Graduate Theses and Dissertations

12-2021

# News Media Trust and Mistrust During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Kaitlyn Seiter
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

News Media Trust and Mistrust During the COVID-19 Pandemic


A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Journalism

by

Kaitlyn Seiter
University of Arkansas
Bachelor of Arts in Journalism, 2020


December 2021
University of Arkansas


This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.


_____

Rob Wells, Ph.D.
Thesis Director


_____          _____

Ray McCaffrey, Ph.D.                          Gerald Jordan, M.A.
Committee Member                              Committee Member

**Abstract**

With the uncertainty and growing information surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, news media consumption has increased drastically compared to pre-pandemic consumption. At the start of the pandemic, 94% of Americans reported closely following COVID-19 news, with more than half of Americans spending more than two hours consuming COVID-19 news everyday (SSRS, 2020). With the news media serving as a critical source of information through this public health crisis, the public's reactions, behaviors, and attitudes to the pandemic stem from the level of trust they have in the news media to share COVID-19 information. Because of this, this study examines trust in the news media and its possible impacts on public health. A survey of 314 individuals explored how trust in the news media varies with COVID-19 coverage on a national and local level and how trust and mistrust in the news media relates to an individual's willingness to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. Findings suggest that trust in the news media is lower with COVID-19 coverage compared to general news coverage, with many participants believing news sources exclude COVID-19 facts. When comparing trust in COVID-19 coverage between national and local news providers, trust was highest in local sources for the majority of participants. In general, the study found that individuals are more likely to be vaccinated if they have high levels of trust in the news media. The findings suggest that trust in news media is significant in navigating public health crises, as mistrust in the news media can lead individuals to undermine the efforts to end the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table of Contents**

## Introduction

The present study investigates trust in the news media and its possible impacts on public health. More specifically, the study examines how trust in the news media differs between general news coverage and COVID-19 coverage, local and national reporting, and the extent to which trust is related to political affiliation and COVID-19 vaccination status.

COVID-19 spread to the United States in January 2020 and was declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Nationwide lockdowns were implemented, schools and businesses closed, and travel was halted. By April 10, 2020, the U.S. reported a death toll of 23,036, making the United States the global leader for COVID-19 deaths. Over the next few months, the United States reached the worst unemployment rate since the Great Depression, millions of people were infected, and the death toll surpassed 300,000 in December 2020 (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2021). As the pandemic wreaks havoc on the nation, the public's need for information has been heightened, and millions of Americans are turning to the news media (Deane et al., 2021).

The news media has the ability to set the public agenda and form public opinion. Ultimately, society relies on journalism to share information of public interest, and as a result, the news media can shape the public's attitudes and behaviors (McQuail, 2013). During health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, news coverage is essential for communicating information about the virus and its threat to the public. The news media serves as one of the primary sources of information, connecting health and government officials with the public. How the news media assesses, frames, and communicates information can influence how the public responds to the pandemic policy-making and immunization efforts (Laing, 2011).

With an abundance of news sources to choose from, the public beliefs and perceptions quickly became divided. News sources have taken different approaches to COVID-19 coverage, some focusing more on evidence-based information, such as statistics on death and case rates or the economic impact of the virus, while some share human interest stories, ranging from people affected by the virus to conspiracy theories about the origin or severity of the virus (Basch et al., 2020; Dhanani & Franz, 2020). The different messages, paired with the political polarization of the virus and partisan reporting, has resulted in many Americans concerned about COVID-19 misinformation (Deane et al., 2021). This fear of misinformation has resulted in a divide in behavior and response to the pandemic, including disputes over complying with mask mandates, social distancing, and the willingness to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. As important as it is that the messages communicated are perceived as credible and factual, the news media must also be perceived as a trusted source of information for communication to be successful.

## Literature Review

The following section will examine literature on the existing issue of trust in the news media to prepare for the investigation of trust in the news media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Trust in journalism

Trust in journalism has declined substantially in America, threatening its important role of fostering trust in society (Grosser, 2016). According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, trust in traditional media in the United States is at a record low, with only 46% of Americans reported trusting the media ("2021 Edelman", 2021). Trust in institutions and social systems hinges on beliefs that the system or organization is functioning properly, which can be determined by the individuals or processes representing the respective entity (Blöbaum, 2014). Fink (2018) outlined

the public's lack of trust in news media as the biggest challenge facing journalism today. Grosser (2016) defined trust in journalism as the public's willingness to be vulnerable to the journalistic system's selection and communication of current information. Consistent with the Edelman Trust Barometer results (2021), a Gallup poll found Americans' trust in the media in 2021 to be the second lowest in Gallup's trends. According to the poll, 7% of U.S. adults had a "great deal" and 29% "a fair amount" of trust in the media, while 34% reported "none at all," the highest level of distrust in Gallup's history (Gallup, 2021). The public's trust in the media has declined for several reasons. Media coverage has been seen as sensationalistic, with some arguing that the media exaggerates risks and portrays health threats based on emotion rather than facts (Klemm et al., 2016). Journalists are expected to relay health information on a scientific, factual basis, avoiding emotion or exaggeration (Klemm et al, 2016). A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center observed how trust in COVID-19 reporting varies when individuals also get information from the White House (Mitchell et al., 2020). Of the surveyed Americans who preferred the White House to news media for information on the pandemic, only 24% believed media coverage to be mostly accurate, while 72% believed journalists exaggerated the risks of the virus (Mitchell et al., 2020).

The decline of trust in the news media is part of a broader cultural phenomenon of mistrust and cynicism in all institutitions in society. The trend of cultural distrust has been growing in the U.S. for decades and includes the institutions that most affect Americans' daily lives, including schools, houses of worship, banks, the government, and the news media (McGrath, 2017). While historic lows in trust have been recorded in recent years, mistrust of social instutituions has been trending since the late 1960s, most notably attributed to the publicization of the Vietnam War (McGrath, 2017). According to Hallin (1989), distrust in

journalism in the 1970s intensified as distrust in other insitutions grew, especially in the government and corporate community during the post-Watergate era. In an annual Gallup survey measuring confidence in major institutions, confidence in most institutions had decreased in 2021 despite increasing in 2020, suggesting the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted trust in all institutions. According to the poll, confidence in the key U.S. institutions - academia, government, religion, new media, and business - all declined in 2021 (Brenan, 2021a).

Partisan reporting and the public's declining trust in the government, as well as the government's declining trust in the media, has also been a factor. According to the Pew Research Center, the partisan divide in trust of the news media widened in 2021. While trust in national news sources decreased for both Republicans and Democrats, the percentage of Republicans who have "a lot" or "some" trust in the information that comes from national news organizations dropped to 35% in 2021 from 70% in 2016. Democrats responded 43 percentage points higher than Republicans, with 78% reporting they have "a lot" or "some" trust in national news organizations (Gottfried & Liedke, 2021).

Usher (2018) argues that trust in journalism is critical to democracy, but the conceptual understanding of trust in journalism has been broken. According to Usher (2018), the concept of trust has been misrepresented in research by measurements of news consumption, rather than the construct that involves journalists, audiences, and sourcing. Traditionally, journalists fill the role of the public watchdog, which in turn sets the public agenda. However, the distrust in the media has led the public to see journalists as pushing personal agenda, rather than serving the public's interest (Newman & Fletcher, 2017). Without trust in the news media, journalists struggle to fill the role of public watchdog. Grosser (2016) suggested that trust in society is not always fostered through direct interactions, but rather is comes through intermediaries, such as journalism.

Because of the low trust in journalism that exists today, journalism is no longer fully serving its intermediary role, which threatens the general trust in people, organizations, and social systems (Grosser, 2016).

The increased existence of mainstream media cynicism and skepticism often leads audiences to consume non-traditional news sources, some of which can undermine or challenge the professionalism values in journalism. The proliferation of digital news media has complicated the transparency and authority that exists in traditional journalism, partially due to errors reporters make when trying to meet tight deadlines and production quotas in modern journalism (Karlsson, 2020). Digital news has changed the expectation for "currentness," that is the publication of news that is current and relevant and allows the public to consume and share news constantly (Grosser, 2016). With these challenges in mind, to re-establish trust, audiences must be connected to journalists who establish credibility, an aspect of trust, in a multitude of ways (Fink, 2018).

