

# The Effects of False Information on Journalism

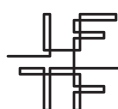
## KEY FINDINGS

- **The focus on “fake news” and disinformation in the media has decreased trust in journalism for a subset of Americans; however, in contrast, part of the public has simultaneously increased their demand for and respect of journalism, resulting in increased hiring at large outlets.**
- **Several survey respondents link the current news environment to increased harassment: 27% of surveyed respondents said they have been harassed and 43% said they have colleagues who have been harassed. Minorities and women are disproportionately the targets of harassment.**
- **Heightened publicity about false information has led some journalists to increase the time and resources they spend on sourcing. It has also led members of the public to call for greater transparency of the journalistic process.**

This brief explores how false information\* has influenced the profession of journalism, journalists themselves, and the production of news. Evidence draws from an original survey of 1,018 journalists, 22 semi-structured interviews, and secondary sources. See the Executive Summary for more information about the methodology. The effects outlined in this brief primarily stem from two sources: (1) journalists’ knowledge of increasing misinformation and disinformation shaping their behavior, and (2) the public’s varied interpretations of “fake news” in the current news environment. “Fake news” had a range of meanings to respondents, but was broadly considered to reflect a general attack on the media—specifically allegations that the field of journalism is rife with fabricated information due to misinformation, disinformation, and the journalists themselves. Balancing the public’s understanding of “fake news” and maintaining trust in a time when accusations of “fake news” are commonplace, has impacted the ways in which journalists conduct themselves.

## ABOUT THESE BRIEFS

The New Venture Fund provided a grant to the IFTF Digital Intelligence Lab to survey leading journalists and experts to ascertain the impact of false information on the information ecosystem and the production of news. For more information see Digital Propaganda and the News Briefs, Executive Summary at [www.iftf.org/journalismandfalseinfo](http://www.iftf.org/journalismandfalseinfo).



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## THE PROFESSION AT LARGE

Across the board, interviewed and surveyed journalists agreed that the emphasis on disinformation campaigns,<sup>1</sup> particularly with reference to the 2016 U.S. elections, and the increased prevalence of the term “fake news,” has negatively impacted the public’s perception of journalism. One respondent lamented that, “The credibility of [the] journalism profession is on par with used car salesmen.” This sentiment is supported by recent research that finds individuals exposed to discussions of “fake news” are less likely to express trust in the media and more likely to misidentify real news.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that as the emphasis on “fake news” and revelations about disinformation campaigns continue, the broader credibility of the media has decreased.

Others pointed out a more nuanced effect, which many referred to as the “polarization of trust” in the news. Respondents mentioned that while trust had declined among some subsets of the population, demand and respect for quality journalism has increased in other subsets of the population as a direct result of the focus on false information. When asked about the effect of “fake news” on the profession at large, a local health reporter from Maine said:

**I think it cuts both ways, there are people who accuse the media of being part of the supposed “fake news” machine, often this is very partisan, but at the same time there is a greater appreciation of traditional mainstream media than there was say 10 years ago. You can go to the *New York Times* and other sources and you know in general you’ll be reading things from people trying to get the news right. So I’ve heard a lot more overall appreciation from people. I couldn’t say what side of the ledger is greater or less than. My perception is that it cuts both ways.**

**Some people are convinced that mainstream media is fake but more people appreciate us more.**

The increased respect and demand for journalism by some has led to tangible benefits in the profession more broadly. Many journalists reported that readership and subscription numbers are up. The increased demand for journalism has also led to increased hiring. A television reporter from a major network based in New York said:

**People say that we are under attack a whole lot, but viewership numbers are up and subscription numbers are up. And newsrooms are going on a hiring spree so there is a misperception that attacks of “fake news” are hurting journalism. But if anything, it is driving the bulk of readers and viewers to go to quality news sources.**

Increased hiring has not been limited to reporters focused on false information and the political environment; it has also affected traditional journalism beats. For example, a large national newspaper reported that due to increased readership, their DC bureau staff has increased by over 65% in recent years. That increase has allowed the bureau to employ a full-time education reporter and a full-time poverty reporter for the first time in years.

