

# Even in the Digital Era, Canadians Have Confidence in Mainstream News Media

May 11, 2011

## Key findings:

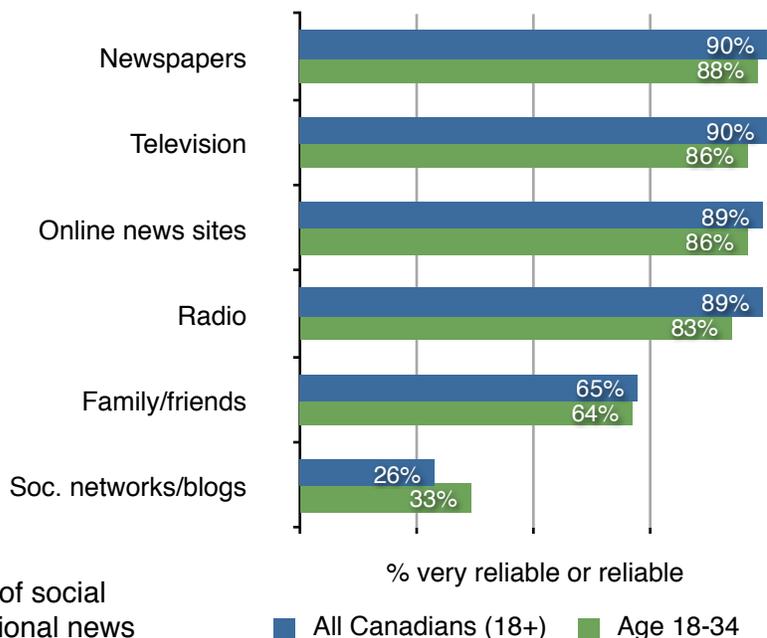
- Information provided by traditional news media is judged to be reliable and trustworthy by nearly nine out of 10 Canadians.
- In contrast, only one in four thinks information from social networks is reliable.
- Younger Canadians (18 to 34 years of age) are a little more likely to express confidence in social media (33%).
- While many are unsure, most Canadians with an opinion have more confidence in information posted by citizens when they know it has been edited by professional journalists.
- Professional editing inspires more confidence than “crowd editing” on wikis and similar sites.
- Most Canadians believe professional journalism is better at performing critical democratic functions than citizen journalism.

## Reliability and trust

The increased competition for attention in the digital era has not significantly eroded public confidence in the mainstream news media, according to a recent poll conducted by Angus Reid Public Opinion for the Canadian Media Research Consortium. Canadians responding to an online survey of a representative national sample of 1,682 adults report high levels of confidence in the reliability and trustworthiness of established news organizations.

Offline newspapers, television newscasts and their online websites lead the way in public assessments of reliability, far ahead of social networks and public wikis. The traditional news

Figure 1: How reliable would you rate the information you get from:



organizations, including radio news, are judged to be reliable and trustworthy by nearly nine out of 10 Canadians, while social networks are seen as reliable by only one in four.<sup>1</sup> Confidence in the information found on social networking sites is higher among frequent visitors to social networks. Among Canadians who visit social networks at least daily, some 40 per cent regard the information found there as reliable.

In an era of increasing audience fragmentation and competition for established news media, this is good news for traditional journalism, but reliance on and confidence in online sources is also high. Online news websites and television are the most important sources of information for Canadians. Younger Canadians rank online sources and interpersonal sources as most important, while older respondents are more likely to rely on traditional news sources, especially television.

While younger Canadians are more likely than their elders to have confidence in non-traditional news providers, they retain strong confidence in the mainstream media as well. Young adults have more confidence in social networking sites and blogs than average, but they still rank them far behind established news sources. Traditional news outlets were ranked as reliable or very reliable by between 83 and 88 per cent of young adult respondents; only 33 per cent said the same about social networking sites or blogs.

Women are considerably more likely than men to regard interpersonal sources of information as reliable (71% versus 59%) indicating perhaps that more personal styles of journalism, such as blogging, might also appeal more to women. Many Canadians rely on social networks to alert them to news, even though they may often seek verification from traditional news outlets.<sup>2</sup> (See Figure 1.)