**Trust in community and local journalism**

Community, or local, journalism was once defined as "a newspaper publication with a circulation under 50,000 that serves people who live in a distinct geographical space with a clear, local-first emphasis on news" (Lauterer, 2006). When first conceptualized, Byerly (1961) said community journalism has a "nearness to people" standard. Lauterer (2006) said these journalists are actively involved in the welfare of the communities they are covering. By this definition, community journalism was limited to print publications within a specific town's geographic borders. However, the concept of community journalism has evolved with digital technologies and a change in what constitutes a "community." Modern community journalism can be redefined as community-focused content that shares news and information the public, or the

community, needs to know, rather than placing emphasis on a physical location (Reader & Hatcher, 2012). With this expansion, community journalism can include local, special-interest or online-only news organizations (Robinson, 2014). Gutsche and Hess (2018) argued that the rise of digital reporting has resulted in journalists serving a more significant connector role in communities. Their study on local reporting in Australia found that journalists who report on local topics and consider themselves community members hold more authority with audiences than national reporters. The authority was attributed to the audience's sense of community that was built by the journalists. (Gutsche & Hess, 2018).

Throughout the pandemic, many Americans have turned to local news sources for COVID-19 information because they perceive local news outlets are more credible (Shearer, 2020). According to a Pew Research study, 61% of Americans were closely following the coronavirus coverage equally at both the national and local level, while 23% reported paying more attention to news at the local level (Shearer, 2020). To learn about COVID-19 news, 64% of surveyed U.S. adults listed local information sources, while 46% cited consuming local news sources (46%), state/local elected officials (36%), friends, family, and neighbors (16%), and community newsletters or Listservs (8%) (Shearer, 2020). With so many turning to local news organizations, it is important to know what content is believed to be more credible from local sources than national sources. According to Jones (2020), 68% of Americans seek local news sources for information on how local politicians and business leaders are responding to the coronavirus in their community, while 62% are looking for information on how to protect themselves from COVID-19.

In consideration of trust in other social institutions, research has found that trust tends to be higher at the local level. According to the Arkansas Poll, the approval rate of state

government and public officials was higher than the approval rate of federal government and public officials, suggesting that proximity is an important influence in trust (Parry, 2021).

Often, local reporting results in participation and engagement by the public, otherwise known as crowdsourcing (Fink, 2019). While crowdsourcing is also used in national reporting, it is used more frequently in local reporting (Fink, 2019). Crowdsourcing can happen in many ways but is usually seen as audience members sharing information and expertise with journalists that can later be used in reporting (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2019). Community journalism requires the audience's involvement in the gathering of information, as well as suggesting, requesting, or submitting content (Reader & Hatcher, 2012). Within the exchange of information, journalists attempt to connect with the community they are covering in hopes that the quality of coverage will be improved and readers will benefit (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2019).

As a solution to the decline in trust, journalists take a collaborative approach to improve the quality of news, which has been found to increase the likelihood that news will be appreciated and trusted by the public (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2019). More so, a sense of community in journalism has been linked to an increase in general trust in society. According to Kye and Hwang (2020), local COVID-19 coverage increased the general trust in the government. Although the partisan divide is lesser in local news, the gap in trust between Democrats and Republican was higher in 2021 than recent years. Eighty-four percent of Democrats and 66% of Republicans had at least some trust in information from local news sources in 2021, compared to 85% of Democrats and 79% of Republicans in 2016 (Gottfried & Liedke, 2021).

**Research questions and hypotheses**

*RQ1:* Is trust in news media positively correlated to vaccination status?

*RQ2:* Are local news providers more trusted with COVID-19 news coverage than national news providers?

*RQ3:* Are individuals who report having more trust in local news providers more likely to be fully or partially vaccinated?

*H1:* Trust in general news coverage will be higher than trust in COVID-19 news coverage.

*H2:* A partisan divide will exist in vaccination status that is consistent with the partisan divide in trust in COVID-19 news coverage.

## Method

**Sample**

To address the hypotheses and research questions, data was collected from a random sample of 314 adults residing in the United States. Participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete a Qualtrics survey on their trust in the news media and COVID-19 reporting and their COVID-19 vaccine status. Amazon Mechanical Turk is a diverse pool of potential respondents who participate in online research for a nominal pay. There were a total of 342 participants recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk, and 314 passed the inclusion criteria and completed the survey. Data collection occurred in October 2021, 10 months after the COVID-19 vaccines were authorized for emergency use and two months after the Pfizer-BoiNTech vaccine was approved by the Federal Drug Administration (FDA).

**Procedure and materials**

Amazon Mechanical Turk workers who participated in the research followed the provided link to the survey hosted on Qualtrics. Participants read the required online consent form, and upon consenting, the survey began. Participants who did not consent or did not live in the United States were redirected to the end of the survey.

The 25-question survey (see Appendix A) measures individuals trust in COVID-19 reporting on a national and local level and their vaccination status. Responses to the questions are coded using a Likert-scale and data was analyzed in Qualtrics and Microsoft Power BI.

**Measures**

*Trust in news media*

Trust in news media was measured by asking participants if they agreed with generally trusting (no specific news topic specified) their preferred national news provider, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Trust in COVID-19 news*

Trust in COVID-19 news was measured in various ways. The first method asked participants if they agreed with trusting their news provider's COVID-19 reporting, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The second method asked participants if they agreed with trusting COVID-19 news reports based on factors of media credibility drawn from a pre-existing scale (Kohring & Matthes, 2007) that has been used successfully in previous research (Usher, 2018). The scale measures trust in the selectivity of topics (1 item), trust in the selectivity of facts (1 item), trust in the accuracy of depictions (2 items), and trust in journalistic assessment (1 item) to establish overall trust in journalism (Kohring & Matthes, 2007).

The final method asked participants who did not at least somewhat agree with trusting the selectivity of topics, the selectivity of facts, the accuracy of depictions, or the journalistic assessment of COVID-19 coverage to select reasons why, with options: (1) Misleading or inaccurate information, (2) Distrust in sources used by the news provider, (3) Lack of

independent investigations or fact-checking, (4) Personal bias and emotion in news reports, (5) Political agenda / partisan reporting.

***Trust in local news***

Trust in local news was measured by asking participants if they agreed with having more trust in COVID-19 coverage from their state, regional, or county news provider than their preferred national news provider, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Participants who at least somewhat agreed with the statement were asked to select the reason why they trust local news providers for COVID-19 coverage, with options: (1) Information can be more easily verified, (2) More trust in their sources, (3) Less bias / political agenda, (4) More relevant reporting, (5) More credible journalists, (6) Other.

***Vaccine status***

COVID-19 vaccine status was measured by asking participants their vaccination status (2 items), with options: (3) Yes, (2) Prefer not to say, (1) No.

Participants who were not fully or partially vaccinated with a scheduled second dose were asked to select the reasons why they have not been vaccinated, with options: (1) Risk of the potential short-term side effects, (2) Mistrust in the effectiveness of the vaccine, (3) Mistrust in the vaccine ingredients, (4) Unable to be vaccinated due to medical or religious reasons, (5) Risk of long-term side effects, (6) Don't believe there has been enough research and/or testing, (7) Don't believe it is necessary, (8) Encouraged not to by trusted sources, (9) Prefer not to say, (10) Other/Open ended.

Lastly, participants who reported being fully vaccinated were asked if they received the COVID-19 booster shot, with options: (3) Yes, (2) Unable to receive the booster, (1) No.

**Results**

Despite using a national survey pool to gather a diverse random sample, the sample was demographically skewed but geographically diverse. The average participant of the current study was a white male, age 25 – 34. Roughly 66% of respondents identified as male, 33% female, and 0.3 percent did not share their gender identity. Nearly 82% of respondents identified as White, 6% as Black or African American, 5% as Asian, 5% as Hispanic or Latino, 1% as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.3 percent as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. The ages of respondents ranged from 18 – 74, with 51% of respondents identifying as 25 – 34 and 30% as 35 – 44 years old. The sample included participants from 38 of 50 states, with California recording the most responses at 22%. Roughly 30% of respondents identified as Republican, 60% as Democratic, 9.8% as Independent, and 0.3 percent as Other. Lastly, 276 respondents (88%) reported being fully vaccinated, four reported being partially vaccinated, 28 (9%) reported being unvaccinated, and six did not disclose their vaccine status.

