

[Trust and verification in an age of misinformation Joy Mayer Interview](#)

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Craig Silverman: Hey everyone welcome to the last week of the course. I hope you've been enjoying it so far. This is our final guest speaker for our course here in week 4 and I'm really thrilled to have Joy Mayer join us. She's coming from Florida is that right Joy?

Joy Mayer: Yep, Sarasota.

Craig Silverman: Sarasota yeah, so you can see she's got more sunshine in her camera than I do from mine in Toronto. And so you join and we're gonna talk about trust. We're gonna talk about transparency. This is something that Joy has been researching and practicing and consulting with newsrooms on for a long time. So Joy thank you so much for joining.

Joy Mayer: You bet. Thanks for having me.

Craig Silverman: So maybe I gave a little overview of you and your work but do you want to just talk about what you do in this realm with trust and transparency. And and and get people up to date on sort of the work you've been doing.

Joy Mayer: Yep, so for about eight years now my work has focused on what we call audience engagement in journalism, which is fundamentally about a relationship. For a few for your few years now, since the beginning of 2016 that work has manifested largely through the trusting news project, which is an effort to demystify how people decide what news to trust and to give journalists strategies to actively earn trust. Realizing that if what we're looking for is a relationship that has to be built on trust and too often journalists feel like if they just put good work out there that people will find it and that the job of journalists ends when you've put together a piece of work you're proud of and you hit publish and you walk away and start to work on the next thing. But really the process of people finding and consuming it has got to come under the umbrella of the journalistic process. So we're working with newsroom partners to test out some ideas for how journalists can better demonstrate credibility.

Craig Silverman: Now in your experience, it sounds like journalists are like “sort of well people should trust me I'm a journalist look I do good work” is that sort of the default you find in a lot of cases.

Joye Mayer: I mean to be to be a little hyperbolic about it yeah. I think that too many of too many journalists just sort of wish that were the case even if they sort of realized that it's not. They wish that they automatically stood out from the rest of the information landscape, which I know you guys have been talking about. The more crowded it gets the more choices people have the harder it is to find the good media important or just ethically done responsibly practiced journalism. And people have to spend their trust somewhere and it's up to journalists to help people figure out where to spend that trust.

Craig Silverman: That's an interesting kind of way of putting it people spending their trust. So in a sense is trust kind of is it a finite resource. Is it the kind of thing there's only so much trust that someone can give out to different outlets in different places.

Joye Mayer: I mean we make decisions. I don't know unless you want to go into debt right. If we're gonna continue the budget ability I guess I'm gonna have places I turn to find out what happened to last season's contestants on the voice, And I'm gonna have places I turn to figure out where I should like tips for traveling with my kids this summer or whatever. Trust is not just about serious journalism it's about for any of my information needs. How do I meet them? how do I figure out who to find? And some of that's gonna be whatever a search engine delivers to me some of it's gonna be what my friends recommend and some of its just gonna be the perception I have of different journalists and news brands.

Craig Silverman: Why do you think journalists tend to not kind of think about demonstrating and necessarily earning trust? Why is it something that in our daily work we don't think about it in a concrete sense as much.

Joye Mayer: Well, where does it show up in a job description. I mean journalists like most people are creatures of habit. So it's like here's what it means to do my job. Whether I'm designing a print newspaper or reporting on crime and courts, or you know working as a web producer, like it's usually about what I'm producing and the process of creating journalistic content. This sort of makes sort of a customer service aspect of how well are we serving people, how do we know for doing it. Sort of a marketing aspect. I'm also working with newsrooms on like telling the story of who you are and what value you offer most newsrooms couldn't even like recite back their missions or I think about the driving values that shape how they decide what to cover and how to cover it and how to distribute information. These are not conversations that a lot of newsrooms have nearly often enough. So even if within the newsroom they can't agree on it they certainly don't have a system in place for real sort of messaging around it.

Craig Silverman: Now it trust is I mean at the core of it it's it's a very human thing right. We we have ways of building trust with people in our lives. How do you how much of that do you think carries over into thinking about institutions or even like sort of professionals? Are those signals the same where do they get a little bit different.

Joye Mayer: A lot of them are the same. I mean if you think about what makes you trust someone in person it's like repeated consistent contact and delivery keeping of promises. Its accessibility like if you continually try to reach someone and they don't get back to you that doesn't build trust and yet all the time I see comment threads where people are asking journalists a specific question and nobody ever answers it. Journalists tend to swoop in and out of people's lives in a way that in and out of communities some of which is necessary but some of which can feel really disrespectful. So I do think there are principles of interpersonal communication that can apply to building trust as an organization.

