Journalist Fellowship Paper

The mirage in the trust desert: Challenging journalism's transparency infatuation

By Jussi Latvala

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Introduction

In the spirit of transparency, let's begin with a confession: I used to think I knew how to fix journalism.

It all started back in the early 2010s, when times were tough for Finnish media. Newspaper circulations were shrinking, managers were laying off staff, and selling ad space had become increasingly difficult.

At the same time, social media influencers were on the rise, growing their audiences and getting people to engage with their content. Some of them were, and still are, financially successful also while doing all this.

I, the fresh-faced university student, thought: "If only the audience understood. We *journalists* have more professional know-how, journalistic ethics and editorial guidelines to adhere to. Surely these things should have some value in the eyes of the audience. If only they knew more about how the news is made."

I was frustrated: anyone could write some text or make a video, but it was only *really* journalism if it was done while adhering to a certain set of principles and ethics.

The solution was clear to me: if journalists could become better at showing our audience how and why we do our work, the audience would see the value in journalism, trust us more, and come to our websites, broadcasts, and social media channels, instead of opting for influencers' content. More audience, more income. What's not to love?

I wasn't alone in thinking like this: more and more people were talking about the need for "journalistic transparency". That was typically shorthand for showing the audience how journalism is made in order to improve their trust in us.

But while the talk grew in volume, I didn't see much changing in practice over the years. So I came to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism with the aim of defining best practices in journalistic transparency and winning back our audiences.

I'm just going to spoil the ending right away: after talking with journalists, academics, and ombudsmen, and after reading research and analysis about it, I am far less convinced that transparency is the silver bullet solution it has been hyped up to be.

More specifically, I've become sceptical of transparency's ability to do anything meaningful to increase trust from the audience.

I guess I've also become a bit jaded about the transparency discourse and how so many journalists – me included – accepted it at face value, without much critical thinking. It isn't actually that difficult to see why transparency might not be a very effective cure to our problems as an industry.

I'm not proposing that we should throw the idea of more transparent journalism out of the window entirely, or that it doesn't work at all.

But what we should do is manage our expectations about it – understand where, when and why it can be a useful resource for journalists, unpack some limitations and serious dangers of it, and put the reasoning behind the transparency-infatuation under scrutiny.

And while we do that, I hope this paper can provide some help.

The busy journalist's guide to transparency

This is a long paper. While I do hope you will read the whole thing, I understand you might not have the time. That's why I made this chapter: a summary of all the key points made over the coming pages.

Hint: if there's only one aspect of the discussion that interests you, each section is designed to stand alone, so feel free to jump ahead if you want expert views and resources from a specific angle.

The transparency hypothesis

Transparency has been proposed by both journalists and academics as a solution to falling trust. The working theory: by showing how news is made, audiences will trust journalism more.

The nature of the problem this theory aims to address seems similar in many countries: the relationship between news publications and audiences is broken.

The hypothesis: if publications explained their processes, gave information about how and why a story was made, disclosed more background information, or introduced the authors creating the journalistic content, then the audience would be more trusting.

Find the whole chapter here.

The science of trust

If you have a hard time pinpointing what trust in news actually means, you're not alone. It's complicated. Many media scholars think trust in news media is a form of institutional trust and could be defined as "voluntary vulnerability".

If someone trusts a news organisation, there's a power difference at play and it makes the trustor vulnerable because – at least theoretically – it is possible for someone to abuse that trust.

While there is an epistemological component in trust (that is, evaluation of the quality of the source and its trustworthiness) there are probably other factors at play, too: satisfaction, relevance, and interest, and whether or not an audience member feels represented in the output of a news organisation, for example.

What is interesting (and potentially frustrating for journalists) is the fact that trust in news media isn't only rooted in the output or performance of journalists. It is also affected by political and cultural factors. Quality reporting doesn't necessarily lead

to high levels of trust, and high levels of trust are not automatically a sign of journalists getting it right.

Find the whole chapter here.

Does transparency increase trust?

Here is the million-dollar question: does journalistic transparency really work as a vehicle for increasing trust from the audience, or are we dealing with empty hype?

Unfortunately, the scientific evidence is pretty damning. Transparency and its potential to build trust have been academically studied, and what research finds is that often transparency has no effects on trust. Sometimes quite modest positive effects are observed, sometimes it has even decreased trust in journalism.

On the other hand, these experiments have their limitations, and it could be argued that we don't know what long-term effects of increasing transparency could be. However, if transparency was as effective a tool for increasing trust as it's heralded to be, it should have more concrete evidence in support of the enthusiasm.

There are also theoretical arguments and focus-group based evidence hinting towards substantial limitations of what transparency can do in practice. If you don't trust an organisation publishing news, why would you trust its description of how that news was made? It could even be argued that transparency is the opposite of trust because trust is about, well... *trusting*. In other words: 'I don't require further information because I trust you as a source.'

Seen from this angle, transparency doesn't look like a tool that could increase trust; it looks like a tool that could potentially remove the need for trusting a news organisation altogether.

Find the whole chapter here.

Transparency as a moral obligation

Perhaps we won't find a silver bullet to all of journalism's problems in transparency. That doesn't mean we should entirely ditch the idea. We should just think carefully about why exactly we want to be more transparent (if that is what we want) and calibrate our expectations of how we would like the audience to respond.

The most solid argument for being more transparent in our reporting, I think, comes from being morally obligated to do so: transparency is something journalists demand from other actors of the society, so it makes sense for us to adhere to a certain level of transparency, too.

If that sounds too philosophical, a more practical foundation for the moral obligation argument could be found in quality. If reporting is conducted with a certain level of transparency, it creates an environment where journalists have to reach a certain level of professionalism. This could, potentially, lead to journalism of better quality and journalists more easily held to account.

Find the whole chapter here.

Transparency on social media

There may be contexts in which introducing elements of transparency– such as explaining the reporting process or providing more information about different sources of information – could be fruitful in terms of increasing trust. Social media might be one such context, because when news organisations publish there, they are directly competing with other accounts and creators whose guiding principles might be very different from those of journalists. The journalistic process, therefore, becomes a unique selling point.

Here, I also touch upon the issue of motivation behind transparency. In the transparency discourse, transparency is supported because news organisations supposedly benefit from it (by, supposedly, gaining more trust). Perhaps a better motivation for transparency is that it should be something the audience benefits from. Reframe transparency as a service to your viewers or readers, not a quest to make them change their mind about journalism.

Find the whole chapter here.

Transparency as theatre

Another context in which transparency can be a meaningful tool for a newsroom might be a surprising one: on the stage. “Live journalism” refers to events organised by journalists or newsrooms wherein the journalists take the stage to share a journalistic story in a speech format.

This format often includes elements of transparency: disclosing who the journalist is in relation to the topic, explaining how and why the story was made, sharing information about how the information was gathered.

Here, however, we can unpack a dilemma that is always present when we are dealing with transparency: it is never complete. Transparency is always consciously managed in the sense that journalists are making decisions about what to disclose to the audience and what not to. On stage, as in print or broadcast, these decisions are affected by personal assessments of what is important, interesting, dramatic, thought-provoking, or emotional. In this sense, live journalism makes one key

element of transparency quite apparent: when someone else is deciding for you, transparency isn't the "see for yourself" feature it's often heralded as.

A second lesson from live journalism: those who are willing to pay for a ticket to watch a journalist talking about their story are probably not those who have the most severe trust issues with journalism. That's not a bad thing; it's worth serving the audience that is already close to you to keep them there in the future as well.

Find the whole chapter here.

Transparency as a marketing technique

When talking about transparency, an interesting thought pattern often emerges or is underlying in the discussion: "if the audience only knew how well we are doing our job, then surely they would trust us!"

There is often a promotional element in transparency enthusiasm, which can be difficult to merge with other journalistic ideals. We aren't supposed to be promoting anything, only providing our audience with the best possible information – right?

Maybe, then, it is worth separating transparency from journalism and turning it into a marketing campaign instead. This is what the BBC in the UK did: a marketing campaign promoting the editorial guidelines of the broadcaster, giving glimpses of how they do their reporting in practice. Unfortunately, the BBC was very hesitant to talk about their campaign for transparency.

Find the whole chapter here.

Transparency on demand

In broader terms, it's possible that not everyone is interested in how or why some piece of news came about – they just want the news. That's why it might be a good idea to try to tailor special products for those who are more interested or passionate about how journalism is being made. In relation to this, it's worth to practicing transparency preparedness or predictive transparency: there are times when the audience might have a higher need for explanations about news coverage, even though the baseline interest isn't that high.

Find the whole chapter here.

The pitfalls of transparency

A big part of the appeal of transparency is that it *feels* very righteous. Surely, an ethical journalist wants to adhere to the highest professional principles. Being transparent about our work can feel like it belongs right up there.

But it is also important to spend some time thinking about dangers and risks of transparency. Protecting vulnerable sources is an obvious reason to do so. Not everything we know can be made public.

Ideals of transparency can be also used against journalists: what's stopping an authoritarian leader, for example, coercing a publication to disclose where its sensitive information came from in the name of transparency? Transparent journalism can lead to serious questions about who is at the steering wheel, and how newsrooms maintain their autonomy when they publicly espouse transparency.

There are also parts of our work that are very difficult to explain, such as story selection. Why was one topic covered yesterday, but another one wasn't? While there might be nothing to hide, explaining one's motivations isn't easy because we may not even be able to succinctly verbalise all the intricacies that go into each decision. Getting someone to trust those explanations is even more difficult.

There are also situations where the audience might not reward a news organisation for being more transparent, as sometimes it only reveals more mess. Furthermore, there is scientific evidence to suggest transparent journalism has the potential to disappoint audiences who disagree with how journalists handle certain situations.

Find the whole chapter here.

A mirage of answers

The Serenity Prayer, popularised by Alcoholics Anonymous, sums it up for me:
God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can, And the wisdom to know the difference.

In my opinion, journalists are getting better at recognising what problems we have as a profession. (And many of the problems are substantial.) Transparency has been proposed as a solution to at least one of these problems.

However, I am not sure journalists are good at identifying the things we cannot change – what isn't in our hands to remedy. In my concluding chapter, I will explore to what extent trust in news is based on what journalists do, and to what extent it isn't. Then I ask if transparency is trying to address a problem that isn't fixable by journalists. Maybe transparency is just a mirage of answers in the trust desert.

Finally, I ponder whether in all our worries about how media literate the general public is, we might have forgotten to address severe gaps in journalists' knowledge about journalism.

Find the whole chapter here.

The transparency hypothesis

"Transparency is the antidote to fake news," Raney Aronson-Rath, the executive producer of PBS investigative documentary series Frontline, wrote for Nieman Lab in 2017.[1] In her text, she first painted a grim picture of how the phenomenon of fake news is not going to disappear and how attacks on press will continue.

"It all means that news organisations will have to keep fighting for the trust of a sceptical public, coming up with ways to demonstrate our credibility across all of the platforms on which we publish our journalism."

The solution Aronson-Rath offered was journalistic transparency. She had a concrete example of what that could mean: as PBS published the documentary *Putin's Revenge*, they also made available online 56 full-length interviews that were conducted for the documentary. [2]

The audience could now take a look at the source material themselves if they were sceptical or curious about how Frontline had approached the topic, what they had left out and what else their interviewees had to say that didn't make the cut.

This wasn't a one-time thing: Frontline has now published hundreds of full-length interviews behind multiple investigations, and anyone can access them online. [3]

The Frontlines Transparency Project is a famous example of what journalistic transparency could look like in practice. The reasoning behind the initiative goes something like this: the industry is facing serious problems with trust, but transparency is a way to win back that trust.

This line of reasoning is often present in the discourse. Here's what Deborah Turness, the CEO of BBC News and Current Affairs, wrote in 2022 while arguing for more transparent journalism:

"I want to 'pull back the curtain' and show people the incredible hard work going on behind the scenes at BBC News. Because I believe the more that people see the work our journalists do, the more they will know they can trust our journalism."[4]

According to Sebastiaan van der Lans, the chairman of The Trusted Web Foundation, the most important thing for journalism going forward is transparency.

[1] https://www.niemanlab.org/2017/12/transparency-is-the-antidote-to-fake-news/
[2] https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview-collection/the-putin-files/
[3] https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/about-frontlines-transparency-project/
[4] https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/articles/2022/deborah-turness-bbc-news-trust-is-earned

In an age where readers are sceptical, "[…] they want the tools and information at hand to be able to fact-check for themselves".[5]

All these examples embody what is perceived as journalistic transparency. It's not a single thing or action newsrooms can either do or not, but "various ways of opening up the production and decision-making processes – or, more generally, the inner workings of newsrooms to outsiders – to hold journalism accountable".[6]

A stage metaphor is often used to explain and define what transparency means: if what we traditionally think of as journalistic output (articles, news stories, TV segments and so on) is taking place on a stage, then journalistic transparency offers the audience a view to the backstage too and lets them know what happens behind the scenes.

Because, the argument goes, when they know what's happening backstage, they can ease with their suspicions and start trusting journalism more.

When journalistic transparency is offered as a brand-new idea – *additional to* or expansive of "standard journalism" – one might feel a little bit baffled. Isn't journalism transparent to begin with? We are in the business of supplying audiences with relevant information, and the way we normally do this is by letting them know where our information came from.

Usually, quotes are attributed to a person, statistics are attributed to their aggregator, statements by a government agency are attributed to that agency. If a journalist does reporting physically present in a location, this is communicated in the dateline, which is traditionally one of the first words in the article – as is the name of the journalist who did the reporting. If this is just "journalism", then what constitutes as "transparency"?

Margo Smit, the ombudsman for the Dutch public broadcaster NPO and the president of The Organization of News Ombudsmen and Standards Editors, voiced reservations in an interview with me. While there is plenty of will, she said, there isn't necessarily a defined way.

"A lot of newsrooms have some ideas of wanting to do this [transparency], but they don't quite know how to, […] because it is an investment of time to be more transparent and accountable. Particularly for a smaller or daily news programme, which is kind of like an ongoing train, they have a hard time figuring out how to factor all of this into their daily routine. So [willingness to be more transparent] is there, but they also see the limitations or at least the obstacles in doing it."

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[5] https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2021/07/21/the-future-of-journalism-is-transparent-publishing

[6] Koliska, Michael. "Trust and Journalistic Transparency Online." Journalism Studies (London, England) 23.12 (2022): 1488-509.

This isn't a uniquely Dutch problem. In a 2015 study about how journalists in the U.S. understand and practice transparency, a *New York Times* editor said that while they recognise transparency being a buzzword, on a day-to-day level it's just not an issue people talk about. Interviewees from different newsrooms said the only type of transparency that gets green-lit is procedures that demand little additional effort or resources.[7]

I have found no agreed-upon set of practices at the core of the journalistic transparency ideal. However, commonly cited practices include explaining reporting processes, including information about the author, a more detailed "About Us" section, making editorial guidelines and codes of ethics public and easily accessible, hyperlinks to information sources, descriptions of methodology in data journalism stories, granting the public access to editorial meetings, and allowing them to participate in the making of a story.[8] This is by no means an exhaustive list of what journalistic transparency might look like.

One distinction that can be made here is between disclosure and participatory transparency. Disclosure transparency refers to giving the audience more information about the news organisation and how and why it does news. Participatory transparency refers to inviting members of the public into the news production process.[9]

It's also worth noting that many of these examples were being practiced long before the notion of transparency was a twinkle in the news industry's eye. For example, ombudsmen or editors-in-chief writing columns to explain the practices or reasoning of a newsroom has been a common practice for decades.[10]

Not only is there no set of practices that make up journalistic transparency, but there is also some variance in the terminology. For example, it's quite common to hear about radical transparency in the context of journalism, while – to my understanding – referring to similar practices that fall under the category of standard journalistic transparency.

