

PEOPLE LIKE YOU: HOW PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY RATINGS INFLUENCE TRUST IN MEDIA

A GALLUP/KNIGHT
FOUNDATION ONLINE
EXPERIMENT



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PEOPLE LIKE YOU: HOW PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY RATINGS INFLUENCE TRUST IN MEDIA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Executive Summary
2	Introduction
3	Research and Experiment Design
3	About the Experimental Platform
4	Experimental Conditions
6	Comparison Groups: Conditions and Sample Sizes
7	Major Results
7	Approach for Evaluating Results
8	How Trust Perceptions Differ Between Groups
10	Comparing Past and Present Trust Ratings
13	Conclusion
14	Appendix: Calculation Methods for Opinion- or Behavior-Based Averages
15	About the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
16	About the Ford Foundation
17	About the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
18	About the Open Society Foundations
19	About Gallup

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rise of so-called “fake” news has presented recent challenges for the U.S. news media. With social media and algorithms playing a role in the dissemination of news, many U.S. news consumers are more susceptible than ever to viewing potential misinformation — information that is made up or cannot be verified as accurate but is presented as if it is accurate.

Furthermore, many digital outlets (Facebook® and Twitter®, among others) use opinion- or behavior-based metrics, such as user ratings, to suggest stories to their users. Unfortunately, artificial users or bots have the ability to manipulate metrics like these. As a result, both reliable and unreliable news stories are served to users of digital platforms.

Recent research from Gallup and Knight Foundation investigated how the use of opinion- or behavior-based metrics influenced study participants’ level of trust in the media.

The experiment used a custom-built news aggregation platform that showed 11,695 study participants up-to-date news stories from seven prominent news outlets that represented viewpoints across the ideological spectrum. Participants were asked to rate their level of trust in every news article they read using a 5-point Likert scale.

Each participant was randomly assigned to an experimental group that viewed a news article and certain average historical trust ratings of the news source. Based on their experimental group, individuals saw ratings of their own (personal), all users of the platform (community), people similar to the news consumer (“people like you,” based on gender, political affiliation, age and other factors), a combination of personal ratings and either community or “people like you” ratings, or none of the aggregated trust indicators (control group).

The findings of this experiment suggest that viewing aggregated trust ratings that convey group opinion affects a consumer’s trust in the news. Participants who viewed either the community average trust rating or the “people like you” average tended to be less trusting of the articles they read, compared with the groups who viewed their own past behavior or no past ratings. Participants who saw their own historical average trust rating generally remained consistent in how they rated news outlets before versus during the experiment.

This study shows how malleable Americans’ trust in the news can be when exposed to group opinions, and it shows how difficult it may be to break the trend of declining trust in the media. It seems that the more people know, the more skeptical they become.

INTRODUCTION

A GALLUP/KNIGHT FOUNDATION ONLINE EXPERIMENT

The spread of misinformation or strongly biased news has been enabled, at least partially, by digitally based techniques that strategically target news content at consumers. The methods provide news consumers with stories based on the story's popularity in the general public or with a certain group of people, or because of the consumer's past online behavior.

The use of opinion- or behavior-based metrics such as trust ratings, as well as the use of algorithms, may not only direct some Americans to less-than-credible stories but also could lend these stories unwarranted credibility.

How this reality interacts with another long-standing media trend — the decline in Americans' confidence in the media — is not entirely clear. This report hopes to contribute to this overarching issue by reviewing the results of an experimental study that measured how the use of opinion- or behavior-based metrics influenced study participants' levels of trust in the media.

In the experiment, study participants used a custom-built news aggregation platform to view up-to-date news stories from seven prominent news outlets across the ideological spectrum. Then they rated their level of trust in the article using a 5-point Likert scale.

When viewing a news story, some participants were able to see the average historical trust rating assigned by themselves or other participants in the study. Those in the control group rated their trust in each article, but they did not see any other groups' historical average ratings.

The findings of this experiment suggest that showing news consumers the trust ratings of others has a negative effect on news consumers' trust levels.

