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**News with value**

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Programme**

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**Bryan Gibson**

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## A note on digital tools

The artificial intelligence platform Perplexity was used to source and sort a number of the studies cited in the Literature Review. The referencing application Mendeley was used to manage the academic literature cited in this study. No AI or large language model application was used in the composition of the report itself.

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## Executive Summary

As long as we have had democracy, we have had journalists to inform citizens on the workings of government and industry, holding power to account. But in recent years that social contract between citizens and journalists has been eroded as more people question the motives of news media. Even more alarming is the fact that as a society, we seem to be losing a number of the agreed “truths” we previously all took for granted. One only has to observe recent debates on vaccination to see what a threat this breakdown is to society.

Against this backdrop, the news industry is still struggling to find a new model to sustain newsrooms. With the internet being the primary channel, most readers expect to access news for free. But the advertising revenue enjoyed in the days of printed newspapers has not made the move online.

The key question of this research is this: How can we build a news and data platform that farmers recognise as a vital decision-making tool that they are willing to invest in?

To find the answer, it is vital to delve into the current mindsets of news makers and news consumers. In the farming context, where this project centres, the chosen method was a survey of farmers and growers. In terms of attaining a better understanding of how successful publishers and journalists operate, free-form interviews were conducted. As these two strategies produced by qualitative and quantitative data, a convergent parallel design model was adopted, allowing the two workstreams to evolve independently, while being able to make holistic conclusions based on the entirety of the data.

A comprehensive literature review was also undertaken.

After studying the data produced in this process, it appears there is reason for optimism that the research question can be answered in the affirmative. New Zealand's food and fibre sector values the news media that serves it. But there is work to do, as outlined in these recommendations.

For journalists and publishers:

Maintaining trust is the key to a sustainable fourth estate. Accuracy, transparency and adherence to journalistic ethics will help retain social licence.

If the food and fibre sector is to invest in news and information, it needs to see its value. Content must be tailored to meet this need.

Online channels must be reliable and frictionless. Farmers and growers access digital content across a variety of devices, so ensure news content will work for them where they want to find it.

Investigate bundling news and data with other incentives, perhaps linking with agribusinesses to offer discounts or promotions. However, impartiality and editorial independence must be retained.

For farmers, growers and agribusiness professionals:

If you regularly use news and information in your day-to-day business decision-making, treat it as you would any other farming advice. Put a value on it.

Be careful with the information you find. Check the source, and if it's not trustworthy don't share it. Often misinformation spreads because well-meaning people fail to do due diligence.

For industry leaders:

Marketing budgets are better spent in ways that benefit other New Zealand agribusinesses. Do a stocktake of how much of that spend is heading offshore to social media companies.

For government:

Increase investment in rural connectivity.

Where possible, legislate to put New Zealand content creators on a level footing with global companies, in terms of taxation and intellectual property.



### 3. Introduction

Journalism is an industry at a crossroads, but it is still deciding which way to turn. For decades, the business model built on printed content, funded by advertising revenue, provided publishers with businesses that were the envy of other industries. But the emergence of the internet changed everything. In the early days, news media organisations made the decision to move content online, for free. Advertising revenue did not make that move.

Since then, publishers have sought new ways to fund the important journalism they do, with varying levels of success. This is an existential problem not just for the news media industry, but for society as a whole. Journalism is the mechanism by which our leaders, in business and in government, are held to account. A strong, stable fourth estate is essential to the democracy we depend upon. Without it, there would be unchecked power.

Agricultural media have experienced digital disruption slightly differently to the industry as a whole. Print advertising revenues, especially in New Zealand, stayed strong for longer because advertisers were guaranteed to reach the entirety of their target market each week through the various free publications farmers enjoy. In recent years that has started to change, and agricultural media is now experiencing a drop off in that print advertising revenue, without a corresponding lift in value from online channels.

This is a challenge for everyone in the food and fibre sector. Businesses thrive when they have high-quality information, analysis and data to inform decision-making. Without it, our farmers and growers do not have the assurance that the investments or choices they make every day are the right ones.

This challenge is made all the more difficult by the fact that many people in society are becoming more suspicious of the news media they consume. The rise of misinformation, bad actors and partisan news services has led many to question the motives of journalists and publishers. In the past, it was only a select few media organisations or figures accused of working with hidden agendas and ulterior motives. Now, the whole industry is under suspicion. For an industry already struggling to fund its work, that erosion of trust could be fatal.

The big question that needs to be answered is this: Is news a valuable tool that helps farmers and growers thrive? If so, how do we make sure those who create the news can realise that value?

This research project seeks to answer those questions.

## 4. The research question

Farmers and agribusiness professionals require high-quality and trusted news to help them make decisions with confidence. However, the current structure of news media is unsustainable.

**How can we build a news and data platform that farmers recognise as a vital decision-making tool that they are willing to invest in?**

### 4.1 Why

- Traditional news channels reach the target market, but not in a package that is recognised as a vital decision-making tool.
- This project intends to understand the needs of agribusiness professionals and farmers – what they require and how they want it delivered.

### 4.2 How

- Literature review of business news platforms that meet the needs of creator and audience.
- Online survey of New Zealand farmers and agribusiness professionals. I will collect farmers' views on rural news and data content and gain an insight into what the value proposition could look like for a comprehensive farming news platform.
- In-depth interviews with journalists and publishers who operate successful paid news operations that serve a specific business group.
- Recommend a structure that delivers value to the audience and economic sustainability to the rural media.

## 5. Methodology

A review of the literature is essential to understanding the issue. There is a large amount of published research into tactics and strategies used by news media to build resilient businesses that are fit for the digital age. Studies on agricultural media specifically, and news media in New Zealand, are less common, but there are still valuable lessons to be learned from the experiences of newsmakers and the audiences they serve globally.

A functioning and valuable agricultural news media in New Zealand relies on the relationship between publishers and readers. Therefore, those two groups are the focus of this study.

Audiences were surveyed to find out the opinion they have of the news media they consume. Questions focused on trustworthiness, usefulness, and whether readers think journalism adds value to their business. They were asked about the content and channels of delivery that would be most meaningful to them. What does a news and information decision-making tool look like?

Alongside this, journalists and publishers were interviewed about their experiences in developing and maintaining subscription-based online news services. What were the challenges, how was the audience defined and found, how was value created?

As these two strands of inquiry delivered quantitative and qualitative data, a mixed method model was utilised for analysis. Convergent parallel design is a method that allows for qualitative and quantitative data to be studied in isolation first, before bringing the two together for a final analysis. Throughout the process, findings from one strand will inform work in the other, and vice versa.

