



What We Think We Know and What We Want to Know: Perspectives on Trust in News in a Changing World

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**TRUST IN NEWS
PROJECT**



Contents

About the Authors	4
Acknowledgements	4

1. Introduction	5
2. What We Think We Know	8
3. What We Want to Know	14
4. The Path Ahead for the Trust in News Project	20
References	21

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1. Introduction

Trust in news has eroded worldwide. According to the Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report 2020*, fewer than four in ten people (38%) across 40 markets say they typically trust most news (Newman et al. 2020). While trust has fallen by double digit margins in recent years in many places, including Brazil and the United Kingdom (Fletcher 2020), in other countries more stable overall trends conceal stark and growing partisan divides (see, for example, Jurkowitz et al. 2020).

Why is trust eroding, how does it play out across different contexts and different groups, what are the implications, and what might be done about it? These are the organising questions behind the Trust in News Project. This report is the first of many we will publish from the project over the next three years. Because trust is a relationship between trustors and trustees, we anticipate focusing primarily on audiences and the way they think about trust, but we begin the project by taking stock of how those who study journalism and those who practice it think about the subject. We want to be informed by their experiences and for our research to engage with how professional journalists and the news media approach trust so that it can be more useful in their work. Combining an extensive review of existing research on trust in news (including nearly 200 interdisciplinary publications) and original interviews on the subject (including 82 with journalists and other practitioners across several countries), we summarise some of what is known and unknown about trust, what is contributing to these trends, and how media organisations are seeking to address them in increasingly competitive digital environments.

Trust is not an abstract concern but part of the social foundations of journalism as a profession, news as an institution, and the media as a business. It is both important and dangerous, both for the public and for the news media – important for the public because being able to trust news helps people navigate and engage with the world, but dangerous because not everything is equally trustworthy; and important for the news media because the profession relies on it, but dangerous because it can be elusive and hard to regain when lost.

So if 'trust is the new currency for success', as the World Association of News Media has stated (Tjaardstra 2017), then how is it earned and what can this currency buy? For those who want to regain or retain it, it is not enough to do things that merely look good or feel good. Those things actually have to work or they risk making no difference, or worse, being counter-productive. Even when they do work, many of the choices involved in seeking to increase trust in accurate and reliable news may come with trade-offs. Our aim in the project is to gather actionable evidence to help journalists and news media make informed decisions about how best to address concerns around eroding trust.

1.1 Why trust in news matters

Some growing scepticism about news may well be a natural consequence of increasingly pluralistic media environments (Schudson 2019; Waisbord 2018). However, in a world where, despite their imperfections, many news media remain the most reliable independent sources for accessible, timely, and relevant information about public affairs, declining trust may be a significant barrier for citizens seeking to make informed political decisions and hold leaders accountable. Large percentages in many countries, especially the Global South, say they are concerned about being able to discern what is real from what is fake online (Newman et al. 2020), and while much of the public hold platform companies and domestic politicians responsible for contributing to these problems, some also identify journalists as the source of false or misleading information they are most concerned about (Newman et al. 2020).

Some of the most compelling reasons to care about trust in news are the ones we heard in interviews these past months with journalists and senior managers from a wide variety of newsrooms. These include practical commercial considerations since many media organisations' business models are more reliant than ever on direct revenue from subscribers and supporters, but many also stressed consequences for journalism itself. Trust impacts everything from sourcing – where it is 'sacrosanct' in the words of one senior reporter at a British newspaper – to reporters' safety (see Beaumont 2020) to the public impact of reporting on corruption and malfeasance.

If there is a dog barking but no one cares, what good is it?

Margaret Sullivan, media columnist, *Washington Post* (USA)

1.2 Our focus

We focus on media environments in four democracies – Brazil, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These countries encompass both the Global South and North, with a range of cultural heterogeneity and political practices that vary in their partisan and populist tendencies. For our purposes, one of the most important differences across these countries is in how audiences have integrated digital and social media practices into how they consume news. Whereas public social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter have rapidly become key conduits of information in democracies worldwide, many of those we interviewed pointed to the popularity of encrypted messaging services like WhatsApp, specifically in Brazil and India, which have combined with deficits in digital literacy to serve as a 'breeding ground' for misinformation and disinformation (Chakrabarti et al. 2018). As Irineu Machado, head of content delivery at UOL (Brazil), told us, audiences increasingly 'distrust organisations who traditionally' cover news and 'distrust information in general', and some rely not just on public social networking sites but also private groups and messaging applications.

The interviews we conducted included journalists from the most prominent brands in each of these four countries as well as additional voices of those working to address challenges in the information environment, both inside and outside of newsrooms.¹ Given the sensitivity of the subject, about a third asked that we withhold their identities; nonetheless, all contributed substantial insights that shaped our thinking. Where possible we include example quotations from our interviews with practitioners, but it is worth noting that sometimes experienced news professionals have divergent or even mutually incompatible views on trust and how it works. Sometimes those views are not yet backed up by research or even contradicted by it. Our aim is to faithfully represent the perspectives we heard, even where they diverged from one another or are only partially aligned with existing research.

