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The Future of Trustworthy Information: Learning from Online Content Creators

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Abstract

Journalism is facing a trust crisis. Audiences are increasingly skeptical that mainstream media serves their interests and are turning their attention away from traditional news outlets. Meanwhile, online content creators who engage in journalist-style work are building huge, loyal audiences that eclipse those of traditional media.

This shift in attention can be attributed, in part, to the different types of relationships that journalists and creators have with their audiences. This paper examines these relationships through the lens of trustworthiness. The paper considers three key elements — ability, benevolence, and integrity — that must be present for trust to exist in a relationship.

What we find is that individual creators often work hard to demonstrate ability, benevolence, and integrity to build trust with their audiences. They narrate their expertise, respond to reader questions or suggestions, and interact with their critics — all tactics that help build trust.

News institutions have put less effort into building trustworthy relationships with audiences, and journalists at large institutions do not always have the license to engage independently with audiences in ways that could increase trust. In addition, journalists' interests are not always aligned with their employers, and they sometimes have a hard time overcoming the trust issues that audiences have with their employers.

This does not mean that journalists are inherently less trustworthy. In fact, you could make a strong case that journalists are more trustworthy because of institutional guardrails, but those guardrails are often internal processes that are not exposed to the public. Meanwhile, creators who often have fewer internal guardrails have built more external-facing practices that help establish trust.

This points to the fact that there is more work for journalists to do to build trusting relationships with their audiences – and that there are specific techniques they could learn and adapt from creators to do this.

Introduction

American trust in journalism has never been lower. Nearly three-quarters of Americans say they have little to no trust in mainstream news reporting, according to a stark 2023 Gallup poll.

Some of this downturn is part of an overall decline in trust in institutions of all kinds, and some of it is due to a concerted effort to undermine the legitimacy of mainstream media by powerful people such as President-elect Donald Trump and tech billionaire Elon Musk.

As journalists, we would be remiss if we didn't also acknowledge that some of this mistrust is earned — and that we need to earn trust back. This essay attempts to lay out some aspects of what it might take to rebuild trust with audiences through the lens of learning from online content creators.

I chose to focus on online content creators because that is where audiences are migrating. eMarketer predicts there will be more social network users than TV viewers by 2025. News is still a small part of the creator economy and is currently dominated by partisan political commentators, according to the Reuters 2024 Digital News Report.

Despite the scarcity of formal journalism on those platforms, audiences increasingly are turning to content creators using short-form video formats on YouTube, TikTok and Instagram for information, according to the Reuters report.

Many of these creators serve roles that were traditionally filled by journalists. Consider Marques Brownlee, a YouTuber with 19 million subscribers whose reviews of tech products are hugely influential. The closest recent comparison to Brownlee is Walt Mossberg, the longtime tech product reviewer for The Wall Street Journal who was referred to in the industry as "The Kingmaker" for his influence. Mossberg retired in 2017.

Or consider Coffeezilla, a YouTuber with more than 3 million subscribers who investigates and reveals crypto scams and whose work is comparable to traditional investigative journalists. Or Anthony Padilla, whose YouTube channel with more than 7 million subscribers is perhaps comparable to Oprah with its in-depth interviews of famous people and deep dives into difficult topics.

The size of YouTube audiences often dwarfs traditional media. A mid-tier YouTube channel may have an audience of 4 million viewers — far more than all cable news combined on a single night. That's not counting top YouTube channels with audiences in the tens and hundreds of millions, far eclipsing the reach of all top news media outlets combined.

Yet, mainstream journalism has not taken online content creators seriously, treating them largely as niche entertainers. There is plenty of silly stuff online — dance crazes and pranks — but there is also a lot of popular serious content such as instructional videos and explanatory journalism.

"Traditional media have much to learn on how to better engage audiences in this increasingly complex and competitive space," author Nic Newman writes in the Reuters report.

This essay seeks to understand what journalists can learn from the ways that online content creators build trust with their audiences.

The Creator vs. Journalism Economies

The creator economy is worth about $250 billion dollars and is expected to roughly double in size to $480 billion by 2027, according to a 2023 Goldman Sachs study. There are currently an estimated 50 million global creators, and that number is expected to grow at 10-20% compounded annually over the next five years, according to the study.

