



Depth and Breadth: How News Organisations Navigate Trade-Offs Around Building Trust in News

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The logo for the Trust in News Project features a white, semi-circular arc above the text "TRUST IN NEWS PROJECT" in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

**TRUST IN NEWS
PROJECT**



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1. Introduction

The global climate for journalism is challenging, if not outright hostile in some places, with little apparent signs of improvement any time soon. This year's Reuters Institute *Digital News Report* (Newman et al. 2021) showed rising rates of concern about the quality of the information environment in many countries. On average, across the 46 markets covered in this year's report, nearly six in ten said they were concerned about differentiating between what is real and what is fake on the internet. Some blame digital platforms for allowing discredited rumours to reverberate widely, sowing seeds of doubt about all information online, and see conventional newsgathering as a crucial remedy to this growing uncertainty. However, much of the public see news organisations themselves, rightly or wrongly, as part of the problem rather than the solution (Livio and Cohen 2016; Palmer et al. 2020; Riedl and Eberl 2020). More widely, prior research shows low and declining rates of trust in news in many places around the world (Fletcher 2020; Jones 2018; Hanitzsch et al. 2018).

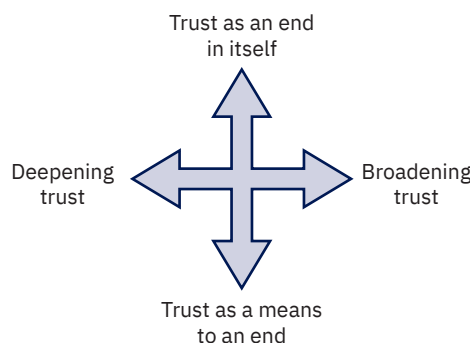
Against this backdrop, in October we invited representatives from a diverse range of news organisations around the world to participate in a series of virtual roundtable discussions about their perspectives on what may be driving this erosion in trust and how they think about restoring trust with audiences in their countries. We created this forum to bring researchers and journalists working across a variety of environments and organisational structures into dialogue with each other, and in this report we detail many of the concerns, questions, and insights gleaned from these conversations.

Overall, the journalists who participated in these roundtables were generally concerned and pessimistic about the current state of affairs. Many focused on external forces they felt constrained their organisations' abilities to build and sustain trust. These included digital platforms, such as Facebook, Google, and WhatsApp, which many saw as obstacles to fostering meaningful engagement with audiences. Others were more focused on powerful political headwinds, which they worried deeply influenced the public's receptivity to the information they reported. (Academic research generally supports these latter worries, highlighting how politicians provide elite cues for their supporters and can drive polarisation, often undermining trust in news [see, for example, Clayton et al. 2021; Ladd 2011; Li and Wagner 2020; Van Duyn and Collier 2019]).

The assembled journalists often underscored these external forces when discussing their own news organisations' strategies around building trust with audiences. All media face trade-offs when considering how to deploy scarce resources most effectively, and many grappled openly with identifying which audiences to target for trust-building initiatives and why. Two sets of choices come through clearly in our roundtables. First, the question of *who*: do journalists and news media seek to *deepen* trust with audiences most similar to those they are already reaching? Or do they seek to broaden trust by focusing on new (currently indifferent, sceptical, or even hostile) audiences they would like to reach? Second, the question of *why*: do journalists and news media seek to build trust because it is seen as intrinsically important, an end in itself? Or do they do it because it is seen as a means to an end – for example, driving audience engagement, membership, or subscriptions? These gradations around 'who' and 'why'

are illustrated in Figure 1. They are not either/or questions, but they capture differences in emphasis. Few journalists or news media will be in a position to pursue all of them with equal dedication.

Figure 1. The ‘who’ and ‘why’ of building trust in news with audiences



How news outlets navigated these questions varied widely depending on business models – among other factors, whether they were private or public service media, or whether they relied on advertising or subscription revenues – but, at a basic level, most roundtable participants expressed uncertainty about how to identify target audiences and how to measure success beyond existing metrics such as clicks, follower counts, and subscriptions.

In practice, given finite resources, competing priorities, and the various pressures news organisations face, when describing engagement strategies many focused on building trust with particular segments of the public rather than with all readers or viewers. Likewise, many discussed trust as being valuable in itself but most especially as a means towards various ends. The result is that trust-building initiatives tend to be focused on deepening trust among somewhat narrow audiences: those most likely to become loyal users or paying members or subscribers, rather than the mass public more broadly.

While this makes sense for individual organisations, it may pose a problem for journalism more generally. If news outlets each focus on building trust with those already most likely to trust them – and many already compete for attention, trust, and reader revenue from the same, often *already* relatively trusting (and privileged) parts of the public – the people most indifferent to or distrusting towards news, who are most difficult to reach and most resistant to such appeals, and frankly often less commercially attractive, are at risk of being left behind or further alienated. Doubling down on serving those who already trust and engage with journalism is reasonable given the pressures and incentives news organisations face, but it is unlikely to change minds among those who do not trust journalism or even actively distrust it. This is a critically important collective challenge at a time when many political actors around the world seek to sow distrust in the professionalism and purpose of an independent press among many of these same disaffected constituencies.

1.1 Background and Overview

What we heard echoes many of the themes our team of Reuters Institute researchers have been grappling with over the past year as part of the larger, multi-year Trust in News Project, which

seeks to examine the subject in a more focused, sustained, and internationally comparative manner than previous efforts to date. By studying trust in news in depth across four countries – two from the Global South (Brazil and India) and two from the Global North (the United Kingdom and the United States) – we seek a more nuanced understanding of what trust means to different audiences around the world, how it is earned, how it is lost, and what can be done to provide people with the tools they need to make more informed decisions around the sources of information available to them.

To date, we have published three reports. The first from a year ago (Toff et al. 2020), sought to summarise the state of existing academic research on trust in news and drew on one-to-one interviews with journalists to assess the major unanswered questions on many journalists' minds in all four countries. In a second report this spring (Toff et al. 2021a), we compared what we heard in these interviews to what we heard from news audiences, using qualitative data in the form of in-depth interviews and small-group discussions with both high- and low-trusting individuals in each country. We found key differences between the way journalists tend to think about trust in news and what audiences say they pay attention to when evaluating and differentiating between the news outlets they encounter. Mostly, audiences were more focused on visible characteristics of news, the way sources look and feel, and a sense of familiarity with brands' track records and heritage. While many believed journalistic standards and editorial processes were important, few felt especially qualified to evaluate organisations on this basis, even as journalists tended to regard such characteristics as central to their own brands' reputation and reliability.

We followed up these findings with an additional report this autumn (Toff et al. 2021b), presenting results from original representative surveys we conducted this summer in all four countries. We focused on people we called the 'generally untrusting' – individuals who said they trusted few or no news outlets in their country at all – and we showed how this group differed from the most vocal and ideological critics of news. Untrusting audiences tended to be much less interested in politics, less plugged in to the way journalists go about their work, and less knowledgeable about journalistic standards and practices. Reaching such indifferent audiences, we argued, requires somewhat different strategies than those employed to engage with already interested news consumers.

We note these findings here to highlight the context of what follows, but this report aims to be forward-facing with two main objectives. First, as our project prepares to collect additional data on news audiences over the year ahead, this report seeks to step back and take stock of new developments around the study of trust in news, much of which we highlight in relation to relevant points raised by journalists in roundtables in the sections of the report that follow.

Second, as a team of researchers removed from the daily pressures involved in the practice of journalism, we must also continually assess whether our research is focused on the questions that are most urgent and resonant to communities of practice. We aim to produce findings that are not only of interest to academic communities but 'socially robust' (Nielsen 2018; Nowotny 2003) as well. If we aim for our findings to be useful in concrete ways to the news as an industry, we must therefore study news audiences in parallel with efforts such as this report, which also considers the perspectives of a variety of practitioners.

