



Trust in news in New Zealand

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April 2020

This snapshot report is published by AUT's research centre for Journalism, Media and Democracy (JMAD).

About this snapshot report

This is the first JMAD report from the centre's ongoing research project into the level of trust New Zealanders have in the news. It is produced in collaboration with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. With permission from the institute's researchers, we have used the same survey questions and comparable sampling method they use in their annual *Digital News Report* (<http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/>). This allows international comparisons between levels of trust in the news in Aotearoa New Zealand and those 38 other countries covered by the Reuters project. While our survey was conducted during the coronavirus pandemic, and as New Zealanders were preparing for a national Covid-19 lockdown in late March 2020, it is impossible to know how coronavirus coverage and the lockdown may have affected trust in news.

The survey data for our report was collected by New Zealand online market research company Horizon Research Ltd. The production of this report was funded by the Auckland University of Technology (AUT), and it has ethics approval from the AUT's Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Recommended citation: Myllylahti, M. & Treadwell, G. (2020). *Trust in news in New Zealand*. AUT research centre for Journalism, Media and Democracy (JMAD). Available: <https://www.aut.ac.nz/study/study-options/communication-studies/research/journalism,-media-and-democracy-research-centre/projects>



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Overview

In 2019, the Reuters Institute's annual *Digital News Report* found that general trust in news in the 38 countries surveyed had fallen, and that fewer than half of those surveyed trusted news they consumed¹. However, in some markets (including the USA) people's trust on reputable news sources was increasing. Additionally, in 2019, people were paying for high quality digital news, but in general, the level of paying for online news continued to be low. The fact that people trust legacy media, but are still not paying enough to support them, captures the essence of the current media crisis in New Zealand, as elsewhere.

Against this background, this JMAD snapshot report investigates trust in news in Aotearoa New Zealand. It can be argued that the timing of this report could not be more relevant. In April 2020, news media companies in Aotearoa New Zealand were in existential crisis as the Covid-19 pandemic further ate away at their already falling advertising income and print sales. In many Western countries, media companies have asked for financial support from their governments. In some countries (including Australia), governments have responded with support packages for ailing commercial media outlets. Just how the Aotearoa New Zealand Government responds to the current crisis remains to be seen. At the same time, like many global news players, the nation's media companies have seen sharp increases in their audience numbers, and website traffic, as citizens search for information about the novel coronavirus and related issues. *Newsroom* co-editor Mark Jennings says that during the Covid pandemic, the independent digital news outlet has seen a substantial increase in its audience: "One of the things that has happened during the crisis

¹ Newman, N., Fletcher, N., Kalogeropoulos, A. and Nielsen, R.K. (2019). *Digital News Report 2019*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/DNR_2019_FINAL_0.pdf

obviously is that the readership has, and ours was growing anyway, but it's skyrocketed during the crisis. We are now seeing between four to five times our normal levels." Additionally, *The Spinoff*, another independent digital media outlet, has seen growth in its paying membership. Publisher Duncan Greive says that the site has had "stunning growth there [in memberships] and that's given us the tools to survive the winter, survive the lockdown."²

Key findings

- Compared internationally, trust in news in Aotearoa New Zealand generally is high, with 53% of people agreeing they can trust 'most of the news most of the time'.
- Even more New Zealanders (63%) trust the news they personally consume.
- Trust in news consumed via social media and search engines in Aotearoa New Zealand is low when compared internationally.
- State broadcasters are the most trusted outlets for news in Aotearoa New Zealand, with Radio New Zealand (7) and Television New Zealand (6.8) topping the rankings as most trustworthy when ranked out of 10.
- Internationally, public broadcasters tend to have higher trust score than digital outlets as they have a longer track record.
- Despite strong levels of trust in news, New Zealanders are strongly concerned by poor journalism (factual mistakes, dumbed down stories, misleading headlines/clickbait), facts being spun to push certain agendas, and commercial and political messages dressed up as news.
- New Zealanders are more concerned about 'fake news' than news consumers in 38 other countries.
- New Zealanders are worried about the use of term 'fake news', too; 86% of respondents were concerned it was used by politicians and others to discredit news sources they did not like, with 50% of respondents saying they were strongly concerned about this.

² Journalism in crisis: NZ media bosses at the Covid-19 committee (2020, April 15). The Spinoff. Available: <https://thespinoff.co.nz/media/15-04-2020/journalism-in-crisis-nz-media-bosses-at-the-covid-19-committee/>

Data collection and sample

The survey on which this report is based did not ask New Zealanders to specifically comment on trust in the news in the light of Covid-19 pandemic. While our survey was conducted during the pandemic and at the outset of the lockdown, it included no specific questions about trust in news in relation to Covid-19. The research project seeks to understand how New Zealanders trust their news and which news outlets their trust most.

