# News Sources and Engagement

# in Fresno, Kansas City, and Macon

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## SUMMARY

This project was led by the News Co/Lab at Arizona State University in collaboration with the Center for Media Engagement at The University of Texas at Austin. Together, we designed and tested an online survey tool that news organizations can use to improve transparency, engagement, and mutual understanding with the communities they serve.

The News Co/Lab, at ASU's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, envisioned, co-created, and promoted the survey online with the help from newsrooms at *The Fresno Bee*, *The Kansas City Star*, and *The Telegraph* in Macon, Georgia.

The Center for Media Engagement at UT Austin's Moody College of Communication researched previous surveys and co-created the survey instrument with News Co/Lab partners at the Cronkite School. The collaboration also included feedback from the Media Education Lab at the University of Rhode Island, American Press Institute, Google Surveys, and those who commented on blog posts of a draft of the survey questions. Center for Media Engagement researchers programmed the survey using Qualtrics, collected and analyzed survey results and produced this preliminary report.

We surveyed the news sources of three regional news organizations—*The Fresno Bee*, *The Kansas City Star,* and *The Telegraph*—to gauge the sources' attitudes toward the newspapers and their relationship with their audience. The news sources' surveys included six sources from *The Fresno Bee*, 16 from *The Kansas City Star* and 29 from *The Telegraph.* We combined the responses of the 51 news sources who completed the surveys in our analysis.
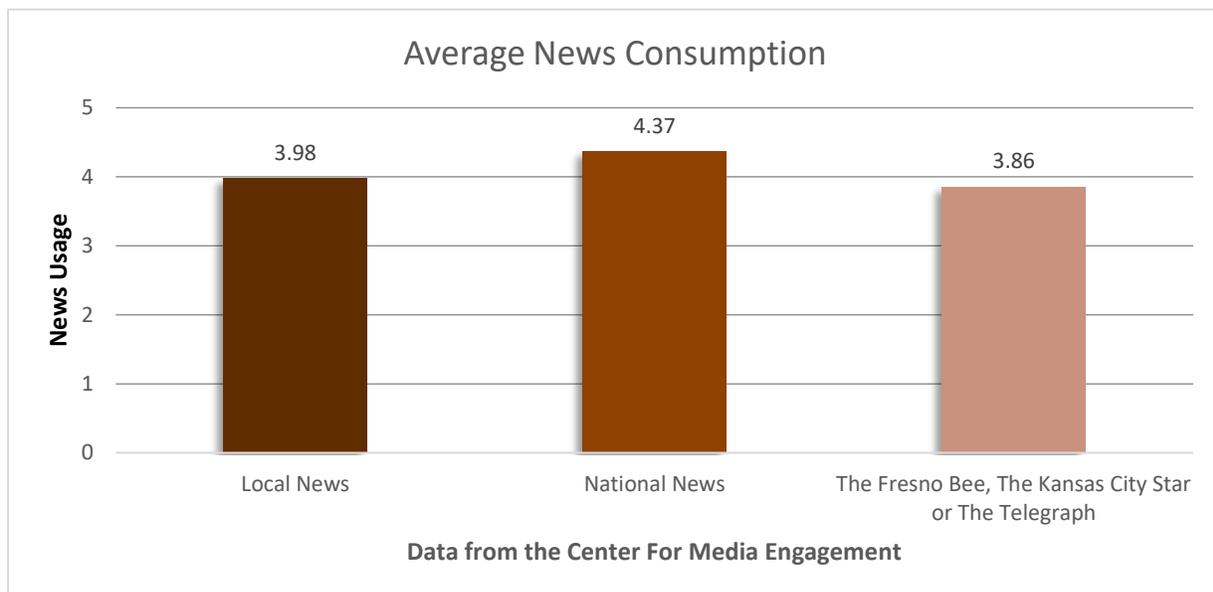
The following results stand out from the surveys with the news sources:

- While news sources say that their local news organizations are accurate, credible, and committed to the facts, they don't express the same confidence in the newsrooms' relationships with their community.