In general, Canadians have a higher level of trust in the information they get from newspapers and television news networks than in information provided by Internet service providers, government or corporations. Comparing institutions, online Canadians appear to think that the traditional news media can be trusted to provide information less tainted by self-interest than government or business. The 2011 Edelman Trust Barometer reports that in Canadian the media have a relatively high level of trust (49%), higher than the global average for business

---

<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in a recent survey conducted by IPSOS-Reid for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 79 per cent of news consumers were satisfied with the fairness and balance of news reports on issues they followed. Ipsos-Reid. *The News Fairness and Balance Report: What Canadian news consumers think about fairness and balance.* Prepared for the CBC English service. English-speaking respondents only. Released October 5, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> For more detail, see *Social Networks Transforming How Canadians Get the News*, released April 27, 2011. CMRC website: <http://www.mediaresearch.ca>.

and government and trailing only NGOs.<sup>3</sup> (See Figure 2.)

Except for social media, public assessments of the reliability and trustworthiness of information from various sources and media types is fairly consistent across demographic categories. Women (87%) are a little more likely to trust television networks than men (78%) but overall trust levels for the networks are high.

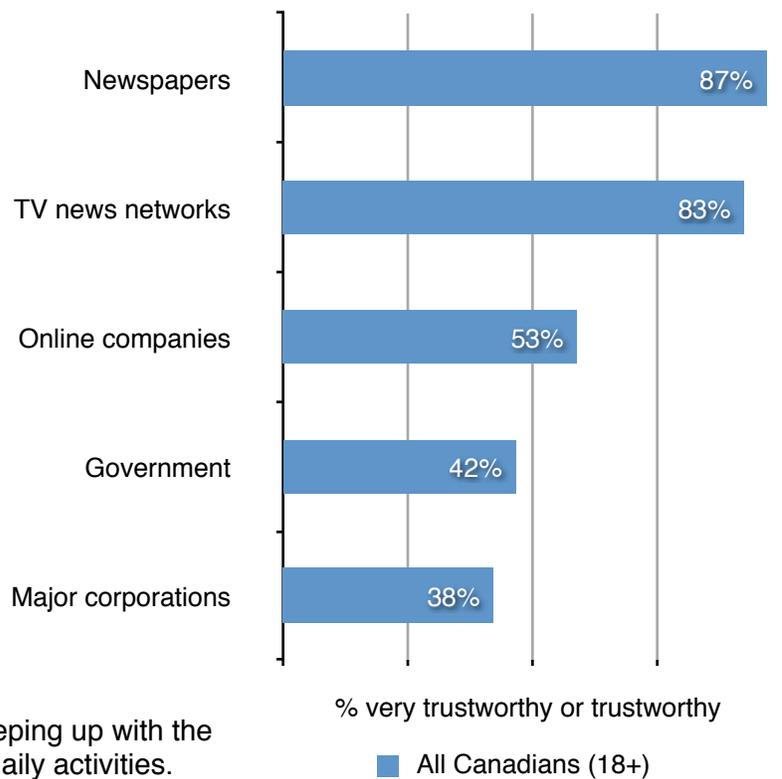
**The broader information environment**

Although trust in established news media remains quite high, habitual consumption of news is declining. The younger generation of online Canadians – those under 35 years of age – is significantly less likely to regard keeping up with the news as an important part of their daily activities.

Although four in five respondents in this generation think it is important to keep up with the news, only 27 per cent think it is very important. In contrast, almost all Canadians older than 55 think keeping up with the news is important and 45 per cent think doing so is very important.

Similar findings emerge in a recent poll conducted for the CBC: 66 per cent of Canadians agreed that “journalism plays a critical role in society” but there were important differences by age. Support for this statement was highest among respondents 65 and older (79%) and lowest among the crucial 18 to 34 group (58%). These data support the observation that increasing numbers of younger Canadians take a broad view of information, with traditional journalism seen as only part of the mix, supplemented or supplanted by interpersonal sources, including social media. Traditional media remain an important part of the information mix but, increasingly

Figure 2: How much trust do you have in the information you get from:



