



# Trust in news in New Zealand 2021

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

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## About this snapshot report

This is the second 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* to measure public trust in news (<http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/>). This allows international comparisons between levels of trust in Aotearoa New Zealand and 40 countries covered by the Reuters project. In addition to the 2020 survey questions, this year's survey includes two questions about trust in Covid-19 reporting.

As in 2020, survey data for the 2021 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 Ethics Committee (AUTEK).

Availability: **The report** can be freely accessed [here](#).

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## Authors



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## Overview

In 2020 and 2021, general trust in the news in Western media markets was declining, and a similar pattern started to emerge in New Zealand in 2021. Since JMAD's first *Trust in News in New Zealand* report (published on April 23, 2020), New Zealanders have experienced multiple lockdowns, political controversies, a bombardment of misinformation, and a general election. To exemplify this turmoil, in July, Minister of Health David Clark resigned after he breached his own government's lockdown rules and National Party leader Todd Muller resigned after just 53 days in the job. Somewhat later, misinformation about the Covid pandemic was spreading on social media platforms to the extent it triggered a response from the government. The new Minister of Health, Chris Hipkins, warned New Zealanders against spreading misinformation and "vile slurs" on social media platforms.<sup>1</sup> However, in September, the newly formed Advance Party held a rally in Aotea Square in Auckland to protest against Covid-19 restrictions, and a month later the party was removed from Facebook because it was spreading misinformation, and therefore violated the platform's policies.<sup>2</sup> On October 17, the Labour Party won an election landslide and Jacinda Ardern became Prime Minister for a second term. These, and other political events and governmental actions give some context to our trust report.

The *Reuters Digital News Report 2020*<sup>3</sup> found that overall trust in the news was at its lowest point since the annual report started to include trust data in 2016. In 2020, 38% of those surveyed in 40 countries trusted most of the news most of the time, a drop of 4% from the previous year. Fewer than half of respondents – 46% – trusted the news they consumed themselves. In the US, the

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<sup>1</sup> Stuff on August 16, 2020: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/300083605/coronavirus-chris-hipkins-and-ashley-bloomfield-slam-spreading-of-vile-rumours-about-latest-covid19-cluster>

<sup>2</sup> The New Zealand Herald on October 15, 2020: <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/advance-nz-partys-facebook-page-removed-for-breaching-misinformation-policies/XLKCVSZF7LRV6LKOMWVITWWAXI/>

<sup>3</sup> Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Schulz, A., Andi, S. and R.K. Nielsen. *Digital News Report 2020*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR\\_2020\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf)

*Edelman Trust Barometer 2021* painted a similar picture, showing global trust in traditional media had declined to an all-time low<sup>4</sup>. The barometer states that “the global infodemic has driven trust in all news sources to record lows” with 53% trusting traditional media (a decline of 8% from the previous year), and just 35% trusting social media. Approximately 59% of those surveyed believed journalists were “purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are false.”<sup>5</sup> Edelman CEO Richard Edelman said that “this is the era of information bankruptcy”, adding that “we’ve been lied to by those in charge, and media sources are seen as politicised and biased”. In New Zealand, politicians and journalists are rated as the least trusted public figures. In a *Research NZ* survey, 35% of people trusted people who work for the government, and 23% trusted journalists<sup>6</sup>.

#### *Covid-19 crisis handling and reporting*

The *Edelman Trust Barometer* observes that Covid-19 “has accelerated the erosion of trust around the world”. This is most evident in the US and China where the “governments are deeply distrusted”. A report by Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and others found that in the UK people’s trust in the government’s ability to handle the Covid-19 crisis was high at the start of the pandemic (in March 2020), but it shrunk considerably by September 2020<sup>7</sup>. While in the early days of the pandemic 72% of people said the UK government was handling the coronavirus crisis either very well or well, the figure shrunk to 31% by late September. A similar pattern emerged in New Zealand. According to a

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<sup>4</sup> Edelman (2021). *Edelman trust barometer*. <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer>

<sup>5</sup> Edelman trust barometer press release, January 31, 2021: <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer/press-release>

<sup>6</sup> As reported by RNZ on August 2, 2020: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/sunday/audio/2018757587/politicians-journalists-rated-nz-s-least-trusted-figures>

<sup>7</sup> Nielsen, R.K., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A. and Simon, F. 2020. “Communications in the coronavirus crisis: lessons for the second wave. Reuters Institute. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/communications-coronavirus-crisis-lessons-second-wave>

poll by *Horizon Research* in April 2020, 91% of New Zealanders trusted the Ministry of Health and Government in their handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, but by August 2020 the figure had fallen to 82%<sup>8</sup>. The poll also found that overall trust in the political parties in Parliament was high, except for the ACT Party.