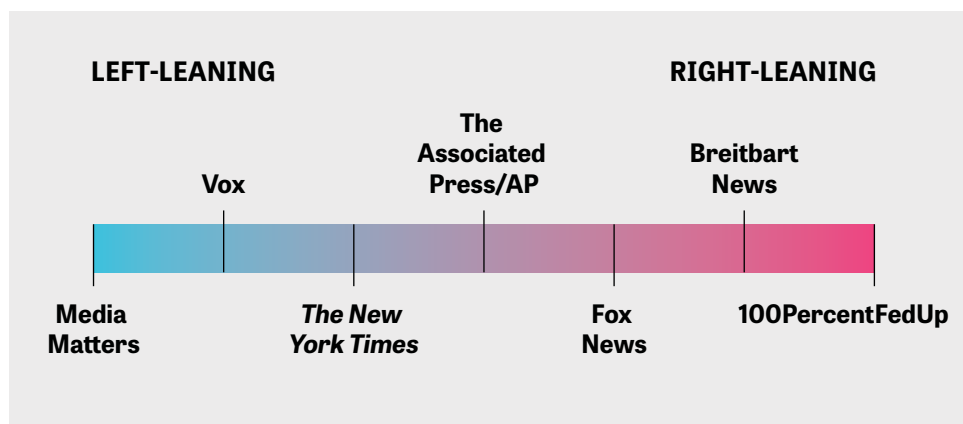
Gallup and Knight Foundation acknowledge support for this research from the Ford Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Open Society Foundations.

RESEARCH AND EXPERIMENT DESIGN

ABOUT THE EXPERIMENTAL PLATFORM

This study was conducted using Gallup's experimental news aggregation website. The platform regularly collects news stories from seven major news outlets, which represent various points on the ideological spectrum, from the far left to the far right.

Media Outlets That Appear in Gallup's News Aggregation Website



The main page of the website divides the news content into three categories: economy, politics and science. As shown below, users can view the headline, first sentence and source of the article on the main page, and they can click on the story to view the full-length article.

ECONOMY	POLITICS	SCIENCE
<p>ECONOMY Extracted on 25 Jan 2018</p> <p>Why Strong Growth Is a Headache for the European ...</p> <p>FRANKFURT — Mario Draghi, the president of the European Central Bank, has what might be called a happy problem. The ...</p> <p><i>The New York Times</i> Continue To Read And Rate ></p>	<p>POLITICS Extracted on 25 Jan 2018</p> <p>WOW! CONSERVATIVE FILMMAKER Dinesh ...</p> <p>In May 2014, Dinesh D'Souza pleaded guilty to one felony count of making illegal contributions in the names of co-workers. ...</p> <p><i>WOW NEWS</i> Continue To Read And Rate ></p>	<p>SCIENCE Extracted on 25 Jan 2018</p> <p>Whopper: Burger King Thinks It Can Explain Net Neutrality ...</p> <p>Burger King has released a video criticizing the FCC's repeal of net neutrality by attempting to explain the issue through their ...</p> <p><i>BREITBART</i> Continue To Read And Rate ></p>
<p>ECONOMY Extracted on 25 Jan 2018</p> <p>Coal's Decline Seems Impervious to Trump's ...</p> <p>BOBTOWN, Pa. — When Nic Zmija applied for a job at the 4 West coal mine three years ago, he was tantalized by a fat raise and a ...</p> <p><i>The New York Times</i> Continue To Read And Rate ></p>	<p>POLITICS Extracted on 25 Jan 2018</p> <p>Trump just said he's "looking forward to" testifying under ...</p> <p>President Donald Trump told reporters Wednesday afternoon that he would testify under oath to special counsel Robert ...</p> <p><i>Vox</i> Continue To Read And Rate ></p>	<p>SCIENCE Extracted on 25 Jan 2018</p> <p>New Findings Could Save Lives of More Stroke Patients</p> <p>Many more stroke victims than previously thought can be saved from disability or death if doctors remove blood clots that are choking ...</p> <p><i>The New York Times</i> Continue To Read And Rate ></p>

This is the landing page of the experimental platform. Users can click on individual articles to read and rate.