- News sources do not think journalists' political leanings and personal biases play a large role in how they select stories to report on. The most important influence, they believe, is how many people will pay attention to the story.
- Sources who said they had asked for a correction in the past did not generally rate their local news organization as being particularly responsive to their concern.
- The predominant reason news sources didn't ask for a correction when they believed a mistake was made was because they felt the error was not a big enough problem to warrant reaching out.
- Despite expressing some uncertainties about their local news outlets, the great majority of news sources say they would agree to be a source again in the future.
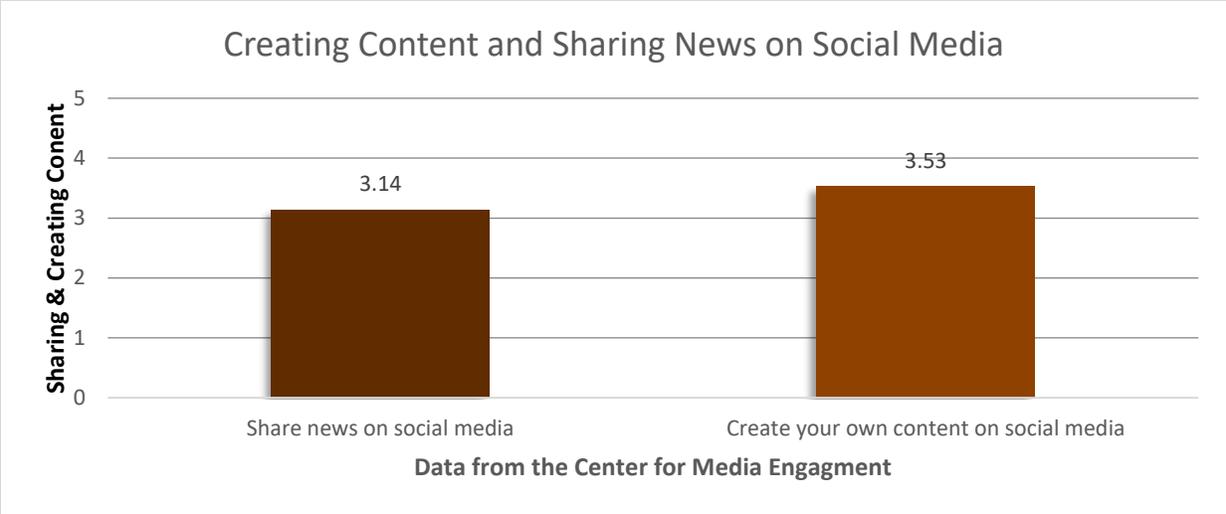
## NEWS CONSUMPTION

Respondents were asked to rate their news usage on a 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*more than once a day*) scale separately for local news, national news, and their local news organization. News sources reported that they consumed all three types of news about once a day and that they consumed national news the most frequently.

**Average News Consumption**

| | Local News | National News | The Fresno Bee, The Kansas City Star or The Telegraph |
|---|---|---|---|
| News Usage | 3.98 | 4.37 | 3.86 |