The hope is to arrive at some recommendations for journalists, politicians, industry leaders and the farm media audience to consider.

## 6. Literature review

### 6.1 Trust

For any paid news media offering to be successful, it needs to be trusted by an audience. Potential subscribers will not invest in a service if they don't trust it to deliver balanced, reliable content on the industry it serves.

Since the covid-19 pandemic surveys from around the world have reported that people have less trust in the news media than they once did. The annual report from the Reuters Institute shows the media is struggling to connect with audiences. "In most countries we find traditional news media struggling to connect with much of the public, with declining engagement, low trust, and stagnating digital subscriptions. (*Digital News Report 2025 | Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2025*)"

The reasons cited for this declining trust centre on a few factors. The first is the fragmentation of news media companies, with a growing number of independent and often partisan news organisations gaining market share. Podcasters, YouTubers, and others are taking audiences from the institutional journalism that dominated previously. Populist politicians in many countries is also having an impact. The report authors say these leaders often favour media that is friendly to their messages, meaning those messages are rarely challenged as they should be. Artificial intelligence is also discussed, as both a challenge and an opportunity. While there is scepticism of AI as a news generator, the authors posit that it could be utilised to re-engage those people who have avoided the news media in recent years.

AUT produces an annual report on how New Zealanders feel about the news media that serves them, and while it mirrors international findings, the most recent report shows a stabilisation of sentiment (*Trust in News in New Zealand | Journalism, Media and Democracy Research Centre, 2025*). The report found around 32% of respondents trusted most of the news, most of the time, which was 1% down on the previous year. In 2020, 53% of those surveyed answered the question positively, showing how much trust has been eroded over the past few years.

A high percentage of respondents were still actively avoiding the news, with the main reasons given being perceived bias, an increase in sensationalism and clickbait, a blurring of the line between news and opinion, and a general sense of being overwhelmed by the news.

This trend is also seen in Australia, where the latest report from the Australian Communications and Media Authority shows trust in news is falling.

“Levels of trust in news varied by demographic and consumer groupings (including education, political interest, and levels of consumption), with commonality found in the factors that influence Australians’ perceptions of trustworthiness in news, chiefly being journalistic standards and transparency of the outlet’s editorial process (*News Media in Australia*, 2025).”

Many researchers have studied how successful subscription-based news services operate, and the defining characteristic is trust. One study found that trust is not a homogenous concept that people apply to all or none of the news they consume. In fact, audiences were discerning, and there are some sources of news that are trusted and some not (Nelson & Kim, 2021).

As these findings show, there is a clear, positive link between audience trust in a news source and loyalty to that news source. That this link exists in South Korea—where many more people consume news via third-party platforms than in other countries—is telling. The fact that citizens who by and large get their news through intermediaries are still cognizant of the difference between outlets they trust and those they do not, and report a willingness to spend more time with the former and less with the latter, suggests that news organizations pursuing audience support for their work are right to consider trust an important piece of that journey (Nelson & Kim, 2021).

The literature clearly shows that journalism has a major trust issue to overcome, as fragmentation, misinformation and the emergence of partisan voices become more prevalent. Many people have become overwhelmed by both the amount of news, and its tone.

## 6.2 The new models

Since the emergence of the internet as the primary source of content delivery, news media organisations have faced the existential challenge of maintaining income streams. In the past, print advertising revenue was more than enough to sustain media companies, but the move online has not resulted in that revenue continuing.

This challenge has been around for most of this century. In 2010, Jim MacNamara painted a bleak future for an industry that was failing to understand the new environment. “Referred to in the industry as ‘audience fragmentation’ or ‘disaggregation’, this breakdown of large mass audiences

of mass media is having a 'double whammy' effect on the dominant commercial media business model: advertising (MacNamara, 2010)." The factors MacNamara highlights are the plummeting number of consumers and the corresponding drop in advertising rates and revenues. He concluded that despite years of debate, there was no agreement on what models could sustain the industry. "At this stage, no consensus or even widespread agreement has emerged on any alternative business model, and many of those proposed require further development and analysis (MacNamara, 2010)."

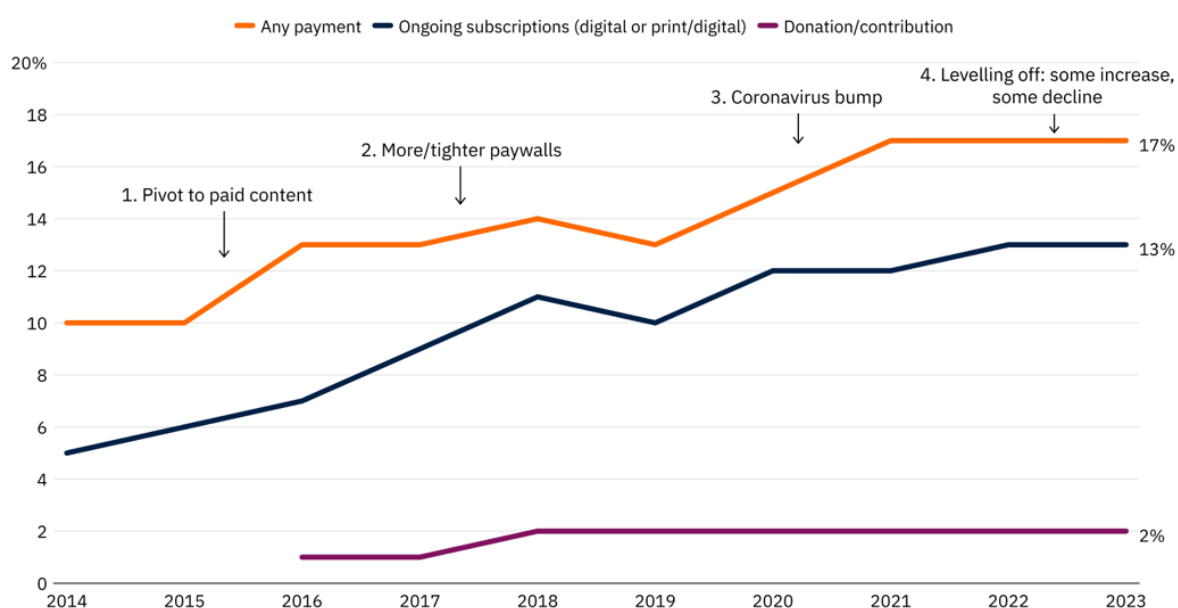
This debate continues today. In 2023, Groot Kormelink gave 68 participants a three-week newspaper trial subscription, then conducted in-depth interviews with them (Groot Kormelink, 2023). He found price was the primary reason that participants had reservations about investing in newspaper subscriptions. Other factors voiced by the participants included subscription over-saturation, an ideological opposition to having to pay for high-quality news content, and a belief that they simply didn't use the service enough to warrant the cost.

