26th ISOJ How to Rebuild Trust in Journalism After Years of Attacks and Declines in Credibility

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- Sally Lehrman, founder and CEO, The Trust Project
- Joy Mayer, founder and executive director, Trusting News
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Summer Harlow We have how to rebuild trust in journalism after years of attacks and declines in credibility. And this conversation will be moderated by Michael Bolden, who is CEO and executive director of the American Press Institute.

Michael Bolden Good morning everyone, it's great to see you. For more than 50 years, the Gallup organization has been tracking trust in American institutions. The trendlines across sectors have been clear. Trust in all of our institutions has been declining, and trust in media is especially low. This is happening even as the media environment grows more complex and our populations grow. The need for dependable factual information is greater than it ever has been. But the lack of trust is a barrier to this dissemination. So let's have a conversation about how we can improve this. My fellow panelists, please welcome Stephen Buckley, public editor of the Dallas Morning News and a scholar at Duke University. Yeah, please, go ahead.

Stephen Buckley Thank you for saying I'm a scholar, but I'm not really a scholar.

Michael Bolden Fair enough.

Stephen Buckley Just a journalism professor.

Michael Bolden Joy Mayer is Founder and Executive Director of Trusting News, which launched as an independent organization last year. And Sally Lehrman is Founder and CEO of the Trust Project. So let's dive in. Today members of our communities may not even agree on what trustworthy means. What do you say it means? Let's start with Stephen.

Stephen Buckley Well, when I think, when our communities think about trust in the context of the news media, I think they think about two things. One, are we competent at what we do? Do we get facts right? Do we include context? Are we thorough? So I think there is that piece, but also there's a character piece, if I can call it that. What are our motives? What are the motives behind what we do? Are they pure? Are they sincere? So, yeah, I think character and competence are why the public trusts the news media, or should trust the news.

Michael Bolden Joy?

Joy Mayer Yeah, that shows up in research as emotional trust or effective trust. The integrity, the benevolence. Do journalists care what happens as a result of their work? Are they on the side of good here? I'll just add to that that I think people trust things that are relevant and useful, and I think it would be kind of amazing if as journalists we would

spend more time realizing that we don't get to decide if we're credible and useful. People actually get to decide that, and it's a core ingredient in trust.

Michael Bolden Can't wait to dig into that one. Okay, Sally?

Sally Lehrman Yeah, and this is such an important question, and when I started the Trust Project, I felt like we were really all talking among ourselves as journalists about what trust meant and why it was declining. And so we used the user-centered design process. And if you don't mind me taking a minute, because this is what really we're founded upon, is this concept of what trust and trustworthiness means to the public. So we went and used this user-center design process, which means going out and talking to people and asking them: What is it you value in news? Do you value the news? And how do you decide whether to trust it? And it really is like ethnographic, like you're not just doing a focus group or what have you. I mean, those are useful, but talking with them and watching their news journey. And so we came up with eight core things that in the U.S. and Europe, we were hearing these same things. And it had to do with, well, what's your agenda? Everyone aims to be independent, but how are you really guiding your news. And so one of the elements is trust is we are about the public interest, and we have all these standards and policies to help us get there. And then how do you know who is this journalist? Why should I trust them? Information about that journalist. And we did hear many of those things. We were talking about the empathetic aspects of trust. It's a relationship, so having a relationship with that individual, with that journalist. Diverse voices. We heard from lots of people about not just wanting to hear from people at high levels of business and government. I think we ought to think about this a lot right now. Instead, they wanted to hear about people like them. They wanted to hear voices like their own, and voices that were very different from their own. So they saw the value of news as a place to bring people together. They worried about news blending with opinion, and they said, “We don't even know that journalists know the difference.” And then we combine methods and references because it's about, well, how did this story get built? Where did your information come from? And it gets to that concept of competency as well. Local, do you know me? Do you know my community? Were you even here when you did this story? And a very high desire for engagement beyond just comments. So I think even the word “consumer,” we talk about our audiences as consumers. Well, no, they are part of a relationship with us, and we want to engage with them. And we heard this a lot from the public. Don't just expect, like don't just dump information on us. We want to be part of the equation.

Michael Bolden So, with that, a lot of Joy's work focuses on the relationship between newsrooms and the community. So, Joy, how do you go about this? And then, Stephen, I'd ask you to come in with some of what's happening at the Dallas Morning News and some of what you see happening in your studies at Duke.