*Trust in news media*

The majority of survey respondents (89.5%) "strongly" or "somewhat" agreed with generally trusting their preferred national news provider.
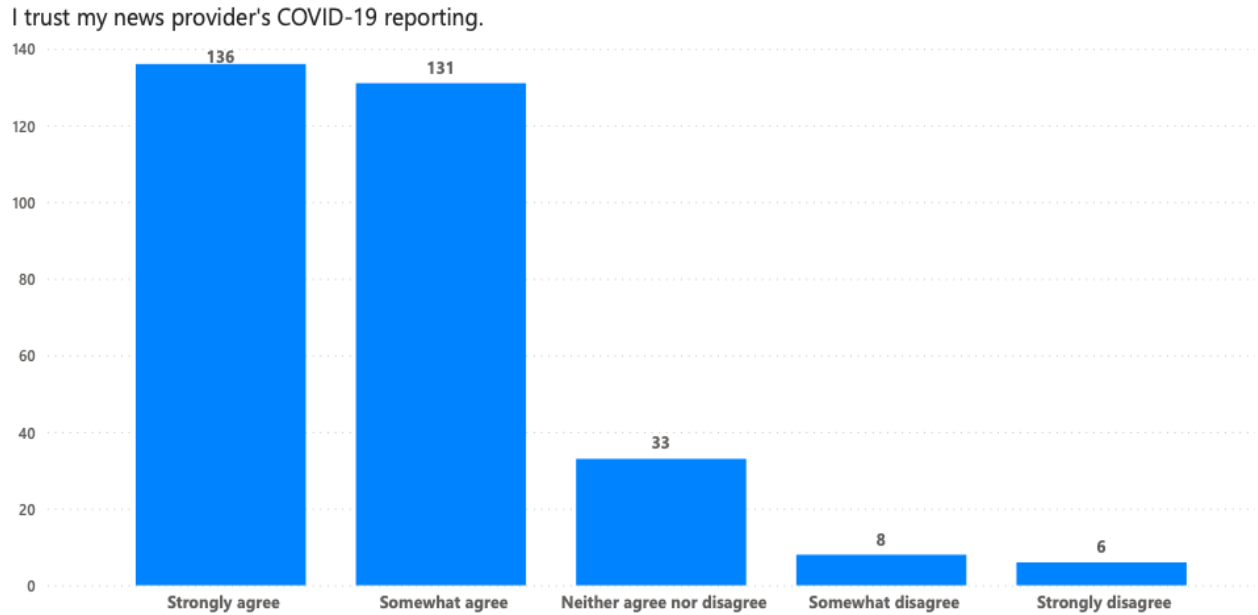
In general, I trust my news provider.
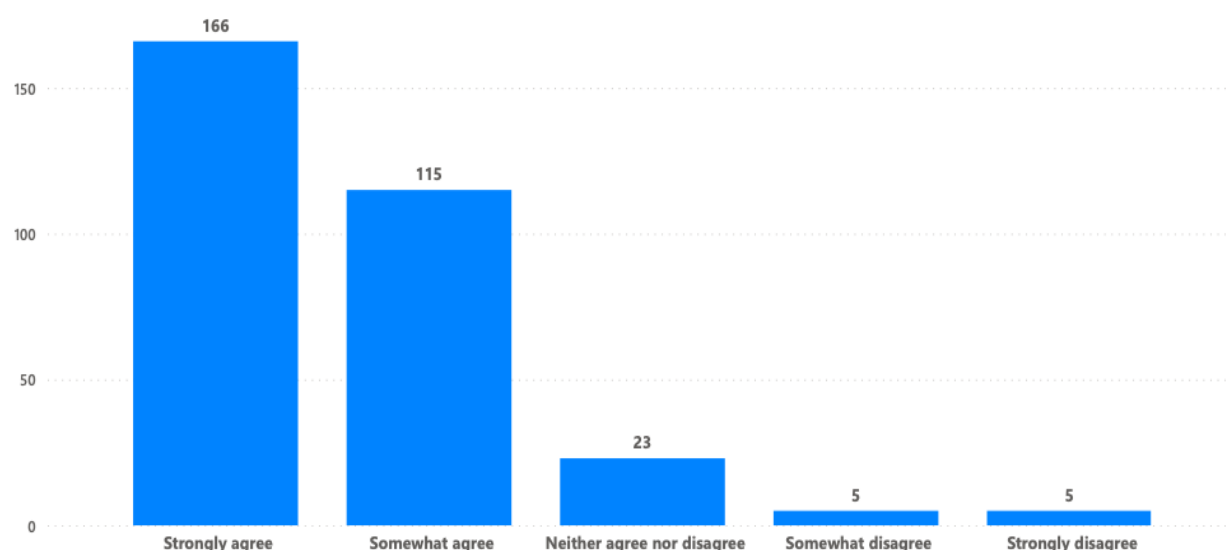


*Figure 1: Participants "strongly agree" with generally trusting their preferred national news provider.*
*n = 314*

Of the participants who "strongly" agreed, 60.8% were Democrats, 32.5% were Republican, and 6.63% were Independent. The vast majority of participants who "strongly" agreed (96.4%) reported being fully vaccinated. Of the individuals who "strongly" disagreed with trusting their news provider, 40% were Republican, 60% were Independent, and the majority (80%) reported being unvaccinated.

**Trust in COVID-19 news**

When asked to consider their preferred national news source, the majority of respondents (85%) reported at least somewhat trusting COVID-19 news coverage: 136 (43.3%) respondents strongly agreed, 131 (41.7%) somewhat agreed, 33 (10.5%) were neutral, and 14 (4.4%) somewhat or strongly disagreed. In comparison, a higher percentage of participants (89.5%) reported at least somewhat trusting general news coverage, while a lower percentage (3.2%) reporting somewhat or strongly disagreeing with trusting news in general.

I trust my news provider's COVID-19 reporting.



*Figure 2: Participants "strongly agree" with trusting their preferred national news provider's COVID-19 coverage.*
*n = 314*

