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IMPORTANCE OF TRANSPARENCY IN MODERN JOURNALISM

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Abstract

Public trust in media continues to hover near all-time lows, driven by perceptions that the news industry is partisan and peddles inaccurate information ("fake news"), as well as ambivalence about news from social media. According to a new Knight Foundation report on news media trust, transparency is a key factor in restoring trust. Although media organizations promote the inherent value of transparency, they often do not explain what it means in practice. In contrast, research in business organizations points to a clearer meaning and more specific practices of transparency that, if applied to journalism, could help journalists regain greater public trust.

Introduction

In this age of "fake news," trust in news media is at an all-time low. Increased use of social media and the internet in recent years have exacerbated this problem. There is a huge increase in misinformation on the internet, and it's difficult to weed out what is true. Genuine news media publications are faced with a public that no longer knows what to trust. There needs to be a shift in transparency in news publications. If news publications are more transparent in where and how they are crafting these stories and acquiring information, there will be a positive shift in public trust of news.

Transparency can be achieved by taking action and prioritizing the public. Reporters and journalists need to tell the public how they got the story, why they deemed it newsworthy, how they got the information that was included and who their sources were. It is important to respect the audience, and journalists need to take responsibility for the news they are releasing. When talking with journalists and experts to examine how to be more transparent in an effort to shift public trust, the American Press Institute stated, "If journalists are truth seekers, it must follow that they be honest and truthful with their audiences, too." In order to achieve this, journalists need to make a greater effort "to cite original source material, to offer ways for the audience to participate in the news-gathering process, or to be responsive to requests for correction." Furthermore, they found that the five keys to credibility were:

1. Support your reporting with sources and show your audiences

2. Collaborate with your audience

3. Attribute information responsibly

4. Offer disclosures and statements of values

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5. Correct website and social media errors effectively

News agencies need to implement a standard process that ensures everyone is accountable across the board. People are suspicious of the media and some outlets are not trustworthy. By implementing processes to enhance accountability, publishers will not only have an advantage over other publishers, but they will also help incite trust in the news again.

Opinion articles need to be clearly marked so that the public can distinguish them from objective news. All news outlets have different ways of labeling content which can lead to confusion. There should be a nationwide standard for how articles are labeled. Online media sources should be explicit about disclosing all commercial funding. The public has a right to know what is paid to advertise and what goes into the algorithms that determine what advertisements the public sees.

By being more transparent and honest with the public, by being willing to redact and fix mistakes and by showing how stories are created, the credibility of news and the faith of the public will rise. In our digital world, there are masses of information, some true, some false, and explaining stories and sources will lead to improvements in reporting.

- The basis of journalism ethics is not transparency. It is responsible publication for democracy. The latter is neither identical with, nor reducible to, transparency.
- Transparency is not sufficient for good journalistic practice.
- Often, good journalism practice is non-transparent, like other democratic practices.
- Transparency cannot replace basic ideas, such as editorial independence.

Democracy balances transparent and non-transparent practices.

Journalists also use non-transparent policies. They don't identify confidential sources. Some minimize harm by not naming victims of sex abuse. Most journalists wouldn't report a police operation to arrest terrorists minutes before it happened. Embedded war reporters don't reveal the location of their military units. Shield laws for American journalists — laws against revealing sources — are a non-transparent legal mechanis. Journalism is not obligated to full transparency, anywhere and everywhere. Good journalists balance transparent and non-transparent practices.

"If journalism wants to make the case that it is valuable, it has to start showing its work. "

Embracing A Radically Transparent Reporting Process
In 2013, the Poynter Institute published The New Ethics of Journalism and replaced "Act Independently" with "Be Transparent." Kelly McBride, a co-editor of that book, wrote that "News organizations want to be trusted advisors. To do that, they need to embrace radical transparency, where they explain every decision they make." This kind of transparency is still

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rare, but I've seen some good examples of news organizations giving audiences a look behind the curtain to see how editorial decisions are made."

•   ProPublica has led the way by describing their journalistic judgment and process early and often. See for example their note about why they decided to partner with the Guardian to report on the Snowden documents, their response to criticism from the Red Cross, and their description of how and why they built their surgeon risk database.

•   Almost a decade ago OnTheMedia did a great segment about how National Public Radio edits its interviews, revealing how significant some of the invisible edits can be and asking good questions about what it means to hide this editing from listeners.

•   In her role as the public editor of the New York Times, Margaret Sullivan regularly brings helpful transparency to how the Times shapes its stories.