1.2 Roundtables on Trust in News

To that end, during the week of 4 October 2021 our team of researchers convened a series of nine virtual roundtable discussions with journalists and senior newsroom managers from the four countries that are the focus of this larger project: Brazil, India, the UK, and the US. A total of 54 individuals from a variety of organisations participated in these sessions, from small, local, and niche online publications to large, industry-leading brands, including the *New York Times* in the US, the BBC in the UK, and Globo in Brazil. A full list is provided in the Appendix.¹

Each roundtable lasted approximately one hour and 15 minutes and was moderated by a member of the research team. Most were conducted in English with a mix of journalists from each of the countries, but three with Brazilian participants were conducted in Portuguese. Where we quote from these exchanges we do so using English translations.

The roundtables were semi-structured and, where possible, free-fl wing and conversational, with a focus on three main questions:

1. What specific initiatives had news organisations tried or considered trying in the past to build trust with specific audiences? What did and did not work?
2. What were the main challenges and obstacles journalists saw preventing their news organisations from building or sustaining trust?
3. How did journalists see their relationships with digital platforms, including Facebook, Google, and WhatsApp? What opportunities did they see in engaging with audiences through these intermediaries? What limitations or drawbacks had they encountered?

1.3 Key takeaways

Not surprisingly, given the international comparative focus of this project, roundtable participants faced somewhat different problems in different places and had unique insights and experiences. Nonetheless, we focus on some common themes, which we summarise here:

- **A lack of control and minimal optimism.** Many journalists, especially those from smaller news outlets, expressed frustration about what they perceived as their organisations' limited ability to confront the larger challenges they faced in bridging gaps in trust, with digital audiences especially. Reaching distrusting audiences could, often understandably, feel like a secondary concern to more existential questions about how to survive financially or how to respond to an onslaught of toxic and threatening criticism online.
- **A need to focus strategically on who is persuadable and who is not.** Many journalists described how their organisations grappled with deciding on which audiences to build trust with: those most similar to already trusting audiences versus harder-to-reach,

¹ Invitations were extended to a range of additional news organisations beyond those listed but scheduling constraints and other factors limited who participated.

untrusting audiences, who others even suggested should be written off as a lost cause. Organisational mission and structure often dictated the way outlets evaluated trade-offs around these questions.

- **Ambivalence about whether to give up on the ‘generally untrusting’ audiences.** While some non-profit or mission-driven organisations saw it as essential to focus on building trust among even those audiences least interested in news and most indifferent towards journalism, many others questioned the value of doing so. Audience engagement strategies require trade-offs, and with scarce resources it can make little sense to focus on building trust with audiences most resistant to such appeals. We think this points to a larger collective problem for trust in the institution of news in all four countries; few individual news organisations have clear incentives for investing in building trust with indifferent, sceptical, or outright hostile parts of the public.
- **Balancing depth versus breadth when building a foundation for trust.** Beyond the strategic question of balancing between deepening trust with existing audiences and broadening trust with new audiences, journalists often described tensions around how best to make use of digital platforms in engaging with audiences. Membership-driven and subscription-based news organisations were particularly sensitive to this question, noting that what is helpful for ‘reach’, or attracting attention online, was often very different from the ‘depth’ they felt audiences willing to pay for news were actually looking to support. Reader-revenue-based organisations who see trust as, in part, a means towards other ends (signing up and retaining paying members or subscribers) have clearer incentives to invest in trust-building activities but may also be more likely to focus on depth over breadth.
- **Uncertain strategies around promoting brand identity and few mechanisms to measure success.** While some roundtable participants emphasised the value of editorial initiatives as important for trust, such as fact-checking verticals or improving coverage of subjects relevant to underserved audiences, others placed greater emphasis on brand-level communication strategies, such as engagement and outreach in ways less directly tied to news content. These included events, partnerships with community organisations, and other non-editorial initiatives. Many described such initiatives positively, but few pointed to systematic efforts for tracking their effectiveness.

2. A Challenging Climate for Building Trust

In this section, we focus on how roundtable participants talked about the current environment for news in their countries and what they often perceived to be a distressing level of enmity directed towards journalists. With some exceptions – such as more established brands who felt more comfortable about their standing with much of the public – many blamed the combination of digital platforms and the politicians and other actors they allow to attack the press with impunity online as primary obstacles to building and sustaining trust with broader audiences.

2.1 Polarisation, hostility, and ‘echo chambers’

The mood across most of the roundtables was typically grim, even as participants themselves were often supportive and thoughtful towards each other. Many participants expressed concern about the level of animosity and vitriol directed at journalists within their own organisations and in their countries more generally. Many focused on what they perceived as significant external constraints on their own newsrooms’ abilities to cultivate trust with the public. Most, especially smaller organisations, felt they had little control over the way people saw and interacted with their brands in these spaces.

DIGITAL PLATFORMS AS ‘ECHO CHAMBERS’ FOR BAD-FAITH CRITICISM

Although most held somewhat ambivalent attitudes toward digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, WhatsApp, and YouTube – a ‘double-edged sword’ as Laura Collins, Editor, *Yorkshire Evening Post* (UK) put it – these companies were typically viewed negatively on balance and seen as a major reason why growing portions of the public distrusted professionally produced news and journalism.

Many believed that platforms and their algorithms facilitated ‘echo chambers’ such that messages from like-minded voices reverberated incessantly, sowing distrust towards uncomfortable facts or opposing viewpoints. Many blamed platforms particularly for elevating the voices of bad-faith critics, including political leaders with their own axes to grind towards independent journalism.² As Paula Miraglia, CEO and co-founder of Nexo (Brazil) said, ‘The media has been constantly attacked by the president’ and digital platforms often provide the means. Many lamented what they saw as an inability of their own organisations to get a fair hearing in these spaces amid a wider discourse about news they felt they had little control over.

‘Algorithms make it difficult for us to break through,’ Pedro Borges, Editor-in-Chief and co-founder of Alma Preta (Brazil), explained. He believes platforms reward engagement with polarising content. Adding the names of politicians like Lula and Bolsonaro to stories online is an easy way to attract more clicks, but rarely in a way that ‘pierces the bubble’ across supporters

² We note that prior research has suggested that concerns about ‘echo chambers’ and ‘filter bubbles’ may be overstated for most members of the public (e.g. Eady et al. 2019; Guess 2021); however, even if only a small share of the public engages with information on platforms in this way, they may still be a vocal share of those who are negatively engaging with news organisations online.

of different political figures. When his own news organisation succeeded in doing so, the result was typically unproductive.

When this bubble is somehow punctured, it means that, I don't know, Eduardo Bolsonaro or someone from the Bolsonaro's family shares some content and it's, 'Let's just go and attack these people!' And then a bunch of grotesque comments show up. People don't even bother to open the article to read it. They just look at the title and then they start throwing insults of the lowest kind.

Pedro Borges, Editor-in-Chief and co-founder of Alma Preta (Brazil)

Others likewise blamed platforms for failing to distinguish positive from negative engagement and rewarding both instead (see also Hagey and Horwitz 2021).

Facebook or Twitter probably do not care about the difference between positive likes and negative likes or angry buttons and things like that, but I think we as editorial people know and care about what kind of engagement is good and what kind of engagement is bad.

Ramanathan S., Partner, Content and Strategy, The News Minute (India)

Complicating concerns about the impact of algorithms was an acknowledgement that such criticism of news often spreads privately on messaging services like WhatsApp or Telegram or on social media groups and message boards. As P. Kim Bui, Director of Product and Audience Innovation at the *Arizona Republic* (USA) noted, people are turning to digital spaces 'where people are finding community in and of itself, where they might have had a lack before, especially during COVID,' making it uniquely challenging to stop misinformation.

[The platforms] will be like, 'Oh, we have removed all of these publishers who are very clearly fake news from the Facebook algorithm.' Great, but that doesn't stop people from copy-pasting that news and putting it in a group. And I truly do not know what the answer is to that.

P. Kim Bui, Director of Product and Audience Innovation, *Arizona Republic* (USA)

HARASSMENT AND TARGETING OF JOURNALISTS

Concerns about the climate for journalism in all four countries went well beyond concerns about echo chambers. Many roundtable participants expressed alarm about what they saw as extreme hostility and resentment from vocal segments of the public. Sometimes such enmity rose to the level of threats of violence, as several noted, especially for women and reporters of colour (see also Ferrier 2018). Some talked about needing to hire security in response to specific incidents. Bui (USA), for example, said she had 'never in my life dealt with more death threats against our reporters than in the past couple of years'. Like many others, she pointed towards social media as sites where users are 'pretty much egging each other on and pushing each other to that limit where they do say some really hateful, terrible things'.

