How to Improve Trust in Local Journalism

September 2022
1. **Trust in local news sources is good, but not excellent** and it’s extremely fragile. 50% of people who say they trust a local news source also say they have questioned whether they should. 1 in 5 say local TV or local radio are sources with “fake news”.

2. A question about the trustworthiness of a single journalist puts the integrity of the entire organization in jeopardy. 60% of respondents share this “one rotten apple” sentiment.

3. **Action, not promotion, is the key to cultivating trust with the audience.** There are 28 things local news sources and journalists should work on to earn and build trust.

4. Success will not come from the targeting of a specific demographic. The findings are very consistent across all demos. It is not a generational challenge. Nor is it a challenge primarily rooted in political orientation.

5. **Social media is a significant challenge.** It is easily the least trusted local news platform. It is also the second most used local platform daily. Journalists who post personal opinions on social media are hurting their trust relationship with the audience.
Online interviews were conducted with a national sample of 2,000 adults 18–64 years old.

Respondents were contacted randomly and qualified for the sample if they use a LOCAL source weekly for LOCAL news and information: TV newscast, radio newscast/programs, social media, website, and/or mobile app.

Interviews were conducted in April/May 2022.
Average survey length: 15 minutes
The local news consumer

**GEN Z (18–24)**
- 15% of the 18–64 audience in the sample.
- Light consumers of local news on any platform. Social media is this group's most-used (42% daily+) source for local news.
- Share the same opinions about what's important to trust as other generations; not nearly as passionate about these.

**MILLENNIAL (25–40)**
- 36% of the sample. The generation with a majority stake in the 25–54 demographic.
- Moderate consumers of local news on all platforms. Most likely to use social media (60% daily+) and television (50% daily+).

**GEN X (41–57)**
- 34% of the sample.
- Local television (61% daily+) is by far the most dominant platform used by this generation. But Gen X are consuming local news on all platforms regularly.

**BABY BOOMER (58–64)**
- 15% of the sample. No longer a part of the 25–54 demographic.
- Strong users (61% daily+) of local television news. Light use of all other platforms.
- Tends to find platforms not used regularly less trustworthy.
Sample

- **50%** Female
- **49%** Male
- **1%** Non-binary

**Demographic Breakdown**

- **44%** Democratic
- **25%** Republican
- **23%** Independent
- **9%** Other / none

**Region Distribution**

- **21%** Midwest
- **23%** West
- **38%** South
- **17%** East

**Political Affiliation**

- **73%** Democratic
- **15%** Republican
- **5%** Independent
- **5%** Other / none

**Race**

- **15%** African American
- **5%** Asian
- **5%** White
- **5%** Other / DK / NA

18% identified as being of Hispanic or Latino origin.
A CALL TO ACTION
Local news consumption is healthy

78% of the sample uses a local source daily (driven primarily by television and social media), putting the news consumer in a good position to evaluate local sources and local journalists.
Trust in local news is good...not excellent

50% (GOOD)
The average 8–10 score for all five platforms.

There are differences based on political affiliation:

Democrats: 60%
Republicans: 48%
Independents: 39%

Thinking about the following sources you use to get LOCAL news and information, how much do you trust that the news and information you get from the source is accurate and correct?

- A local TV station’s local newscast
- A local radio station’s newscast/programs
- A news app from a local news source
- A website from a local news source
- Social media from a local news source
Trust in local news is good…but fragile

% of respondents who say they’ve ever wondered if they can trust what they’re getting from…

- **TV**: 43%
  - **WHY?**
    - They start to get "sensational".
    - Political stories.
    - They give opinions.
    - Overly dramatic headlines.
    - Don’t show all sides to an important story.

- **Web**: 48%
  - **WHY?**
    - When they quote the big media firms.
    - When reports don’t use primary sources.
    - They are giving completely different information than other local news.
    - Political reporting.
    - If they say something outrageous.

- **Radio**: 49%
  - **WHY?**
    - Exaggerate the news.
    - Unverified information.
    - Weather related news.
    - Covering national news.
    - Far fetched news stories.
    - Story only has one side.
    - Political stories.

- **App**: 50%
  - **AVERAGE**
  - **WHY?**
    - Stories seem outrageous or unbelievable.

- **Local Platform**: 56%
  - **WHY?**
    - When the stories seem outrageous or unbelievable.
    - When that news feed is sponsored or backed by advertisers.
    - When it comes to politics or world news.
    - Leaning to one side.
    - If the news didn’t sound correct.
    - If the story sounds sketchy.

- **Social**: 66%
  - **WHY?**
    - When the stories seem outrageous or unbelievable.

