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DATE: May 24, 2005

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**Public and Press Differ About Partisan Bias, Accuracy and Press Freedom,
New Annenberg Public Policy Center Survey Shows**

The American public disapproves only narrowly of partisan journalism, splits about evenly on whether news organizations usually get their facts straight, and narrowly accepts the idea that the government can limit the right of the press to report a story, according to a national survey conducted for the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center.

But journalists, including reporters, editors, producers, news executives and owners, were also surveyed for the study which measured the divide between those who work in the news media and those who consume it. They heartily disagreed with the public on all those issues and many others.

"This study reveals a worrisome divide between the public's view of journalism and journalists' own views of their work. If journalists do indeed believe that what they do is valuable, fair and ethically sound, it's past time they began to put that case more effectively to the public," noted Geneva Overholser, co-editor of a new Oxford University Press book, *The Press*.

Sixteen percent of the 673 journalists who were polled and 43 percent of the 1,500 members of the public surveyed said it was "a good thing if some news organizations have a decidedly political point of view in their coverage of the news. Eighty percent of journalists and 53 percent of the public said it was a "bad thing."

Eighty-six percent of journalists but only 45 percent of the public said news organizations generally "get their facts straight." But 48 percent of the public and only 11 percent of journalists said news organizations were "often inaccurate." When serious mistakes are made, 74 percent of the journalists said news organizations quickly report the error, but only 30 percent of the public said they do. In the public, 24 percent said news organizations try to ignore errors and 41 percent said they try to cover them up.

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“The public perception that journalism is often inaccurate should raise alarm in the journalistic community. Confidence in the press is built on the belief that fact is reliably reported,” said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, co-editor of *The Press*. “The public belief that when reporters get the facts wrong they fail to quickly report the error invites editors to ask what accounts not only for that perception but for the discrepancy between their confidence in the correction process and the public’s doubts.”

The findings were released at a panel discussion on the state of American Journalism sponsored by Oxford University Press.

Asked if the government “has the right to limit the right of the press to report a story,” 44 percent of journalists said “never,” 48 percent said “rarely” and 6 percent said “sometimes.” Among the public, just 29 percent said “never,” 17 percent said “rarely,” 37 percent said “sometimes” and 14 percent said “always.”

Some of these and other differences appeared to reflect the fact that the media sample, with a median experience level of 23 years, is distinctly more liberal than the public in general, measured by a separate poll of 1,500 adults. Thirty-one percent of those in the journalists’ sample called themselves liberal, 49 percent said they were moderates and just nine percent said they were conservatives. In the public generally, 24 percent said they were liberal, 33 percent moderate and 38 percent conservative.

The study did not probe political opinions on many issues, but one question did measure a huge gap between journalists and the public. The journalists were asked whether they favored a law in their state that would allow same sex marriages. Fifty-nine percent said they did, while 20 percent said they did not. In polling for the National Annenberg Election Survey last year, only 28 percent of the public favored such a law while 64 percent did not.

Another significant difference between the journalist and the public came on church attendance. Forty percent of the public said they attended church once a week or more, compared to 17 percent of the journalists, while just 16 percent of the public and 23 percent of the journalists said they never attended religious services.

The survey revealed differences among conservative journalists and conservatives in the public at large, as well. For example, among conservatives in the general public, 21 percent said the government never had the right to halt reporting and 15 percent said rarely. But among conservative journalists, 32 percent said “never” and 54 percent said “rarely.”

In a series of questions asked only of the general public, freedom of the press ranked well below other core constitutional values, especially among younger respondents, who also tended to rank other values as less important than their elders did. Sixty-seven percent of the public, and 58 percent of those 18 to 29, said it was “very important” for them to “live in a country where news organizations can report the news without government censorship.”

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In contrast, 92 percent of the public (and 86 percent of those 18 to 29) rated religious freedom as “very important,” 91 percent of the public (and 88 percent of 18-29 year-olds) called a judicial system that treats everyone equally “very important,” 84 percent of the public (and 74 percent of 18-29 year-olds) called honest elections “very important,” and 81 percent of the public (and 76 percent of 18-29 year-olds) said it was “very important” to them “to live in a country where you can openly say what you think and criticize the government.”

The public also rated the ethics of journalists well below that of teachers, but above that of government officials, lawyers and politicians. Seventy-four percent of the public said journalists’ ethics were good. Eighty-nine percent rated teachers’ ethics good, 54 percent rated the ethics of government officials or lawyers good, and 43 percent rated those of politicians good.

But 95 percent of journalists ranked their trade’s ethics as good; 32 percent said “very good,” a rating given by only 7 percent of the public. Ninety-two percent of journalists rated teachers’ ethics as good, 64 percent gave that grade to government officials, 69 percent said lawyers’ ethics were good, and 40 percent said politicians’ ethics were good.

Besides accuracy, the survey measured many areas of public distrust of news organizations. Journalists shared many of their criticisms, though rarely with the same intensity.

For example, 79 percent of the public said they believed “a media company that receives substantial advertising revenue from a company would hesitate to report negative stories about that company.” The issue was put somewhat differently to journalists, but 33 percent said that to either a great extent or a moderate extent, “media organizations either intentionally or unintentionally avoid news stories that are potentially unfavorable to major advertisers.” But 47 percent of journalists said the same of unfavorable stories about their company’s owners.

Both journalists and the public gave positive ratings to how the New York Times and CBS News handled recent reporting scandals, although many said they had not heard or read about those events.

Sixty-one percent of the public and 80 percent of the journalists said the Times had done a good job of correcting the situation involving Jayson Blair, a reporter who made up stories in 2003.

Fifty-eight percent of the public and 52 percent of the journalists said CBS News had done a good job of correcting the situation involving Dan Rather’s use of unverifiable, possibly forged documents concerning President Bush’s service in the Texas Air National Guard.

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But when asked what led CBS News to run that story, 40 percent of the public said a major reason was “CBS News and Dan Rather are liberals who dislike President Bush.” Only 10 percent of journalists agreed. The journalists attributed the decision to run the story heavily to CBS’s belief in its accuracy (76 percent)” and to its “being in too much of a rush” (73 percent).

Journalists offered several areas of self-criticism on subjects that were not put to the general public. Eighty-one percent said the news media had done a poor job of reporting on terrorism before the attacks of September 11, 2001. Fifty-nine percent said the news media had done a poor job of reporting on the Bush Administration’s justification for the war in Iraq.

The journalists were also critical of one element of their political coverage, with 58 percent agreeing with the proposition that if one side in a campaign is being more deceptive than the other journalists usually just say that both sides are deceptive, thereby giving the impression that the deception is at similar levels.

The survey of journalists was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International between March 7 and May 2, 2005, among 673 journalists including owners and executives, editors and producers, and staff journalists, and representing both print and broadcast media, and local and national organizations. Interviews were conducted online and by telephone by Princeton Data Source. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling is plus or minus 4 percentage points.

The public survey was conducted by telephone between March 3 and April 5, 2005, among a nationwide representative sample of 1500 adults 18 years of age and older. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

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