Once a user clicks, the page with the full story asks users to rate how trustworthy they find the content. Users indicate the degree of trust that they have in the article by using a 5-point Likert scale.

RESEARCH AND EXPERIMENT DESIGN

EXPERIMENTAL CONDITIONS

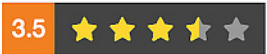
When viewing an article, participants saw additional information next to the trust rating scale. This information varied from user to user and could include:

- **personal average only:** the average of all trust ratings that the individual user gave for a particular news outlet before the commencement of this study
- **community average only:** the average of the trust ratings that all of the experimental platform users gave a particular news outlet in the past
- **“people like you” average only:** the average of the trust ratings that a collection of experimental platform users with similar demographic qualities gave a particular news outlet in the past; users were not told which qualities were included in the “people like you” metric but, instead, were allowed to infer what this meant
- **personal and “people like you” averages** or **personal and community averages:** two groups’ averages instead of one
- **none** of the additional pieces of information; this is the control group

Examples of Ratings Presented on the Platform



Rate This Article's Trustworthiness



3.3 People Like You Rated Articles From Vox

3.1 In The Past, You Have Rated Articles From Vox

Users in the combination group that saw both personal and "people like you" averages saw the above features at both the top of the article and the bottom of the article.

EconomyPoliticsScience

AP

Rate This Article's Trustworthiness

People Like You Rated 3.5 Articles From Associated Press News

In The Past, You Have 3.9 Rated Articles From Associated Press News

House Democrats talk to Cambridge Analytica whistleblower

Extracted on 25 Apr 2018

WASHINGTON ([Press]) — House Democrats, frustrated by what they see as GOP inaction and with an eye on midterm elections, on Tuesday held the first of what they hope to be several interviews with witnesses who have not been interrogated in the Republican-led Russia investigations.

For all seven sources, users saw features based on the experimental group that they were in. This is another example of what a user would see if they were part of the "personal and 'people like you'" experimental group.

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RESEARCH AND EXPERIMENT DESIGN

COMPARISON GROUPS: CONDITIONS AND SAMPLE SIZES

Gallup recruited study participants via the nationally representative survey panel known as the Gallup Panel™. Gallup invited 77,801 panelists to join this study. The invitation, sent via email, also included a link to the experimental news aggregator platform. The 19,754 panelists who clicked on the invitation link were enrolled in the study, which ran from March 7 to April 13, 2018.

Of the 19,754 panelists who were enrolled in the study, 11,695 rated at least one article during the experiment.

Participants could be assigned to one of the six experimental groups; however, only participants who had used the platform during an open survey period before this experiment officially began could be assigned to groups 1, 4 or 5, as these groups were shown their personal average trust ratings as part of the experiment.

All study participants were assigned randomly to one of the groups for which they were eligible.

Experimental Groups and Sample Sizes

	NUMBER OF USERS*
Experimental Group	
1: Personal average only	580
2: Community average only	3,323
3: “People like you” average only	3,340
4: Personal and “people like you” averages	587
5: Personal and community averages	553
6: Control group	3,312
Total Users	11,695

*Not all users who followed the invitation link rated an article.

MAJOR RESULTS

APPROACH FOR EVALUATING RESULTS

To understand the full effect of viewing the trust averages, we evaluate the results in two ways:

1. We examine how trust perceptions differed between groups during the study period.
2. We focus on the relative change of users' trust perceptions compared with their activity before the study. In the "Comparing Past and Present Trust Ratings" section below, we examine only the subset of users who rated at least one article before joining the experiment *and* during the experiment.

MAJOR RESULTS

HOW TRUST PERCEPTIONS DIFFER BETWEEN GROUPS

To compare average trust levels between experimental groups, we compare the experimental groups' average trust scores on a rating scale of 1 to 5, with 5 indicating the highest level of trust.

Average Trust Ratings During Experiment, by Experimental Group

	MEAN TRUST RATING (1-5)
Experimental Group	
1: Personal average only	3.11*
2: Community average only	3.02***
3: "People like you" average only	3.00***
4: Personal and "people like you" averages	3.08
5: Personal and community averages	3.05
6: Control group	3.07

Mean values are statistically significant across experiment groups at three significant levels ($p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.005$, *** $p < 0.001$). Asterisks indicate that the mean trust rating of the experimental group differs from the control group in a statistically significant manner.

