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The biggest challenge facing journalism: A lack of trust

Katherine Fink
Pace University, USA

The single biggest challenge facing journalism today is the public's lack of trust in it. This is not a new challenge, but it is persistent, and it has been getting worse. Gallup's most recent poll on trust in US media found only 28 percent of respondents believed news organizations supported democracy 'very well' or 'well'. By contrast, 43 percent of respondents believed news media supported democracy 'poorly' or 'very poorly' (Ritter and Jones, 2018).

Public trust in news media has waned for many reasons. The collapse of traditional, advertising-dominated business models have left news organizations as a whole with fewer resources to produce quality journalism (Rosenstiel and Mitchell, 2004). Audiences have reacted negatively to sensationalized coverage and 'clickbait' as news organizations try to entice people to click on stories online (Brants, 2013). A lack of trust in media has also been connected to declining trust in government and other institutions (Jones, 2004). Media are seen as being controlled by powerful people who want to push their personal agendas rather than serve the public (Newman and Fletcher, 2017).

Individual journalists are also seen as powerful people who push agendas that are not always in the public interest. This was clear in the recent book *Becoming the News* (Palmer, 2017), which focused on the experiences of ordinary people who became news subjects. The book noted a disconnect between the way ordinary people see journalists and the way journalists see themselves. The news subjects 'felt like David, to journalism's Goliath', in their interactions with journalists. News subjects often felt like they were used by journalists to tell stories whose direction was out of their control. In journalists' minds, though, '*They* are David, facing down the powers-that-be in the name of the citizens' (p. 7). This disconnect reveals another reason for a lack of trust in media: journalists often do not recognize the power they wield over members of the public, and thus fail to treat them with sufficient care and respect.

Having the trust of one's audience is vital to journalism's core function of 'sensemaking' (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). Audiences depend upon journalists to help them make sense of current events by explaining them in context, such as by providing a

Corresponding author:
Katherine Fink, Pace University, Pleasantville, NY 10570, USA.
Email: kfink@pace.edu

history of events that led up to the latest news. The context journalists provide depends on a shared ideology or news judgment (Deuze, 2005). Journalists also consider who is in their imagined audience (Anderson, 2011) in order to determine what background information is relevant. Are their audiences primarily local, national, or international? Do they imagine their audience to be other journalists or 12-year-old girls (Darnton, 1975)?

Journalists know more about their audiences than they used to. Tools such as Google Analytics and Chartbeat allow journalists to see data about their audiences and which articles they read, like, and share most. However, having that information does not necessarily help journalists communicate with their audiences more effectively (Petre, 2015). Analytics provide a limited view of who audiences are. Journalists still remain 'out of touch with the lived reality' (Deuze, 2008: 857) of their audiences, viewing them mostly as abstractions (Heinonen, 2011). Although journalists recognize the importance of audiences to their work, they are often reluctant to involve them in editorial decisions (Tandoc, 2014).

Many newsrooms are hiring 'audience-oriented editors' (Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc, 2018) to mediate the relationship between journalists and their audiences. However, audience-oriented editors themselves may not communicate with audiences – at least, not directly. Rather, they are often the ones who manage and interpret the sea of analytics data, creating a vision of audience as algorithm (Anderson, 2011). Audience-oriented editors are thus different from ombudsmen or public editors, positions that are increasingly rare at news organizations (Barr, 2015). Unlike audience-oriented editors, ombudsmen and public editors interact frequently with audiences and act as their representatives when presenting their questions and concerns to news organizations.

News organizations may yet attempt to build relationships with audiences in other ways, such as via crowdsourcing or other so-called 'engagement' initiatives. Members of the 'crowd' may, for example, help journalists search for newsworthy nuggets among piles of records. Journalists may also crowdsource photos from people who happen to be in locations where news is breaking. But such initiatives are usually valued by news organizations for their ability to save journalists time and labor – they are not designed as outreach, as a mechanism to build public trust. Indeed, crowdsourcing initiatives depend on people who already trust news organizations, at least to the extent that participants are willing to volunteer their time and labor to help.

What to do? My suggestion for building trust is modest, low-tech, and unoriginal: journalists should have more conversations with strangers. That is, once a week, every journalist should meet someone new. Go out for coffee, or ice cream, or whatever. It should be face-to-face, because in-person conversations are better for building trust (Nilsson and Mattes, 2015). Journalists should choose people who have never been sources or are likely to become sources due to their jobs, expertise, or social prominence. Journalists could, for instance, pick random people from their news organization's list of subscribers. Even better, journalists should seek out news avoiders (Toff and Nielsen, 2018) – their trust in media is obviously so low that they have decided news is not worth their money or time. News avoiders are the ones with whom journalists truly need to 'engage'.

These conversations with strangers should be informal and off-the-record – no notes or recordings allowed. Journalists should aim to talk as little as possible and not try to steer the conversations in self-serving directions. If their conversation partners want to talk about news, fine – but journalists should not see these conversations as means to stories, quotes, or sources. That means resisting the journalistic impulse to interject 'that would be a great story!' even when conversation partners say something that truly would be. Journalists should instead focus on active listening (Charon, 2001) in order to build trust.

Afterward, journalists may do well to write memos for themselves in order to help remember what was discussed. But these should be for the journalist's eyes only – not for their bosses, or co-workers, or audiences. And who knows, maybe a story idea will emerge that the journalist could pursue – but some other day.

I expect journalists not to take my advice. As mentioned, it is modest. (Coffee once a week? How much of a difference could that make?) And yet, even this modest suggestion will seem impractical to many journalists. (Coffee once a week, with no promise of a story? Who has time for that?) And indeed, it may be impossible for many journalists to implement this idea without the support of their managers and organizations. It may in fact be an idea that should be implemented at the organizational level, similar to the way Google encourages its employees to spend 20 percent of their time on side projects.

My suggestion is also low-tech, which hurts the chances of news organizations adopting it. Journalists love technology, particularly when it appears to help them solve difficult problems – such as how to build, retain, and engage with audiences. Still, journalists also are aware of the limitations of the quantitative data they gain through audience analytics tools. And as professional interviewers, journalists recognize the potential of conversations to provide qualitative data that analytics tools do not capture.

The third strike against my suggestion: it is unoriginal. Journalism as a conversation was a central theme of the public journalism movement in the 1990s, especially in the writings of James Carey (e.g. Carey, 1987). And the concept is still discussed today in areas such as participatory journalism, community journalism, and reciprocal journalism. Conversation is also at the heart of current journalistic endeavors such as Hearken and GroundSource, platforms that help news organizations involve the public more deeply in story development.

And yet, more conversations need to take place. By taking the time to talk to strangers, journalists can show that they are actually trying to serve the public more than themselves.

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