Data: The data for this research was collected by Horizon Research Ltd

(<https://www.horizonpoll.co.nz>), a company specialising in online polling. The results in this report are drawn from a national online survey of New Zealand adults (18 years of age or over) who are members of a Horizon Research Ltd respondents panel and a third-party research panel, which both represent the New Zealand population at the 2018 Census. Questions in the survey exactly matched those concerning public trust in the news in the annual digital news survey conducted in 2019 in 38 countries by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. In terms of limitations, as noted elsewhere, any influence the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2020 may have had on survey results is difficult to judge.

Sample: Between March 23 and 30, 2020, 1204 people responded to the trust-in-news survey. This sample is weighted on age, highest educational qualification, personal income, employment status, ethnicity and region to match the New Zealand population at the 2018 Census. It has a maximum margin of error at a 95% confidence level of $\pm 2.9\%$ overall.

Overall trust in news

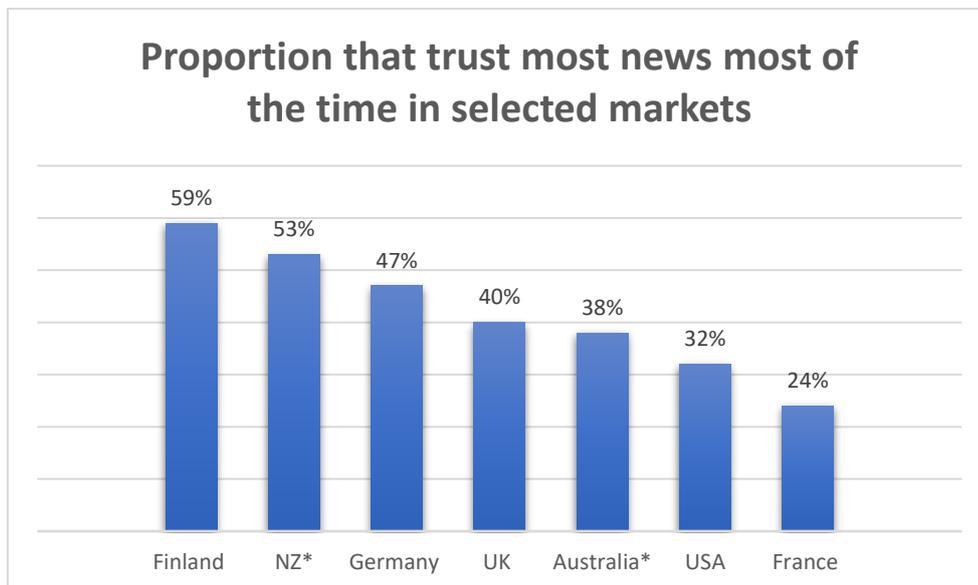
Q1³ asked New Zealanders about their trust in news generally and their attitudes to news media.

Based on our sample, 53% of New Zealanders say they can trust most news most of the time.

Additionally, approximately 62% trust the news they personally consume (figure 1). Overall, trust is higher in New Zealand than in the 38 countries included in the Reuters *Digital News Report 2019*⁴.

According to the Reuters report, in 2019 the overall trust in news across 38 countries surveyed stood at 42%, and 49% of respondents across those nations said they trusted news they consumed.

Figure 1: Trust in news in selected markets



Source: JMAD/Reuters Digital News Report 2019

*New Zealand and Australian figures are for 2020, others for 2019

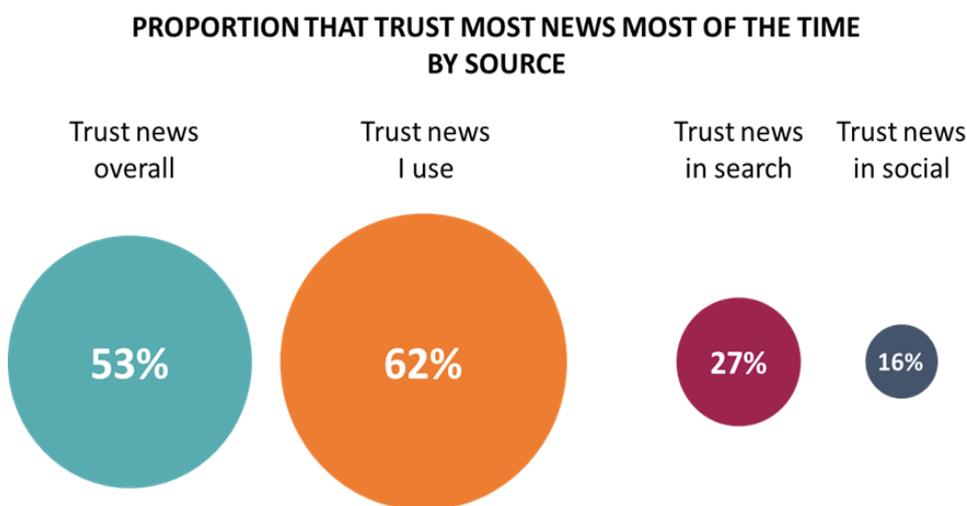
³ Q1. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: I think you can trust most news most of the time/I think I can trust most of the news I consume most of the time.

