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## Syracuse University Trust Barometer: A Study of SU Students' Media Consumption Habits and Trust in News

Jessica Hajjar

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**Syracuse University Trust Barometer:  
A Study of SU Students' Media Consumption Habits and Trust in News**

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors  
May 2014

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## **Abstract**

In order to communicate effectively with a target audience, public relations professionals must understand the news media their intended public consumes and trusts. In recent years, media polls and surveys have shown the trust Americans place in the news media is declining. The purpose of this study is to examine the news media habits of Syracuse University students and the trust students place in news information.

This study is based off responses from 254 Syracuse University students who agreed to participate in a voluntary response survey. The seventeen question survey was designed to examine students' daily news consumption patterns and the levels of trust they placed in a variety of media institutions and spokespeople. The aim of this study is to better understand: which media sources and outlooks SU students viewed, what individuals and spokespeople SU students considered to be the most reliable, how trustworthy SU students considered various news channels and media sources and what role social media played in SU student's news consumption.

Findings indicate that Syracuse University students spend far less time consuming news information each day than do older generations. Results also show that traditional news sources including national newspapers, television broadcast news, and television cable news are the most consumed and trusted among students. Students also tend to place a great deal of trust in academic researchers and traditional company figureheads such as Chief Executive Officers and Chief Financial Officers.

This study also examines the ways in which the internet and social media have influenced students' news consumption. Although most students agree social media has had a positive effect on their ability to consume and share news, most students are still hesitant to trust these mediums as a credible source of news information. Students also indicated a low level of trust in other news mediums that exist purely online, such as blogs.

The results expressed in this study can greatly aid public relations practitioners targeting Syracuse University students. By forming a more comprehensive understanding of a public's news habits and placement of trust, PR practitioners can more effectively pitch stories and plan media campaigns. In the age of the internet, the news landscape is in constant flux and the success of the profession of public relations depends on the ability of practitioners to understand how their intended public is responding to these changes.

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## **Executive Summary**

Building trust with the public is vital for an organization's survival. Therefore, it is immensely important that public relations practitioners understand how they can reach their intended audience through honest and transparent channels. Choosing the best method through which to disseminate information is a key part of PR strategy. In today's increasingly globalized world, the processes through which information is shared and circulated are constantly shifting. The rise of social media now allows individuals to share news with friends, peers, and viewers almost instantaneously. However, ease of sharing is just one factor in deciding which media and information channels will provide the most efficient and effective spread of information. Forming a relationship with a public is not only about getting the audience to hear an intended message, it is dependent upon how trustworthy the information seems.

Public trust is also critical for the survival of the media as an institution. In their study, "Cruising Is Believing?: Comparing Internet and Traditional Sources on Media Credibility Measures," Thomas J. Johnson and Barbara K. Kaye emphasize the importance of media credibility in the digital age. Johnson and Kaye note, "If people do not trust or believe what they see or hear in the traditional media or from online media sources, they are less likely to pay attention to it" (Johnson et al., 325). Public relations professionals must understand that trust in a media source is a key factor in determining whether or not information will be seen and absorbed by the intended public.

Although social science and marketing research has yielded many different definitions of trust, for the purposes of this study, I focus on an interpersonal model of trust. Interpersonal trust is the most common type of trust. It focuses on the relationship

between the “trustor” and “trustee.” This relationship can be described as the, “attitude the trustor holds toward the trustee, such as expectation of or confidence in the trustee’s competence (Blomqvist, 1997; Giddens, 1990), goodwill (Blomqvist, 1997; Hardin, 2001; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998), ethical behavior (Barber, 1983), or future actions (Anderson & Weitz, 1989; Gambetta, 1988; McAllister, 1995; Zaheer, McEvily, & Perrone, 1998)” (Kelton et al., 364). Given this emphasis on reliability, proficiency, and ethics, I believe trust in the media is most effectively analyzed through an interpersonal model.

In order to better understand the types of news media Syracuse University students consume and trust, I have created The Syracuse University Trust Barometer. My aim is to better understand what media outlets and spokespeople college-aged students rely upon the most. By enhancing the understanding of where students get their news and how much of it they believe to be trustworthy and accurate, my research will increase the knowledge of public relations professionals who want to reach out to these students. Understanding the target audience is crucial to a public relations campaign and my hope is that my research sheds light on how and why students gravitate towards different news outlets.

I began my research by looking into other, similar surveys that had been conducted by PR professionals and researchers. The foremost example of this type of trust survey is the Edelman Trust Barometer. The Edelman Trust Barometer is published each year by Edelman, the world’s largest privately owned PR firm. The 2013 survey collected results from over 31,000 respondents in 26 different countries. The expansive survey collected data on what organizations and news outlets were the most

respected and trusted around the world. Throughout my analysis, I will refer back to the Edelman Trust Barometer and other similar surveys in order to compare and measure how responses given by Syracuse University students compare to those given by individuals around the globe.

In order to best understand and analyze SU students' media habits, I kept four key goals in mind. I aimed to better understand:

- 1) Which media sources and outlets SU students viewed;
- 2) What individuals and spokespeople SU students considered to be the most reliable;
- 3) How trustworthy SU students considered various news channels and media sources;
- 4) What role social media played in SU students' news consumption.

These criteria provide a basis for the structure of my survey and an overall foundation for the questions I will answer through my analysis. Overall, my survey contains 17 questions, some containing multiple parts. A mockup of the full survey can be found in Appendix A. My report details the design and distribution of my survey, an analysis of the results, and a plan for how PR practitioners can best connect with SU students. Through my Syracuse University Trust Barometer, I provide insight into the news habits of college aged students and the ways in which PR professionals can connect with this public to establish relationships built on trust and credibility.

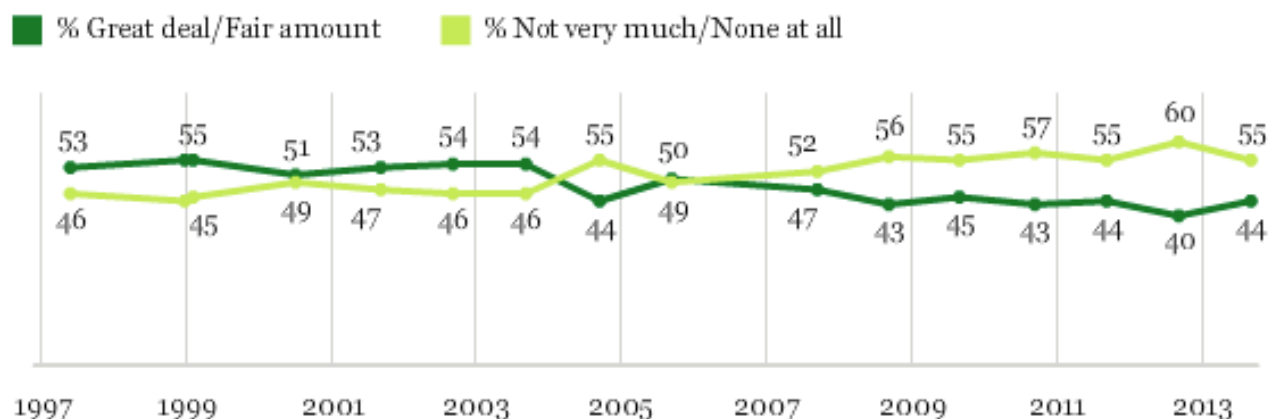
## **Literature Review**

### ***The Importance of Disseminating Information through a Reliable Source***

In recent years, polls and surveys have shown a steady decline in trust in the news media. Americans now seem far less willing to trust the press and to accept news information as being credible. This lack of trust in the media not only has an impact on journalists, it also has an important effect on the profession of public relations. Building and maintaining media relationships remains a key aspect of effective public relations and in “both public relations and journalism the related notions of trust and truth are central to their professional activities” (Davies, 13). Public trust remains both the goal and cornerstone for journalism and public relations. Public relations practitioners must realize the importance of gaining trust and credibility through not only the content of the messages they disseminate, but also the media channels through which they communicate. Understanding how to effectively choose a media channel begins with understanding the current public perception of the news media.