On the other hand, the *Reuters Digital News Report 2020* report found that in general, trust in media's coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic "was relatively high in all [40] countries, at a similar level to national governments and significantly higher than for individual politicians"<sup>9</sup>. They found that traditional media was more trusted than social media networks, video platforms, or messaging services for Covid information. A 2020 survey by Goldfinch and others found that in Australia and New Zealand, trust in government "increased dramatically" during the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>10</sup>. Their research found that in July 2020, approximately 80% of Australians and 83% of New Zealanders agreed that the government was trustworthy, and over 85% had confidence in the public health scientists. What comes to the Covid-reporting, a poll conducted by New Zealand's Newspaper Publishers Association (NPA) in March 2021, shows that "the news media has a bigger place in people's lives post-Covid"<sup>11</sup>. According to the poll, "just half of the people were engaging more with news websites and apps than they were a year ago". Approximately 72% said that "newspapers and news media were highly important to them in the wake of Covid."

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<sup>8</sup> Horizon Research Limited, press release, August 9, 2020: <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO2008/S00101/overall-82-trust-pandemics-management-down-from-91.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Schulz, A., Andi, S., and R.K. Nielsen. *Digital News Report 2020*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR\\_2020\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Goldfinch, S., Taplin, R. and Gauld, R. 2021. Trust in government increased during the Covid-19 pandemic in Australia and New Zealand. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-8500.12459>

<sup>11</sup> As reported by *Stuff* on March 26, 2021: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/124666188/covid-reporting-has-improved-perceptions-of-the-media-survey-suggests>

## Key findings

### 1. Trust in news in New Zealand

- In 2021, fewer than half of New Zealanders trusted news in general
- General trust in news declined from 53% to 48%, and trust in the news people themselves consumed fell from 62% to 55%
- Trust in news found via social media and social engines also declined, with 26% of people trusting news they found via search engines, and 14% trusting news on social media
- All news brands in New Zealand experienced erosion of trust, with statistically significant declines occurring for Newshub and Newstalk ZB
- As in 2020, RNZ (6.8 out of 10) and TVNZ (6.6 out of 10) were the most trusted news brands, and Newshub remained the third most trusted (6.3 out of 10) news brand

**Table 1: Trust in news in New Zealand in 2020 and 2021 (%)**

	2020	2021	Change
Overall trust in news	53%	48%	(-5%)
Trust in news I use	62%	55%	(-7%)
Trust news in search	27%	26%	(-1%)
Trust news in social	16%	14%	(-2%)

### 2. Trust in news compared internationally

- Compared to 40 other countries, the trust in news in general in New Zealand is high (48%) compared to the international average (38%)
- New Zealanders' trust in news they consume themselves is also substantially higher than the international average; however the trust in news consumed has fallen more in New Zealand than internationally (-7%/-3%)

- Trust in news on social media continues to be low internationally – 14% of New Zealanders trust news in social media compared to the international average of 22%
- Trust in news on search engines is also lower than in other countries – 26% of New Zealanders trust search engine news compared to 32% international average

**Table 2: Trust in news internationally and in New Zealand 2020-2021**

	Reuters 2019	Reuters 2020	Change %	JMAD 2020	JMAD 2021	Change %
	Int. average	Int. average	Int. average	NZ	NZ	NZ
Overall trust in news	42%	38%	-4%	53%	48%	-5%
Trust in news I use	49%	46%	-3%	62%	55%	-7%
Trust news in search	33%	32%	-1%	27%	26%	-1%
Trust news in social	23%	22%	-1%	16%	14%	-2%

### 3. Trust in news during the Covid-19 pandemic

- In 2021, RNZ and TVNZ were the most trusted sources of news and information about the Covid-19 pandemic
- Social media platforms were the least trusted sources for pandemic news, scoring poorly compared to news media outlets
- Approximately 62% of New Zealanders believe that the New Zealand mainstream news is the best place to receive news of pandemic
- Only 12% of New Zealanders think that social media is a good source of important pandemic information

#### 4. Reasons for not trusting the media

As a part of the survey, participants were asked: “Do you have any final comments on this survey or the issues raised in it?”, and 93 of those surveyed submitted a comment. These comments reveal some reasons for the news distrust. Some participants mentioned that they have lost trust in the media, especially in talkback radio, because of political bias or politicisation, or because the media pushes a specific agenda. Some respondents say news outlets offer opinions rather than factual news and well-researched information, hence reducing their trustworthiness.