This report is divided into two main sections. First, we outline important lessons from existing research and practitioners' observations on trust in news. Second, we identify outstanding questions that we expect will guide our project in the years ahead. We summarise key takeaways from both sections below.

1.3 Key takeaways

- There is no single 'trust in news' problem, but rather multiple challenges involving both the supply of news and demand for information. Different segments of the public, as

¹ We selected media organisations using the 2020 *Digital News Report* (Newman et al. 2020) rankings of the top three most-used brands online and offline and the top and bottom three brands in trust. For India, we relied on a Reuters Institute pilot report (Aneez et al. 2019). Additional outlets were also included at the local/regional level as well as others generated using snowball sampling methods.

well as journalists and researchers, hold different beliefs about how journalism works and sometimes conflicting views about what they expect from it. Thus, those who want to address it need to be specific in their strategic aims and, ideally, base their work on supporting evidence, as initiatives that work with one part of the public may not work with others.

- Many scholars and practitioners have diagnosed problems in the production of news that may contribute to distrust. The effects of changing distribution practices, especially the important role played by platforms, are less well understood but are likely to be important. Many of those interviewed fear platforms undermine the public's trust in news, even as they also help people find news. Improving journalistic standards and practices may not improve trust if such efforts are not visible to users who come across news only fleetingly on social media.
- Internal and external initiatives focused around transparency, engagement, and media literacy have shown promise, but empirical evidence about what works, with whom, and under what circumstances, remains murky. Research has often been too disconnected from practice and too focused on only a handful of countries. There is a considerable risk here of doing things that look good and/or feel good, or imitating what others are doing on the basis of little or no evidence, which could lead to wasted efforts at best and counter-productive results at worst.
- Efforts to improve trust, as important as they may be, involve trade-offs in divided and polarised societies and can also be at odds with other important priorities, such as holding power to account. Combating entrenched preconceptions about how news works, whether strategically perpetuated by political leaders or passed down over generations in particular communities, involves making choices that are likely to alienate some audiences over others.

2. What We Think We Know

In this section, we summarise four basic insights identified in previous academic research on trust in news as well as by practitioners we interviewed. These include the importance of clarifying the terms of debate, gaps in the public's understanding about how news is made, and the need to reckon with past failures. Above all else, many interviewees also echoed research findings that underscore the impact of partisanship and politics on how people feel about news.

2.1 Defining 'trust in news' requires specifying 'trust', 'whose trust', and 'what news'

WHAT IS TRUST?

Research on trust has focused on its psychological, cultural, and relational components, and many of the journalists we interviewed saw the concept as similarly multi-faceted. Many agreed that trust is rooted in beliefs about the integrity, professionalism, and motivations of those working in the news media, but trust can also hinge on how well news reporting corresponds to pre-existing notions about the true state of the world. 'When they like the fact [being reported], they like us; when they don't like the fact, they don't like us,' said Felipe Harmata, news supervisor for Band News Curitiba (Brazil), speaking about audience reactions to news coverage. These dynamics make trust a particularly challenging phenomenon to measure and change.

While some scholarship has distinguished trust from the more narrow concept of 'credibility', or the believability of reported information (Meyer 1988; Strömbäck et al. 2020; Van Dalen 2019), others have underscored the importance of *affective* dimensions of trust (Coleman et al. 2012) – that is, how people feel about news, not just how they evaluate its accuracy and reliability.

Do people feel like you're on their side? Do they feel like you're good people, do they feel like you have good intentions, that you are honest?

Joy Mayer, Director, Trusting News (USA)

WHOSE TRUST? AND WHAT NEWS?

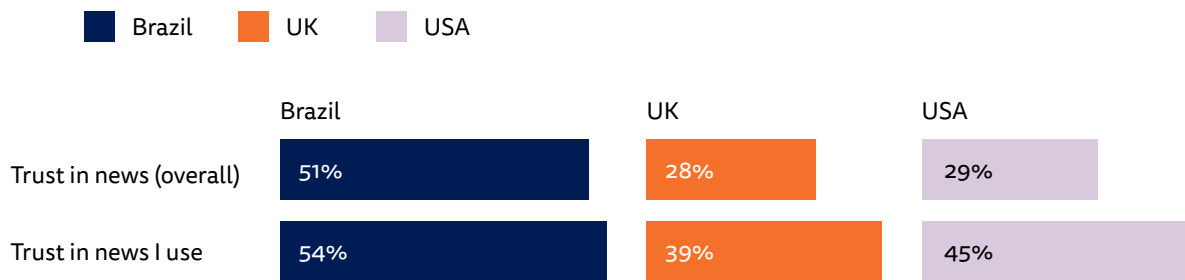
Just as individual articles, particular journalists, or entire modes of media (e.g. print or social media) may generate contradictory assessments (Strömbäck et al. 2020), audiences may also hold differing expectations about what trustworthy journalism looks like. Studies have shown, for example, that some consumers find watchdog journalism off-putting or harmful to their communities (Meyer 1988; Poindexter et al. 2006) even as journalists often see it as indispensable. Some demand news that is inclusive of diverse voices (Schmidt et al. 2019) while others prefer news that supports a particular ideological worldview (Schulz et al. 2020).