Only a small slice of creators can afford to do it full-time. There are only about 2 million professional content creators who make more than $100,000 a year, according to the Goldman Sachs study. Creators make most of their money from sponsored content and affiliate marketing, according to eMarketer's 2024 creator revenue forecast.

Journalism is a much smaller market. Global news revenues plummeted to nearly $32 billion in 2022 from $107 billion in 2000, according to GroupM. As of 2022, there were only about 85,000 news and editorial personnel in the United States, according to the 2022 American Journalism study. Journalists' median income was about $74,000, according to the survey.

The collapse of journalism continues to accelerate. Recruiting firm Challenger Gray estimates that at least 2,600 U.S.-based journalism jobs were lost in 2023, and another 500 jobs were lost in just the first month of 2024.

As journalism declines and the creator economy surges, creators are increasingly invited into spaces traditionally reserved for journalists. President-elect Donald Trump bypassed traditional media almost entirely during his campaign in favor of interviews with online creators such as Joe Rogan and Lex Fridman. Vice President Kamala Harris, who ran a more traditional campaign, also sat for interviews with leading content creators such as Charlamagne Tha God and the podcast "Call Her Daddy."

During the Democratic convention in Chicago, the party provided press credentials to 200 content creators. TikTok food reviewer Jeremy Jacobowitz, for instance, asked DNC convention goers to describe presidential candidates Kamala Harris and Donald Trump as food dishes. "The audience that I'm reaching, this is what they watch," Jacobowitz told CNN. "They don't have cable. They don't watch the news. They don't even read the news. They don't trust the news. They'll trust us more than mainstream media, unfortunately."

To understand how creators build trust with their audiences, I convened a panel of creators at Harvard Kennedy School in April for a day-long discussion of their techniques and approaches. The event, "21st Century Media: Meet the Online Influencers Doing Trusted Accountability Reporting,"

featured six online content creators who do not all consider themselves journalists but do work that holds power to account across different domains. They are:

Mohammad “Siyab” Panhwar

a cardiologist who makes TikToks debunking medical misinformation that he encounters on social media.

Taylor Lorenz

an independent journalist who covers the content creator industry and is an influential creator herself across platforms including YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram.

Meredith Lynch

a TikTok creator who focuses on private equity and its impact on our consumer culture.

Ernest Crim III

a creator who creates educational content about Black history across multiple platforms, including TikTok, Instagram, and LinkedIn.

Samuel Denby

a YouTube creator who operates multiple channels including Wendover Productions, which creates explanatory videos about journalistic topics.

Volkan Yilmaz

a leather artisan who dissects luxury bags on TikTok to examine their quality.

Before we dive into the details of the discussion, let's define trustworthiness.

The Building Blocks of Trustworthiness

There is a vast literature on trustworthiness that I will not seek to summarize. Instead, I will lean on a framework that I find persuasive, which was put forward by Roger C. Mayer, James H. Davis and F. David Schoorman in "An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust." Their 1995 analysis examines the scholarship of trust and concludes that three factors are key to trustworthiness: ability, benevolence, and integrity.

Ability. A key component of trustworthiness is perceived competence or expertise. The trustor must believe that the trustee has the ability to perform the given task. Ability is always domain-specific: I might trust a pilot to fly my plane but not to do surgery.

Benevolence. Trustworthiness is based on the quality of the relationship. The trustor must believe that the trustee, whether a person or institution, has benevolent motives or intentions toward them and has their best interests at heart.

Integrity. Trustworthiness depends on accountability. The trustor must believe that the trustee will adhere to a set of principles that the trustor supports and that is enforced either by personal integrity or institutional guardrails.

All three components are necessary for trust. For instance, you might not trust a surgeon who is competent and benevolent if the surgeon faces no consequences for making mistakes.

A 2015 study, "Measuring Laypeople's Trust in Experts in a Digital Age: The Muenster Epistemic Trustworthiness Inventory (METI)," found that digital news poses particular challenges for people deciding whether to have confidence in what they read online.

Readers struggled to determine the competence (ability) of the sources of information "without themselves possessing much topic-specific knowledge," the authors of the study Friederike Hendriks, Dorothe Kienhues, and Rainer Bromme wrote.

