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Measuring the Concept of Credibility

*Factor analysis produces
12-item credibility factor.
Scores for newspaper
and television on this
credibility measure correlated.*

► Five decades of research on media credibility have raised a number of questions about the extent of media credibility problems.¹ Estimates of the magnitude of problems depend on how "credibility" is measured. The purpose of this article is to describe measurement of this concept in previous research and to report the results

¹ For historical data, see: Cecilie Gaziano and Kristin McGrath, "The Media Credibility Problem: Putting the Research into Perspective," paper presented to the American Association for Public Opinion Research, McAffee, N.J. (1985); Hazel Gaudet Erskine, "The Poll: Opinion of the News Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 34:630-643 (1970-71); D. Charles Whitney, "The Media and the People: Americans' Experience with the News Media: A Fifty-Year Review," Gannett Center for Media Studies, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027 (1985).

² "Preliminary Notes on a Study of Newspaper Accuracy," *Journalism Quarterly*, 13:394-401 (1936).

³ Carl I. Hovland, Irving L. Janis, and Howard H. Kelley, *Communication and Persuasion*. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1953); Carl I. Hovland and Walter Weiss, "The Influence of Source Credibility on Communication Effectiveness," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 15:635-650.

⁴ Burns W. Roper, *Public Attitudes Toward Television and Other Media in a Time of Change*. (New York: Television Information Office, 1985). The question was: "If you got conflicting or different reports of the same news story from radio, television, the magazines and the newspapers, which of the four versions would you be most inclined to believe—the one on radio or television or magazines or newspapers?"

of a national survey which treated credibility as a multidimensional concept.

Credibility research has two primary ancestors, the work of Mitchell V. Charnley² on newspaper reporting accuracy and the work of the Yale group on believability of source as a component of persuasive communication impact.³ Interest in credibility increased after the Roper polling organization began to ask a question in surveys for the Television Information Office about the relative believability of media and got differing results between 1959 and 1961, which pointed to increased public trust in television, compared with newspapers.⁴ Since 1961, television's lead over other media has increased. However,

► Kristin McGrath, president of MORI Research, headed the study and coordinated planning with the ASNE Credibility Committee, of which David Lawrence, Jr., was chairman. Cecilie Gaziano, research analyst, was project director of the national survey.

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the margin over newspapers has remained relatively stable.⁵

The Roper question has been the most frequently used operational definition of credibility in published research. At least 14 reports have used some version of this question.⁶ Some of these studies have found that whether the question specifies "local" news stories or "national" news can influence results on the relative credibility of television and newspapers. In some studies, newspapers have been perceived as more believable than television for local news,⁷ but this has not always been so.⁸ Although this question has been pursued for about a quarter of a century, apparently no researchers have asked people if they ever actually have received conflicting news stories about different media.

When researchers' interest in credibility began to mushroom in the 1960s, interest also grew in developing the concept more fully. Hovland and his colleagues identified two main components of source credibility as "trustworthiness" and "expertise."⁹ This led some scholars to be interested in identifying through factor analysis, underlying dimensions of credibility such as "safety," "qualification," "dynamism," "knowledgeability," "accuracy," "fairness," and "completeness," as well as differences between media and people as communication sources.¹⁰

The degree to which people differentiate among different criteria for media performance, concepts implying credibility, different kinds of media and various media functions has not been clear. Several researchers have concluded that credibility is a multidimensional concept, although the dimensions identified vary from study to study.¹¹

Concern that the public distrusts the news media and that this distrust may be increasing led the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) to commission a more comprehensive look at credibility than any previous research, with a special focus on newspapers.¹² It was followed in 1985 by at least three other comprehensive surveys of the public on credibility, each of which chose a somewhat

different approach to study and each of which varied in definitions of credibility.¹³ A national survey by the Los Angeles Times Poll concerned perceptions of political bias in newspaper reporting and evaluations of media in performance, accuracy,

⁵ In 1959, 32% said they would believe newspapers, and 29% said they would believe television. In 1961, 24% said they would believe newspapers, and 39% said television. In 1984, 24% said newspapers and 53% said television.

