**Is Fear Making Us Better News Consumers?**

By Lata Nott

The majority of Americans consider fake news and misinformation to be serious threats to democracy — and that fear may actually be making us better and savvier news consumers.

Last week, the First Amendment Center of the Freedom Forum Institute released the results of the [2019 State of the First Amendment survey](https://www.freedomforuminstitute.org/2019/06/27/2019-state-of-the-first-amendment-survey-finds-broader-awareness-of-first-amendment-freedoms-but-29think-it-goes-too-far/). We've been conducting this survey since 1997, taking stock of what Americans know and how they feel about their expressive freedoms — and each year we brace ourselves for bad news.

So, it was a bit of a shock for us to look at the data and find that this year's results are, relatively speaking, actually pretty good.

Knowledge of the five First Amendment freedoms — speech, religion, press, assembly and petition — is at an all-time high. This year, 71 percent of Americans were able to name at least one of the five freedoms, up from 60 percent in 2018. More people could name specific freedoms than in years past.

Comparing 2019 to 2018, those naming free speech rose to 64 percent from 56 percent; those naming freedom of religion rose to 29 percent from 15 percent and respondents naming freedom of the press rose to 22 percent from 15 percent.

My colleague [Gene Policinski wrote a piece](https://www.freedomforuminstitute.org/2019/06/27/we-know-more-about-the-first-amendment-for-the-wrong-reasons/) cautioning against too much giddiness in the wake of these findings, because the rise in awareness is most likely due to the fact people are increasingly worried about losing these freedoms.

Fair point. But still, it's nice to see that our anxiety is making us slightly sharper.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the responses to the questions we asked about how Americans feel about the news and those who provide it. Seventy-seven percent of our survey respondents agreed that misinformation on the internet and the spread of fake news were serious threats to democracy. One might expect that fear to translate into a rising distrust in the press at large. But that wasn't the case. Instead, our data showed that more Americans think the news media reports the news accurately and without bias than they did in 2017, the last time we asked that question (48 percent vs. 43 percent).

Furthermore, a majority of Americans agree that it is important for our democracy that the news media act as a watchdog on government — 72 percent, up from an all-time low of 68 percent in 2017. These might not seem like drastic improvements, but they are significant ones. They indicate that the specter of fake news hasn't eroded all trust in all media — instead, it seems that Americans are putting greater trust in media outlets that do real reporting.

They're also becoming more media literate. Americans are taking more steps to verify and review the news they read online, by:

* + Talking with others (80 percent, up from 73 percent in 2016);
	+ Looking at other news stories (78 percent, up from 72 percent in 2016);
	+ Reading comments about the story (71 percent, up from 58 percent in 2016);
	+ Looking for a rating from a fact-checking website (46 percent, up from about 42 percent in 2016).

None of these tactics is foolproof, but the uptick in each of them suggests Americans are no longer taking everything they see on the internet at face value — and that’s a good thing for our democracy.