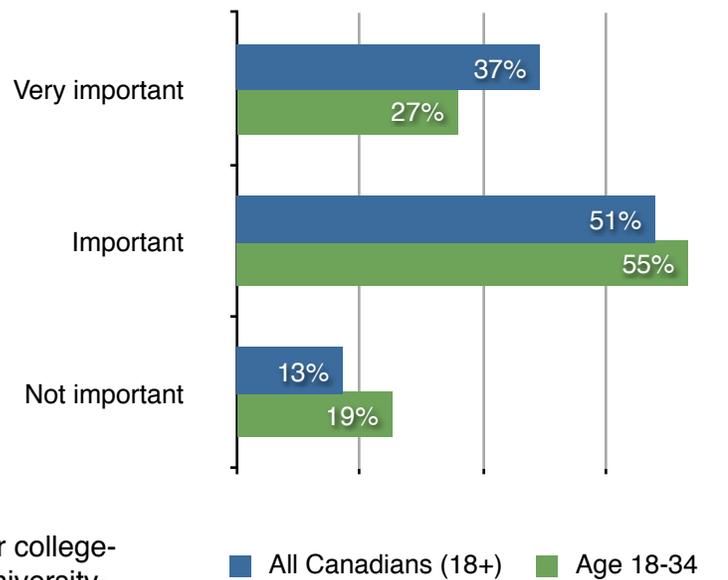
<sup>3</sup> The Edelman Trust Barometer is based on interviews in 23 countries with “informed publics,” that is respondents aged 25 to 64, university-educated, in the top 25% of household incomes in their countries report significant levels of media consumption.

it seems, people are consulting multiple sources.<sup>4</sup> (See Figure 3.)

Interest in keeping up with the news is influenced by gender, education and language. Forty-two per cent of men describe keeping up with the news as very important, compared to 32 per cent of women. French-speaking Canadians (41%) are slightly more interested than English speakers (36%).

Not surprisingly, the correlation with formal education is quite strong. The percentage saying keeping up is very important rises from 30 for those with a high school education or less to 38 for college-educated respondents and 49 for the university-educated group. The demographic drivers of news consumption are important and tend to support a niche-strategy for news delivery.

Figure 3: How important is it for you to keep up with the news?



There are also important regional differences. Residents of Alberta (23%) and the Prairies (28%) are less interested in keeping up with the news than those in Ontario (37%), Quebec (40%) and BC (43%). Urban-rural differences are not statistically significant, suggesting that the regional differences reflect some elements of regional culture or news availability.

### Audiences and non-professional content

Because the information mix has broadened to include a range of reporting and commentary often called citizen journalism, it is important to assess audience responses to non-professional content. The CMRC survey asked Canadians two related questions: (1) “Would you trust non-professional content more or less if you knew that it was edited by a professional journalist for a news organization?” and (2) “Do you trust the information on user-generated content websites that is edited and fact-checked by a collective crowd of web users, without the help of professional journalists, such as on websites like Wikipedia?”

In responding to the first question, most Canadians are not sure. While 44 per cent say they are unsure, 37 per cent said they would trust content more if it were professionally edited and only 19 per cent say they would trust it less. It seems that the emerging collaborative model, citizen reports edited by professionals, is not yet widely understood.

There are significant regional differences, with respondents in Alberta, the Prairie provinces and to a lesser extent Quebec respondents, less likely to value editorial oversight than those in other provinces. Age and income differences were small, but respondents with a university education were more likely to value editorial oversight of citizen reports. Nearly half those with a university education thought a collaborative model would be more trustworthy than unedited reports

<sup>4</sup> Ipsos-Reid. *The News Fairness and Balance Report*.

(46%). This was true for only 39 per cent of college grads and 29 per cent of those with a high school education or less.

When asked about what might be called “crowd-editing,” online Canadians are considerably more sceptical. Although approximately one-third are unsure about this editorial approach as well, only one in four trusts the wiki model and 38 per cent are sure they do not trust the information available on wiki-type sites.

Prairie respondents are sceptical about all forms of citizen journalism, whether edited or not. Respondents in other regions tend to be negative or uncertain.