'Trust is a relationship', said Sally Lehrman from The Trust Project (USA). 'It's more than just that I believe what you're talking about but that we share values.' Lehrman's organisation has sought to map out shared indicators around 'fundamentals of journalism with integrity' and integrate them into the infrastructures of digital algorithms on a global scale. Doing so has meant finding common ground across journalistic cultures and media systems, balancing flexibility while trying to remain true to core principles.

Measuring trust in news with surveys is also highly sensitive to how questions are asked. While it's possible to form views about news one never uses (Barthel 2014), asking about news in the abstract tends to generate lower ratings than measuring trust in news that people regularly access

(Daniller et al. 2017). Although we presently lack representative data for India, this dynamic has been apparent across the three remaining countries that are the focus of this project (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Trust in news overall versus trust in news respondents say they consume



Source: *Digital News Report 2020*; **Q6_2016_1**. I think you can trust most news most of the time. **Q6_2016_6**. I think I can trust most of the news I consume most of the time. Base: Total sample in each country: Brazil = 2058, UK = 2011, US = 2055. Note: India was not included in the main survey.

FAMILIAR BRANDS ARE OFTEN MOST TRUSTED BUT ALSO LIGHTNING RODS

'Trust and reputation are all tied up together', said Louise Hastings, managing editor at Sky News (UK). Indeed, studies have shown that established brands tend to be most trusted, although many factors besides trust, including habit and routine, also predict why people use specific news sources (Tsfati and Cappella 2003, 2005; Williams 2012).

'There is this continuing power' to being recognisable, noted Ben Smith, media columnist for the *New York Times* (USA) and founding editor-in-chief of BuzzFeed News. 'People continue to trust famous old brands, honestly, more than I'd expected.'

But reputations are subjective. Many also pointed out that well-known brands can be just as likely to generate criticism in politically divided societies.

Every time there is polarisation, Globo is in the middle of it. Why? Because it is, of course, a by-product of our large reach, popularity, and work.

Cristina Piasentini, Newsroom Director, Globo-SP (Brazil)

2.2 Public understanding of newsgathering and verification practices is persistently low

Our interviews and review of relevant scholarship highlight the importance of knowledge gaps around how journalism works. Blurring boundaries between editorial and sponsored content, the lack of clear labelling online, and marginal knowledge of journalistic practices (Media Insight Project 2018) hinder efforts to build trust in accurate and reliable information sources.

'The average person does not have a great grounding in how we do our work on the most basic level,' acknowledged Craig Silverman, media editor at BuzzFeed News (USA). Although we do not yet know how such gaps in understanding may impact trust, so long as few know the mechanisms professional journalists employ to report and confirm information, audiences cannot be expected to differentiate between brands using informed assessments about newsgathering practices, which so often vary in quality.

LIMITS OF MEDIA LITERACY AND FACT-CHECKING INITIATIVES

Research on the effectiveness of interventions designed to help people navigate high-choice

media environments shows promise but has typically been limited in scope (but see Guess et al. 2020; Hameleers 2020; Walter et al. 2020). Some we interviewed expressed concern that education in particular remains a barrier. Linda Bezerra, chief editor from *Correio* (Brazil), noted, 'Even if you have robots employed to disseminate disinformation, some people believe it because they don't have formal education, they don't know how to distinguish between sources.'

However, such problems are not limited to those without formal education. As the *Wall Street Journal's* South Asia columnist Sadanand Dhume observed, 'There are too many people who are not able to distinguish between an article I have written and an article I have shared [on Twitter]'

Retired ambassadors, doctors, even scientists forward misinformation that's wild and crazy. People who are trying to fight this are trying to bail out the ocean with a thimble.

Sadanand Dhume, South Asia columnist, *Wall Street Journal* (USA/India)

UNEVEN STANDARDS AND PRACTICES

Others pointed out that blaming media literacy can be a cop-out for media organisations whose own failings have contributed to confusion. Many spoke about sensationalism, 'clickbait', and other corrosive practices, such as the documented and widely condemned practice in some Indian news publications of selling editorial space to politicians, known as 'paid news' (Press Council of India 2010).

While platforms have arguably contributed to these problems by incentivising content that generates clicks, others pre-date them. One Indian editor at a national paper told us that newsroom oversight even at their own organisations can be especially challenging. 'Editors do not have the bandwidth to fact-check local stories', which can be 'so decentralised that there is a considerable difference in stories even within the same state'.

Of course, disreputable practices are by no means limited to the Global South.

There's enough examples of terrible quality reporting, straightforward political bias, and poor output in mainstream outlets that, unsurprisingly, has eroded trust in many respects.