Increased readership has trickled down to less mainstream outlets as well. For example, an editor at a relatively young international online outlet said that she feels readership has increased where she works because there has been a heightened demand for diverse sources beyond the mainstream media. Another editor at a national magazine said that he thought increased readership was a direct result of attacks on the media, but that he was concerned that the current investment in the news infrastructure could collapse and lead to another media depression, particularly at mid-range and smaller newsrooms.

## JOURNALISTS

Many journalists linked decreased credibility, at least among some subsets of the population, with increased unease and harassment. Interviewed and surveyed respondents reported heightened “stress” and a sense of “background anxiety,” as well as feeling overwhelmed by the current news environment. Additionally, they reported feeling a “greater sense of urgency” and pressure to get things right. Others described being “on the defensive” due to the current environment. Many mentioned a heightened awareness of how their words could be “weaponized” or manipulated. Several reported that they had minimized their social media presences, particularly on Twitter, and carefully vetted any posts they shared publicly. For example, one journalist said:

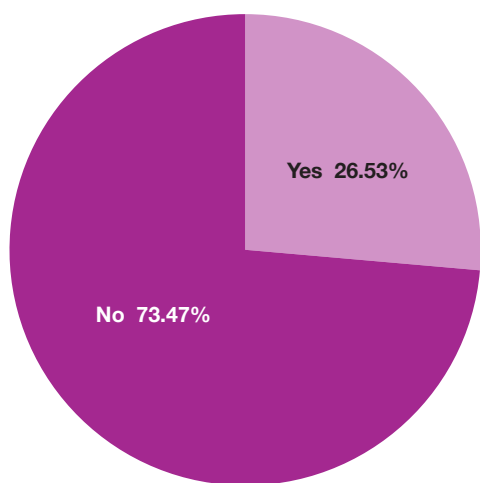
**I don't want to have such a large public attack surface that invites trouble. [So] I lie low in public digital presence.**

In contrast, one interviewee in his first year as an education reporter said that he found the increasing criticism of journalism “motivating.” Others said that while the heightened criticism was disheartening, they were inspired to regain readers’ trust through the production of credible work.

In addition to increased anxiety, many respondents mentioned direct harassment as a byproduct of the increasing use of the term “fake news” and media attention on recent disinformation campaigns. Many veteran reporters acknowledged that harassment has always been a challenge for journalists. However, increased exposure and access to journalists through the Internet and social media, coupled with increasing accusations leveled at the media by elites, led many interviewees and survey respondents to link this atmosphere to increased harassment. Of surveyed journalists, almost 27% reported being harassed (Figure 1) and roughly 43% said they knew other journalists that have been harassed (Figure 2).

In interviews, accounts of harassment ranged from angry readers to sophisticated and coordinated attacks. The most common narrative from respondents was continued written attacks via email and Twitter direct messages. Others reported attacks by professional trolls or automated “bot” social media accounts. One expert working in the area recounted a colleague whose phone and email were hacked a few months prior. Impersonation on social media, circulation of memes, and doctored videos of reporters were also mentioned.

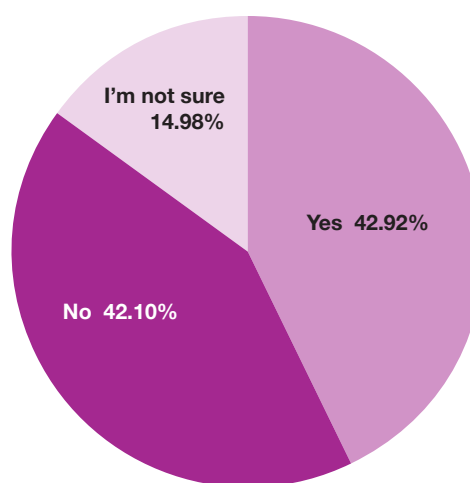
**FIGURE 1**  
**Have you been harassed?**



Total Responses: 848

Source: Stanford University and Institute for the Future, Survey on Current News Environment, 2018.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Do you know other journalists that have been harassed?**



Total Responses: 848

Source: Stanford University and Institute for the Future, Survey on Current News Environment, 2018.