Newman and Robertson assessed the willingness of people to pay for news in 2023 and found there were several factors that were sought when choosing which subscription to take up. "News subscribers are attracted by a combination of distinctive high-quality, curated, and exclusive content, identification with the brand, a desire to support quality journalism, and a higher-quality user experience (Newman & Robertson, 2023)."

However, they also found that the vast amount of free content available was a factor in decision-making. Many of those questioned said that if there was trustworthy news available for free, they would be less likely to pay for similar news content.

Having said that, data from 20 countries showed that paid news subscriptions were growing (Figure 1). The number of people subscribing, making a one-off payment or a voluntary subscription to a news outlet grew from 10% in 2014 to 17% in 2023.

**Figure 4. Proportion that paid for any online news (2014–2023) – 20-country average**



*Figure 1. Paid subscriptions growing over time (Newman and Robertson 2023).*

Of course, trust alone is often not enough to entice people to subscribe. Potential subscribers must see value in the content itself, and in the overall package being offered. One way to sweeten the proposition is to bundle news content with other products and services. One study found that potential subscribers were far more willing to sign up to packages that bundled a variety of news services, covering both national and regional news (Erbrich et al., 2024).

News organisations must be very careful when transitioning to subscriber-based models, however, because while they may convert a percentage of readers, many others will be driven away by the prospect of having to invest in news content. There are other risks to consider as well: “As online ad revenues are heavily linked to newspaper readership, newspapers also stand to put these revenues at risk if the paywall leads to heavy reader attrition. Thus, the overall impact of setting up newspaper paywalls is far from obvious (Pattabhiramaiah et al., 2019).”

### 6.3 The farming context

There has been very little research done on specific farming news models. However, some research suggests that bundling news content with industry data and analysis is an effective strategy for niche news providers.

Dagens Næringsliv (DN), Norway’s leading financial newspaper, introduced a personalised data portal for paying users. “The combination of real-time stock market data and qualitative journalistic content has proven immensely

valuable to readers. DN strategically implemented a freemium model, allowing visitors to access certain personalisation features for free on the Investor page, which the company utilises as a conversion funnel (*INMA: Dagens Næringsliv Meets Need for Financial News Consumption, Drives c...*, 2024)."

The ability to use artificial intelligence and other tools to analyse reader data more comprehensively will also transform how news can be delivered. The result will be more personalised content delivered in a way that suits a particular reader. "Subscribers could receive newsletters tailored to their interests, content recommendations aligned with their engagement patterns, or even dynamic pricing options based on their preferences. These hyper-targeted experiences are essential for retaining readers and fostering loyalty (*Predictions for Journalism 2025: Revenue, Subscriptions and Registrations | Media News*, 2024)."

This more personalised provider-reader relationship is seen as one of the more important strategies for news media organisations in the coming years.

Top-tier news organisations like The New York Times could refine recommendation engines and experiment with dynamic subscription pricing, while smaller outlets could develop targeted micro-subscriptions that cater to niche audiences. This democratises access to advanced technologies, enabling newsrooms of all sizes to thrive. This trend is about more than technology; it is about meeting rising audience expectations for tailored experiences, similar to those offered by platforms like Netflix or Spotify. Newsrooms that fail to adapt risk losing readers, while those that embrace personalisation can position themselves as indispensable. By focusing on individual needs rather than one-size-fits-all approaches, media companies can foster deeper trust and engagement. In 2025, personalisation will shift from a "nice-to-have" to a "must-have" (*Predictions for Journalism 2025: Revenue, Subscriptions and Registrations | Media News*, 2024).

## 6.4 Summary

It is clear from this review of the literature that there is a massive gap in research of agricultural media. While there is many studies to draw on concerning mainstream and business news, and the challenges it faces formulating successful strategies in the digital space, farming news specifically has not been studied to any meaningful extent.

Farm media is unique in that it serves a specific audience, yet uses the wide array of journalistic forms of general media. It delivers everything: business



news, political analysis, science communication, lifestyle content, world news, and regional stories.

The key to the future success of agricultural media in New Zealand hinges on understanding the values and needs of the audience, and using the digital channels available to deliver a service that meets the needs of the modern farmer.

## 7. Research method

This research project seeks to understand whether New Zealand's food and fibre sector values news and information content, and if so, how it can be delivered to them in a way that offers a compelling value proposition. Two methods of data collection were used. The first was a survey of farmers, agribusiness professionals and other rural stakeholders. The survey asked them to indicate their perceptions of news media – what they thought of the news they consumed now, and what they considered to be the optimal package of news for their needs. This produced quantitative data from 124 respondents which could be analysed and discussed.

The second piece of data collection involved two in-depth and free-form interviews with publishers of subscription news services. They were asked about their careers in journalism and how they came to choose a paid-news model for their current work. The questioning also covered details of their business strategies, including the digital platforms chosen, editorial policy, subscription management and audience analytics. Wider conversations on the current state of the news media here and overseas were also had.

As there is both quantitative and qualitative information to appraise, a convergent parallel design method was chosen (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). This is a mixed methods research approach in which quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed simultaneously but independently, and the results are merged for comparison and interpretation to achieve a comprehensive understanding of a research problem.

This design treats both types of data with equal priority, integrating findings to corroborate, validate, or expand insights (Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. P. 2017). It is commonly used when the researcher seeks to triangulate or integrate numerical trends with contextual explanations to produce a more holistic interpretation of a phenomenon.

## 8. Snapshot of the sector – a survey of attitudes towards farm media

### 8.1 Introduction

The first part of this project centred on a survey for farmers and agribusiness professionals to complete. The object of this survey was to get an idea of how the audience viewed the news media, particularly farming media, and whether or not they would consider subscribing to a service that fits their needs.

To maximise completions the survey was kept brief, and was delivered in a very simply way through Google Forms. It was promoted through my LinkedIn profile, through various Farmers Weekly channels including the print

Which sector/s are you involved in?