It's toxic. Twitter in particular, but also Facebook. And in the United States, certainly in the last year, year and a half, it's a constant source of attack for both the institution, and more seriously, at a very personal level, at the journalists. And that has a really harmful, corrosive effect on the morale of people, even on the safety of people. For the first time, we have relationships with law enforcement where we reach out to them and seek their help, which

journalists do not like to do, because somebody has been threatened in a very specific way and it's all through social media.

Gabriel Escobar, Editor and Senior Vice President, *Philadelphia Enquirer* (USA)

Laura Collins, Editor at the *Yorkshire Evening Post* (UK), described a focused effort around 'trying to clean up our Facebook pages in particular' and 'make our Facebook pages a safer and nicer place to be' in response to the way younger female reporters on the staff would be treated when 'out and about doing Facebook Live, say, from crime scenes, for example. We'd have a lot of really negative comments just talking about their appearance, or the way that they're dressed, and it really, really impacted the team'.

Several of the Indian journalists in the roundtables focused on what they saw as state-sponsored or co-ordinated harassment, including via platforms but also more generally through the legal system. Ritu Kapur, Editor of *The Quint* (India) pointed to 'well-oiled, well-funded machineries of IT cells which are constantly out to discredit not just organisations like some of ours, but also to individually discredit journalists.' Kapur added that 'enforcement directed raids, income tax raids' and other techniques were used for 'harassing people and slowing a lot of us into legal processes' but that they also had the effect of undermining news organisations with their audiences 'because to the lay reader, the view is, there must be something wrong with the organisation for the enforcement director to have done that raid'.

Abhinandan Sekhri, founder and CEO of NewsLaundry (India), criticised platforms for 'incentivising' the spread of false information directed at legitimate news organisations. Referencing President Duterte in the Philippines and the way he has used public platforms to antagonise Maria Ressa and her news organisation Rappler, Sekhri said, 'That happens in India all the time. That happens with Trump all the time.'

2.2 A lack of control online

In addition to concerns about harassment and echo chambers online, many roundtable participants pointed to other external challenges they felt constrained their abilities to cultivate trust with audiences online. Many specifically voiced concern that the type of news content most likely to garner trust with audiences was often distinct from the stories that platforms rewarded and incentivised with interactions and attention. As Escobar, the Editor of the *Inquirer* (USA) said, 'We don't have any control. I mean, this is not the newsstand of the 1970s, where the *Inquirer* was right there front and centre, and you could just go and pick it up.' Instead, the modern version of the newsstand 'is really mysterious' and depends on 'somebody else that's essentially screening the content and making it available to different people depending on a complex formula, so we have no control over that'.

There are so many opportunities now for people to almost throw those grenades on social media and be like, 'This is all rubbish' or 'we don't believe a word you're saying about this' and then they just walk away and that's it. And that can really damage the reputation of a title.

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

TRADING DEPTH AND QUALITY FOR BREADTH AND SCALE IN ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

Several participants described engaging with audiences on platforms in paradoxical terms.

Many believed that the quality and depth of their reporting was the main reason why audiences should trust their organisations but said such coverage typically did not fare as well when forced to compete online for audiences' fleeting attention on digital platforms.

For some, this problem around depth versus breadth manifested as a concern about the quality of the information platforms helped amplify. As Sara Lomax-Reese, President and CEO of WURD Radio (USA), framed it, news organisations are often 'trying to get scale through the platforms', but in doing so they must contend with attention-grabbing 'information that is often misinformation or disinformation' and algorithms that too often reward outrage over civility.

We have incredible trust that has been built in our audience because we give voice, we turn over our platform to the people, basically. So, we're in constant dialogue with the Black community in Philadelphia who feel a sense of ownership in this media organisation because their voices are not heard anywhere else. So when we talk about trust it cuts both ways, because sometimes there are people who are deeply uninformed who are given the opportunity to share their perspectives, their truths, whatever you want to call it, and we have to constantly navigate what is true and what is maybe misinformation, disinformation.

Sara Lomax-Reese, President and CEO, WURD Radio (USA)

For other news outlets, the depth versus breadth issue meant they struggled to communicate to audiences that their brand identities include more 'reportage' or 'analysis that isn't polemical'. As Rohan Venkat, Deputy Editor at Scroll (India) said, 'It's something that we find quite hard and we have to keep innovating in trying to convey that the format, the medium, is more complex than just what the headline contains.' He continued, 'Putting the entire weight of distribution on a headline and image is something that, I think, everyone has struggled with.'

We end up basing our choices on this constant fight for the audience, and we end up being addicted to it, and we end up relegating other points of contact with the audience that we could invest more in.

Rodrigo Hornhardt, Management of Integration and Journalism Planning, SBT (Brazil)

This 'flattening of news' on platforms, as Venkat put it, makes it harder for brands to 'individualise, to make evident that your quality comes from the publication and not individual headlines or stories'. In fact, prior research has provided evidence of precisely this problem; audiences who access news on platforms often have a difficult time remembering the sources of information they click on (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019). Others echoed similar sentiments.

Platforms are terrible at helping consumers understand what brand that information is from. Brands get completely, sort of, almost dissipated in the world of the Facebooks and social media and others.

Katie Vanneck-Smith, co-founder and Publisher of Tortoise (UK)

MONITORING WHAT HAPPENS TO STORIES AFTER THEY ARE PUBLISHED

In addition to concerns about the kinds of content that algorithms reward, others noted the importance of gaining a better understanding of how their own news organisation's content got used and misused by others after it was published or broadcast. As Paul Volpe, editor of a new

team focused on trust in news at the *New York Times* (USA), said, ‘We used to think that once you published a story, that was the end of it, and now that’s only the beginning.’

There’s a lot of conversation that happens on platforms, off platforms, on TV, social media, and a lot of people haven’t even read the article and they are responding to a headline, they are responding to what they’re seeing and what they’ve heard about that story. And so being aware of that conversation that’s happening – it’s not always necessarily about engaging or defending – but just having an awareness that it’s out there, and maybe that can be helpful as we publish things further on that subject matter.

Paul Volpe, Editor, Trust Team, *New York Times* (USA)

Taneth Evans, Associate Editor of *The Sunday Times* (UK), noted that since her news organisation’s reporting is behind a paywall, ‘it’s a real battle for us’ because ‘so many people only see the headline, or sometimes the top sentence, or sometimes someone shares something totally out of context and all they have is the – unless they kind of pay for a trial or whatever – all they have to put that into context is the headline.’

We’ve started to really think more carefully – ‘How will this look as a standalone if people don’t read the article?’ – but that’s not good. That’s not how we – we’re not in the business of writing headlines only, without articles to go with them. So that’s a real issue for us, and I don’t know what the answer is.

Taneth Evans, Associate Editor, *The Sunday Times* (UK)

2.3 Uncertainty about which audiences to build trust with

Amid these external challenges and constraints, many roundtable participants said they had become somewhat less interested in chasing after reach and scale on platforms and instead increasingly focused on relationships with select segments of the public. Determining which audiences to focus on, however, could be challenging in its own right.

TRYING TO REACH EVERYONE

Some of the more established brands felt relatively confident in their positions and believed they had a well-earned reputation for trustworthy, balanced, and reliable journalism. As Tony Gallagher, Deputy Editor at *The Times* (UK) said, ‘I think we’re in the lucky position of already having a relatively high reputation for trust’, adding, ‘We’re obviously keen to go further because you want everybody to trust you.’ Gallagher emphasised his organisation’s hard paywall, which served as ‘a good corrective to us when we think we’ve gone down the wrong path or we’ve alienated a core element of the audience’, as they will express disapproval by threatening to cancel subscriptions.