Regarding the attributes of trust (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), the selectivity of topics, measured by "COVID-19 receives the necessary attention and news coverage," had the strongest overall impact on trust in COVID-19 news coverage.
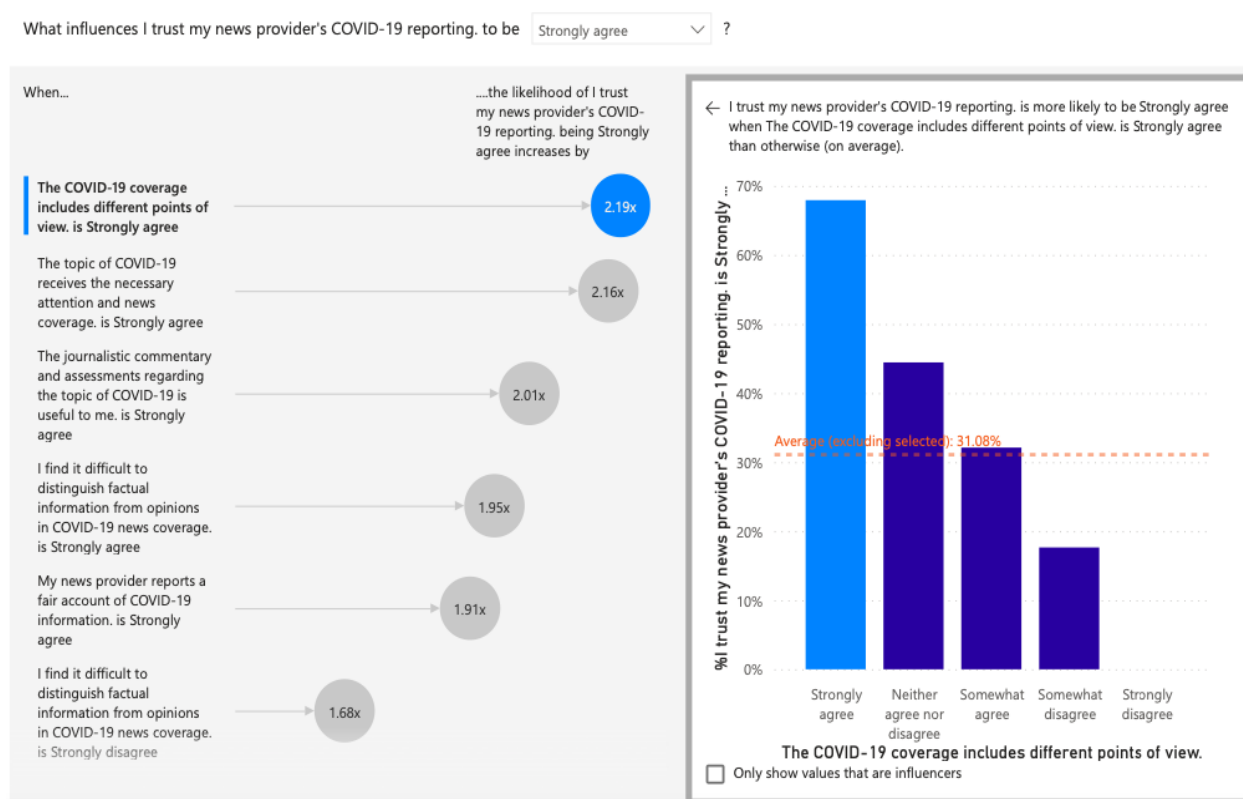
*Figure 3: Participants are 2.19x more likely to "strongly agree" with trusting their news provider's COVID-19 coverage when they also "strongly agree" that COVID-19 coverage includes different points of view.*
*n = 314*

However, the data suggests that participants who "strongly" agree with their news provider's

COVID-19 coverage including different points-of-view were most likely to also "strongly" agree

with trusting their news provider's COVID-19 coverage.

Of the individuals who "strongly" agree with trusting their news provider's COVID-19

coverage, 94.12% reported being fully vaccinated, while 100% of individuals who "strongly"

disagreed reported being unvaccinated.

More than half of the participants (67.83%) "strongly" or "somewhat" agree that their

news provider excludes COVID-19 facts. Of the 213 participants who believe COVID-19 facts

are excluded, 54.27% believe it is because of political agenda or partisan reporting, 32.01%

believe it is because of personal bias and emotion, and 13.72% believe it is because of a lack of reputable sources.

I believe my news provider has excluded COVID-19 facts.



| I believe my news provider excludes COVID-19 facts because: | Count of Participants |
|---|---|
| Political agenda / partisan reporting by the news organization | 92 |
| Political agenda / partisan reporting by the news organization,Personal bias and emotion by the reporters | 48 |
| Personal bias and emotion by the reporters | 28 |
| Political agenda / partisan reporting by the news organization,Personal bias and emotion by the reporters,Lack of reputable sources | 27 |
| Political agenda / partisan reporting by the news organization,Lack of reputable sources | 11 |
| Lack of reputable sources | 5 |
| Personal bias and emotion by the reporters,Lack of reputable sources | 2 |

*Figure 4: Participants "strongly agree" with believing their news provider excludes COVID-19 facts, with the most common reasons being: political agenda / partisan reporting, personal bias and emotion, and lack of reputable sources.*
*n = 213*

Participants who "somewhat" or "strongly" disagree with trusting COVID-19 reporting said they were lacking trust mostly because news providers share misleading or inaccurate information (32.35%), news providers don't have trustworthy sources (23.53%), and/or news providers do not fact-check or independently investigate before sharing (23.53%). The data suggests participants who "somewhat" or "strongly" disagree with their news provider reporting a fair account of COVID-19 information were most likely to "somewhat" or "strongly" disagree with trusting their news provider's COVID-19 reporting.
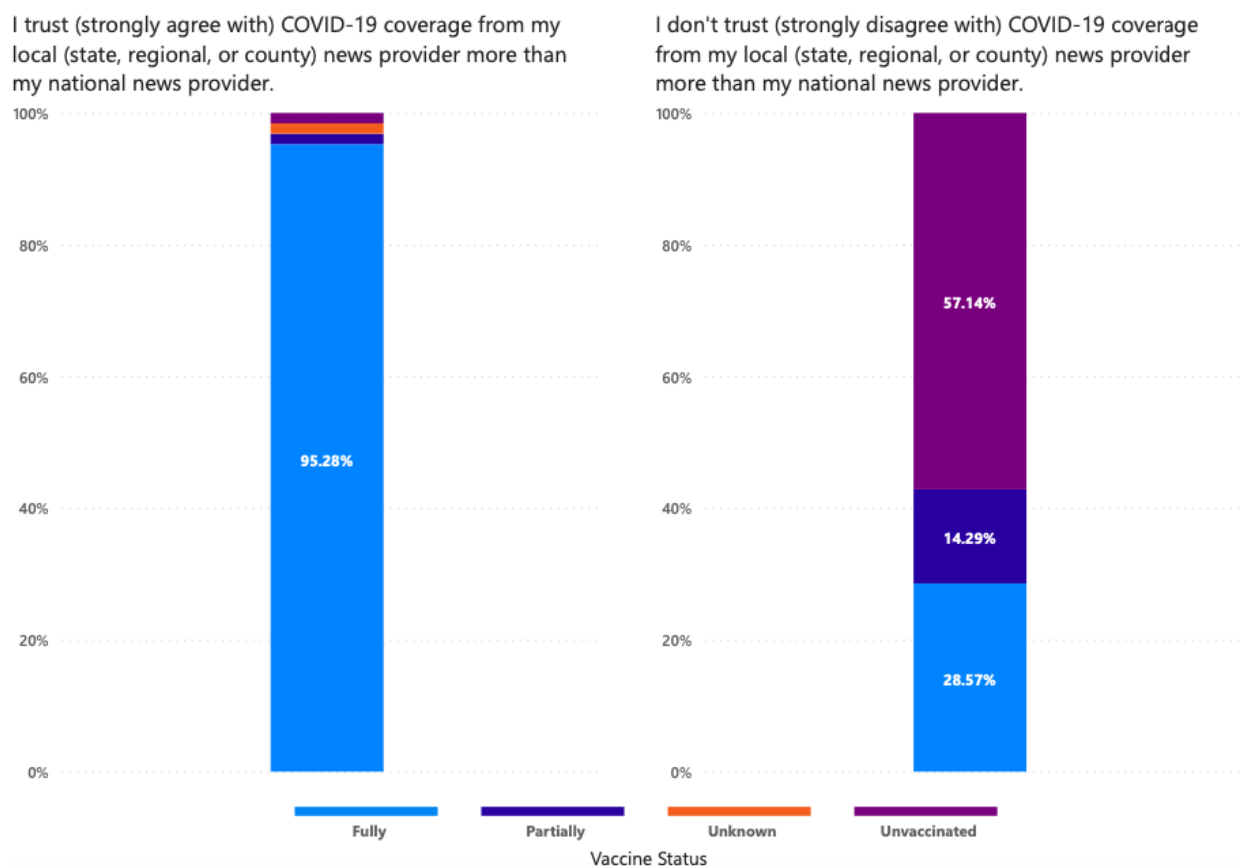
***Trust in local news***