One participant comments that

*“good well written accurate, factual reporting is hard to find as everything is sanitised, politically corrected or sensationalised for clicks or sales.”*

Another one mentions that

*“the problem with the news is that it is no longer the news. It is one side of an opinion and the other sides are left out of the story.”*

One of the participants says that

*“newspapers frequently have misinformation, misspelling or grammar errors, or they don't report the full story. This does not make them feel trustworthy.”*

Another comment was,

*“journalists appear to want to own their stories by selectively reporting to a predetermined plan.”*

Another criticism was that the New Zealand news media does not offer a comprehensive picture of news events, lessening their trustworthiness:

*“I read several overseas news outlets and a few NZ ones – and then try to pull together a balanced picture from that.”*



***Some reasons for mistrust:***

- Political bias, especially in talkback radio: “they are pretty right-wing”
- Politicisation of media
- Media is pushing certain social/other agenda (including climate change)
- Media offers opinions, not factual news and information
- Not offering a full picture of the events
- Selective reporting
- Poor standard of journalism including poor sourcing, factual mistakes, poor grammar and low standard of writing

## Data collection and sample

### 2021

This report on *Trust in News in New Zealand* is the second produced by the AUT research centre for Journalism, Media and Democracy (JMAD). The first six questions concerning news trust are the same as we asked 2020, and they exactly matched those asked by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. In January 2020, the Reuters Institute conducted a survey of 40 countries across Europe, the Americas, Asia/Pacific and Africa, and our international comparisons are made against this group. JMAD's trust survey in 2021 had two additional questions related to trust in news and information about the Covid-19 pandemic. The 2020 survey was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, but it did not ask New Zealanders to specifically comment on trust in the news in the light of the pandemic.

**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 together represent the New Zealand population at the 2018 Census.

**Sample:** This report is based on a national online survey of 1,226 New Zealand adults (18 years of age or over) who are members of Horizon Research's own national panels and a third-party research panel, both representing the New Zealand population at the 2018 Census. The survey was carried out from 4 to 9 March 2021 and has a maximum margin of error at the 95% confidence level for the total sample of  $\pm 2.8\%$ .

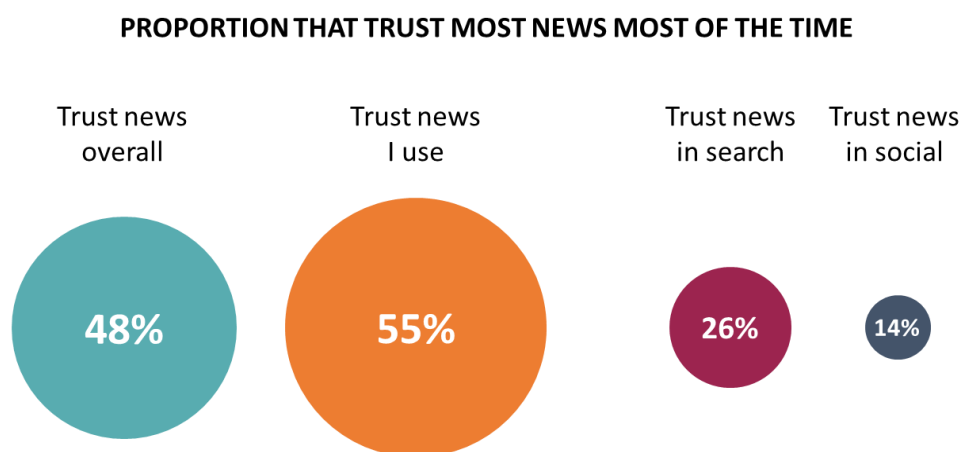
## Overall trust in news

Q1<sup>12</sup> asked New Zealanders about their trust in news generally and their attitudes to news media.

Based on our sample, 48% of New Zealanders say they can trust most news most of the time.

Additionally, approximately 55% trust the news they personally consume (figure 1).

**Figure 1: Trust in news in New Zealand, March 2021**



Overall, trust is higher in New Zealand than in the 40 countries included in the Reuters *Digital News Report 2020*<sup>13</sup>. According to the Reuters report, in 2020 the overall trust in news across 40 countries surveyed stood at 38%, and 46% of respondents across those nations said they trusted news they consumed.

