Trust and verification in an age of misinformation Module 4.2

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Hey welcome to the second lesson in week 4. We're going to really dig in now on some concrete things you can do to try and build trust and transparency. Let's take a look at the three things were going to dig it on.

The 1st is showing your work and sharing source material. How to do that? Second is being transparent about methods and limitations in your work. And the third is we're going to talk about collaborating with the audience some good ways of doing that.

The first example I want to give around showing your work is what is now a Pulitzer prize-winning story from the Washington Post. It's a really important serious story. It's talking about allegations against someone who is running for the senate in the United States alleging that he had inappropriate sexuasl encouters with teenage girls. So this is obviously a story that has some legal risk. There's people really stepping forward and until I'm very vulnerable stories. So how you handle it is really important. It's also in the context of a campaign. So people are going to have some suspicions about whoa is this a partisan motivated attack? The Post did a really good job of addressing these things.

This first paragraph I want to highlight here. They talk about one of their key sources and how they sort of tested her story. They say that they had 6 interviews with her. She was consistent all of them. And then they talk about how they confirm some physical details and things that she had described as happening by going out and talking to other people. That's an important piece there.

This next paragraph is really important. They talk about really to those concerns about source motivation. They talk about how none of the women sought out the reporters at The Post. They talked about how The Post came across these rumors in these stories while they are reporting other stuff in Alabama and then went and track this down. They also talked about how the women were reluctant to speak and how they don't know each other. All addressing really important questions. And the last thing to know here is they talked about how the story is based on interviews with more than 30 people.

So you get a sense of them doing a lot of work here. About them testing these stories. Getting independent verification. Talking to lots of people. Really really good job I think of laying this out in just a few paragraphs high up in the story. And so the takeaways I've highlight here is the first is that in doing the story they anticipated and addressed

objections and concerns that people might have had. And they're really clear about that. Second thing is they thought about the key questions that people would have. How did you get this story? What is it based on? What are the motivations of your sources? And they addressed all of those again pretty high up in the story. And the last thing is that they make it clear that they they tested these women stories. They really tried to figure out what the motivations were of them and it also go and get independent confirmation of details. All really important stuff.

When it comes to sharing source material some basic tips I'd say is one you know the web is a great place for hyperlinking you should take advantage of that. You should also credit people it doesn't make you reporting better if you deny people credit for good work they've done. There's a great service called DocumentCloud, that's free. Where you can upload things like PDF another documents. And if you want you can keep them private to start and just be a place to organize your source material. But then once you're ready, you can actually make certain things public and link directly to them from your story.

GitHub is a place where you can upload computer code and if you if your story involves some custom code that was created you could share them on GitHub and help and let people review it. And then the last thing is if you're pointing to videos or things online, embed it, put it there, don't make people work to try and find it.

Alright last thing on showing your source material is what PolitiFact does. This is a fact checking website where they take claims from public figures and then they go and they try to determine whether it was true or false or somewhere in between. And what's highlighted in red here is a list of the sources that they cited in fact checking this claim. So in effect you can go in and fact check their fact checking. They're showing you exactly what they use to make their determination and I think that's a really simple and powerful thing to do.

And talking about limitations of methodology. I want to give you an example of a story I worked on. So Twitter does a thing where it will withhold an account in certain countries. And this is done often in response to laws or complaints about violations of terms of service. But Twitter doesn't actually give a list of all the accounts that are withheld in different country. So for example of country withheld in Germany, if you are outside of Germany you could read the tweets from that account. If you are inside Germany you cannot. And so we we found a way to build a list of accounts that are withheld in different countries around the world. But of course because Twitter doesn't publish a

list, we built our own. We need to really explain how we built our list but also how comprehensive it is or isn't.

So the first thing is very high up in the story, we gave her a brief description of that. But we told readers, if you want the full details go to the end of the story which is where we had this. So you can see there, we have the section how we got the data. And one of the things we admit the limitations of our data. We say for example is unclear how representative this list is of the entire universe of withheld accounts. Twitter wouldn't really give us an estimate of that so we need to make that clear to people. We also talked about how the database is incomplete. And why it might be incomplete. And situation where we might have missed accounts to help people understand that context. We give a step-by-step explanation about our process for identifying these accounts. And the last thing we did is, is in acknowledging that the course is of course incomplete, we invited people to use a Google form to send us accounts that we may have missed. And that way we're collaborating with the audience and we're also kind of saying we know it's incomplete maybe there's something that together we can do about it.