Jim Waterson, Media Editor, *Guardian* (UK)

DEFENDING REPUTABLE JOURNALISM

Some argue that it is up to journalists to advocate for their profession (see Pingree et al. 2018). One Brazilian television journalist suggested that 'more than doing good journalism, we also need to explain to people, "Look, trust me, my news is good. Don't trust everything you read online"'

In one noteworthy example over the past year, the *Yorkshire Evening Post* (UK) took to their own pages to defend the trustworthiness of their reporting following a barrage of accusations on social media that a story they published about the National Health Service was 'fake news'.

Local journalism does matter and we as an industry need to bang that drum and really make our voices heard going forward.

Laura Collins, Editor, *Yorkshire Evening Post* (UK)

2.3 Chronic deficiencies in coverage have strained bonds with some audiences

Several interviewees also highlighted what they saw as news organisations' past failings in reflecting the voices and perspectives of the communities they seek to serve, which complicates

calls for defending the profession. For Richard Prince, veteran journalist and author of the column 'Journal-isms' (USA), diversity is central to this task of 'ensuring accuracy and the representation of life as the reader sees it'.

When journalists are far removed from their audiences, delivering journalism that meets such expectations can be especially challenging.

If you ask a poor man on the street – someone who is historically deprived – whether there is media news content which is of relevance to their life and the way they are on any of the social or political issues, the answer would probably be no. Why should they trust the media?

Vinod Jose, Executive Editor, *The Caravan* (India)

RETHINKING STRATEGIES FOR LISTENING

Several journalists interviewed emphasised engagement strategies their own news organisations have adopted to build deeper relationships with targeted groups. Such efforts have also become a growing focus of journalism research (see Zahay et al. 2020).

In the US, for example, Kelsey Davis Betz, a reporter with the non-profit news site Mississippi Today, described convening 'public newsrooms' (see Nelson 2018) to better cover 'severely underserved' Mississippi Delta communities. Hugo Balta, news director at Chicago's public television station WTTW News, told us about anchoring coverage of COVID-19 from different neighbourhoods across the city to focus on the pandemic's disparate impacts on diverse communities, including Latino and Black residents of the city. In Brazil, Arlen Medina Néri, director of journalism at *Jornal O Povo*, detailed a Readers' Council that meets on a monthly basis to review and evaluate the quality of their coverage.

RECKONING WITH PAST FAILURES

Some of those interviewed, but almost exclusively those in the US and UK, also talked about the importance of newsrooms taking public-facing steps to address aspects of their coverage that have stigmatised, damaged, or altogether ignored key segments of the public. Some described open letters or source audits – especially around race and gender. Others sought to confront histories of disparities in their own ranks (see Nielsen et al. 2020).

Pippa Crerar, political editor of the *Daily Mirror*, pointed to a certain homogeneity across journalists in the UK – typically educated, middle-class, white, male, etc. – and 'if you're not any of those things ... then you don't feel that the media is representing you'.

GRAPPLING WITH COMPETING VIEWS ABOUT DIVERSITY

Strategies around diversifying coverage and staffing are not without risk, since focusing on some communities can alienate others. While Kelsey Davis Betz, for example, spoke about Mississippi Today's efforts to be 'a lot more open about what we care about' and more intentionally cover people 'who have historically been really violently harmed by the news', Kayleigh Skinner, the organisation's managing editor, told us about how such efforts have also generated angry responses from conservatives accusing them of 'race-baiting'. Other interviewees noted similar trade-offs; as Jess Austin, communities editor at *Metro* (UK), put it, 'Trust can be built by representation, but it can also be torn apart'.

The fact that a vast majority of media outlets have a more progressive view while part of society doesn't align with that – it is oversaturated, [and it] leads to distrust.

Guilherme Cunha Pereira, CEO of GRPCOM Group (Brazil)

2.4 Assessments of trust and distrust are deeply intertwined with politics

Ultimately, many attitudes about news may have little to do with newsrooms. As trust in other civic institutions has fallen, trust in news has typically followed (Hanitzsch et al. 2018). ‘People in democratic societies have moved from having maybe unreasonable levels of trust or faith in their institutions to now going in the other direction,’ said BuzzFeed’s Craig Silverman. ‘We know that they fail, we know they are flawed, we know they have done harm, and people are struggling with what do we do about this.’

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTISANSHIP

Studies have pointed to partisanship as one of the strongest predictors of distrust in news (Ladd 2012; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Suiter and Fletcher 2020; Taber and Lodge 2006), but research on the subject has focused mainly on a select few countries. Still, many journalists interviewed in Brazil and India also raised partisanship as an important driver of distrust in their own countries.

Indian politics was always extreme to begin with – always polarised, a country of bitter contestations and rivalries.

Swagato Ganguly, Editorial Page Editor, *Times of India*

THE INFLUENCE OF ELITE RHETORIC

Like many political attitudes, cues about the press are often taken from political leaders – some of whom have orchestrated ‘a very deliberate and concerted effort to turn supporters against the press to sow doubt and confusion’, as the *New York Times*’ Brazil bureau chief Ernesto Londoño put it (see also Mourão et al. 2018; Van Duyn and Collier 2019).