Craig Silverman: one of the ones that was an obsession for me for a long time was was the the element of kind of human fallibilities. So you know a journalist we make mistakes right. It happens, yes I know it's a terrible thing to have to admit and a lot of times journalist don't want to admit them which is a big problem in itself. One of the things when it came to talking about kind of the ethic of Corrections of why we publicize our mistakes. Why we put them out there and countable for them. That in a lot of ways it's a weird sort of paradox in trust. That's the more we're willing to admit our mistakes and the more open we are about them the more we supposedly are worthy of trust. It's an interesting dynamic huh?

Joye Mayer: Oh, it absolutely is and it's true not just in journalism when I was first studying trust. You know I was looking at other industries and a woman I worked on who was working on patient engagement in the medical industry was talking about how when hospitals post their sort of error rate or whatever they call it that here are the ways we've screwed up that trust went up. I just think admitting vulnerability acknowledging when we're wrong, correcting transparently all of those things make us seem more human and demonstrate that we're willing to hold ourselves publicly accountable.

Craig Silverman: So when you talk to individual reporters and they say: "okay, joy what are the things that I should be doing?" What are some of the core tips you give them?

Joye Mayer: So one of the things that we learned, we did a whole series of interviews with news consumers, like journalists around the country data ,interviews with their own news consumers as part of this project. One of the things they heard over and over are

just some miss assumptions about how journalism works that we too often don't think about or we blow off like is one crazy comment or when realize it's pretty prevalent. So like people think we pay our sources, people think that we really do purposefully suppress some information and highlight other information based on personal bias. People think that we have corporate bosses who are telling us what's a cover based on what will make them more money. People think that we make more money based on what we cover and we're chasing clicks because will personally profit there's a lot about sort of business model. Also just ethics and process that people don't understand. So one of the things we're working on is ways to inject some literacy about how we function actually into our stories. So for example, the Colorado and newspaper in Fort Collins when they reported on a suicide recently as part of this project. On Facebook said "Hey here's our policy for when we covered this, this is a hard story to cover but here's how we decide when to cover public suicides" Or you know here are bringing you this story is the result of attendance at all of these meetings requesting of all of these documents. A little bit about the rigor of the reporting process that even if people aren't that interested in this step-by-step. They they at least get the impression that there was significant work behind it. We're trying to inject these strategies into the journalism not just like have the editor write a column every once a while says "hey let me tell you some things about our ethics," But like where you already have people's attention figure out what are we likely to get blowback about this? What about this are people likely to criticize? and then, try to head that off.

Craig Silverman: Obviously a lot of times the criticism comes and lives on social media. You can sort of see it's something about your story is starting to really resonate in a way you hadn't expected. Do you have advice for journalists on engagement on those terms when there is some blowback that's starting to happen.

Joye Mayer: yeah for sure! I think that one thing journalists often struggle with is not being defensive. Well, first of all they struggle with just ignoring it, and not even responding. So let's just get it on the table that unless you just your audience is so huge that you can't even possibly address the comments, which is a different problem most of us can. So second of all, it's just way too easy to be like no you're wrong. Here's this thing, well if you'd read the story carefully and you just come off like really condescending and defensive. One of the things I work with newsrooms on a lot is a more informal personal voice acknowledging what people are saying figuring out what question they're really asking or what you can address and then answering it with "well here's why we do have a paywall, allow us to explain why we need to get paid for our work or I understand that you are frustrated by the perspective this story takes here's a link to a story we did last week that that brought a different perspective on this very

complicated issue. So just addressing the specific complaints people have in a way that feels like good customer service.

Craig Silverman: You recently, you have a medium publication for a lot of the work that's related to trusting news. There was a case study about USA Today. Could you talk us through that a little bit? Because I thought that was a really interesting example of something that journalists did to counter a kind of a claim that was out there.

Joye Mayer: Yep, so the USA Today Network has journalists all over the country and the sort of mothership in DC but also at papers all over the country. When the spokesperson for the NRA after the parklands shooting made a comment in a speech that journalists love mass shootings. She went on to say, they love them because they you know they increase ratings. This statement really struck a nerve with a lot of journalists and what USA Today did was invited journalists who had covered mass shootings and it was like all of them. It was someone like across like decades of people who'd had to cover these things. People in Orlando, people in Texas and reflecting on what the experience was just sort of anecdotes from people saying this why this is the worst day, this is why this is the hardest thing to do, this is why this person I interviewed will always stick with me, this is why it's so difficult to run toward the tragedy instead of away from it, and it was just a really powerful way to humanize the job of journalism. And remind people that when you complain about the media it's individual people it's people who's go to school and who live near you and it's not that's just like a corporate or overlord. No newsroom I've ever been in has said "yes, higher ratings, yeah"

Craig Silverman: I mean the media thing is something that you talk about a lot. It's pretty, it's really striking you can have a conversation with the person I find where they're very critical of the media and the media this in the media that. But then when you ask them "Well, you know what about I see you subscribe to the local newspaper can you talk to me about the Eternals they are like -oh no, they're not part of the media" They're in my community, the media is like in your core is that kind of thing. There's this interesting it's like a monolithic idea of something.