Another journalist was continually contacted by an angry person who had been the subject of a story leading her to get a security system at her house and to officially report the situation to her newsroom. Two interviewees mentioned death threats and others alluded to recent violence against journalists. The most common avenue for attacks was via professional email, although attacks on Twitter and other social media platforms were also very common (Figure 3). Of the respondents who had been harassed, 10% had been harassed in person (Figure 3).

A local television reporter's experience in Pittsburgh revealed the variety of harassment and challenges the current news environment fosters. He described several instances: "fake news" was yelled at him during a live broadcast; covering a Trump Rally, the audience was instructed to turn around and jeer at the press; and, a doctored version of one of his broadcasts accusing him of racism circulated online. During his recent coverage of the Synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh in October of 2018, he was attacked on his professional Facebook account by users claiming he was perpetuating a false story and that the shooting did not happen. In addition, a meme of him interviewing a rabbi at

the scene has circulated online, accusing him of interviewing crisis actors.

Attitudes toward harassment varied greatly. Some respondents said it was par for the course for all journalists. One veteran technology reporter said:

**Every journalist that writes things that gets read widely, gets trolled in one form or another. And the more prominent you are the more heavily you get trolled. It is pretty straightforward.**

Others expressed that they were very scared or hypervigilant with regard to attacks. Many respondents felt frustrated by accusations of "fake news" and harassment. A young reporter from an international newspaper based in California said:

**I find it disheartening...I find it upsetting, and slightly scary. If I've stuck my neck out there to reveal something and it was a long process, I think this was not worth it.**

**FIGURE 3**  
**How have you been harassed in the past?**



Source: Stanford University and Institute for the Future, Survey on Current News Environment, 2018.



Another survey respondent reported:

**All of this serves to erode my drive to work in this industry and general faith in the collective reasoning power of people at large. In short, it is depressing. On my worst days, I think that if readers can't tell news from opinion, yell "fake news!" at anything they don't agree with, and distrust any expert or effort put into investigation and research, what's the point?**

Some journalists alluded that the current environment might actually deter people from joining the profession or make some journalists burn out and move on.

Experiences with harassment also varied across subsets of journalists. Roughly a quarter of interviewees mentioned that harassers often target journalists because of their sexual orientation, gender, or race. In reference to harassment, a veteran reporter from California said:

**I'm a middle aged white dude, which makes me less likely to get picked on than a lot of people... [but] the stories of people of color and women, [are] all just disgusting.**

An education reporter in Virginia recounted that a colleague of his was attacked widely for referencing one of his articles. He believed that his colleague was attacked, while he remained unscathed, because of his colleague's race. In a discussion with two prominent contributors, one male and one female, to a high profile law publication, the male respondent was asked about recent attacks on Twitter. In response, he said that while he found the attacks frustrating, they were nothing compared to what his female colleague endures on a regular basis. As a commentator on a national news network, she is constantly harassed about her looks and

accused of not producing credible work. In the same vein, one expert in the field of journalism said that she believes the disproportionate harassment targeting women and people of color is likely influencing who is going into journalism, which could potentially have long-lasting effects on the field.

Variation in harassment was also linked to exposure. One respondent attributed her insulation from attacks to her publication's online paywall. Other respondents said that they were more likely to face harassment when their emails were included in the byline. Finally, on-air reporters or journalists with videotaped segments seemed to face greater targeting due to their exposure both on TV and online.