Margaret Sullivan, former public editor of the *New York Times* and current media columnist for the *Guardian*, spoke in June 2023 about how journalism can help save democracies from the brink of collapse, but only if it becomes more open about its methods and sources.

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[7] Chadha, Kalyani, and Koliska, Michael. "Newsrooms and Transparency in the Digital Age." Journalism Practice 9.2 (2015): 215-29.

[8] https://docs.google.com/document/d/12v1NFN8_M5cH8Fr2xb21dTP95TnHMyaN_ZIt2xGsZMc/edit

[9] Karlsson, Michael. "Rituals of Transparency." Journalism Studies (London, England) 11.4 (2010): 535-45.

[10] McBride, Kelly, and Tom Rosenstiel. The New Ethics of Journalism: Principles for the 21st Century. Washington, D.C., 2014.

“I call it radical transparency: journalists should explain how they came to conclusions and their reporting techniques and share primary information. In other words: ‘Here are receipts, you can see them yourselves.’ We can’t change the craziness of the environment, but we can relentlessly explain ourselves,” Sullivan said, according to *The Guardian*.[11]

There are many other examples of people using the term “radical transparency” (News Literacy Matters called it “transparency on steroids”), but typically they do not define what differentiates it from regular old journalistic transparency. [12] I deal with this in more detail in the final essay of this paper.

The term “journalistic transparency” has also sometimes been used to describe non-journalistic interventions. In a 2022 study, the term referred to the inclusion of information about news outlets in Google Knowledge Panels. These were not controlled by journalists but automatically generated on Google search pages.[13] For the purposes of this discussion, I won’t recognise that as journalistic transparency because the information is not created or transmitted by journalists.

While there is some confusion or different views about the terminology and practical applications, the basic idea and promise of journalistic transparency is this: if journalists show their audience how journalism is made, then the audience will trust journalism more.

Joy Mayer is the founder and director of Trusting News, a U.S. organisation that trains newsrooms to earn trust from audiences. One of my first questions to her was if she thought journalistic transparency was a vehicle for increasing that trust.

“Yes, definitely,” she said.

Mayer believes transparency is about making visible and clear that which would otherwise be opaque. She said people have many assumptions and gaps in their knowledge about how journalism works.

“And that is reasonable: there are a lot of different ways journalism works. There are a lot of things done under the big umbrella of journalism or media that I don’t think are responsible. So scepticism is warranted. We need to earn the trust of the people we aim to serve by demonstrating to them what makes us trustworthy and credible.”

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[11] https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jun/02/media-must-be-more-open-to-save-democracy-says-former-standards-editor

[12] https://newsliteracymatters.com/2021/03/23/the-case-for-radical-transparency/

[13] Masullo, Gina M, Wilhelm, Claudia, Lee, Taeyoung, Gonçalves, João, Riedl, Martin J, and Stroud, Natalie J. "Signaling News Outlet Trust in a Google Knowledge Panel: A Conjoint Experiment in Brazil, Germany, and the United States." New Media & Society (2022): 146144482211358.

“What we train newsrooms on is how increased transparency demonstrates credibility, invites accountability, and builds trust,” said Mayer, explaining the work of Trusting News.

Trusting News advocates for a variety of elements and practices of transparency: adding “explain your process” boxes to news stories, publishing editorial guidelines and engaging in conversations with the public, explaining who you tried to reach for a comment even if you weren’t successful, and so forth. [14,15,16]

Mayer said the best way to implement transparency is by injecting it into the actual journalism instead of having standalone products or separate places where the “how-to” of the journalism is explained.

“If you look at how many people read, for example, a big investigation, and then a separate column from the editor saying, ‘Here’s how we did this story,’ many, many fewer people are going to see that column.” It’s better to incorporate explanatory elements in your actual article in Mayer’s opinion.

According to her, this doesn’t only apply to written journalism. At the time of our interview, Trusting News was preparing to send out a newsletter to its subscribers explaining how to practice transparency within a TV news story.

She summarised: “Here’s why we’re covering this, here’s what we were careful to do, here’s how we found sources, here’s what our process was like. And it’s not like a sidebar, it’s woven throughout. And broadcasts can be so natural for that because you're already talking directly to the audience.”

Mayer suggested that it doesn’t matter what medium we are dealing with. Transparency can be introduced anywhere.

“I think wherever people are consuming your journalism, they can also be learning how the journalism was done. That’s ideal, rather than ‘oh, let’s post an event and invite people to come learn about journalism’, or ‘let’s have a whole separate newsletter series or column or show where we explain the journalism’. It’s really best if it’s woven throughout.”

Trusting News is not the only organisation promoting journalistic transparency. In 2014, the Society for Professional Journalists, the biggest journalism organisation in

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[14] https://medium.com/trusting-news/explain-your-process-box-improves-perceptions-of-news-organization-7abe96f36b65

[15] https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1OXWxG3_BNm-fAYIydpGDONHddXzxcLmcrbzdU-9_vvk/edit#slide=id.g9874435071_0_227

[16] https://docs.google.com/document/d/12HKjxcpRr2dUORCqfRVssrCAIkdcdw5KPcNkunDIgQ4/edit

the U.S., added transparency to their ethics code, saying journalists should explain their choices and processes to audiences.[17]

In a 2019 report that tackled the question of how to renew trust in democratic institutions in the United States, the Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy urged news organisation to practice "radical transparency" and disclose the ways they collect, report and disseminate the news. "The Commission believes that transparency breeds trust," the call-to-action segment of the report said.[18]

UNESCO is supporting a programme for South East European media outlets to increase their transparency towards readers.[19] Transparency has been hailed as a key tool to improve trust in journalism in Brazil.[20] In Spain, the newspaper Público has introducer "radical transparency" to its editorial process to regain trust from the audience and is urging other actors in the news gathering business to adhere to its News Transparency Commitment Manifesto.[21]

The examples continue.

In my home country, Finland, transparency has also been suggested as a way to combat disinformation and improve the relationship between the news media and the public.[22]

Jaakko Lyytinen, a Finnish feature journalist working for the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, is on the same page as Mayer. To him, transparency is a way to show how and why something was made. A crucial part of it is owning mistakes and being accountable when journalists make a mess, he said.

"I think the right way to do that isn't necessarily for the editor-in-chief, two days after a controversial story has been published, to write a slightly grandiose column explaining that we did it for the public and so forth. It should be always thought through at the moment of publishing if we can actually explain [why we did it]."

The stage metaphor I mentioned earlier is why I scheduled time to speak with Lyytinen for this project. He is one of the founders and producers of the live

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[17] https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp
[18] https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media_elements/files/000/000/283/original/Knight_Commission_Report_on_Trust_Media_and_Democracy_FINAL.pdf
[19] https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/road-transparent-journalism-unesco-supports-commitment-media-outlets-south-east-europe-ethical
[20] https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/transparency-journalism-brazil/
[21] https://www.transparentjournalism.org/reader/, https://wan-ifra.org/2018/03/how-a-new-tool-might-help-bring-back-trust-to-publicos-readers/
[22] https://suomenlehdisto.fi/nayta-tyosi-taustat/, https://journalisti.fi/nakokulmat/2016/04/kerrotaan-niille-kaikki/

journalism theatre concept *Musta laatikko* (“Black Box” in English) at *Helsingin Sanomat*. Here, journalists take the stage and tell journalistic stories.

Transparency is a core concept here because the journalists often explain how and why they did their reporting in the show. This concept is explored in more detail in *Transparency as theatre*.

As to whether or not transparency has the potential to increase trust from audience, Lyytinen has a clear answer. “Rather idealistically, I think that, yes, absolutely. I think it’s maybe one of the most significant methods to determinedly start increasing trust, as long as it’s done in ways which are natural and well-founded.”

Lyytinen admitted it might be easier for him to be a proponent of transparent journalism because he mostly does long-form journalism and live journalism. In other words: deadlines are not as imminent as they may be for journalists working on the news desk at *Helsingin Sanomat*.

Other journalists I talked to for this project also voiced support for transparency and are also incorporating it in their work. Finlo Nelson Rohrer is a senior news editor at BBC News, and he is in charge of many of the data journalism projects the BBC does.

For an online article based on a big pile of data, it’s a pretty common practice to include a segment about the methodology of the analysis, he said. Here, they explain possible wrinkles, problems, or limitations that they encountered while putting the data together.

“Data journalists feel very comfortable doing that kind of thing. They want to talk about the methodology, they want to talk about the limitations of the exercise, they don’t feel embarrassed doing it.”

Rohrer also manages fact checkers and said one way they practice transparency is by publishing some fact checks that don’t have a clear answer.

He thinks there has been a change in culture over the past few decades. “In the old days, the inclination would have been just to miss that [dead end] out as basically insignificant detail. And now we will have much more tendency to say, let’s put in that we did that particular exercise, and it failed to come back with the results.”

Rohrer said a potential problem with including transparency elements such as methodology sections on all articles could be length: if you’re going to dwell for too long in the questions of how this information came to be, is the audience going to be frustrated and distracted? This is a problem not only for online articles but for TV news and online video too.

Rohrer is also conscious that some members of the public might misinterpret transparency about the dead ends journalists encounter as inefficiency.

Still, he thinks that transparency has the potential to increase trust, although he has baked a caveat into his answer.

“I’m going to be biased in this instance, because my background as a journalist for the past five years has kind of hinged on a slightly exaggerated form of transparency. So I’m clearly going to say yes, it drives trust,” he said, before somewhat jokingly turning the tables. “Now, it’s your job as somebody who has studied this for months to tell me whether there’s any actual, quantitative data that backs that up.”

That’s an answer I reserve for my third essay, when we explore the scientific evidence about transparency and its potential to increase trust.

Before that, we need to define a key concept: what is trust actually, and how well does it reflect the quality of a news organisation’s performance?

The science of trust

I'm a journalist by trade, but in my free time I like to bake. I think my relationship with trust in news has been very similar to the relationship I have with yeast: I'm pretty sure it's important to the process, but I am not exactly sure how it works.

In a similar way, I knew that trust from the audience was important for journalism to thrive – if nobody trusted us, nobody would listen, right?

Even as I recognise the importance of trust, I had a pretty lousy, simplistic understanding of how trust in news comes to exist and what it actually is. More trust: good; less trust: bad, I would have said, but trust felt like such a basic concept that surely you wouldn't have even needed to bother. You don't need a definition of what a chair is in order to ultimately sit on it.

If, like me, you would struggle to define what trust is, know that you are not alone. According to a literary review of research on trust in news media, there is no single universal definition. [23] However, there are three features of trust that are largely agreed upon:

- *Willingness of a trustor to be vulnerable to a trustee based on past experiences and positive expectations*
- *Orientation towards an unknown future, which is why trust is inherently risky and an element of uncertainty is present*
- *Reduction of social complexity: expectations about future become more consistent*

The review authors conclude that trust in news media is "the individual's willingness to be vulnerable to media objects, based on the expectation that they will perform a) satisfactorily for the individual and/or b) according to the dominant norms and values in society (i.e. democratic media functions)".

[23] Fawzi, Nayla, Steindl, Nina, Obermaier, Magdalena, Prochazka, Fabian, Arlt, Dorothee, Blöbaum, Bernd, Dohle, Marco, Engelke, Katherine M., Hanitzsch, Thomas, Jackob, Nikolaus, Jakobs, Ilka, Klawier, Tilman, Post, Senja, Reinemann, Carsten, Schweiger, Wolfgang, and Ziegele, Marc. "Concepts, Causes and Consequences of Trust in News Media - a Literature Review and Framework." Annals of the International Communication Association 45.2 (2021): 154-74.

A similar definition is provided in another scientific article: Trust is the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner.[24] And in another paper: "trust is 'the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party".[25]

I found these definitions fascinating and tried to translate them from academic language into lay English. The best translation I have come up with goes like this:

To trust means to be comfortable with not being in charge based on the assumption that nothing bad will happen.

Seeing trust from this angle hints towards a power dynamic at play: a situation that requires trust is one in which one party has something (status, knowledge, resources, for example), and the other one is willing to believe that that *something* is used in a benevolent way.

I use the word "believe" here very deliberately, because when we are dealing with trust, an innate precondition is that the trustor can only believe but never truly know if that benevolence is there. If the trustor actually knew, then there wouldn't be any need for them to trust anyone in the first place. In a sense, trusting is the opposite of knowing: by definition they cannot exist at the same time with regards to the same thing.

Vulnerability is also an interesting concept to unpack in the context of trust. There has been a tendency to assume that people are generally quite trusting and even gullible. This assumption has been present in discussions about the Brexit vote and Cambridge Analytica, fake news, and subliminal messaging, for example. [26,27,28]

The belief goes: it's not difficult to manipulate the masses on an important topic, or make them believe all kinds of wild ideas if they are just influenced in the right

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[24] Hanitzsch, Thomas, Van Dalen, Arjen, and Steindl, Nina. "Caught in the Nexus: A Comparative and Longitudinal Analysis of Public Trust in the Press." The International Journal of Press/politics 23.1 (2018): 3-23.

[25] Mayer, Roger C., Davis, James H., and Schoorman, F. David. "An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust." The Academy of Management Review 20.3 (1995): 709-34. Revisited in Schoorman, F. David, Mayer, Roger C., and Davis, James H. "An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust: Past, Present, and Future." The Academy of Management Review 32.2 (2007): 344-54.

[26] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/07/the-great-british-brexit-robbery-hijacked-democracy

[27] https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/04/05/fake-news-is-bad-news-democracy/

[28] https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/02/magazine/get-out-of-my-subconscious.html

ways. In this context, if trust requires vulnerability, should it be considered dangerous?

While working on this project, I came across a book by the French cognitive scientist Hugo Mercier, a research scientist at Institut Jean Nicod in Paris. The book is called *Not Born Yesterday*, and there, Mercier argues against the notion of people being gullible.[29] If anything, people are too *stubborn*, and getting people to change their minds on important issues can sometimes be a problem.

His book explores how people evaluate information and make decisions about whether to trust something. Even though Mercier isn't specialized in questions of journalism, I wanted to interview with him to discuss what trust really is.

"The way [trust] is often defined in the social sciences is essentially when you're taking a risk with someone else. And if they fail you, you will pay a cost. So you're taking a bet on someone behaving the way they said they would or doing whatever you expect of them," Mercier told me.

So if trust is voluntary vulnerability, the next question is *why* we choose to trust someone or something, and not trust some other thing. How does trust come about, what is behind this willingness to be vulnerable?

When it comes to communication, Mercier distinguishes two components of trust. First of all, there's the evaluation of the other person or actor in terms of whether they have your best interests at heart – will they give you what they believe to be true? That could be called honesty.

The second component or dimension of trust is competence: do you think the other person is knowledgeable or competent enough to give you correct information? Honesty on its own doesn't help much if the other person honestly doesn't know what they are talking about.

"The two are necessary for me to accept what you're saying. So I have to believe both that you're well informed, and that you will communicate the thing that you believe to be true."

This type of differentiation also has consequences for who is responsible if the information turns out to be false in the end, Mercier explained. If you decide to buy a computer based on a recommendation by someone who has told you they don't know a lot about computers, it's pretty much your fault if you're not happy with your purchase.

[29] Full reference: Mercier, Hugo. Not Born Yesterday: The Science of Who We Trust and What We Believe. Princeton, NJ, 2020.