Joy Mayer Well, some of what we, our work really is based on a lot of transparency and engagement, and also humility on the part of newsrooms, understanding who you're serving well and who you are not serving. So the basics of transparency are often kind of small, iterative things. Do we explain that we value accuracy in how we correct errors? Turns out a lot of people don't believe journalists correct errors, and you know what? Lots of people in the media ecosystem do not. Any complaint that somebody has about the media, we can find plenty of examples of where it's true. So what are journalists doing to get on the record about things like their integrity, their ethics, their independence, where their money comes from, how they're funded? Interesting note from the Congressional testimony yesterday when Katherine Maher was asked about bias, one of the answers she

gave was that she'd worked hard to improve the editorial standards and a Congressman said, “Why are you even writing editorials? Just give us the news.” Basic things like the language we use to describe our work. We've been talking about that for years, actually. It's confusing to use the word editorial in two different ways. So some of what we do is small things. It can feel small. How are we describing the work that we do, and where does our credibility rest? Some of what we do, though, is bigger swings. And I'm really feeling like we need some bigger swings. It's about understanding who feels seen and understood by our journalism, and who feels left out or misrepresented by our journalism. And what internal changes and coverage changes do we need to close that gap?

Michael Bolden So before Stephen picks this up, Joy, talk a little bit about the tactics that you use to get newsrooms to adopt this work. Your trust kits, your webinars, how do you actually get this work out into the journalistic community?

Joy Mayer Yeah, we try to take big questions, like people don't understand your integrity and turn it into sort of step-by-steps. And so if you're hearing from your community that they're confused about a certain aspect or that they are making assumptions, we often take misassumptions that people have about journalism and turn it into strategies. And so, if people are accusing you of only charging for your news because you're greedy and want to make a lot of money, well, what's your counter narrative? Where on your website or in your communications do you explain where you get money? Why you count on community support for your money. So we break down big questions into step by step.

Michael Bolden And so Stephen, your job as public editor of the Dallas Morning News, I think that even arose from a trust-oriented project. Could you tell us a little bit about that, and then delve more into this question of relationships with the community there?

Stephen Buckley Sure, so Grant Moise, the publisher of the Dallas Morning News, was doing a bit of research in early 2024, and he had been thinking a lot about trust and the erosion of trust in the news media, and came upon the fact that at the height of trust in the news media there were a number of public editors. At the time mostly they were called ombudsman, which is a kind of an old-fashioned term. And so he thought, you know what, what if we brought that back to the Dallas Morning News? What if there was somebody who could be a bridge between the newsroom and our audience? What if there was somebody who could nurture the relationship between the newsroom and our audience?

And so there are really three pillars that govern that relationship. One is transparency. I spend a lot of time just explaining the processes, and the people, and the roles in a newsroom. We do, I've been in journalism, in and around journalism for 35, 36 years now. Most people, we just take for granted that the public sort of understands what an editor does, for example. Most people have no idea what an editor does. So that's part of it, just helping folks understand what we do so it's much less opaque and mysterious. The second thing, though, is that we try to, we work very hard to hold ourselves accountable to the public. Journalists spend a lot of time holding other people accountable, and so it makes perfect sense that we would be held accountable ourselves. And so, to Joy's point about corrections, when we get something wrong, we need to say, “Hey, we got that wrong. Our bad.” And then the last thing is just humility. That's the third pillar. So transparency, accountability, and humility. And other folks have talked about this, so I won't dwell on this for too long, but it is really about understanding that we are among the people. We are not up here, and we're not below the people. We are with the people. And that is a really important and resonant message. People understand that and feel that when we are acting that out, when we act with humility, that really does speak to them.

Michael Bolden Thank you. At API, we do a lot of work with newsrooms, trying to get them to be transparent, to be humble, and it can be a chore at times. But, Sally, let's talk a little bit more about the trust indicators in your project. How does that work, right? When people see the trust indicators, what are you hoping that that engenders? What is that relationship with newsrooms? How does that all come together?