Joye Mayer: When you talk to people about trust in the media, they almost always jump in their minds to national political coverage, often national TV political coverage. They don't realize that that also includes someone at their local newspaper who covers arts and sports and local education and neighborhood news. I had that exact conversation last week with someone at South by Southwest who said "well, you can't honestly tell me that any of those journalists aren't for one side or the other," and I was like "well, let's set that aside for a minute and let me ask you if you know the people in your

hometown News” and he's like “oh, I know all of them, they do great work.” Okay that's us, that's the media -hi I'm Joey, nice to meet you.

Craig Silverman: A lot of the people that are taking this course are not in the United States and they may be in cases in countries where you know the media is actually very much a propaganda effort tied to a more kind of a third to authoritarian government. I suppose for people in those scenarios. One there's a safety and danger issue overall, but two I'm wondering the idea of them helping distinguish that “no, we're not part of that state apparatus, we're different” that seems like a really important thing as well.

Joye Mayer: Yeah, I mean honestly I think that we're possible being transparent about who we are is really important and you know whoever the sort of ownership is or whatever the driving forces behind coverage, just look for opportunities to explain it to people not hide it. There are definitely times even in the US where people you know they do get directions from corporate bosses or networks like here's the version of the story you're gonna write. I just think that there's a lot of lack of understanding about how the news business functions. I think that no matter what that looks like for us we need to be willing to talk about it.

Craig Silverman: So one of the things that's been happening a lot and related to some of the readings that I've given people for this week. There's a real movement afoot in. It's mostly in news organizations in the US, although a few international ones as well. Where they're really trying to actually put things on their website or actually include data in their stories or present articles in a certain way. They're testing to sort of see like, are these signals that increase trust in our work? We've talked a lot about human behavior and human interaction, which is a really core thing. I'm wondering also when you think about sort of design elements and other features and the effect that they can have in this.

Joye Mayer: Yep, I think that. So you're right that the work that I do is very much about human behavior and empowering individual journalists day to day. I'm so excited though, about some of the larger work the trust project which Sally Lehrman leads. It is doing a lot of fantastic work around the furniture of websites and the signals you can send back to algorithms. One of my favorite examples is the Washington Post labeling of different kinds of content. So they'll say “this is an analysis piece and when you hover it's gonna tell you. What their definition is of that, and over time you're gonna get data about who looks at that and you could at some point survey readers and see if they notice it and how that changes their opinion. I think that one of the things Sally's looking at is inclusion of ethics policies and bio information for reporters and how could you put

together a system of things that lead to being considered a credible verified news source. Then can those signals go back to search engines because honestly I have a 14 year old and he's very interested in in the world and when I send him to find information and he pulls up a list of Google results and I see him kind of searching through like oh where should I learn about gun laws in Florida like okay. What is the process by which you are going to decide, which of these two to trust. It's just not simple even when someone's looking for it. So I think there's a lot we could be doing to to just label content better to teach search engines to rank and describe content differently and to help credible ethically collected information in the public interest stand apart.

Craig Silverman: Yeah yeah for sure. I suppose, I guess that maybe as it seems like that's kind of a good final tip for people. You're a part of an organization, so there's that that organizational structure that you can sometimes take advantage of. But for you as a person as a journalist existing on social media and in other places it's like think about the signals you're giving off. In the way you behave it and the way you present yourself.

Joye Mayer: Yep, and in the questions you ask in your organization because no matter how low you are on the totem pole you can ask your editor when you're having a conversation about how to cover something you can ask your editor I wonder how readers or viewers will know that we had this conversation. Is there a way we can point out that this structure for this rally you know closely follows the structure for the one we covered last month just to show people that we're trying to take a fair approach? There are a lot of things that that that individual journalists can do that I think just build brand trust over time, build trust in individual journalists over time and just really embed this ethic of actively earning trust into the work of journalism.

Craig Silverman: Awesome, well look joy thank you so much for joining us. Thank you for the weather, the work you do. Folks you had links to some of her work in the materials this week and now you got to hear from her live. So thanks again joy.

Joye Mayer: You bet, Thanks Greg.

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