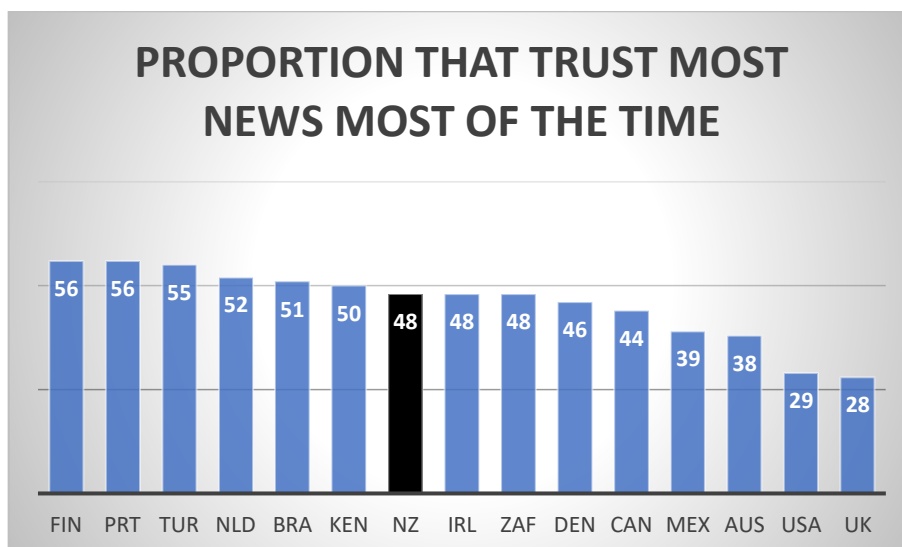
When compared to other countries, trust in news in New Zealand is clearly below Finland, Portugal and Turkey, but much higher than in countries such as Australia, the US and the UK (figure 2).

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<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> All international comparisons here use data from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020 <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/>.

**Figure 2: General trust in news in selected media markets**

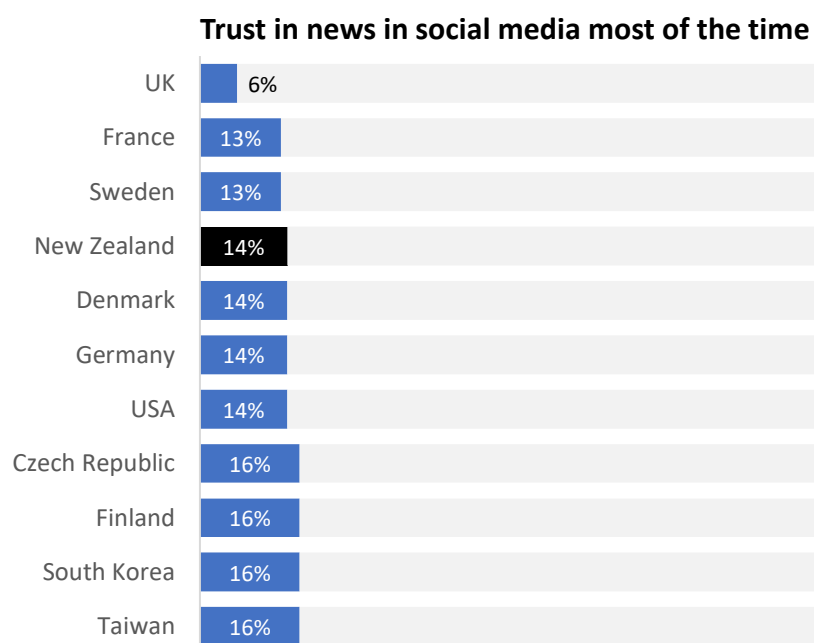


### Trust in news in social media and search

In Q2<sup>14</sup>, New Zealanders were asked about the trust in news they received via social media and search engines. Based on our sample, 26% (-1% from 2020) of New Zealanders said they trusted news they found via search engines, but only 14% (-2%) of respondents said they trusted news in social media (figure 1). These trust levels for news on search and social media are low internationally. In the Reuters *Digital News Report 2020*, 32% of those surveyed trusted news in search and 22% trusted news on social media. The Reuters 2020 survey found that the lowest levels of the trust in social media were in the UK, France and Sweden. New Zealand was in the 4<sup>th</sup> equal place with Denmark, Germany and the USA (figure 3).