Sally Lehrman So, and I appreciate everything that's been said so far. It really resonates with the work we do and our findings in our research. We do this research in an ongoing way. So what we do is the eight trust indicators are kind of our core product offering, if you will, although it's not something we sell. It's something we work with news organizations, number one. We engage with them to implement these trust indicators on their pages. And what it means is, or if they're a broadcast, then it's something you might voice. And what it means is that you are providing transparency to the public around things like funding. Where do we get our funds? Who is our owner? How do we separate ownership interests from our journalism? And as part of that, building that into the structures of everything that you do. So we work from essentially, it's like a public health model, where you're not just expecting journalists to behave a certain way or engage with the community in a certain way, but you're thinking about, well, what needs to change at the institutional level to flow down into the environments in which journalists work and are able to work and then into the journalists' work itself. So the eight trust indicators across these different dimensions, providing newsrooms training, coaching, working with them on the technical side so that it is shown and heard. And then the second pillar is the technology platform. So we work with technology platforms so that their machines can see the machine readable code associated with all those trust indicators and their attributes with the idea of helping these technology companies do a better job of surfacing trustworthy news. And there's other elements, too, like advertisers being able to know, okay, this is coming from a trustworthy space. Or with AI, I think there's many uses that we will see. And then the third piece is around the public. So we found that the trust indicators aren't just helpful on all the hundreds of new sites that show them, but in fact, they're helpful to any member of the public that wants to be able to have an easy way to assess, "Okay, is this trustworthy or not?" And they're built so that it's really about user empowerment. It's not saying trust this because we say you should. It's okay here are eight things and all their attributes that you can look for and then make a decision based on your own priorities. And the last thing I want to mention, we're here at UT Austin. Talia Stroud at the Center for Media Engagement was the very first person to test the trust indicators, and when I came to her we worked this all out and she says, "You know if we test them, they might not work." And so I was like, "Talia, let's go ahead." And she did this amazing study. It was an experiment with 1,100 people looked at sites or set up site with the trust indicators, and one half saw them, and the other half didn't. And she found that, and she and her team found that, there was a statistical significance in the difference between how people interpreted those sites. So those who saw the trust indicators as a whole, they felt that the site was more trustworthy, told the whole story, words like that, and also it reflected on their sense that the journalists had done their homework, so to speak, and was knowledgeable about the work that they do.

Michael Bolden So Sally, just to follow up, so part of what you do is you make sure through public relations campaigns that people know about the trust indicators, so you have a direct community outreach, or is that something that you train the newsrooms to do, or how does that work?

Sally Lehrman Yeah, it's a great question, because we aim to do both, and this is an area that we've been working on. So our news organizations, really, there's so much that can be done to promote your transparency, your integrity, as well as your humility. And I feel like news organizations need so much help doing that. We have some doing a great job. Like one of our news partners is Colorado Sun. They're out there all the time, one, engaging with the community, and also saying, “These are the things that we're doing in order to help you decide to trust us.” And then, so we hoped, we're not hoped to, but we're working on helping other news sites do a better job, kind of like the Colorado Sun and some others I could name. And then the other piece is this direct public outreach. So we have been doing work with Microsoft for almost two years now, where there are ads that run on Microsoft surfaces, and they're general. So it's trustworthy news will give you multiple perspectives, or trustworthy news separates opinion from other kinds of information or paid content. And then those ads link to our, what we call our trust indicator learning page. So you can see that lifts up journalism for everyone. It's not just about the trust project. But it points people to these trust indicators as a way to assess news. And we found that that campaign was really successful in terms of building confidence. So when people came all the way to our learning page and answered a little survey, 60% of those who went through that process said that they felt more confident in their ability to assess the news. And to me, that's so important, because part of why we were seeing people turn away, and we still are seeing people turn away from news, but why we started that was because we were hearing from people, “Well, it's just too overwhelming and too hard to figure out what's trustworthy or not. Like, there's so much disinformation out there.” So being able to build confidence, to me, was a great win and something we should really be working on more.

Michael Bolden Great, so I'm actually going to mix in some questions from the audience as we go along. One of the things I talk about a lot when I speak to press associations and journalist groups is I talk about showing love for your community, which is a word that I don't think journalists should be afraid of. So Brian Murray poses the question, when trying to be trusted by our communities, how should journalists balance being caring and being a part of a community with staying impartial or distant from the facts and events. How can we do both as best we can? Let's start with Stephen.

Stephen Buckley I'm going to share a story here that I think will help answer this question. I was talking to a couple of reporters. I was talking to reporters not just from the Dallas Morning News, but from all over the country, because of the work I do as a professor, obviously. And these reporters were telling me about how they had covered a very tragic event. I want to say it was a shooting or a car accident. And so they went to interview a family, and they were obviously, the family wanted to talk, but these reporters were quite, they wanted to also be empathetic. They wanted it to make it clear that, yes, they were there to do a job, but that they were human, too. And so what they did was they sat in the living room of this family, and they did their reporting. And after they had done their reporting, they then went out to their car, and they brought back a bouquet of flowers. And that was their way of saying, “We appreciate your sadness. We mourn with you. We are a part of the community that mourns with you."

Joy Mayer When I think about what it looks like to be in a newsroom that is trying to figure out how to cover something like that, I've worked in newsrooms where long, intense conversations are held about what is means to show care, to guide sources, especially in vulnerable situations through things, to hold government accountable. All of those conversations are invisible to the public unless we talk about them publicly. So, the intent that we bring, the thoughtfulness that we bring is invisible. And it's reasonable for people to doubt our motives, and we have to understand that people do not automatically

understand things like concepts like accountability. So if our job is to hold government accountable, to some people that reads like getting in the way. They do not understand why that is a public good and the good that comes of it, and journalists do not invest in telling that story. We take people's trust for granted. We take their faith and our integrity for granted. And I think about work that we did, like recently we worked with an ABC station in Sacramento that their race and culture team was trying to figure out how to make the process of their work more clear, and as part of reporting on an incident between a member of a community and the police department, they took time on air to say, here's the parts of this video we're showing, and here's what we're not showing, and here is why. Here are the options we gave the families that were involved, like just demonstrating that there was care. It didn't take that many extra seconds, and it's so important. So this is the kind of thing I think about when I think if we invest in understanding what the public thinks of us, then we can invest in telling our story and correcting their misassumptions. But we have to earn that. It doesn't come automatically.