The digital world also posed additional integrity challenges, the authors concluded: "Because virtually anyone may publish online without gatekeepers such as publishers or editors, it is up to the recipient to assess online sources for trustworthiness and information on their credibility."

This is the world that traditional journalism has been operating in — one which places readers in a difficult position of assessing competence, benevolence, and integrity from media outlets that provide them little to no insight into those factors. It's no wonder that trust is low.

Creators operate in the same low-trust digital environment. Audiences don't necessarily expect them to have expertise, benevolence, or integrity. A 2023 study showed that most people are skeptical of content creators' product recommendations, and a 2022 study of German young adults'

news consumption found that viewers mostly fact-checked news they heard from online influencers by searching on Google to ensure that the same information was displayed across multiple sites.

It turns out creators have a key advantage: they entered the digital arena knowing they had to build trust, while journalists entered it assuming they could bring their legacy of trustworthiness with them. As a result, creators are working hard to gain trust from their audiences while journalists have been largely taking it for granted.

Let's examine how creators and journalists approach each element of trustworthiness.

Demonstrated Ability

Journalism has a complicated relationship with demonstrating expertise. Most newsrooms prize reporters skilled in the processes of journalism — cultivating sources, verifying information and writing quickly and concisely — but this type of expertise is not transparent to the public.

It is less common for mainstream media newsrooms to recruit reporters with formal credentials in the domain on which they report. Occasionally there will be a doctor covering medicine, or a lawyer covering legal issues, but those are the exception, not the rule.

Even if a journalist has developed expertise from covering a subject for decades, the norms of "objectivity" in traditional newsrooms often discourage journalists from relying on their own expertise. Instead, they often must cloak their expertise in quotes from outside voices or with lines like "experts say" or "critics say."

Traditional newsrooms also focus very little time on advertising their reporters' expertise. Recently, some news outlets have started adding more details to reporters' online biographies in an attempt to bolster trust but it is not clear whether readers ever visit those bios or find the information compelling proof of expertise, and that expertise is rarely showcased or referred to in the journalism produced by the reporters.

By comparison, creators prioritize demonstrating their expertise directly to their audiences. Many creators specialize in a particular topic, and those with expertise often describe it in every video. TikTokers Mohammad Siyab Panhwar, a doctor who debunks medical misinformation, and Volkan Yilmaz, a leather maker who dissects luxury handbags, said they both mention their credentials in every video.

YouTuber Sam Denby said that he structures his videos "the reverse of journalists." Journalists make a point, then give the supporting evidence, he says. "We flip it," he said. "We walk through the evidence to get to the point. Sometimes we don't even give a full point, but let people come to it themselves."

Denby said that YouTubers also increasingly include citations in the descriptions below their videos. "If you upload an educational video and you don't have citations, then you get called out," he said. By comparison, journalists vary in how comprehensively they cite their evidence. Some outlets are more rigorous about linking to previous reporting and identifying sources than others, and newsrooms often don't respond to criticism about their choices.

Visual evidence is also key to the online video format. Creators often use a "green screen" background that allows them to project information behind them. Audiences "don't want to just hear you talk, they want to see something — even if they can't read it," said TikToker Meredith Lynch.

Perceived Benevolence

Journalists often perceive themselves as benevolent and working to represent the public interest, but that view is increasingly not shared by their audiences.

Only 23% of viewers believe U.S. national news organizations care about the best interests of their readers, viewers, and listeners, according to a 2022 study by Gallup and the Knight Foundation. This number is higher for local news, with 47% of Americans believing that local news organizations have their best interests at heart, but this still represents less than half of the audience.

Even worse, a full 50% of Americans believe that national news organizations actively intend to mislead or misinform the public, the survey found. Researchers have found that U.S. audiences express concerns about the political and class biases of journalists, as well as the economic incentives for journalists to sensationalize the news.

Research shows that suspicion of a profit motive is a key factor in assessing benevolence, which can put journalists at a disadvantage. Many of the largest national media companies are owned by wealthy individuals with political agendas or conglomerates with relentless profit incentives. Many regional news outlets are now owned by private equity firms that are hollowing them out for profit. These institutions serve their shareholders first and foremost.

Audiences are being rational when they are skeptical of these media institutions' motives — even if the journalists who work in these institutions do not share the motives of their employers. Individual journalists often work to overcome institutional distrust by developing their online personas on social media. However, individual journalists do not always have the freedom to respond directly to user requests and comments.