Others offered a more mission-driven perspective on the importance of reaching and serving entire populations of readers or viewers. As Suki Dardarian, Managing Editor of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (USA), said, ‘We care about our whole state. We feel like we serve and must serve our whole state.’ At the same time Dardarian, like many others, was conflicted about the trade-offs required to do so and the challenges around reaching those populations most resistant to news.

If there're older, disinterested people, how hard do I have to work to get those people, when I have a bunch of younger people coming in who might be more interested? Like, I'm not saying I'm writing them off, but you know, if I have to make some choices ...

Suki Dardarian, Managing Editor, *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (USA)

Roundtable participants from other news organisations expressed a similar uncertainty about how selective to be around whom to build trust with. Volpe said the *New York Times* was continually looking at 'where we want to concentrate our efforts', recognising that there are both 'hardcore loyalists who already believe you' as well as 'the unconvertible who maybe never will'. A third group, he speculated, might be those who do not yet know what to think: 'Maybe it's a younger audience, maybe it's someone who's not exposed as much to media.' Determining precisely which audiences have the greatest potential to become trusting and committed readers remains an ongoing challenge.

IMPORTANCE OF BUSINESS MODELS AND OWNERSHIP

Variation in how organisations navigate this question depends in a large part on how news outlets are structured and, relatedly, their sense of purpose. In contrast to advertising-driven commercial news organisations, non-profit membership-supported, or donation-funded organisations are often more narrowly focused on specific audience groups rather than seeking to build trust broadly with the public. As Mehraj Lone, Senior Editor at Newslaundry (India), said, relying on subscriptions means that while 'hot takes' and 'opinion pieces and funny stuff' bring engagement online, the value of such content is questionable. Trust must be viewed through the lens of 'Why do people pay you? What is it that makes people subscribe for you?' Or as Sergio Spagnuolo, founder and Editor of Volt (Brazil), said, 'We need to grow with more quality, like people who actually engage and pay us, or become a member or something, than just to have eyeballs on the website.'

It is certainly true that in the early years of Scroll we were often very popular – and even today once in a while popular – because of, I would say, smart and sometimes polemical opinion, and that, of course, has the potential to draw in a large audience, but it tends to also condition the audience to expect broadly that even though the bulk of our investment in journalism goes into other things – reporting primarily.

Rohan Venkat, Deputy Editor, Scroll (India)

Some more niche outlets, including digital start-ups in all four countries, see themselves mainly as alternatives to dominant news outlets, which they believe have often poorly served certain audiences or are even aligned with corrupt figures in business or government. These perceptions make them more likely to draw lines around the specific audience segments they hope to serve.

Our model is different because we were starting with an audience that didn't trust news, so we were built to serve those people. And it's a little bit, I think, different from the experience of larger or more legacy newsrooms that have to deal with this change in audience. Our audience did not trust the news much because they didn't have good reason to, right? We serve predominantly a Black audience in Detroit that has been kind of maligned by and ignored by the mainstream media outlets here.

Sarah Alvarez, Founder and Editor, Outlier Media (USA)

Non-profit news organisations face their own unique challenges as they often seek to reach people ‘who will not necessarily be paying customers, but are integral to our work’, as Susan Chira, Editor-in-Chief of The Marshall Project (USA) put it. Her news organisation’s focus on issues around criminal justice in the US means they aim to ‘establish trust among a group of people who have had experiences with the criminal justice system, who are often poor and non-white. They don’t have the barrier of payment for us, but they have the barrier of feeling excluded or caricatured by the news media.’ She said they seek to do ‘a lot of experimentation’, some of which we summarise in the next section.

For some news outlets, the regulatory environment in their country – especially in the UK – plays a significant role in constraining their organisation’s ability to communicate at all with audiences about their own brand identity. As Ben de Pear, Editor at Channel 4 (UK), noted, ‘We’re actually not very good, I think, at saying “You should watch us because we do the following things”.’ He added:

We are so regulated here by a regulator; you can’t really talk about yourself or your journalism without falling into the trap of the Ofcom code.

Ben de Pear, Editor, Channel 4 (UK)

DECIDING WHOM TO IGNORE

Few roundtable participants were explicit about a desire to exclude groups from trust-building initiatives altogether, but some came closer than others to drawing lines around who might be out of reach.

‘We accepted the fact that everybody’s going to hate us for some reason at some point, and we try to educate folks as we come across them’, said Bui at the *Arizona Republic* (USA). ‘I feel like there are people on either side that don’t feel like they are going to be moved. And I don’t think it’s our job to convince them to move either way.’

I think there is a small group of people, in the minority, who are very far from trusting us. It’s not that this guy simply has a mistrust based on our eventual mistakes, which obviously exist because journalism is made of mistakes and successes. I think the distrust of this small segment of the population is so deep that I wonder how much energy has to be spent to convince this guy, who nowadays would fit the profile of a ‘complete denier’ here in Brazil.

Pedro Dias Leite, Executive Director, CBN (Brazil)

As one roundtable participant asked, while requesting that their comments remain unattributed to them, ‘Are you going to try and build trust with that bunch of people who are regularly trolling you online or attacking you online? No. I don’t want to build trust with such people.’ The key question instead is ‘Who do you want to build trust with?’ given that ‘in today’s market it’s impossible to build trust with every reader.’ This participant advocated for taking into consideration ‘broader editorial and moral values’ in order to ‘draw boundaries on which kind of an audience’ one seeks to build trust with and which to ignore.

Similarly, for smaller news operations, which cater to more niche audiences, many feel that building trust outside their core readership is a secondary concern. ‘It’s hard to just keep

running, right?’ said Alvarez from Outlier Media (USA). ‘It’s a difficult environment for news organisations, and so maintaining trust requires that you stay in business and are able to actually do your job.’

As important as it is, as fundamental as it is that our audience actually trusts us, and that even people who are not our audience but are in the community trust us, I think that often is not – that’s put kind of in the background. Because foregrounded is: ‘How are we going to keep paying people today?’ So I don’t think we can ever forget that, that people see this as urgent, but I think a lot of news organisations see it as, like, something that they still yet don’t have time for.

Sarah Alvarez, Founder and Editor, Outlier Media (USA)

3. Fostering Trust through Editorial Initiatives and Engagement

Despite the many external constraints roundtable participants noted – including those imposed by platforms and by the political environment – which limit their abilities to connect with audiences and build trust, news organisations are not resigned to doing nothing. Participants described a wide-ranging set of strategies and initiatives they have tried or considered trying in order to cultivate, sustain, or restore trust with core audiences.

In this section we recount many of the approaches discussed during these sessions and highlight a consistent theme we noticed throughout. Mostly, news organisations have few tools at their disposal for measuring the success or failure of these initiatives. Typically, newsrooms rely on limited and imperfect evidence: messages or feedback from select groups of readers or fluctuations in subscriptions or membership. As trust itself remains a difficult construct to measure (see, for example, Fawzi et al. 2021) – and is often seen as a means to an end – it is rare for news organisations to examine it directly.

3.1 Attaining trust through quality content

Many roundtable participants, when asked how their news organisation went about trying to build trust with audiences, focused overwhelmingly on the content of their reporting and newsgathering, hoping that their work would speak for itself. These participants placed a premium on editorial initiatives their organisations had spearheaded.

A FOCUS ON ACCURACY AND DIFFERENTIATING FACT FROM OPINION

For many news organisations, building trust is largely about building a reputation for quality and accuracy. Gallagher, Deputy Editor from *The Times* (UK), for example, talked about his organisation's emphasis on responding to reader concerns in a weekly column and correcting errors quickly and publicly: 'We found that readers like to see that, that they don't want you to be fighting a correction that takes months to emerge.'

Fact-checking initiatives also came up frequently as another way news organisations differentiated themselves in terms of their content. Rama Lakshmi, Editor for Opinion and Features at The Print (India), said one way The Print tries to signal to readers a commitment to accuracy has been by partnering with a fact-checking outlet and 'constantly busting fake information which is put out there on social media, on WhatsApp groups'.