124 responses

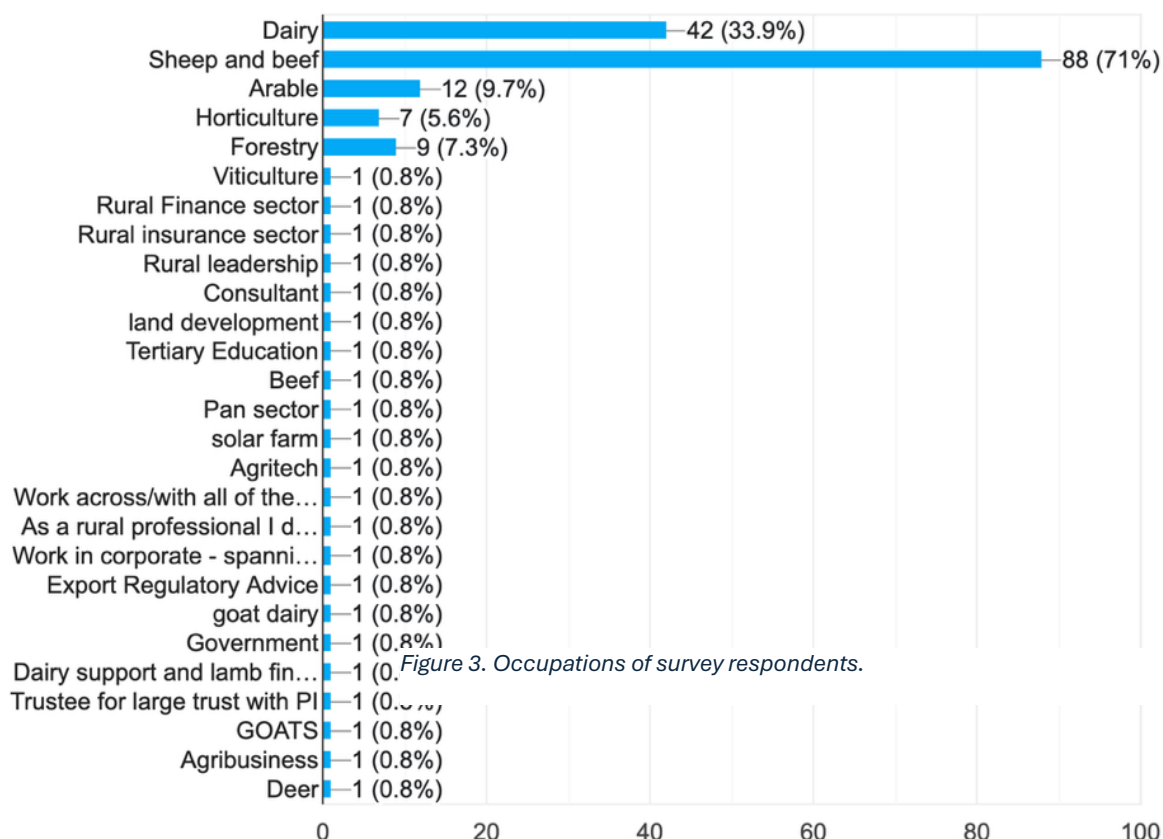


Figure 3. Occupations of survey respondents.

Figure 2. Occupations of survey respondents.

publication, electronic direct mail (EDM), and social media. Federated Farmers also promoted it in their Friday Flash EDM.

The survey was completed by 124 people, whose professions are collected in Figure 2.

The vast majority of respondents were farm owners or workers, which was a positive outcome as they are the primary audience for this research project.

More sheep and beef farmers were represented than dairy, while the number of respondents from other sectors within the food and fibre sector was more or less in line with the size of those sectors.

Regional distribution and age of respondents was also fairly reflective of the industry as a whole. Farming strongholds such as Waikato, Manawātū-Whanganui and Canterbury dominated, as was expected.

Half of respondents were over 50 years of age, with almost 42% in the 31-50 bracket (Figure 3).

How old are you?  
124 responses

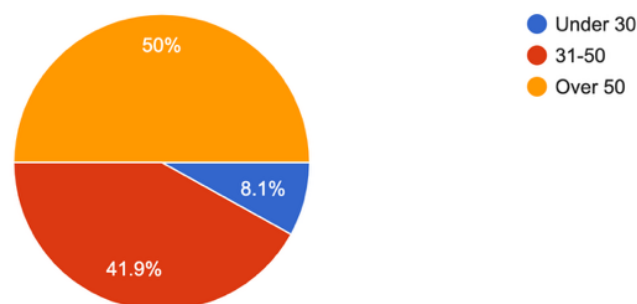


Figure 3. Age distribution of survey respondents.

The sources that respondents looked to for their farming news were also consistent current trends.

The primary sources of news were newspapers (34.7%), news websites (42.9%), and social media (17.7%). Radio (3.2%) and podcasts (1.6%) were the other two channels to register votes.

Most respondents sought out farming news either daily or multiple times a day, and more than three-quarters utilised non-news information from sources like farm economists, breed societies and banks.

## 8.2 Do farmers trust the news they read?

A key question of this research is the trust farming communities have in the news media. If a person is going to invest in a news and information service, they need to trust that the content they receive is accurate, timely, trustworthy and presented in good faith. Therefore, the degree to which the New Zealand farming community trusts its news media is pivotal to this research.

The survey asked respondents to rate their trust in the general news media in New Zealand on a scale of 1-4, with four being the highest amount of trust. As seen in Figure 4, the highest number of respondents place a fair amount of trust in the news. However, if the two lower-trust choices are added together, we see 48.3% of people – almost half – feel they distrust more news than they trust. This statistic aligns with the work cited in the literature review on the growing amount of distrust seen globally.

As the fourth estate, journalism is seen as a vital check on state and commercial power. Respondents were asked how important they thought the news media were in holding power to account and preserving democracy. A large majority thought journalists played a pivotal role in society, with 62.6% supporting the statement strongly (Figure 4). Only about 10% didn't think this role of the news media was important.