The control group, which was not subject to any experimental condition, reported an average trust score of 3.07 across all users and all news sources.

The experimental groups that saw only personal, community or "people like you" ratings gave average ratings that differed in a statistically significant way from the control group, suggesting that each of these metrics, on their own, affect an individual's trust rating.

The average trust rating for users who saw only their personal average was higher than the averages of all other groups, especially the two groups who saw either the community or "people like you" averages.

Seeing others' trust ratings without the presence of one's own average ratings had a negative effect on user trust ratings. The average trust ratings of the two groups who saw either the community or "people like you" averages were lower than the control group and other groups. The average trust ratings of the groups that viewed only the community average or only the "people like you" average did not differ in a statistically significant way from each other.

**SEEING OTHERS'
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TRUST RATINGS.**

When users were shown two metrics together — either the personal average and “people like you” average (group 4) or the personal average and community average (group 5) — the effect of the two metrics is less clear. The average trust ratings of both of these groups did not vary in a statistically significant way from the control group.

These results seem to suggest that seeing one's personal average has a positive impact by creating less cognitive dissonance — inconsistent thoughts, beliefs or attitudes regarding behavioral decisions and attitudes — regarding a person's typical level of trust in news content.

MAJOR RESULTS

COMPARING PAST AND PRESENT TRUST RATINGS

To further investigate the questions raised in the above analysis, we consider how this experiment affected users' trust levels compared with their previous levels of trust. In other words, are users consistent in how they assess the credibility of news articles in this experiment compared with their assessments before participating in the study?

While all Gallup Panel members had an opportunity to rate articles on the platform before the beginning of the experiment — from Jan. 14 to March 5, 2018, with no personal or group historical averages shown to them — 5,126 users rated at least one article before the experiment and at least one article during the experiment. The analysis that follows in this section examines only this subset of platform users.

The table below compares the average trust scores of the users in each group for the time periods before and during the experiment.

The average mean trust scores of the control group did not change significantly from the prestudy to the experiment period.

Average Trust Ratings, by Experimental Group

	AVERAGE TRUST RATING BEFORE THE EXPERIMENT	AVERAGE TRUST RATING DURING THE EXPERIMENT
Experimental Group		
1: Personal average only	3.31	3.28
2: Community average only	3.27*	3.14*
3: "People like you" average only	3.31*	3.18*
4: Personal and "people like you" averages	3.31	3.31
5: Personal and community averages	3.25	3.23
6: Control group	3.33	3.30

*Average trust rating before the experiment compared with during the experiment differed at a statistically significant level of $p < 0.05$.

Overall trust declined during the experiment for the groups who saw either the community or “people like you” averages.

Even larger declines in trust are apparent when comparing the “community average only” or “‘people like you’ average only” ratings for each of the seven news outlets presented within the platform. The graph below shows, by group and news outlet, the difference between the average trust rating during the experiment and the previous average trust rating. A negative value indicates that the group became less trusting of that news outlet's articles during the study.

