



GAINING TRUST IN TV NEWS

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SUMMARY

The Center for Media Engagement examined how TV news stations can increase trust by including certain elements in a story. The results of our focus groups suggest that news stations should:

- Explain why the story is being done and make it clear why the explanation is being provided.
- Encourage audience participation or provide additional resources at the conclusion of the story.
- Keep these trust items brief and to the point.
- Be cautious of describing stories as exclusive because viewers may not value that.

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THE PROBLEM

News organizations are facing persistent issues with audience trust.¹ Our [research](#) shows that one way to build trust is to provide information next to the story text about how and why a story was done,² although this [approach](#) did not always work.³ Another [study](#) showed that trust increased if stories included a series of *trust elements* – such as a reporter’s photograph and bio, story labels, and links to information about news outlets’ policies on ethics, diversity, and corrections.⁴

This project tackles the issue of trust in a new way and aims to give newsrooms tools to increase audience trust. We used four focus groups to examine how TV news audiences perceived three trust items:

- An introduction that described how and why the story was reported
- Information that encouraged audience participation or provided resources at the end of the story
- A description of the station’s overall mission for the story, provided in the middle of the report. For example, explaining that the station covered a story about a police officer’s arrest because he is in a position of power and authority in the community.

For this study, we partnered with [Trusting News](#) and [WCPO 9](#), the ABC affiliate in Cincinnati, Ohio. WCPO 9 provided two news clips from past broadcasts and created a new version of each story that included three trust items. Focus group participants watched both sets of clips and discussed them at length.

KEY FINDINGS

- Participants generally preferred the news clips that contained trust items, but they often could not specify why the stories were different. They described the clips as “more personal” or as providing “more facts” or “more context” and saw them as generally more complete.
- Overall, participants preferred two of the trust items:
 - An introduction explaining why the story was being done.
 - An invitation for audience participation or explanation of where to get additional resources at the end of the story.
- Reactions were less universally positive to a trust item in the middle of the story that explained the general news mission in regard to the story. Most participants liked this item, but some were confused about why it was necessary.

- A minority of participants preferred the stories without trust items, raising concerns that these items “added extra fluff.”
- Participants had strong negative reactions to a news clip that started by saying the story was exclusive. This statement was in a news clip that did not include trust items.

SOLUTIONS FOR NEWSROOMS

Based on the focus groups findings, we recommend that news stations:

- Explain why the story is being done and make it clear why the explanation is being provided.
- Encourage audience participation at the conclusion of the story.
- Keep trust items brief and to the point, so they do not seem to unnecessarily lengthen the story.
- Be cautious of describing stories as exclusive because viewers may not value that.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Four focus groups were conducted in Cincinnati, Ohio. A total of 19 participants watched two versions of two WCPO 9 news stories. First they watched the version as it had originally aired. Then they watched the version with trust items added to it. The stories, described below, were chosen because they were typical of news stories the station aired and were expected to have high viewer interest.

- **The cliff effect:** This news clip focused on workers’ experiences when they get a small raise that makes them ineligible for government benefits because they now make too much money to qualify. This is known as the “cliff effect.”
- **Police officer arrested:** This news clip detailed the arrest of a local patrolman who was accused of loading a shotgun while intoxicated and making threats against his wife and her boyfriend while off duty.

After viewing the news clips, focus group participants discussed their general impressions of the two versions of each story. Then they viewed the clips again and focused on the specific trust items. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym that is used here, accompanied by their actual ages.

Create personal connection

Across the four focus groups, participants noted that the news clips with trust items seemed more complete and relatable. Several participants used phrases such as “personal connection” to describe why they preferred these versions of the clips, even though they could not immediately identify what was different about them.

“The second video [with the trust items] was, I think, a lot better,” explained Anthony, 35, after watching the cliff effect stories. “... It made more sense to me and since there is like that personal connection I could see how it could possibly affect my life if I would ever go through that. ... I guess in the first one I felt a lot more disassociated with it, and the second one, yeah, I could feel better what she’s feeling.”