⁴ All international comparisons here use data from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/>.

Trust in news in social media and search

In Q2⁵, New Zealanders were asked about the trust in news they received via social media and search engines. Based on our sample, just 27% of New Zealanders said they trusted news they found via search engines. Only 16% of respondents said they trusted trust news in social media (figure 1). These trust levels in news found through search and social media are internationally low. In the Reuters *Digital News Report 2019*, 33% of those surveyed trusted news in search and 23% trusted news found via social media.

Figure 2: Trust in news in New Zealand, March 2020



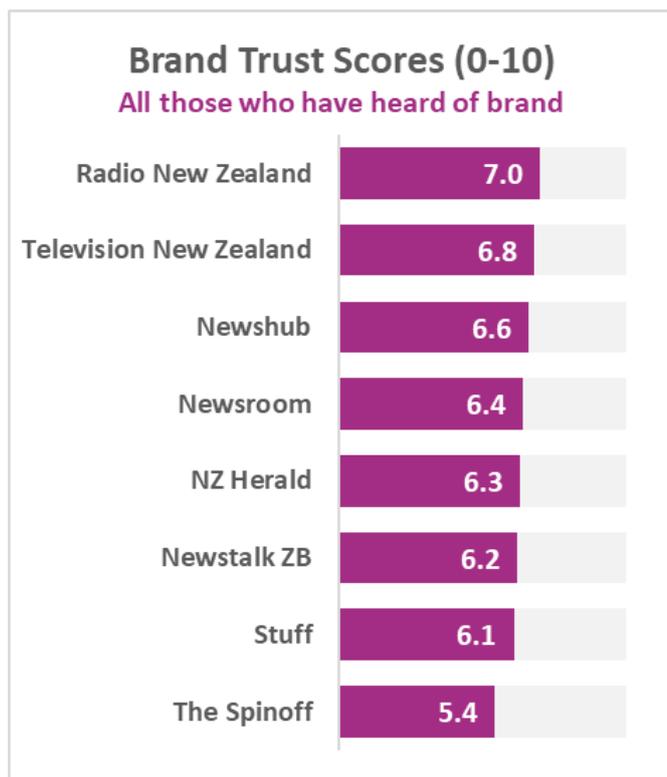
Source: JMAD/Horizon Research

⁵ Q2. It is now possible to get online news in many different ways, including from search engines and social media sites. With this in mind, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: I think I can trust news in social media most of the time/I think I can trust news in search engines most of the time.

Trust in New Zealand news brands

Q3⁶ asked about the trustworthiness of prominent New Zealand news outlets. Using a scale of 0-10, where 0 was not trustworthy at all and 10 completely trustworthy, respondents were asked to rate their level of trust in eight news brands. Average scores out of 10 were calculated from those who knew of each source. Based on our sample, New Zealanders ranked RNZ as the most trustworthy (7), TVNZ came second (6.8) and Newshub third (6.6). These three were followed by Newsroom (6.4), the NZ Herald (6.3), Newstalk ZB (6.2), Stuff (6.1) and The Spinoff (5.4). In the countries where the public broadcasters have a long tradition – including the UK, Australia and Nordic countries – they tend to have higher trust score than digital outlets as they have a longer track record.⁷

Figure 3: Average brand trust scores New Zealand



Source: JMAD/Horizon Research

⁶ Q3. How trustworthy would you say news from the following brands is? Please use the scale below, where 0 is 'not at all trustworthy' and 10 is 'completely trustworthy'. NZ Herald/Stuff/Newshub/TVNZ/Newsroom/The Spinoff/RNZ/Newstalk ZB.

⁷ Reuters Digital News Report 2019, p. 68-69.

Misinformation and disinformation

Q4⁸ asked New Zealanders whether they were concerned about what was real and what was fake news on the internet. Based on our sample, 68% of respondents were concerned about what was real or fake on the internet. This is higher than in the Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report 2019*. In the Reuters sample, a little more than half of respondents – 55% – in 38 countries were concerned about their ability to separate fake and real news. The concern was at the same level in New Zealand as in Mexico and Spain (68%) and higher in countries such as the UK and Brazil.