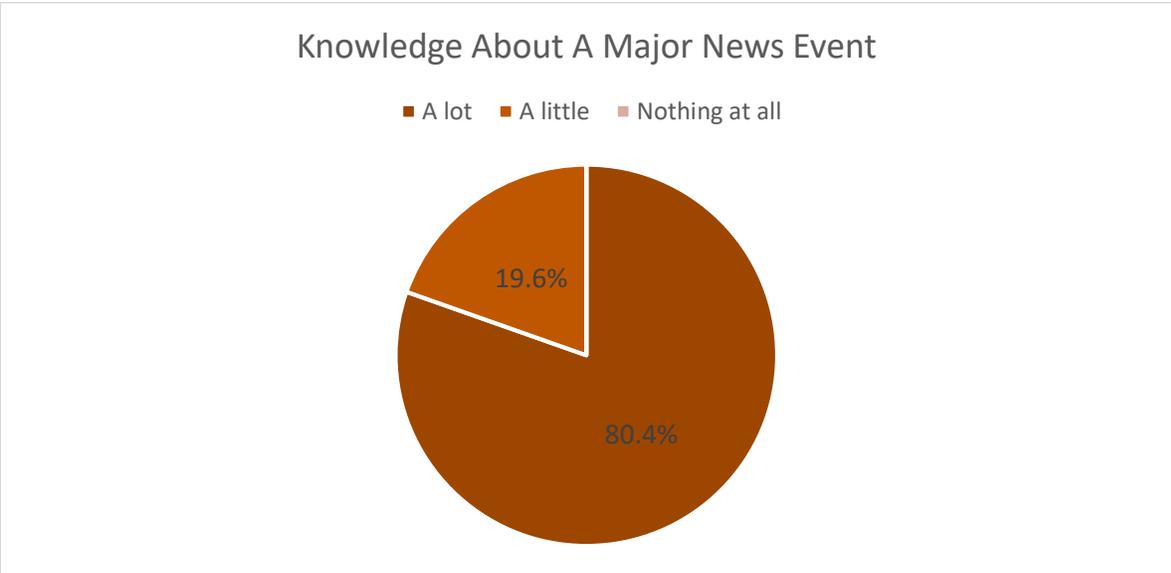Data from the Center For Media Engagement

## CREATING CONTENT AND SHARING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

News sources rated how often they share news and create their own content on social media on a scale of 1 (*never*) to 6 (*once a day or more often*). On average, news sources reported sharing news on social media about once or twice a month. They said they created their own content on social media slightly more often.

**Creating Content and Sharing News on Social Media**

(bar chart)
- Share news on social media: 3.14
- Create your own content on social media: 3.53

Y-axis: Sharing & Creating Conent (0 to 5)

**Data from the Center for Media Engagment**

Respondents were asked how much, if anything, they knew about a major news event in their community. Each of the news organizations had provided a news event that they covered extensively for this question. For the Kansas City survey, respondents were asked about the Kansas City International Airport renovation. For the Fresno survey, participants were asked about the trafficking of sex slaves in the region. For the Macon survey, participants were asked about allegations of fraud in Bibb schools. Every news source reported hearing at least a little about the news event, with 80.4% reporting that they had heard a lot about it.

**Knowledge About A Major News Event**

Legend: ■ A lot  ■ A little  ■ Nothing at all

(pie chart)
- 19.6%
- 80.4%

## AUTHENTICATING AND IDENTIFYING NEWS CONTENT

Of the news sources surveyed, 72% reported that they required no help in finding the information they need online, 26% said they occasionally need help, and 2% said they frequently need help. Additionally, respondents expressed confidence in their ability to figure out if online information is correct and reliable. The average response was 4.12 on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale. Using the

same scale, participants rated whether they gather ideas from several news outlets to get a full picture when they are interested in a topic. The news sources' average rating was 4.39, indicating participants often look at multiple news outlets.

Participants also rated how often they take certain actions when verifying the authenticity of a news article on a scale of 1 (*all of the time*) to 5 (*never*). The most consistently used strategy was to look at which news source published the story, with the average response being 1.18 among the news sources. Respondents also said they looked at who shared the story with them and what evidence the story contained all or most of the time to assess the authenticity of stories. Respondents reported being somewhat less likely to always search for other similar news reports, although on average they still reported doing so some or most of the time.

**Table 1. Averages showing how frequency people employ strategies to authenticate news**

| Strategy | Frequency of Strategy |
|---|---|
| Look at who shared it with you | 1.38 |
| Look at which news source published it | 1.18 |
| Look to see what evidence the story contains | 1.50 |
| Search for other similar news reports | 2.40 |

News sources from all three cities displayed a reasonably strong ability to identify a false headline. In Macon and Fresno, 80% of participants correctly picked out the false headline. In Kansas City, 72.9% correctly identified the false headline.