### How important is journalism in maintaining our social and political institutions?

123 responses

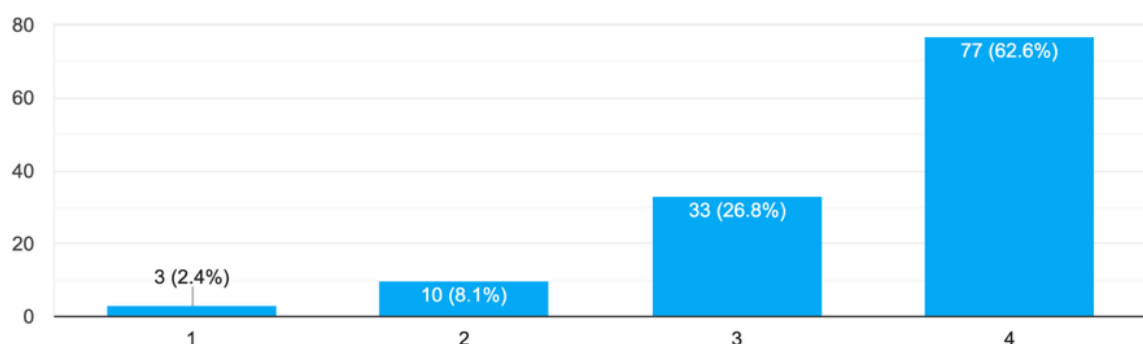


Figure 4. the importance of journalism to society.

## 8.3 What news can a farmer use?

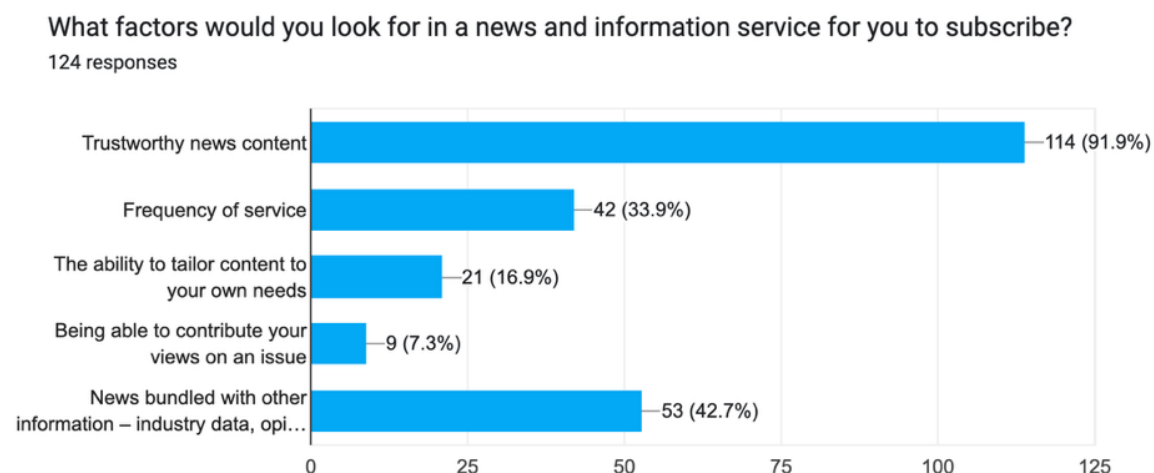
The second key thrust of this research is to find out what mix of news, data and analysis the food and fibre sector would find valuable. Right now, there are a wide variety of companies producing news for the food and fibre

sector – most of it free. This model of delivery drives editorial policy that favours broad, full-sector coverage, with little bespoke offerings tailored to an individual's needs.

Alongside the news, there are also several subscription data providers that target those looking for up-to-date information and analysis on specific parts of farming, such as saleyard reports and international trade statistics.

Survey respondents were asked how important high-quality news and information was to their farming businesses. More than half (54.8%) indicated it was highly important, with another 33.9% saying it was important. A little over 10% did not view it as very important.

They were then asked what features would entice them to subscribe to a news and information channel. As shown in the literature review, many news subscribers value things like the ability to personalise the news they receive, the presence of discussion forums, or other information or offers being bundled up as part of a package.



*Figure 5. What does an ideal news subscription contain?*

The question allowed people to pick multiple boxes, indicating the attributes they valued (Figure 5). Trustworthy news content was the most highly valued, with 91.9% choosing it. Bundled offerings that included data, opinion or commercial discounts was the second most-picked factor, with 42.7%. Interestingly, very few people thought discussion forums, or feedback channels were as important as the other options available. Social media was not as popular as a forum for discussing farming issues as predicted, with only 30.8% of people saying they used it for that purpose.

When asked whether they already paid for a subscription to a news provider, 48% said they did, while the same number said they subscribed to a farming news provider. Respondents were also asked whether they would consider subscribing to a farming news package in future and only 24.2% said they would not, with the balance either already subscribing or indicating they would consider it.

The final section of the survey gave respondents a chance to add comments relating to the topics covered in previous questions. Thirty-two people took the opportunity to do this, and some of them made interesting points that are worth recording.

On the issue of trust, many held farming media in higher regard than the overall news media.

“I trust the rural news media but not the general new media.”

“Ag journalism tends to be more objective than the wider media sector.”

“News media and farming media sit in different buckets for me, in terms of how much you trust it.”

“I find rural news providers [are] much more reliable than mainstream media. I wouldn't trust mainstream media at all, but have a reasonably strong level of trust with rural media.”

Others addressed the type of news content they would like to receive.

“It would be great if reports included practical insights and decision-making tips alongside the usual industry updates. This would make it easier for the farmers, growers, and other rural professionals to turn information into actions and feel more confident running a business.”

In summary, the survey achieved its goal of getting a sense-check of how the news media, and farming media specifically, was viewed by its audience. Some insights were also achieved into what type of content the food and fibre sector valued, and whether or not they saw it as a useful decision-making tool.

## 9. Building a better news service

The second part of this research project sought to understand the opportunities and challenges journalists face when evolving media businesses into modern, digital services. To do this, two leading publishers were interviewed in a free-form setting. They were asked to outline their experiences in setting up bespoke, subscription news platforms and highlight the wins and losses they experienced. Similarly, they explained the strategies they employed in terms of editorial policy and revenue generation.

A theme analysis of these two interviews shows many similarities in the way the two publishers went about the challenge and reveals some excellent insights into how farming media could follow their lead.

The first publisher manages a business housing three separate subscription news services that deliver news and analysis to members of three specific sectors. Those sectors only get passing coverage from the mainstream media, so for people wanting comprehensive news content of their sector, subscribing is the only viable option. The content is housed behind a paywall on the company's website, and subscribers can view and discuss the stories with other subscribers in a private, safe space. Content is also delivered via an electronic direct mail every day.

The second publisher has had a long and varied career in journalism, starting in mainstream news before founding three different bespoke news offerings, each with a different strategy for editorial policy and content delivery. They have experience in paywalled news, multimedia and news services utilising more recent platforms like Substack.

Both publishers highlighted key themes that are central to successful subscription news platforms which are described below.