We do try to be bold and strong with news published on social media, so R7 can be a reliable source of information on social media. And that's a challenge. The feeling I get is we do chase our own shadows, right? As we're working, and it takes time to fact-check information, and to convey said information to the public, that takes time. As you're dealing with this, there are hundreds of fake news stories being published in favour of any political spectrum, be it right-wing or left-wing ... it's very difficult, it's like drying ice.

Thiago Contreira, Content Director, Record (Brazil)

Others emphasised the importance of clarifying to readers the difference between opinion versus factual reporting, although many roundtable participants noted that doing so in practice can be particularly challenging on social media. Prior research has suggested that explicit labelling alone has a limited effect on trust (Peacock et al. 2019), in part because few pay attention to it.

There are also questions about how to communicate journalists' expertise to audiences but at the same time 'how to do it in a way that genuinely feels community-oriented' and not 'elitist', as Emily Goligoski, Senior Director for Audience Research at *The Atlantic* (USA), put it. She noted, as our previous research has shown (Toff et al. 2021a, 2021b), that 'people don't know how journalism is made'. But then, communicating to audiences that 'you should trust us because we're an institution' could ultimately have 'the opposite effect' than what is intended.

BETTER SERVING UNDERSERVED AUDIENCES

For others, building trust through editorial initiatives was also about developing areas of coverage that better catered to audiences who were traditionally underserved, ignored, or maligned by the press in the past. For Alvarez at Outlier Media (USA), for example, this means using 'public data and then also surveys to find out where the biggest information gaps are here in Detroit' and targeting coverage towards those areas. 'So we cover housing, we cover utilities, we cover transportation. And then during COVID, of course, we covered a lot more.'

Rochell Sleets, Director of News at the *Chicago Tribune* (USA), similarly talked about her news organisation's Spanish-language Facebook page, which the *Tribune* created to better serve the city's large Latino community. The *Tribune* posts translated versions of stories on this page but has also hosted outreach events, like a COVID-related Facebook Live involving a question-and-answer session with a Spanish-speaking doctor.

If you don't see yourself reflected, or any of your experiences reflected in news coverage, regardless of whether it's positive or negative, then you kind of start to think you live in a different world, or that you're being offered a world that doesn't really exist, or doesn't match any of your experiences.

Nathalie Malinarich, Executive News Editor, Digital, BBC (UK)

Most agreed with the importance of finding ways to better serve such audiences, but doing so successfully was often a work in progress. On the one hand, for news organisations that sought to serve the entire public, focusing on particular audience segments could often be alienating to those most distrusting of the organisation. As Giulliana Bianconi, Director and co-founder of *Gênero e Número* (Brazil) noted about a focus on gender and race in political affairs, 'this whole topic antagonises the right-wing in Brazil'. At the same time, she believes in the importance of having 'more diverse journalists and communicators' in order to reach audiences who are otherwise too often left out.

A lesser-educated public, a peripheral public, from the favelas, will it have no representation in the media? It won't read Folha de São Paulo, Estado de São Paulo, what will these guys read? One should understand when we're talking about Brazil, right?

Giulliana Bianconi, Director and co-founder, *Gênero e Número* (Brazil)

Smaller, regional and local news organisations seek to get around some of the contentiousness of national political affairs by emphasising their unique relevance to people's daily lives at the local level, which many also see as their organisations' comparative advantage over national titles.

With the Yorkshire Evening Post, for example, our journalists all live here, we all work in the city of Leeds, and it's reminding our readers that we have just as much of a vested interest in what happens in our city as they do.

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

TRANSPARENCY AND TRUST INITIATIVES

One of the other ways roundtable participants talked about communicating their brands' reputations for quality and reliability was through efforts to be more transparent about their own reporting practices, editorial stance, and journalists' backgrounds. Some of these efforts were about disclosing more about the identities of those producing the news. For example, Susan Potter, a senior editor at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (USA), described an initiative her newsroom participated in where staffers wrote public letters to readers, which were then featured in 'beautiful videos' where they talked about 'why I'm a reporter, this is what's important to me in covering the community' in order to remind people that 'they're actually humans writing the stories'.

These are not just faceless hacks somewhere putting together these things that we're trying to force down your throat, but they're actually people who live in your community and care about the community, and care about the stuff that may be important to them, too.

Susan Potter, Senior Editor for State Government & Politics, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (USA)

Such resource-intensive, brand-level strategic campaigns are somewhat rare, however. More often, roundtable participants emphasised transparently disclosing information on news organisations' websites. Louise Hastings, Managing Editor of Sky News (UK), described 'as a starting point' the importance of 'publishing our editorial guidelines, and making sure that those are freely available'. Likewise, Ana Naddaf, Executive Director of *O Povo* (Brazil) said, providing journalists' bios along with their photos and bylines has been a way for readers to 'get acquainted with the journalist's latest publications' and 'a way for us to learn and figure out how we should introduce ourselves and how readers should perceive us'. But many were unsure about the effectiveness of such measures given that few audiences ever saw or engaged with such content. Goligoski from *The Atlantic* (USA) noted that author pages tend to be 'amongst our lowest visited pages'.

I completely get why users a lot of the time are, like, 'Yeah, I don't really care, just give me the news'.

Nathalie Malinarich, Executive News Editor, Digital, BBC (UK)

Another form these efforts take, which does not require audiences to seek out information about the news organisation itself, involves partnerships with third-party organisations such as the Trust Project or the Journalism Trust Initiative. These organisations provide internet users with visual cues through badges and indicators reinforcing participating news organisations' public commitments to meeting certain professional standards around transparency and social

responsibility.³ As Hastings from Sky News (UK) maintains, having this association clearly ‘on the top of all of our website stories’ helps to have it ‘constantly ticking over in people’s minds: who we are, what we’re doing, and why we’re doing it’, or at least that is how they hope audiences view these signals.

3.2 Community-building and cultural initiatives

Beyond efforts to garner audience trust through investing in aspects of the news coverage itself, several roundtable participants described non-content-related efforts designed to engage with audiences. These include partnerships with other news or civic organisations, an emphasis on cultural coverage and events, and services designed to provide practical advice to users around consumer products, recipes, and other information relevant to daily life. These kinds of initiatives are sometimes viewed as peripheral to the civic value of news to society, but as roundtable participants underscored, such efforts can also be a way for news outlets to stay essential in people’s lives in more direct, demonstrable ways.

TRUST BY ASSOCIATION VIA PARTNERSHIPS

Partnering with other third-party organisations as a strategy for building trust came up mainly among smaller, more niche organisations, including start-ups and non-profits but several of these outlets emphasised the importance of partnerships for connecting with different audiences and building a reputation for quality. Susan Chira, for example, described how partnerships with more established news organisations are responsible for the lion’s share of the Marshall Project’s distribution. Daniel Bramatti, Editor of *Estadão Verifica* the fact-checking unit of *O Estado de S. Paulo* (Brazil), likewise mentioned his involvement with *Comprova*, a unique collaborative initiative with First Draft and 33 Brazilian news organisations around combating misinformation.⁴

Other kinds of formal and informal partnerships with community organisations also came up, less as vehicles for distributing or reporting news but as a means of ‘public accountability’ that improves the journalism itself. David Plazas, Opinion and Engagement Editor at *The Tennessean* (USA), talked about developing ‘a very deep relationship with Muslim leaders in the community’, which was critical – for example, after the newspaper published an inflammatory advertisement – in helping to ‘regain that trust that would not have been there had we not developed those relationships over time’.

Other kinds of partnerships could also be more fraught, a cause for concern that might even contribute to an erosion of trust. Rodrigo Hornhardt of SBT (Brazil), for example, described partnering with Facebook to study the effectiveness of certain branded content initiatives.⁵ He called it a ‘very delicate experience’, but one that more and more publishers must face as Facebook itself increasingly comes in ‘as funders of journalism’ not only as a platform for distributing journalism.⁶

³ These organisations have also advocated for digital platforms to use these indicators in their algorithms and provide a boost to participating news organisations. There is little to no public disclosure from platforms, however, around how or whether they may use this information. For more information, see <https://thetrustproject.org> and <https://www.journalismtrustinitiative.org>

⁴ See <https://projetoconprova.com.br> as well as <https://firstdra.news.org/tackling/comprova/>

⁵ For more information, see <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/success-stories/sbt-increases-in-stream-ads-revenue-by-375-with-a-new-video-strategy>

⁶ See for example: <https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/programs/grants/coronavirus-local-news-relief-fund-recipients>

This money is significant for them – for the publishers – but are they [Facebook] going to start telling us what news is? Do you understand? On what gets produced from money that comes from them? I think it’s quite a delicate matter.