Meghan, 63, saw a similar distinction between the two versions of the police officer story. “The second story [with the trust items] was just so much more expanded than the first story,” she said. “The first story was very short. It was just about the police officer. The second story was the big expansion, and it explained why they were covering the domestic abuse with the police officer. And it gave a lot of resources for people to go [to]. It really expanded into personal, individuals’ experience with domestic abuse and reached out to them so that they could get some help if they felt that they were in a similar situation.”

Encourage audience participation

With few exceptions, participants really appreciated the trust item at the end of stories that encouraged audience participation. The cliff effect story provided an email address and phone number for the station, so people could let the station know about community programs or events. The police officer story provided viewers with a domestic abuse hotline number. In both cases, participants felt this addition improved the story, and, in some cases, made them trust the station more.

Cardi, 23, expressed this viewpoint about the cliff effect story: “I like that they – at the end of the second video – they opened it up kind of to the community. Hey, what do you want to know about? We’re not going to just keep telling you or shoving information down your [throat]. Tell us what we want – what you want to know about?”

Multiple participants noted that the domestic violence hotline number was helpful for the police officer story, and it made them feel they trusted WCPO more.

“I think I’m more likely to trust the station when they’re putting out the resources and the domestic abuse hotline because it seems like they more genuinely are caring about their viewers,” explained Anne, 27. “Like if somebody was going through domestic abuse and needed that hotline number, so in my mind that makes them more trustworthy because they’re showing that they care about who’s watching.”

Introduce coverage

Most participants valued the trust item near the start of the news stories that explained why the station covered certain aspects of the story the way it did – although a few people felt it was obvious and unnecessary. In the cliff effect story, the introduction with the trust element explained that it was a “story about local people sharing their personal experiences to help others.” The other version began with “All right, we have a story you will only see on 9.” For the police officer story, the trust item at the beginning explained that the threats the officer was accused of making were against his wife and her boyfriend. The introduction for the other version noted the officer was arrested for domestic violence, but did not include the other details.

Almost universally, participants disliked the station discussing exclusivity in the police officer story without trust items. In fact, the dislike for the exclusivity statement was so strong that some people seemed to prefer the version with trust items just because it did not include the mention of exclusivity.

A comment by Jackie was typical of this viewpoint: “I don’t need to know it’s exclusive. I don’t need to know that it’s only on 9 or whatever, because ... somebody else is covering it somewhere. And again, it doesn’t matter to me whether you’re telling me it’s exclusive to you. I’m not switching news broadcasts because you’re telling me you have an exclusive story.”

With the police story, people seemed to prefer the introduction with the trust items because it explained essential details of the story sooner. This seemed to help them understand why the station was doing the story, although some noted that this information just made the story longer – not stronger.

Anthony noted that the additional details of the crime at the start of the version with the trust items made the story come across as unbiased. “Initial reaction, I thought the first one [without trust items] was kind of like loaded against the officer,” he said. “They just said that he loaded a shotgun while he was, whatever, intoxicated. Didn’t really explain anything else. Second one explained why he loaded the shotgun, so it just gave more context to the story.”

Explain mission

Participants were more conflicted over the trust item that was added midway through the story and described the station's mission for the story. For the cliff effect story, this included a reporter voice-over that started with "At WCPO, we work to gather the most complete information available about the issues impacting our communities." In the police officer story, the statement explained that the station was covering the story because it involved a "police officer, someone who has power and authority in our community."

People who liked these explainers saw them as a way for the station to explain why they were doing the story. Robin noted that this part of the story made her feel like WCPO cares about her community. "For me, it made it feel like they were talking specifically to me. Like, 'Hey, I want you to know what's going on. I want you to know what happened in this story, and here are the facts,'" she said.

Similarly, Anthony noted the explanation in the police story would make him trust the station more. "They're hitting all the bases," he said. "They're explaining why – they clearly state their mission. Clearly state the reason for the news story, and all those things are kind of like trying to build rapport with the person that are the audience. So yeah, I would definitely trust them more and would watch them more."