<sup>14</sup> 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.

**Figure 3: Countries with the lowest levels of trust in social media**



### **Trust in New Zealand news brands**

**Q3**<sup>15</sup> 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. In 2020, eight news brands were included in the sample, but in 2021 the sample was expanded and included Māori TV, Iwi Radio and Interest.co.nz.

As seen on table 3, all news brands included in both 2020 and 2021 survey saw their trust scores decline. Statistically significant declines occurred for Newshub and Newstalk ZB. As in 2020, RNZ was the most trusted news brand, followed by TVNZ. Newshub and Māori TV had the same trust

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<sup>15</sup> **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.

ranking and shared the third place. Newsroom and the NZ Herald were regarded similarly trustworthy, but Stuff was somewhat behind (6.0).

**Table 3: Trust score (0-10) for New Zealand news brands in 2020 and 2021**

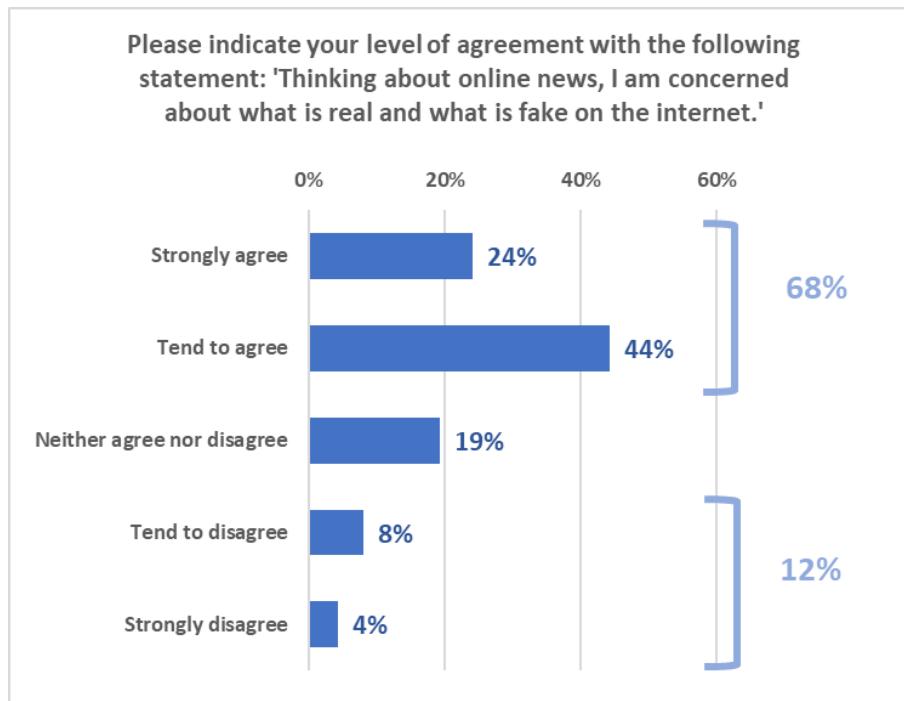
Brand	Trust score 2020	Brand	Trust score 2021
RNZ	7.0	RNZ	6.8
TVNZ	6.8	TVNZ	6.6
Newshub	6.6	Newshub	6.3
Māori TV	(not included)	Māori TV	6.3
Newsroom	6.4	Newsroom	6.2
NZ Herald	6.3	NZ Herald	6.2
Stuff	6.1	Stuff	6.0
Newstalk ZB	6.2	Newstalk ZB	5.7
Interest.co.nz	(not included)	Interest.co.nz	5.7
Iwi Radio	(not included)	Iwi Radio	5.7
The Spinoff	5.4	The Spinoff	5.2

### Misinformation and disinformation

**Q4**<sup>16</sup> asked New Zealanders whether they were concerned about what was real and what was fake news on the internet. Similar to 2020 results, 68% of respondents were concerned about what was real or fake on the internet (figure 4). When compared internationally, New Zealanders were the 5<sup>th</sup> most concerned in this measure, behind Brazil (84%), Portugal (76%), Kenya (76%) and South-Africa (72%).

<sup>16</sup> **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.

