Developing a "Trust Guide" for Analysts

In our previous post about the power of visual storytelling, we spoke about the importance of the relationship between the analyst and the consumer of intelligence, and the key role that the intelligence product plays as a central mode of communication between the two parties. Today we will hear from Grace, whose research explores the concept of communicating trust in this relationship.

What does intelligence analysis have in common with journalism, research, and risk communication? No, that's not the beginning of a bad joke. In fact, literature from each of these fields can offer important insight on building and maintaining trust in analyst-customer communications.

I'm Grace Salo, an undergraduate student intern working with the Laboratory for Analytic Sciences (LAS), and the research behind this blog post — and the guide coming soon! — is a result of my work on the Analytic Rigor and Performance (ARP) team at LAS. Two inspirations for this research were Michelle Winemiller's article, "Journalism and Intelligence: Correlations and Adaptations," and a report prepared for LAS by Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy students, "Communicating Intelligence to Decision Makers."

"Decision makers rely on those they trust"[1]

Trust is foundational to the effectiveness of journalists, researchers, risk communicators, and intelligence analysts alike.[2] It is an element that extends beyond simply the *truth* of an object and into the realm of relationship and dependency.[3] As the FDA points out: "if the public does not see FDA as trusted and credible, its communications will be less effective — even if all its practices and procedures are solidly evidence-based."[4] This project focuses on establishing trust in the analyst-customer relationship by exploring how principles of trust-building from other fields may also be applicable to products created by intelligence analysts. As a result, eight trustworthiness factors were identified, and a few highlights are listed below:

1. PURPOSE: understanding and stating the customer's objectives.

Journalists are advised to know how they satisfy the needs of their audience[5] and to explain why a story is covered in order to build trust with readers.[6-9] For analysts, explicit identification of a product's purpose can help align customer and analyst expectations.

2. ACCURACY: getting the facts right.

Although journalists "cannot always guarantee 'truth'... getting the facts right is the cardinal principle of journalism."[10] As the "paramount principle of trust,"[11] journalistic accuracy is critical to "confirm a relationship of trust with the public."[12]

3. TIMELINESS: presenting the information within a relevant timeframe, sometimes in a trade-off with completeness.

Critical to a message's credibility is "timely disclosure of relevant information."[2] For this reason, risk communicators are advised to sometimes forgo completeness in favor of timeliness[13-15]; for analysts, this includes considering customers' small decision-making windows of opportunity.[13] In these situations, the preliminary information released should be kept in its proper context as subject to change.[13-14]

4. OBJECTIVITY: evaluating and presenting alternative views and remaining unaffected by personal or customer bias.

Balanced and impartial journalistic reporting "builds trust and confidence,"[10] as does remaining free from "biases as perceived by others"[2] and abiding by an agenda to inform readers above monetary or political incentives.[16] For analysts, objectivity may require highlighting differences in data interpretation and explaining the underlying arguments of each, neither "cherry-picking" evidence nor letting personal biases enter in.[13,17-18]

5. TRANSPARENCY: conveying assumptions, an accurate confidence level in an analytic judgment, and a distinction between fact and speculation.

To show trustworthiness, journalists and risk communicators are advised to admit uncertainty and be comfortable saying they don't know.[2,14-15,19-21] Analytic transparency, which gives decision makers a "deeper mastery of the analysis and the ability to explain their decisions to others,"[2] is achieved when analysts clearly communicate the nature and degree of analytic uncertainties,[17] underlying assumptions,[13,22-23] and the distinction between a judgment and fact.

6. ACCESSIBILITY: prioritizing clarity to promote informed customer decisions.

One study showed certain features of online news sources, such as slow load times and excess ads, actually affected whether audiences relied on the source, despite not typically being considered elements of journalistic trust.[11] Similarly, the details of an analytic product matter in building trust. Products may promote accessibility through only using technical terms that are necessary (and defining them),[24] using clear and consistent language, avoiding professional jargon and acronyms, and maintaining a concise and organized message.[2,14-15,21]

7. NON-PRESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS: providing empowering analysis that aids decision-making without prescribing policy or strategy.

Effective, next-level journalism doesn't stop at simply the "provision of news" but extends beyond to "knowledge that empowers."[12,25] Analysts are trained to avoid suggesting policy, but can still "point to opportunities for using leverage to support US initiatives,"[26] use data to test the customer's theory of a case against reality,[13] or provide a unique consideration of background knowledge and temporal perspective.[17]

8. CONSISTENCY: delivering trustworthy products every time.

A news organization's consistency earns audience trust and induces an emotional connection of dependability.[11,19] Similarly, a risk communicator's credibility is "closely linked to the perceived past performance record."[2] Analysts can provide a consistent product format to returning customers by incorporating customer preferences on modality, product composition,[26] and data presentation.[27]

Taken together, these eight factors provide a glimpse into how trust may be communicated within intelligence settings. If you've been following our blog posts this month or are familiar with other work from the ARP team, you may have noticed some degree of overlap between the trust factors presented here and how we are considering the measurement and evaluation of analytic rigor. The concepts share some distinct similarities, including themes of objectivity, truth, credibility, and transparency, among others. However, our initial investigation into trust suggests that it may be distinct from rigor in its focus on the relationship between audience and communicator. "Trust" is often referenced as something that must be built between two parties whereas analytic rigor has been described as one inherent quality of intelligence analysis. In order to build trust between the intelligence analyst and consumer of intelligence, it comes as no surprise that the intelligence analysis produced by the analyst should include aspects of rigor that consider the consumer's needs.

Next Steps: A Trust Guide

As an immediate next step, we are developing a "Trust Guide" to deliver these findings and associated resources to the analytic community. Based on feedback on the guide, we may seek to explore trust even further, which could include a range of projects on trust, the analytic space, rigor, and customer preferences. While recognizing that a research perspective into intelligence analysis is by no means comprehensive, we hope these insights bring awareness to specific trust-building approaches, so that a lack of trust doesn't stand in the way of truth being received.

To connect or request further details, please contact csbrugh@ncsu.edu and smkim4@ncsu.edu, ARP team leads!

ENDNOTES

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