



The University of Texas at Austin
Center for Media Engagement
Moody College of Communication

REPORTER BIOS ALONE AREN'T ENOUGH TO BOOST TRUST

Caroline Murray and Natalie (Talia) Jomini Stroud

SUMMARY

The Center for Media Engagement previously found that using multiple trust strategies in a news article, including reporter biographies, can positively affect readers' trust in and engagement with news. In this study, we explored how biographies alone influence readers' perceptions of reporters and news organizations.

We found that readers were equally engaged and expressed similar levels of trust in the reporter and the news organization regardless of whether the biographies were present and irrespective of whether the biographies were more personal or professional.

However, readers did feel they knew the reporter better after reading a biography with a personal photo and personal details.

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THE PROBLEM

News organizations approach journalists' biographies in many different ways. Some news organizations do not link to biographies of their reporters. Some outlets, like [KPRC 2 in Houston](#), have elaborate biography pages for their reporters. In order to see what value reporter biographies might bring, the Center for Media Engagement, with funding from the Democracy Fund, tested whether biographies make a difference in the way readers view the reporter and the news organization. We also examined whether using a personal image versus a professional headshot and including personal information in the biography text, such as hobbies and family details, influenced readers' perceptions.

KEY FINDINGS

- When readers saw a biography that contained both a personal photo and personal details about the reporter, they felt they knew the reporter better than those who saw any other type of biography.
- Reading a specific type of biography, or even seeing a biography at all, didn't significantly affect readers' views of the article, the reporter, or the news organization.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NEWSROOMS

Using a personal photo and including personal details in a reporter's biography made participants feel they knew the reporter better, but this feeling didn't influence readers' attitudes about a news organization more broadly. This suggests that providing journalist biographies isn't enough to boost trust and engagement when used alone. This doesn't mean newsrooms should completely discount using biographies, however. Using a personal photo and sharing personal details in a biography could be a way to humanize reporters and make connections with readers. It's also possible that other combinations of trust and transparency measures could be effective in tandem with biographies to boost trust and engagement. Newsrooms should try using reporter biographies in combination with [other trust strategies](#), which we found to be effective.



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THE EXPERIMENT

For this experiment, we created biographies for a mock reporter from a mock news site called The Gazette Star. Participants were asked to read:

- A biography with a personal image and personal details,
- A biography with a professional image and personal details,
- A biography with a personal image and no personal details,
- A biography with a professional image and no personal details, or
- No biography at all.

Personal Bio / Personal Image



By Jim Phelps
The Gazette Star Staff Reporter

Jim Phelps is a science reporter for The Gazette Star. His coverage of energy and the environment has appeared in the Dallas Morning News, The Atlantic and Newsweek. A Colorado native and life-long Broncos fan, he began his career at the Denver Post, where he was part of a team that won a Pulitzer Prize for their story about the pollution of popular hot springs in Aspen. He graduated with a journalism degree from Vanderbilt University where he served as the editor-in-chief of the student newspaper. His simple pleasures in life include fishing with his wife and two sons and the smell of barbecue on the lakefront after surviving a cold winter.

Professional Bio / Professional Image



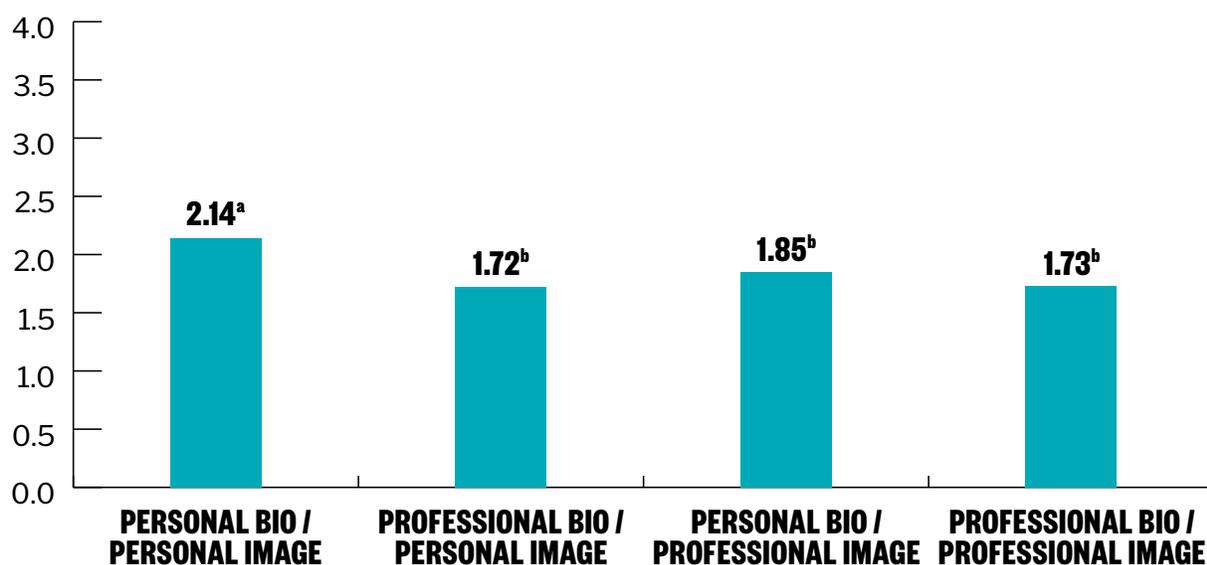
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After reading a version of the biography, participants were asked to read a science article about “superbugs,” or antibiotic-resistant bacteria. The article was accompanied by the same biography that participants had seen previously. Those who were in the control group (no biography) proceeded straight to a version of the article that featured a traditional byline and no picture or other information about the journalist.