### 9.1 A market driven evolution

The declining revenues of print-based media has been a challenge for publishers for much of this century, as digital channels are adopted by more readers and advertisers. This emerged as the key driver for both publishers interviewed. Analysis revealed a pivot to digital, and specifically to a user-generated revenue model rather than an advertiser-generated one, was the best hope of sustaining the news services for both.

“With an advertising-led publishing model you are susceptible to the the ups and downs of that very discretionary spend of corporate and business advertising. And it's hard as a publisher, because you've got to



scale up and down the size of your publication around how much advertising you have. You see that today still, in newsprint media. Online became more and more prevalent and I looked and thought, heck, this is where we've got to be, because we can get everything out so much faster, certainly in the business media space."

The second publisher also saw the challenge of advertiser-funded media, even for online platforms.

"But even we were seeing by 2010-11 that Facebook and Google were destroying the value in advertising online. So the price went from \$90 per 1000 page impressions to around nine or 10 when I left. Now you'd be lucky to get 90 cents. So every time that number drops, you have to increase your page impressions by a significant amount just to stand still. And so it takes you down the track of wanting to juice things – fancy headlines, outrageous content, forced debates."

While the clickbait strategy has been adopted by many mainstream news organisations, it is not one that fits all sectors, especially those that cater to business groups seeking content with a high trust value. The value proposition for both publishers was based around high-quality news content, delivered regularly and exclusively to the audience that needed it.

## 9.2 Editorial policy

The value proposition that each publisher presented to their audiences was one based on accuracy, timeliness, frictionless access, and in-depth analysis. They highlighted the need for subscription news to offer something that couldn't be found for free elsewhere. It was not one factor that drove this proposition but rather a handful of benefits, with each probably appealing to some audience members more than others.

"Our key principles are exclusivity, in-depth and speed. Ideally, you want to be getting things before they've even been announced. We want our writers to be talking about the developments in the sector before they've been announced. When you're starting out, you are trying to win subscribers. Your target market is often reading the news somewhere else, whether it's mainstream, or there'll be some other provider, or they'll be hoovering up, through a news aggregator, their own version of what's happening in their sector. So you've got to be providing exclusive, rich content. And then, of course, as you get going they expect you to do everything else, all the big announcements. They want you to do that. And we obviously measure our traffic on all of our articles. So we know where we need to be. A journalist is limited

how much they can actually write. So where are you allocating your resource?"

Another factor to consider is the difference in the way readers digest print media as opposed to digital, and especially emailed subscription, content. The second publisher said this was an important revelation.

"One of the things I find is that emails are consumed differently to when people read a newspaper. It's more of a lean forward experience than a lean back experience. So when you lean forward, you have, like, I'm hunting for particular information. I don't have a lot of time. I just want to get the juicy details and move on, because I've got 73 other emails that I haven't read yet. Whereas on the weekends, you sit down with a paper on a cup of coffee, and you lean back and you read. Finally, I've got some time to myself. I can read this thing properly, finish my cup of coffee."

It is this demonstration of value that makes a news subscription successful. It moves from being a nice-to-have to now being a vital piece of the information puzzle for a business owner. This was emphasised by both publishers as being the heart of the strategy. Having an appealing delivery channel or attractive bundle of content is worth nothing if the core news content is not differentiated and exclusive.

### 9.3 Building a community

Many successful paid news services include an active and lively discussion forum, where news content acts as a conversation starter for the readers to then continue. Social media has made people feel as if the ability to express their views on a topic is their right. But the flipside of this is that social media algorithms reward engagement of any sort, and it is conflict that often drives interest in the initial content. Now, subject experts and industry leaders tend to disengage from social media discussions because they devolve into arguments, forums or misinformation and ad hominem attacks. The solution is to provide a safe environment where readers feel they can have meaningful conversations about the issues that matter to them without running the risk of having trolls take over.

"People comment a lot on our site. Our readers comment and people love that. And you know, the industry knows with us that those commenting, they're very discerning. There's nuance and well thought out comment pieces."

## 9.4 Adding value to traditional news content

Simply delivering written news content as it was done traditionally is not enough for modern readers, according to the two publishers interviewed. Both add value by including datasets, multimedia content, and other occasional features.

Producing news for a specific sector of the economy allows news providers to look for collections of information related to that field that would add value for their subscribers. The first publisher, for instance, has built up a library of information that subscribers can search and utilise, providing a valuable resource.

Publishing predominantly on the Substack platform has allowed the other to integrate multimedia tools as they are released to platform users. They regularly produce video interviews and podcast content to supplement the regular written news the service is known for.

“Most people still get their information in text, you know, but after about two years, would have been 2022, you could start putting podcasts into the email newsletter. There's a podcast listener thing, so you push the button, and in your email browser or your client – Outlook or whatever – you hit the button and suddenly this plays audio. And I held that back for paying subscribers and it was incredibly successful for some people. It helped increase that connection and to justify paying money.”

These value-add features are seen as a vital part of the subscriber experience and one of the reasons to invest.

## 9.5 Analysing the audience

Digital delivery platforms allow publishers to scrutinise how audiences are interacting with the content. They can see which stories perform the best, which method of presenting it resonates, and what time of day readers are connecting with them.

This allows the content to be tailored more precisely to the needs of the audience, ensuring maximum engagement. Both publishers interviewed used digital analytics to get the best out of their journalistic work. However, strong editorial content was still the main driver of success.

“We do look at things like, you know, the time of day that we send the newsletter out, time of day we publish. But I kind of always fall back to, if it's strong content, it'll get opened. And it doesn't matter when you

send it people will open it and read it and stay in it and stay on the site."

## 9.6 Discussion: Where the writer and the audience meet

If we now assess the two parts of research – audience values and newsmaking practices – we see some themes that resonate across the divide.

In a society that is experiencing increasing amounts of misinformation, clickbait and partisan news content, discerning audiences are seeking out news content they can trust. This is even more pronounced for those who need accurate and trustworthy news content to make informed decisions in their jobs. While casual readers of news can be drawn to titillating or extravagant stories, that type of content is a distraction for those in business.

A majority of those surveyed on what they value in news media highlighted the importance it played in their decision-making. Access to high-quality news content was not a nice-to-have, but a critical source of knowledge. The two publishers interviewed have siezed on this value set and aligned their content so it meets this need. They are focused on adding value to the communities they serve by establishing themselves as a vital tool in the toolkit that community uses to build success.