Similar to the other effects discussed here, anxiety and harassment of journalists were attributed both to mis- and disinformation, as well as "fake news." Some respondents reported that the tools utilized by disinformation campaigns, such as automated "bot" accounts, made them nervous and increased their demand for operational security. Others' comments reflected concerns that the "fake news" phenomenon has emboldened politicians, business executives, and others in the public eye to label unfavorable investigations as "fake" and to attack the credibility of critical reporters. This, in some respondents' minds, has led to an environment in which harassment of journalists is more accepted and even promoted.

## THE PRODUCTION OF NEWS

Roughly half of surveyed respondents reported that attention to false information and disinformation campaigns has not changed how they produce news or execute their jobs on a day-to-day basis. Although, in interviews, some respondents initially said that it had not affected their job, and then later circled back to the question and said that upon further

reflection, it had impacted how they treated sources or framed their stories. Surveyed and interviewed journalists who felt that their work had been impacted, categorized the effects across three areas: subject matter, sourcing, and transparency.

### Subject Matter

Many of the interviewed journalists pointed out that increasing false information, including misinformation and coordinated disinformation campaigns, has given them subject matter to write about. Over 70% of those surveyed said that they had reported on the topic of false information (Figure 4). Interviewees mentioned that an increasing number of news outlets have reporters solely focused on covering disinformation and that the topic has become its own beat. Others who report on technology or social media have found that they are increasingly covering false information, both spread by foreign actors and mistakenly online.

### Sourcing

The most mentioned impact of the current news environment was on journalists' sourcing techniques. In surveys and interviews, almost all respondents said that the current news environment made them increasingly careful about sources in general. One respondent echoed countless others when he said the current news environment:

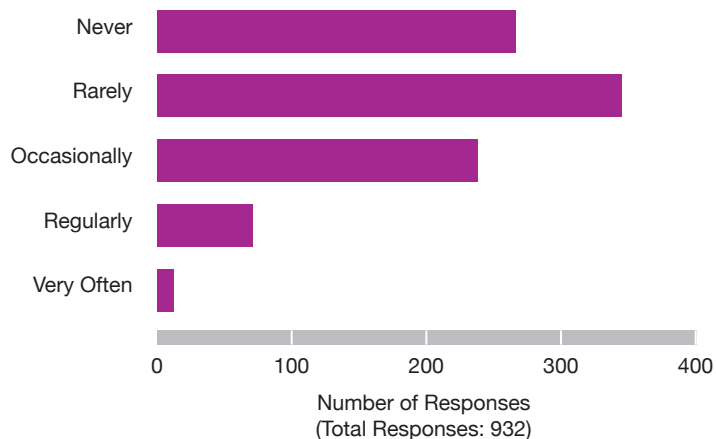
**...has made me more aware of, and more driven to make sure I have every fact and detail correct and that the stories that I'm publishing are real.**

Respondents described the motivation to double-check sources as both a reaction to misinformation, as well as a way to protect themselves from accusations or being labeled "fake news."

In addition to simply double-checking sources, respondents discussed taking more care to trace information via links online to their original sources or, in some cases, original social media posts. Several journalists discussed being more conscious of social media posts themselves. Many referenced how it used to be common to just grab screenshots of tweets or report on things simply because they were trending, but that now they are reluctant to do so.

Another downstream effect is increasing distrust of sources and the accompanying increased time spent validating sources. Many reported that their job now takes more time due to increased information and increased awareness of the circulation of false information. Sources also seem to be more distrustful of members of the media; one surveyed journalist said "it has become more difficult to gain sources' trust."

**FIGURE 4**  
**How often have you reported on false information?**



Source: Original Survey from IFTF/Stanford

Some respondents mentioned informal approaches to sourcing. For example, some newsrooms have informal blacklists of online news outlets. Others described only using “mainstream” news sources for their work. Listed mainstream sources varied greatly by respondent and ideological orientation. One respondent discussed asking sources on social media to take “selfies” of themselves and text them to prove they were in fact who they claimed to be. Two interviewees said they now try to primarily meet sources in person versus interacting with them on the phone or online. Many also mentioned relying on informal networks of other reporters and experts to verify sources as a result of the current news environment.