⁶ For example, see: Leslie A. Baxter and John R. Bittner, "High School and College Perceptions of Media Credibility," *Journalism Quarterly*, 51:517-520 (1974); Ronald Mulder, "Media Credibility: A Use-Gratification Approach," *Journalism Quarterly*, 57:474-476 (1980); Joey Reagan and Jayne Zenaty, "Local News Credibility: Newspapers vs. TV Revisited," *Journalism Quarterly*, 56:168-172 (1979); David Shaw, "Public Finds News Media More Fair than Accurate," *Los Angeles Times*, pp. 1, 20-21 (Oct. 11, 1981) and "Public Relies on TV for News of World. Papers for Local Coverage, Survey Finds," *Los Angeles Times*, pp. 3, 22 (Oct. 13, 1981, Late Final Edition); Eugene Shaw, "Media Credibility: The Measure of a Measure," *Journalism Quarterly*, 50:306-311 (1973).

⁷ James B. Lemert, "News Media Competition Under Conditions Favorable to Newspapers," *Journalism Quarterly*, 47:272-280 (1970); Guido Stempel, III, "Effects on Performance of a Cross-Media Monopoly," *Journalism Monographs*, No. 29 (June 1973).

⁸ John D. Abel and Michael O. Wirth, "Newspaper vs. TV Credibility for Local News," *Journalism Quarterly*, 54:371-375 (1977); Walter Gantz, "The Influence of Research Methods on Television and Newspaper News Credibility Evaluations," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 25:155-169 (1981); Stempel, *op. cit.*

⁹ Hovland, *et al. op. cit.*; Hovland and Weiss, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Harvey K. Jacobson, "Mass Media Believability: A Study of Receiver Judgments," *Journalism Quarterly*, 46:20-28 (1969); Raymond S. H. Lee, "Credibility of Newspaper and TV News," *Journalism Quarterly*, 55:282-287 (1978); David K. Berto, James B. Lemert, and Robert J. Mertz, "Dimensions for Evaluating the Acceptability of Message Sources," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 33:563-576 (1969-70).

¹¹ Timothy J. Meyer, "Media Credibility: The State of the Research," *Public Telecommunications Review*, 2(4):48-52 (1974); Michael Burgoon, Judee K. Burgoon, and Miriam Wilkinson, "Newspaper Image and Evaluation," *Journalism Quarterly*, 58:411-419, 433 (1981); Gantz, *op. cit.*

¹² American Society of Newspaper Editors, *Newspaper Credibility: Building Reader Trust*. American Society of Newspaper Editors, conducted by MORI Research, Inc., P.O. Box 17004, Washington, D. C. 20041 (1985). Other ASNE publications from this study include: "Focus Groups on Newspaper Credibility" and "Technical Appendix: Newspaper Credibility: Building Reader Trust" (both 1985).

An annotated bibliography on media credibility is included in the technical appendix. The data tapes for the study have been deposited with the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut. Inquiries may be addressed to the Center at Box U164, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CN 06268. Telephone (203) 486-4441.

¹³ David Shaw, "The Times Poll: Media: High Ratings Are Tempered," *Los Angeles Times*, pp. 1, 8 (Aug. 12, 1985) (Los Angeles Times Poll No. 94); D. Charles Whitney, "The Media and the People: Soundings from Two Communities," Gannett Center for Media Studies, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027 (1985); *The People & the Press: A Times-Mirror Investigation of Public Attitudes Toward the News Media*, conducted by the Gallup Organization in collaboration with Michael J. Robinson of George Washington University and the American Enterprise Institute (1986).

fairness, responsibility, and role in criticism of government. The Gannett Center conducted studies in two communities, focusing on the role of public knowledge, media use, and personal experience with media and news in perceptions of credibility, including variation in opinions by community. The Times Mirror study used both cross-sectional and panel national surveys, scrutinizing public knowledge of media, ratings of accuracy and believability, press criticism with regard to press behavior and practice, political bias, independence, freedoms, libel law and government criticism.

The national study sponsored by the ASNE and conducted by MORI Research, Inc., took the broadest approach to definitions of credibility among these four surveys, highlighting areas in which credibility concerns seemed to be greatest.¹⁴ Primary research questions included the following:

- 1) What are the dimensions of credibility and how are they related to one another?
- 2) How well do people differentiate between news in newspapers and news in other media?
- 3) Are credibility problems concentrated in particular coverage areas? Do credibility problems increase or decrease as the location of the news event gets closer to home?
- 4) How do people feel about First Amendment issues, such as those dealing with revealing sources and gaining access to news events?