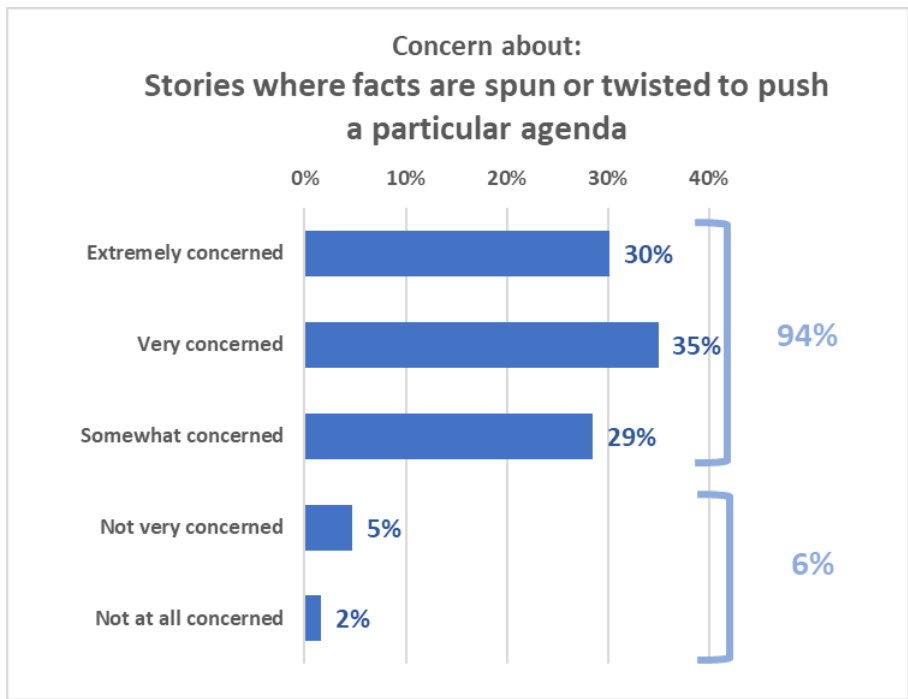
**Figure 4: Concerns about what is real and fake news on the internet**



**Q5<sup>17</sup>** asked to what extent respondents were concerned about poor journalism (stories with spin 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 94% of those surveyed were worried about spin and twisted facts, compared to 95% in 2020 (figure 5). Additionally, 91% of people were worried about poor journalism or stories which looked like news stories but were advertisements.

<sup>17</sup> **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.

**Figure 5: Concerns about twisted or spun stories in news media**



In 2021, 91% of those surveyed were concerned about poor journalism (a similar level to 2020).

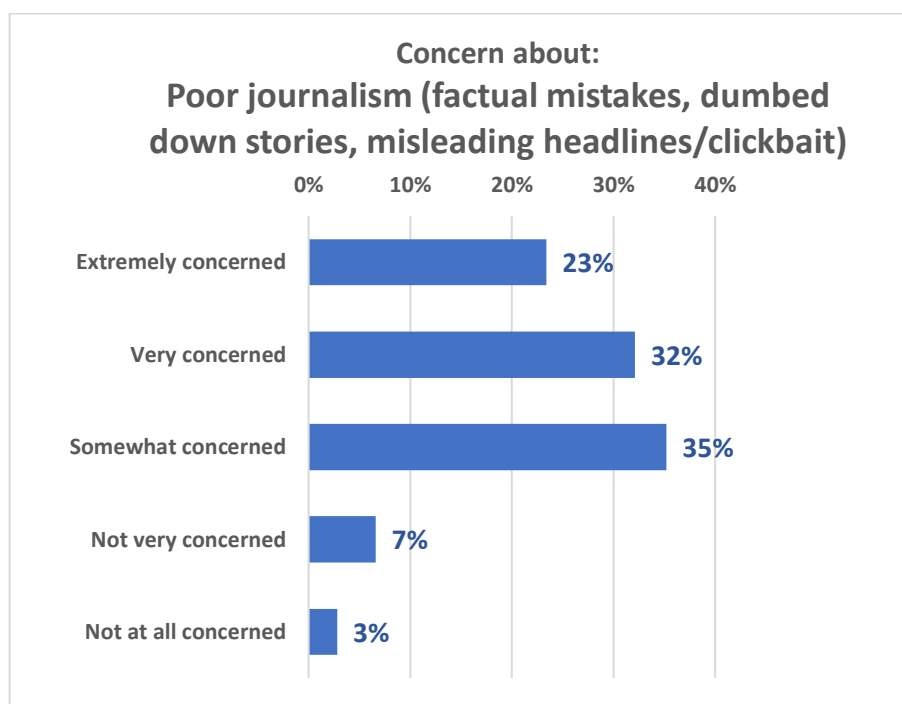
Poor journalism was defined by respondents by factual mistakes, “dumbed down stories”, misleading headlines and clickbait.