Michael Bolden I want to give a quick double shout out to ABC 10 in Sacramento. We've worked with them as well, and we gave them a grant to go out and do some election work that it sort of prescribed what they were going to do. And they came back to us and they said, “You know, we had this idea for a project, but we don't know that that's what we should do. We need to go ask people first what we should do.” Which I thought was, I mean, that's really the right attitude to take. So Sally, what about this community part of this?

Sally Lehrman Yeah, and along the lines of asking the community, one of our news partners is CBC in Canada, and they have developed this whole program now of asking, what do you want, how do you want us to cover this election? So we're not just going to cover it the way journalists usually do, which can be kind of boring unless you're a super political person, and instead asking, well, what are the issues and questions you have? And I know Jay Rosen has really led the drive here in the U.S. to do that. So it gets to, one, I mean we've talked a lot about knowing your community, and I think that's what we have to do, and what we're encouraging all of our nice news sites to do is go in there and talk with your community members. That's not the same though as bridging that divide. And when we think about what Stephen and Joy have said about really finding the humanity in the work that we do and sharing it with the public, sharing our ethics considerations, one of the things that we work very closely with news organizations to do is to be able to structure that across the institution. And those are, well, I'll say it's primarily one trust indicator, which is methods, which might sound kind of dry. So one, yes, we went out and talked to 200 people or read 200 reports for this investigative story, but what about a more community-based story? Well, we went in, and we found out what people wanted, or I covered this tragic plane crash, and I felt terrible about it. And here's how I navigated that feeling that I had, my concern for the people involved, and yet maintaining my professional sense of self and asking those tough questions. So pulling back the veil, the curtain of what we do, at times, not always, but in times and certain spaces. And this is, again, something that we're trying to institutionalize, and let every news organization figure out the best way to do that across their whole newsroom.

Michael Bolden So, something that obviously flows from this, Dominic Plata poses the question around the concept of objectivity. We've all followed many of the debates that have happened in our field, especially among the newer generation of journalists about where objectivity fits. So he asks, should we rethink the definition and importance of objectivity, and would some scenarios call for less impartiality and more of a personal commitment to the story? Joy.

Joy Mayer I spend more time thinking about the values that a newsroom's work rests on than I do the language they use to describe it. I think that the answer is going to be different for different newsrooms. I think the notion of sort of impartiality, or fairness, or balance for the Dallas Morning News is going to be different than it is for Capital B, another newsroom I've been working with recently, and I think it's completely appropriate. From a public trust standpoint, they just want us to be honest about where we're coming from. So if your journalism is done through a lens, do you even realize that? Or is your newsroom so similar, is there so much social homophily in your newsroom that you don't even realize that there's sort of a groupthink happening that is dominating the way you cover the news? Be aware of it enough to say, here's where we are standing, and here are the values we rest on. I think what bothers the public most is when we throw around words like “objectivity,” and aren't really assessing what they mean, what they look like in practice for us.

Michael Bolden So, Stephen, I'm really curious about your thoughts on this, because you also work at a university, and you're exposed to lots of student journalists who must be considering this question.

Stephen Buckley We talk about this a lot, and I'm going to quote Sonal Shah here, CEO of Texas Tribune, who many of you know, who likes to say that part of our problem is that we treat objectivity as if human beings can be objective, as opposed to an act of objectivity. And I really think that's important because obviously nobody is objective as a human being. We all bring our biases and experiences to whatever we're doing. And so in my classes, I really work hard to help students understand the original vision of objectivity, which actually has nothing to do with how we've come to think of it. When objectivity was first unspooled back in the, as a notion, back in say, I think the 1920s, the folks who came up with it said was, “You know what, what if you created a sort of scientific method for journalism?” And so what that might mean is that you follow evidence wherever it leads. And so we talk about that with our students, that sometimes as reporters we, well all the time as reporters, we follow the evidence wherever it leads, and sometimes it leads to surprising and uncomfortable places, right? It means the original vision of objectivity says, hey, when you are engaging with a source, and you are naturally prone to be sympathetic to that source, all the more reason to ask that source tough questions. And if you are engaged with somebody whom you are inclined to dismiss, all the more reason to really lean in, and listen, and engage that person. So those are, when we talk about objectivity in our journalism classrooms at Duke, that's the behavior that we are trying to help students walk away with. And if we do, and if we're successful, I do think that that will produce more empathetic, more impactful, more useful journalism.