Of the survey participants, 127 individuals (40.45%) "strongly" agree and 119 individuals (37.90%) "somewhat" agree with trusting COVID-19 coverage from their local (state, regional, or county) news provider more than their national news provider. The data suggests that people have more trust in local COVID-19 coverage because the information can be more easily verified (30%), sources are more trustworthy (31.77%), and/or there is less bias or political agenda in local reporting (17.42%).
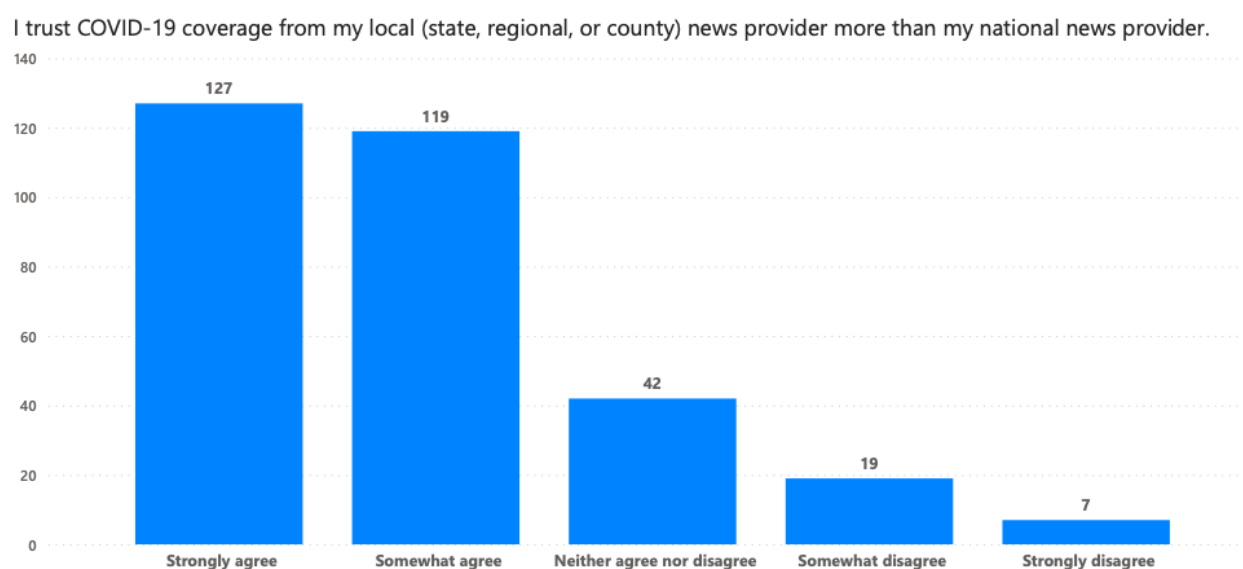


*Figure 5: Participants "strongly agree" with trusting COVID-19 coverage from local (state, regional, or county) news providers more than national news providers.*
*n = 314*

Of the participants who "strongly" agree with trusting local COVID-19 reports more than national COVID-19 reports, 95.28% reported being fully vaccinated. In comparison, 57.14% of individuals who "strongly" disagree reported being unvaccinated.

I trust (strongly agree with) COVID-19 coverage from my local (state, regional, or county) news provider more than my national news provider.

I don't trust (strongly disagree with) COVID-19 coverage from my local (state, regional, or county) news provider more than my national news provider.

Vaccine Status

*Figure 6: Participants with high trust (strongly agree) in COVID-19 coverage from local news providers are more likely to be vaccinated. Individuals who had lower trust (strongly disagree) in local COVID-19 coverage than national COVID-19 coverage are more likely to be unvaccinated.*
*n = 314*

## Discussion and Conclusion

### Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate trust in the news media and the possible impacts on COVID-19 vaccine status. Research questions examined (a) how trust in the news media is associated with willingness to vaccinate, (b) if local news providers are more trusted with COVID-19 reporting than national news providers, (c) if individuals are more likely to be vaccinated if they trust local news sources more than national news sources. The study's findings align with some, but not all, of these research questions.

*RQ1:* Is trust in news media positively correlated to vaccination status?

      Findings from the survey show that general trust in the news media is positively correlated with vaccination status ($p < 0.00001$). Individuals with high trust in the news media are more likely to be fully or partially vaccinated than unvaccinated.

I trust my news provider's COVID-19 reporting.

● Strongly agree ● Somewhat agree ● Neither agree nor disagree ● Somewhat disagree ● Strongly disagree
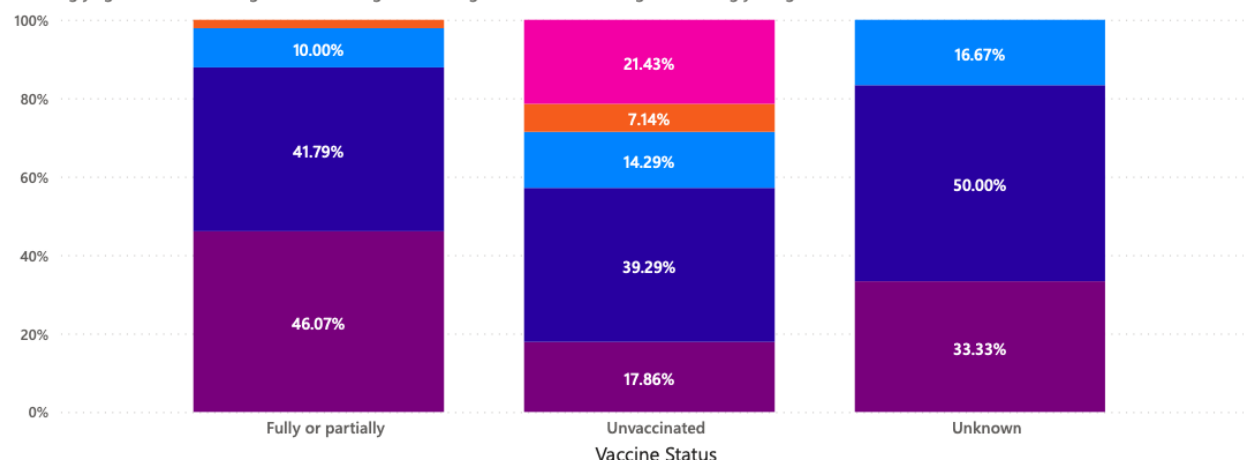
*Figure 7: Participants with high trust in COVID-19 reporting are more likely to be vaccinated than individuals with lower trust in COVID-19 reporting.*
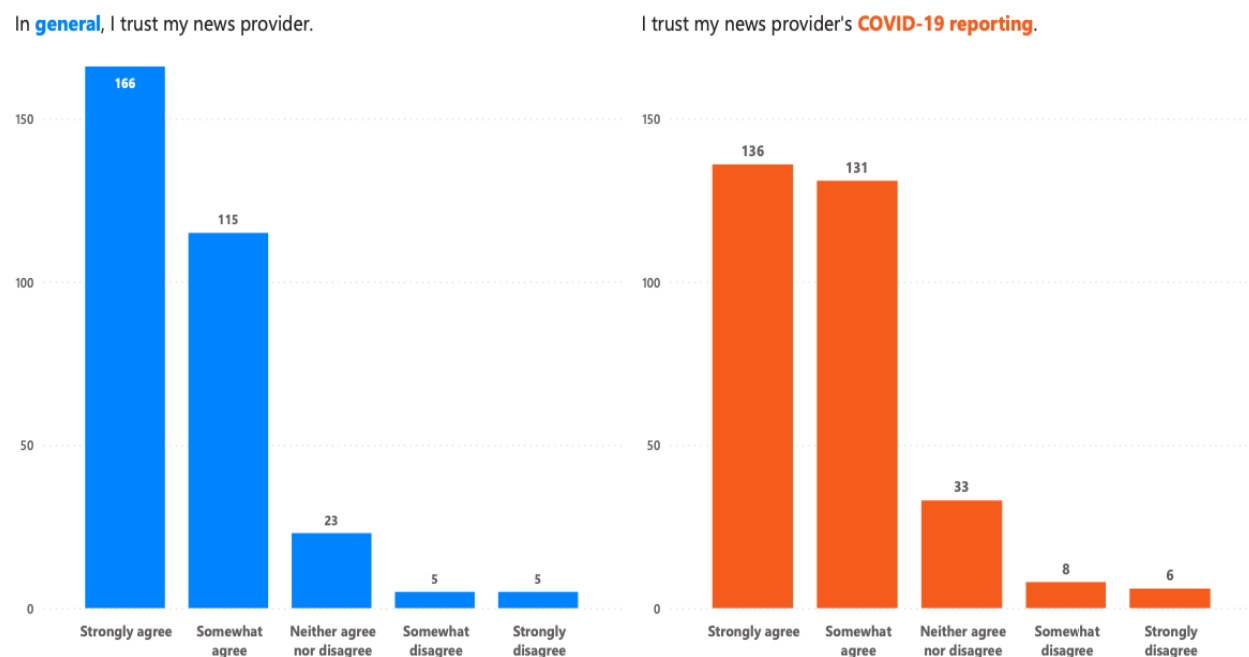*n = 314*

      Likewise, the survey shows that individuals with higher trust in COVID-19 news reporting are more likely to be fully or partially vaccinated than unvaccinated, and those with lower trust in COVID-19 news reporting are more likely to be unvaccinated. Recent research has found that people who use traditional news media sources, specifically trusted data-driven sources, are up to 80% more likely to get the COVID-19 vaccine compared to those who use other sources (El-Mohandes et al., 2021). As one of the main information sources through the pandemic, individuals are reliant on the news media for making decisions about COVID-19.