**Table 2. Percentage of people who thought each of the following headlines was fake**

| City | Headline | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **Macon** | Hothead jailed over lack of BBQ sauce at Waffle **[True]** | 6.7% |
| | Bizarre: Man says cops ordered him to cut off his dog's head **[True]** | 13.3% |
| | Macon gang initiation: Shoot white women at mall **[Fake]** | 80.0% |
| **Fresno** | Judge's son sends lewd email and obscene photos **[True]** | 20.0% |
| | Bizarre: Sushi fan pulls five-foot tapeworm from his body **[True]** | 00.0% |
| | By population, Fresno is now the 10th largest city in the U.S. **[Fake]** | 80.0% |
| **Kansas City** | Man freed from jail after 17 years when 'lookalike' is found **[True]** | 14.6% |
| | Bizarre: Dead body in truck in airport parking lot – for eight months **[True]** | 12.5% |
| | New study: Nearly half the nation's scientists now reject evolution **[Fake]** | 72.9% |

News sources displayed a similar level of talent when it came to identifying different types of content (news, analysis, opinion, or sponsored content). More than 90% of respondents correctly identified an opinion piece and an analysis piece. When shown a news story, some participants identified it as an analysis piece, but no participants believed it was an opinion piece or sponsored content. Participants had the most difficulty correctly identifying sponsored content.

**Table 3. Percentages showing how people categorize each of the four types of content with correct answers in boldface**

| Story Shown | News | Opinion | Analysis | Sponsored Content | Correct Answer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Headline:** State Legislature Approves Sweeping Tax Plan<br><br>**First paragraph:** In a close vote, the state legislature approved the state budget yesterday with sweeping tax changes that affect nearly every taxpayer. | **85.7%** | 0.0% | 14.3% | 0.0% | **News** |
| **Headline**: The Biggest Tax Scam in History<br><br>**First paragraph**: The bill our leaders rammed through this week was done too quickly, without enough analysis of its likely economic impact. It's the biggest tax scam in state history. | 0.0% | **93.3%** | 0.0% | 6.7% | **Opinion** |
| **Headline**: How the New Tax Bill Affects You<br><br>**First paragraph**: The tax bill affects each person differently. Here is a brief overview of the new provisions, based on interviews with tax experts, and what it means for your returns. | 0.0% | 0.0% | **100%** | 0.0% | **Analysis** |
| **Headline**: Seven Myths About the Tax Plan<br><br>**First paragraph**: Knowing how to navigate the new tax system could make the difference between getting the refund you deserve or overpaying your taxes. For a modest fee, our tax consultants can save you a lot of money. | 8.3% | 8.3% | 16.7% | **66.7%** | **Sponsored Content** |

## PERCEPTIONS OF LOCAL NEWS OUTLETS' CREDIBILITY

News sources rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale how well nine statements related to credibility and trust with the audience applied to their local news outlets. The statement with the highest average (3.48) was "Cares about getting the facts right." The statement with the lowest average (2.60) was "Explains to the community how and why we decide what stories to cover."

**Table 4. Average ratings for nine statements related to credibility and trust**

|  | News Sources' Average Ratings |
| --- | --- |
| Is concerned with our community's interests | 2.67 |
| Is focused on helping people in our community | 2.65 |
| Cares about getting the facts right | 3.48 |
| Explains to the community how and why we decide what stories to cover | 2.60 |
| Is fair in our reporting | 3.23 |
| Knows the community well | 3.21 |
| Provides all the related information readers need to fully understand news stories | 2.69 |
| Invites the community to suggest story ideas or help with reporting | 3.17 |
| Tells the community who our journalists are and what they do | 3.52 |

News sources also evaluated how well seven adjectives related to credibility and trust applied to their local news organization on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale. Results indicated that the news sources held neutral to positive attitudes toward the newspapers. The highest averages were for "Credible" (3.57) and "Accurate" (3.43). The lowest averages were for "Biased" (3.02) and "Transparent" (3.09).