According to a 2013 poll conducted by Gallup as part of its annual Governance survey, only 44 percent of Americans say they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the mass media. The following chart marks the response rate from 1997 to 2013 to the question, “In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media- such as newspapers, TV, and radio- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or none at all?” (Mendes, 2013).



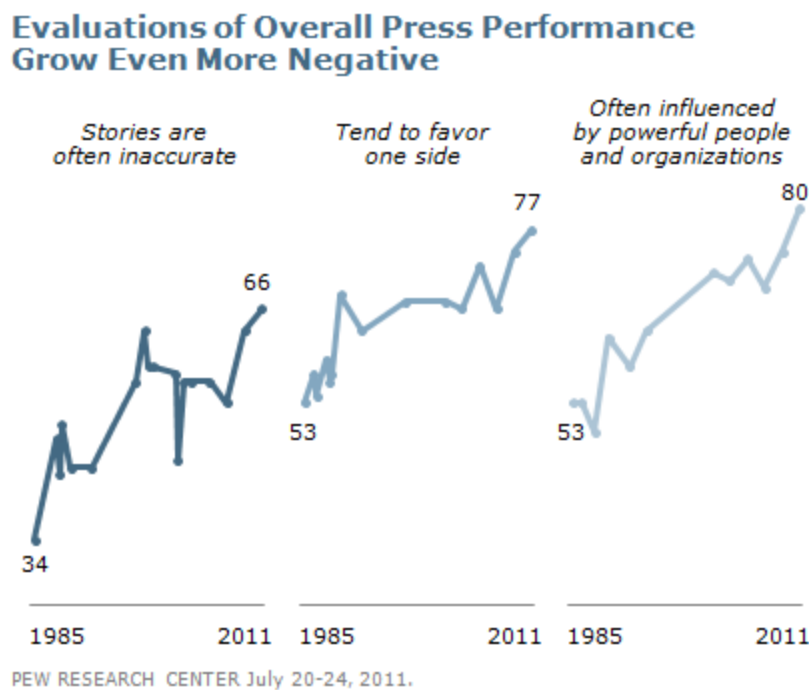


Gallup trend since 1997

Gallup's poll shows that in 2012, trust in the American media hit an all-time low with only 40 percent of people stating they believe the media is moderately to very trustworthy. Although there was a four point increase in 2013, media trust still remains low. A comparison between Gallup's findings and the results expressed in my analysis of SU students suggests that college aged students may be much more likely to trust the news media than are members of the general public.

Research conducted by the Pew Research Center in its biennial survey on American media attitudes shows that public perception of the press has become increasingly negative over the last 20 years. In the 2013 survey, 75 percent of respondents stated they believed that news organizations were biased and often influenced by powerful outside sources such as large companies or organizations. Sixty-seven percent of people also believed that stories reported by the news media were often inaccurate and 71 percent thought the press often tried to cover up its mistakes instead of openly admitting them and accepting responsibility.

The following graph reflects public perception on three key aspects of the news media over a twenty-six year period from 1985 to 2011:



This graph shows a steady upward trend in distrust in the media over the last two decades. Although this research presents a dismal outlook for the future of the press, further questions in the study reveal that while Americans do tend to distrust the press overall, they are inclined to trust the news sources they visit the most.

The Pew Research Center's 2011 study showed that while 66 percent of Americans thought the stories reported by the general news media were prone to contain errors and misinformation, only 30 percent of Americans believed the news organizations they viewed the most were inaccurate. Sixty-two percent of respondents believed that their preferred news sources "got the facts straight."

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### Public Offers Better Evaluations of the News Sources They Use Most



PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 20-24, 2011. Q38.  
July 21-24, 2011 Omnibus. PEW4.

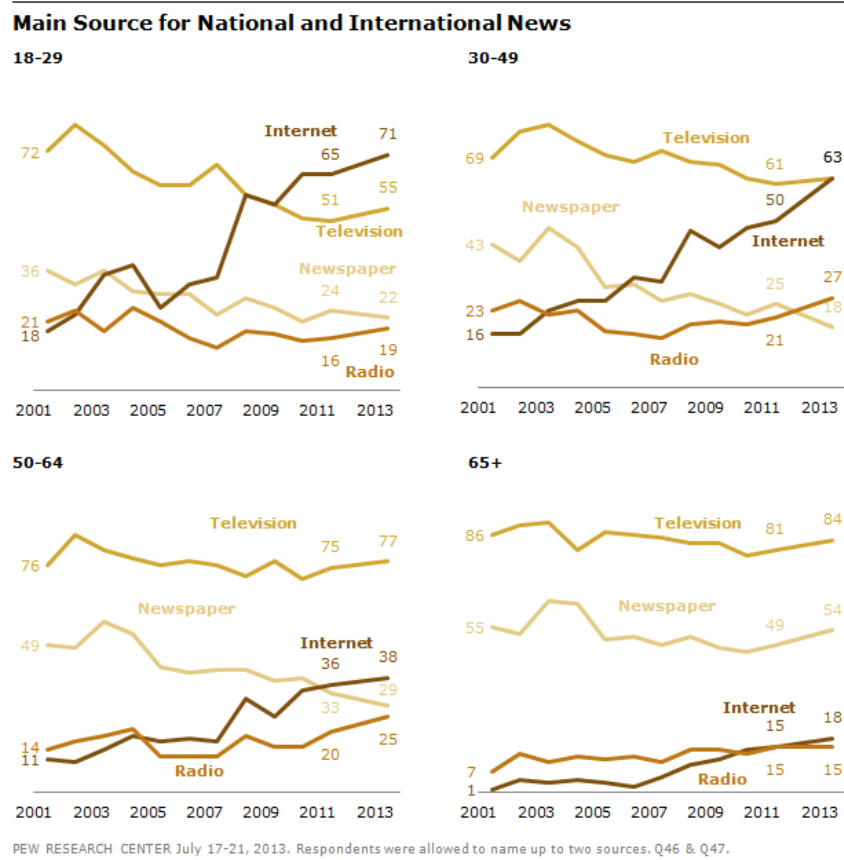
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This research shows how crucial it is for public relations practitioners to choose a news medium their intended public frequently visits and trusts. The source of the information is a determining factor for whether or not the public will believe the information to be true. Although Americans today are less willing to trust the media in general than they were ten or twenty years ago, they still place their trust in the news sources they use the most. The importance of finding a news source which is both relatable and credible to the intended public cannot be overlooked.

### ***News Consumption Among Young Adults***

A 2013 report, “Amid Criticism, Support for Media’s ‘Watchdog’ Role Stands Out” released by the Pew Research Center states that the internet is now the main source of news for Millennials with 71 percent of individuals aged 18-29 citing the internet as the news medium they use the most (Dimock et al.). The proportion of young people who use the internet as their main source of news is much larger than that of older generations. Thirty-eight percent of 50-64 year olds and 18 percent of people 65 and

older chose the internet as the source they most frequently turned to for news information.



This chart, compiled by the Pew Research Center, shows how the consumption of selected media sources varies among people of different age groups. For young people ages 18-29, the internet is by far the most popular source. Television is the second most popular source with 55 percent of Millennials seeking news information there. Newspaper and radio were utilized by a small percent of young adults; newspaper was a key source of information for 22 percent of Millennials and 19 percent indicated they regularly obtained news by listening to the radio. These responses show that young people are moving away from traditional sources of information and becoming heavily reliant on the internet as a news source.