But if someone says their expertise is to give you high-quality information about computers and you follow their advice, you are right to blame them for giving you a bad recommendation.

"So the way of dividing responsibility should be like: it's my job to estimate your competence to some extent, whereas it's your job to be honest."

When you look at trust like this, it feels like it would make a lot of sense to use transparency to increase trust. Journalistic transparency is all about helping the audience make assessments of the competence of a news organisation.

Of course, then the assumption is that transparency would show just how amazingly competent the news organisation in question is, and that the audience would then be happy with what they see (and reward the organisation with more trust). In *The pitfalls of transparency* I will explore this assumption in more detail, but a spoiler: unfortunately, this might not be the case.

Trust isn't only about making assessments about whether someone is giving you accurate or false information. In my home country, Finland, we have a high level of trust in news: according to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report in 2023, 69% of the Finns say they trust in news most of the time – the highest percentage among the countries measured that year. [30]

When I think about the 31% surveyed who fall into Finland's "untrusting" category, I do not think it would not be accurate to say they all believe we are deliberately publishing false information or that all reporters are totally incompetent. Those I have met express problems with what type of decisions newsrooms are making: what is perceived as important and newsworthy and, in contrast, what isn't, how societal trends are framed and covered, who gets interviewed and whose lifestyle is noticed or taken seriously by the media.

To put it more simply: I think what is reported as trust in news might be more accurately defined as *satisfaction* with the performance and output of journalists as a profession, and not simply whether the news is true or not. Maybe many of the distrustful just don't really like how news is made and that's why they say they don't trust it.

Mercier agrees – trust is not only about accuracy of information.

"It's clearly an important thing. But it's clearly not the only thing. Most of the things that are true are deadly boring."

Trust is also about relevance: is this publication giving me information about the topics I'm interested in, with angles and emphases I agree with, do I feel like my life

[30] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/finland

is somehow represented or recognised in their coverage? All these things can affect one's willingness to be vulnerable.

If distrust stems from a dissatisfaction like this, journalistic transparency might not be very helpful in addressing it. An obvious solution would be to fundamentally change what gets covered, by whom, and how a newsroom makes decisions. That type of change might not always be necessarily bad, but it creates new problems: if 69% trust your news now, are they going to stay on board after these fundamental changes? Perhaps it is quite difficult to do journalism that 100% agrees on.

When you try to wrap your head around trust, things get very complicated very quickly. We now have a definition of trust, we have identified some mechanisms of how people evaluate what to trust, we have found some features of information that can have an impact on what is perceived as trustworthy. But it doesn't end here.

When talking about institutional trust, there are two big lines of thought: cultural and institutional theories. Institutional theories are probably easier for journalists to understand. The basic idea is that trust is based on the performance of a given institution: if people have trust, say, in a news organisation, an institutional explanation would be that this is because the organisation has performed well in the eyes of the people.

In my experience, this type of thinking is pretty common in newsrooms. If they get nice trust percentages in, for example, the Digital News Report by the Reuters Institute, then – hooray, we did well!

Cultural theories, by contrast, might feel like a party pooper, but I think they are much more fascinating. In this line of thinking, trust is something that isn't necessarily contingent on the performance of the institution being evaluated, for example news media. Instead, trust is seen as originating from personal experience, early-life socialisation, and cultural norms. Whatever type of trust is created and fostered by these conditions is then transferred to public institutions.[31]

Fawzi et al. conducted a literary review of scientific research in media trust. They identify a myriad of trust causes, ranging from conspiracy mentality, political participation, social network use and societal status, to democratic performance, economic development, and press freedom of the society we are talking about.

[31] Fawzi, Nayla, Steindl, Nina, Obermaier, Magdalena, Prochazka, Fabian, Arlt, Dorothee, Blöbaum, Bernd, Dohle, Marco, Engelke, Katherine M., Hanitzsch, Thomas, Jackob, Nikolaus, Jakobs, Ilka, Klawier, Tilman, Post, Senja, Reinemann, Carsten, Schweiger, Wolfgang, and Ziegele, Marc. "Concepts, Causes and Consequences of Trust in News Media - a Literature Review and Framework." Annals of the International Communication Association 45.2 (2021): 154-74. Web.

In short, there isn't any one clear ingredient of trust. There are cultural, societal, political, psychological, emotional, individual, and technological factors at play, among others. Media perceptions and evaluations are only one of the dozens of causes of media trust they identify. Trust isn't only a product of the journalism that is put out there.

It's not even that clear that the public would reward high-quality performance by a journalistic organisation with high levels of trust – sometimes it might even be punished. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, director of the Reuters Institute, expressed the same sentiment in 2022 about the Philippines-based publication Rappler, co-founded by the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa.[32]

Even though journalism by Rappler is widely respected within the international journalistic community, it has ranked low among the Philippines brands when trust in news has been measured in the Digital News Report.[33]

"Our research suggests that a large part of the explanation is about political dynamics that impose a cost on those who have the courage to seek to hold power to account through independent reporting. Politics matters because trust in news is about much more than the factual accuracy and the trustworthiness of an outlet's journalism. It is also about how that work is interpreted in light of domestic politics and people's partisan sympathies," Nielsen wrote.

So, not even high-quality journalism is guaranteed to be met with high levels of trust from the audience if that journalism is published in an environment where it's being attacked by political actors. This might be extremely frustrating for journalists, especially if their thinking around trust is akin to the institutional theories, which say that trust is based on the performance of an institution.

Ressa has criticised the Reuters Institute for publishing results that are then used by political actors to undermine the credibility of news organisations.[34] While she has a point about the abuse of academic research, the Digital News Report is forthright in saying it doesn't try to assess what is actually trustworthy or what should be trusted. It only measures what people in different contexts perceive as trustworthy.

Who gets to have trust isn't always fair. And yeast is starting to feel surprisingly simple by comparison.

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[32] https://scroll.in/article/1026399/the-cost-of-courage-what-lower-levels-of-trust-in-independent-digital-news-outlets-actually-reflect
[33] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/philippines
[34] https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/jun/14/nobel-laureate-says-research-by-oxford-institute-can-be-used-against-reporters

While the stakes for journalists might be high when we're talking about trust in news, for the general public the question of trust might be nowhere near as essential. "I don't think most people walk around thinking about 'I trust this, I don't trust that'," Benjamin Toff tells me. He's a senior research fellow at the Reuters Institute, where he leads the Trust In News Project.[35]

"Trust is something they can sort of formulate ideas about if they are forced to think about it. That's what we found in our interviews with people. They would often say 'Well, I guess I must trust this because I use it all the time, right?' And it's much harder to point to it being about the journalism itself that's driving those decision for many of those audiences," Toff said, adding that there are big variations inside audiences and a wide range of engagement with news.

Journalists might have specialised ways of differentiating between sources in terms of their trustworthiness. That might lead to an assumption that audiences are thinking in similar ways. "And there are some who are. But I think, for most audiences, those are kind of unusual people," Toff said.

Hugo Mercier talks about something similar in reference to an article by the famous sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The point is made already in the title of the paper: *Public Opinion Does Not Exist*.

In the article, which was originally presented as a lecture in Noroit, France in January 1972, Bourdieu questioned and criticised a type of democratic culture – one that is probably recognisable to a lot of people today – where people are routinely polled about different topics of perceived societal importance, and the results of these polls are then reported as "the public opinion".

Bourdieu's point was that people generally *don't* have spontaneous opinions about a lot of topics – instead, public opinion is artificially created or constructed when people are asked to form an opinion by a pollster.

What's more, public opinion that emerges from polls is, in Bourdieu's view, always politically motivated, because what questions get asked is usually linked to the goals and ambitions of whoever commissions the poll. 'Public opinion' is then created based on questions that, to some extent, force people to come up with an opinion.

"You can have a public opinion in the sense that if you ask people a question they will answer, but they had never really thought about it. This is very superficial; they could easily be convinced [to answer] otherwise. And this is true for most people and most opinions," Mercier explained.

[35] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/trust-news-project

While he conceded that the relative stability of opinions in polls over time suggests people aren't just randomly dishing out opinions when a pollster contacts them, he said it still might be the case that those opinions are often not very strong or important to a lot of people.

To add an extra layer of complexity, high levels of trust can also be problematised. Toff explained that, for the Trust In News Project, his team had talked to Indian journalists who work for progressive or reform-minded news organisations that are often in opposition to the Modi government.

"They will say they don't actually want the public to be as trusting. They want them trusting of their reporting, but their view of most of the mainstream news in the country is that it's not something that the public should be as trusting [of] as they are. I think there are many places in the world in which the public could benefit from being a little bit more sceptical of a lot of the news that they are getting. So I do think it's important to move away from just a pure 'high trust is good and low trust is bad' dichotomy."

This is an interesting idea to weigh in the context of my home country, Finland, where trust in media is high. In my experience, journalists often understand these numbers to reflect the quality of the output of news outlets – in that sense, there is a lot of "trust is earned" thinking. My employer, the public broadcaster Yle, has very high levels of trust, something that we tend to be proud of.[36]

In many ways, it's a good position to be in, but I must say I wonder if 100% trust is something to be sought– we want our audience to be critical and active, too. And what should also be remembered is that it's not just journalistic institutions that are widely trusted in Finland. Trust in institutions and authorities tends to be high across the board in my home country.

I asked Toff what he thought about this: how well do trust polls mirror the actual performance of the news media?

"It can be meaningful if we're keeping certain things constant. So, trust in an individual news organisation, in an individual country – if you see changes relative to where things were, that could be a sign of something going right or something going wrong. That could be meaningful. But of course, some of those high levels of trust towards the organisation have to be understood in their context."

Of course it matters what journalists do and what kind of content is published by news organisations. But trust doesn't occur in a vacuum filled only by journalism.[37]

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[36] https://yle.fi/aihe/a/20-10005042

[37] Hanitzsch, Thomas, Van Dalen, Arjen, and Steindl, Nina. "Caught in the Nexus: A Comparative and Longitudinal Analysis of Public Trust in the Press." The International Journal of Press/politics 23.1 (2018): 3-23.

Toff told me that even when we are looking at individual news organisations and their levels of trust, these tend to go up and down in line with the overall trust in that country.

"The way I would put it [trust in news] is probably much less determined by the journalism and the journalistic practices than journalists tend to think it is. Not that it's unimportant. But on average, far less important than I think people tend to think it is."

I no longer think about yeast when I think about trust. Now I think about the immune system.

To be more specific, I am thinking of an article that was published in *The Atlantic* in 2020, when the world was desperate to find a cure or vaccine or just about anything to help us be more equipped to face COVID-19.[38] The article was written by Ed Yong, who won the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting for his coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It explained exactly how the immune system works and how complicated it is. Layers on top of layers, different systems operating in co-operation or regardless of one another, sometimes producing desired outcomes and sometimes not. The word "immunity" means one thing to immunologists and something else to the rest of us.

Kind of like trust.

Regardless of all the confusing layers and complicated factors, "trust" and "immunity" are still things that have meaning to people. And, while trust is complicated, it can be measured, and its existence has consequences.

The journalistic community has paid a lot of attention to trust because many of our hopes and fears about the future of journalism are dependent on it. And, with all that context, we can return to the million-dollar question.

Does transparency have an impact on trust?

[38] https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/08/covid-19-immunity-is-the-pandemics-central-mystery/614956/

Does transparency increase trust?

Trust is eclectic, complex, sometimes unfair, and almost always multilayered. But to be trusted by its audience is also essential to a news organisation.

Trust in news is declining in many countries (dramatically so in some), and journalistic transparency has been heralded as one way to fix the issue. Does it really work?

The short answer: it looks like it doesn't. At least, not very well.

The medium answer: in some contexts and with the right kind of execution, it might have some positive effects. But mostly, the scientific evidence that we have about transparency does not provide a firm basis for the level of enthusiasm around the transparency discourse.

The long answer: it depends on your definition of "working".

The important thing to know about transparency in the context of journalism is that there isn't only enthusiasm for it inside the journalistic community. There are also scientific studies about the topic.

Michael Karlsson, professor of media and communication at Karlstad University in Sweden, is the scientist behind many of these studies. In the early 2000s, when Karlsson was doing his PhD, he noticed how in the context online journalism – still more or less in its infancy – new practices were emerging: editing or even retracting articles and correcting mistakes, for example, with no explanation.

Compared to traditional print journalism, the landscape was becoming much more dynamic in terms of journalistic content changing after it has been published. Karlsson thought that this could be a problem for journalism.

At about the same time, he also came across of an idea that could be helpful.

"My conclusion in my dissertation, which came out in 2006, was that transparency could be a good norm for journalism to appropriate."[39]

But that was Karlsson's conclusion almost two decades ago. Since then, he has authored multiple articles about journalistic transparency and, among other things, conducted experiments testing the effects of transparency on assessments of trust.

[39] Karlsson, M. (2006). Nätjournalistik: En explorativ fallstudie av digitala mediers karaktärsdrag på fyra nyhetssajter. [Doktorsavhandling (monografi), Medie- och kommunikationsvetenskap]. Department of Sociology, Lund University.

In an interview I had with him in March 2023, this is what he said about the topic:

“I do not oppose that journalism is transparent. I’m just saying that it won’t lead to these kind of trust effects that we would hope or expect.”

While there aren’t huge numbers of peer-reviewed studies about transparency, there are some. Experiments usually involve showing participants news articles with transparency elements (e.g. background information about the making of the article, hyperlinks, an author bio) and then surveyed for their assessments of how trustworthy or reliable they think the article they read was.

These results are compared to a control group, who read a version of the same article that didn’t contain transparency elements. Then researchers calculate whether incorporating transparency into journalistic content affects the perception of trustworthiness.

Scientific, peer-reviewed experiments along these broad lines have been conducted in Sweden, the U.S. and Germany (among others). And the results were… not very encouraging. Sometimes a small positive impact was observed, but quite often, the experiments delivered null results.

Let’s start with the most encouraging example. In a study published in 2021, 1,182 U.S. adults were shown news articles with or without elements of transparency – these included additional reporter information, a “behind the story” section and footnotes. [40]

The researchers found that the transparency elements had a positive impact on assessments of news organisation’s credibility, although the documented effects were not large. Transparency elements also increased participants’ intentions to engage more with the news organisation in the future.

Unfortunately, researchers have not been able to duplicate these modestly positive results in other studies.

For a study published in 2014 (Karlsson is one of the authors), a similar experimental design was conducted, this time with Swedish participants.[41] They too encountered a news article with different transparency elements, such as

[40] Curry, Alexander L, and Stroud, Natalie Jomini. "The Effects of Journalistic Transparency on Credibility Assessments and Engagement Intentions." Journalism (London, England) 22.4 (2021): 901-18.
[41] Karlsson, Michael, Clerwall, Christer, & Nord, Lars. (2014). You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet. Transparency's (lack of) effect on source and message credibility. Journalism Studies (London, England), 15(5), 668-678.

explanation of how and why the article was written, reader comments and disclosure of the journalist's values.

In this study, the researchers reported virtually no effects on the evaluations of credibility. "Therefore, transparency cannot, at least not based on these results, be considered an enhancer of journalistic credibility compared to traditional journalistic norms. Transparency will neither revolutionise or reform journalism's credibility in the short or middle-long terms," the researchers concluded, while leaving the door open to possible long-term effects.

There is some evidence suggesting that transparency might even *decrease* credibility. In a 2017 study, participants were given articles that either included information about the author or did not. [42] The stories with information about the author (i.e. the transparent ones), were rated less credible than the non-transparent ones. The title of the paper is revealing: *Readers value objectivity over transparency*.