Outlets in polarised environments may also take sides to please partisans. *The Caravan*’s Jose, for example, said that many of the ‘bigger players’ in India, in his view, have found that it makes ‘business sense’ to align themselves ‘as a sort of ministry of propaganda for the ruling ideology’ (see also McLaughlin 2018).

A ROLE FOR THE FOREIGN PRESS

Journalists we interviewed who worked as foreign correspondents often said they felt somewhat insulated from widespread perceptions that reporters were part of the same partisan ‘backroom political wheeling and dealing’ as politicians, as the *New York Times*’ Londoño told us, discussing the work of the foreign press in Brazil. Although some reporting, for example on the environment, has prompted criticism that ‘we’re a tool of a global conspiracy’, Londoño felt such cases were more the exception than the rule.

Jamie Angus, director of the BBC World Service Group (UK), noted that in places where speaking to local journalists could cause people to ‘fear for the consequences for their own wellbeing and security’, foreign outlets like the BBC, in his view, had a vital role to play – even though they might be seen by some as a ‘leftover from an imperial project’.

In some of those disputed markets where there’s a real deficit of trusted and fair information, audiences still have a keen appreciation that the BBC has no reason to present a partial picture one way or the other.

Jamie Angus, Director, BBC World Service Group (UK)

EXPANDING MEDIA CHOICES

Many interviewees expressed concern about the tendency of the digital media environment to

reinforce partisan beliefs, especially in countries divided by political and social issues and where misinformation flows freely on messaging apps (de Freitas Melo et al. 2019).

While some, such as Sérgio Dávila, editor-in-chief for *Folha de S. Paulo* (Brazil), believe events like the COVID-19 pandemic will help convince audiences that 'there is no Facebook group to solve your problems; you need to go to professional journalism sources to check the information', most were more pessimistic.

[The internet] has largely facilitated polarisation, so news becomes a weapon of war.

Luis Nassif, Editor, *Jornal GGN* (Brazil)

As David Lauter, senior Washington correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* (USA), said, 'The best we can do is develop and hold to standards we feel we want to uphold and hope that it prospers in the market. It either does or does not.'

3. What We Want to Know

In this section, we outline four research questions our work has generated so far. These include a focus on the role played by platform companies in how trust in news works online, questions around the effectiveness of both audience engagement initiatives and efforts to be more transparent, and uncertainty related to the impact of broader cultural narratives around news.

3.1 To what extent are platforms damaging to news organisations' brand identities?

The experience of consuming news online is increasingly mediated by platforms that some suggest have steadily 'eroded the integrity of content by undermining its provenance', in the words of News Corp's chief executive, Robert Thomson (News Corp 2017). Organisations that seek to improve trust by emphasising ethical standards and independence must find ways of communicating these core principles to distracted users as they scroll and click through feeds filled with what Thomson has called 'the fake, the faux, and the fallacious'.

HELD 'CAPTIVE' TO PLATFORMS

Many of those we interviewed were disturbed by these changes. The Trust Project's Sally Lehrman, describing her own conversations with news executives, said many felt like they were held 'captive to social media and search engines and just the digital environment in general'. Rafael Cores, vice president of digital content at Impremedia, which owns multiple Hispanic media outlets in the US, spoke with frustration about efforts to connect with audiences on Facebook and Twitter only to see platforms 'change the rules of the game completely randomly, without letting you know'.

When I see stuff all over Facebook from random sites, I'd be very curious how we get people to focus more on actual news organisations.

Amanda Gilbert, television reporter, Fox 23, Tulsa, Oklahoma (USA)

While some spoke approvingly about how changes in algorithms have boosted publishers who post original content, without clear labels 'the average audience would have no clue', said Yara Silva, group head of social media for Reach Plc's national publications in the UK (including the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Express*, and the *Daily Star*). In fact, studies have shown that many users do not recall the source of stories they click on (Kalogeropoulos and Newman 2017).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUILDING TRUST?

Some we interviewed were more optimistic about ways platforms might be harnessed to deepen relationships with audiences, or felt that the often-variable quality of information they surface might, in fact, be an opportunity for publishers to stand out. After all, as Thiago Contreira, content director for Record TV/R7 (Brazil), observed, the chaotic environment online may only underscore the need for reputable sources who can serve as 'the watchman of quality information'.

In terms of deepening audience relations, Caroline Bauman, community engagement strategist for the non-profit news organisation Chalkbeat (USA), said social media pages have been 'a great place for us to grow our audience and grow trust' but only because Chalkbeat itself has worked 'super, super hard' at cultivating a 'really engaged and loyal' following where readers feel involved in coverage. Bauman noted that doing so has required being 'really thoughtful moderators for that to be true, for it not to just become a place of misinformation and unchecked hate'.

OUTSIDE INFLUENCERS

Establishing trust online also requires grappling with forces whose influence platforms may have magnified (see Turcotte et al. 2015), namely non-journalists, including celebrities and politicians, and those seeking to deliberately spread lies.

People do not follow media organisations anymore; they follow other people. Then, some random guy who sees the world from his bedroom window and writes about everything receives the same importance as an organisation such as Estadão, which has 400 journalists working all the time.

