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Hawaii News

'News literacy' can help restore trust in media, editor says

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Posted May 13, 2017

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COURTESY NPR

News outlets must take the lead in working to regain trust, says National Public Radio's public editor, Elizabeth Jensen.

Trust in the media has plummeted in the United States in recent years, but reporters can take steps to win back the confidence of their readers and listeners, according to National Public Radio's public editor, Elizabeth Jensen.

"Numerous polls show that Americans are expressing unprecedented levels of distrust and even dismissal of the media," she said Monday, outlining a range of causes, from technology and social shifts to "just plain errors."

Both news producers and consumers need to do more to ensure that a robust, free press continues to play its vital role in democracy, said Jensen, in town to give the George Chaplin Fellowship in Distinguished Journalism Address, sponsored by the East-West Center and Hawaii Public Radio.

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She cited a [Gallup poll](#) released in September that found just 32 percent of those polled had a "great deal or fair amount" of trust in the media to report the news fully, accurately and fairly. The figure had dropped 8 percentage points in just one year to its lowest point ever. And that was before the November election, which she noted has "brought a whole new round of questions about whether the media can be trusted."

Americans are less trusting of most institutions these days, with just 9 percent expressing "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in Congress, according to [Gallup](#).

As NPR's public representative or ombudsman, Jensen is on the front lines in hearing from listeners, fielding complaints and following up on concerns. She has spent decades as a reporter, covering the news business for outlets including The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and the Wall Street Journal.

Mistrust in the media has been building for decades and reflects societal changes including those unleashed by the internet, "talking heads" rather than reporting, a blurring of the line between opinion and fact, and the financial problems faced by the press. Policy has also played a role, including the 1987 abolition of the Fairness Doctrine, which required radio and television licensees to cover issues of public importance fairly and air contrasting points of view.

Jensen said news organizations also share the blame, having missed the boat on big stories such as the lack of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the likely outcome of the 2016 presidential election. Newspapers have also lost credibility as they sliced

the ranks of copy editors, who traditionally kept errors out of the paper. Newsrooms have been decimated and many have simply shut down.

"The newsroom of one of my alma maters, the Los Angeles Times, has shrunk from more than 1,200 people in 2001 to about 430 today," she said. "That's a huge blow."

Still, she remains optimistic. She pointed to new projects such as an effort by Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia, to launch WikiTribune, a news service drawing on professional journalists and volunteers to deliver free, factual and verifiable articles. "The Trust Project" at Santa Clara University's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics aims to help high-quality journalism "stand out from the chaotic digital crowd."

She called for more investment in "news literacy" so people can better gauge whether the news they are viewing is based in reality and professionally produced. Readers and viewers need to know which stories are produced by journalists who adhere to best practices, including following an ethics code, fact checking, a clear corrections policy and transparency as to funding. One idea that has been thrown out is a sort of "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval."

To rebuild trust, news outlets should do a better job of labeling stories, clearly delineating straight news versus analysis and commentary, said Jensen, who is based in New York. Because so many citizens have no idea the steps that reporters take to verify their work, she advised them to illuminate that to readers.

"Show me your work, not just the answer, as they tell kids in middle-school math classes," she said. "Annotate each statement in your story. Hyperlink it to supporting documents. Where did you get this fact? Or take it a step further and tell us the questions you asked."

"It's tedious, yes. It's antithetical to the more, faster news culture today. It might not work on Twitter, but there are other places where it might work, and my guess is it's worth it."

Consumers need to do their part as well and support high-quality journalism with their subscription dollars and donations, she said.

People tend to trust the news outlets they agree with and distrust the others, she noted. But they also trust their local news outlets more than the national media's coverage of politics and policy. That offers a possible path to rebuild trust: bolstering local journalism.

Foundations are investing in tools to support grass-roots media and investigative journalism. The Center for Cooperative Media is working to strengthen local journalism. NPR is doing the same with statehouse coverage at public radio stations across the country and intends to better integrate that local news-gathering into its report.

Getting it right at all levels is key.

"If one element of rebuilding trust is basic accuracy, then that's a pretty easy fix," Jensen said. "It's a quality control. Get back to basics. Yes, it will cost a little bit more. But what is the cost of lost public trust?"

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