      Furthermore, the public is more likely to accept the vaccine if they feel involved in the communication and decisions surrounding it (OECD, 2021). By disseminating factual COVID-

19 information and establishing trust with the public, the news media can influence the public's willingness to vaccinate.

***H1:*** Trust in general news coverage will be higher than trust in COVID-19 news coverage.

The current study supports the hypothesis that trust in general news coverage is higher than trust in COVID-19 news coverage.
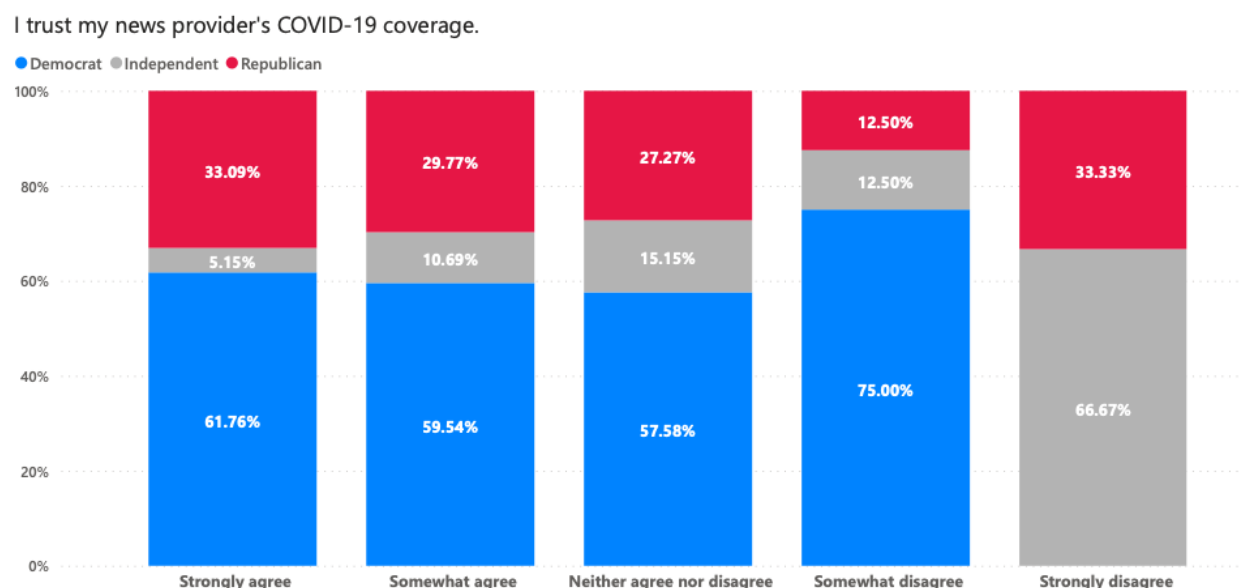


*Figure 8: General trust in the news media is higher than trust in the news media's COVID-19 reporting.*
*n = 314*

While the proportion of individuals who trust general news coverage (89.49%) was relatively consistent with the proportion of individuals who trust COVID-19 news coverage (85.03%), the proportion of individuals who were either neutral or distrusted COVID-19 reporting was higher than general news coverage. This finding aligns with recent research conducted by the Pew Research Center, in which trust in national news organizations was down to 58% in 2021, compared to 65% before the pandemic (Gottfried & Liedke, 2021).

More than half of the survey respondents reported lacking trust in COVID-19 news coverage because news providers exclude facts. Additional research has found that misinformation, sensationalism, and contradicting narratives have driven the lack of trust in COVID-19 news (Ravenelle et al., 2021).

*H2:* A partisan divide will exist in vaccination status that is consistent with the partisan divide in trust in COVID-19 news coverage.

Findings from the current study support the hypothesis of a similar partisan divide existing among vaccination status.

**I trust my news provider's COVID-19 coverage.**

● Democrat ● Independent ● Republican

| | Strongly agree | Somewhat agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Somewhat disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Republican | 33.09% | 29.77% | 27.27% | 12.50% | 33.33% |
| Independent | 5.15% | 10.69% | 15.15% | 12.50% | 66.67% |
| Democrat | 61.76% | 59.54% | 57.58% | 75.00% | |

*Figure 9: Political polarization of trust in COVID-19 news coverage.*
*n = 314*

Democrats reported the highest level of trust in COVID-19 news coverage, as well as the highest rate of vaccination (fully or partially). Republicans had lower levels of trust in the news media, and similarly, a lower rate of vaccination than Democrats. This is consistent with a recent Gallup study that found vaccination rates were lower among Republicans than Democrats (Saad, 2021).

Individuals who identified as Independents had the lowest trust in COVID-19 news and reported the lowest vaccination rate.

## Vaccine Status

● Democrat ● Independent ● Republican
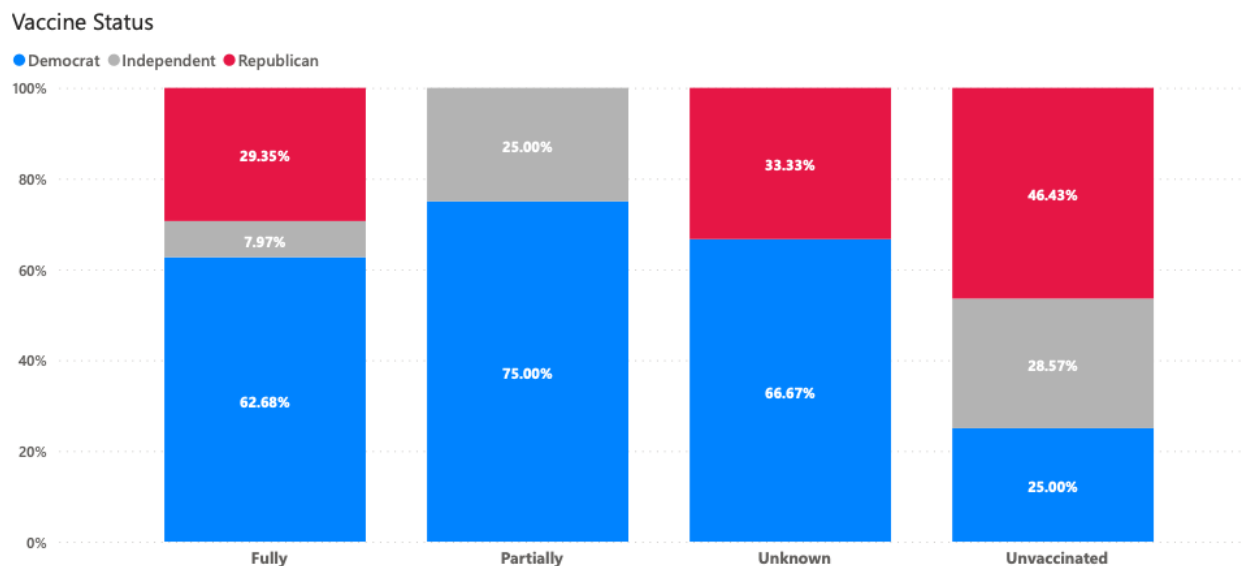


*Figure 10: Political polarization of COVID-19 vaccine status* in the survey pool.
*n = 314*

News media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the partisan divide, with Republicans sometimes downplaying the severity of COVID-19 and Democrats putting more emphasis on COVID-19 risks in the news (Allcott et al., 2021). These findings suggest that the political polarization of news media, and its subsequent effects on trust in the news media, transcends to the public's trust in the COVID-19 vaccine.

