consume their products? There are several possible answers. One is that people may distrust journalists generally while still trusting the newspaper that they read. There must be truth in this. Long-term readers of a particular paper, for example, may have developed confidence in the judgement of particular journalists on the paper and possibly also in its editorial management. They may also be content that the paper's reporting and commentary reflect their world view. Such loyalty in turn could foster distrust of journalists working for other papers, whose approach is by nature different (and sometimes very different).

It is also the case that people may buy a newspaper for reasons that have little or nothing to do with the propensity of its journalists to tell the truth – because it publishes better puzzles or a better horoscope or better recipes; because it gives fuller cricket scores or tends to devote more space than others to Manchester City Football Club; because it covers fashion or popular music in a particular way. It seems likely that such factors are more important to some readers, perhaps many readers, than news reporting and political coverage. Equally, people may regularly read and enjoy a newspaper while remaining sceptical about the accuracy of its content. They may laugh at the humour and irreverence of the political coverage or savour the gossip in the entertainment pages without particularly needing to believe that the information is truthful.

If the newspaper market was stable it might be possible to argue that brands were shielded from the consequences of low trust levels by factors such as these. Journalists and managements in the industry could assert that they know and understand their readers and are able to retain their loyalty in the teeth of dismal trust data. But this is not a stable market. Over the past decade sales of national newspapers have almost halved from around 12 million every day to around 6.5 million per day, and year on year the declines continue to be steep (Mayhew, F. 2017).[3] The point here is emphatically not that this is primarily the result of declining trust – there are other explanations. It is that millions of readers are deserting. They may continue to get some of their news from the same news supplier online or on mobile but very significantly (with rare exceptions) they no longer pay for it.

[3] Historical UK Audit Bureau of Circulation datasets are not published. A useful set is maintained by Wikipedia under 'List of newspapers in the United Kingdom by circulation', available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_newspapers_in_the_United_Kingdom_by_circulation [Accessed 13 June 2017]

In such a sharply declining market any negative factor, such as low trust, would normally matter.

Conclusion

For professional journalism the importance of trust is likely to increase in the future. Sources of information are proliferating online and in social media and, as is now notorious, many either have no commitment to seeking truth or are deliberately subverting it. In such an environment the social and democratic value of journalists and journalistic brands that command trust in the accuracy of their output is obvious. We should expect people who read claims that they find suspect to turn to such brands to find the truth. Even inside the 'filter bubbles' of polarised political debate, where people tend to see only information that affirms their world view, there is and will be a need for yardsticks to measure the trustworthiness of news. Those yardsticks will be provided principally by journalists and journalistic brands that enjoy the trust of readers because they verify the information they publish. Further, the leading international online platforms are already under pressure to help readers distinguish between 'fake' and 'real' news. This is challenging in many ways, but it seems reasonable to expect that in the future the algorithms employed by these platforms to rank information will identify and tend to marginalise news sources with a track record of demonstrable inaccuracy. Where that is the case those who aspire to produce the most trustworthy news, and who show the evidence of its trustworthiness, are likely to benefit. Or to put it another way, online news publishers that do not make the effort to cultivate trust will be less likely to see their content appearing near the tops of searches.

Current trust data need to be seen in this context. Newspapers will not survive much longer, except possibly as a niche product like vinyl records. The brands that produce them – the so-called legacy brands – none the less have an advantage in the new information world: unlike the native digital brands they have tradition, money and usually instant recognition to help them. However, if they mean to continue producing journalism into the future and are content with trust levels at 20 per cent they are surely doomed and all their precious history and brand familiarity will go to waste – because anyone can produce untrustworthy information.

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