**Q6**<sup>18</sup> asked who should do more to help separate misinformation more clearly from real information. Approximately 73% (+3%) of respondents believe that Google and Facebook should do more to separate fake news from real information; 79% (+1%) of respondents believed it was the job of journalists and media companies to make it easier to separate real and fake news; and 62% (-1%) of respondents agreed it was up to the Government and journalists.

<sup>18</sup> **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.



**Figure 6: Level of concern for poor journalism in New Zealand**



**Q7<sup>19</sup>** asked how trustworthy news and information about the Covid-19 pandemic was from a variety of prominent New Zealand news outlets and social media. Respondents were asked to use a scale of 0-10, where 0 was not trustworthy at all and 10 completely trustworthy and rate their level of trust in eight news brands. Average scores out of 10 were calculated from those who knew of each source.

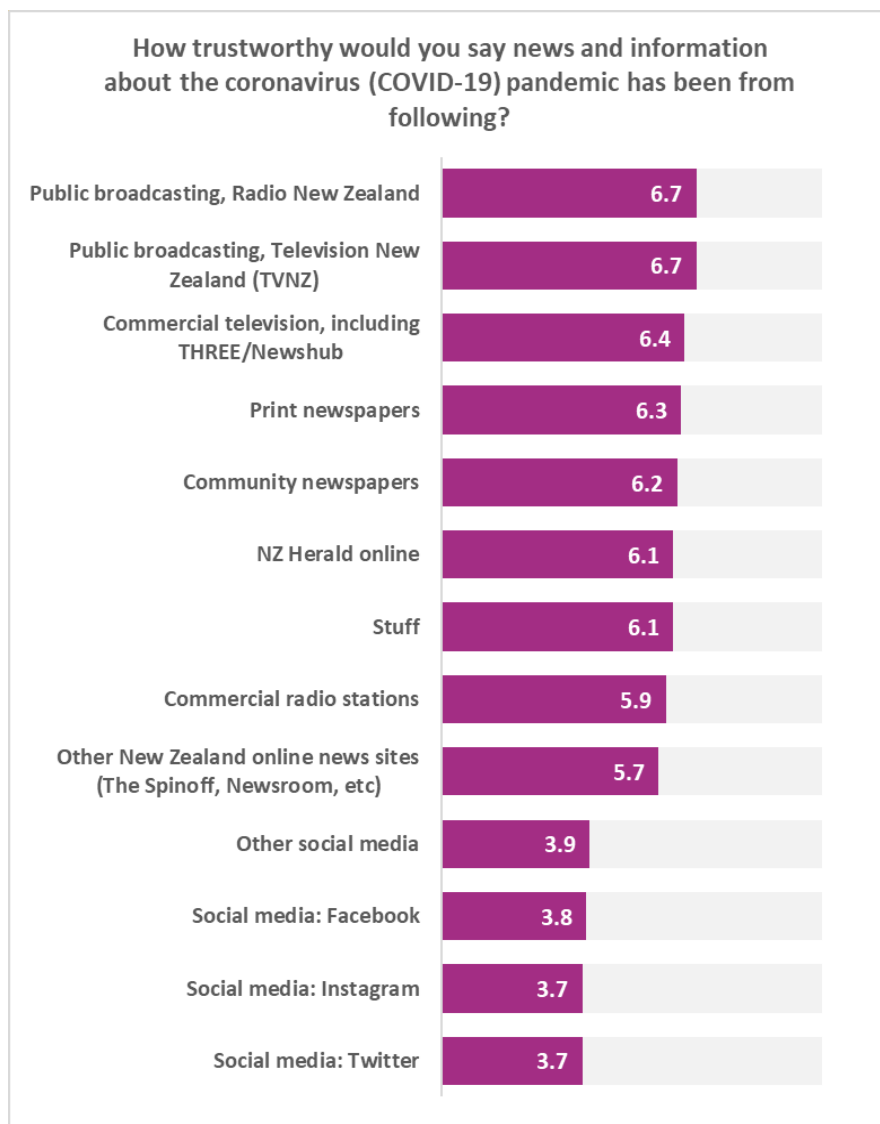
In 2021, the most trusted news sources for Covid-19 news and information were RNZ and TVNZ, both receiving score 6.7 out of 10 (figure 6). These broadcasters were also most trusted sources for