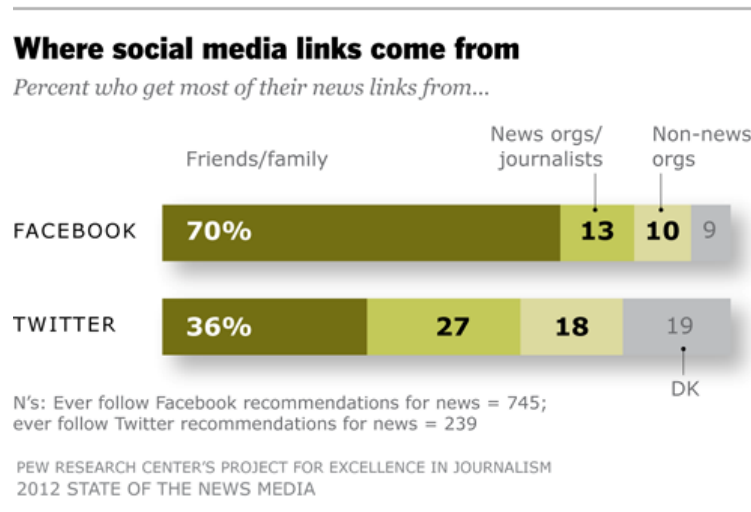
## ***The Emergence of Social Media as a News Medium***

Over the past decade, social media has emerged as a new way for people to share and consume news information. In the report “What Facebook and Twitter Mean for the News,” Amy Mitchell, Tom Rosenstiel, and Leah Christian write, “At the moment, Facebook and, to a lesser extent, Twitter, dominate [the] intersection of social media and news.” Their report details how Twitter and Facebook are changing the news landscape by encouraging conversations about popular news stories and increasing traffic to online news sites.

Although these social media sites are changing the way many people receive news, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, and Christian state that the extent of the news consumption via Twitter and Facebook is not as large as many people believe. Research presented in the Pew Research Center’s 2012 State of the News Media Report shows that only 9 percent of people say they follow news recommendations on Twitter or Facebook “very often.” However, the research also shows that younger people may be more inclined to share news via social media than older people. Although only 19 percent of people overall stated they saw news on a social media site yesterday, the percentage almost doubled for Millennials with 34 percent of 18 to 24 year olds stating they saw news on a social networking site the day before.

On Facebook, social media users are more likely to follow news recommendations posted by friends or family members, whereas on Twitter users tend to follow links posted by both peers and professional journalists or news sites (Mitchell et al.). The following chart from the 2012 State of the News Media Report by the Pew

Research Center shows the difference between links people are likely to follow on Facebook and on Twitter:



On Twitter, there is a much greater mix of links followed through friends, journalists, and independent organizations. However, on Facebook people tend to be much more likely to follow only links posted by individuals they know personally.

The 2012 Pew Research Center News Consumption survey also saw key differences in use among Twitter and Facebook users. While over half of Americans stated they used social networking sites including Facebook, LinkedIn, and Google Plus, only 13 percent said they have ever used Twitter. Forty-seven percent of respondents stated they previously got news on Facebook, but only 11 percent said they had seen news on Twitter. However, among individuals who do use Twitter, news sharing is prevalent. Eighty-three percent of Twitter users said they have seen news on Twitter and 59 percent said they have actively shared or retweeted news. In comparison, 61 percent of Facebook users stated they have shared a news story on the site.

As research reflects that young people are increasingly turning towards digital channels for news, public relations practitioners must learn how to navigate new information channels and establish public trust via online mediums. In my research, I examine how college aged students perceive the media and how PR professionals can best connect with a generation that has been raised in the age of the internet.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

Designing each question in my survey took a great deal of time and careful thought. I began with six key demographic questions that helped me to understand what types of students took the survey and how I could best categorize their responses. The first question, “Are you an undergraduate currently enrolled at Syracuse University?” was designed specifically as a mechanism to ensure I received responses only from the population I intended to measure. Respondents who indicated “No” as a response to this question were discarded. The next three questions address gender, age, and year level. These independent variables were used to provide a basis through which I could analyze how media consumption varies by sex and age. Although I felt somewhat certain all respondents would be approximately ages 18-23, I imagined that the media habits of a freshman male may be very different than those of a senior female.

After establishing this basic demographic information, the survey moves on to address news consumption and trust. Questions eight through seventeen serve largely as the dependent variables in my study. In order to organize my results, I have chosen to break down my analysis into three sections: time distribution, media consumption, and media trustworthiness. The time distribution section details how much time SU students spend following the news. In the media consumption section, I examine what news sources are most frequently visited by students. Lastly, in the media trustworthiness section, I provide a comprehensive analysis of which sources students consider to be the most reliable and how likely they are to consider information from various sources to be true.



The next chapter in my study addresses significant differences found in cross-tabulations between gender, year level, and media habits. In this chapter, I highlight key differences found between males and females as well as lower and upper classmen. These differences can help public relations professionals to understand which students they can best target through various news mediums and information channels.

In the final chapter of my research, I address how my findings can be utilized by PR practitioners aiming to reach college aged students. I examine the most effective channels through which news information can be disseminated to SU students based on how trustworthy and reliable students believe those channels to be. I also highlight the relationship between trust and viewership emphasizing that if students do not believe a media source to be credible, they are far less likely to spend their time viewing that source. This final chapter of my research demonstrates the key role media trust plays in effective PR management and campaign planning.

## **Survey Distribution and Limitations**

I first distributed my survey via the Renée Crown University Honors Program list serve. This distribution method gave me access to students of all year levels across all majors. Despite this advantage, it is important to note that the typical honors student may have different media and news consumption than the “average” SU student, thus creating a bias in the results. Honors students at Syracuse must maintain a high GPA and fulfill curriculum requirements such as completing “Global Awareness” courses. These requirements may prompt honors students to be more academically driven and socially aware than the average member of the student body.

I also circulated my survey via social media. I posted links to my survey on my own Facebook and Twitter pages as well as in the Facebook groups for each individual Syracuse University class. These Facebook groups (Class of 2016 etc.) have upwards of 1,000 members each and were an effective means to reach out to students.

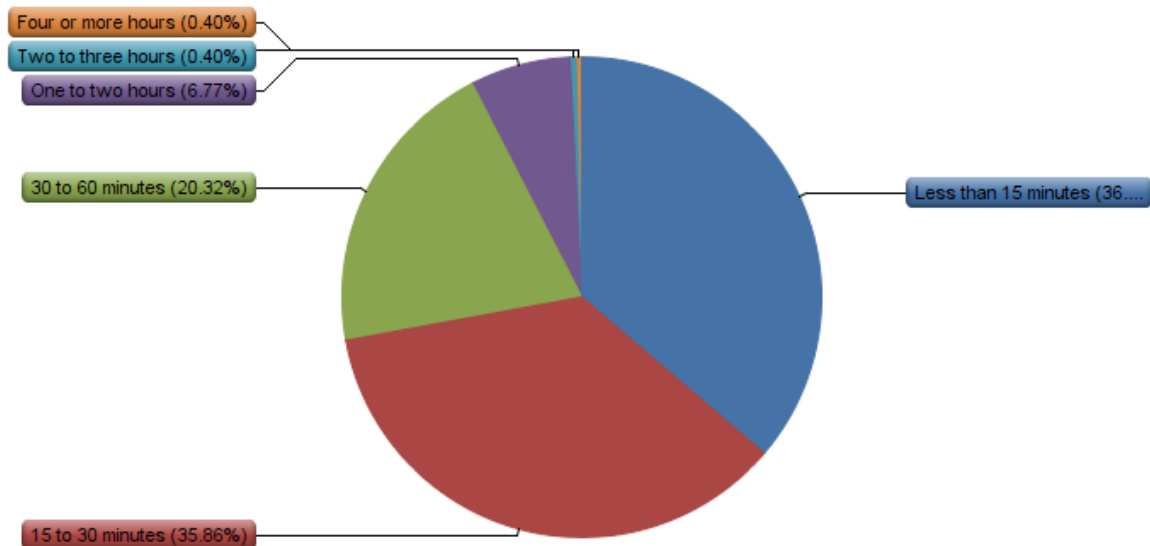
Survey participation was purely voluntary and I extended the link to any undergraduate student who was willing to participate. Although I believe this allowed me to get a wide sample of students, it prevented the survey from being a true random sample. Statisticians note that results collected through voluntary response samples, such as the one I implemented here, may be less reliable than those collected through random sampling. By definition, voluntary response samples contain bias because those willing to participate may hold stronger opinions about the topic than do members of the general public.

My analysis is based on 254 completed surveys from SU undergraduates. There are a total of 14,442 undergraduate students at the University; given this population my results are significant at the 95 percent confidence level with a confidence interval of +/- 6 percent. Overall, I have learned a great deal through researching and analyzing the results of my work. My results provide useful insight into the media habits of college age students and how news consumption can vary across demographic groups.