In Germany, transparency elements were examined in both national and local news contexts.[43] Elements included information about the author and how the data was collected for the article. "We cannot find any evidence for positive effects of two commonly used transparency tools on credibility judgments," the researchers concluded.

Similar findings were reported in a dissertation by Michael Koliska in 2015. [44] Transparency features, such as an editorial text explaining the production of the news article, hyperlinks, corrections, reader comments or information about the author did not impact participants' trust evaluations.

In a more recent study, the results were mixed.[45] The researched examined the effects of a "transparency box" explaining the why and how a news article was done in three different contexts. In only one context (participants reading a story on the USA TODAY or Tennessean website) transparency increased people's perception of the credibility. However, in the two other contexts – a mock news website and three news sites owned by the McClatchy chain – the researchers reported null results.

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[42] Tandoc, Edson C., & Thomas, Ryan J. (2017). Readers value objectivity over transparency. Newspaper Research Journal, 38(1), 32-45.
[43] Henke, Jakob, Holtrup, Stefanie, and Möhring, Wiebke. "The More, the Better? Effects of Transparency Tools and Moderators on the Perceived Credibility of News Articles." Journalism (London, England) (2021): 146488492110606.
[44] Koliska, Michael. Transparency and Trust in Journalism: An Examination of Values, Practices and Effects (2015).
[45] Masullo, Gina M., Curry, Alexander L., Whipple, Kelsey N., and Murray, Caroline. "The Story Behind the Story: Examining Transparency About the Journalistic Process and News Outlet Credibility." Journalism Practice 16.7 (2022): 1287-305.

The authors' conclusion: transparency may have "limited influence on news outlet credibility", but to work, they would have to be very prominently featured in an article, and they do not work consistently.

Another recent study also delivered mixed results: transparency boxes fostered assessments of credibility when they were presented with one story, but in the context of another story, they didn't. The authors summarised the study to "further highlighting limitations of transparency as a solution for declining news trust and engagement".[46]

There are some other studies that deal with, or are adjacent to, the question of whether transparency can improve trust in news, but the big picture remains the same: the effects seem to be either non-existent or modest at best.[47]

Trusting News, a U.S. organisation that trains journalists and newsrooms to regain trust from their audiences, has collaborated with researchers to do experiments about journalistic transparency and its impact on trust. They have had more positive results – for example, according to their research, newsrooms could benefit from adding an "explain your process" box into their stories, describing why and how they did their reporting.[48]

However, these results were published outside the peer-reviewed scientific journal ecosystem, which is why I'm hesitant to give them the same weight as the ones previously mentioned. (Note: it is possible that these results will be published in a peer-reviewed journal at some point in the future if the writers pursue that path. That was the case with the "explain your process" box study, and the version published in *Journalism Practice* mentioned here earlier.)

In another non-peer-reviewed study, where Trusting News co-operated with researchers, it was found that similar boxes did not result in much higher feelings of trust in the article or news organisation.[49]

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[46] Peifer, Jason T., and Meisinger, Jared. "The Value of Explaining the Process: How Journalistic Transparency and Perceptions of News Media Importance Can (Sometimes) Foster Message Credibility and Engagement Intentions." Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 98.3 (2021): 828-53.

[47] E.g., Roberts, Roberts, Mark Christopher. Measuring the Relationship between Journalistic Transparency and Credibility (2007).

[48] Chen, Gina Masullo, Curry, Alex, & Whipple, Kelsey. (2019, February). Building trust: What works for news organizations. Center for Media Engagement. https://mediaengagement.org/research/building-trust

[49] Norsworthy, C.F., Wojdynski, B.W., Binford, M.T., & Duncan, J. (2022, October). Designing for trust: How users view and interpret transparency boxes in online news. Digital Media Attention and Cognition Lab. http://dmaclab.com/whitepapers/designingfortrust.pdf

All these studies, peer-reviewed or non-peer-reviewed, naturally have their limitations. They are one-off experiments, which means that they are not designed to reveal the possible long-term effects of transparency.

Then again, it could be very difficult or almost impossible to figure out what those possible long-term effects are, since for those to be measured, a scientist would have to be able to control or eliminate all other possible factors influencing the perceived trustworthiness of a news publication – and as I explored in *The science of trust* essay, there are a myriad of them.

Even if we do accept that these studies probably haven't told us everything there is to be known about journalistic transparency, they still raise a hugely important question: if journalistic transparency worked in the ways it has been heralded to – that is, increasing trust from the audience – then shouldn't we have convincing evidence about it by now?

From the point of view of someone who had genuinely thought that transparency could be a viable solution to some of the big problems journalism is facing, I must admit I was quite surprised – maybe even a little bit shocked – when I read through this body of research and its lacklustre results.

It had all felt so logical: if the audience has a problem with journalism, then let's just show them how we make it all happen, and surely they will then understand how hard we are working to serve them with quality information.

I also started wondering if it's exactly this type of logic that is behind not only my own personal interest in transparency but behind the larger hype among my profession. Transparency can feel like an intuitive solution when you are dealing with trust issues.

Michael Karlsson agreed.

"I think you have a point there. It kind of makes sense when you think about it in a common-sense way."

Karlsson told me that it's not like journalists invented the idea of transparency. On the contrary, transparency emerged as a value in other areas decades ago. For example, government transparency is often seen as a way towards better governance. When journalism started to face new challenges in the forms of the internet and digitalisation, transparency looked like an obvious norm to adopt.

"I think the ground was well prepared for accepting the theoretical package at face value, and then just running from that. And then when the results started to come in and [transparency] wasn't behaving according to the theory, we started to question the assumptions that we should have been questioning from the beginning. But it's not easy to do that, because it makes sense on the face of it."

That transparency doesn't seem to increase trust is not just a journalistic quirk. While this paper is not about government transparency, it's interesting that even in that context it doesn't seem clear that government organisations being open about how they operate yields more trust from the public.

In a 2013 study, for example, researchers experimented on effects of government transparency on perceived trustworthiness. [50] Even though the context was completely different, the results are astonishingly similar to those of journalism studies: transparency had a subdued and sometimes negative effect on trust in government. The authors' note that in other empirical research, positive effects of transparency on trust have been limited at best.

Speaking about transparency as a societal idea, British philosopher Onora O'Neill noted back in 2002 that trust has seemed to recede as transparency has advanced.[51]

With these types of results, an obvious question emerges. If transparency is a modest booster of trust at best, or not even that in some contexts, then why is that the case? Why doesn't it work better?

Karlsson mentions a possible fallacy in the thinking of journalists and researchers when they try to tackle problems such as declining trust.

"We tend to take the journalist perspective and think that, OK, so this is how journalism works. Now, do people trust it? But if you want to start with why people trust, you need to start with the people rather than journalism."

This is very recognisable to me when I think about how I got excited about transparency. There definitely was an element of arrogance there: that journalism is done with fancy ethics and guidelines, but the problem is the audience who is just unaware of these nice principles – and the solution would then be transparency, which convinces the audience about the goodness of these principles and how we apply them.

But from an audience perspective, trust might come about for very different reasons.

"Simple things like spelling might have deteriorating effects on trust, because that is what people can actually evaluate," Karlsson gave as an example.

Different perspectives between the audience and journalists might help further explaining the lacklustre effects of journalistic transparency: even though, for a

[50] Grimmelikhuijsen, Stephan, Porumbescu, Gregory, Hong, Boram, and Im, Tobin. "The Effect of Transparency on Trust in Government: A Cross-National Comparative Experiment." Public Administration Review 73.4 (2013): 575-86.
[51] https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p00gpzcz

researcher or journalist, it might feel like the most exciting thing to know more about, it's just not that fascinating for most people.

"There's a lot of realities around audience engagement with news that would probably be very disappointing to individual journalists," Ben Toff, the head of the Trust In News Project at the Reuters Institute, told me. "How audiences think about your organisation may have very little to do with the kind of reporting that you personally value and believe is the thing that is the most essential or praiseworthy."

Toff explained that, for a lot of audiences, the question of trust is more about questions such as "do I like this brand" or "do I find their stories enjoyable" or "is it relevant in my life". Individual journalists, on the other hand, tend to be much more engaged in thinking about the civic value of journalism.

Michael Karlsson says that for many people, getting more information about the background operations of journalism is just not a priority.

"They're busy with their lives cooking dinner and picking up the kids from kindergarten. People in general are not that interested in knowing how the sausage is made."

Other people I interviewed for this project voiced similar views. Transparency might be interesting to journalists and a small part of the audience that has a more conscious or passionate attitude towards news, but at large it is not something that people care about.

The sausage metaphor came up more than once.

"I can imagine how [it is] for a journalist – you want to know the methods, you want to know how the sausage was made, because that's relevant to you, and you can evaluate it very well. But for a lay reader, you don't really care. You know, you want to have your source that's reliable and that tells you stuff that's relevant. And they figure it out, they do the hard work. How they did it, that's their business," said Hugo Mercier, a French cognitive scientist who has specialised in how people evaluate information and decide what to trust.

Mercier is also sceptical about the sheer practicalities of explaining the journalistic process to an audience. Would there be actual interest to engage with journalism that details its reporting practices for the reader to see? Mercier said that when he is reading news articles, he rarely feels like he would like to have more information about how the story came to be.

"There is a trade-off, obviously, between how much information you give and the relevance of the information. And it's hard to get people to read a normal-sized article. If you double the size of it or even triple it, nobody is going to read it."

There is some evidence, however, of people generally appreciating the idea of journalistic transparency. This evidence comes from a U.S. poll commissioned by the Knight Foundation and conducted by Gallup in 2018. According to the report, 71% of US adults felt that commitment to transparency is very important.[52]

The definition for transparency was that a news organisation "shares information about how it is funded, how it makes decisions on what it reports and does not report, and where it gets the information for its stories".

While more traditional factors of trust were even more popular (such as commitment to accuracy, with 89% saying it's very important, and commitment to fairness, with 78%), this makes it sound like there really is a demand for more transparent journalism from the audience, at least in the U.S..

But is it one thing to say transparency is important when it's presented at you as an option by a pollster, and another thing to actually put value on that as you live your daily life and encounter news? Another study conducted by Michael Karlsson and Christer Clerwall might suggest as much.[53]

They ran 13 focus groups with a total of 82 participants who were drawn from a representative sample of Swedish population, the topic being what the participants thought constituted "good journalism". Transparency came up rarely, and when it did, it didn't remain as the focus of the conversation for very long. Instead, the participants put emphasis on such classical journalistic values such as objectivity, non-partisanship, and verification of facts.

In *The science of trust*, Mercier referenced a famous paper by Pierre Bourdieu called *Public Opinion Does Not Exist*, which made the point that people in general don't have an opinion on a lot of issues, at least not very strong ones. But when a pollster contacts them, they might come up with an answer, even though they haven't necessarily thought about the topic that much. In that sense, public opinion is not just out there waiting to be examined by pollsters – instead, the very pollsters artificially create it.

"It's not just randomness. You have some vague intuition, and these opinions became stable over time. But they can be stable but pretty weak," Mercier said.

So maybe transparency is something that is recognised by the audience as an agreeable idea in principle, at least when it's actively presented to them as an option

[52] https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media_elements/files/000/000/216/original/KnightFoundation_Panel4_Trust_Indicators_FINAL.pdf

[53] Karlsson, Michael, and Clerwall, Christer. "Cornerstones in Journalism: According to Citizens." Journalism Studies 20.8 (2019): Pp1184-1199.

– but that doesn't automatically mean it's something they themselves look for or consciously appreciate when consuming journalism.

In a way, this contradiction is also addressed in the Knight Foundation report, which concluded: "While transparency is not an idea that is top-of-mind for Americans when talking about trust in their own words, it is among the most highly rated factors when respondents rate the relative importance of a number of items that can influence trust in the media."

While Mercier's research focus isn't journalism, as a cognitive scientist who studies trust he is sceptical about the potential of journalistic transparency to make audiences trust a news organisation more. But he doesn't outright reject the idea.

"I think it's important to go back to the distinction we were making between the competence dimension and the honesty dimension."

Explained in more detail in *The science of trust*, here's the gist of it: when people make a decision about whether or not to trust someone, they evaluate both how knowledgeable or competent the potential trustee is to give you information about a certain topic, and how honest they are – is the trustee going to tell you what they think is correct?

"Let's say you don't trust a newspaper reporter, not because you think they're dishonest, but because you think that they are not very competent and that they don't really know what they're talking about. In that case, giving more information about all the sources you consulted and why they were relevant and how you gathered the information and put it to together – that should reassure the reader that actually you know what you're talking about," Mercier said.

But if the problem of trust lies in the honesty dimension, it's a very different type of situation.

"If you don't trust that the person is telling you the truth, then they can tell you everything, and it's not going to make a difference."

Transparency then just becomes extra information from a source that you find untrustworthy.

"My intuition is that the people who don't trust the media, it's more of this kind of honesty problem. They think that the media don't have their best interests at heart and is part of the elites. If that is true, then more transparency is not going to make much of a difference," Mercier said.

That's one of the main limitations of transparency I have come to think about as well. If you don't trust a news organisation with their journalism, why would you trust a description by that very organisation of how that journalism was made?

I asked Michael Karlsson for his view on the picture Mercier painted, and he agreed.

“That makes sense to me. Because, usually, when we’re talking about trust, there’s this competence [dimension] and this intention dimension of it. And if the members of the public see us [as] ill-intended, there is no way you can inform that away. You can’t solve a non-cognitive problem with more information.”

As Margo Smit, ombudsman for the Dutch public broadcaster NPO, put it: you can’t reason somebody out an opinion they have not been reasoned into in the first place.

“So if people have already a very strong belief in something, you can bring up all the sources in the world to say that, you know, it’s not like you think. And still, they will not accept, and they will just say, that’s your point of view.”

Edward Wasserman, professor and former dean at Graduate School of Journalism of University of California, Berkeley, has had a critical view towards journalistic transparency for a long time. He told me that, to him, transparency seems like a reaction to declining circulations and trust levels that seems to be saying: love us, we’re not that bad!

“I guess in my heart I find that a little bit contemptible. I react to transparency in the sense of ‘Why do you need to be loved? Why don't you just do your job?’ You’re not going to be loved, because bearers of bad news historically are put to death. And that’s what happens, because it’s a natural feeling that the person with the news is somehow responsible for the news.”

Don’t shoot the messenger, right?

Wasserman also thinks news organisations are missing the point if they think that trust levels are dependent on transparency measures such as thorough corrections of errors.

“It doesn’t seem to me that correcting errors is what people are unhappy with. They may seize upon that, but what they are unhappy with is that they don’t feel good about [what] motivates the journalists and motivates journalism. And they believe that there’s something basically untrustworthy about journalism: that journalists are telling me things because they’re trying to advance a political agenda. So it’s a deeper problem than something that’s remedied by running corrections.”

There are other reasons why transparency might be an ineffective solution to declining trust. Actually, transparency might be the *opposite* of trust. This argument is neatly put together in Karlsson’s book *Transparency and Journalism* where he writes that trust is a state where one doesn’t have to be convinced any further.

They no longer need extra information, because they, well… trust you. They have taken the leap of faith.[54]

Transparency, on the other hand, is all about giving extra information. It suggests an environment where everything can be suspected and tested. If things are truly transparent and people make use of that transparency, then there isn't really any need to trust anything.

This was also alluded in *The science of trust*, when I wrote about how trusting and knowing are very different things that by definition can't occur at the same time: if someone trusts, then they are willingly vulnerable and accept the fact that they are not in control. If you know it all, you don't have to trust.