David Friedlander, Editor-in-Chief, *O Estado de S. Paulo* (Brazil)

3.2 Which audience engagement strategies build trust? Which may undermine it?

A small but growing number of newsrooms have sought to collaborate with researchers to test various engagement initiatives, but as Joy Mayer, who leads Trusting News, pointed out, ‘actually testing what works is incredibly tricky’. The few peer-reviewed empirical studies conducted in this area have suggested that some efforts foster trust only under specific conditions (Karlsson 2020) or depending on the type of medium (Nelson and Kim 2020).

INTUITION-BASED APPROACHES

Most often, newsrooms make decisions guided by intuition about what works. Many interviewees said they believed journalists might earn audience trust by investing in the product itself: quality journalism ‘you can’t get anywhere else’, as Seth Kaplan, a local US television producer, put it:

If we can do that and we put that on Facebook and it gets all this traction, people are going to realise, ‘That’s good stuff. Maybe I’ll check out one of their newscasts.’

Seth Kaplan, Executive Producer, Fox 9, Minneapolis, Minnesota (USA)

But in environments where distrust runs deep, it is not clear whether costly enterprise reporting or civically oriented journalism will be rewarded. Fábio Gusmão, editor of special projects for *Extra* and *O Globo* (Brazil), underscored these uncertainties, ‘We are even delivering fact-checking for society and, even so, people say, “No, that’s all fake news.”’

DIRECT ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS AND SCALABILITY

In 2019, the Society of Professional Journalists conducted ‘The Casper Project’, a series of panels and workshops over six months in Casper, Wyoming, a place with some of the lowest levels of trust in news in the US (see Hicks 2019). National and local journalists connected with community members and discussed newsgathering and reporting practices. But in the end, no significant changes were found in participants’ news habits or views about the press.

I thought we might persuade a couple, two, or three people, but I knew that it would not be the majority of people. It’s very hard to change people’s minds about things, and it’s also hard to break people’s habits.

Rod Hicks, Journalist on Call, Society of Professional Journalists (USA)

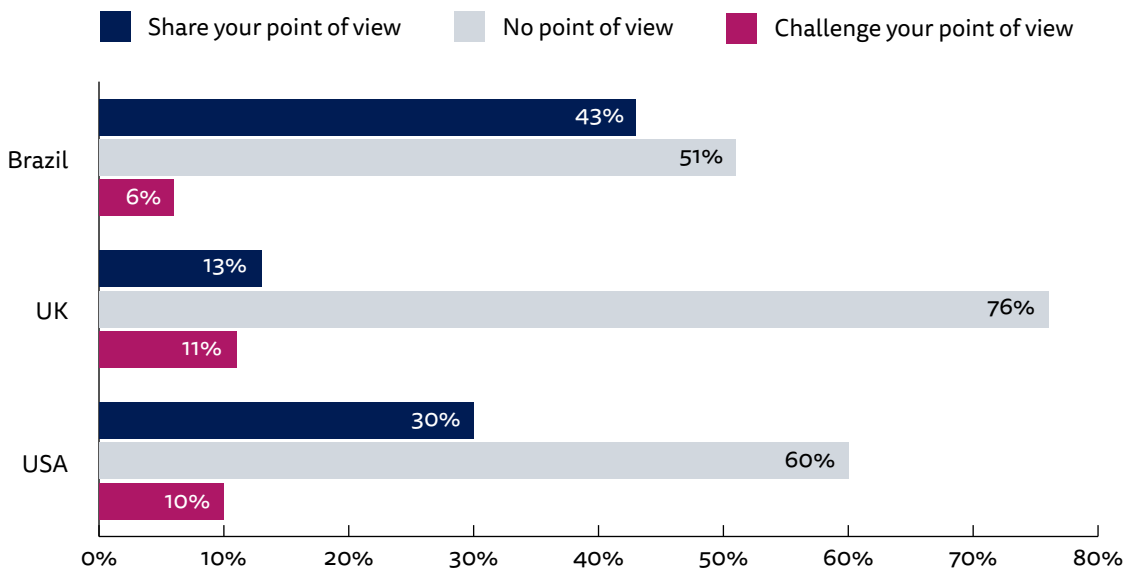
Replicating even successful initiatives in different media environments requires resources at a time when they are scarce. UOL’s Machado (Brazil) spoke about his organisation’s labour-intensive efforts to use social media groups to discuss topics with readers and disseminate fact-checked content. Linda Bezerra from *Correio* (Brazil) even writes letters to new subscribers giving them her WhatsApp number because she said she wants to better understand their perspectives. She recognised, however, that as readership grows, such personalised attention will become impossible.

MAKING CHOICES AROUND ADVOCACY

Several interviewees raised questions about whether conventional impartial news formats will remain commercially viable. While most news users globally say they prefer news that does not have a particular point of view (Newman et al. 2020), in polarised societies, large and often active segments of the public seek news from sources that share their worldview (Fig. 2).