However, others found these parts of the news clips odd or atypical of what they expect from broadcast news.

Travis, 31, for example, did not like the mission explainer in the cliff effect story. "Yeah, I noticed it and ... my immediate thought was it's a shame that they're taking the focus away from the actual story and now putting it on themselves, [a] way to inflate yourself there. It was just that immediate thought – they're inflating themselves versus just focusing on the story," he said.

No "extra fluff"

The minority of participants who preferred the versions of the stories without the trust items explained that the trust versions seemed to add unnecessary information. They questioned why the information was included or questioned the station's motives.

"I liked the first one better [without the trust items]," noted Jackie, 48, regarding the cliff effect story. "... I don't want all the extra kind of fluff. ... I thought there was a lot of extra fluff in that second clip." When asked what she meant by "fluff," she defined it as: "all the stuff at the end about go to our website, do this."

Betsy, 59, had similar issues with the version of the police story that contained trust items. She felt the callout at the end explaining how to report domestic violence was unnecessary. “I want just the facts. I don’t want all the emotions and everything else to go with it. That’s up to me to decide on how I should interpret it. But the second news clip is to incite outrage,” she said.

METHODOLOGY

This project was funded by [Trusting News](#), with support from [Democracy Fund](#). [Various Views Research](#) conducted the focus groups on April 7, 8, and 10.⁵ Focus groups lasted about 90 minutes each and were conducted virtually, video-taped, and transcribed.

Participants had to be at least 18 years old. We sought participants who were diverse in regard to age, gender, education, and race/ethnicity. Our sample of 19 people comprised 11 women and 8 men. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 63.

All participants had at least moderate interest in local news.⁶ Focus group participants reported that on average they watched local TV news occasionally, or about 4 days per week.⁷ They also reported watching WCPO TV news occasionally on average, or about 3.5 days per week.⁸

The focus group moderator asked participants a standardized series of questions about their consumption of TV news and of WCPO TV news. During each focus group, the moderator played two versions of a news story – one with trust items and one without. She then prompted participants to discuss whether they noticed the trust items, what they liked and did not like about specific aspects of each news clip, and their overall assessments. The moderator replayed parts of the clips that contained trust items repeatedly to aid in the discussion.

Participant Demographics

Age	
18-29	6
30-49	7
50-64	6
Gender	
Female	11
Male	8
Race / Ethnicity	
White	14
Black/African American	3
Hispanic/Latina/Latino	2
Party ID	
Democrat	3
Republican	7
Not affiliated	9

Data from the Center for Media Engagement

ENDNOTES

¹ Knight Foundation. (2018, June 20). Perceived accuracy and bias in the news media. <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/perceived-accuracy-and-bias-in-the-news-media>

² Chen, G.M., Curry, A., & Whipple, K.N. (2019, February). Building trust: What works for news organizations. *Center for Media Engagement*. <https://mediaengagement.org/research/building-trust>

³ Murray, C., & Stroud, N.J. (2020, January). Testing behind the story cards. *Center for Media Engagement*. <https://mediaengagement.org/research/behind-the-story-cards/>

⁴ Curry, A., & Stroud, N.J. (2017, December). Trust in online news. *Center for Media Engagement*. <https://mediaengagement.org/research/trust-in-online-news/>

⁵ The University of Texas at Austin's Institutional Review Board approved the project on November 5, 2019.

⁶ Interest in local news was measured on a 1 (*not at all interested*) to 5 (*extremely interested*) scale, and participants were only included in the sample if they answered at least 3 (*moderately interested*).

⁷ Participants rated on a 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*) scale how frequently they watch local TV news with an average of 3.52. They also rated how many days per week they watch local TV news with an average of 4.42 days.

⁸ Participants rated on a 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*) scale how frequently they watch WCPO TV news with an average of 3.21. They also rated how many days per week they watch WCPO TV news with an average of 3.47 days.