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1 in 5 say local news sources have “fake news”

What does “Fake News” mean?
- “News you can not trust.”
- “News stories that are not true.”
- “Things reported in a slanted way.”
- “News that pushes a false narrative.”
Every journalist counts... for better or worse

60%

Say if just one journalist from a local news source is not trusted, they would be less likely to use the source overall.

“Journalists are a reflection of the source they belong to.”

Why would you be less likely to use the source overall because of the specific journalist?

“If one is reporting badly, you can’t trust the others aren’t doing the same bad job.”

“One rotten apple spoils the bunch.”

“If they let the one journalist continue, then they must be okay with lies or opinions.”

“Might be just an example of a deeper problem with the source.”

“If they let one journalist spread lies, they would probably let all of them.”
WHAT BUILDS “TRUST”?
Trust is built and broken in many ways

Respondents were asked about their level of agreement on a 10-point scale that the action could impact trust in local news.

**Excellent** actions have 65%+ strong agreement (8-10).

**Good** actions have 50-64% strong agreement (8-10).

**Concerning** actions have 40% or less strong agreement (8-10) and/or a net score ([8-10]–[1-3] below 40%)

Demographic segmentation shows some differences in the intensity but not the rank of the responses and with no meaningful exceptions.
Next, we want you to think about the local news sources you use to get local news and information. How much do you agree or disagree that the following have an impact on your decision to trust the news and information you get from a local news source?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trust actions for local news sources</th>
<th>8-10</th>
<th>4-7</th>
<th>1-3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That the source has a high level of integrity and is ethical</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have used the source for a long time and are very familiar with it.</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When they make a mistake or error, they own up to it and apologize</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can depend on the source to be consistent in their coverage of important local news.</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They are involved with the local community and are in touch with important things happening in the community</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is respected as a professional journalistic organization</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They care about and have an interest in the things that are important to their local news consumers</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The local news source has a diverse group of journalists</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
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0% = Strongly disagree; 10 = Strongly agree.
## Trust actions for local news sources

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<td>They have the ability to cover the local news without making mistakes or errors</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>They demonstrate that they are socially responsible</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The local news source is known to be the leader among local news consumers</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The local news source lives up to the promises it makes in its advertisements</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The local news source has specific journalists you know whose work you trust</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is involved and participate in local organizations and charities to support the local community</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They ask their local news consumers to help them keep in touch with important things that need local news coverage</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The local news source wins awards for excellence</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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- **0%**: Totally disagree
- **100%**: Totally agree
- **8-10**: Strongly disagree
- **1-3**: Strongly agree
- **DK/NS**: Don't know / No opinion

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<td>They solicit and listen to their news consumers and want their feedback on their coverage of the local news</td>
<td>47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowing the company or people who own the source</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>The local news source is transparent about how your data is used by its app or website</td>
<td>46</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The local news source was recommended to you by family or friends</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>The local news source lets you personalize the information/news that you are interested in.</td>
<td>42</td>
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Now, we want to ask you about some of the things that might impact how much you trust a local journalist. How much do you agree or disagree that the following have an impact on how much you trust a journalist to be accurate and correct?

- They are knowledgeable about the local community and what issues are important to local news consumers
- They are experienced
- They seem to care about the local news consumer, their families and their community
- It is clear that they are very knowledgeable about the local area and community
- They are authentic and genuine
- They are balanced in their coverage of local news stories, explaining all sides to important local stories
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- They have local stories that focus on what is being done to solve or work towards solutions to local issues/problems
- They take the time in their reporting to explain how stories developed and changed over time
- They report on stories that focus on solutions to problems facing your community
- They include “experts” in their news stories that are credible and knowledgeable
- They ask tough questions of government officials and politicians
- They are open and transparent about how they get their stories
- They do not let their own political position impact how they report on important local news stories
- For TV journalists specifically, they sound like they are competent and don’t stumble and have difficulty communicating
- They are an advocate for the viewer, reporting on stories that watch out for them, their family and their community
- They aggressively investigate local authorities, politicians, and businesses to make sure they are truthful and honest
- They identify themselves as a journalist

10= Totally agree. 1= Totally disagree.
Trust actions for local news *journalists*

They are a good representative of the kinds of people who live in your community
They explain who their sources for local stories are and why they are a valuable source
They do not take any specific “position” on important or controversial local news stories
They are involved with local community organizations
You are very familiar with the journalist and have a long history of getting your local news from them
They are from the local area
They write stories conversationally and talk to the consumer
They look and sound like you and your community
They do not make mistakes or errors in their local news coverage

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Risky actions with negative consequences

They give their personal commentary on news stories

They share their personal opinions, even about stories they're not covering, on social media

They post personal information about themselves on social media

They identify themselves as a storyteller

Gen Z and Baby Boomers had very similar responses to these issues, indicating agreement across all ages.
TAKING ACTION
Key takeaways

1. The state of trust
Local news sources and journalists will need to work aggressively to reinforce a good, but often fragile relationship with the audience. Local sources are in a better position than network and cable entities. But the current state of trust in local sources cannot be taken for granted.