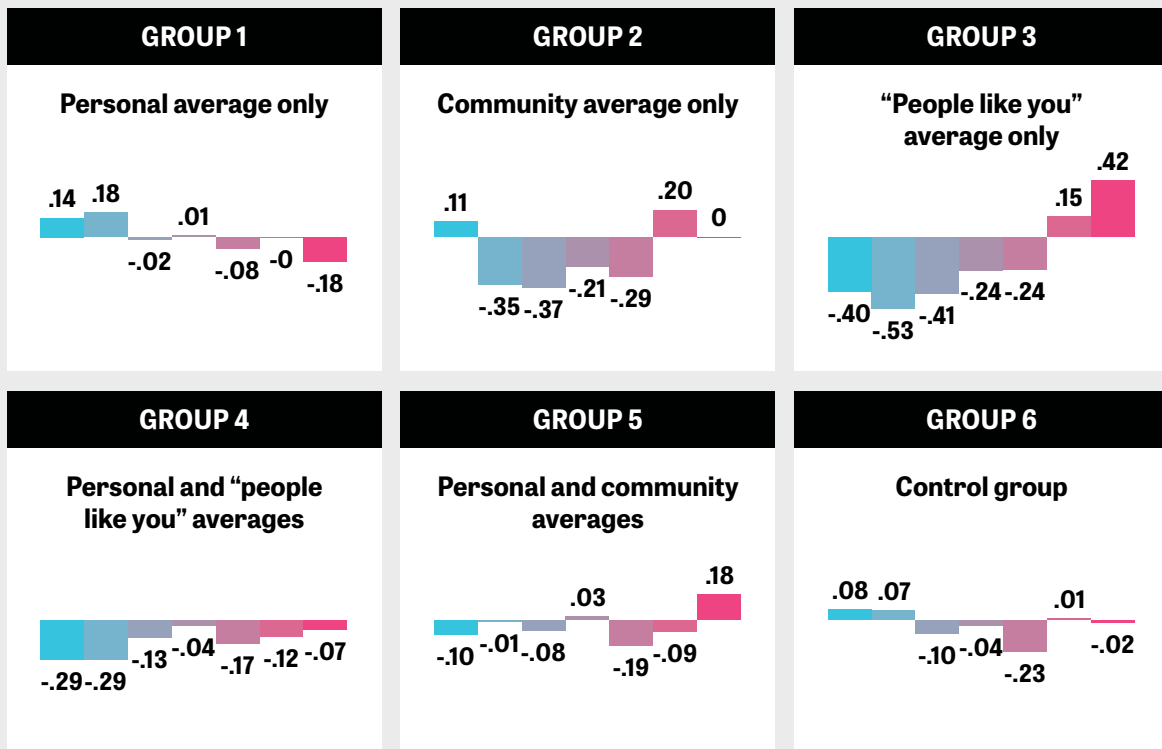
For group 2, which saw only the community average trust rating, perceptions of trust in four of the seven publications declined. Interestingly, three of those four sources, including The Associated Press, *The New York Times* and Fox News are among the most well-known media outlets. Most Americans (66%) are not familiar with Vox, according to the Gallup/Knight Foundation report *Perceived Accuracy and Bias in the News Media*,¹ and its trust rating was among those that declined after users viewed the community average trust ratings. The trust levels of the other three publications, by contrast, stayed the same or increased during the study period, compared with before the experiment.

For users in group 3, who viewed the “people like you” averages, trust perceptions declined for five of the seven news outlets. Perceptions of trust for the center and left-of-center publications declined. In addition, trust in the well-known but right-leaning Fox News dipped. Breitbart News saw a modest increase, while the average trust rating in 100PercentFedUp increased by more than four-tenths of a point.

NEWS SOURCE

Media Matters Vox The New York Times AP Fox News Breitbart News 100PercentFedUp

Difference Between Current and History



1 kf.org/tmdreport3

This analysis finds clear evidence that, concerning media trust perceptions, people appear to change their attitudes when presented with metrics conveying others' opinions. The difference between a person's past attitudes and the general attitudes communicated via the community or "people like you" averages causes cognitive dissonance that ultimately effects overall media trust perceptions adversely.

A natural follow-up question to this claim would be *why* is the effect negative? Why are respondents, or a significant share of them, downgrading their typical levels of trust after looking at either the community or "people like you" averages? One theory is that a substantial portion of respondents adjusted their trust attitudes to match or be similar to the lower community or "people like you" average. It is more likely that the reasons varied for why respondents downgraded their level of trust after viewing either of the group-think statistics. Further research and analysis are required to better understand the various reasons that respondents chose relatively lower trust perceptions, as compared with other groups, after viewing community or "people like you" averages.

While there is evidence that community and "people like you" averages have some persuasive power over individuals' perceptions of media outlets, the influence of personal trust rating historical averages is less clear. No statistically significant differences exist between perceptions before and during the experiment for users who saw their personal averages. We hypothesize that being reminded of one's own past beliefs or preferences encourages people to act *consistently*.