### Transparency

Finally, the last major effect outlined by respondents concerning the production of news was increased transparency about the journalistic process. Many mentioned an ongoing push in the industry to more clearly label opinion and news articles to avoid their conflation and perceptions of journalistic bias that can foster increased distrust. However, numerous respondents went further. Many said that the current distrust of the media, and information in general, has necessitated walking audiences through a given article, including how the story came to fruition and the data used to support the story. A survey respondent lamented:

**Reporters and news organizations need to be more transparent in their reporting process during this digital age. It's obvious that the general public does not know how journalists do their jobs. Sometimes, we need to take non-journalists through the reporting process and show them how we produced a story.**


An interviewed education reporter echoed this sentiment and said:

**I believe as journalists we should be as official as we want officials in the government to be. So with the increase in misinformation, it is becoming more and more important for journalists to show their work. So if I'm writing on a school board meeting, I'll attach the full report. When I'm analyzing different target capacities, I'll attach spreadsheets to show [the] work I did to arrive at this number.**

Similarly, many mentioned including thumbnails of original documents or more footnotes to explain sources. If the story is based on original data analysis, a technology reporter mentioned either linking to the data or making the data available. Others mentioned clearly delineating the process of reaching out to sources and explaining the initial tips that had led to a story.

Respondents also said it was critical given the current news environment to acknowledge the shortcomings in a given story or its sources. Another education reporter said he often uses polls but when he does so he tries to either use multiple polls from different sources or acknowledge the limitations of polling data. Others, particularly health reporters, mentioned being clear about the funder of a given report or source to reveal any potential biases in the findings. A surveyed respondent said:

**It's made me realize the financial stakes involved with the spread of misinformation, so I try to look more closely at people's motivations whenever they express an opinion (or a fact for that matter... #alternativefacts).**



When debunking false information, another survey respondent pointed out that it is critical not just to say something is false, but also to say why it is false and how the reporter arrived at that conclusion. Similar to an increased focus on sourcing, respondents attributed the need for transparency to both a desire to educate their audience due to the prevalence of misinformation and also to protect themselves from allegations of “fake news.”

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

In the current news environment, journalists feel discouraged and discredited. More awareness of the anxiety prevalent across the field and strategies to approach accusations of “fake news” are greatly needed. Journalists explicitly said that they would benefit from better mental health resources (see Brief 3) and a broader, more visible, discussion about the implications of harassment and declining credibility in the field. Further research is needed to better understand how anxiety and harassment is influencing who is entering the field and who is potentially leaving the field. Some respondents hypothesized that increased burnout or the deterring effects of the current news environment may impact the future of the news force, particularly for minorities and women, which could have long-term effects on the production of news. Research should be conducted to understand this trend. Additionally, further research needs to be conducted on how the “polarization of trust” (as discussed in this report) may be changing the public’s expectations, interaction with, and attitudes toward the media, in order to understand the long-term implications of the focus on misinformation, disinformation, and “fake news.”



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## ENDNOTES

- \* This brief will use the term false information to refer to information that is factually incorrect including mis- and disinformation. Borrowing from Wardle and Derakhshan, misinformation refers to “information that is false, but not produced with the intention of causing harm,” and disinformation refers to “information that is false and deliberately produced to harm a person, social group, organization, or country.” Wardle, Claire and Hossein Derakhshan. 2017. “Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking.” Council of Europe, pg 20. 64% of respondents were male and 36% were females.
1. In this report, we use the term “disinformation campaigns” to describe coordinated computational propaganda efforts, such as the actions carried about by the Internet Research Agency.
  2. Van Duyn, Emily and Jessica Collier. 2018. “Priming and Fake News: The Effects of Elite Discourse on Evaluations of News Media.” *Mass Communication and Society*, 00:1-20.

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The **Digital Intelligence Lab** at Institute for the Future is a social scientific research entity conducting work on the most pressing issues at the intersection of technology and society. We examine how new technologies and media can be used to both benefit and challenge democratic communication.



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