Method

The study had two phases, a series of focus group discussions and a national survey of adults aged 18 and older living in the contiguous United States. The quantitative phase of the project had two parts.

An initial telephone sample was selected through random digit dialing to allow

¹⁴ The ASNE and Los Angeles *Times* Poll surveys also had companion surveys of newspaper journalists on credibility. See: Associated Press Managing Editors, *Journalists and Readers: Bridging the Credibility Gap*, conducted by MORI Research, Inc., c/o Robert W. Ritter, Executive Editor, *The Sun*, 399 North D Street, San Bernardino, CA 92401; David Shaw, "The Times Poll: Public and Press—Two Viewpoints," *Los Angeles Times*, pp. 1A, 12-13 (Aug. 11, 1985).

unlisted numbers to be included. Up to four attempts were made to reach respondents determined to be eligible for the survey. Respondents were selected within households by a random method with a quota for sex. Interviews, lasting 20 minutes on the average, were completed with 1,600 adults between December 7, 1984 and January 19, 1985. The statistical margin of error for a random sample of this size is plus or minus 3%. Error margins are larger for sub-groups.

During the initial telephone interviews, respondents were asked to give their names and addresses so a second questionnaire, could be mailed to them. Those who agreed received a 12-page questionnaire, a cover letter and a \$1 incentive. After about a week, these people were re-contacted by telephone so they could read back numbers corresponding to their answers on the mail questionnaire. Final telephone interviews were completed with 1,002 respondents during this second phase (December 14 to January 30). The completion rate was 58% of contacts with eligible respondents, and those taking part in the second phase were 63% of those completing the first part. The mail sub-sample somewhat underrepresented people aged 18 to 24 and 65 or older, people with lower education and income, blacks, men, and widowed people. It slightly overrepresented people aged 25 to 44, those with higher education and income, women, married people, and those who read a newspaper the day before.

For the analysis, results were weighted by sex, education, household size and race to match national figures from the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The weighted total of respondents participating in Part I was 1,469. The data reported in this article are based on responses from the mail sub-sample, whose weighted total was 875 persons.

The Concept of Credibility

The ASNE survey used a variety of operational definitions of credibility, including broad and narrow measures. In order to provide a standard against which

responses to different types of questions about the media could be compared, credibility scores for newspapers and television were constructed. People were then divided into groups that were high, medium and low on credibility.

The first step in constructing an overall credibility score was a factor analysis of 16 items measuring people's attitudes toward newspapers on a number of dimensions. People were asked to rate these characteristics from 1 to 5 on a 5-point scale. Items were coded or recoded so that they were scaled in the same direction with 5 as the highest possible rating and 1 the lowest possible rating. The question for newspapers asked people to rate the daily newspaper with which they were most familiar.¹⁵ The television question appeared in a later section of the questionnaire and concerned television news.

The factor analysis showed that 12 of these items grouped together. The items concerned whether newspapers and television news are fair, are unbiased, tell the whole story, are accurate, respect people's privacy, watch out after people's interests, are concerned about the community's well-being, separate fact and opinion, can be trusted, are concerned about the public interest, are factual, and have well-trained reporters. Because most of these concepts have been treated as indicators of credibility in previous research, this factor was termed "credibility." Some previous research suggested that some of these items would separate into several factors such as fairness, trustworthiness and accuracy, but that did not happen in this case.¹⁶

Table 1 shows the factor loadings (the higher the loading, the greater the relationship) of the aspects of the credibility problem that were combined to create the overall credibility score. The table also shows the proportion of respondents rating newspapers or television highly on each characteristic (4 or 5 on the 5-point scales).

Items which grouped into a second factor, termed "social concerns," included caring what readers or viewers think, sen-

sationalizing, and being moral. Being patriotic (rated highly for newspapers by 62% and highly for TV news by 54%) grouped only with concern for the community as a third factor for newspapers, and it grouped with sensationalism and reporter training items as a TV news factor. The method was principal components with a varimax rotation.¹⁷

Television and newspaper credibility scores were correlated moderately with each other ($r = .40$, $p = .0001$), suggesting that people's attitudes toward these media are similar to a certain degree. About 61% of respondents scored either medium or high on the two media, and about 13% were low on both. Another 26% scored low on one but higher on the other.