Rodrigo Hornhardt, Management of Integration and Journalism Planning, SBT (Brazil)

CULTURAL COVERAGE AND EVENTS

Several roundtable participants highlighted the importance of other kinds of cultural initiatives their news organisations had been involved in, which helped to connect their newsrooms to the communities they sought to serve. For example, Aruana Brianezi, Content Director at *A Crítica* (Brazil), talked about an ‘open day’ held on the newspaper’s anniversary where they invited people to come and visit the newsroom. ‘A lot of people showed up. Many people wanted to come in and see what it’s like inside and so on. I think this is a starting point, let’s say, to begin to untie this knot there.’

Others underscored the importance of ‘social initiatives’ as Girish Kuber, Editor at *Loksatta* (India) called it. By holding, for example, ‘special lectures’, the news organisation sought to build connections with audiences beyond ‘doing vanilla journalism’. He explained how, for the last ten years his organisation, which still considers the printed paper ‘king’, has also offered a ‘big canvas’ of activities around ‘entertainment and school and theatre, whatever is cultural’, which is a ‘formula that works so far’. Without such events and involvement in the community, ‘there is a complete disconnect, you know, between readers and those who make the paper in the office’.

Engagement is the only way and engagement builds trust – that’s what we have realised.

Girish Kuber, Editor, *Loksatta* (India)

LIFESTYLE AND CONSUMER COVERAGE

Some of the ways news outlets describe engaging around cultural affairs involves other kinds of initiatives beyond events or partnerships. These include efforts to create community around the everyday concerns in people’s lives. Dardarian, from the *Star Tribune* (USA), described how the paper has used its internal metrics to better identify what audiences actually care about. They found that ‘some of the more uplifting stories, and stories about faith, religion, spirituality, were actually resonating with people, not like clickbait, but people were spending more time sharing, really valuing that content’, which led the paper to invest in more storytelling along these lines. In another instance, an annual feature around lifestyle challenges (e.g. cutting back on sugar, improving sleep) took on a life of its own after the newspaper created an online forum devoted to the challenges.

We ended up with thousands of people. Every once in a while I go into the sugar challenge and they’re still talking and sharing recipes. And it surprised us because we didn’t intend to make that like a forever thing, and we were like, ‘Whoa, wait, what’s happening here?’ And they built their own community.

Suki Dardarian, Managing Editor, *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (USA)

For news organisations that rely on advertising revenue as part of their business models, such initiatives can sometimes be tied to advertising or marketing departments. There are, however, differences of opinion about the degree to which this is appropriate, or whether accepting external support for such activities might undermine trust with certain audiences. As S. from

The News Minute (India) said, their paying members believe that ‘once in a while you can advertise, it’s fine’. After all, consumer recommendations are a way of informing people about ‘what’s happening out there in the world’. However, how much and to what extent are open questions. Some news organisations take pride in their rejection of all advertising, knowing that some users see such commercial considerations as a violation of the news organisation’s overall independence.

3.3 Efforts to listen and communicate in new ways

While partnerships, events, and cultural initiatives are often used to ensure news organisations stay relevant in the eyes of their users, others underscored the importance of finding ways of listening to their audiences and hearing their concerns and preferences more clearly.

LISTENING AND CONVERSING IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Roundtable participants described a variety of efforts both offline and online such as focus groups or listening sessions, to hear from audiences about how they viewed existing offerings and what they expected from news. Gallagher from *The Times* (UK) said his news organisation has typically relied on focus groups to ‘tell us when we’re doing things right, when we’re doing things wrong, what they’d like to see more of’. He cited a new channel called Times Earth that was a ‘direct response to the concerns of readers who felt that the environment wasn’t being properly served’.

Bui at the *Arizona Republic* (USA) described the paper relying on reader advisory groups ‘to hear people’s concerns and questions, and all of that’ but noted that, when they work, what seems to matter most is ‘who they’re comprised of and who runs them’, recognising that who shows up to such events and the focus of the sessions varies considerably depending on the way they are structured and how many barriers there are for people to participate.

Plazas from *The Tennessean* (USA) raised similar concerns when talking about outreach efforts on Facebook called Black Tennessee Voices Initiative, which has sought to cultivate ‘a bunch of ambassadors who are contributing to the conversation’. The newspaper has made an effort to have a ‘curator who is African American who guides these conversations’ and has also kept the group ‘deliberately closed’ because of ‘all the misogyny and racism that we see on social media’ in order ‘for the community to feel safe and not attacked’.

Several roundtable participants said they found it difficult to engage with audiences in digital spaces in productive ways, given the level of toxicity and negativity on platforms and the internet in general. Patricia Gnipper, Editor-in-Chief at Canal Tech (Brazil), described a decision over the past two years to turn off user comments on Canal Tech’s website – a decision she found ‘disheartening’. In the past, she saw comments as ‘a space for dialogue with the reader and where we can establish a relationship with them and where they can ascertain their trust in us and say, “These people are talking to me, which means they value their readers”’. However, over time, ‘the negative side of it speaks louder’, becoming a ‘can of worms’.

We used to joke and say that the space we created had turned into an outlet for hatred where people could challenge what had been published. Well, if these people had bothered to read the first paragraph of the article, they would not have commented on it; however, they do so

in order to attack the journalist writing the article, whose name appears on it. I was even contacted through social media and got messages saying that I should be caged and forbidden to use the internet.

Patricia Gnipper, Editor-in-Chief, Canal Tech (Brazil)

Some participants emphasised what they saw as opportunities to converse with audiences more directly by using communication technologies, especially messaging apps. But doing so at scale was typically only possible for smaller news organisations, a point that many explicitly noted.

We care about including people in the conversations. So we have our Telegram group with our readers and subscribers and stuff. We talk a lot with them. We reply to every single email we get. We reply to every single social media response of social media mention, except if it's offensive or aggressive, but we do this 100%. Of course, it's way harder to do that [if you're] the BBC or New York Times or Atlantic, but since we are small, we reply to everything we have the chance to, so people feel part of what we do.

Sergio Spagnuolo, Founder and Editor, Volt (Brazil)

More conventional forms of media were also discussed as important tools for engaging harder-to-reach audiences who might not be as likely to volunteer their time to converse with journalists or participate in listening sessions. Chira from the Marshall Project (USA) described an experiment involving 'running spots on local news radio at a Black-owned community radio station asking people to tell us their experience with the justice system' combined with flyers they plan to pass out at churches, text messaging, video, and other ways of communicating.

Many recognise the need to not only listen and understand audiences better but to build more durable brand identities, especially online, where users often have limited information about how to differentiate between sources. Even well-established brands worry at times that their history or heritage could be more of a hinderance than advantage with younger audiences, who might associate the brand with being stodgy or out of touch. As de Pear from Channel 4 (UK) asked, 'How do you insert public information that's in the public interest in those places' where people are spending most of their time consuming information, whether digital platforms or entertainment streaming services?

Four, five years ago whenever we were first combating this, we were saying, 'Look at these fake stories, and look at this ...' And sometimes I think we were patronising to those people because we said, 'Look, look at these idiots believing this rubbish'. But they're definitely underserved by us, and they were definitely a very fertile group of people who wanted to snack on alternative facts, as you might call them.

Ben de Pear, Editor, Channel 4 (UK)

KNOWING WHAT WORKS

Ultimately, one of the most fundamental questions many roundtable participants grapple with is a lack of clarity around what kinds of engagement strategies actually 'work' to improve trust with which audiences. Few describe clear metrics for measuring success beyond existing ways of quantifying engagement, which researchers have also highlighted as severely limited (Steenen et al. 2020).