Participants who read a biography were asked how well they thought they knew the reporter personally on a scale of 1 (not at all well) to 4 (very well). Readers who saw a biography that contained both a personal photo and personal details about the reporter felt they knew the reporter better than those who saw any other type of biography.¹

RATINGS FOR HOW WELL PARTICIPANTS KNOW THE REPORTER



Data from the Center for Media Engagement

Notes: Means with different superscripts indicate statistically significant differences.

However, participants’ attitudes toward the reporter, the article, and the news organization were unaffected by the presence of a biography or the type of biography.²

There was a slight indication that the professional biography and professional image, compared to no biography, made people less likely to think that the reporter was like them. This difference was not statistically significant, however.³

METHODOLOGY

We recruited 634 participants from TurkPrime, an online platform that draws participants from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. The experiment was embedded in a Qualtrics-based online survey.

We tested for differences using ANOVA. All results were controlled for level of trust in news,⁴ as there were significant differences between the groups in different conditions.⁵ There were no significant differences between conditions for any other demographic factors.

AVERAGE OPINIONS BY BIOGRAPHY CONDITION

	Personal Image + Personal Bio	Personal Image + Professional Bio	Professional Image + Personal Bio	Professional Image + Professional Bio	No Bio
Opinion of reporter’s professionalism ⁶	5.68	5.71	5.53	5.65	5.61
Positive feelings toward The Gazette Star ⁷	5.34	5.23	5.23	5.23	5.20
Positive feelings toward the article ⁸	5.54	5.56	5.57	5.55	5.65
Likelihood to take action ⁹	3.98	3.87	4.01	3.98	4.08
“The article told the whole story.” ¹⁰	5.28	5.31	5.06	5.32	5.46
“The reporter who wrote this article is like me.” ¹¹	4.11	3.92	4.04	3.74	4.27

Data from the Center for Media Engagement

Notes: Participants were asked to rate the statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree/extremely unlikely) to 7 (strongly agree/extremely likely).

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

n = 634

Gender

Male	59.8%
Female	40.2

Race/Ethnicity

White	74.8%
Black/African American	9.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	5.1
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	5.9
Other/Multiracial	4.6

Age

18-29	31.3%
30-49	55.8
50-64	11.4
>64	1.6

Education

High school or less	32.8%
Associate's	15.7
College degree or more	51.6

Household Income

Less than \$30,000 annually	21.8%
\$30,001 to \$50,000 annually	29.0
\$50,001 to \$75,000 annually	23.9
\$75,001 or more annually	25.3

Political Affiliation

Democrat	49.8%
Republican	19.4
Independent	28.6
Other	2.2

¹We tested for differences using ANOVA. There was a significant effect of condition $F(3, 503) = 6.18, p > .05$. Post-hoc comparisons show significant differences between those who saw a personal biography with a personal image and any other group that saw a biography.

²Post-hoc power analyses indicate that with a sample of this size, we would be able to detect differences with an effect size of 0.14 or greater with power of 0.8. Effects sizes of 0.10 are considered small, 0.25 considered medium, and 0.40 considered large.

³ ANOVA produced a marginally significant difference between conditions $F(4, 632) = 2.37, p=0.52$. Post-hoc tests showed a significant difference between the participants who saw a professional biography and professional photo and those who saw no biography at all ($p < 0.05$).

⁴Trust in news was calculated by averaging participants' ratings of two statements on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale: "I think you can trust most news most of the time" and "I think I can trust most of the news that I consume most of the time." Responses to the two statements were highly correlated, $r = .853, p < .001$.

⁵If we run the analysis without controlling for trust in news, there is only one change in the results: there is no longer a significant difference in the ratings of how well participants felt like they knew the reporter between the group who saw a personal biography and personal photo and the group who saw a personal biography and professional photo. No other results in this report change.

⁶On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), participants were asked to rate three statements: "The Gazette Star reporter carefully researched this article," "The author of this article was well-qualified to write it" and "The Gazette Star reporter has high expectations for their reporting." We combined the ratings into a single variable to test for differences (Cronbach's alpha: 0.801). We tested for differences using ANOVA. There was no significant effect of condition $F(4, 633) = 0.645, p > .05$.

⁷On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), participants were asked to rate a series of statements related to The Gazette Star's level of trustworthiness and transparency. We combined these ratings into a single variable to test for differences (Cronbach's alpha: 0.885). We tested for differences using ANOVA. There was no significant effect of condition $F(4, 633) = 0.416, p > .05$.

⁸ On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), participants were asked how well a series of positive adjectives (Full list: interesting, engaging, unbiased, transparent, credible, trustworthy, well-written, informative, accurate) applied to the news article. We combined the positive adjectives into a single variable to test for differences (Cronbach's alpha: 0.881). We tested for differences using ANOVA. There was no significant effect of condition $F(4, 633) = 0.380, p > .05$.

⁹On a scale of 1 (extremely unlikely) to 7 (extremely likely), participants were asked to rate how likely they were to take certain actions after reading the article, including following the journalist on social media, reading more articles from The Gazette Star and talking to others about the article. We combined these ratings into a single variable to test for differences (Cronbach's alpha: 0.883). We tested for differences using ANOVA. There was no significant effect of condition $F(4, 633) = 0.343, p > .05$.

¹⁰We tested for differences using ANOVA. There was no significant effect of condition $F(4, 632) = 1.88, p > .05$.

¹¹ See footnote ³.