Respondent ratings were translated into a score by adding up their ratings on each of the 12 credibility items. The lowest possible credibility score was 12 (less if respondents did not give an answer for each item), and the highest possible score was 60. Respondents were divided into high, medium and low credibility groups. Score distributions were skewed toward higher ratings, with about one-fourth of respondents giving low ratings to each medium (scores of 20 or less), and about one-third giving high ratings (scores higher than 30). Most respondents (43% in each case) bunched into a middle group with a narrow range of scores from 21 to 30. Cut-off points were selected at 10-point intervals because these breaks were a logical cutting

¹⁵ The question wording was: "Now, we'd like you to think about the daily newspaper you are the most familiar with . . . Please circle the number in between each pair (of words and phrases with opposite meanings) that best represents how you feel about the daily newspaper you have in mind." This wording was repeated for "television news."

¹⁶ Television news items separated into two factors, containing the same items as the newspaper credibility factor. No new items grouped with these. There appeared to be no reason not to use the same 12 items in a television credibility score.

¹⁷ The Eigenvalue of the newspaper credibility factor (first factor) was 5.97, and the final communality estimate was 8.46. Eigenvalues for the television credibility factor (first and second factors) were 6.12 and 1.38, and the final communality estimate was 9.73. The proportion of total variance explained by the newspaper factor was .37, and the proportion of interpreted variance was .71. The proportion of total variance explained by the first and second TV credibility factors was .38 and .09, respectively; the proportion of interpreted variance was .38 and .32, respectively.

TABLE I

Items Chosen for Newspaper and Television Credibility Scores^a

Credibility Factor	Daily Newspapers		Television News	
	Factor Loading	% Rating Newspapers Highly on Item	Factor Loading	% Rating TV News Highly on Item
Is fair or unfair	.66	52%	.77	52%
Is biased or unbiased	.66	36%	.82	39%
Tells the whole story or doesn't tell the whole story	.71	43%	.71	40%
Is accurate or inaccurate	.69	49%	.68	50%
Invades or respects people's privacy	.66	30%	.66	24%
Does or does not watch after readers'/ viewers' interests	.55	36%	.76	31%
Is or is not concerned about the community's well-being	.47	61%	.72	51%
Does or does not separate fact and opinion	.71	38%	.57	38%
Can or cannot be trusted	.72	51%	.57	48%
Is concerned about the public interest or is concerned about making profits.	.57	42%	.70	38%
Is factual or opinionated	.71	50%	.63	48%
Has well-trained or poorly trained reporters	.57	48%	.36	57%
Social Concerns Factor				
Cares or does not care what audience thinks	.71	44%	.78	44%
Sensationalizes or does not sensationalize	.55	30%	.38	20%
Is moral or immoral	.77	53%	.74	47%

^aSubsample: Those who participated in Part 2 interview (N = 875).

point and they provided large enough groups for analysis.

When all of the credibility and non-credibility items are taken into account, the percentages of people rating newspapers and television news highly (4 or 5 on a 5-point scale) on these characteristics were relatively similar, although t-tests on differences in mean scores were statistically significant for 10 of the 16 items. Newspapers were rated highly by 6 people in 10 on

concern for the community's well-being and patriotism. About 5 in 10 rated television news highly on these characteristics (t-tests significant at $p \leq .0001$). About 5 in 10 evaluated newspapers and TV news this favorably for fairness, trustworthiness, morality, accuracy, and being factual. Very few people gave either television or newspapers low ratings on these characteristics. T-tests were significant only for morality, with newspapers receiving slightly higher scores ($p \leq .001$).

TV news and newspapers did relatively less well (high ratings by about 4 in 10) on being unbiased, caring what the audience thinks, separating fact and opinion, watching out for their audiences' interests, telling the whole story, and being concerned for the public interest. T-tests were significant for higher newspaper scores in the last three areas mentioned, as well as for a higher television score on lack of bias. Areas in which TV news and newspapers were especially likely to receive low ratings were respecting people's privacy and sensationalism, with newspapers receiving slightly higher scores ($p < .0001$).