## Survey Analysis

### Time Distribution

In order to establish a basis for understanding the media habits of SU students, I first wanted to establish how interested they were in seeking out news information. Question 7 asked students, “How much time do you spend following the news each day?” My results reflected that most students spend under 30 minutes per day following the news. Less than fifteen minutes of news consumption per day was the most popular choice with 36.25 percent of responses. Fifteen to thirty minutes was an extremely close second with 35.86 percent. Only two students indicated they spent over two hours each day following the news. The results of Question 8 are expressed in the following pie chart:



In 2012, a survey of news habits conducted by the Pew Research Center found that Millennials (ages 18 to 31) spend less time each day following the news than do

older generations (Kohut). The following chart shows the time spent following the news each day by different generations:

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### **Generational Gaps in Time Spent Following the News**

*Average number of minutes per day following the news by age group\**

	<b>Silents</b>	<b>Boomers</b>	<b>Xers</b>	<b>Millennials:</b>
2004	88	75	63	43
2006	80	71	63	45
2008	82	72	64	43
2010	83	79	71	45
2012	84	77	66	46

\*On the day prior to survey.

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Throughout the years, the Pew Research Center found that Millennials spent on average 45 minutes each day following the news. This is significantly less than the Silent generation (67-84 year olds) who spend approximately 83 minutes following the news. When my research is compared to that of the Pew Research Center, it may suggest that younger people are spending less time following the news than ever before. The Pew Center's research on Millennials includes a larger age demographic (18-29) than my research does and one may hypothesize that the slightly older respondents, ages 24-31, spend more time tracking news stories than those aged 18-23.

In a 2011 study, "Does Trust Really Matter? A Quantitative Study of College Students Trust and Use of News Media," conducted at the University of Nebraska, researcher Soo Hui Lee found that college aged students spent an average of 16 minutes per day obtaining news from the news media (Lee, 36). The table below

reflects Lee's analysis of two questions asked in her study. The first asked students to identify the average number of times they sought out news information from the news media. The second question asked students to identify how many minutes they spent consuming news information the prior day.

HOW OFTEN IN THE PAST WEEK AND TIME SPENT YESTERDAY GETTING NEWS FROM THE NEWS MEDIA			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
How Often (Average Number of Times) in the Past Week Getting News from the News Media	488	2.14	8.822
Time (Average Minutes) Spent Yesterday Getting News from the News Media	486	16.16	18.027

Lee's findings were consistent with my own and provide further evidence for the assertion that young people spend less time following the news than do people in older generations.

Since young adults spend less time each day following the news than older people do, PR practitioners targeting a college-aged demographic may have less time and opportunity to catch their attention. Time becomes a valuable commodity when aiming to reach Millennials. A message must be fine-tuned to catch the attention of a young person who will be quicker to move on to other activities than members of an older viewing audience.

## Media Consumption

To be able to determine what media channels provide the best methods through which to reach college students, PR professionals must first understand which sources students view and utilize. Question 11 asked students, “What media sources do you use to obtain news and information? Please choose all that apply.” The following chart reflects the responses given:



Online news sources proved to be the most popular source of news information. Sixty-two percent of students indicated that they regularly viewed online national news websites as a source of information. These outlets include the online versions of popular newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. The category also encompasses news sources that exist only online such as *The Huffington Post*.

The second most popular source of news information was cable television with 47 percent of students viewing this medium. National newspapers in their print editions were chosen as an information source by 31 percent of students. This suggests that

while the popularity of print may be declining in recent years, it is not entirely dead. Broadcast TV news and online regional newspapers and news websites were both utilized by 25 percent of respondents. Magazine (15 percent) and radio (11 percent) were among the least popular news sources for young people. Blogs also received a 15 percent response rate which I found to be somewhat surprising given the overwhelming surge in internet usage in the last ten to fifteen years.

Given the great deal of time young people spend on social media<sup>1</sup>, I expected that a significant number of students would receive their news via sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Question 13 asked students to indicate how often they followed news recommendations posted on both Facebook and Twitter. Thirty-five percent of students said they sometimes follow news links and recommendations on Facebook and 23 percent said they do this quite often or very often. Twenty-six percent of students indicated they rarely followed Facebook recommendations, yet only 15 percent said they never did.

Overall, students appear to be less willing to follow news recommendations posted on Twitter. Fifty-six percent of students indicated they rarely or never follow recommendations posted on Twitter. Twenty-two percent stated they sometimes follow recommendations and 22 percent stated they quite often or very often do this. These findings suggest that PR practitioners may be more successful in reaching students by outreach through Facebook rather than Twitter. One reason behind this trend could be that Facebook friends are more likely to be people students interact with and trust than Twitter followers, therefore they are more likely to follow stories posted.

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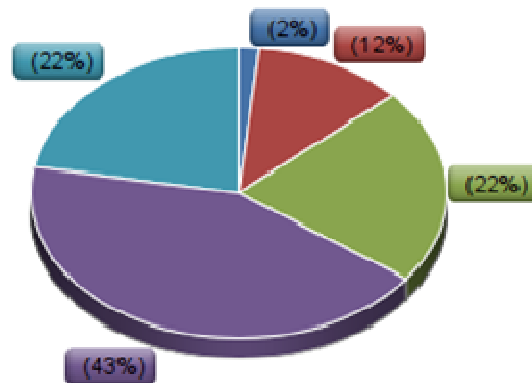
<sup>1</sup> Research conducted by Ipsos Open Thinking Exchange found that 18-34-year-olds spend, on average, 3.8 hours a day on social network sites ("Social Networking Eats Up 3+ Hours Per Day For The Average American User.")



When asked to rate the statement, “Social media has positively affected my ability to receive news,” 65 percent percent of students stated they either agreed or strongly agreed. A majority of students feel as though social media has created a better environment for news sharing. I believe this is most likely a result of the immediacy and efficiency through which social media allows information to be shared.

■ Strongly Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither Agree nor Disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree

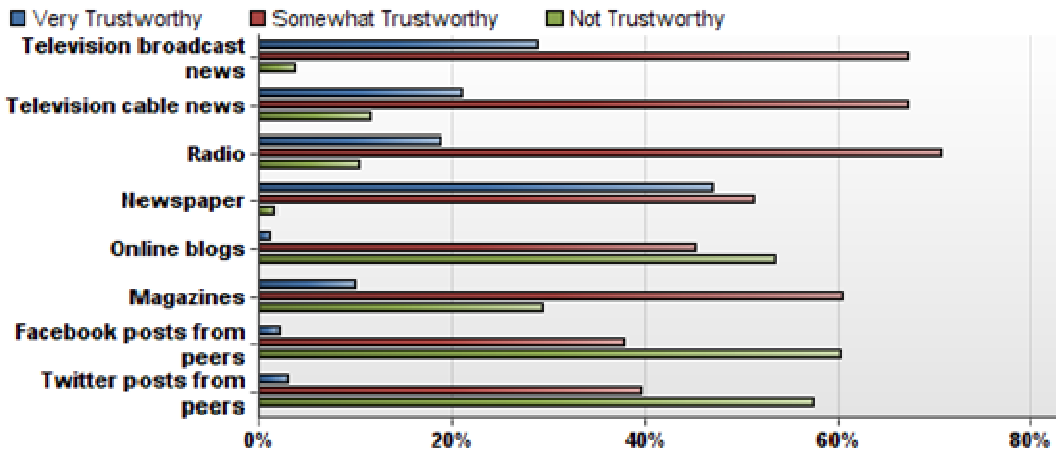
**Social media has positively affected my ability to receive news.**



## **Media Trustworthiness**

As a starting point for my analysis of trustworthiness, I asked students “In general, how trustworthy do you consider news reported by the media” (Question 9, Appendix A). A vast majority, 83 percent, indicated that they considered the media to be somewhat trustworthy. Nine percent believed the news media was very trustworthy and only 7 percent believed it was not trustworthy. I believe this is a hopeful sign for PR professionals. While students are certainly hesitant to blindly trust the media, they do show a tendency to believe the information they are hearing is at least relatively credible. As we will see, the subsequent questions in and responses to my survey provide a solid basis on which PR professionals can make decisions about which channels they can utilize to gain public trust.