From this angle, sentiments such as "If you know how it's made, you can trust what it says" don't make a lot of sense, because if you know how it's made, then what is there left anymore to be trusted?[55]

The ethos of transparency, then, starts to resemble the idea at the core of a famous Russian proverb made famous in the West by U.S. President Ronald Reagan in the midst of nuclear disarmament negotiations with the Soviet Union in the 1980s: "Trust, but verify".

I am not sure how people generally interpret that proverb, but to me it sounds like a joke or belittling of trust: "Come on, we all know we can't operate just with something as elusive as trust; we need some tangible verification methods." That level of scepticism is probably warranted in the context of nuclear weapons!

But it doesn't sound like an ideal that news organisations should strive to shape the relationship with their audience around. And, again, transparency doesn't seem like a tool that has the power to increase trust – it seems like a tool that could potentially remove the need for trust altogether.

It's not like journalistic transparency – at least in the way it is understood today – could change some fundamental basics in the audience relationship. "There's always an information asymmetry between the journalist and the public. And it needs to be that way," Karlsson told me, "because the public turns to journalism to know things that it doesn't know from its own experience. So even if you are being more transparent, you're still in a position where you know more than the public."

And transparency measures are also actively selected and deployed by journalists – what is made transparent (and what isn't, which will be explored in more depth in

[54] Karlsson, Michael. Transparency and Journalism: A Critical Appraisal of a Disruptive Norm. 1st ed. London, 2021. Disruptions.
[55] https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/articles/2022/deborah-turness-bbc-news-trust-is-earned

the essays *Transparency as a marketing technique*, and *Transparency as theatre*) is inherently similar decision-making to journalism.

“So the trust issue, the leap, doesn’t go away, regardless of how much information you can [provide] about what you do as a journalist,” Karlsson said.

One final, some may say depressing, thing to consider when weighing whether understanding something actually makes people trust it more: technological advancements like generative AI and algorithmic content programming.

There is evidence suggesting that people might perceive algorithms as more objective than journalists.[56] “They think they’re objective because they’re not human – that they’re like a machine that makes perfect sorting. But they forget that there’s a human that programmed the machine at the beginning,” Karlsson said.

And, with the rise of large language model-based interfaces like ChatGPT, are newsrooms equipped to explain how the information was generated by the technology if they use it, for example, to summarise a large policy document?

“When journalists themselves can’t explain why something looks the way it is, then it raises really serious issues about autonomy, I think, as well as trust and credibility,” Karlsson said.

Karlsson also explores this question in his book, where he notes that the ways in which algorithms operate are opaque, not transparent. But even with all the opaqueness, they are seen as more objective, and therefore more credible. That doesn’t exactly fit together with the idea that transparency increases trust.

At the start of this essay I wrote that the long answer to the question of whether transparency works depends on your definition of “works”.

And here we are. Scientific evidence suggests transparency will not do much to increase trust, and the logic (or perhaps idealism) behind the whole notion seems to break apart pretty easily when you consider how people evaluate information.

However, we can still make the argument that transparency promotes *honesty* in society. And, from the specific perspective of moral obligation, is journalistic transparency still a norm to be upheld? In the next essay, we’ll explore this argument for why transparency works.

[56] Waddell, T. Franklin. "Can an Algorithm Reduce the Perceived Bias of News? Testing the Effect of Machine Attribution on News Readers’ Evaluations of Bias, Anthropomorphism, and Credibility." Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 96.1 (2019): 82-100.

Transparency as a moral obligation

If transparency isn't a powerful driver of trust in news and journalism – as the scientific evidence explored in the previous essay suggests – does that mean it should just be thrown out of the window?

I don't think so.

It would be stupid to think we have only two options: either we fully commit to transparency and believe in all the promises uttered in its name or abandon the idea completely. And it's worth underlining: this project was never conceived to convince anyone out of acts of transparency.

But when I first read the scientific evidence debunking key aspects of the transparency hype, I must admit I was quite disillusioned. If it doesn't do what it's supposed to be doing when it comes to trust in news, then what's the point?

Well, maybe there is a point after all. One of my interviewees for this paper was Kathy English, former public editor of the *Toronto Star* and current chair of the board of the Canadian Journalism Foundation.

She acknowledged that positive connections between transparency and trust are difficult to prove, but as someone whose job it was to talk with thousands of readers over the years, she still sees an anecdotal link. And she sees another angle from which transparency should be considered.

"I think there's something philosophical here. For news organisations, you know, part of our DNA is to hold others to account. If we say, 'we're the watchdog: we hold the government to account, we hold public officials to account'… we have to show our audiences that we hold ourselves to account, too. Editorial standards, statements about where we're coming from, who funds us – all of that is helping the audience understand [us] and giving them a means to hold us to account."

There is a symmetry in this argument. If journalists are asking other actors of the society to be transparent, it's only fair that journalists themselves are transparent.

It's an idea voiced by other journalists, too. For example, when Lydia Aguirre, a journalist and the project manager for the Spanish 'Transparent Journalism Tool', was explaining the venture to the International Press Institute, she said: "As a journalist, you must apply to yourself the same rules of strict honesty and transparency that you should demand from governments, private companies and any other public or private institutions."[57]

[57] https://ipi.media/spanish-project-bets-on-radical-transparency-to-restore-reader-trust/

With this argument, whether or not transparency builds trust is not the point. It's transparency as a moral obligation. And, as English noted, it's not merely an ideal – it also empowers the audience to hold journalists to account.

One common way to do this is to publish the editorial guidelines of an organisation. Many news organisations do so these days, but when English started out as public editor of the *Toronto Star* in 2007, this was not the case.

"At that point, the editorial guidelines weren't online [for the public to see]. I argued for putting them online. Interestingly enough, there was initial pushback from the lawyers. There used to be a sense, in the old days, that, 'you shouldn't make your standards public, because if you fall down on them and you're going to be involved in a libel suit of some sort'. Then the other side will see that you failed."

English argued that, in reality, if you're involved in a libel case, the other side is going to ask to see all your standards anyway. So, after some debate, the *Toronto Star* made their editorial standards public.[58]

This made it possible for the audience to review the journalism of the newspaper against the backdrop of what the organisation itself says it's adhering to.

"If you've clearly laid out your standards in black and white – made them accessible to the public – then they have a standard to hold you to. And whether it's the editor, the public editor, or the person who is in charge of accountability, they have a standard to hold others to as well."

Having editorial standards in the public domain also meant English was able to better explain the journalism the *Toronto Star* was publishing by providing context.

She wrote a weekly column about what was happening in the newsroom that week. The topic might have been a specific correction that required further explanation, or a big mess-up that needed to be detailed – even something that was done well – and English could explain the reason for those assessments.

"So in any columns I wrote, I would try to say, 'as the journalistic standard state' – to sort of keep telling the public that these standards exist. I would link to them, and really try and get them to see that this is how I am adjudicating and assessing this complaint, based on whether we met the standards we said we would meet."

Often these assessments are a question of interpretation. But it becomes more easily possible to have these sorts of columns, discussions, and debates when the guidelines and standards are public.

[58] https://www.thestar.com/about/statementofprinciples.html

English's own experience is that the audience respected this type of transparency, especially in cases where a more significant blunder needed to be interrogated and analysed publicly. She said it wasn't always easy to write these columns, which often required drawing attention to something her colleagues had done that didn't go as it should have.

But there was a lot of positive reaction from the audience: "The harder the column was for me, it seemed the more the public respected the news organisation for taking those steps to be transparent. I really believe that there was a lot of respect for that transparency."

Being held accountable to your standards is never easy. But sharing them can have surprising impacts. "You need to be prepared that the public will hold you to them. One of the biggest ways we can lose trust is to be hypocrites; to say we do one thing and not to follow through," English said. "It is a big step, because it's the mental step of being prepared to stand by what you say you do."

To be clear, English does not think transparency only involves publishing your editorial standards, although our discussion revolved around them a lot. But these guidelines are important for at least two reasons: they give the audience a clear idea about what they can rightly expect from you, and they are also crucial in mandating what journalistic transparency means for a given publication.

What is the policy for fixing errors, for example, how are hyperlinks used, how much information is given to the public about the reporters?

The current discourse around journalistic transparency doesn't prescribe answers to these and many other questions. At most, it suggests that these things should be considered by news organisations.

If the moral obligation of accountability doesn't feel like an exciting enough reason for an organisation to get into transparency, there may be another practical application to consider. Ben Toff, leader of the Trust In News Project at the Reuters Institute, tells me transparency might affect journalists themselves.

"It has the effect on many of improving the quality of journalism, because they know that some of these [guidelines] are going to be out in the open. There can be value internally in terms of the quality of the journalism, and that can be a reason to do it as well," Toff said.

He added that this is not disconnected from audience trust: if the quality of journalism increases or decreases, this may theoretically have an impact on the trust levels. (Caveat: in *The science of trust* we make clear that there are many factors affecting trust beyond mere journalistic output.)

Toff noted that, while many members of the audience are unlikely to pay close attention to practices of transparency, those practices can still be a way for a news organisation to demonstrate that they care about journalistic ethics, and they want to get things right.

“It’s not just that they do it, but that they are communicating [that they do it]. And then it becomes very apparent and observable to audiences that this is valued and really central to the journalism that they do.”

Here, again, we seem to be circling back to the question, “*Does transparency increase trust?”* The answer, in the short-term, is made clear through scientific research summarised in this earlier essay. But perhaps we are back here because of another question that requires answering: what do we know about possible long-term effects of transparency on trust?

Not much, because studying long-term effects is notoriously difficult. But, if that's the case, should we give transparency the benefit of the doubt as a potential trust builder over time?

Toff doesn’t immediately reject the idea: we probably should keep an open mind about transparency, he said, but also manage our expectations.

“Communicating what is unique and distinct about what you do as a journalist, or an organisation has potential value in helping to build reputation over time. But it’s not going to be an instantaneous fix – like, if you’re transparent about X, Y and Z, then suddenly the audience would be more trusting.”

How we communicate our transparency will be the focus of two further essays. In the next essay, we will explore whether transparency can help news organisations differentiate their content from others on social media.

And in *Transparency as a marketing technique*, we will encounter an application that is notably distinct from the practice of journalism: promoting journalism.

Transparency on social media

If you've read the previous essays in this series, you'll know by now that expecting transparent journalism to be rewarded with more trust from the audience will likely lead to disappointment.

But I've been thinking about another context where transparency might be valuable: social media.

Most news organisations have a presence on multiple social media platforms, each with varying strategies and goals. Common to these strategies is the practice, in one form or another, of posting journalistic content on a third-party platform.

What follows that post is interesting: the journalistic content must compete directly for engagement, views and clicks with content that is created by many different types of actors who probably don't adhere to journalistic ethics and principles: politicians, activists, interest organisations, companies, influencers, and so on.

In these crowded information environments, could it be that news organisations have a competitive advantage – or at least a unique selling point – if they maintain their values and practices of verifying information, and making sure the reporting is fair and truthful?

When you look at *how* news organisations present themselves on social media, it doesn't always seem like that's the case. Many social media accounts run by professional journalists aren't exactly going out their way to communicate to their audiences that what they do is "journalism" and thus inherently different to the next post in the endless stream.

Take the example of the undeniably successful and very entertaining TikTok account of the *Washington Post*, @washingtonpost. Their videos are often hilarious, fast-paced, and highly engaging, well made – a natural fit in a TikTok feed.

But the videos are not exactly screaming JOURNALISM to me, even though journalists run the account. If journalism can be a differentiating factor, it's not really used to a very large extent here.

I had a chance to ask about this topic directly when Carmella Boykin, the associate TikTok producer of the *Washington Post* was a guest at the Reuters Institute's Global Journalism Seminars in May 2023.[59] She explained that her style of creating content for TikTok is influenced by her personality.

[59] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/calendar/top-five-takes-washington-posts-tiktok-experiment

“The most effective thing for brands, big organisations and even individuals – and this is going to sound corny – is to be the most authentic and what’s most natural for you,” Boykin said and continued: “I’m naturally a light person. With this job I get to be little bit more myself, and I think that translates really well to an audience and it leads to more success.”

So can news itself and journalistic principles be a differentiating factor on a social media platform? “Absolutely,” Boykin said. They have created more recognisably “classical” journalistic content on their TikTok account, too.

“When the war in Ukraine started, people wanted to know where the information was coming from: are we making it up? Because a lot of people had questions about what was going on.”

The *Washington Post*, being a big organisation, was able to show and explain to the audience who the reporters were, where the information came from, where they got their footage, how they check the information and so on. “Being able to show that process really gained trust from the audience,” Boykin said.

One of my interviewees for this project was Jurjen IJsseldijk, a Dutch journalist who is the managing editor of two news brands at Dutch public news broadcaster Nederlandse Omroep Stichting: NOS op 3, whose target audience are young adults, and NOS Stories, targeted at teenagers.

Both brands have a presence on different social media platforms and publish content that reports or explains news and current affairs in ways that resonate with younger audiences.

IJsseldijk said some of the things they do on social media in terms of transparency are quite traditional and “normal” by 2023’s standards. For example, their social media managers try to communicate with the audience in the comments, explain their coverage, and ignite conversations.

But they also try to offer “additional services” to their social media audiences. For example, they always have their scripts checked by experts, and sometimes they have the very experts answering questions in the comment sections personally.

“It’s not really a journalistic transparency,” IJsseldijk noted. “But it’s a way of getting in touch with your audience and taking them seriously. So that the people know we’re there for them. We try to help them by explaining the news. We try to give them context so that they can follow the news better.”

In a more classical spirit of journalistic transparency, IJsseldijk said they tell their audiences which sources were used in videos and which experts they spoke to, both in the descriptions of their videos and in the videos themselves.

They also ran an interesting experiment on Twitch, a streaming platform for gamers, where three people from his teams ran a livestream to reach their audience online. In it, the journalists were talking about a video they had published earlier.

“[We were] explaining why we picked certain topics, telling what struggles we had as journalists,” IJsseldijk said, adding that while the “behind the scenes” descriptions of journalism are not in the actual story that the journalists were talking about, the audience still had a chance to ask them questions about that on Twitch.

“The audience loved it. We host the show on a platform [they’re already on], so they don’t have to come to us. We come to them.”

While the Twitch livestreams were only an experiment that ran for a few months, IJsseldijk told me they are thinking about continuing those streams in the future.

“Because transparency, or talking about your work, is not only good for the audience; it’s also good for journalists to talk about their process, because it teaches them things about their own choices, right? It forces you to think about why you do what you do.”

This is a point that was also made in the previous essay: transparency might raise the bar for journalists to do better, or at least more conscious, journalism.

IJsseldijk thinks that, on social media, it’s best to provide journalistic transparency as an additional resource. The audience can get more details about the reporting process if they want it but not everyone does.

“You could put more transparency in the storytelling in your videos on YouTube, but not everybody in your audience is interested in that. They just want the facts about the story. They believe you anyway because they trust you already. So I think the best way to do that is providing it as an extra.”

Of course this may depend on the type of content you are posting. If it’s an explainer video about something that has been in the news lately, it might feel natural to add more information about the sources and background of the process, because people come to that video to understand what’s going on.

“I think you can be smart in how you use transparency in your storytelling, but you shouldn’t overdo it,” IJsseldijk said. “Not everybody is as interested in transparency as we are.”

I asked IJsseldijk whether he thinks his teams have built more trust with their audience because of transparency on social media. He was careful with his answer: maybe with some people that has happened, but those that they have lost along the way are not coming back because of transparency.