Figure 4: Concerns about fake news on the internet

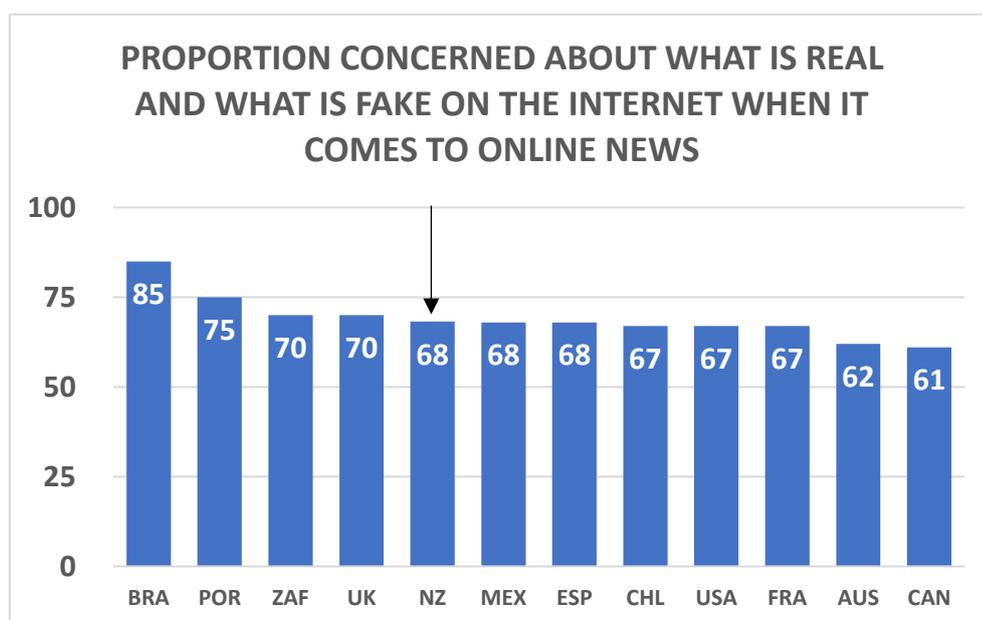


Source: JMAD/Horizon Research

⁸ Q4. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: "Thinking about online news, I am concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet." 1 Strongly disagree/2 tend to disagree/3 neither agree nor disagree/4 tend to agree/5 strongly agree.

Q5⁹ asked to what extent New Zealanders were concerned about poor journalism (stories with spun or twisted facts; stories made up for political or commercial reasons; or satirical stories that are simply made up); and the use of the term ‘fake news’. Approximately 90% of respondents were concerned about poor journalism; indeed 57% of respondents were very or extremely concerned. Approximately 95% of respondents were concerned about stories where facts are spun or twisted to push a particular agenda. Again, 90% were concerned about stories which are produced for political or commercial purposes, and 51% were concerned about news satire. Roughly 86% of respondents said they were worried about the use of term ‘fake news’ (50% had strong concerns).

Figure 5: Concerns about fake and real news in selected markets



Source: JMAD/Horizon Poll

Note: NZ figure is for 2020

⁹ **Q5.** To what extent, if at all, are you concerned about the following: Poor journalism (factual mistakes, dumbed down stories, misleading headlines/clickbait)/Stories where facts are spun or twisted to push a particular agenda/Stories that are completely made up for political or commercial reasons that look like news stories but turn out to be advertisements/Stories that are completely made up to make people laugh (satire)/term fake news. Scale: Not at all concerned/Not very concerned/Somewhat concerned/Very concerned/Extremely concerned.

Q6¹⁰ asked who should do more to help separate misinformation more clearly from real information. Approximately 70% of New Zealanders believe Google and Facebook should do more to separate fake news from real information; 78% of respondents believed that it was the job of journalists and media companies to make it easier to separate real and fake news; and 63% of respondents agreed it was up to the Government and journalists.

¹⁰ **Q6.** Any action to decrease/reduce the amount of “misinformation” (in the media or in social media) is likely to have the consequence of reducing, to some extent, the range of real or legitimate news or opinion available. With this in mind, please indicate your agreement with the following statements: Technology companies (e.g. Facebook and Google) should do more to make it easier to separate what is real and what is fake on the internet/Media companies and journalists should do more to make it easier to separate what is real and what is fake on the internet/Government should do more to make it easier to separate what is real and fake on the internet.

About the Journalism, Media and Democracy (JMAD) research centre



Based at the Auckland University of Technology's School of Communication Studies, the Journalism, Media and Democracy research centre (JMAD) was established in 2010 to promote research and advance knowledge about the media and communication industries, news and journalism professional practices. Since 2011, JMAD has published annual New Zealand media-ownership reports which track changes in media ownership and key trends and events in New Zealand media. Additionally, since 2014 AUT Media Observatory has provided regular measurement and analysis of news, and has produced three reports concerning New Zealand election coverage.

More information about JMAD and its projects can be found [here](#).