In order to explore what mediums students considered to be the most trustworthy, I asked, “How trustworthy do you consider the following sources of information?” Students were asked to rate eight different information channels as being “very trustworthy,” “somewhat trustworthy,” or “not trustworthy.” The following table reflects the response rate for Question 10:



Newspaper was considered to be the most trustworthy source of information with a mean of 1.55 (lower mean scores reflect a higher level of trust). 47 percent of students rated newspapers as very trustworthy, while only 2 percent of students consider newspaper to be not trustworthy. Television broadcast news was considered the second most trustworthy source with a mean score of 1.75. Following closely behind were television cable news (1.90) and radio (1.92). These more traditional information channels were considered to be generally trustworthy by students. Less than 12 percent of students considered each of these mediums to be not trustworthy.

Magazines were rated as somewhat trustworthy by 60 percent of students and not trustworthy by 30 percent. I think this reflects the disparate nature of the magazine industry. This survey did not ask students to specify which particular magazines they had in mind while answering the question. I believe that students' responses may have been influenced by which titles came to mind when they were asked about "magazines" as a general category. For example, I hypothesize that a student who typically reads highbrow magazines like *The New Yorker* and *The Economist* may be more likely to consider magazine as a genre to be more trustworthy than a student who instantly

thought of gossip based magazines such as *Us Weekly* and *OK! Magazine*. Certainly, this difference in opinion can be noted for each different news medium, but I believe the spilt reflected in magazine credibility shows that magazines as a whole may be considered a more diverse genre than, say, newspapers.

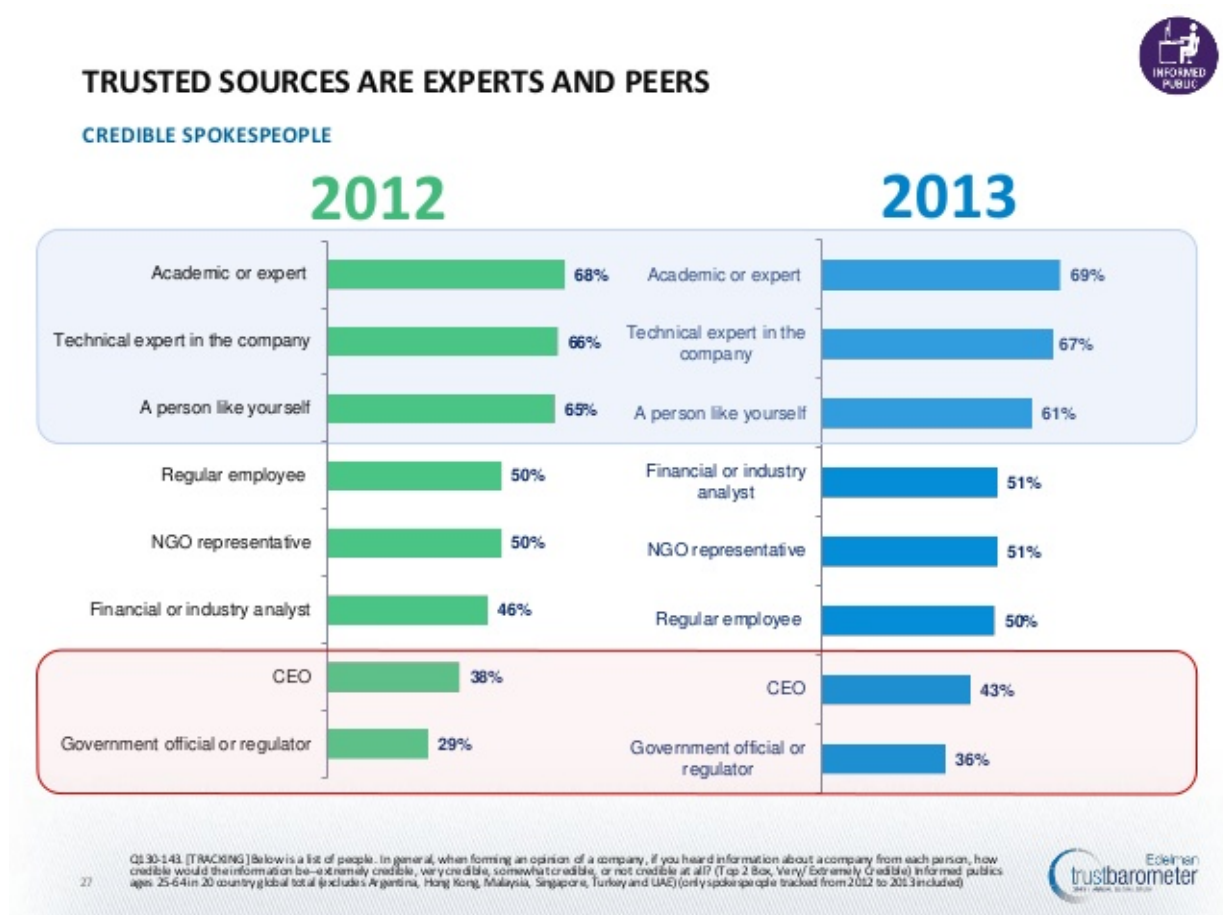
Digital mediums were considered to be significantly less trustworthy by students. The mean score for online blogs was 2.52, with 54 percent of students rating blogs as not trustworthy. Forty-five percent of students thought blogs were somewhat trustworthy, but virtually no students (1 percent overall) thought blogs were very trustworthy. I believe the hesitation to trust blogs is linked to the inherent nature of blogs themselves. Blogs emerged as a way for individuals to write and express their own opinions on a subject. Recently, blogging as a news medium has grown and now many companies, media outlets, and nonprofit groups run blogs in conjunction with their websites. However, I believe that many students still view blogs as a personal website that is used to express the beliefs of the author, not objective, newsworthy facts. Overall, social media was considered by students to be the least trustworthy source of information. Fifty-eight percent of students rated Twitter posts from peers as not trustworthy while 60 percent found Facebook posts from peers to be not credible.

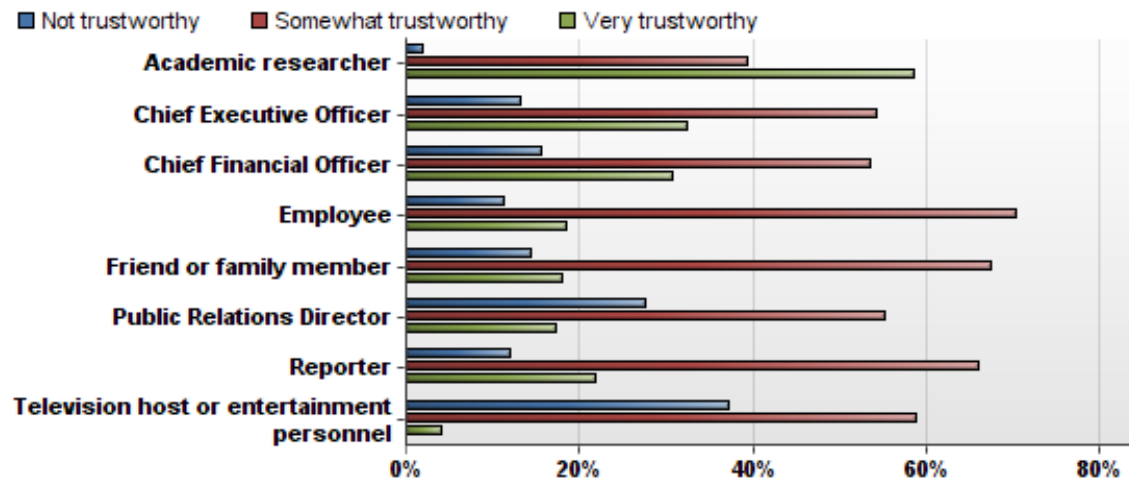
Despite displaying a tendency to trust traditional mediums more than digital channels when asked to indicate the trustworthiness of individual sources, when asked if the print or online version of the same media source was more trustworthy, most students indicated both versions were equally reliable (Question 14, Appendix A). Fifty-seven percent of students stated that they believed the print and online versions of the same media source were equally credible. Thirty-one percent believed the print version

was more trustworthy, which I believe could be linked to the editing process and length of time taken before a print source is published. In today's society, journalism moves quickly and online articles can be published almost instantly after a newsworthy event occurs. Students may presume that an article or post published minutes after an event occurs may be more likely to contain errors than an article in a print source that is published the next day and undergoes a more arduous fact checking process.