Michael Bolden So, Stephen, what do you tell the public, though, as public editor of the Dallas Morning News, when someone writes you and says, “That doesn't seem very objective to me?” How do you respond to that?

Stephen Buckley Well, I don't give them the three and a half minute sermon that I just gave you all, but I do give them a version of that. I say, “Hey, here is where the reporting led, and the reporter so far seems to be correct. And until proven otherwise, then the reporter has done her job.” And so, that's what I tell them.
Michael Bolden Sally?

Sally Lehrman Yeah, well, I think so far we've heard a lot of really great explanations and thoughts about this. One, I really lean toward the word “impartiality” because we do know,

like, as human beings, we aren't objective, and also as a science reporter, that was something that I've always tried to talk to audiences about is that we really do follow essentially the scientific method. We're looking for the evidence, and asking those tough questions, and taking it where it leads us. Two of the areas in which we don't do such a great job is number one, going in and really diving deeply into our own backgrounds, our own histories, our own ways that we were raised, philosophies, experiences that do guide our reporting, and then thinking about how do we correct for that. And I think, Stephen, you were referring to that, but do we really do that self-reflection on an ongoing basis and also at an institutional level? And then, secondly, how much do we share with the public? So as I said, one of the very first things that we heard from the public when we started doing these questions, these interviews, was, “Nobody's really impartial. What is your agenda?” So there is a great desire to hear more about that, and yes, some organizations do have an agenda about lifting up a particular community and that's important to talk about. Some may have a left leaning or a right leaning agenda. That's important to talk about. Or as an individual journalist, it may not be that you have an agenda per se, and then hopefully your agenda is all about the public interest, but you do have a background. And I think the important thing here is to say that. Like here's where I was raised. I was raised on a farm. I'm learning about the urban community. Or I was raised on the East Coast. I'm learning about the central part of America, or whatever it might be. Or I grew up in a very left-leaning family, and I make an effort to correct for that. So it's about transparency as well as action and the action behind it.

Joy Mayer Yeah can I just add that I think what Sally said is really important, and this is where the humility comes in. Do we even realize how our background is showing up in our work? At Trusting News we have a program we co-created with Spaceship Media called Dimensions of Difference that walks newsrooms through some self-assessment, some identity mapping, who's in the newsroom, what are you equipped to see, what might you be missing. Let me just say that a couple weeks ago a journalist, a reporter at a major metro newsroom, said to me, “Do we really need to be interviewing Trump supporters?” And I have heard a sentiment of some variety of that many times in the past few months. And I think that as newsrooms, and I've heard from journalists saying, “You're not gonna believe the stuff journalists in my newsroom are saying, but I'm not going to question them.” And I think that we need to be very careful to make sure our newsrooms are inviting dissent, that people in our newsrooms feel welcomed and rewarded for challenging each other's work, for saying, “Hey, I think we might be missing something, or shouldn't we be curious about this other side too?” Because as Stephen said, it's one thing to defend the accuracy of stories, the facts in a story, but stories can be accurate and not true if they are leaving things out. And so sometimes when people criticize a newsroom, they're saying, “I don't think you got this right.” Other times they're saying, “I don't see myself in that. I think you're missing something”. What values and assumptions are guiding our journalism, and are we showing appropriate intellectual humility as we assess that?

Michael Bolden Well, so now you've set Stephen up, because I have to ask him, so how do you invite the dimensions of difference into the work of the Dallas Morning News, right? These pathways of dissent or disagreement, how does that manifest at the Dallas Morning News? How do you deal with it?

Stephen Buckley You mean within the newsroom?

Michael Bolden Well, let's take both within the newsroom, and also when the public comes to you and says some of the things that Joy just said.

Stephen Buckley So, I live in a world of endless conversation, always talking to the newsroom and always talking to the public. I'm a professional listener. And sometimes what that means is that when I'm engaging with the newsroom, they are responding to criticism. And I am trying to respond with the same transparency, and accountability, and humility, trying to model that with them, and hopefully showing that they can disagree with me. Same thing with the public. And so, you know, I have what I call some frequent flyers, folks who are often emailing me. And then occasionally somebody new will pop up, and we'll have a robust back and forth. Well, they always have the last word. I think it's important to let the public understand that we as journalists, we work for them. We serve the truth, but we do work for the public. And so I think it's important for the public to feel like they can disagree with the public editor. And what's interesting, before I stop, what's interesting is that very often, and I confess this has surprised me in this role, very often the last word from the public is, “Hey, thanks for listening. Thanks for engaging with me. I don't agree with you, but I appreciate your taking the time to engage me.”

