



University of Connecticut
Department of Public Policy

**PRESS FREEDOM IN THE U.S.:
A NATIONAL SURVEY OF JOURNALISTS AND THE AMERICAN PUBLIC**

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ONLY 14% OF AMERICANS – AND 57% OF JOURNALISTS – CAN NAME FREEDOM OF
THE PRESS AS A RIGHT IN THE FIRST AMENDMENT

PUBLIC AND JOURNALISTS SUPPORT DEFYING JUDGE'S RULE TO DIVULGE
SOURCES

USE OF TV AND INTERNET FOR GETTING THE NEWS SPIKES

JOURNALISTS SAY INTERNET IS CHANGING JOURNALISM

This is a summary of findings from a set of surveys directed by Dr. Ken Dautrich and Chris Barnes at the University of Connecticut's Department of Public Policy. Dautrich is the Chair of the Department of Public Policy, and Barnes is a Researcher in that Department.

Summary of methodology: The findings in this summary are based on a telephone survey of 1,000 American adults, and a telephone survey of 300 television and newspaper journalists. Interviewing was conducted in late March and April of 2005. Sampling error for the survey of American adults is +/- 3.5%. Sampling error for the Journalist Survey is +/-5%.

A full copy of the survey results and questionnaires used in the surveys may be found at www.dpp.uconn.edu.

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Following are the key findings from the surveys

Is Freedom of the Press in the First Amendment?

Only 14% of Americans, and 57% of newspaper and TV journalists, can name “freedom of the press” as a right that is guaranteed by the First Amendment, according to a new University of Connecticut study.

“Freedom of the press is at the core of America’s brand of democracy,” commented Professor Ken Dautrich, who directed the study. “It’s quite surprising that so few Americans can name it as part of the First Amendment. Even more disappointing is the fact that those who use free press rights in their work aren’t more knowledgeable about it.”

When asked to identify the specific rights guaranteed by the First Amendment, “freedom of speech” is cited most frequently (58%) by Americans, followed by freedom of religion (16%). The right to peaceably assemble (10%), and the right to petition government for a redress of grievances (1%) are even less identifiable than free press.

Among the national sample of journalists, 66% mention “freedom of speech” as one of the rights in the First Amendment. 39% of journalists know the right to assemble is included, 35% cite freedom of religion, and 6% mention the right to petition.

Over the past 8 years, there has been an increase in the perceived importance of First Amendment rights.

Today, 89% of Americans say that the right to practice the religion of one’s choice is “essential” to our democracy. In 1997, 81% described this right as “essential.”

80% now say that freedom of speech is an essential right, up from 72% in 1997. The 67% who now say that the right to peaceably assemble is an “essential” right is up from 56% eight years ago.

The perceived importance of freedom of the press has also spiked from 60% in 1997 to 70% today.

Our sample of journalists was also asked about the importance of the First Amendment rights. Fully 96% say that freedom of the press is essential to our democracy, and 95% say religious freedom also is essential. 88% say freedom of assembly is essential.

Does the press have too much freedom in our society?

43% of Americans think so, while another 43% say the press has about the right amount of freedom in America. 12% believe the press has too little freedom.

Conversely, only 3% of American journalists say the press in America has too much freedom, whereas 33% say it has too little freedom. A majority of journalists (62%) say that the press has about the right amount of freedom.

Confidentiality of News Sources

Not surprisingly, journalists overwhelmingly (96%) agree that reporters should be allowed to keep a news source confidential. Confidentiality of sources is central to the work of most journalists, as 76% say that the use of confidential sources is essential to one's own ability to report some of their stories.

While only 14% of journalists think that a news story relying on unnamed sources should not be published, a majority (53%) of American adults think that way.

However, large majorities of both journalists (74%) and the American public (89%) agree that one should question the accuracy of news stories that rely on unnamed sources.

The strong feelings of support among journalists regarding confidentiality of sources underlie their support for press rights. For example, 89% of journalists say that reporters should keep secret the identity of a source even when ordered by a court to disclose the source. 59% of the American public also agrees with this.

“It's not only journalists, but most Americans also feel pretty strong about the importance of keeping sources confidential – so strong in fact that they support the idea of having journalists defy the orders of a judge to divulge a source,” said Dautrich.