The following info-graphic shows findings from the 2013 Edelman Trust Barometer based on the question, “Below is a list of people. In general, while forming an opinion of a company, if you heard information about a company from each person, how credible would that information be- very credible, somewhat credible, or not credible at all?” (Global Results, Slide 22).

Edelman’s results can be compared to the following chart which represents SU students’ responses to the question, “On average, how trustworthy would you find information about a company coming from each of the following individuals?” (Question 16, Appendix A).





“Academic or expert” was found to be the most credible source in both the 2012 and 2013 Edelman Trust Barometers, with 69 percent of people finding this source to be reliable in 2013. SU students also found academic researchers to be the most highly trusted of all individuals listed. 59 percent of students found academic researchers to be “very trustworthy.” Only 2 percent of students overall found academic researchers to be not trustworthy. This information suggests that across the board, various publics look to academics as a sound and trustworthy source of information.

“A person like yourself” was also considered an extremely credible source of information in the surveys conducted by Edelman. In 2005, a time that coincides with a rise in the usage of social media<sup>2</sup>, Edelman noted that public trust began to shift away from authority figures and become more peer focused. Edelman defined the next year, 2006, as specific period in which “a person like me” began to emerge as a reliable source. Most SU students, 68 percent, rated friends and family members as being

<sup>2</sup> Research by Web Designer Report notes that major social networks such as MySpace, Facebook, YouTube and LinkedIn first emerged and rose to popularity from 2004-2006 (“The History and Evolution of Social Media.”)

“somewhat trustworthy.” This suggests that most students are willing to accept information from peers and family members as being fairly credible, but not entirely.

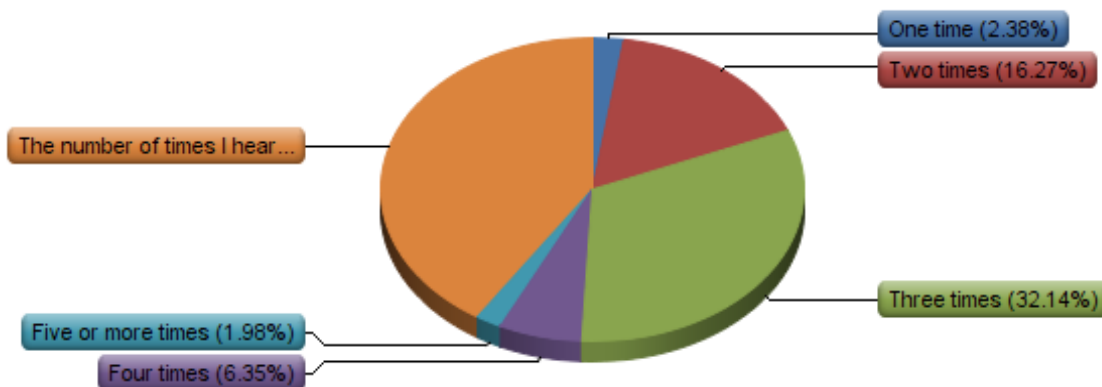
Students also appeared inclined to trust company spokespeople such as the Chief Executive Officer and Chief Financial Officer. Fifty-four percent of students found the CEO and CFO to be somewhat trustworthy. Thirty-two percent and 31 percent of students respectively found each of these individuals to be very trustworthy. However, the population surveyed by Edelman was far less trusting of these high level positions. Financial or industry analysts received a credibility rating of only 51 percent in the 2013 survey. CEO's fared even worse, with only 43 percent of the population considering these individuals a credible source in 2013. I found it interesting that Syracuse students, young people with little to no experience in the business world, found CEO's and CFO's to be far more trustworthy than did the “informed publics” (all over age 25) surveyed by Edelman.

Analyzing which spokespeople SU students trust can greatly aid public relations professionals aiming to reach student audiences. Students would be most inclined to find information from academic researchers to be reliable. Therefore, PR professionals in fields such as tech and healthcare would be well advised to use academic research to back up claims in communications and outreach to their publics. CEO's and CFO's are also considered to be credible by students; therefore, students may be more easily swayed by information they hear directly from these spokespeople. Public Relations professionals were considered somewhat trustworthy by 55 percent of students; however, 28 percent of students found them to be not trustworthy. Therefore, in



presenting information to students, PR professionals may want to take a backseat and urge an executive to deliver the information directly.

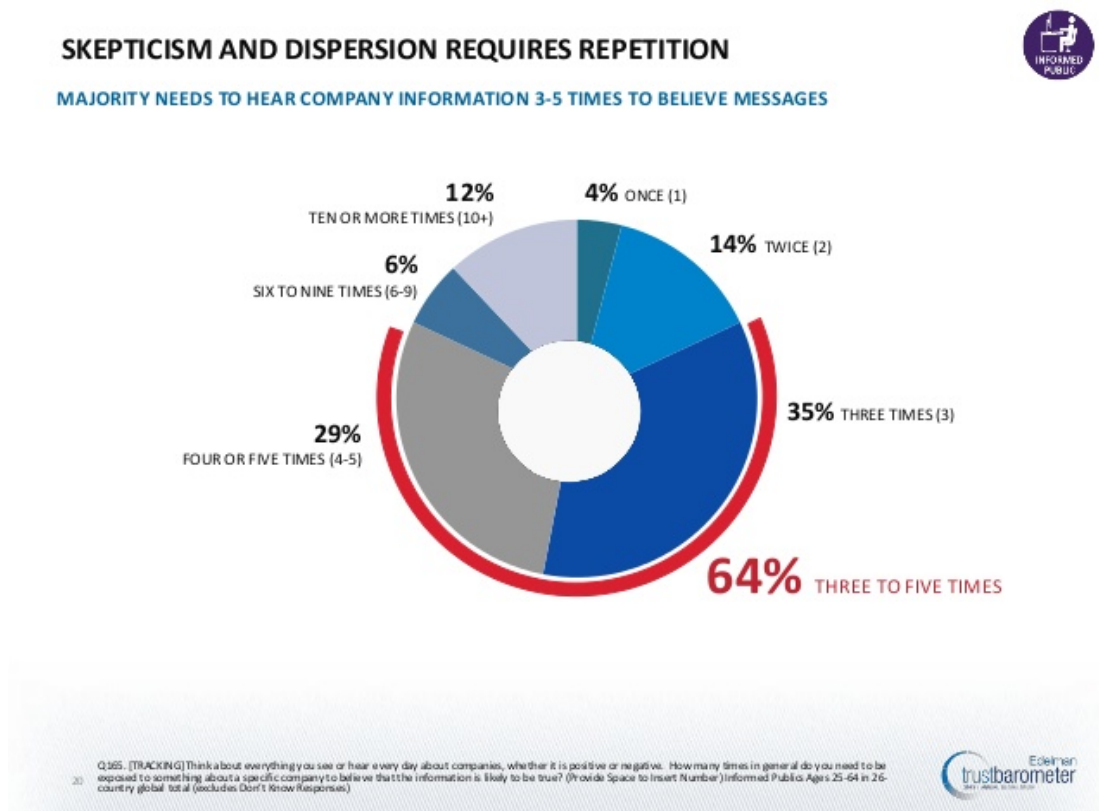
The frequency to which the public is exposed to the message may also play an important factor in determining how successful a PR strategy is. The following graph reflects the response rate to the question, “How many times would you need to be exposed to a piece of news or information to believe that it is true?” (Question 15, Appendix A).