Credibility scores were then used as "yardsticks" with which to compare results on other credibility measures, including believability when news reports conflict; media preferred for local, state, national or international news; reliability of coverage of specific topics; and responsible exercise of First Amendment rights. Results given for credibility scores in the following tables compare the extreme groups (high and low). Four other sets of questions also were chosen as indicators of credibility, since most credibility studies rely on only one or two definitions of credibility. These questions were: a) the Roper poll question about media believability when news reports conflict, b) preferences for media to aid understanding of complex or controversial issues,¹⁸ c) preferences for reliable news coverage,¹⁹ and d) news source preferences.

Comparisons of Dimensions

Participants were asked the Roper believability question, and their answers were quite similar to Roper's results. They would be most inclined to believe television as to believe newspapers by a 2-to-1 margin (52% versus 25%). Nine percent said radio, and 14% said magazines. Credibility scores were related to the choice of newspapers or television as the medium to believe in the face of conflicting reports (Table 2). For instance, those who gave newspapers high credibility scores were more likely to believe newspapers than those with low newspaper credibility scores. Those with high television credibil-

ity scores tended to select television. However, a large proportion of those scoring high on newspaper credibility would believe television.

A follow-up question, "Why do you feel that way?" was then asked. The most frequent reason people gave for selecting television was that "seeing is believing." One respondent said, "You can see their eyes. You can tell if they're lying." Other reasons for believing television were that it delivers news fast, easy and first, has some advantage related to credibility, or that other media are unsatisfactory. People who said they would believe newspapers most often cited the ability of newspapers to provide detail, to take time to prepare reports, or to have some advantage related to credibility.

Which medium people would believe is an important consideration. Half of those surveyed said they had heard conflicting reports of a news story from different news sources. When asked to provide details about this, half of these respondents said that the conflict involved two or more different media, such as television and newspapers.²⁰ About one-third said that two or more of the same kind of medium were involved, such as several TV stations, or they pointed out differences within sections of the same newspaper. When asked what conflicting reports were about, people most often mentioned breaking news stories about crimes, disasters, assassinations and attempted assassinations involving public figures.

Exposure to conflicting reports diminishes media credibility. Almost two-thirds of those with low newspaper or TV credibility scores were aware of conflicting

¹⁸ See: Barry Sussman, "Public Has Sharp Complaints About News Media, Poll Says," *Washington Post*, pp. A1-2 (Aug. 16, 1981); *Washington Post*, "Public Attitudes Toward the Media Survey," *Washington Post Company* (1981). Their question was: "If there is a situation in the news that is hard to understand or controversial, which part of the major news media would you trust the most to help you understand it?"

¹⁹ See: Shaw (1981), *op. cit.*; I. A. Lewis, "The Media," *Los Angeles Times* Poll No. 46, *Times-Mirror Company* (1981). Their question was: "Does the news seem more reliable to you when you see it on TV, or when you read it in a newspaper?"

²⁰ The next question was: "Please tell me what the circumstances were and where you heard the conflicting reports."

TABLE 2

Media Comparisons^a

1. BELIEVABILITY

a. If you got conflicting or different reports of the same news story from radio, television, magazines, and newspapers, which of the four versions would you be the most inclined to believe — the one on radio or television or magazines or newspapers?

	Newspaper Credibility Score		Television Credibility Score	
	LOW ^b	HIGH	LOW	HIGH
Television	49%	51%	46%	61%
Newspapers	15	34	23	23
Magazines	22	10	19	11
Radio	14	5	12	6

b. As far as you can recall offhand, have you ever heard conflicting reports of the same story from different news sources.

Yes	62%	46%	67%	42%
No	38	54	33	58

2. UNDERSTANDING THE NEWS

a. If there is a situation in your local area that is hard to understand or is controversial, which *one* of your local news media would you trust the most to help you understand it?

Television	33%	30%	29%	41%
Newspaper	48	61	57	48
Magazines	3	2	4	1
Radio	16	7	10	10

b. If there is a situation in the national news that is hard to understand or is controversial, which *one* of the news media would you trust the most to help you understand it?

Television	55%	54%	48%	64%
Newspapers	24	35	33	28
Magazines	12	9	13	5
Radio	10	4	9	5

3. RELIABILITY OF NEWS COVERAGE

a. Overall, does local and state news seem more *reliable* when you see it on television, read it in a newspaper, hear it over the radio, or read it in a magazine?

Television	58%	52%	53%	66%
Newspapers	24	42	33	27
Magazines	8	2	6	2
Radio	10	4	9	5

b. Overall, does national and international news seem more *reliable* to you when you see it on television, read it in a newspaper, hear it over the radio, or read it in a magazine?