•   Outfits like the Center for Public Integrity are publishing behind the scenes addenda explaining their process and the provenance of their data.

However, as Dan Gillmor notes in his book Mediactive, the relationship between trust and transparency is complex. "Greater transparency will lead your audience to trust you more even while they may believe you less," he writes. Put another way, our transparency may engender more trust even as it encourages more skepticism.

Active Transparency For Deep Engagement

Transparency is also increasingly necessary and valuable as part of emerging practices in community engagement. Newsrooms can't expect to build meaningful relationships with their communities if they continue to operate at an arms distance (or further) from that community. Last month Anthony De Rosa suggested that publishers should let readers see how a story changed over time, perhaps by toggling a track changes button on the story. "This transparency builds greater trust between the reader and the publisher," De Rosa writes. "It also reclaims something that is becoming lost when readers are led to many places through social media rather than relying on a single publication: loyalty."

•   Curious City, a public radio news experiment at WBEZ in Chicago, and its national counterpart Hearken, is perhaps the best example of mixing transparency and engagement. The platform lets the public assign journalists stories rooted in local curiosity and reporters show their work throughout the process, even inviting community members along to interview sources.

•   Serial was a podcast sensation built largely on giving listeners a look inside the process of reporting a really complex story. In the Columbia Journalism Review Joyce Barnatham argues that "What makes Serial so special and so meaningful for journalism is reporter Sarah Koenig's transparency. She takes her listeners along with her." And for those fans who wanted to go deeper than the weekly audio reports the team created a website based largely on source documents.

•   Elise Hu's use of Tumblr to complement her reporting and engage her audiences in the US and in Korea is another great example. Nieman Lab has a good overview of how Hu is using the Tumblr and the kind of feedback she has gotten.

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Emerging Technology Demands Greater Transparency

The rapid changes in technology, both in reporting and consuming the news, also demands greater openness from newsrooms and journalists. As an industry we are immersed in new tools that shift our practices. Projects like Source and Storybench are useful repositories of knowledge, documenting how journalists are using emerging technology. At the recent SRCCON, Chris Amico argued that journalists should "Use every part of the pig," describing how "open notebook reporting and structured journalism" can make use of more of our reporting materials by putting them in the hands of our communities. I have written previously about how transparency around fact checking and verification can be a tool in community engagement too.

At the heart of all of these models of transparency is the goal of building trust. In 2011 longtime editor Melanie Sill wrote, "As the web matures, newspeople and others can make a conceptual leap that puts journalism fully in service to citizens and consumers and returns respect and value to the work and those who do it." For Sill, the core of that leap was new modes of trust rooted not in authority but in transparency, responsiveness and participation. That same year, Dan Sinker, the director of the Knight Mozilla OpenNews project, said "the philosophy of working in the open," exemplified by the moto "show your work," was one of the most important shifts in how newsrooms operated.

New Modes Of Transparency For New Models Of Sustainability

Recommitting to transparency and redefining journalism as a service to community is also critical today because an increasing number of news organizations are asking the public to support their work through donations, membership programs, apps and more. Revenue models rooted in events and crowdfunding often force newsrooms to make the case as to why people should support their work or why they should show up for an event. For some newsrooms, this can be a painful process but in the end many journalists I talk to are stunned by the support and feedback they get when they open themselves up to their community. In fact, at a recent summit on membership models for news, a representative from Kickstarter noted that one of the most popular rewards for Kickstarter donors is behind the scenes access to journalists and media makers.

In this context, transparency is not only about building trust but also about illustrating to our communities the kind of labor involved in doing meaningful journalism. I recently got to hear Andrea Bernstein and Matt Katz, two WNYC reporters, describe the reporting process behind their Peabody award winning series on NJ Governor Chris Christie. It was a stunning tale that deepened my appreciation for their work; WNYC should share that story with their audience.

When we conceal the work of reporting, then journalism just appears on the screen or the page or the doorstep. Why would people support something they don't understand, or value

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something when they don't see the craft behind it? With most people facing a flood of information every day, transparency is becoming a critical building block fostering stronger, more trustworthy relationships between newsrooms and the audience.

Conclusion

In its rightful place, transparency is a public good. But when transparency [is] over-hyped and replaces important values -- it distorts the ethics of democracy and media The digital platform makes transparency much easier to achieve. The ability to link within a story makes following information trails out from the journalist quick and easy for any reader, and helps to bolster the argument being made by the journalist. No longer does the public rely on the "voice of God" reporting style of newspapers; rather, there is greater push for community involvement in reporting. With journalists acting as gatekeepers and organizers to a vast trove of available information.

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