Michael Bolden So, as a follow-up for our panel, so Carrie Cochran asks, do any of you know of examples of outlets actively engaging with communities and individuals who are vocal about criticizing their outlet, inviting them in? Any advice there?

Stephen Buckley Can you repeat the question, Michael?

Michael Bolden Do any of you know about examples of outlets where you're actively engaging with communities and individuals who are vocal about criticizing your news organization? And what advice do we have for news organizations in this regard? Joy?

Joy Mayer Yeah, we do a lot of work sending journalists out into communities specifically to talk to people with low trust in the news, to ask questions like, “What do journalists get wrong? Do you see your own life reflected in the news?” I'll give you one interesting example that I wasn't actually involved in, but we've done a lot of work with the national bridge-building organization, Braver Angels, that looks at political divides and bridging political divides. They hosted an event in Vermont and invited five or six journalists from different outlets in Vermont to come to an event with the local alliance of Braver Angels, so a mix of people across the political spectrum, and took turns talking and listening, and asking each other questions, specifically looking at coverage of local issues in Vermont and how it was perceived across the political spectrum. I think that kind of thing, finding community groups that are willing to engage in good faith and give reasonable, intelligent feedback and input about how well journalists are serving their whole complex, diverse community is really inspiring.

Sally Lehrman Yeah, so two things. One, we do this essentially as a routine thing. We go out and talk with members of the public, invite them in workshops to look at the eight trust indicators and really respond and build on them for us, for our newsrooms. We also, as I was saying, actually developed tools that they can use in their communities, in their families, in their libraries, wherever it might be. Then the second thing is we, so I said we would do this ongoing research, we just a couple of years ago finished a study with a Native American, American Indian, indigenous people and talked with them, worked with an indigenous media alliance, Freedom Alliance, and we talked with them about their relationship with the news. And two really powerful things emerged among others. One was just this sense that news had abandoned them, that they were just not seen. And two, just horribly misrepresented. And so we brought together, and this time it was our news organizations, along with native people, along with community people that we had interviewed, along with native journalists, and talked with them about how can we solve

this problem. And I just want to share one of the outcomes was getting to that public listening, but again, institutionalizing it. So they were thinking, okay, they're not going to come to an event, the people we're trying to reach are not going to come to an event. We knew that from the research. Either they're scattered from various different directions, or they're too far away to come to some central event. However, we knew folks were on Facebook a lot, and that was a way that a lot of nations were able to communicate with one another. And so the idea that a couple of our news sites came up with was, okay, let's create a space in Facebook, and it really is all about listening. It's all about native people telling us, “You know, you're using the wrong term here, or you are being incredibly culturally insensitive by the way you're covering this, or why are you completely missing this important story that is of value to us?” And so it's built not to just push out news. I mean, that's part of it, but the primary purpose was to listen. So thinking of just, it's like a journalism advice line or listening post. And so the idea was to do it in that space where they knew people were. And I think we can do all the things that we know work like going out and talking with people in third spaces, going out and creating forums. But we also, it’s so important to think of well, where people are, and how do we connect with them in those places?

Stephen Buckley Just building on the theme of listening, so a few months after I began as public editor, a reporter at the Dallas Morning News said, “You know, it's great that we have Stephen.” Well, I'm not sure she said it was great that we have Stephen, but she said, “I appreciate our efforts around building trust with the community. How come the reporters are not more engaged and involved in this effort?” And so there is now a trust committee at the Dallas Morning News, and among the very first things they're doing is just going out and listening to the community, just trying to absorb how people perceive the Dallas Morning News, what people need, how they interpret the work that we do. I don't think it's a surprise that listening plays such a big role in connecting with the community.

Michael Bolden So, briefly, I want to talk about two things that I think are very relevant to this. First, in my work at the American Press Institute, we've done a lot of work in Pittsburgh, trying to get newsrooms more aligned with the needs of the community. One of the things that we've done is that we have founded a community advisory board that's not associated with any one news organization. Any news organization who wants to listen to people in the community can access that advisory board to hear what people think about media in Pittsburgh, and what's on their minds. Because one of the things we found is that people don't just say, “Oh, Public Source is bad, or this other organization is bad.” They paint the entire media ecosystem, right? So having a broad advisory board that can respond to anything from a cross-section of the community is very useful, and that advisory board, I think we're up to six or nine month terms now, and anybody can use them. The other example I'll give is from when I was a managing editor at the San Francisco Chronicle. They started an initiative called SFNext, which basically involved going to various circles within the community, sometimes it was housing leaders, sometimes church leaders or whatever. And as a newsroom, news leaders from the publisher on down, just sitting there and listening to people tell you often what was wrong with you. I remember the first session that we held, we held at the Chronicle’s headquarters, and one of the people stood up and said, “You know, we appreciate being here, but you've been here for 150 years. And you've never done this before, why should we talk to you now?” Right, and so the humility necessary for that process and the feedback, it's not just a matter of listening, it's also acting on the feedback. Which leads to our next question from Kate Winkle, who asks, and we've touched on this, but let's explore it a little bit more. What's the best place for a newsroom to start with? One, exploring the

existing trust relationship with their audience, and then what are some ways to get upper management and the rest of the newsroom on board? Who wants to take it first?