Television	67%	68%	61%	80%
Newspapers	15	22	19	14
Magazines	10	9	14	5
Radio	8	1	5	2

TABLE 2 *continued*

4. NEWS SOURCE PREFERENCES

a. If you had to choose <i>one</i> source for local news, which source would you choose — newspapers, television, radio, or magazines?	Television	45%	46%	47%	54%
	Newspapers	33	43	36	33
	Magazines	2	1	2	1
	Radio	20	10	15	12
b. If you had to choose <i>one</i> source for state news, which source would you choose — newspapers, television, radio, or magazines?	Television	58%	53%	51%	62%
	Newspapers	29	41	38	33
	Magazines	3	1	2	1
	Radio	10	5	9	5
c. If you had to choose <i>one</i> source for national and international news, which source would you choose — newspapers, television, radio, or magazines?	Television	69%	69%	64%	78%
	Newspapers	14	25	21	17
	Magazines	8	5	8	4
	Radio	9	1	6	1

^aSubsample: Those who participated in Part 2 interview — newspaper credibility, N = 862 with 13 observations missing; TV credibility, N = 850, 25 observations missing).

^bOnly the extreme groups are compared here (newspapers: low, N = 213; high, N = 275; TV: low, N = 232; high, N = 256).

reports; less than half of those with high scores knew of such reports.

Some previous credibility research has suggested that geographic scope of news is an important variable. For example, some research has shown that people in some communities would believe newspapers more often than television if topics involved are local, but that they would be more likely to believe television if topics are national.

Local News. Newspapers did better than television in only one of the following comparisons. About half chose newspapers when asked which one of their local news media they would trust the most to help them understand “a situation in your local area that is hard to understand or is controversial” (Table 2). Just under 4 in 10 chose television. People who gave high ratings to newspaper credibility were particularly likely to trust newspapers for helping them understand complex local issues.

However, when the comparison was the single source people would choose for

local news, about half the respondents chose television. Only one-third chose newspapers. Preferences for a single source of state news and as the most reliable source for local and state news were similar. Even though credibility scores were related to preferences, they did not make a great deal of difference. About 5 in 10 people with high newspaper credibility scores chose television over newspapers in these comparisons.

National News. When respondents were asked which one of the news media they would trust to help them understand national news, 57% chose television compared to 29% for newspapers (Table 2). About 7 in 10 chose television as the most reliable medium for national and international news and as the one source they would choose for national and international news. Credibility ratings were related to choices, but did not make much difference. For example, 68% of respondents with high newspaper credibility scores said that television is more reliable for national and international reporting.

It is noteworthy that the credibility of television increases as the focus moves from local to state to national and international for each of these measures.

Overall, if respondents had to choose just one way of getting news and information, 64% would rather get it on TV or radio and 36% would rather read it in print. Even a majority of frequent newspaper readers preferred broadcast. Giving high credibility scores to newspapers did not have much influence on preferences for newspapers or magazines, but giving high scores to television did affect preferences for television or radio. Even among people who rated newspaper credibility high, 59% preferred broadcast media. This is almost as high a proportion as those rating newspaper credibility low who preferred broadcast (64%).

Coverage of Specific Topics

Survey respondents gave daily newspapers and television high marks for their reliability overall, the quality of their reporting and their coverage of controversial issues. However, evaluations differed among specific topics.

Respondents rated the reliability of newspaper and television coverage of 17 different topics on a scale of 1-to-5 where 1 meant "not at all reliable" and 5 meant "very reliable." Both media were rated highly (4 or 5) by a large majority (6 to 7 in 10) for coverage of local news, elections, natural disasters, crime and entertainment news.

Roughly 5 people in 10 evaluated television and newspapers highly for reporting on the economy, President Reagan, the government in Washington, business news, religion news, and health and medical news. Both media were given relatively lower marks for coverage of the Arab countries, Latin America, Israel, the Soviet Union, and the abortion issue. Roughly 4 in 10 rated reporting of these topics highly.

Although respondents tended to evaluate newspapers and television similarly, they gave newspapers an edge in local news (t-test on means significant at $p < .0001$), and they gave television a slight

TABLE 3

Reliability of News Coverage^a

For each topic please rate the *reliability* of coverage by the daily newspaper you are the most familiar with (on a scale of "1" to "5," where "1" means "not at all reliable" and "5" means "very reliable"). (Question repeated for television news.)