Hicks noted that the most sceptical Casper participants were avid Fox News viewers who saw scrutiny of President Donald Trump as evidence of bias. Others spoke about the appeal of forms of journalism oriented toward advocacy. As GRPCOM Group’s Guilherme Cunha Pereira argued, ‘Being transparent about what one believes is a premise for generating a strong trust relationship’.

Figure 2. Differences across Brazil, the UK, and the US in the percentage who say they prefer news with no point of view.



Source: *Digital News Report 2020; Q5c_2020*. Thinking about the different kinds of news available to you, do you prefer getting news from sources that share/challenge/have no point of view. Base: Total sample (excluding don't knows): Brazil = 1901, UK = 1659, US = 1760. Note: India was not included in the main survey.

‘The old, impartial model, which we’re all very proud of and feel very passionately about, is not universally beloved by younger audiences’, acknowledged the BBC’s Jamie Angus. But in experimenting with styles of reporting that elevate underrepresented ‘personal stories led by individual personalities or perspectives’, it creates new challenges around preserving an overall neutral editorial stance. ‘Centring reportage from the point of view of one person only inevitably gives you an impartiality problem, right?’

PLEASING ALL AUDIENCES IS IMPOSSIBLE

‘We at least owe it to our readers and ourselves to make the case for “mainstream” journalism,’ said Sewell Chan, editorial page editor at the *Los Angeles Times* (USA), referring to Tom Rosenstiel’s public defence of what Chan called journalism rooted in a ‘method of objectivity’ (Rosenstiel 2020). Channel 4 news editor Ben de Pear (UK) similarly said, ‘We’ve kind of doubled down on everything we used to do.’ Both recognised, however, that audiences have evolving expectations about how much news should reaffirm rather than challenge the way they see the world.

The fact the station makes impartial journalism in a polarised world doesn’t diminish trust, but it turns away an audience that sometimes thinks we are boring. But I’ll never give my impartiality up in exchange for that.

Pedro Dias Leite, Executive Director, CBN Radio (Brazil)

3.3 How much is too much transparency? What types of transparency matter most?

As philosopher Onora O’Neill (2002: 68) noted, never has information about many of the individuals and institutions we judge been more abundant, ‘yet this high enthusiasm for ever more complete openness and transparency has done little to build or restore public trust’. Meanwhile, the very platforms that facilitate access to such information often operate so opaquely as to be close to unintelligible to their users.

In spite of this mixed outlook for transparency, the kinds of initiatives we heard referenced in interviews most frequently were those designed to pull back the curtain and make reporting processes and decision-making more visible (see also Heyamoto and Milbourn 2018; Milhorange and Singer 2018). These efforts include showcasing policies around conflicts of interest, advertising, and corrections, but also the identities of the people who select stories and determine what’s newsworthy.

As Marcelo Rech, president of the Brazilian Newspaper Association (ANJ), noted, ‘The first relationship of the public is with the communicator’. But different forms of openness may influence trust differently, and evidence remains lacking for when and how it can be effectively deployed.

JOURNALISTS AS THREE-DIMENSIONAL HUMANS

Many spoke about the need to foreground reporters and presenters as real, relatable people – often with specialised knowledge – rather than distant, faceless media figures. This might mean linking to journalists’ biographies online so readers ‘see a bit more about who is the person writing that story, what do they know about it’, in the words of Nick Sutton, head of digital output at Sky News (UK). It could also mean journalists participating in social media livestreams or other personalised outreach online despite concerns about the role of platforms in eroding trust. Amanda Gilbert, the local Tulsa television reporter (USA), said she and her colleagues were required to post on their professional Facebook pages three times a day ‘so people get to know you’.

Little is known about whether such efforts might build trust over time. As the *New York Times*’ Ben Smith noted, ‘If you think about other products that ask for real trust, it is mostly brands, not individuals’, adding ‘people are more likely to trust a human but also more likely to distrust a human’. Still, organisations like the *New York Times* have invested heavily in podcasts as one part of a strategy to connect with readers on what they hope is a more personal level.

[Audio] shows the humanity of news in a way that a lot of print struggles to show – it shows the humanity of people we’re talking about, it shows the humanity of people gathering the news, it shows the humanity of the world we live in in a different way than print stories can.

Hans Buetow, Senior Producer, *New York Times* (USA)

HOW TO HANDLE SOCIAL MEDIA

For social media specifically, many news outlets have publicly wrestled with how much detail to share about the journalists delivering the news. Organisations like the BBC have placed strict editorial guidelines on both professional and private activities, including online, which they say are meant to avoid compromising commitments to impartiality (BBC News 2020).

Elsewhere, however, policies vary widely and some even advocate for more rather than less disclosure around personal political views. For instance, *Jornal O Povo*’s Medina Néri (Brazil) explained that they encourage journalists ‘to have opinions and publish them in the right place’, in order to demonstrate a clear and explicit division between news and opinion.