Forty-one percent of students indicated that the amount of time they hear a piece of information has no effect on whether or not they trust it to be true. However, for 59 percent, the frequency with which they heard the message was significant. Thirty-two percent of students expressed that they needed to hear a piece of news three times before they believed it was credible. Only 2 percent of students stated they would believe the information after hearing it just once. I believe these findings serve as an important reminder to PR professionals that for a message to be effectively conveyed, it must be repeated enough times to stick with the intended public.

These results can be compared to those reflected in the 2013 Edelman Trust Barometer. The slide below represents the answers given to the question, “Think about everything you see or hear every day about companies, whether it is positive or negative. How many times in general do you need to be exposed to something about a specific company to believe the information is likely to be true?” (Global Results, Slide 20).

In Edelman’s survey, there was no option given to reflect that the number of times a piece of information was heard would have “no effect” on its validity. Despite this key difference, there are some apparent similarities to the results collected in my



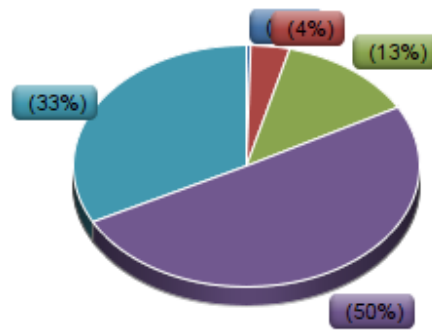
survey. Thirty-five percent of Edelman's respondents needed to hear the information three times, compared to 32 percent of SU students. Another similarity was that a very small minority, 4 percent, needed to hear the information just once to consider it to be valid.

However, there was also a major difference between Edelman's results and my own. Edelman's research shows that 47 percent of people needed to hear a piece of information at least four or more times before believing it was true. In my survey, just 8 percent of students stated they would need to hear the information four or more times in order to consider it to be trustworthy. This shows a significant difference in the mindset of college aged students and the population surveyed by Edelman. My research suggests that students may only need to hear a piece of news three times before considering it to be credible.

When asked to rate the statement, "Trustworthiness is an important factor in deciding what news outlets I view" on a five point Likert scale, 83 percent of students stated that they would either agree or strongly agree. No students indicated that they would strongly disagree and only 4 percent disagreed. This overwhelming tendency to view news sources that one considers to be credible shows how important it is for PR practitioners to spread their message through news sources with a reputation for being credible and trustworthy. Not only may students be less likely to believe a message in a source that is not considered trustworthy, they might not see this information at all. Information published in sources without a reliable reputation may go unnoticed by students.

■ Strongly Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither Agree nor Disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree

**Trustworthiness is an important factor in deciding what news outlets I view.**



## Chapter 3: Cross Tabulations

### Gender Trends

On average, males reported spending slightly more time following the news than females did. The gender distribution for time spent following the news was significant with a p-value of .02. Forty-one percent of females reported that they spent less than fifteen minutes each day reading or viewing news mediums, while 28 percent of males responded similarly. Thirty-eight percent of females stated they spent 15 to 30 minutes with the news each day. Just over 20 percent spent more than 30 minutes. For males, the most frequent response was 15 to 30 minutes, with 32 percent of men choosing this option. 29 percent of males reported following the news for 30 to 60 minutes each day compared to just 16 percent of females. Twelve percent of males and only 5 percent of females stated they spent more than one hour per day consuming news information.

For both genders the top three most popular news sources were the same: online national newspapers and news websites, cable television news, and the print editions of national newspapers. Sixty-six percent of males and 60 percent of females indicated they regularly used online national newspapers and news websites. Sixty-four percent of males and only 37 percent of females indicated that they obtained news information from cable television news. A large gap can also be seen in the consumption of news from online regional newspapers and news websites; 39 percent of males indicated they used online regional publications to receive news; however, only 16 percent of females responded similarly. These results were significant at the .01 level. Below is a chart reflecting gender distribution for Question 7:

		What is your gender?		
		Male	Female	Total
Which media sources do you use to obtain news and information? Please choose all that apply.	Broadcast TV news (PBS, WSYR, etc.)	33.70%	19.38%	24.60%
	Cable TV news (MSNBC, FOX, CNN, etc.)	64.13%	36.88%	46.83%
	Radio	15.22%	8.75%	11.11%
	National newspaper (print edition)	43.48%	23.13%	30.56%
	Regional newspaper (print edition)	22.83%	13.75%	17.06%
	Online national newspaper or news website	66.30%	60.00%	62.30%
	Online regional newspaper or news website	39.13%	16.25%	24.60%
	Blogs	23.91%	10.63%	15.48%
	Magazines	17.39%	13.75%	15.08%
	Other (Please indicate)	14.13%	15.00%	14.68%
Total		100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Throughout my analysis, I also noticed that in statistically significant cross tabulations, males seemed to be more willing to trust the media than females. In response to the question, “In general, how trustworthy do you consider news reported by the media?,” 13 percent of males indicated ‘very trustworthy’ while only 7 percent of females chose this option. This trend can be further explored through an analysis of gender distribution for Question 12, “How trustworthy do you consider the following sources of information: television broadcast news, television cable news, radio, newspaper, online blogs, magazine, Facebook posts from peers, and Twitter posts from peers?” For the majority of the news mediums, no statistically significant gender difference were noted. However, the gender gap in trustworthiness of online blogs was significant with a p-value of .04. The majority of females, 57 percent, stated that online blogs were not trustworthy while 48 percent of males indicated this response. Three percent of males stated they believed online blogs were very trustworthy, yet no

females indicated this response. Forty-eight percent of males and 43 percent of females indicated blogs were somewhat trustworthy.

Trust in Facebook and Twitter posts by peers were also statistically significant; both had p-values of .01. Five percent of males and zero percent of females indicated that Facebook posts were very trustworthy. For both sexes, the majority of respondents indicated that the posts were not reliable. Sixty-five percent of females compared to 52 percent of males believed Facebook posts were not trustworthy. The results for Twitter posts showed a similar distribution. Seven percent of males thought Twitter posts were very trustworthy, compared to 63 percent of females. Forty-nine percent of males indicated these posts were not trustworthy in contrast to the 62 percent of females who chose this response. Overall, I believe these findings suggest that males are slightly more likely to trust in social media posts from peers than are females.

For Question 18, “How trustworthy would you find information about a company coming from each of the following individuals?” just one category, trustworthiness of reporters, was deemed to be statistically significant for gender. Seventeen percent of females, compared to just 3 percent of males, stated that reporters were not trustworthy. A solid majority, 75 percent, of males believed that reporters were somewhat trustworthy. Twenty-two percent of people of each gender indicated that reporters were very trustworthy.

## Year Level

Respondents' year level, freshman through senior, was also significant in a number of cross tabulations. The response distribution for Question 17 part one, "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Trustworthiness is an important factor in deciding what news outlets I view," suggest that students in more advanced year levels care more about the reliability of the sources they consume than do students in lower grades. The distribution for this question had a p-value of .03. Very few students (8 percent of freshmen, 1 percent of sophomores, 3 percent of juniors and 5 percent of seniors) indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Twenty-five percent of freshmen indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement showing that this group may be, on average, more apathetic about the reliability of news sources than seniors, of which only 5 percent indicated neither agree nor disagree. Thirty-seven percent of seniors stated they would strongly agree that their decision regarding which news outlets to view is dependent on how trustworthy they believe that source to be. In contrast, 23 percent of freshmen indicated they would strongly agree. Thirty-seven percent of juniors and 34 percent of sophomores also chose this option.

Question 7, "Which media sources do you use to obtain news and information?," was also significant with a p-value of .04. For each of the nine media sources listed, a larger percentage of seniors than freshmen indicated they regularly obtained news information from the source. These findings may suggest that as students become older, they more actively seek out news information. However, although there was a



steady upward trend from freshmen to seniors, the habits of sophomores and juniors were somewhat more unpredictable.

A cross tabulation between year level and the frequency at which students followed news recommendations on Twitter was also significant at the 5 percent level with a p-score of .02. Although a large percentage of students from each year level, (58 percent of freshmen, 65 percent of sophomores, 49 percent of juniors, and 58 percent of seniors) stated they never or rarely follow news recommendations on Twitter, the percentage of students who indicated they quite often or very often followed these recommendations increased steadily from lower to upper classmen. Eleven percent of freshmen, 18 percent of sophomores, 25 percent of juniors, and 40 percent of seniors quite often or very often followed news recommendations via Twitter. These findings suggest that PR practitioners disseminating news information via Twitter have a better chance of catching the attention of juniors and seniors than lowerclassmen.