	Pearson correlations with: ^b	
	Newspaper Credibility Score	Television Credibility Score
Local news	.34	.37
Election coverage	.36	.30
Natural disasters	.31	.33
Crime	.36	.46
Entertainment news	.30	.26
President Reagan	.36	.38
Health and medical news	.35	.34
Business news	.39	.41
The economy	.40	.43
The government in Washington	.45	.44
Religious news	.32	.38
The arms race	.40	.46
The abortion issue	.37	.42
The Soviet Union	.37	.39
Israel	.38	.35
The Arab countries	.33	.38
Latin America	.39	.39

^aSubsample: Those who participated in Part 2 interview — newspaper credibility, N = 862 with 13 observations missing; TV credibility, N = 850, 25 observations missing).

^bAll correlations are significant at $p < .0001$.

advantage in coverage of natural disasters ($p < .01$).

Respondents' credibility scores were highly related to their ratings of television

and newspaper coverage of these topics. Correlations between television and newspaper credibility scores and evaluations ranged between .26 and .46, all of which were statistically significant at $p \leq .0001$ (Table 3).

Responsible Exercise of Rights

Respondents appeared to be the most supportive of press freedoms when the press was seen as a watchdog over government. They took the strongest positions on limiting freedom of the press when the press was seen as an institution which tramples on other people's rights and takes advantage of the ordinary citizen. A substantial minority, 4 in 10 respondents, showed a desire for curbs on freedom of the press. This minority disagreed that the media exercise their right to freedom of expression responsibly and that it is important to maintain a free press. A similar number agreed that the government has a right to demand access to all of the files and notes of a reporter, whether the information has been made public or not.

Newspaper credibility ratings were negatively related to agreement with the statement that "sometimes, there's too much freedom of the press," but television credibility ratings were not. Both newspaper and television credibility ratings were negatively correlated with agreement with the statement that "the media abuse their Constitutional guarantee of a free press" (Table 4). However, there was no relationship between credibility scores and attitudes toward a reporter's right to maintain confidentiality of information not yet made public.

The minority who took a critical view of press rights was smallest when the issue was whether or not the press oversteps bounds in its role as a watchdog over public officials. One-fourth said that the press often gets in the way so that public officials cannot do the job they were elected to do. All the others subscribed to the view that the press helps keep public officials honest. Television and newspaper credibility ratings were negatively related to press criticism.

More than two-thirds of people interviewed agreed that a journalist's right to protect confidentiality of sources is like the right of confidentiality extended to doctors or members of the clergy. Newspaper and television credibility scores were related to holding this view.

When the issue was the rights of ordinary people versus the rights of the press, people surveyed were much less likely to favor the press. Seven in 10 said that a person's right to a fair trial outweighed the public's right to be informed. Further, 7 in 10 agreed with a more strongly worded statement: "The news media often make people accused of crimes look guilty before they are tried in court."

People giving high credibility scores to television and newspapers were almost as likely as those giving low scores to support the right to a fair trial over the public's right to be informed and to agree that the news media often make people accused of crimes look guilty before trial.

Summary and Conclusions

This article highlighted research questions in four areas: 1) insights into dimensions of credibility, 2) people's ability to differentiate well between news in newspapers and news in other media, especially television, with regard to credibility, 3) credibility problems in particular coverage areas, and 4) the relationship between credibility and attitudes toward First Amendment issues.

Dimensions of Credibility: First, a factor analysis showed that 12 items grouped together in a credibility factor (for example, being fair, unbiased, trustworthy, complete, factual, and accurate). Newspaper and television credibility scores were created, based on scores on the 12 items. (The Gannett Center asked these same questions for newspapers, replicating evaluations in all but one. Respondents in the two communities surveyed rated their newspapers lower on being factual. The *Times Mirror* also replicated the morality finding for "news organizations.")