**Table 5. Average ratings for seven adjectives related to credibility and trust**

|  | News Sources' Average Ratings |
| --- | --- |
| Fair | 3.26 |
| Biased | 3.02 |
| Accurate | 3.43 |
| Trustworthy | 3.40 |
| Credible | 3.57 |
| Transparent | 3.09 |
| Engaging | 3.13 |

News sources also shared how they thought journalists decide what stories to cover. Participants were shown a series of five statements and asked to rate how important they thought each was to journalists when selecting stories on a scale of 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*extremely important*). News sources said they believed journalists' personal biases played the smallest role in their decision-making. How many people would pay attention to the story was rated as the most important influence over what stories journalists decide to cover.

**Table 6. Average ratings for influences on journalists' decision-making**

|  | News Sources' Average Ratings |
|---|---|
| How many people will pay attention to the story | 3.79 |
| How many people are affected by the story | 3.64 |
| The personal biases or political views of the journalist | 2.33 |
| A desire to help people make up their minds on issues | 2.60 |
| A desire to help solve problems in society | 3.23 |

## EXPERIENCE AS A NEWS SOURCE

News sources were asked how often they had been cited as a source by their local news outlet. More than half (57.4%) said they had been cited a few times, but it wasn't a common thing. A quarter (25.5%) identified as a frequent or recurring source. Seventeen percent of participants said they had been cited only once by their local news outlet.

Participants were also asked if their local news outlet had made errors when quoting or citing them as sources on a 1 (*never*) to 5 (*frequently*) scale. The news sources said the stories they had been cited in very rarely contained factual or grammatical errors and that they rarely lacked context. They were somewhat more likely to report that their newspaper had misquoted them or had been generally unfair.

**Table 7. Average ratings for statements about the stories where sources were quoted**

|  | News Sources' Average Ratings |
|---|---|
| Contained grammatical or typographic errors | 2.27 |
| Contained factual errors | 2.40 |
| Misquoted the words I said | 3.48 |
| Lacked context (for example, left out important information) | 2.60 |
| Been unfair (for example, gave a false implication) | 3.23 |

## CORRECTIONS

Of the news sources surveyed, 29.5% said they had asked for a correction in the past. In contrast, 27.3% said they had felt a correction was warranted but had not asked for one. The remaining 43.2% of news sources said their local news outlet had never been wrong in citing or quoting them.

Those who reported the news organization had been in the wrong when citing or quoting them were asked to explain what impact, if any, they experienced from the error. Eighteen people responded, with eight saying there was no impact or the impact was merely a "minor inconvenience." The remaining 10 people reported experiencing impact from the mistakes, including: lost time, embarrassment, hurt feelings, loss of professional credibility, and a misinformed public.

Of those who had asked for a correction, half said their local newsroom was very to somewhat unresponsive. Another 41.7% said their local newsroom was somewhat responsive and 8.3% said they were responsive. These participants were asked if the newsroom took certain actions after they had asked for a correction. The action newsrooms took most often was to explain to the news sources personally why the mistake happened, but the frequency of this action was moderate. No participant said that the newspaper had ever explained in public why the mistake happened.

**Table 8. Percentage of news sources who said the newsroom took each action after the source asked for a correction**

|  | News Sources Who Asked for a Correction |
| --- | --- |
| Correct the mistake promptly | 15.4% |
| Correct the mistake with the appropriate visibility | 7.7% |
| Correct the mistake adequately | 30.8% |
| Repeat the error while correcting the mistake | 15.4% |
| Explain in public why the mistake happened | 0.0% |
| Explain to you personally why the mistake happened | 38.5% |
| Corrected the mistake in future news coverage | 7.7% |

Participants who thought their local news organization had gotten something wrong but did not ask for a correction were asked why they made that decision. The most common reason why news sources didn't ask for a correction was that they felt the problem was not a "big enough deal."