The speedy evolution of digital technology has changed the way people consume news media. While many still value traditional print media, more and more people look to the speed and convenience of the online environment. Websites, email newsletters and podcasts allow on-demand consumption that can be tailored to user needs. The ability to customise how a channel functions – what time it delivers and on what device, for instance – is becoming a feature many readers expect from the news media. Publishers are meeting this need and it works in their favour too. Customised news delivery gives publishers granular data on individual readers, which they can then use to improve and advance future content.

A key question of this project was to determine whether the New Zealand food and fibre sector was willing to pay for news content. Do they see news and data as a decision-making tool that they need to succeed as businesspeople? The research shows that they do, and many are willing to subscribe if the value proposition is favourable. Interviews with publishers working in the subscription news space back up this finding, as while the concept is still reaching maturity in a general news sense, those serving smaller sectors of the business world are finding success as highly-valued news and information providers.

## 10. Recommendations

For agricultural media to thrive, it needs more than just the buy-in of the audience it serves. The changing face of our digital world and the corresponding evolution of civic society mean that all of us have a part to play in ensuring our fourth estate not only survives and flourishes, but helps society to do the same.

### 10.1 For journalists and publishers:

Maintaining trust is the key to a sustainable fourth estate. Accuracy, transparency and adherence to journalistic ethics will help retain social licence.

If the food and fibre sector is to invest in news and information, it needs to see its value. Content must be tailored to meet this need.

Online channels must be reliable and frictionless. Farmers and growers access digital content across a variety of devices, so ensure news content will work for them where they want to find it.

Investigate bundling news and data with other incentives, perhaps linking with agribusinesses to offer discounts or promotions. However, impartiality and editorial independence must be retained.

### 10.2 For farmers, growers and agribusiness professionals:

If you regularly use news and information in your day-to-day business decision-making, treat it as you would any other farming advice. Put a value on it.

Be careful with the information you find. Check the source, and if it's not trustworthy don't share it. Often misinformation spreads because well-meaning people fail to do due diligence.

### 10.3 For industry leaders:

Marketing budgets are better spent in ways that benefit other New Zealand agribusinesses. Do a stocktake of how much of that spend is heading offshore to social media companies.

### 10.4 For government:

Increase investment in rural connectivity.

Where possible, legislate to put New Zealand content creators on a level footing with global companies, in terms of taxation and intellectual property.

## 11. Limitations

While this research has shown there is real potential to deliver a meaningful subscription news and information package to the food and fibre sector, more research is required to sharpen its focus. This requires more market research into audience preferences, perhaps through a more comprehensive survey of a series of focus groups.

Likewise, while the two publishers interviewed have experience across a range of news organisations, there is scope for more investigation into the strategies and models that are successful in New Zealand.

There are a number of news media organisations in other countries that are already running successful subscription-based farming news businesses. It would be illuminating to spend some time with some of them and work up a series of case studies that could be referenced and built upon in a New Zealand farming context.

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## 13. Appendices

### 13.1 Reader survey

The purpose of this survey is to discover how people working in the food and fibre sector engage with farming news and whether there's a new way of packaging and delivering news and information that would help people make business decisions with more confidence.

The survey responses contribute to a Kellogg Rural Leadership project. All results will be anonymous. Some responses from the survey may be quoted in the final report which will be published but quotes would be broadly attributed to either 'a commercial sheep farmer' or 'a stud sheep breeder'.

It is estimated that this survey will take 10-15 minutes to complete.

I really appreciate your time and insights.

How old are you?

Under 30

31-50

Over 50

What region do you live in?

Northland

Auckland

Waikato-Bay of Plenty

Hawke's Bay

Taranaki

Manawatū-Whanganui

Wellington

Nelson-Marlborough

Canterbury

West Coast

Otago

Southland

Which sector/s are you involved in?

Dairy

Sheep and beef

Arable

Horticulture

Forestry

Viticulture

Other:

What best represents your current job?

Farm owner

Share/contract farmer

Farm manager

Farm worker

Rural professional

Farm product supplier

Farm services supplier

Other:

What is your primary source of farming news?

Newspaper

News website

Radio

Television

Podcast

Social media

How often do you seek out farming news?

Multiple times a day

Daily

Weekly

Every now and then

Do you seek out farming news from other sources besides the news media? (eg, farm consultant newsletters, breed societies).

Yes

No

What factors would you look for in a news and information service for you to subscribe?

Trustworthy news content

Frequency of service

The ability to tailor content to your own needs

Being able to contribute your views on an issue

News bundled with other information – industry data, opinion, commercial discounts etc

Do you use social media to discuss farming issues?

Yes

No

Our food and fibre sector is well-served by news and information providers – radio, newspapers, newsletters and podcasts (eg, The Country, Rural News, Farmers Weekly). List your top three sources below.

How important is access to farming news to your job?

Not that important

1

2

3

4

Very important

Do you pay a subscription to a farming news provider?

Yes

No

Do you pay a subscription to another news or data provider?

Yes

No

Would you consider paying a subscription to a farming news provider?

Yes

No

I already do

Ideally, how would you like to receive farming news and information?

Newspaper

Website

Email

Smartphone app

Social media

Generally, how trustworthy do you think the news media in New Zealand is?

Not trustworthy

1

2

3

4

Very trustworthy

How important is journalism in maintaining our social and political institutions?

Not important

1

2

3

4

Very important

If you'd like to add more context to any of your answers, you can write them in the box below.