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<sup>19</sup> **Q7.** Overall, how trustworthy would you say news and information about the coronavirus pandemic has been from the following? Public broadcasting, TVNZ/Public broadcasting, RNZ//Commercial TV, including THREE/NewsHub/Commercial radio stations/NZ Herald online/Stuff/Other New Zealand online news sites (The Spinoff, Newsroom etc.)/Social media sites (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, other social media)/Community newspapers. Please use the scale below, where 0 is 'not at all trustworthy' and 10 is 'completely trustworthy'.

the news in general (see above). In contrast, social media platforms were the least trusted news sources with Facebook receiving score of 3.8, Instagram (owned by Facebook) a score of 3.7, and Twitter a score of 3.7.

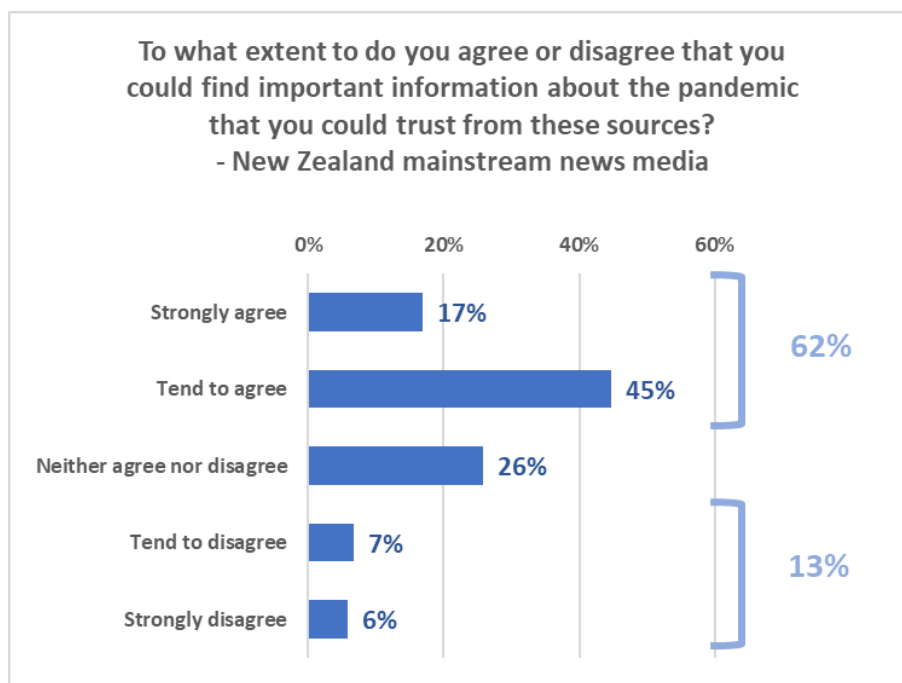
**Figure 6: Trustworthiness of Covid-19 reporting by various outlets**



**Q8.** asked about people's ability to find important Covid-19 information from various news channels. The channels included New Zealand mainstream news media, global news media, social

media and local media<sup>20</sup>. Just over six in ten people (62%) agreed they could find important information about the pandemic they can trust from New Zealand mainstream news media, while 13% disagreed.

**Figure 7: Ability to find important Covid-19 information in NZ media**



New Zealanders trust the country’s mainstream media for Covid-pandemic information more than they trust global news sources. Only 44% of those surveyed said they can find important information about Covid-19 in global media, with 18% distrusting global media. Only 12% of those surveyed agree that they can find important pandemic information from social media. Over half of those surveyed (51%) believe that social media does not offer important information about Covid-19. Only 12% agree and 3% strongly agree that they can find important information about the

<sup>20</sup> **Q8.** To what extent to do you agree or disagree that you could find important information about the pandemic that you could trust from these sources? a) New Zealand mainstream news media/ b) global news media/ c) social media/ d) local media (such as community newspaper, community radio, community news site). 1 Strongly disagree/1 tend to disagree/3 neither agree nor disagree/4 tend to agree/5 strongly agree.

pandemic. Over half (51%) of those surveyed believe that they cannot find relevant information about the pandemic on social media platforms.

## 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 ten annual *New Zealand Media Ownership* reports which track changes in media ownership and key trends and events in New Zealand media. Since 2020, JMAD has produced two *Trust in News in New Zealand* reports. Additionally, since 2014 AUT Media Observatory has provided regular measurement and analysis of news and has produced three reports concerning New Zealand election coverage