By comparison, creators are generally small businesses, often run by an individual or with just a few people. Audiences are also skeptical of the financial motives of online creators, but creators use

various techniques to demonstrate benevolence. One common theme among the creators I convened was that they all saw their work as a service to their communities and evaluated their work through the lens of whether it was helpful to the viewer.

Many said they also try to respond to audience requests for content — something that journalists rarely do. “Users will see something suspicious, tag me and ask me to make a duet,” which is a video that responds to another user’s video, Panhwar said.

Sam Denby, the YouTuber, said that he also follows the audience’s lead in deciding what content to make. “When we do work that you might describe as accountability, we might just call it an explainer with a political perspective,” he said. “That is what works for our audience.”

Another key element is how they disclose paid partnerships. Younger audiences avoid influencers who appear to be pushing brand partnerships, according to a 2022 study. TikTokers Lynch and Panhwar said they don’t take brand deals because audiences are skeptical of them. “It’s more credible if I don’t monetize my content,” Panhwar said. Leathermaker Yilmaz rarely mentions his leather brand in his videos for the same reason.

Seeing creators in their own homes and cars also builds credibility. “I’m just a regular guy walking down the street in my scrubs. My hair looks like crap,” Panhwar said. “It’s like you’re talking to a friend of yours about this rather than, you know, talking head on CNN. It’s very relatable.”

Integrity

Many newsrooms have strong ethical standards — including rules to prevent conflicts of interest and methods to ensure that subjects are provided an opportunity to respond to any allegations — but usually those practices and enforcement of them are not particularly visible to the public.

What the public sees is a variety of enforcement mechanisms that are lacking. Many news outlets have removed their comment sections, or if they have them, they do not engage with the comments in them. Many leading newsrooms have removed their ombudsmen or public editors, who previously served as a source of accountability, and there is no professional journalism organization that sanctions bad journalists, the way that a doctor can lose their license, or a lawyer can be disbarred.

Often, journalists can feel most accountable to their bosses and to their sources who will call and yell at them if they get something wrong. This insularity can enable high-profile missteps like New York Times journalist Judith Miller’s credulous reporting of fabricated intelligence fed to her by her sources.

As a result, only 40% of Americans said that journalists have "very high" or "high" ethical standards, in a 2020 Pew Research Center survey. Disturbingly, most respondents (56%) said that journalists have "low" or "very low" standards.

Creators operate in a different environment. Much of their work is "policed" by the platforms that host their content. As a result, a certain portion of complaints about creator content is directed at the platforms rather than the creators themselves.

Creators and their audiences also hold each other accountable in meaningful ways in the comments section. When YouTuber Tim Pool was recently found to have been secretly taking payments from Russian operatives, for instance, commenters flooded his videos with posts mocking him for his Russian ties. By comparison, major media outlets compete fiercely behind the scenes but are often loath to call each other out publicly for missteps.

Many creators said they make it a practice to engage with commenters immediately after posting a video. "I take one hour to look at comments," said Yilmaz. "It gives me immediate feedback that I can learn from."

Panhwar said commenters can be vicious: "If you post something and it's wrong, TikTokers will rip you apart." On TikTok, it's common for creators to post follow-up videos in their comment sections responding directly to critics, and sometimes beefs between creators can take on an entire life of their own.

Unlike journalists, creators also feel more comfortable expressing uncertainty to their audiences. Ernest Crim said he often uses hedging language when he talks about news, such as "based on what we know now," to highlight gaps in his knowledge. In one video, Yimaz tried to track down a fake luxury brand site in Turkey, but couldn't find it, so he told the audience directly that he hadn't succeeded and asked for their help.

Conclusion

What emerges most clearly from this comparison of journalists and creators is that journalism has placed many markers of trust in institutional processes that are opaque to audiences, while creators try to embed the markers of trust directly in their interactions with audiences.

Journalists (generally) do have competence, are motivated to serve their audiences, and are held accountable to ethical standards within their newsrooms. But because none of that is visible to the audience — and crucially, the audience often does not feel like they have agreed to the same set of standards — they are often viewed with skepticism.