Sally Lehrman Well, I'd say the best place to start is by listening, to really go out there and start asking questions. And our questions are really good ones that you can continue to ask. Why do you value the news? What do you look for in the news? What's your news journey? And could we do better? And I would start there, in terms of getting buy-in. There's some really good data that you can use, and again, I can point to the data around the trust indicators. When Talia did that study, she also found that when people felt that a site was trustworthy or specifically, in our case too, the trust indicators were in place, then they were — 33 percent said they were somewhat or very more likely to spend their own dollars to pay for news from that source. They also said they were more likely to return to that space. This work has been supported in a study that we did with Ipsos and lots of other studies. So we know that trust is tied to loyalty, tied to more subscribers, tied to revenue streams. So there's a really good reason to do it for the survival of the organization, let alone for just making sure that you're actually serving the public that you aim to serve. So, it's doing that, and then, of course, buy-in across the newsroom is inviting everyone in. And one of our newsrooms, in Germany, what they did is start with the very beginning, bring everyone together to talk about what are our ethics really, continuing with that, building brown bag lunches about it, really making it, all these things, a living project that everyone was part of.

Joy Mayer We usually start by identifying obstacles to trust. So what do you think is getting in the way of trust? Is it that you're creating news for news junkies, and it turns out there are a lot of people you're not reaching because they're not news junkies. Is that a format problem? Is that a vocabulary problem? Or is the problem that you are speaking to a certain slice of your community and not others? One interesting example actually I recently learned about from Dallas, from your former colleague Katrice before she left for the Marshall Project. She said at the Dallas Morning News they were rethinking use of the word “expert” because of what it signals to people about what kind of expertise is valued. Instead of just labeling somebody an expert and expecting people to trust us that they're an expert, explain where their expertise lies. This person has studied this thing for 20 years or whatever it is. So is the obstacle for trust that you are seen as elitist, that you're seen as politically biased, that you are producing news that works for a certain segment of your community or not for another segment of the community? Then you're fundamentally also talking about audience growth, which makes it easier to get buy-in from management.

Sally Lehrman Yeah, and those two things work together. So why do you trust us? What makes you trust us? What is the barrier?

Stephen Buckley I think it's, just building on what Sally and Joy have said, I don't think we spend enough time in newsrooms really thinking through the sort of reflexive habits that have formed over decades, and really thinking about, gosh, what is it that we really do well, what is that we don't do well, and how does that compare to how the public perceives us? And I think that's understanding how we see ourselves, and then how the public sees us is a pretty good place to start.

Michael Bolden So, one of the things that we espouse at the American Press Institute are 360 evaluations of newsrooms. This manifested in our work with the API Inclusion Index, which was the creation of my former colleague, Dr. Letrell Crittenden. But what we do with the Inclusion Index, which is not just about diversity, it's about the total wellness of a news organization. But it requires an internal examination and survey of a newsroom's practices

to understand how people within the newsroom perceive things. And then you go out and you also ask those same questions or similar questions of the community. And so you get what is a more robust picture of both internal practices and external practices. And then, you can develop a strategic plan for how you begin to address these things. So that's something that we definitely espouse. And just to plug for API because we have detailed all of this work with the Inclusion Index and the community advisory board on our website and with lots of guides for you to look at.

The next question I want to turn to is a little bit different. It's very topical. We know many newsrooms are wrestling with AI and how they should use it in their newsrooms. The next panel here will even talk about its real impact. What should newsrooms tell the public about their use of AI, and how they're even using it? So, Joy, let's start with you.

Joy Mayer We're in the middle of some research on this that my colleague Lynn Walsh is leading, along with Ben Toff at the University of Minnesota. I don't know if Ben is here. Our first stage of research showed that 94% of people say that they would like newsrooms to disclose when they use AI. So then our next question is, what does disclosure look like? If we just say AI was used in the development of this story, well that's actually probably just going to confuse people and irritate them, because they either don't know what it is, or they'll fill in the gaps of what you didn't say with their own assumptions about what that means. When I asked my mom, she says, “Well, that just means the robots are doing the work, right?” So what does that actually mean? Or we get so detailed in listing out the, we use language in describing the tools that we used and the processes we went through that don't make sense to regular people. So we're in the middle of a cohort of newsrooms testing out a disclosure. We have kind of a Mad Libs style disclosure right now that we're testing out, that's like this tool was used to do this thing, for this reason, here's what it allowed us to do, and here was the involvement of humans, here's the oversight that was involved in that. So I think that it is reasonable for people to be skeptical and worried about how AI will influence journalism and life around them, and we need to reward their skepticism with information. Here is how we're using it, here is how we’re not using it. So that starts with a policy, but then it means story-level disclosures about how and when it was used.