**Table 9. Reasons why sources did not ask for a correction**

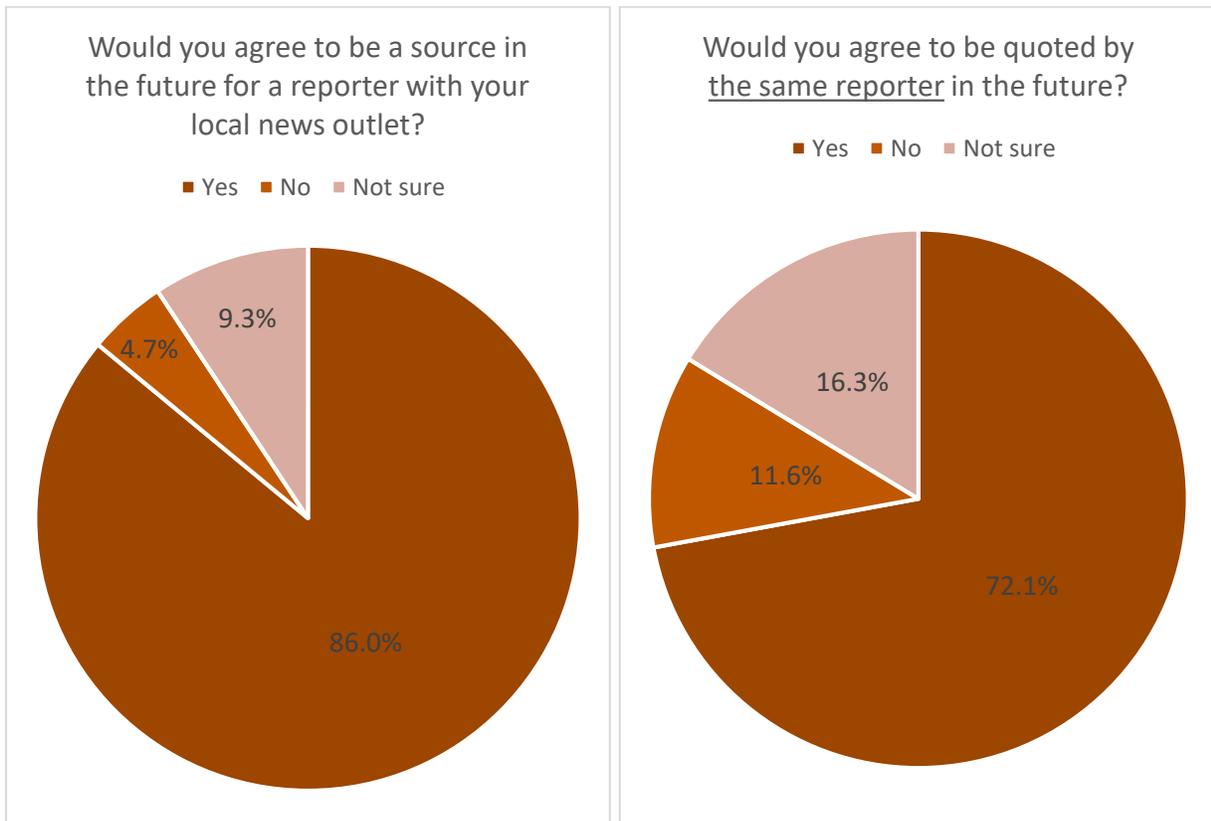|  | News Sources Who Did Not Ask for a Correction |
| --- | --- |
| The newspaper makes mistakes all the time, so what's the point | 9.1% |
| I thought it would be a hassle to ask for a correction | 9.1% |

| | |
|---|---|
| I thought it would be difficult to find the right person | 0.0% |
| I didn't think the problem was a big enough deal | 54.5% |
| I don't really like to complain | 0.0% |
| Other | 27.3% |

The 27.3% of news sources who indicated "other" to why they did not ask for a correction were given an opportunity to explain why, but only four people did so. Their reasons were:

- "The damage was done and a correction would not help."
- "Ordinarily, it is not worth the effort because the correction is buried at the bottom of the second page and is not noteworthy like the headline of the article."
- "No point in disagreeing or explaining."
- "Denying or questioning an accusation often only makes people believe that it must be true. My opinion."