“Some groups are so critical of what you do. You can't win them back by being more transparent because it will feel for them as if you’re trying to defend yourself.”

In this way, IJsseldijk is echoing what some of my other interviewees said in *Does transparency increase trust?*: if a person has lost trust and doubts your honesty, you being more transparent is probably not going to do much to help. He thought that journalists shouldn’t try to use transparency for their own gains, whether it be to defend journalism or win more trust from the audience. “I don't think transparency is there to make people believe you.”

Instead, IJsseldijk said, transparency should be there to give your audience something extra – some additional service or information or experience that the audience desires. We might class this as audience-driven transparency, instead of newsroom-driven transparency.

When we consider the underlying reason for the recent emphasis on transparency, it’s often rooted in declining levels of trust in news. Obviously, that’s not a problem for the audience; it’s a problem for newsrooms – one that transparency was purported to solve. However this perspective can be reversed: transparency should be used when it serves the audience’s needs.

I asked IJsseldijk what he thinks about the idea of journalistic transparency as a differentiating factor on social media. Should we create posts that show the journalistic process and help news organisations prove their information is unique?

To him, this type of positioning had more to do with brand image. It should already be clear to the audience *why* they should come to NOS Stories or NOS op 3.

“They have to know what they get there, so that they come to you,” IJsseldijk said. “For instance, if a bomb explodes somewhere in Holland, they come to you for the news because they know you’re trustworthy. So it’s all about building your image and building your brand. And transparency is one way to add value to a brand.”

But it’s not only about putting journalism and transparency out there, it’s also about showing the people behind the content are reachable if you have a question or a comment. Interestingly, IJsseldijk also spoke about reaching the young audiences by making them more familiar with who journalists are and what they do.

And that doesn’t necessarily have to involve social media or digital technology. His teams also do good old-fashioned footwork by going to where people are and meeting them.

“We just go out. For instance, with NOS Stories we visit high schools to tell about our work and show our face to the people we want to reach. So that’s one form of transparency,” IJsseldijk told me. “Every week, two of our colleagues visit a high

school for half a day, and we give presentations about our work to two or three high school classes of approximately 30 students."

That means that every week, the people behind NOS Stories physically meet almost 100 teenagers and directly explain their work. For NOS op 3, which targets 18- to 35-year-olds, the task is a little bit more difficult, since people in that segment are not typically gathered in one place, like a school.

"We tried to figure out ways to get in touch with them as well. So we visit them at work, sometimes we give a presentation in universities… we go out and we tell them what we do, and they get a chance to ask questions."

IJsseldijk says that, in their experience, meeting people is an effective way to connect with the audience.

"What we see is that people are very enthusiastic about seeing people that work at NOS. It's a bit like a fortress for some people. They only see the hosts of the shows on TV, but they don't see the people that actually work there. So it's very nice for them to see that young people do work there as well, or people that have hobbies – normal people, you know?"

IJsseldijk also believes that this is a way to address media trust problems. Some of the people they meet on these visits say they don't trust journalists. "But you talk to one [journalist], and you can see that they're just general people. So that's one way of breaking down those barriers."

Transparency as theatre

The stage has been used in literature as a metaphor to explain the basic idea of journalistic transparency – that is, what has traditionally been "backstage" in journalism should be brought to the "front stage" for the audience to see.

But it turns out the literal, non-metaphorical theatre stage could be one of the places where journalistic transparency might actually thrive.

I am talking here of live journalism: the idea that instead of delivering a story to the audience via print, broadcast or digital, you invite them to a venue so they can listen to you presenting your story on the stage.

Live journalism performances are usually akin to a well-scripted speech enhanced by impressive visual and audio effects.

While these types of live journalism events aren't available everywhere, there are a handful of examples. In the U.S., Pop-Up Magazine has been producing live journalism for years (although the project announced its end in 2023 due to financial reasons), and in Europe, it's been done in France and Belgium (by Live Magazine), Germany (Reporter Slam), Spain (Diario Vivo) and Denmark (Zetland) – that we know of.

In my home country, Finland, the daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* has successfully experimented with and embraced live journalism since 2016. As of spring 2023, *Helsingin Sanomat* has put on over 150 live journalism shows, which they call *Musta laatikko* ("Black Box" in English). They have sold more than 50,000 tickets to these live journalism shows.

In a typical show, eight journalists from the newspaper take the stage to tell the audience a journalistic story. If you've never experienced live journalism, a TED Talk could be an adequate reference point – at least in terms of delivery: one journalist at a time, each giving an impactful speech and addressing the audience in a well-prepared manner.

From the perspective of journalistic transparency, what is interesting is that often these stories include descriptions of how and why the reporter wanted to cover that topic, how the reporting process took place and what kind of decisions they had to make along the way. Usually, the stories presented at *Musta laatikko* are also published in written format in *Helsingin Sanomat*'s print and digital editions.

Jaakko Lyytinen, a feature reporter at *Helsingin Sanomat* and one of the founders and producers of *Musta laatikko*, told me: "I have to admit that I don't think we were

really thinking about transparency when we got started. It was quite chaotic, and we were just trying things out. We didn't have any kind of manual for how to do it."[60]

Pretty quickly, however, Lyytinen and his team noticed that the *Musta laatikko* audience seemed very interested in how journalists do their work. The producers started paying special attention to how the presenting journalist explained their own position in relation to the story: who were they to talk about this topic?

"While our understanding about live journalism has increased, this aspect [the journalist positioning themselves in relation to the topic] has become more important. Those speeches work best where the speaker has a clear starting point in terms of why they want to talk about this. It's an important factor of transparency: to show your own motivation to talk about this specific topic."

Over the years, the people behind *Musta laatikko* have found ways to talk about journalism to their audiences in ways that qualify as journalistic transparency. I asked Lyytinen whether the experiences they have had on stage influenced how news was produced at *Helsingin Sanomat*. After all, the people speaking at the live journalism shows are typically writers or visual journalists who return to their day jobs.

"That's a good and difficult question. The team of *Musta laatikko* is hoping that we could see certain kind of hybrid storytelling in the future [in the print and digital editions of Helsingin Sanomat], where we could show the process of reporting as a part of a story. But I would say that currently it is quite sporadic."

Lyytinen said that what works well on a theatre stage might not feel as natural in a written article. That's why it's not like the lessons of live journalism can just be directly adapted to "non-live journalism".

I also asked Lyytinen whether they had to consider the limitations of what information can be shared – such as confidential sources – while preparing their shows. After all, the same Finnish journalistic guidelines that apply to journalism in general apply also to live journalism.[61]

So far, he said, this hasn't been something they have had to really think about.

"We haven't had that kind of hardcore investigative stories in our shows," Lyytinen told me. He then considered how they would tackle a hypothetical situation where a journalist was telling a story that relied on confidential sources. "I think we would then have to be able to talk about that decision. The more flammable the issue is,

[60] Now there actually is a manual for live journalism. In 2023, a Live Journalism Handbook was published as a part of a larger research project about live journalism: https://livejournalismi.fi/gallery/The_Power_of_Live_Jounalism_Handbook_FINAL_2023.pdf
[61] https://jsn.fi/en/council-for-mass-media/

the better we should be prepared to explain the decision and how it came to be." With even the best intentions of transparency, he agreed, editors would still need to actively make decisions about what information can and cannot be shared.

For this reason, even live journalism cannot grant the audience completely unfettered access to the backstage. The same is true of every medium. What's possible to see is controlled by the newsroom's decisions on what is safe to share.

In that sense, transparency is always managed. The audience might find a view that is offered to the backstage interesting, but they don't decide what view is revealed.

Another way to address how transparency is managed is to focus on boredom. I don't think the *Musta laatikko* shows are boring – quite the contrary – but that's the point. The speeches are well-scripted, captivating stories that include all kinds of interesting, emotional, surprising, or exciting things that reporters or photographers might encounter when they do their work.

But we all know that's not the full picture of what our work is like. It's also sending emails, talking on the phone, reading press releases, hitting dead ends, sitting in meetings, fighting with the printer, and reading through huge policy documents. A really significant proportion of journalism is actually pretty dull.

But if we say we are committed to transparency, then how do we justify leaving the boring bits out?

"Yeah, there are many stories that have required that kind of boring, routine information gathering, and, yes, it is selective transparency in that we don't [dwell on] that so much," Lyytinen admitted.

But he also adds that sometimes in *Musta laatikko* shows, they do explain very standard information gathering techniques to the audience. For example, they have had political reporters of *Helsingin Sanomat* interviewed on the stage about leaks by politicians to journalists. "Maybe that's not the most boring area of journalism. But it's still a pretty basic thing for a political reporter."

However the creators of *Musta laatikko* practice transparency, the audience seems to appreciate it. In 2019, Anna Eveliina Hänninen studied the experiences of Musta laatikko audiences by asking them to fill in a questionnaire either during the intermission or immediately after the show. Some audience members were also interviewed.

The data found an appreciation for behind-the-scenes information that was given by the journalists. That kind of transparency was perceived as increasing the credibility of the journalists.[62]

These are promising signals to those looking for ways to bolster the connection between the journalist and the audience. But I wonder what their meaning is outside the theatre.

Those who want to come to see a *Musta laatikko* show are, obviously, making a very active decision to engage with journalism and journalists. They probably didn't have a lousy relationship with journalism or *Helsingin Sanomat* to begin with. We spoke in *Does transparency increase trust?* about how most people are probably not that interested in how the sausage is made. But that doesn't mean that *Musta laatikko* isn't serving the needs of an already-engaged audience well.

Lyytinen is very aware of this. He brought up the limitation before I even asked about it. "They [the audience] have paid €35 for a ticket, they come to the theatre, they have reserved a whole evening for this," he said. "Clearly, it's very distorted as a research setting. We have people in the audience who are positively tuned [to the show] and who have had a glass of champagne."

When you take that into account, it's not surprising that they had nice things to say in a survey. To me, it looks like evidence of people being happy about *Musta laatikko* shows, but if we again broaden our scope and remember the hypothesis under which transparency is supposed to fix trust problems, perhaps there's only so much that live journalism can do.

This links to the results of a Swedish study, where it was found that those who already have a high level of trust in journalists and media are also most responsive towards transparency.[63] The more sceptical a segment of the audience is, the less responsiveness they are to transparency – so once again, we might hit a wall with how to reach those who are more doubtful towards journalism.

But it's never a bad thing to try to deepen the relationship with that core audience that already appreciates journalism. Lyytinen, like other interviewees, suspects doing so may yield longer term results among doubtful. When Lyytinen was a

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[62] Hänninen, Anna Eveliina. "The Power of Live Journalism from the Audience's Point of View." In The Power of Live Journalism: A Handbook. https://livejournalismi.fi/gallery/The_Power_of_Live_Jounalism_Handbook_FINAL_2023.pdf, Hänninen, Anna Eveliina, and Rautiainen-Keskustalo, Tarja. "The Rise of the Talking Journalist: Human Voice, Engagement, and Trust in Live Journalism Performance." Journalism Practice (2023): 1-18.

[63] Karlsson, Michael. "Dispersing the Opacity of Transparency in Journalism on the Appeal of Different Forms of Transparency to the General Public." Journalism Studies (London, England) 21.13 (2020): 1795-814.

Reuters Institute journalist fellow, he interviewed Jay Rosen, the associate professor of journalism at New York University, for his project about live journalism.[64]

"He told me that live journalism could be a way to create superfans, messengers. If we create enough positive emotions in people about what journalism can be, then they will talk about their experience to others as well. And even if those others won't come to see our show, it might still affect the relationship that they have with *Helsingin Sanomat*. It's quite powerful as marketing," Lyytinen said.

Marketing is another context where transparency could prove fruitful, and we'll address it in the next essay.

[64] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-08/RISJ_Final%20Report_Jaakko%20Lyytinen_2020_FINAL%20%281%29.pdf

Transparency as a marketing technique

There are some elements of the transparency discourse that might be a little difficult for journalists to stomach.

We started off this series with the logical-sounding premise that if people had a better understanding of how news was made, they would trust it more. (It's a proposed causality we debunked in this essay.)

It's a premise that centres the needs of the newsroom, not the needs of the audience. The newsroom wants more trust from the public, so it's going to be transparent. (That's an idea we poked holes in here.)

But suspend disbelief, and let's stay with this premise through to its final destination: it sounds like we're asking journalists to try to convince the audience about the virtues of journalism every time they report a story.

Doesn't that seem more like promoting an idea ('journalism is trustworthy, you can trust us') rather than reporting information that is important to our audience?

When you look at the topic from this angle, some elements of transparent journalism have a distinct aftertaste of marketing to them. Journalists are assuming and promoting a competitive advantage over other types of information.

That's not an altogether horrible, but perhaps it is a job best left to the marketing department to communicate?

That's what BBC News did. In September 2022, they launched a new marketing campaign that brings the editorial guidelines of the BBC to life in the context of the war in Ukraine.[65] The campaign video consists of dramatic shots of BBC journalists doing reporting in Ukraine, presented together with segments of the editorial guidelines stating that BBC journalists must verify information and corroborate claims, and how accuracy is more important than speed.[66]

The video encapsulates many ideals of journalistic transparency. Though, obviously, it's not journalism. It's marketing. And that's how the BBC is framing it too: the video has appeared across the BBC's linear channels, social media channels and BBC iPlayer.

I don't know if the campaign is completely unique in its presentation of journalists doing their work and connecting that to the ethical principles of their organisation.

[65] https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines
[66] https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/2022/trust-in-bbc-news-film/

But what I find fascinating is how clearly the campaign has been connected to journalistic transparency by the leadership of BBC News.

When the campaign was launched, the CEO of BBC News and Current Affairs Deborah Turness wrote a text accompanying its launch. The headline read: "If you know how it's made, you can trust what it says - trust is earned".

In the text, Turness talked about how she wants to add transparency to the BBC's audience promise. "I want to 'pull back the curtain' and show people the incredible hard work going on behind the scenes at BBC News. Because I believe the more that people see the work our journalists do, the more they will know they can trust our journalism," Turness wrote.[67]

I had hoped to talk to Turness or other members in the leadership of BBC News to discuss how they made the decision to do a marketing campaign that appears to be inspired by or be connected with journalistic transparency. But despite many attempts over several months through different routes, I didn't get an interview or written answers to my most important questions about the campaign.[68] (From a transparency perspective that feels a bit contradictory.)

I did talk with Ben Toff, leader of the Trust In News Project at the Reuters Institute, about it. He said a benefit of journalistic transparency might be in branding: people might not pay close attention to the specifics of what a news organisation is doing but can see value in demonstrating adherence to transparency.

When it comes to a marketing video, the point of course is to get people to pay attention to something specific. While Toff has no knowledge of the specifics BBC had in mind before launching this campaign, he said he suspected many news organisations are betting on the brand advantage of emphasising transparency.

"I think [news organisations] are very realistic about the fact that probably most of their audiences is not closely paying attention to those kinds of details. But I think they do see the value of distinguishing the forms of journalism they practice from others by pointing to 'look at how transparent we're being about all these things'."

In short, if it's difficult to get the audience to care about actual transparent journalism, maybe you can get the audience to notice a marketing campaign that shows the news organisation is fond of the ideal.

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[67] https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/articles/2022/deborah-turness-bbc-news-trust-is-earned

[68] As a last-ditch effort, I also submitted a FOI request for information. This was denied because, under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, you only have the right to information that is not held for the purposes of journalism, art, or literature from this public authority. See more about the BBC's FOI track record here: https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/fewer-successful-foi-requests-made-to-bbc-in-2020-than-earlier-years/

“I think there is real value from a branding and marketing perspective […] that is very central to the sort of cultivating of feelings of trust in relation to audience.”