With respect to the so-called “shield law,” 87% of journalists favor passing a law that would protect journalists from being required to disclose confidential sources in federal court. +

Given the support for the shield law, it isn't surprising that the vast majority (87%) of journalists disagree with the recent federal court ruling requiring reporters to release their confidential sources during grand jury investigations. 81% of journalists also say that this Appeals Court decision violates the First Amendment's free press clause. Only 48% of the American public, however, think this decision violates the First Amendment.

How do Americans feel about Newspaper Censorship?

While three-quarters (75%) of American adults agree that newspapers should be allowed to publish freely without government approval of a story, as many as 22% believe that government should be able to censor newspapers. In 1997, 80% said newspapers should be allowed to publish without government's interference.

A survey of high schools students that was conducted last year found that only 51% of students agreed that newspapers should be able to publish with government approval.

Not surprisingly, journalists have strong opinions on the topic of newspaper censorship: 98% agree that newspapers should be allowed to publish freely without government approval of a story.

What do Americans think about free expression rights for musicians?

Americans are less willing to give First Amendment protections to musicians than they are to journalists. 58% agree, for example, that musicians should be able to sing songs with lyrics that others might find offensive. The high school student survey found that 70% of students favored protecting musicians' first amendment rights.

There has been a significant change in what Americans consider their primary news source since 1997.

Today, 61% say that television provides their main source of news, compared to 50% who relied mostly on TV eight years ago. And whereas only 1% relied mostly on the Internet in 1997, today fully 8% say the Internet provides their primary source of news.

Increased reliance on TV and the Internet come at the expense of declines in newspaper use and the use of radio. Today, 20% depend primarily on newspapers (a 6 point decline since 1997), and 9% rely only radio (a drop in 6 points).

“Advances in technology, new ways of presenting the news, and shifts in the American public have all changed where Americans go to get the news,” Dautrich said. “Cable TV and the Internet are the big winners and newspapers and radio the losers amidst these changes.”

Among those who currently rely mostly on television, 53% cite their local TV station as the specific source they use the most. 18% say Fox News, 15% say CNN.

How do Americans rate the performance of the news media?

A majority (63%) of Americans say the media do either an “excellent” or “good” job providing coverage of current events. When it comes to reporting information accurately however, only 39% offer a positive rating of excellent or good. Also, less than half say the media do at least a good job in keeping public officials accountable (42%) and in educating the public about complex issues (43%).

Journalists have a very different sense of how well they are performing in the accuracy of reporting. 72% of reporters say the media is doing at least a good job in reporting information accurately (compared to 39% of Americans). However, less than half (45%) say the media is doing excellent or good in keeping public officials accountable, and only 34% say they do at least a good job in educating the public about complex issues. 66% of journalists say they do at least a good job in providing coverage of current events.

Still, when Americans are asked to think about the news source they use most often, about 8-in-10 (79%) give a rating of either excellent or good.

Is there a bias in the news?

Only about one-third (36%) of Americans agree that the news media tries to report the news without bias, while 61% claim that there is bias to coverage of the news.

Perceptions of bias may be based on how journalists and American adults differ in their own political orientations. Among all American adults, 33% say they are Democrats, 32% claim to be Republicans, and 22% say they are politically independent. 33% of journalists also claim to be Democrats; however, only 10% say they are Republicans and half say they are independent.

Interestingly, 18% of Americans describe themselves as liberal and 18% of journalists say they are politically liberal. But while only 10% of journalists say they are conservative, 34% of Americans say they are conservative. 53% of journalists say they are politically moderate, while 40% of Americans describe themselves that way.

Finally, 68% of journalists say they voted for John Kerry in 2004, while only 25% voted for George W. Bush. Only 1% say they voted for Nader, and 5% say they did not vote.

The Internet and News

The sample of journalists was asked about the influence of the Internet on news and newsroom practices. 9-in-10 feel that the emergence of blogs has changed the profession of journalism at least a little.

A majority (61%) say that the emergence of the Internet has made journalism better, while only 18% say it has made journalism worse.

About two-thirds (65%) say that the Internet has increased the deadline pressures that journalists face.

Journalists have low regard for news coverage provided in Weblogs: only 11% rate weblogs' news as either excellent or good, while 41% rate it as fair and 32% say poor. 59% of journalists do not consider blogs a legitimate source of news, and only 13% consider bloggers to be journalists.

Still, 85% of journalists think that bloggers should have the same First Amendment protections as those afforded to newspapers and books.

Fully 83% of journalists report having used blogs themselves, with 4-in-10 claiming to use them at least once a week. Among those who use blogs, 55% say they use them to support the work they do in writing news stories.