## FUTURE AS A NEWS SOURCE

Taking their experiences with the newspapers into account, the great majority of news sources said that they would agree to be a source for the newsroom again in the future. They were slightly less likely to say they would agree to be quoted by the same reporter.



Would you agree to be a source in the future for a reporter with your local news outlet?
■ Yes  ■ No  ■ Not sure
9.3%
4.7%
86.0%

Would you agree to be quoted by the same reporter in the future?
■ Yes  ■ No  ■ Not sure
16.3%
11.6%
72.1%

## CONCLUSIONS

The news sources surveyed expressed confidence in their ability to find the information they need online and to figure out if that information is correct and reliable. They reported visiting multiple news outlets when they are interested in a topic and using a variety of strategies to authenticate news stories. Their confidence held up when tested. The sources performed well when asked to identify a false headline and distinguish between different types of content.

When it came to the news sources' impression of their local news outlet, the results were more mixed. On the one hand, sources repeatedly showed that they believe their local newspaper is committed to the facts. They characterized the newspapers as accurate, credible, and trustworthy and reported their news coverage very rarely contained factual errors. They also believe journalists' political leanings and personal biases do not play a large role in how they select stories to report on.

On the other hand, news sources expressed uncertainty about their local news organizations' relationship with the community. The three local outlets received low ratings on trust-related statements like "Explains to the community how and why we decide what stories to cover" and "Is focused on helping people in the community." In addition, sources who said they had asked for a correction did not generally rate their local news organization as being particularly responsive to their concern or as taking action to right the mistake.

Despite these reservations, however, news sources report that they read their local paper about once a day on average. The great majority reported they would be willing be quoted in a story by their local news organization again in the future.

## METHODOLOGY

The surveys were created on Qualtrics online platform, and *The Fresno Bee*, *The Kansas City Star*, and *The Telegraph* distributed the surveys to their news sources with the assistance of the News Co/Lab. News sources were encouraged to complete the surveys, but not required to do so.

**Table 10. Demographics of survey participants for the newsroom survey**

| | |
|---|---|
| *N*=51 | |
| **Gender** | |
| Male | 57.1% |
| Female | 42.9 |
| **Race/Ethnicity** | |
| White | 83.7% |
| Black/African American | 9.3 |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 0.0 |
| Hispanic/Latino/Latina | 2.3 |
| Native American/Alaska Native | 0.0 |
| Other/Multiracial | 2.3 |
| Prefer Not to Respond | 2.3 |
| **Age** | |
| 18-29 | 2.4% |

| | |
|---|---|
| 30-49 | 26.2 |
| 50-64 | 45.2 |
| 65+ | 26.2 |

| Education | |
|---|---|
| Some high school | 0.0% |
| High school graduate | 2.3 |
| Associate's degree | 2.3 |
| Bachelor's degree | 32.6 |
| Master's degree or professional degree or higher | 58.1 |
| Prefer Not to Respond | 4.7 |

| Household Income | |
|---|---|
| Less than $30,000 annually | 0.0% |
| $30,001 to $50,000 annually | 7.0 |
| $50,001 to $75,000 annually | 16.3 |
| $75,001 to $100,000 annually | 7.0 |
| $100,001 to $150,000 annually | 20.9 |
| Greater than $150,000 annually | 37.2 |
| Prefer Not to Respond | 11.6 |

| Political Affiliation | |
|---|---|
| Democrat | 38.1% |
| Republican | 28.6 |
| Independent | 19.6 |
| Other | 2.4 |
| Prefer Not to Respond | 11.9 |