Transparency on demand

One reason transparency might not be a massive booster of trust is because people typically don't care to know how the sausage is made. It's a message that several experts interviewed for this series have repeated to me.

They also said that, while this seems to be the case in general, there is always a minority to be found with a keen interest in how news is made – take journalists themselves for starters, or those with a keen interest in a news topic. Is there a case to be made for niche transparency content catering to the needs of those audiences?

One interesting example comes from the *Financial Times*. They have a newsletter called The Climate Graphic: Explained, which they send out to subscribers every Sunday.[69] It does what it says on the tin: in each newsletter, a member of *FT*'s climate reporting and data visualization team goes through a graph and tells readers the work that went into it.

In 500–600 words they explain why the *Financial Times* decided to do a graphic illustration of a given topic, how the data was collected, why they decided to present it in the way they did and what kind of problems they encountered in the process.

Journalistic transparency to a tee that is! Or perhaps: transparency on demand.

Inserting detailed explanations of the reporting process alongside the actual graph when it is first published as part of FT coverage would certainly be too much for most members of the audience. But for those interested in the graphic interpretation of statistics, the option of a newsletter to subscribe to is a great idea.

Other media companies have launched special video or podcast series for those who want access to the backstage of journalism. In 2017, the *Washington Post* published a series of videos called How to be a journalist, which covered topics such as what happens behind the scenes of a presidential debate, what a whistleblower is, and how journalists cover mass shootings.[70]

In 2023, the BBC launched a podcast series called Frontlines of Journalism, where BBC International Editor Jeremy Bowen deals with difficult themes of journalism, such as where the line between journalism and activism lies, and whether objectivity is attainable for human beings.[71]

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[69] https://www.ft.com/content/1f5cdbff-8937-47f7-a3d8-67a4d336cf80
[70] https://www.washingtonpost.com/pr/wp/2017/12/08/the-washington-post-launches-how-to-be-a-journalist-video-series/
[71] https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/brand/m001jkk5

All of this is to say that while the baseline interest in transparent journalism isn't necessarily very high, it can flourish in certain spaces. One clear drawback to transparency on demand is that there might be a limited audience for the content relative to the effort required.

"But, you know, sometimes it's good to strengthen your relationship with people that you want to have future relationship with," Michael Karlsson, professor at Karlstad University in Sweden, told me. "So if this can be done at a relatively low cost, I see no reason not to do it."

And if transparent journalism can flourish in certain places, and in certain niche products, it can also flourish at certain times. There are moments when a larger number of people suddenly do have a need to know and understand why and how a publication did its reporting. This is often the case when either something controversial is published, or when things go wrong, and the audience demands answers about how the gaffe came about.

"When something controversial is published, the interest in journalism goes up," Karlsson said. "And when the interest in journalism goes up, there will be more questions about how it was made. Questions that you usually don't have when you come to journalism. So I think that is probably one of the times where transparency could have an effect."

I think of this as predictive transparency, although it is in many ways also transparency on demand: trying to be proactive in understanding situations where your audience has a need for this kind of journalistic transparency.

I don't see it as an impossible task: newsrooms often have a pretty good hunch about when they are about to publish something that might cause a lot of controversy and criticism among the public. If they are prepared in advance to explain their coverage and decisions (instead of dealing with the situation *ad hoc* in a crisis mode), journalistic transparency might be more effective.

Karlsson agreed that it could be a good idea to try to be proactive. But life can be surprising: sometimes stories you thought wouldn't be controversial at all turn out to receive an immense backlash. And sometimes there are mistakes that need to be fixed and dealt with. Predictive transparency isn't always an option.

As a moral obligation (see this essay), fixing mistakes transparently and explaining to your audience why and how things went wrong and what the publication will do to avoid similar mistakes can be seen valuable. Whether effective crisis communication is a builder of trust is a particularly nuanced question.

Karlsson has done research on this with his colleagues, and while there is evidence that people have some appreciation towards fixing errors, the bigger the error gets,

the less understanding the audience has towards it. [72] Corrections won't make up for bad journalism, and even well-executed transparency might not help if the problem at hand is severe.

"So, again, it comes back to doing proper journalism [in the first place] and not pushing things out that are you need to retract or edit too much later."

[72] Karlsson, Michael, Clerwall, Christer, and Nord, Lars. "Do Not Stand Corrected." Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 94.1 (2017): 148-67.

The pitfalls of transparency

Margo Smit, ombudsman of the Dutch public broadcaster, told me a story about a collision of ideas about transparency she experienced earlier in her career.

"I was working for an investigative television program. When we had a discussion about somebody complaining to us that we had misrepresented quotes or things, my editor-in-chief said: 'I think what we should do is put our entire raw footage online. Then they can see that we don't [misrepresent quotes]'. And I said to him that if you force me to do that, I think I will quit."

Smit said she couldn't count the number of times she had helped someone formulate an answer during a TV interview: for a television news story, you have to get compact, precise, well-formulated and understandable quotes from the interviewees, which is why you sometimes have to ask them to say things again in other words.

Like many journalists, Smit said she has certain ways of getting a good answer from an interviewee, and she doesn't want to fully disclose her line of questioning.

Still, the editor-in-chief had genuinely thought that going fully transparent would be a good idea, and Smit had to push back. "We edit for a reason. We edit for clarity; we edit for privacy… we edit for so many reasons."

Smit's anecdote highlights many realities of the work of journalists. What to leave *out* and not publish is at the core of journalistic decision-making. And many aspects of reporting rely on privacy instead of transparency: not everything that a journalist and source discuss should be made public.

There's a third reality: it involves how ideas that could feel good in principle might be problematic and difficult in real-life situations.

I have never been an editor-in-chief myself, but in many ways I have been *that* editor-in-chief in Smit's story. When I think about why I got excited about journalistic transparency, in hindsight, a big part of the allure came from the virtuous glow of transparency. What would we, hardworking and ethical journalists, have to hide?

For many of us, being fair and rigorous in our reporting is a source of professional pride, so if there is a way to show that off to our audience, then what could be the problem? If, at the same time, we manage to differentiate journalism from other content that is not created under similar ethical considerations, even better.

I can still see the charm of these ideas: journalism might benefit from a wider public understanding of what journalism is. But charm in itself can be a dangerous thing.

If we perceive transparency as something righteous, I worry we might swallow the ideal without evaluating the serious risks and problems it poses. These dangers are even more present if we haven't carefully defined what transparency actually means in practice – and how, and by whom, the boundaries of transparency are managed.

Protecting confidential sources is the most obvious example: there are situations where disclosing sources would put them in life-threatening situations.

What you can do, of course, is explain to your audience why the identity of your anonymous source is not published. That could be called journalistic transparency. But that's beside the point here, which is that not everything that journalists do backstage can be brought to centre stage.

It's not just anonymous sources that require consideration. Sometimes a reporter has to build trust with a potential source for a long time before they are willing to go on the record. It's not easy to see how that type of trust-building process could be done in public. Some extreme forms of transparency might hinder the acquisition of new sources because practices of transparency might signal to them that they can't trust a journalist to keep things private.

Professor Michael Karlsson from Karlstad University agreed there's a risk of transparency harming journalism.

"In principle, a profession must have a backstage or some secrecy to work. For an academic teacher, we need to be able to talk about how we construct our exam without everyone hearing exactly how we discuss it. And we should be trusted to do that because that's what our profession is about. Just like the journalist should be trusted with their work and the doctor should be trusted with their work."

Karlsson said opening up too much can bog down an institution. In this case, transparency takes up too many resources without actually doing anything positive, especially in terms of trust.

"So, yes, I think it might not only hurt in terms of credibility, but also drain it from resources that could be better used elsewhere."

Edward Wasserman, professor and former dean at Graduate School of Journalism of University of California, Berkeley, said he is also worried about the dangers that a certain kind of transparency might pose to journalism itself. "It has to do with transparency as a trick that permits a wider range of conflicts of interests to be smuggled in under the tent."

What Wasserman refers to is a situation where a journalist transparently discloses connections that they have to an entity that they are writing about. Examples of this could be a travel reporter going on a reporting trip that was paid for by a tourism

board of the destination town, or a culture reporter being flown to Los Angeles to interview stars of the upcoming Hollywood movie, all expenses paid by the studio.

"The idea is that, well, I am associated with this entity, but I have now told you that, so I'm free to write about it. And I think that is an extremely dangerous, poor doctrine. Disclosure, when it comes to conflicts of interest, does not rid the journalist of bias. It simply alerts [the reader] to the possibility that there might be bias and challenges you to ferret it out. And I think that is a really dishonest thing."

Wasserman is worried that this practice opens the door to a much more contaminated and corrupted kind of journalism than has traditionally been allowed, because, hey – it's all happening transparently and under the eyes of the audience.

"It gives way and enables reporters who should be nowhere near that story to go ahead and write the story, as if they've been immunized against a conflict of interest. Which is not the case."

In an earlier essay we explored the absence of scientific evidence supporting the notion that transparency fosters trust in news. We found that transparency not only yields limited results in enhancing trust, but it also has the potential to erode it.

If we become more transparent, is the audience going to appreciate the realities of how news is being made? According to the evidence: no, not really. In a Finnish study, young adults were surveyed about what they expect from journalists in terms of how they handle their sources. It was found that they actually expect pretty rigorous source practices and high professional standards.

In the same study, actual newsrooms were observed in terms of source practices. The results suggest that the audience expectations of journalistic performance were higher than what journalists in real-life newsrooms actually deliver.[73]

There might be good reasons for this from journalists' perspectives: working under time pressures under which a reporter can't afford as thorough checking of sources as they would like to, for example.

That won't balance the difference between expectations and reality or erase the possibility of disappointment if this difference is being made visible through acts of transparency. If transparency reveals that journalists' practices are not of as high a standard as the audience thinks they are, it feels difficult to imagine how a revelation like that could produce more trust in journalism.

Once again, from the perspective of moral obligations (see this essay), this might not be a problem: if transparency is in place only to produce more *honesty* into the

[73] Manninen, Ville J. E. "If Only They Knew: Audience Expectations and Actual Sourcing Practices in Online Journalism." Journalism Practice 14.4 (2020): 412-28.

society, then we can be indifferent about its trust impacts. But I believe that for many news organisations, disappointing its audience would qualify as a failure.

There are real-life cases of journalistic transparency backfiring. Consider the case of the Indian media outlet The Wire and its infamous 2022 reporting of how Meta allegedly allowed an Indian politician to remove critical content from Instagram. The article garnered international attention when Meta denied the allegations – and weeks later the outlet was forced to publicly admit that key information in their coverage was false.[74]

Before the admission, The Wire engaged in radical transparency by sharing private emails and evidence it thought would support its claims – and in doing so revealed they had been duped by fake emails. It could be argued that by sharing everything, the truth was arrived at more quickly. Transparency, good?

The other option here is that The Wire could have taken its time investigating its own reporting in detail – with some privacy – and owned the finding that the emails were fabricated. [75] The truth would have been achieved in this scenario too, and it would have saved some face for the outlet. Privacy, better?

During a Reuters Institute Global Journalism Seminar about the scandal, I asked Narasimhan Ram, an award-winning Indian political journalist and director of The Hindu Publishing Group, what he thought about The Wire's decision to defend the article publicly.

"Once the story was challenged in a fundamental way, I think it was an egregious mistake to double down on an email which many people thought was fabricated," N. Ram said.

By now, The Wire has retracted the Meta articles, apologised to its readers and admitted that its coverage failed to meet the standards of the publication.[76]

Every controversy is unique, and it can be difficult to extrapolate general rules for how transparency may or may not contribute to the breakdown of credibility. But it is clear, at least in my opinion, that transparency is not necessarily a panacea for all ills. Just as it is easy to get things wrong in "classical" reporting, it's as likely to happen in the context of practicing transparency.

Some other risks of transparency that I have mentioned here are also risks that can be quite easily managed. While source protection is the most obvious problem for transparent journalism, the solution is also very obvious: a news organisation

[74] https://thewire.in/media/the-wire-retracts-meta-stories
[75] https://www.theverge.com/2022/10/18/23410512/meta-the-wire-facebook-xcheck-india-messy-fight
[76] https://thewire.in/media/the-wire-editorial-to-our-readers-an-apology-and-a-promise

adhering to transparency has to think things through and decide what information is off-limits and maintain clear boundaries.

In my experience, this type of discussion is usually lacking when journalists are discussing journalistic transparency. What does transparency mean for those parts of journalism that thrive in privacy? How are the boundaries of transparency defined? And if some things must necessarily be kept backstage, and journalists get to decide what those things are, then what does the transparency ideal even change?

In the future, I would love to see a lot more discussion about these questions instead of the slogan-level hype about what our audience supposedly appreciates.

I'm especially concerned when journalists advocate for or throw around the term "radical transparency" (see *The transparency hypothesis*). What's troublesome is that "radical transparency" often goes undefined, and it's left to the audience to derive meaning for the term.

Who is to say that the idea won't be abused by, say, an authoritarian leader: 'Well, dear journalists who are a constantly bothering me, since that person said real journalism should be radically transparent, why aren't you disclosing the sources who were critical about my regime?'

Even without dictators, newsrooms are frequently blamed for pushing a political agenda – many newsrooms have grown accustomed to accusations of being too liberal, left-leaning, or progressive (sometimes even at the same time as they are being blasted for being too right-leaning and conservative).

One transparency-motivated solution that has been proposed to address these accusations is that newsrooms should poll and report on the voting behaviour or political leanings of their staff. I don't know if these suggestions are made in good faith – on the contrary, it seems the goal of this type of transparency is to polarise newsrooms and make journalism seem suspicious and politically motivated.

It completely ignores that journalists are trained to do their work professionally and in a fair manner, regardless of personal convictions. I'm not saying personal bias doesn't ever affect journalism – I'm very certain it does – but if we take steps towards a system where the audience is provided with more and more private information about journalists, we risk compromising the concept of professionals conducting impartial reporting, as they are trained to do.

It also poses a risk to journalistic autonomy. If political leanings are publicised, then it wouldn't be a long leap to politically motivated hiring policies, which would put the independence of a news organisation in a very questionable light.

To be clear, I'm not saying newsrooms couldn't benefit from diversity of thought and life experience. There are many good reasons to increase diversity.

And to be clear, political opinions are just one example of where the conversation could go with transparency enthusiasm – it could be replaced with many other parameters of being a human being.

What I am saying is that if journalism wants to be more transparent, the limits of transparency are a very crucial aspect to consider. It is not difficult to imagine how transparency can be hijacked or used against journalists to compromise the independence of journalistic institutions.

Not all aspects of journalistic work are easy to communicate to the public either. Why did we choose to cover topic X today but not Z? I've yet to see a public editor pen a column saying "because this story would give us more clicks" or "this one was cheaper" instead of basing claims in civic values such as public interest or a duty to inform.

These might all be true at the same time, but that's the point: dissecting what actually motivates a team of journalists is not straightforward. "Human beings are capable of both self-deception and a lack of self-awareness, so we cannot assume that the motives a person ascribes to himself are his actual motives," Kyle Heim and Stephanie Craft have written.[77] Do journalist always have clarity on the difference between important and interesting and popular?

There is evidence to suggest that "going transparent" leads to attempts to present oneself in a favourable light. (Surely the opposite of transparency?) When six U.S. news outlets were examined in terms of transparency, the research concluded that there is a willingness to engage in only "a type of low risk managed transparency".[78]

While journalists using language about "radical transparency" might be well-meaning, it's a sloppy way of talking about a potentially big ideological reform when the contents of this kind of transparency are not clearly defined. If journalism is to be more transparent, I think journalists should be very conscious and precise about what that means and what that *doesn't* mean.