Sally Lehrman Yeah, so this is also something we've been working on, and actually have been working on it for years because we had, I was trying to think at least five years ago now, we had our first AI policy, because we had a newsroom and multiple newsrooms, it turned out, were using AI to enhance their sports stories, or stock stories, things like that. But more recently what we've done is we've surveyed our participating news sites to see how they are using AI, what are their concerns around it. And we also have brought together working groups to think about this. And so number one, we do have transparency, disclosure requirements around AI. And they're similar to what you mentioned, Joy, but I would say there is a little bit of an addition to it. So one is explaining at a policy level what is our philosophy around AI, and for some, it's just we don't use it. For others, it's we use it a lot, and here's how. And then on the article page disclosures as well. And it is important not to over disclose in the sense of just dumping too much information, but it's also important to disclose and signal the level in which it's being used. So at the top of the story, like if it's completely generated, then you would make that very clear. Or also at the top of the story, if you've used it in content generation in any way, if you’ve used it in your reporting, that's where we would want a disclosure. If you're using it in a more like, what should I say, for something like checking or for translation, might be a good example, that can go at the bottom. Although we do have news sites that are putting it at the top because they translate like everything they do into five different languages. So what needs

to be said? Well, what tool are we using for what purpose? And what is it trained on? So this is coming from our own archive. This is coming from the general internet, and what are the consequences for that? So, and the human part as well, because there are lots of folks will say, “Oh, this is checked by a human.” Well, what does that mean? Which human? Who is responsible for that? Is it the reporter, is it the editor, some person across the whole newsroom responsible? You can't say all that in an article page, but you can put that in your policy and link to it. We're finding that when we talk to newsrooms, this idea of transparency was very popular maybe a year ago, and now people are pulling back. And I find that very worrisome. And the reason they do it, one editor said to me, “Well, why would we put something like a cigarette cancer warning at the top of our stories?” And I'm like, “Well, why do you think of it as a warning like that?” Channeling Rosental here. It's an opportunity. There’s good things around AI. We just have to be really careful about how we use it, and we want to signal that to the public. We had another editor who said, “You know, we really need to be not only talking about AI for ourselves, and building trust for our own news organizations, but really being, in a way, an ambassador for literacy around AI. And this is one of the responsibilities that newsrooms have.” So I felt like we have a lot of work to do, but we're moving in the right direction if we're having conversations like that.

Stephen Buckley Just really quickly, I don't get a lot of questions from readers about AI, but when I do, they tend to be from the perspective of suspicion and cynicism. And my worry, and I think our worry in the journalism space, should be the potential for AI to further widen the perceived gap between, well, the real gap, between news organizations and the public. And anything that might do that is something that I think we really need to pay close attention to.

Michael Bolden We are actually, we're coming to the end of our time, unfortunately, so very quickly, what is one thing you would want journalists to leave here with today on the issue of trust? Sally?

Sally Lehrman Well, the one thing I would say is really don't be afraid to change, don't resist change. We find so many news organizations, they embrace the idea of building trust, of doing all these things, and then when it comes down to actually doing it, then it's like, well, we don't really want to reveal, or even AI, because we're afraid of the consequences. But if people find out, okay, you're using AI, then they're going to feel completely betrayed, and how do you repair that? So it's keeping the public foremost in the work you do and encouraging within yourself and your colleagues to really embrace the change that's required of us.

Michael Bolden Joy? Your one thing.

Joy Mayer The question of who feels seen and understood by your journalism and who feels neglected or misrepresented by your journalism can lead you in such interesting directions. And my wish for newsrooms is that they would ask really big picture, who are we not reaching? For whom is our content not hearable? And who feels like our stories with them and about them are not fundamentally true and trustworthy? That should lead us to really question a whole lot about what we're doing. In some small ways, what about ourselves do we need to explain? And some in really big ways, what about our coverage just is not resonating? And are we showing up with enough humility to really assess that?

Stephen Buckley The public is not the enemy. I get it. I understand that as journalists, we engage with or hear from bad actors all the time. And it's really easy to think that those bad actors are the majority. I'll tell you that in the work that I do as a public editor, I have

been so heartened by how many people are genuinely trying to understand the work we do, help journalists do better work. And so, yeah, the public is not the enemy.

Michael Bolden So please join me in thanking our panelists.