2. Action items
Local news sources and journalists can target 28 things to work on to can help earn and build trust. This all comes before any promotional efforts are undertaken. With very few exceptions the sentiments are consistent across all demographic and ideological group.

3. Paths to pursue
The action items represent a two-fold approach to cultivating trust. First are actions to demonstrate objectivity and accuracy. Second are actions designed to showcase the local news source and position journalists as real people who are truly connected to and invested in the communities they serve.

4. Social media struggles
While social media is a heavily used source for local news and information, it comes with a great deal of risk. Individual journalists risk harming themselves and their news organization with questionable posts containing personal opinions.
Action items for local news sources and journalists

- Be boldly objective
- Scrutinize social media activity
- Own up to mistakes
- Memorable delivery
- Focus on accuracy
- Show your work
- Immerse in the market
- Fix problems in your community

TRUST
Training, especially for new, inexperienced, journalists is essential.

Review internal systems in your newsroom to ensure a process for double checking the facts.

Be explicit about the credentials of the expert sources in the story.
Explain your work process as often and in as much detail as possible.

- Use process language/demonstrative storytelling to communicate how the facts were gathered.
- Let the audience see/hear you ask the tough questions.
- Think through your “tough questions” (Why are they “tough”?). Watch for an accusatory tone.
Communicate what’s known and not known when a story is developing.

- Be clear about what you’re doing to get more complete information.
- Communicate the reasons for changing facts in a story; be clear about the source(s) of the details.

Be transparent about your efforts to get in touch with someone. “Unavailable for comment” is rarely enough.
Be transparent about your decision-making, when the story you’re covering or the way you’re covering it is controversial.
Immerse in the market

Journalists’ onboarding needs deep training on local issues, culture, etc.

Ensure staff and leadership on-air and behind the scenes reflect the community you serve.

Understand what makes your local market unique.

- Learn how to pronounce the names of important people, places, local institutions, etc.
- Understand the key issues driving politics, the economy, and social issues.
- Network regularly; build relationships with local officials and community leaders.
Assign journalists to “own” elements of your community.

Demonstrate experience & expertise with stories and/or a specific subject area.

- If you don’t have a beat, consider giving yourself one to dig into.
- Keep following up on all your stories; push to advance them. Backsell previous stories.

Enlist local experts on important topics to be a part of your team.
Use known and experienced journalists (many times the anchors) to cover important stories. Explain why they are best suited (i.e., experience).

Don’t let new reporters just appear. Introduce them to your community frequently and in innovative ways.

Consider staying longer; time spent in a market has a direct impact on your value.
Identify the most newsworthy and impactful problems in your community.

- Probe the causes and accountability through tough questions and deep reporting.
- Dig into and highlight the search for solutions.
  - Hold the powerful accountable to making improvements.
  - Spotlight those who are champions of change.
Identify the most newsworthy and impactful successes in your community.

- Probe the causes with deep reporting.
- Get involved (sources and journalists)

Journalists and news organizations should get involved in activities (community organizations and/or nonprofits) that improve your community while remaining independent.
Consider “balanced” coverage in different ways:

- Sharing differing opinions about a controversial topic.
- Probing the differing accounts of something that’s happened.
- Looking not only at problems, but also solutions or potential solutions.

Use overt language in transitions between the various sides to a story.
Re-evaluate the need for systems to improve the vetting of content on all platforms coming from content services.

- Network affiliate services
- Content from owned and operated sister stations/organizations
- Wire service and other content providers
Don’t allow content on your business or private social media account to question your ability to objectively cover the news.

Do not post or interact with a social media post in any way that would communicate your personal opinion on a controversial topic.

Evaluate every individual post for biases; consider the image and the text independently. Each post and each component of the post must stand up to scrutiny on their own.
Journalists should consider treating their personal social media accounts just as they do their work account.

Local news sources should reevaluate their overall social media strategy.
When a source or the public informs you about a mistake, thank them and promise to immediately inform your supervisor.

Corrections and apologies should be made swiftly and across all platforms.

Conduct a mistake post-mortem to determine next steps for addressing systems, training, and/or employee performance management.

Reevaluate internal systems designed to ensure content is accurate on all platforms.
Local news sources should prioritize training, coaching, and feedback of the journalists’ on-air presentation skills.