In October, several public media organisations in the US announced a partnership with the Knight Foundation to demonstrate the impact of ‘engaged journalism’ practices (Muller 2021) which has become the focus of growing scholarly attention (Fisher et al. 2020; Zahay et al. 2020). These efforts reflect recognition by many news organisations of the growing importance of membership models and subscriptions to many news outlets’ continued financial existence.

While these initiatives have been concentrated primarily in the US, and to a lesser extent the UK, similar sentiments were also expressed throughout Brazil and India. Many recognise that distrust towards news in general and brands in particular, however much it is fuelled by external forces, including platforms and politicians, is also rooted in a profound sense of disconnection many audiences have from the work of journalism and its value to their lives, a finding emphasised in our earlier reports (Toff et al. 2021a, 2021b; see also Livio and Cohen 2016; Palmer et al. 2020; Riedl and Eberl 2020).

I think globally, and I think it is true of India as well, there has been a concerted campaign to discredit the media in general, and it is in large part probably founded on how the mainstream media itself has been acting in the past couple of decades.

Ramanathan S., Partner, Content and Strategy, The News Minute (India)

For the most part, efforts to restore trust through engagement strategies, using the variety of different approaches examined in this section, have largely been conducted as experimental initiatives, guided mainly by intuition or previous experience. Few roundtable participants expressed much certainty about which of these efforts were most promising with which audiences. Nor were many optimistic about the prospects of reaching the least trusting and most sceptical among the public at all.

4. Where to Go from Here?

In this report we have recounted insights from nine virtual roundtable sessions we held with newsroom leaders in Brazil, India, the UK, and the US in October 2021, about their perceptions of the climate for journalism in their countries and the strategies they have undertaken or considered undertaking to build, sustain, or restore trust with core audiences.

What we find here is nuanced. On the one hand, these conversations reveal a great deal of pessimism and concern about the impact of external forces on news organisations' abilities to forge trusting relationships with their audiences. Most focused on what they see as the highly corrosive impact of negative criticism on digital platforms, which they increasingly depend on to broaden their reach, but which also serve to amplify bad-faith criticism about independent reporting and the institution of journalism more generally. Many also expressed grave concern about the level of vitriol and toxicity in these spaces, some of it egged on by political leaders with their own reasons for antagonising the press.

Some of these concerns are well-supported by academic research, especially the important role played by elite cues, polarisation, and the distance audiences may feel from the professional practices of journalism. Others centre on very real risks that have yet to be the subject of much academic investigation. However, it is important to recognise that while many journalists may *feel* relatively powerless to move the needle on trust (and much academic research suggests external factors *are* more important for trust in news than the things individual journalists or news organisations have control over), much of the public sees journalism and news media as powerful institutions (see, for example, Palmer 2017) and are unlikely to accept that the root of the problem lies elsewhere, or that they have few options at their disposal. Thus, giving up on building trust may look like a lack of real interest in the issue.

So it is important to note that roundtable participants offered a diverse array of initiatives they and their news organisations are engaging in despite their pessimism. These initiatives included both editorial and communication strategies focused around listening more closely to what audiences want and expect of them, improving content, and cultivating a distinct brand identity along these lines. They also implicitly and sometimes explicitly reflect necessary choices in priorities as well as varying perspectives on whether trust ought to be pursued as an end in itself, or as a means to secure, for example, paying subscribers or loyal members. We have summarised some of these trade-offs here while highlighting a persistent and consistent problem that often arose in these conversations. There remains limited evidence about which of these strategies works, among whom, and under what circumstances.

To be fair, the challenge here is multidimensional. What works for one news organisation may not be generalisable to others, much less to newsrooms operating in different political and media environments elsewhere in the world. But in many of the roundtables we convened this autumn, we noticed many commonalities around how most news organisations think about building trust. They seek, naturally, to first identify which audiences are of strategic importance to the organisation to reach and connect with. News organisations evaluated this question in somewhat different ways, depending on their own business models and other factors, but most

understandably focused on building trust with specific segments of the public – most often those constituencies most likely to become loyal, paying supporters.

This poses two important implications. First, many news organisations may need to think much more strategically about trust than most have in the past. Each will have to assess which specific audience segments can be motivated to come into the fold and which cannot. This likely means being willing to look past those who are most passive and most partisan, particularly for smaller news organisations strapped for resources. Many news organisations who participated in roundtables are already doing this.

Second, while selective trust-building makes sense from a strategic standpoint for individual news organisations, it may exacerbate trust problems for the industry more broadly. Our previous research has highlighted the large share of the public who remain disengaged and disconnected from news, people we have called the ‘generally untrusting’. This is a group of people in all four countries who lack trust in most, if not all, brands and are perhaps among the more difficult for news organisations to build trust with – although many are more indifferent than hostile towards news.

Basically, many individual news organisations have clear incentives to go deep but often quite narrow when it comes to trust. Especially for reader-revenue-based organisations, such efforts hold clear potential for delivering a tangible return on investment of scarce resources. At the same time, the news media as a whole face trust problems that are often about breadth – about indifferent, sceptical, or even hostile audiences that may be harder to reach, harder to engage, harder to convince, and harder to sign up as members or subscribers.

We worry that many of the engagement efforts highlighted in the third section of this report, as worthwhile as many of them are, may be unlikely to reach this subset of the public. In other words, these groups remain particularly vulnerable to being further left behind. It is easy to see how much of the news media – for entirely understandable reasons – can end up doubling down on trying to increase trust among already trusting audiences and people most similar to them. In very crowded markets, cultivating brand-level trust among commercially attractive parts of the already engaged public provides competitive advantages. In contrast, there are fewer clear commercial incentives rewarding attempts to reach and build trust with very different parts of the public.

This is, as we wrote at the outset of this report, a critically important collective challenge for journalism. Authoritarian political leaders seek to sow distrust in the press and, as roundtable participants noted, often do so via the same digital media platforms that have disrupted many news organisations’ bonds with their audiences. Political leaders often have a vested interest in reaching the most untrusting of news audiences; individual news organisations typically do not.

4.1 Major questions raised in the roundtables

The conversations we held this autumn pointed towards several questions we believe it is crucial for researchers and practitioners to answer if both are to make progress on improving the current state of affairs. We crystallise three of the most important here.

1 HOW DO INDIVIDUAL NEWS ORGANISATIONS STAND OUT IN A ‘FLATTENED’ ENVIRONMENT?

As roundtable participants noted, many face distinct trade-offs in an increasingly platform-dominated media environment, for example, when it comes to focusing on scale and reach versus depth and quality. Cultivating a reputation for trust and fairness in these spaces, especially for lesser-known brands, remains an ongoing challenge that is made worse by the lack of control most feel while using these technologies. Most of the journalists and editors who participated in the roundtables feel that platforms such as Facebook, Google, and WhatsApp make already challenging trust problems worse.

2 HOW ACCEPTING ARE AUDIENCES ABOUT HOW NEWS OUTLETS MAKE CHOICES AROUND PAYWALLS AND ADVERTISING?

Although less a focus of this report, roundtable participants asked several questions around how audiences think about the intrusion of advertising or paywalls. Although our previous research has shown that people are only moderately interested in knowing how news organisations fund themselves when considering whether to use one brand versus another (Toff et al. 2021b), the Reuters Institute *Digital News Report* (Newman et al. 2021) has also shown few people understand the dire financial straits many news organisations currently find themselves in. The link between these factors and audience trust in news deserves closer scrutiny.

3 HOW DO DIFFERENCES IN MODE (E.G. AUDIO, VISUAL, TEXT, ETC.) AFFECT TRUST AND DISTRUST?

The changing digital media environment has led to convergence between forms of news that once competed via separate communication technologies. Several roundtable participants asked to what extent audio and visual elements, long a staple of television news and radio, might be harnessed by print and digital outlets to further communicate the humanity behind the headlines and offer a more resilient foundation for establishing trust with audiences. At the same time, to what extent does lifting the veil behind how news is made reveal the subjective basis of many individual journalists’ perspectives – a subjectivity that may undermine trust among audiences who see bias where others see authenticity?