A significant difference between year levels can also be observed for the question, "Which version of the same media outlet would you find the most reliable?" The majority of freshmen and juniors (64 percent of freshmen and 69 percent of juniors) believed that the print and online versions of a media outlet were both equally reliable, whereas 47 percent of sophomores and 42 percent of seniors responded similarly. Sophomores and seniors were more inclined to believe the print version of a news source was more reliable. Thirty-seven percent of sophomores and 40 percent of seniors indicated the print source was the most reliable form of information compared to 28 percent of freshmen and 19 percent of juniors that believed this to be true. These results were found to be significant at the 5 percent level with a p-score of .05.

## **Implications for Public Relations Professionals**

My research findings can help public relations professionals to better understand and connect with a college-aged audience. Businesses and organizations who wish to reach SU students can utilize my research in planning and executing news media campaigns. By forming a deeper understanding of the news habits of SU students, media professionals can more accurately and efficiently target this audience. My findings can provide valuable guidelines for PR practitioners looking to reach SU students.

In order to successfully target SU students, PR practitioners must be aware of how little time they have to catch students' attention. My findings show that 72 percent of respondents reported spending 30 minutes or less following the news each day. Therefore, practitioners must finely tune and manage their message in order to reach students. Based on these findings, I would recommend practitioners use headlines that directly state their objective when pitching news stories. I would also recommend that news stories are kept short to avoid losing the reader's interest. Millennials are far less likely than other generations to spend time following news stories that do not immediately provoke interest. When reaching out to SU students, time becomes a valuable commodity that cannot be wasted.

My survey reflects that online national newspapers and news websites are the most effective means through which to reach SU students. Over 60 percent of students stated they regularly viewed online news websites in order to find news information. News disseminated by newspapers was considered to be very trustworthy by 47

percent of students and somewhat trustworthy by 51 percent. PR practitioners could also effectively reach SU students through cable television news. Forty-seven percent of students reported watching cable news for news information. Given that less than 40 percent of students indicated they regularly obtained information from other news sources listed in this survey, including magazines, radio, and broadcast television, I would advise that practitioners could most effectively maximize their resources by targeting students through online national news websites and cable television news.

Because 83 percent of students agree that trustworthiness is an important factor in deciding what news outlets to view, PR practitioners must be aware of the reputation of the news outlet they are pitching. SU students believed newspapers, television broadcast news, and television cable news to be among the most trustworthy news sources. In choosing a news medium through which to disseminate information, PR professionals should look into the outlet's track record and strive to choose sources that are known for a high level of honesty and integrity. Practitioners must be mindful that their message is being judged not only based on content, but also by the source through which it comes.

Trustworthiness also plays a role in determining what individuals PR professionals should pick to deliver a message. Conventional wisdom holds that the Chief Executive Officer of an organization should be the one to deliver major news about a company. Although other studies have shown that Americans are increasingly less trusting of CEO's, in reaching out to SU students, my research shows the CEO would be an effective choice. Thirty-two percent of students found the CEO to be very trustworthy, while 54 percent stated the CEO was somewhat trustworthy. Students

seem more inclined to trust company higher-ups such as CEO's and CFO's than do members of the general public. However, if possible, PR practitioners would be wise to have academic researchers back up their claims. Fifty-nine percent of students found academic researchers to be very trustworthy. When choosing a spokesperson, PR practitioners should deliver the message through an official with authority; students will be more likely to gravitate towards, and trust, the message.

Practitioners should also be mindful of how often their message is heard. Forty percent of students stated they would need to hear a message three or more times before believing it was true. Therefore, PR practitioners should increase their pitching efforts in order to have their messages disseminated as widely as possible. In the age of the internet, Millennials are exposed to an overwhelming amount of information each day, and repetition could also help a piece of news to be better remembered.

If utilized properly, social media can also be a valuable tool for PR practitioners. Although students show a tendency to be wary of the accuracy of Facebook and Twitter posts, 65 percent of students agreed that social media had positively affected their ability to receive news. Social media should not be used as the sole means of distributing news information; however, it can greatly aid in getting the word out. Through re-tweets and posts, social media can also be used as a way to increase the number of times a student sees a messages.

Overall, my hope is that public relations professionals who wish to target SU students can look to this report as a means to better understand the ways in which students consume news. The evidence presented shows how vital building a foundation of trust can be. Practitioners who understand the importance of trust will be more

successful in audience outreach. The direct relationship between trust in the news media and successful public relations cannot be overlooked, especially in the present age of the internet.

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## Appendix A

Q1 Are you an undergraduate student currently enrolled at Syracuse University?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Q2 What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

Q3 What is your year level?

- ☐ Freshman
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior

Q4 What is your age?

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18-19
- ☐ 20-21
- ☐ 22-23
- ☐ Over 23

Q5 What colleges are you enrolled in at SU? Please choose all that apply.

- ☐ School of Architecture
- ☐ College of Arts and Sciences
- ☐ School of Education
- ☐ L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science
- ☐ David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics
- ☐ School of Information Studies
- ☐ The Martin J. Whitman School of Management
- ☐ S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications
- ☐ College of Visual and Performing Arts



Q6 What is your major?

Q7 How much time do you spend following the news each day?

- ☐ Less than 15 minutes
- ☐ 15 to 30 minutes
- ☐ One to two hours
- ☐ 30 to 60 minutes
- ☐ Two to three hours
- ☐ Three to four hours
- ☐ Four or more hours

Q8 How many hours a day do you spend online?

Q9 In general, how trustworthy do you consider news reported by the media?

- ☐ Very trustworthy
- ☐ Somewhat trustworthy
- ☐ Not trustworthy

Q10 How trustworthy do you consider the following sources of information?

How trustworthy do you consider the following sources of information?

	Very Trustworthy	Somewhat Trustworthy	Not Trustworthy
Television broadcast news	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Television cable news	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Radio	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Newspaper	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Online blogs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Magazines	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Facebook posts from peers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Twitter posts from peers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q11 Which media outlets do you use to obtain news and information? Please choose all that apply.

- ☐ Broadcast TV news (PBS, WSYR, etc.)
- ☐ Cable TV news (MSNBC, FOX, CNN, etc.)
- ☐ Radio
- ☐ National newspaper (print edition)
- ☐ Regional newspaper (print edition)
- ☐ Online national newspaper or news website
- ☐ Online regional newspaper or news website
- ☐ Blogs (5)

- ☐ Magazines (6)
- ☐ Other (please indicate)

Q12 Do you regularly obtain news information from international news sources outside of the U.S. such as BBC News or Al Jeezra? If yes, please specify which outlets you visit.

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes \_\_\_\_\_

Q13 Please use the five point scale to indicate the frequency in which you do the following:

**Please use the five point scale to indicate the frequency in which you do the following:**

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Quite Often	Very Often
How often do you follow news recommendations posted on Facebook?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How often do you follow news recommendations posted on Twitter?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q14 Which version of the same media outlet would you find the most reliable?

- ☐ The print version
- ☐ The online version
- ☐ They are equally reliable

Q15 How many times would you need to be exposed to a piece of news or information to believe that it is true?

- ☐ One time
- ☐ Two times
- ☐ Three times
- ☐ Four times
- ☐ Five or more times
- ☐ The number of times I hear a piece of news information has no effect on whether or not I believe it's true

Q16 How trustworthy would you find information about a company coming from each of the following individuals:

	Not trustworthy	Somewhat trustworthy	Very trustworthy
Chief Executive Officer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Chief Financial Officer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Public Relations Director	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Employee	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Academic researcher	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reporter	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Television host or entertainment personnel	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Friend or family member	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q17 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Trustworthiness is an important factor in deciding what news outlets I view.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social media has positively affected my ability to receive news.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
News sites and news reporters are generally committed to providing truthful information.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would be likely to try a product that was mentioned positively in a news source I consider trustworthy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>