Downsides of Transparency

Transparency around journalistic practice also contains inherent risks. The *Guardian's* media editor, Jim Waterson, said he alternates between sometimes feeling that 'openness and honesty' is 'a good idea' and wondering if 'showing how the sausage is made in journalism is a very bad idea for trust, because no one wants to see how sausages are made'.

If you believed what the public says they want, we'd all just be reading our news in the form of a monthly magazine filled with 4,000-word articles. That's bollocks.

Jim Waterson, Media Editor, *Guardian* (UK)

We know even less about how audiences think about such matters in places like India and Brazil. Just as the safety of journalists and their sources may prompt news organisations to withhold information at times, so the benefits of some forms of transparency may be outweighed by their costs – strengthening trust for some but serving as ammunition for others.

3.4 Where do preconceptions about news come from and how can they be changed?

Finally, distrust in the news for many audiences may be rooted in deeply held preconceptions people hold about bias, motives, and how journalism works. Sometimes called 'folk theories' (Palmer et al. 2020), such ideas may be more or less true (and, of course, sometimes demonstrably false). Whether hostile or not, these preconceptions are likely to be based on a combination of factors ranging from personal experiences and partisan or other identities to popular cultural representations of news, whether salutary (e.g. *Spotlight*) or less so (e.g. *House of Cards*).

Narratives about news are pervasive

Many journalists we spoke to held their own entrenched views about how the media works in the countries they cover. One journalist we spoke to who covers India said, 'We see a very large loss of faith in the integrity of journalists', with many people believing that everyone in the news business is 'bought', which can make defending the profession problematic.

For audiences, too, preconceptions about the press can be so deep-seated that everything about the news is interpreted through that lens. Rebecca Walters, an executive producer for local television affiliate KJRH in Oklahoma (USA), recounted frequent critiques she has heard from viewers who harbour suspicions about the motives of news media. 'I'm sensitive to that,' she said, because she has close family members who feel the same. She struggles to convince even her own father, 'that person who raised me', that her station has no hidden partisan agenda.

I'm really not here to try and shove anything onto you.

Rebecca Walters, Executive Producer, KJRH, Tulsa, Oklahoma (USA)

The need for collective solutions

With individual news outlets simultaneously competing to convince audiences that they are more trustworthy than competitors, what might be the collective effect of such a barrage of messages?

Some did feel there was solidarity among brands, as Steve Graves, executive editor for digital for the *Liverpool Echo* (UK), said about regional outlets, while also noting that 'national and regional titles have quite different trust issues'. Others were less sure.

I'm not going to deceive you. Each one is looking at its own problems and looking for ways of surviving.

Maurício Lima, Editor-in-Chief, *Veja* (Brazil)

A range of cooperative efforts exists, from the previously mentioned Trust Project to the Journalism Trust Initiative to the unprecedented example of a consortium of news organisations in Brazil coming together to independently vet COVID-19 data (Globo 2020).

Most often, however, brands chip away at these problems alone, attempting to establish unique and enduring relationships with audiences awash with choices and narratives about what it means to be a savvy consumer in the digital age.

When you're working in the trenches of news, your biggest fear isn't readers' scepticism. Your biggest fear is the non-existence of readers ... the fear of irrelevance.

Sewell Chan, Editorial Page Editor, *Los Angeles Times* (USA)

4. The Path Ahead for the Trust in News Project

This document outlines previous findings and key questions involving the study of trust in news based on our review of the academic literature as well as interviews with 82 journalists and senior managers at news media organisations across Brazil, India, the UK, and the US. We have engaged with these practitioners because we want to learn from and be informed by their experiences and expertise; in addition, the Trust in News Project aims to produce new insight that is both reliable and relevant to those seeking to address issues around trust in practice.

We maintain there is no single ‘trust in news’ problem, but rather multiple challenges involving both the supply of news – including persistent problems in the ways diverse publics have been covered – and changing expectations in what audiences demand from increasingly complex contemporary media environments. We also want to stress that any attempt to address trust in news needs to recognise that while trust is important and can empower members of the public, it is also dangerous for them, because not everyone and everything seeking their trust is equally trustworthy. Life might be easier for professional journalists and news media if the public showed deference to their work, but deference is not in the public’s interest, while trust, when warranted, is.

At least two main lessons are clear from our analysis. First, more *descriptive* comparative media research is needed to bring greater clarity to how and why news audiences in the Global North and South make the choices they do. Right now, all too often, we are simply flying blind. Second, more *prescriptive* media research is also critical, so that empirical evidence can be brought to bear on what works for building trust, with whom, and under what conditions. It is important to know whether interventions that feel good and look good do, in fact, have the intended effect and what, if any, trade-offs they involve.

We recognise that as researchers we are travelling along not only a well-worn path but one that cuts through ever-changing terrain. The questions we outline above about (a) the role of the platforms, (b) audience engagement strategies, (c) transparency initiatives, and (d) preconceptions about news will serve broadly as a roadmap, and we will put news users – the people whose trust journalists seek to earn – at the centre of our work. This roadmap will guide our way forward while allowing us to be steered by the discoveries that hopefully lie ahead.

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RISJ PUBLICATIONS

SELECTED BOOKS

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