*RQ2:* Are local news providers more trusted with COVID-19 news coverage than national news providers?

*RQ3:* Are individuals who report having more trust in local news providers more likely to be fully or partially vaccinated?

Research questions 2 and 3 involve trust in local news sources and are grouped for evaluation and discussion. Findings from the survey show that local news providers are more

trusted with COVID-19 reporting than national news providers. The responses align with previous research that found people feel "closer" to local news organizations, especially during times of crises (Wenzel, 2020). The majority of individuals have more trust in local news providers because they believe their sources are more trustworthy and information can be more easily verified. These findings are consistent with recent Pew Research Center findings that individuals believe local news media correctly report COVID-19 facts more consistently than the news media overall, and state and local sources report correct information more often (Shearer, 2020). Likewise, individuals believed local news reporting to have less bias or political agenda than national news sources, which is consistent with previous research that found local news media results in less political polarization than other news media sources (Taylor, 2019). Research from Gallup also found that the public perceives less political bias in local news than in national news media (Brenan, 2021b).

Findings from the current study also show that trust in local news providers is positively correlated with vaccine status ($p < 0.00001$). Individuals with high trust in local news media (strongly agree) are more likely to be fully vaccinated. Information that is straightforward and factual, rather than sensationalized or opinionated, from local news sources increases vaccine acceptance (El-Mohandes et al., 2021). Recent research found that local health professionals were the second most preferred source of vaccine information behind the CDC, and local health and government officials rely on local news media, the most preferred media source for COVID-19 information among vaccinated individuals to promote vaccination and build public trust (El-Mohandes et al., 2021; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021).

**Limitations and future research**

The current study has several limitations. First, the sample is not representative of the population and cannot be generalized. The majority of the participants are male (66.56%), resulting in an unrepresentative number of females (33.12%). In contrast, the U.S. population is generally 51% female and 49% male (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2019). Similarly, the majority of participants are White (82.17%) and only a small subset (17.83%) of respondents are Black or African American, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Hispanic or Latino. By contrast, the U.S. population is generally 60% White, 18.5% Hispanic or Latino, and 13.4% Black or African American (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2019). The political affiliation is not representative of the U.S. population, with 59.55% of respondents identifying as Democrat.

Second, there are limitations with the methodology that impact the ability to draw conclusions from the data. While there is strong correlation in the survey results, causality cannot be determined. The statistical associations between trust in news media and vaccine status is not suitable to conclude that trust in news media causes an individual's vaccine status. Ultimately, correlational research lacks the control needed to determine causation, which is a limitation of this survey research.

Finally, the study did not exhaust all variables that could affect the level of trust in news media or willingness to vaccinate. As new information arises and vaccine requirements are implemented, vaccine status may not be as strongly correlated to trust in the news media as earlier in the pandemic. Likewise, there are other variables that could influence vaccine status, such as previous infection or a close connection to someone whose health was, or could be, significantly impacted by COVID-19.

Future qualitative research with a more representative sample is warranted to determine causality between trust in the news media and vaccine status. Qualitative research methods would allow for follow-up questions and deeper insights. Participants found local news media more trustworthy, partically because their sourcing was believed to be more credible, but more research is needed to understand why local sources are more trustworthy and how sourcing can be improved. Furthermore, with local news media being the more trusted source, additional research should investigate the role and responsibility of the local news media to educate the public.

Future discussions and studies should investigate other variables influencing vaccine status, including the evolving mandates and requirements, and the relationship with the news media. More significant findings could be gained from distinguishing between news sources. Similar research measuring trust in print, broadcast, and digital sources could provide more insight into how trust varies between platforms, specifically with COVID-19 information. The proliferation of COVID-19 misinformation on social media networks should be examined as an additional influencing factor.

**Conclusion**

To summarize, the findings of this study suggest that the degree of trust in the news media influences an individual's likelihood of receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, providing further insight into the role of news media in society. It has been long understood that journalism has the power to set public agenda and influence public perceptions, and the present study is further illustration of this behavior. Even though the news media remains a popular source of information during the COVID-19 pandemic, the public is more hesitant to trust the news media. Overall, the study found that individuals have less trust in COVID-19 reporting than general

news reporting, because they believe facts are excluded due to partisan reporting, personal bias or sensationalism, and/or a lack of reputable sources. Because those with less trust in the news media were more likely to be unvaccinated, the findings suggest that hesitancy in trusting the news media is connected with vaccine hesitancy.

While the current study cannot prove causation, data suggests that local news media is more trustworthy, and individuals who trust local news providers are more likely to be fully or partially vaccinated. Previous research has identified higher levels of trust in COVID-19 information from local news sources, but few studies have examined the higher rate of vaccinations in individuals with higher trust in local news providers (Hamel et al., 2021).

Despite its limitations, this study illustrates how trust in the news media can impact society during crises. Without trust in the news media, the public can lose trust in government leaders, public health officials, and the efforts to end a global pandemic. Transparency, factual reporting, and credible sourcing are important in garnering trust in the news media.

**References**

*2021 Edelman Trust Barometer*. Edelman. (2021). Retrieved from
https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer.

Allcott, H., Boxell, L., Conway, J., Gentzkow, M., Thaler, M., Yang, D. (2020). Polarization and
public health: Partisan differences in social distancing during the coronavirus pandemic.
*Journal of Public Economics*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104254.

Basch, C.H., Kecojevic, A. & Wagner, V.H. (2020). Coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the
online versions of highly circulated U.S. daily newspapers. *J Community Health* 45**,** 1089–
1097. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10900-020-00913-w.

Belair-Gagnon, V., Nelson, J. L., & Lewis, S. C. (2019). Audience engagement, reciprocity, and
the pursuit of community connectedness in public media journalism. *Journalism
Practice, 13*(5), 558-575. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2018.1542975.

Blöbaum, B. (2014). *Trust and journalism in a digital environment*.

Brenan, M. (2021a). *Americans' confidence in major U.S. institutions dips.* Gallup. Retrieved
from https://news.gallup.com/poll/352316/americans-confidence-major-institutions-
dips.aspx.

Brenan, M. (2021b). *Local news media considered less biased than national news*. Gallup.
Retrieved from https://news.gallup.com/poll/268160/local-news-media-considered-less-
biased-national-news.aspx.

Byerly, K. R. (1961). *Community journalism*. Philadelphia: Chilton, Book Division.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, August 4). *CDC Museum COVID-19
Timeline*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from
https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html.

Dhanani, L. Y., & Franz, B. (2020). The role of news consumption and trust in Public Health
Leadership in shaping COVID-19 knowledge and Prejudice. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*.
https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.560828.

Deane, C., Parker, K., & Gramlich, J. (2021, March 5). *A year of U.S. public opinion on the
coronavirus pandemic*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from
https://www.pewresearch.org/2021/03/05/a-year-of-u-s-public-opinion-on-the-coronavirus-
pandemic/.

El-Mohandes, A., White, T.M., Wyka, K. *et al.* (2021). COVID-19 vaccine acceptance among
adults in four major US metropolitan areas and nationwide. *Sci Rep* **11,** 21844.
https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-00794-6.

Fink, K. (2018). The biggest challenge facing journalism: A lack of trust. *Journalism*, *20*(1), 40-43.

Gallup. (2021, October 18). *Media use and evaluation*. Gallup. Retrieved from https://news.gallup.com/poll/1663/media-use-evaluation.aspx.

Gottfried, J., & Liedke, J. (2021, August 30). *Partisan divides in media trust widen, driven by a decline among republicans*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/30/partisan-divides-in-media-trust-widen-driven-by-a-decline-among-republicans/.

Grosser, K. M. (2016). Trust in online journalism: A conceptual model of risk-based trust in the online context. Digital Journalism, 4(8), 1036-1057. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2015.1127174.

Gutsche, R. E., & Hess, K. (2018). Contesting communities: The problem of journalism and social order. *Journalism Practice, 12*(2), 136-145. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2017.1397935.