## 13.2 Table of figures

**Figure 4. Proportion that paid for any online news (2014–2023) – 20-country average**

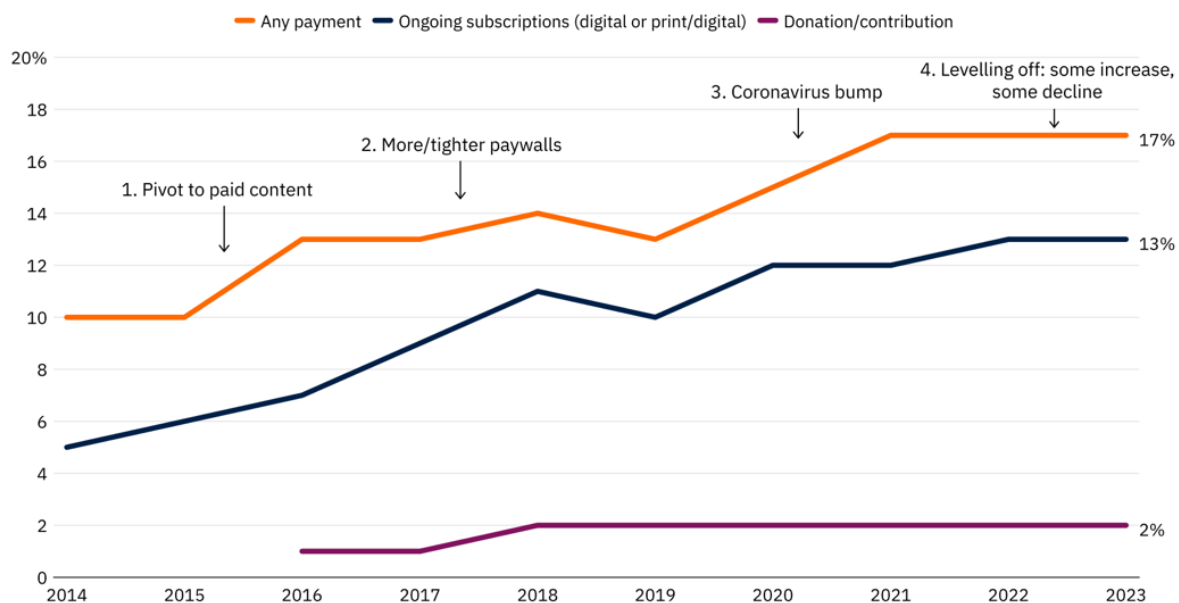


Figure 4. Paid subscriptions growing over time (Newman and Robertson 2023).

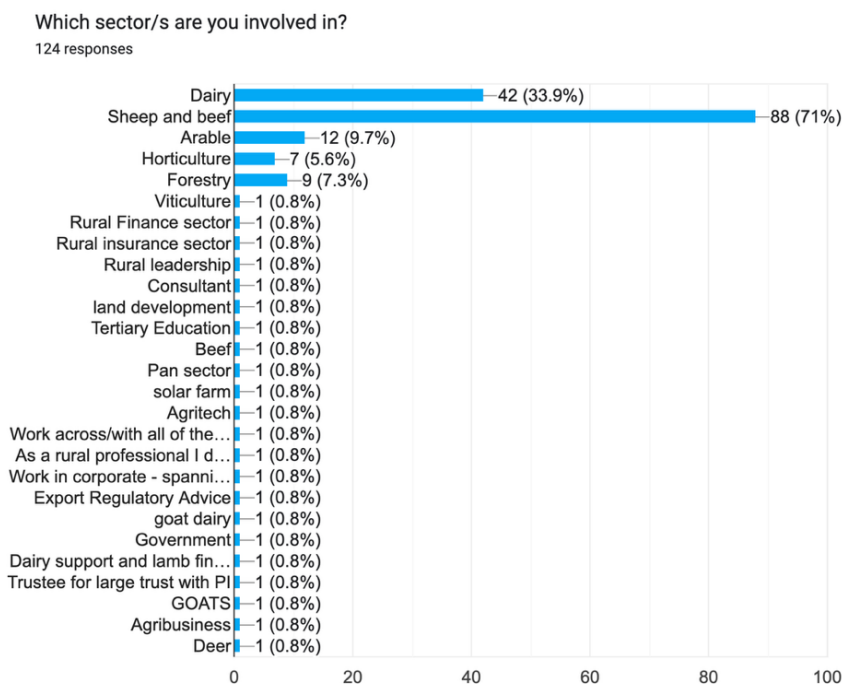


Figure 5. Occupations of survey respondents.

### How old are you?

124 responses

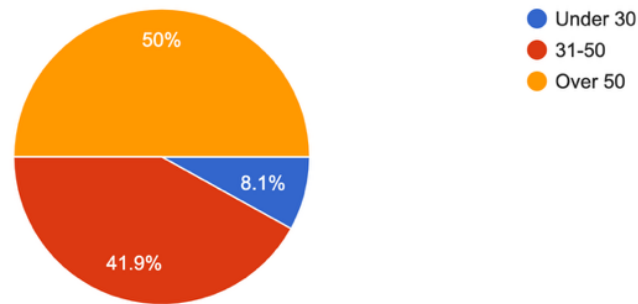


Figure 3. Age distribution of survey respondents.

### How important is journalism in maintaining our social and political institutions?

123 responses

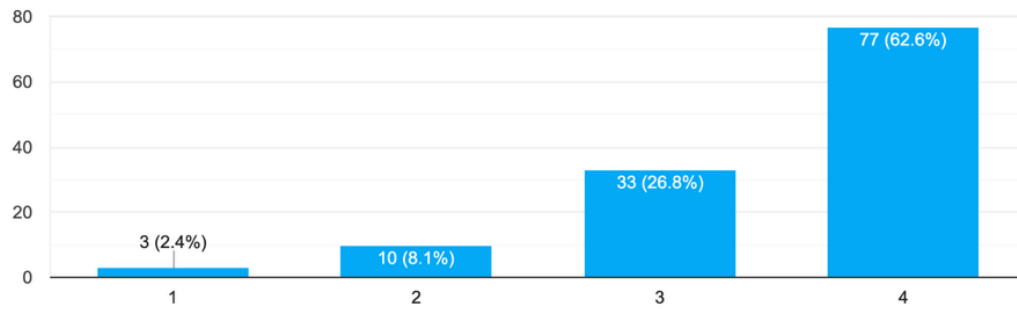


Figure 4. the importance of journalism to society.

### What factors would you look for in a news and information service for you to subscribe?

124 responses

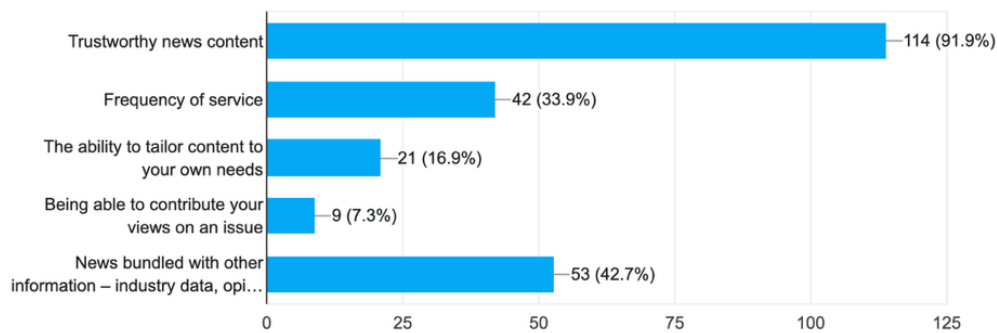


Figure 5. What does an ideal news subscription contain?