Since the two scores were correlated, this suggests that many people's attitudes

TABLE 4

Press Rights Versus Other Rights^a

Which of the following statements comes the closest to how you personally feel:

	Newspaper Credibility Score		Television Credibility Score	
	Low ^b 57%	High 24%	Low 53%	High 20%
1. The media abuse their Constitutional guarantee of a free press.				
OR				
The media are usually careful to be responsible.	43%	76%	47%	80%
2. It's important to have a free press even when the press acts irresponsibly.	54%	65%	56%	59%
OR				
Sometimes, there's too much freedom of the press.	46%	35%	44%	41%
3. The press helps keep public officials honest.	64%	86%	59%	85%
OR				
The press often gets in the way so that public officials can't do the job they were elected to do.	36%	14%	41%	15%
4. A reporter has the right to refuse to give the government information he or she has obtained but which has not been made public.	62%	65%	66%	64%
OR				
If the government feels it needs such information, it has a right to demand access to all of the files and notes of a reporter, whether the information has been made public or not.	38%	35%	34%	36%
5. A journalist's right to protect confidentiality of sources is like the right of confidentiality extended to doctors or members of the clergy.	60%	75%	61%	71%
OR				
Confidentiality is more important for doctors or members of the clergy than it is for journalists.	40%	25%	39%	29%
6. A person's right to a fair trial is more important than the public's right to be informed.	74%	66%	73%	66%
OR				
The public's right to know is just as important as the right to a fair trial.	26%	34%	27%	34%

^aSubsample: Those who participated in Part 2 interview — newspaper credibility, N = 862 with 13 observations missing; TV credibility, N = 850, 25 observations missing).

^bOnly the extreme groups are compared here (newspapers: low, N = 213; high, N = 275; TV: low, N = 232; high, N = 256).

toward the two media are similar. Credibility scores were compared with responses to four other sets of questions used as measures of credibility in past research.

These sets of questions involved: 1) believability of media when news accounts conflict, 2) media preferences for understanding news, 3) media preferences for reliable

coverage, and 4) news source preferences for local, state, and national news.

Differentiating Among Media: In every comparison, high credibility scores were related to choice of newspapers over other media. Similarly, high television credibility scores were related to selection of television over other media. However, in every comparison except one, television did better than other media, and preference for television increased as geographic scope moved from local to state to national/international news. Despite high newspaper credibility scores, many respondents were more likely to choose television when forced to choose among media. The exceptional comparison was media preference for understanding a complex or controversial local topic. In that case, half the sample chose newspapers.

Particular Coverage Areas: Although respondents evaluated daily newspapers and television highly for overall reliability, reporting quality, and coverage of controversial issues, evaluations varied with regard to 17 topics. Both media received similar marks except that newspapers did

slightly better on local news and television did slightly better on coverage of natural disasters. Credibility scores were highly correlated with ratings of newspaper and television coverage of all 17 topics.

First Amendment Issues: Respondents were most likely to support press freedoms when media serve as watchdogs over government. They were least likely to support First Amendment rights when the rights of ordinary people are at stake. These results are supported by findings of the Gannett Center studies and the *Times Mirror* study. (The Los Angeles *Times* Poll found lower belief that the press exercises its privileges responsibly than the ASNE study did.)

Although people's stands on newspaper and television credibility frequently were related to their attitudes toward press freedoms, this was not so with regard to the rights of ordinary citizens to receive a fair trial. People's strong support of the press when it needs to keep information and sources confidential also did not depend on credibility ratings.

Third Class Mail Does Well

Low-cost third-class mail sorted by postal carrier route is delivered nearly as quickly as more expensive first-class mail nationwide, according to research conducted for the American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA).

The results were obtained from a five-city test completed for the ANPA in Wilmington, Del.; Oakland, Calif.; Sherman, Texas; Lawrence, Kan., and Madison, Wis. by Ruder Finn & Rotman, an independent communications and research firm.

Nationally, it took two days after mailing to achieve delivery of 97.5% of the first-class mail, compared to three days for delivery of 97% of third-class mail sorted by carrier route.

The first-class envelopes required nearly seven times the postage as the identical materials in the third-class envelopes.

"Third-class rates do not reflect fairly the cost of delivering third-class presorted mail. A first-class letter weighing three ounces sent by a private citizen or a business costs 56 cents for virtually the same service that costs a direct-mail marketing firm just over eight cents to send third-class," said Sandra C. Hardy, chairman of ANPA's Postal Committee. Hardy is vice president, Calkins Newspapers, Levittown, Pa.

"The Postal Service should be congratulated for its performance in these tests. It got the mail delivered on time in nearly every case. Our question is why it chooses to underprice its good work in third-class mail," Hardy said.