So falling on that theme of collaborating with the audience I want to highlight work that was done by a reporter at the Washington Post. He also won a Pulitzer for this. His name is David Fahrenthold. And one of the things he did in 2016 is he investigated Trump's charity in particular also Trump's charitable donations. Him claiming to have given money to places and did he actually do it. And so what David Fahrenthold found right away is that it was really getting hard to figure out you know where money had flowed and whether donations happen. So he decided to start sharing his work on Twitter. What he did was he made these lists these handwritten list of you know the charities that Trump had said he donated to. He just started calling them and going down them and saying did you ever receive money from Trump?

He put this out there and sort of talked about his work. He invited people to say do you know anything about these donations? Do you know anything that might help my reporting here? And he still doing it today. He still makes lists and share some out and invites people to help him. And he really did get some good leads from people that help him find things that he wasn't able to find himself even though he was making tons and tons of phone calls.

This was actually one of the approaches that was cited by the Pulitzer judges in awarding him the award. I mean it led to a lot of scoops by him and the audience was a huge part of this. Here is a section of an interview with David that was done by the Nieman Journalism Lab. He talks about giving people a way to see what he did. I'm not

trying to conceal anything about what I've tried and I'm open to people's suggestions. If people write to me and say I'm a hack and you miss this thing. I always say tell me more and I'll put it on my list and I'll call those people. You see he's using negative feedback as an opportunity to get more information. I mean I think that's that's great. And you know he he says I just want to be transparent about why I called these groups. And who I called. And what I learned. I'm hoping that people who come in with that degree of distrust, see that and can appreciate it. He's using his his work is diligent work as a as a means to kind of show the people listen I do deserve some trust here.

And just quickly you know this is something that the post editor-in-chief said he said that that this work reimagine investigative reporting. Traditionally Barron said reporters that kept it works secret and guarded until they had developed enough information to publish. Fahrenthold actually opened up his process and asked readers for tips and now they call it the Fahrenthold method. And so this is this is a great thing that you should consider. However I do want to end just like giving you a few cautionary notes here and this is from Joy Mayer who is our our guest speaker this week.

So what are the reasons that you would not want to put information out publicly because we need to think about this. One it could turn out to be false so are you inadvertently spreading misinformation? Second is could it put people in harm's way? This is a really important thing and not just like thinking warzone stuff but also are you opening up private citizens to a huge amount of scrutiny and ridicule? Are you kind of what we call at Buzzfeed putting people on blast. So we do think about if we write about this is this a person who's about to get inundated with potentially loss of abuse and we have to factor that into our decisions. I mean obviously if something is urgent and newsworthy you have to do it. But maybe you can also reach out to them and say hey of course we're writing about this, we want to talk to you. But also making them aware of what they may be in store for. Okay? Does it compromise people's privacy and of course would undo your work by tipping off people or entities to what's coming?

Now in Fahrenhold's case he was obviously tipping of other reporters that he was on this story and looking at it but he didn't worry about that. He didn't worry about people scooping him. It it's really more thinking about are you actually is it an investigation of someone and they're going to actually go and destroy material or evidence as a result of you kind of putting this call out. So that's where you want to think about it.

To summarize some of the great stuff we've gone through here. Think about the questions or objections that you know your audience may have to something and work that into your reporting. Put that into the narrative. Address those things head-on. Make

it easy for people to see sources and understand how you got the story. That could be a list of link like PolitiFact. That could be doing a special section of disclosing stuff like we did on that Twitter story. And the other thing is to think about how you can involve the audience by asking them for information form them. Sharing your process and really engaging in a back-and-forth communication. I really think it's important to think about how journalists are on social media as being social. As not just kind of spewing out links to your work but actually interacting with people, being human. And and the one caution I would kind of say to that is you know the best rule for sharing stuff on social media and keeping that trusted brand is to really think about what you can back up with your reporting and your work. And not going beyond that is a good way to avoid getting yourself into trouble.

Alright so thank you so much for being part of this course. I've got one kind of wrap up video for you with some final thoughts but I hope this useful Thanks.

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