It's very important that journalists and news organisations understand and remain in control of what transparency means in practice. Then, I believe, journalists are also better equipped to explain to their audience what they mean by transparency and why they are practicing it – which I guess was the whole point all along.

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[77] Heim, Kyle & Stephanie Craft. Transparency in Journalism. Meanings, Merits, and Risks. In Wilkins, L., & Christians, C. (2020). The Routledge handbook of mass media ethics (Second ed.). New York, NY.

[78] Chadha, Kalyani, & Koliska, Michael. (2015). Newsrooms and Transparency in the Digital Age. Journalism Practice, 9(2), 215-229.

A mirage of answers

There's this one thing that keeps popping up.

While I've been researching the topic of journalistic transparency, for some reason I have come across this same example or anecdote over and over again – whether talking to people, listening to talks, or going through articles and literature.

The point of it, I assume, is to show how little the general public knows and understands about the practice of journalism. Here it is, paraphrased by me:

Many members of the public don't even know what an anonymous source is. They assume it means that even the newsroom *doesn't know who the source is – that it's anonymous to the reporter as well.*[79]

Obviously, that's not what an anonymous source is. And since it's so obvious to journalists, when I heard this anecdote for the first couple of times, I was shocked. How can it be!? No wonder audiences in many parts of the world have trust issues with news and media if they don't understand what our work entails.

Then I think I got bored with it. "Yeah, yeah: just another damning indictment from the unwelcoming environment the news industry desperately tries to survive in." Also, if that's such a common problem, well then… isn't it super easy to solve? Let's just add a sentence to a story that uses anonymous sources explaining what those are and move on with our lives.

But as I am writing the concluding essay in this series on transparency, I think I'm now just bemused, and a little bit baffled. Why does this one example have such appeal, and why do journalists love to keep telling it to each other?

Of course, I understand that on the surface, the point of this anecdote is to argue for better media literacy or illustrate how big the gap between the journalists and the audience has become.

But, at least to me, the anecdote seems to suggest something beyond that. It alludes to an attitude that could be construed as either concerned or downright arrogant, depending on how you want to look at it:

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[79] You can find variations of this anecdote, for example, here: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-do-journalists-keep-sources-anonymous-isabelle-roughol/, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/how-do-you-use-an-anonymous-source-the-mysteries-of-journalism-everyone-should-know/2017/12/10/fa01863a-d9e4-11e7-a841-2066faf731ef_story.html, https://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/news-media-literacy-conspiracy-theory.php, https://www.poynter.org/newsletters/2020/heres-why-you-should-be-willing-to-believe-anonymous-sources/

How can they appreciate journalism when they know so little about how it's made?

Of course, "anonymous source" is just a prototype for all the bits and pieces an audience is expected to know to meaningfully engage with quality journalism.

I'm not sure I agree with that reasoning. To me, the anonymous sources anecdote raises two different questions.

First of all, is it really that big of a deal if some members of the general public don't know what an anonymous source is? Sure, it would be really nice if everyone knew, and appreciated and praised hard-working journalists for all the good we have done and sent us flowers. I'm not *against* everyone knowing what anonymous sources are.

But at least from a trust in news perspective, I don't know how alarming it is that there are people who don't know the real meaning of an anonymous source. Every day, we trust professionals, processes, machines, and software with very little understanding of how they operate. (Voluntary vulnerability! See this essay!)

We take medication we probably don't comprehend very well, prescribed by doctors whose work we know very little of, who use instruments we can't use (or name) while examining us. We drive cars at high speed on motorways with other drivers of whom we know nothing about, sitting inside high-tech vehicles that are so complex it's getting very difficult to repair them.[80] Often, we don't even understand how our own bodies work.

Against this backdrop, I'm not sure if some people having misconceptions about anonymous sources is such a huge threat to journalism. And if people were engaging with journalism as consistently as they engage with cars, I'm sure journalists would be throwing around that anecdote a lot less often.

But, as things stand, we do throw it around – often in reference to the need for more journalistic transparency. "Well then, we have to educate our audience and tell them how journalism is made," we tell each other.

And, yes, media literacy is important. There is evidence, for example, that better knowledge about the news media also predicts a lower likelihood to endorse conspiracy theories.[81]

But what seems difficult to me is to know where to draw the line: just *how* media literate should the general public be? And is knowledge about anonymous sources

[80] https://www.wired.com/story/high-tech-cars-killing-the-traditional-auto-repair-shop/
[81] Craft, Stephanie, Ashley, Seth, and Maksl, Adam. "News Media Literacy and Conspiracy Theory Endorsement." Communication and the Public 2.4 (2017): 388-401.

above or below that line? Is this an actual problem that we need transparency so save us from?

The second question that I've been pondering is that of ignorance. As I said, to me the anecdote is presented as proof of how bad the situation is and how wide the gap between the journalists and the public has gotten, since they can't grasp such basic things about our work.

Maybe it really is valid signal of that. But if we think the answer is for journalists to constantly explain their process and show backstage operations so they will have a better understanding of how journalism works – read: engage in journalistic transparency – I think we need to pause for a minute.

Shouldn't journalists have a moment of critical self-reflection first and consider that perhaps it is *we* who have knowledge gaps about our profession?

While I've been working on this paper, I have talked both on and off the record to a lot of people who have been enthusiastic about transparency, some of them having endorsed the idea in public. The clear majority of them – albeit not everyone – were totally unaware of the scientific research that has been done about the topic, or of the evidence that suggest that transparency actually might have very limited power to generate trust in journalism.

When I've told them about this body of research, many of them have seemed genuinely surprised. We can still make a good case for why transparency is important despite this research (that was the topic of this essay and this one), but the fact that many journalist didn't even known this research exists and continue to attempt to deploy transparency to increase trust is… well, interesting.

Or alarming.

Compared to this oversight, is the whole situation with anonymous sources really all that worrisome?

To be clear, this is a *mea culpa* confession first and foremost. Before I came to Oxford, I was quite convinced that journalistic transparency could do a lot, and when I found evidence telling me otherwise, I was more or less astonished, and a little bit ashamed. And I recognise my privilege here: not everyone who gets excited about transparency has the luxury of spending months in Oxford just reading academic research.

Nevertheless, I've encountered so much enthusiasm and so little knowledge in our profession about transparency, even though the knowledge is out there (and we as journalists claim to be experts at seeking information). Isn't that a problem?

I sat down with Damian Radcliffe, a visiting fellow at the Reuters Institute and professor of journalism at University of Oregon, and a journalist himself. I wanted to talk to him about why there seems to be this lack of communication or flow of information between the media researchers and journalists.

I asked him if he was surprised that so much enthusiasm for transparency seems uninformed by the available research. How can journalists be so unaware of what academics know about their industry, even though that knowledge could be very crucial for them?

In many ways, he said, he was not surprised at all.

"I believe that these are two sectors that don't really talk to one another," Radcliffe said. "A good example of that would be if you go to any industry conference, you very rarely find academics talking about their research. Similarly, the same thing happens in reverse, go to an academic conference, how many practitioners are there digesting that research?"

Not many, was his point.

"So I think there is a massive disconnect between those two industries."

Radcliffe doesn't only mean conferences. The writing style of the scientists is often impenetrable to journalists. People working in busy newsrooms might have little patience to understand theoretical frameworks. And many academic journals are behind expensive paywalls and can't even be accessed by journalists, even if there were interest.

There are other structural factors at play, too. Even if a scientist is researching journalism, they might not be incentivised to talk to journalists about their research. You're supposed to engage with other academics if you want to get further in your career.

"Academic institutions might typically not reward efforts for industry and public engagement. So you have to look at what the practices within academia are, whereby we say a scholar is doing a good job. That will typically be peer reviewed journal articles and academic conferences with peer reviewed presentations and pitches."

I think Radcliffe is being kind not to blame this problem largely on journalists. An easy, albeit unrealistic, solution to his problem would be to just force journalists to read more academic research. But everyone who has worked in a newsroom knows that's very rarely possible. The time constraints and pressures are just too much to pick up a science journal and keep up to date about the latest research.

“So I believe it’s incumbent on academics to think about how they can disseminate this and how they can disseminate this effectively.”

I also asked Radcliffe about the anonymous sources example. Why do we take it as a sign public understanding of journalism is deteriorating so badly that we must worry? We are sitting in a museum café in Oxford, and we note that when people go to a restaurant that says they source their food locally, customers are normally not asking to see the receipts. They just – trust. I don’t know a lot about where the Oxford cafés and restaurants get their produce. Why do we get all worked up when someone doesn’t know what an anonymous source is? I know we value media literacy, but just how literate do people have to be?

“That’s such a good question,” Radcliffe said, and paused for a moment. “I think you have to be literate enough to understand the implications of the process.”

He said a good way to introduce anonymous sources into a story was to say, for example, that ‘we spoke to people for the story on the condition of anonymity, because talking to us could impact their jobs’.

“Then it’s very clear – OK, this is why it’s an anonymous source.”

Helping the audience understand in the moment is the key. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, as stories and journalistic situations are different, but as an attitude, helping your audience should be the starting point.

That might lead to acts of transparency, but it’s motivated quite differently to other examples presented in the transparency discourse, where the problem on the table is that the audience should understand (and appreciate) what goes on behind the scenes. Maybe they don’t. But they have a right to understand what is shown to them on the stage. Those are two different ways of thinking.

Jurjen IJsseldijk, a managing editor of the Dutch social media news brands NOS op 3 and NOS Stories, spoke about this in an earlier essay, too: transparency might be a good idea, but only if it’s giving the audience something extra and something that they want and need. The motivation shouldn’t be that you as a journalist or newsroom get something nice out of it.

Now it’s my turn to go soft on the journalists. When I’ve tried to figure out why so many journalists seek a solution from transparency, I’ve come to think about desperation. The landscape around journalism has gone through seismic changes from financial and technological standpoints, and politicians are constantly attacking and undermining journalists. At the same time, trust in news has rapidly declined in many areas.

It's very understandable that we have been desperate to come up with solutions. If you are walking thirsty in a desert, of course you would like to find an oasis. And transparency at least feels like something that we *can* do in the midst of all this.

But transparency might just be the mirage in the trust desert. It looks promising from afar, but as you get closer, its promises evaporate.

Naturally, I have a lot of sympathy for journalists experiencing these difficulties, and I recognise them even in Finland, which is a privileged place to do this profession. That's why I don't want to belittle anyone who thinks transparency might help. Maybe it can, at least in some scenarios that I've tried to explore in this paper as well.

But I also think that maybe journalists clinging to transparency are trying to solve a problem that is so much bigger than our industry. This thought was inspired by one of my fellow Reuters Institute journalism fellows, Tanmoy Goswami.

I am not exactly sure anymore what we were discussing in one of our seminars – it might have been the breakdown of media business models in the media and how journalists have lost jobs as a result of poor management. Anyway, we were approaching the discussion with the question of "what can journalists do to fix this". I wrote down Goswami's response in my notebook:

"Why do we think we have to solve a problem that we didn't create in the first place?"

I have thought about that question a lot. I actually do think that if journalists are able to solve trust problems, even if we do not create them, then of course we should do that. And if some elements of transparency work in practice and there's evidence to show that, then of course we should embrace that.

But I also wonder if we have enough room within the discourse to consider the option that maybe our profession is facing problems we cannot solve. Not on our own anyway, if politicians, legislators, regulators, big platforms and other tech companies, teachers and media educators are not on board.

And that, in turn, leads me to the Serenity Prayer, popularised by Alcoholics Anonymous:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. The courage to change the things I can, And the wisdom to know the difference.

To be clear, I'm not joking. I think one of the things the news industry could benefit from is a better understanding of what things it can have an impact on, and what it cannot. Unfortunately, the answers might not by happy ones.

In May 2023, I was reading an article published by the Finnish daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. The article was about the American mentality around firearms and gun regulation. For the article, the U.S. correspondent Elina Väntönen and photographer Julia Rendleman had visited the annual meeting of National Rifle Association in Indianapolis and interviewed people attending the event.[82]

One of the interviewees, a Chicago man named Jason Pacheco, said it was his first time attending the annual meeting. When he was describing his experience, he said:

"Here I have learnt that you mustn't trust in journalists and media. They stay silent and twist things. No offence."[83]

This quote stuck with me, because Pacheco is speaking about trust in media as a matter of what he has learnt at the event. He isn't talking about how his own media consumption has affected his evaluations of the media – it sounds like he has listened to other voices telling him that media is not to be trusted.

It was polite of him to say "no offence" to the reporter at the end. But it really makes you think to what extent things are in our hands when we try to make people trust us. Going back to the Serenity Prayer, how big is the proportion of things that journalists can, with courage, change?

"Short answer is, it depends," Ben Toff told me. In essays on *Transparency on demand* and *Transparency as a marketing technique*, I wrote about how there might be small groups of people who are very conscious or passionate about news and want to know a lot about what's goes on backstage. For them, what journalists reveal can have an effect.

"But I think there's a larger set of people for whom news is a utility that they'll turn to in particular moments when they want to know what's going on. It's not particularly important to their daily lives. For them, it's not unlike other products, where they have ideas about things that they like and don't like, but that's not always connected to the substance of what's being reported day-to-day, or to the practices around journalism."

As Toff explained in this essay, most people don't live their lives thinking about what they trust or don't trust. Many people are guided by daily habits and routines even in terms of media consumption, and not necessarily by rigorous assessments of trustworthiness of news sources.

[82] https://www.hs.fi/ulkomaat/art-2000009073494.html
[83] Quote translated into English from the article in Finnish.

Damian Radcliffe gives a similar answer when I ask him to what extent trust is based on what journalists do and to what extent it's up to journalists to build that trust, vis-à-vis politicians, regulators, media educators and so on.

"I think the answer is it is a bit of all of those. But what you need, therefore, is a coherent strategy, where all of those different stakeholders are working in harmony towards an agreed upon end goal."

So maybe journalists asking "what can we do to fix this problem" are asking the wrong question. A better question might be, "How do we get other key players to fix this problem with us?"

I know that in many contexts, that question might be an impossible one to answer. If attacking journalists has proved to be a fruitful strategy for populist politicians, why would they be interested in finding a solution to end that practice?

Still, asking that question might nudge the conversation in the right direction in the sense that at least journalists don't deserve to carry all the misery and burden alone. Another sobering effect of that question could be that we then focus our efforts on what we're supposed to be doing in the first place: good quality journalism, instead of trying to win over the hearts of our readers and listeners and convince them to believe in the importance of journalism.

I ask Michael Karlsson, the Swedish professor who has studied journalistic transparency extensively and become sceptical about its abilities to increase trust, whether he thinks we should just abandon the idea of transparency since it doesn't seem to deliver what it's purported to achieve. If it really is just a mirage of answers, then should we just turn away?

"Yeah, that's a good question. It's a question I've asked myself. Why do I keep writing things that say I shouldn't study what I'm studying?"

Karlsson said he thinks there might be a role for transparency, even though we should lower our expectations and shift the focus. Perhaps it should be studied in special circumstances or studied in relation to actors other than the audience.

But he would also like to see shifts in the discussion and rhetoric around transparency, which has been mostly celebratory and enthusiastic:

"So that we don't perpetuate the idea that transparency works and improves trust. Although it's just people repeating ideas, it's still focusing other people's attention towards this solution to a problem that has many more layers, I think."