

Research shows journalists can restore media trust

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In a first-of-its-kind study from LSU's Manship School of Mass Communication, researchers discovered journalists can increase media trust by speaking out in defense of their profession, while also doing

more fact checking. Contrary to long-established practices in which journalists traditionally ignore attacks against their profession's credibility, Ray Pingree, Doris Westmoreland Darden Professor, and his team found that the combination of fact checking and defending journalism had positive effects, but fact checking alone did not. This combination increased trust in and use of mainstream news, while also increasing confidence in the existence and attainability of facts in politics.

The research was published Monday in the open-access research journal *PLOS ONE*. This is the first time any study has analyzed what happens to trust in media when [journalists](#) defend their profession.

"We know from past research that attacks on the media decrease [media trust](#), and until now, researchers had not looked at what would happen if journalists responded defending their profession, probably because until recently journalists almost never did that," said Pingree. "Traditionally journalists assume that ignoring attacks and just doing good journalism is the best way to prove the critics wrong. But when one side attacks over and over again and the other doesn't respond, at some point people assume that journalists have conceded the point that they're biased."

Pingree created a custom news portal environment for this study that contained real news stories drawn automatically from Google News. Study participants were paid to use this as their main news source for a week, and were free to choose which articles to read. For half the study's participants, a few editorials defending journalism were added to the news feed. Separately, a randomly assigned half of participants had fact checking stories added to their news feed. Pingree and his team then measured how [study participants'](#) trust in media changed. The study showed that without defense of journalism, fact checking had no effects on media trust, but when participants were exposed to defenses of journalism, their trust in media increased, along with their confidence in

an ability to decide which political facts to believe.

Pingree stresses the real-world implications of this study, which offer new hope that journalists can restore media trust and ultimately make facts matter again in politics by occasionally responding to anti-media rhetoric while also doing more fact checking. Readers who share news on [social media](#) could also help reverse the trend of media distrust by occasionally sharing an editorial defending journalism and a few fact-checking stories, he said.

"This innovative work underscores the importance and relevance of the public policy and [media](#) research underway today at the Manship School," Martin Johnson, dean of the Manship School, said. "We think of it as a public service, and we hope it informs not only journalists but [news](#) consumers around the world."

More information: Raymond J. Pingree et al, Checking facts and fighting back: Why journalists should defend their profession, *PLOS ONE* (2018). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0208600](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0208600)

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