



The obsession with “trust” will end

NAME

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EXCERPT

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0 comments

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My prediction (or rather hope) for 2024 is that journalists will realise that ‘trust’ is a useless metric of their work. Ok, I am kidding. I have no expectation that the news media will cease its pointless obsession with trust surveys. It’s not only a distraction but actually harmful. As Noble Prize winner Maria Ressa has pointed out, authoritarian politicians and corporate giants love to highlight how surveys of trust regularly put journalists at or near the bottom of the league.

[This was first published as one of the [Nieman Lab predictions for 2024](#)]

I don’t have a particular problem with the actual methodology of surveys such as Edelman or RISJ. Although any poll that usually shows that the most public trust news media is in China surely must be fundamentally flawed in terms of purpose? If you asked me whether I trust the ‘news media’ I would

say 'no'. Of course I don't trust the news media collectively, or automatically. I trust some brands some of the time. So when you ask people if they 'trust' a brand that they personally use, they will generally say 'yes'. All trust surveys seem to measure is whether you like a particular news organisation.

As a journalist (or professor!) I never asked to be trusted. I never trusted anyone else without good reason, so why should I ask the same of the public? In the wake of all the untrustworthy content online, journalists have forgotten that it used to be axiomatic that 'you should not believe what you read in the papers'. In a way, we are now in a better place because good journalism can act as a safe haven in a sea of junk and lies. But that is relative and trust is absolute.



TRUSTWORTHY NOT TRUST

Being *trustworthy* might be useful. Build a relationship over time where people have expectations that you will deliver relevant, reliable and accessible journalism. That is much more useful than some kind of deferential, instinctive 'trust'. Show them your workings, admit and correct your mistakes. Be honest about what you don't know and listen to what your users say interests them. Try to be diverse, accurate, empathetic and purposeful. Be constructive as well as critical. Be ethical, moral and political without being partisan. But don't run advertising campaigns saying how

important journalism is. Don't advocate for media literacy education on the basis that people are too dumb to realise how great and valuable your work is. First of all, get yourself more literate about technology, your topic and your public.

Journalists work incredibly hard for scant reward in a precarious profession. They are subjected to endless criticism, abuse and, in many parts of the world, personal, physical danger. So it is not surprising they crave some kind of affirmation. Trust surveys imply it's possible. Perhaps it is, but don't hold your breath. News organisations need public support, revenue and engagement. But they also need to be independent, professional and prepared to tell unpleasant truths. So in 2023 don't go looking for trust in surveys. Whenever you are tempted to use the word, replace it with what you really mean.

About the author



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