4.2 Next steps

As noted in the introduction, this report marks the conclusion of the first year of the Reuters Institute’s Trust in News Project. Over the last dozen months or so, we have learned a lot about how to conceptualise and measure trust, and how audiences think about what it means, but a great deal of work remains. Specifically, we hope to unpack and expand on the audiences we have previously identified as ‘generally untrusting’ towards news to better assess which among them are the most persuadable, how to best go about doing so, and how differences within this group along lines of race, caste, age, class, and geography, may point towards different strategies according to different needs and expectations. Furthermore, as this report has also underscored, there is much that remains poorly understood about the degree to which trust in news is intertwined with trust in other institutions in society, and what news organisations can do to forge connections with audiences despite these broader headwinds.

Practitioners who participated in our roundtables pointed to a series of substantive questions about how information is presented both on platforms and on their own news sites that are

empirical in nature, and we believe future research from ourselves and others can offer a more solid foundation for assessing how best to respond to the contemporary challenges facing independent news media globally. We look forward to doing so over the years ahead.

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Appendix: List of Participants in the Roundtables

Positions held at the time of the roundtables

Name	Title/Position	Organisation	Country
Sarah Alvarez	Founder and Editor	Outlier Media	USA
Evan Benn	Director of Special Projects and Editorial Events	Philadelphia Inquirer	USA
Ívila Bessa	Director of Digital	Sistema Verdes Mares	Brazil
Giulliana Bianconi	Director and Co-Founder	Gênero e Número	Brazil
Pedro Borges	Editor-in-Chief and Co-Founder	Alma Preta	Brazil
Daniel Bramatti	Editor of Estadão Verifica	O Estado de S. Paulo	Brazil
Aruana Brianezi	Content Director	A Crítica	Brazil
P. Kim Bui	Director of Product and Audience Innovation	Arizona Republic	USA
Susan Chira	Editor-in-Chief	The Marshall Project	USA
Ritika Chopra	National Education Editor	Indian Express	India
Laura Collins	Editor	Yorkshire Evening Post	UK
Thiago Contreira	Content Director	Record	Brazil
Suki Dardarian	Managing Editor	Minneapolis Star Tribune	USA
Ben de Pear	Editor	Channel 4	UK
Sarah Dear	International Audience Analyst	HuffPost	UK
Pedro Dias Leite	Executive Director	CBN	Brazil
Gabriel Escobar	Editor and Senior Vice President	Philadelphia Inquirer	USA
Rhys Evans	Head of Corporate Affairs and Public Policy	BBC Wales	UK
Taneth Evans	Associate Editor	The Sunday Times	UK
Renato Franzini	Director	G1	Brazil
Tony Gallagher	Deputy Editor	The Times	UK
Patricia Gnipper	Editor-in-Chief	Canal Tech	Brazil
Emily Goligoski	Senior Director, Audience Research	The Atlantic	USA
Louise Hastings	Managing Editor	Sky News	UK
Rodrigo Hornhardt	Management of Integration and Journalism Planning	SBT	Brazil
Nick Johnston	Publisher	Axios	USA
Sara Just	Executive Producer	PBS NewsHour	USA
Ritu Kapur	Editor	The Quint	India
Girish Kuber	Editor	Loksatta	India
Rama Lakshmi	Editor, Opinion and Features	The Print	India
Rosângela Lara	Executive Director	Band News TV	Brazil
Marcio Lins	Anchor of Bom Dia, Pará	TV Liberal	Brazil
Sara Lomax-Reese	President and CEO	WURD Radio	USA
Mehraj Lone	Senior Editor	Newslaundry	India
Nathalie Malinarich	Executive News Editor, Digital	BBC	UK
Américo Martins	Vice President of Content	CNN Brasil	Brazil
Paula Miraglia	CEO and Co-Founder	Nexo	Brazil

Name	Title/Position	Organisation	Country
Marcelo Moreira	News Director	Globo MG	Brazil
Pedro Moreira	Coordinator of GZH	Zero Hora	Brazil
Vinicius Mota	Managing Editor	Folha de S. Paulo	Brazil
Ana Naddaf	Executive Director	O Povo	Brazil
Tai Nalon	Executive Director and co-founder	Aos Fatos	Brazil
Ludmila Pizarro	Editor of Digital	Istoé Dinheiro	Brazil
David Plazas	Opinion and Engagement Editor	The Tennessean	USA
Susan Potter	Senior Editor for State Government and Politics	Atlanta Journal-Constitution	USA
Fernando Rodrigues	Founder	Poder 360	Brazil
Abhinandan Sekhri	Founder and CEO	Newslaundry	India
Harry Slater	Deputy Editor-in-Chief	HuffPost UK	UK
Rochell Sleets	Director of News	Chicago Tribune	USA
Sergio Spagnuolo	Founder and Editor	Volt	Brazil
Ramanathan S.	Partner, Content and Strategy	The News Minute	India
Katie Vanneck-Smith	Co-founder and Publisher	Tortoise	UK
Rohan Venkat	Deputy Editor	Scroll	India
Paul Volpe	Editor, Trust Team	The New York Times	USA

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- Hearts and Minds: Harnessing Leadership, Culture, and Talent to Really Go Digital*
Lucy Kueng
- Worlds of Journalism: Journalistic Cultures Around the Globe*
Thomas Hanitzsch, Folker Hanusch, Jyotika Ramaprasad, and Arnold S. de Beer (eds)
(published with Columbia University Press)
- NGOs as Newsmakers: The Changing Landscape of International News*
Matthew Powers (published with Columbia University Press)
- Global Teamwork: The Rise of Collaboration in Investigative Journalism*
Richard Sambrook (ed)
- Journalism and the NSA Revelations: Privacy, Security and the Press*
Risto Kunelius, Heikki Heikkilä, Adrienne Russell and Dmitry Yagodin (eds) (published with I.B.Tauris)
- Something Old, Something New: Digital Media and the Coverage of Climate Change*
James Painter et al.
- Journalism in an Age of Terror*
John Lloyd (published with I.B.Tauris)
- The Right to Be Forgotten: Privacy and the Media in the Digital Age*
George Brock (published with I.B.Tauris)
- The Kidnapping of Journalists: Reporting from High-Risk Conflict Zones*
Robert G. Picard and Hannah Storm (published with I.B.Tauris)
- Innovators in Digital News*
Lucy Kueng (published with I.B.Tauris)
- Local Journalism: The Decline of Newspapers and the Rise of Digital Media*
Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (ed) (published with I.B.Tauris)
- Journalism and PR: News Media and Public Relations in the Digital Age*
John Lloyd and Laura Toogood (published with I.B.Tauris)
- Reporting the EU: News, Media and the European Institutions*
John Lloyd and Cristina Marconi (published with I.B.Tauris)

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- Changing Newsrooms 2021: Hybrid Working and Improving Diversity Remain Twin Challenges for Publishers*
Federica Cherubini, Nic Newman, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen
- Overcoming Indifference: What Attitudes Towards News Across the Global North and South Tell Us About Building Trust*
Benjamin Toff, Sumitra Badrinathan, Camila Mont'Alverne, Amy Ross Arguedas, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen
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- Listening to What Trust in News Means to Users: Qualitative Evidence from Four Countries*
Benjamin Toff, Sumitra Badrinathan, Camila Mont'Alverne, Amy Ross Arguedas, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen
- Race and Leadership in the News Media 2021: Evidence from Five Markets*
Craig T. Robertson, Meera Selva, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (Factsheet)

Women and Leadership in the News Media 2021: Evidence from Twelve Markets

Craig T. Robertson, Meera Selva, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (Factsheet)

Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2021

Nic Newman

Women and News: An Overview of Audience Behaviour in 11 Countries

Meera Selva and Simge Andi

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

Benjamin Toff, Sumitra Badrinathan, Camila Mont'Alverne, Amy Ross Arguedas, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

Daily News Podcasts: Building New Habits in the Shadow of Coronavirus

Nic Newman and Nathan Gallo

Few Winners, Many Losers: The COVID-19 Pandemic's Dramatic and Unequal Impact on Independent News Media

Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Federica Cherubini, and Simge Andi

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