**BEING
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CONCLUSION

This analysis looked at the potential effect of opinion- or behavior-based metrics on the trust perceptions of news outlets in two ways: how they may influence a person's perceptions of an outlet while they are viewing authentic news articles and how they may influence a person's trust perceptions over time.

In both instances, we find evidence that the opinion-based metrics — the community and “people like you” averages — had significant and adverse effects on trust perceptions. Generally speaking, users in our experiment expressed less trust when they saw either of those types of rating averages.

Overall, we hypothesize that showing others' opinions, on average, through the community or “people like you” feature in isolation creates cognitive dissonance that results in a user choosing to have a lower level of trust in a news article or outlet. If our hypothesis is further validated in future studies, the results could have important implications for the broader problem facing U.S. society: the widespread distrust of the news media and large-scale lack of confidence in the accuracy of available news information.

Although this problem may seem unique to the digital age, Americans' attitudes related to perceptions of media have been apparent for decades. A 1981 Gallup survey, for instance, found that 35% of Americans had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in newspapers, down from 51% in 1979. And one-third of Americans had those levels of confidence in television news in 1995.

These trends predate the rise of a more openly partisan media that developed, in part, because of digital news sources, which have intensified Americans' doubts in the purveyors of information. As such, skepticism in media in the U.S. now seems essentially entrenched as part of the American culture.

The results of this study suggest how difficult it may be to break this cycle — opinion-based metrics that convey the general impressions of the public seem to drive confidence downward.

APPENDIX

CALCULATION METHODS FOR OPINION- OR BEHAVIOR-BASED AVERAGES

The average ratings required for each experimental group were calculated in the following ways:

- *Personal average trust rating of any given news outlet* represents the simple average of all trust ratings that a user has given across all articles rated by that user. For instance, if a user has read 10 articles from The Associated Press and rated seven of those articles a 5 and three of them a 3, then that user's historical average for The Associated Press would be 4.4.
- *Community average trust rating of any given news outlet* represents the simple average of trust ratings that all of the news aggregating platform's users have given to all articles produced by a news outlet. If, for instance, the platform had 100 users, all of whom rated one article by *The New York Times*, and all of these users rated the one article they read a 1, then the community average for *The New York Times* would be 1.
- *"People like you" average trust rating of any given news outlet* aims to capture the average trust rating that users sharing a common set of features (both attitudinal and demographic) give a particular news outlet. Similarity was determined by performing a k-means cluster analysis on age, gender, party affiliation and past user behavior. These techniques included, first, data reduction methods, which identified the key attributes by which to sort the data, and, second, cluster analysis methods, which segment the data into six groups. Once these groups were defined, the "people like you" historical information represented the simple average of trust ratings that all users in a particular group gave all articles produced by a given news outlet.

ABOUT THE JOHN S. AND JAMES L. KNIGHT FOUNDATION

The Knight Foundation is a national foundation with strong local roots. We invest in journalism, in the arts, and in the success of cities where brothers John S. and James L. Knight once published newspapers. Our goal is to foster informed and engaged communities, which we believe are essential for a healthy democracy.

For more information, visit www.knightfoundation.org.

ABOUT THE FORD FOUNDATION

The Ford Foundation is an independent, nonprofit grant-making organization. For more than 80 years it has worked with courageous people on the front lines of social change worldwide, guided by its mission to strengthen democratic values, reduce poverty and injustice, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement. With headquarters in New York, the foundation has offices in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. www.fordfoundation.org

ABOUT THE BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people — especially those with the fewest resources — have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, Washington, the foundation is led by CEO Sue Desmond-Hellmann and Co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett.

ABOUT THE OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

The **Open Society Foundations** work to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable and open to the participation of all people. In the United States, the Open Society Foundations aim to nurture the development of a society that allows all people to participate equitably in political, economic and cultural life; encourages diverse opinions and critical debate; protects human rights; and promotes broadly shared prosperity and security.

ABOUT GALLUP

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students and citizens than any other organization in the world.

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GALLUP®

World Headquarters

The Gallup Building
901 F Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

t +1.877.242.5587

f +1.202.715.3045

www.gallup.com