Creators, on the other hand, are starting from a deficit on all three fronts. Audiences do not grant them a default position on any of the trust metrics, and so creators have to work hard to gain trust. They do that in large part through the ways that they interact with and take their audiences seriously.

Journalists could be inspired by creators to rethink how we engage with audiences, moving from casual ad-hoc engagement to more structured and thoughtful connections built around the elements of trustworthiness.

To demonstrate competence, journalists could describe their reporting processes more clearly and focus on demonstrating domain expertise. Some newsrooms have started adding more personal biographical details to bolster their reporters' credentials, which is a good start but not nearly enough.

To truly tackle the competence issue requires a rethinking of the antiquated journalistic notion of "objectivity" which has somehow evolved into a competition for journalists to prove their ideological emptiness. Journalist Wesley Lowery brilliantly captures this distortion in his essay on the failure of objectivity, describing how "rather than emphasize a fair reporting process, [journalists] focused obsessively on the appearance and performance of supposed personal objectivity."

Shedding this notion of personal purity in favor of embracing rigor and expertise could change the way news is presented. The way we are approaching it at my newsroom, Proof News, is by providing an ingredients label for each investigation — which describes our techniques and approach — and by explicitly partnering with experts, whether it is with a TikTok Black history creator using our AI testing tool or a social scientist researcher collaborating with us to develop a methodology for AI testing.

The newsroom Semafor includes in each article a section for reporters to specifically demonstrate their expertise on a topic with a section of the story labeled as the "Reporters View" and another section explicitly set aside for a skeptical view.

To show benevolence, journalists must first confront the fact that the corporate ownership of their newsrooms — and the profit motives that encourage clickbait, sensationalism and cozying up to power — can engender distrust. Once we acknowledge that, we can work to overcome it.

Another technique journalists could borrow from creators is focusing more on service journalism. Online video is rife with creators who share their expertise in recipes, fix-it techniques etc., and yet in newsrooms, "news you can use" reporting is often considered less prestigious than other beats. Newsrooms like Documented, which provides resources and how-tos to the New York immigrant community, offer a vision of what a more service-oriented approach could look like.

A commitment to providing service could go a long way toward countering the belief that journalists are incentivized to chase ever more sensational headlines and hot takes. It's tricky to balance true public interest with the interest of the loudest voices in a community, but a good journalist should be able to use their expertise to sort the wheat from the chaff.

Finally, demonstrating integrity is where journalists likely have the most work to do. The creator community can be unruly, with creators sometimes performatively dueling through videos to attract attention. Despite some of the excesses, the level of engagement between creators and their audiences seeking to hold each other accountable provides an underlying feeling that bad deeds will most likely be punished, even if sometimes that can look a bit like a vigilante mob.

By comparison, audiences have almost no meaningful leverage with traditional news outlets. Journalists who have made egregious errors or fed the public false information of grave importance often keep their jobs with few consequences. Critics who try to hold journalists accountable are often dismissed and ignored by newsrooms that have closed their comment sections and fired their ombudsmen.

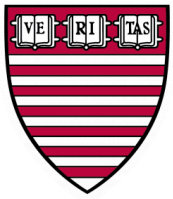
There are good reasons that journalists should seek to insulate themselves from the most cynical and bad faith of critics who seek to sway their coverage. But in doing so, journalists have, in some sense, placed themselves in an ivory tower that is largely beholden to sources and internal ethics monitors, rather than to the public.

Finding a way to provide more meaningful accountability to the public is the most urgent work for rebuilding trust in journalism. Even small steps would help, like hiring public editors to engage with readers and investing in the tools and staff needed to manage reader comments.

The most meaningful accountability to the public comes with interacting with the public — what we used to call "shoe leather" reporting. Reporters who cover immigration should talk to immigrants, their families, and the businesses that employ them as often as they talk to experts and policymakers. Reporters who cover crime should talk to the communities of the victims and perpetrators as much or more than they talk to the police.

The rise of "engagement reporting" — where journalists reach out to people directly affected by issues such as health care — is a good move but is still expensive, rare, and under-resourced in most newsrooms.

Of course, everything I am suggesting costs money and time, which is difficult as newsroom budgets get squeezed. However, to not address or acknowledge the trust deficit is an even greater risk not just to journalism, but to journalism's goal: holding power to account.



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