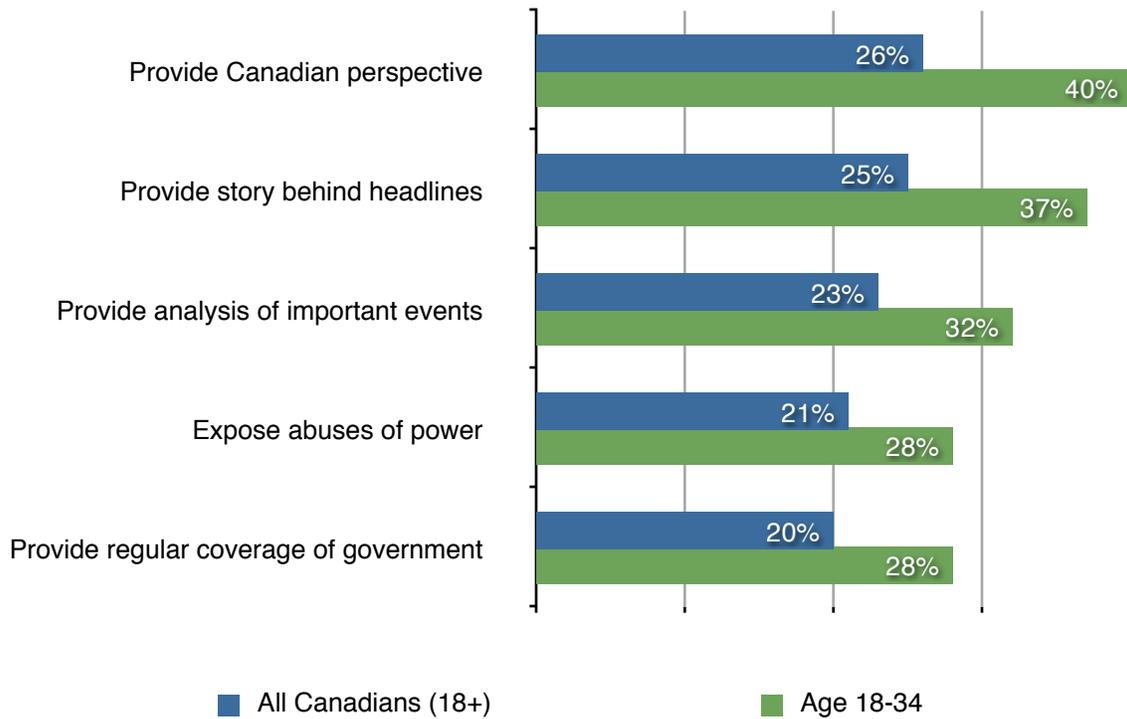
Not surprisingly, the two demographic groups in which there is more trust than scepticism of user-generated sites were those in the 18-34 group (34% positive and 31% negative) and especially students. Current students are the only demographic group where a majority trusts wikis (53%). Only one in four does not trust wiki-type sites. It seems likely that students have the most experience with these sites and/or are confident of their capacity to assess them.

The vast majority of Canadians thinks the critical functions performed by traditional journalism are important:

- Exposing abuses of power by government and other powerful institutions (90%).
- Reporting the story behind the headlines (89%).
- Providing analysis of important events (84%).
- Providing regular coverage of government actions (86%).
- Providing a Canadian perspective on world events (78%).

Despite the increasing importance of non-traditional sources of news and information, most Canadians think these functions can only be performed effectively by traditional journalism. Traditional journalism continues to be valued by all age groups, but younger Canadians have considerably greater optimism about the ability of citizen-based, non-professional media to perform journalistic tasks that are critical to the democratic process. The 18-34 age group is the most open to citizen-journalism collaboration. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4: Per cent who believe citizen-based media can:



### Conclusion

It seems clear that the traditional media and their established processes of verification and editing still inspire public confidence, whether the news and information are delivered online or offline. Social media and other information sites online are still used by many to provide news alerts and alternative perspectives. The established news brands continue to be the gold standard for verification. Although many Canadian news consumers are uncertain about the role of citizen journalism and emerging models of collaboration between citizens and professional journalists, it appears that a majority is open to this option. There is less public confidence in “crowd editing” and posting by unknown sources. Interpersonal sources, including online contacts, appear to be useful supplements to and checks on the news media. Younger Canadians are considerably more optimistic about the capacity of citizen-based media to contribute to the traditional functions of journalism in democratic societies. The traditional media are the gatekeepers of news but, even in the digital age, they remain crucial providers of verification and context.

For further information, contact Fred Fletcher, Adjunct Professor, UBC Graduate School of Journalism ([fred\\_fletcher@sympatico.ca](mailto:fred_fletcher@sympatico.ca))

Fred Fletcher  
Donna Logan  
Alfred Hermida  
Darryl Korell

CMRC website: <http://www.mediaresearch.ca/>

*This is the fourth in a series of CMRC reports that looks into the changing news consumption habits of Canadians. Based at the University of British Columbia, the CMRC promotes economic, social, and cultural research in Canadian media and communications.*

*From August 26 to August 30, 2010, Angus Reid Public Opinion conducted an online survey among 1,682 randomly selected Canadians adults, including 400 Francophones. The margin of error—which measures sampling variability—is +/- 2.5%, 19 times out of 20. The results were statistically weighted according to the most current Statistics Canada data on age, gender, region, and education to ensure a representative sample. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. Respondents were recruited from the Angus Reid Forum, Canada's premier national access panel of online respondents.*