Hallin, D. (1989). *The uncensored war: The media and Vietnam.* Oxford University Press.

Hamel, L., Lopes, L., Kirzinger, A., Sparks, G., Stokes, M., & Brodie, M. (2021). *KFF COVID-19 vaccine monitor: Media and misinformation*. KFF. Retrieved from https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/poll-finding/kff-covid-19-vaccine-monitor-media-and-misinformation/.

Jones, J. M. (2020). *Attitudes about local news mostly stable amid Covid*. Knight Foundation. Retrieved from https://knightfoundation.org/articles/attitudes-about-local-news-mostly-stable-amid-covid/.

Karlsson, M. (2020). Dispersing the opacity of transparency in journalism on the appeal of different forms of transparency to the general public. *Journalism Studies (London, England), 21*(13), 1795-1814. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1790028.

Klemm C, Das E, Hartmann T (2016). Swine flu and hype: a systematic review of media dramatization of the H1N1 influenza pandemic. J Risk Res 19:1-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2014.923029.

Kohring, M., & Matthes, J. (2007). Trust in news media: Development and validation of a multidimensional scale. Communication Research, 34(2), 231–252. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650206298071.

Kye, B., & Hwang, S. J. (2020). Social trust in the midst of pandemic crisis: implications from COVID-19 of South Korea. *Research in social stratification and mobility*, *68*, 100523.

Laing, A. (2011). The H1N1 crisis: Roles played by government communicators, the public and

the media. J Prof Commun 1:123–149. https://doi.org/10.15173/jpc.v1i1.88.

Lauterer, J. (2006). *Community journalism: Relentlessly local*. Univ of North Carolina Press.

McGrath, M. (2017). Beyond distrust: When the public loses faith in American institutions. *National Civic Review*, *106*(2), 46–51. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1002/naticivirevi.106.2.0046.

McQuail, D. (2013). *Journalism and society*. SAGE Publications.

Mitchell, A., Jurkowitz, M., Oliphant, J. B., & Shearer, E. (2020, August 21). *Americans who rely most on White House for covid-19 news more likely to downplay the pandemic*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/05/20/americans-who-rely-most-on-white-house-for-covid-19-news-more-likely-to-downplay-the-pandemic/.

Newman, N., & Fletcher, R. (2017). Bias, bullshit and lies: Audience perspectives on low trust in the media. *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, University of Oxford.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2021). *Enhancing public trust in COVID-19 vaccination: The role of Governments*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Retrieved from https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/enhancing-public-trust-in-covid-19-vaccination-the-role-of-governments-eae0ec5a/#biblio-d1e2071.

Parry, J. (2021). *The Arkansas poll, 2021: Summary report*. University of Arkansas. Retrieved from https://fulbright.uark.edu/departments/political-science/resources/2021_ArkPoll_summary_report.pdf

Piltch-Loeb, R., Savoia, E., Goldberg, B., Hughes, B., Verhey, T., et al. (2021). Examining the effect of information channel on COVID-19 vaccine acceptance. PLOS ONE 16(5): e0251095. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0251095.

Ravenelle, A. J., Newell, A., & Kowalski, K. C. (2021). "The Looming, Crazy Stalker Coronavirus": Fear Mongering, Fake News, and the Diffusion of Distrust. Socius. https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231211024776.

Reader, B., & Hatcher, J. A. (2012). "Community Journalism: A Concept of Connectedness." In *Foundations of Community Journalism*, edited by Bill Reader and John Hatcher, 3–20. London: Sage.

Robinson, S. (2014) Introduction. *Journalism Practice*. 8:2, 113-120, doi: 10.1080/17512786.2013.859822.

Saad, L. (2021, October 5). *More in U.S. vaccinated after Delta Surge, FDA decision*. Gallup. Retrieved from https://news.gallup.com/poll/355073/vaccinated-delta-surge-fda-decision.aspx.

Shearer, E. (2020, August 18). *Local news is playing an important role for Americans during covid-19 Outbreak*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved November 9, 2021, from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/02/local-news-is-playing-an-important-role-for-americans-during-covid-19-outbreak/.

Stanley, T. D. (2019). The decline of local news and its effect on polarization. *Governance: The Political Science Journal at UNLV*. Retrieved from https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=governance-unlv.

SSRS. (2020, April 29). *Covid-19 in America*. SSRS. Retrieved from https://ssrs.com/covid-19-in-america/.

U.S. Department of Commerce. (2019, July). *Quickfacts: United States*. United States Census Bureau. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219.

Usher, N. (2018). Re-thinking trust in the news: A material approach through "objects of journalism". *Journalism Studies (London, England), 19*(4), 564-578. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1375391.

Wenzel, A. D., Ford, S., & Nechushtai, E. (2020). Report for America, Report about Communities: Local News Capacity and Community Trust. Journalism Studies, 21(3), 287–305. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1641428.

**Appendix**

**Appendix A.**

1. **Select your age.**
   *18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65 - 74, 75 – 84, 85 or older*
2. **Select your ethnicity**.
   *White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic or Latino*
3. **Select the gender you identify with.**
   *Male, Female, Non-binary / third gender, Prefer not to say*
4. **Select the state in which you legally reside.**
   *Dropdown select.*
5. **Select the political party you are affiliated with.**
   *Republican, Democrat, Independent, Other*
6. **Generally speaking, your preferred news source is:**
   *Local (independent, nonprofit, affiliates), National, Global*
7. **In general, I trust my news provider.**
   *Strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree*
8. **I trust my news provider's COVID-19 reporting**.
   *Strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree*
9. **I don't have complete trust in the COVID-19 news coverage because**:
   *The news provider shares misleading or inaccurate information, I don't trust the government and/or medical sources used by the news provider, There is a lack of independent investigations and/or fact-checking by the news provider, The reporters display personal bias and emotion in the news coverage, Other:*
10. **The journalistic commentary and assessments regarding the topic of COVID-19 is useful to me**.
    *Strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree*
11. **The topic of COVID-19 receives the necessary attention and coverage**.
    *Strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree*
12. **My news provider reports a fair account of COVID-19 information**.
    *Strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree*
13. **I believe my news provider has excluded COVID-19 facts.**
    *Strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree*
14. I **believe my news provider has excluded COVID-19 facts because**:
    *Political agenda/partisan reporting by the news organization, Personal bias and emotions by the reporters, Lack of reputable sources, Other:*
15. **The COVID-19 coverage includes different points of view**.

*Strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree*

16. **I find it difficult to distinguish factual information from opinions in COVID-19 reports**.
    *Strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree*

17. **I trust COVID-19 coverage from my local (state, regional or county) news provider more than national news providers.**
    *Strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree*

18. **I trust my local news provider for COVID-19 coverage because**:
    *The information can be easily verified, I trust their source, There is less bias / political agenda in local news reporting, The reporting is more relevant to me, The journalists are more credible, Other:*

19. **Are you fully vaccinated? (Two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines, or one dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine)**
    *Yes, No, Prefer not to say*

20. **Are you partially vaccinated with a scheduled second dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine?**
    *Yes, No, Prefer not to say*

21. **If you are undecided or do not plan to be vaccinated, select why:**
    *Risk of the potential short-term side effects, Mistrust in effectiveness of the vaccine, Mistrust in the vaccine ingredients, Unable to be vaccinated due medical or religious reasons, Risk of long-term side effects, Don't believe there has been enough research and/or testing, Don't believe it is necessary, Encouraged not to by trusted sources, Prefer not to say, Other:*

22. **Have you received the booster shot for the COVID-19 vaccine?**
    *Yes, No, Unable to receive the booster*

**Appendix B.**

UNIVERSITY OF
ARKANSAS

| | |
|---|---|
| **To:** | Rob Wells |
| **From:** | Justin R Chimka, Chair |
| | IRB Expedited Review |
| **Date:** | 09/30/2021 |
| **Action:** | **Exemption Granted** |
| **Action Date:** | 09/30/2021 |
| **Protocol #:** | 2109354939 |
| **Study Title:** | News Media Trust and Mistrust During the COVID-19 Pandemic |

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

cc:    Katy Seiter, Investigator