THE TRUST FRAMEWORK

A Guide to Measuring and Building Trust in Information Sharing

Internews

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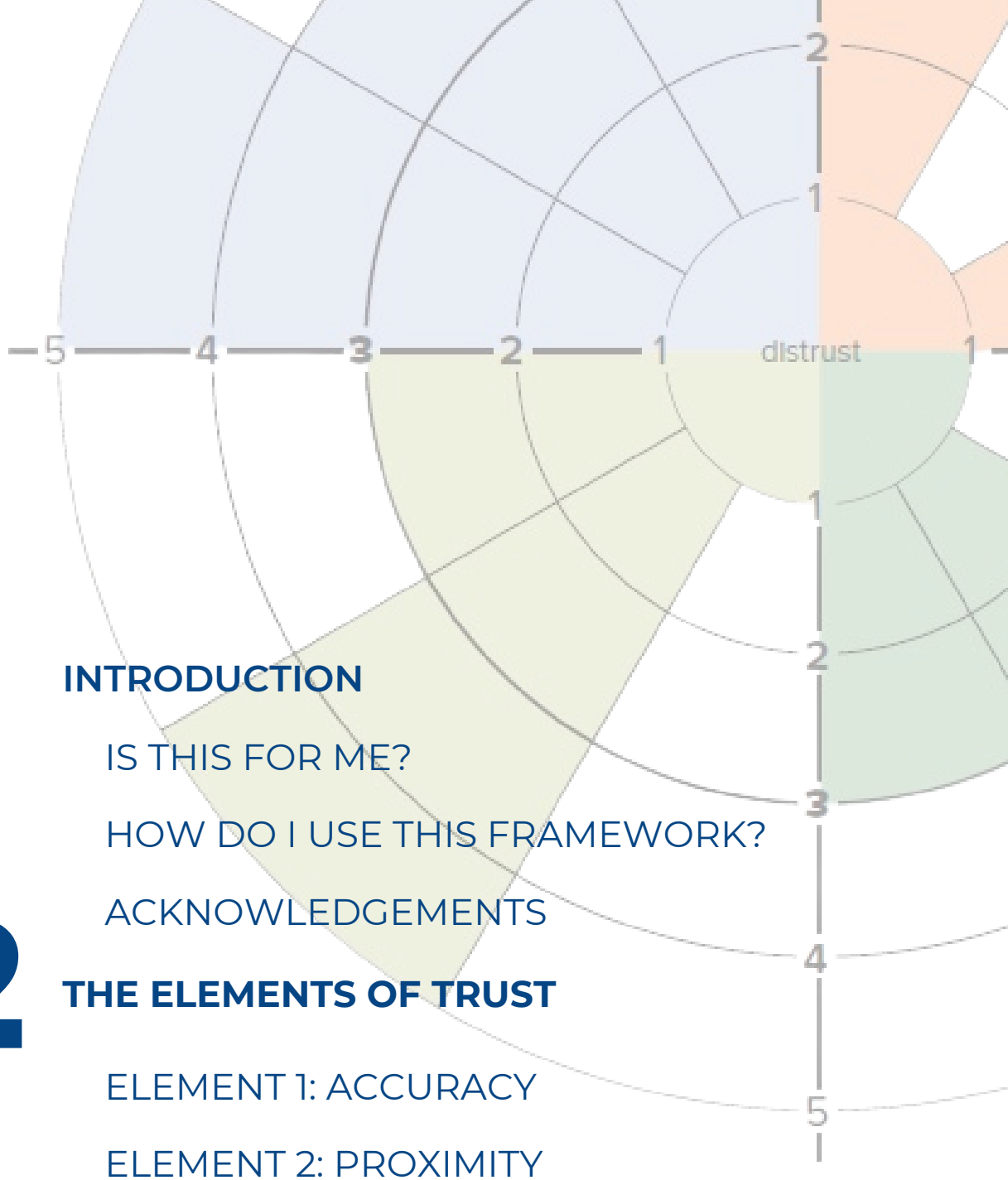

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

At a time where people are doubting experts, distrusting the media, and rejecting facts – trust is big business. In today's ever-evolving information landscape, we find ourselves navigating through a myriad of sources, ranging from blindly trusted fabrications to overlooked gems of reliability, amidst a flood of data coming from professional journalists, communicators, paid influencers, enthusiastic individuals, and bot-farms. The old paradigm that *more* information is the solution to dilute information challenges, is outdated. While it's still important to support the production of locally relevant and reliable information, these efforts will be in vain, if that information is not trusted and therefore rejected or, maybe even worse, ignored.

At Internews, our four decades of global engagement with communities, media, humanitarian responders and other information providers have shown us the transformative power of information. But **information loses its power if it is disregarded, dismissed and ultimately ignored because it originates from a source that is not trusted.** We've come to recognize that trust is not a simple equation of accuracy and authority. It's a dynamic interplay of a multitude of factors, between a multitude of actors, easily lost and yet painstakingly restored, influencing decisions and shaping relationships.

This trust deficit has real world consequences. When people ignore health advice that comes from decades of research and testing. When people no longer have faith in their electoral systems, or when politicians can ignore any report of wrongdoing, it becomes impossible to hold power to account.

Our commitment to empowering information providers in challenging contexts led us to develop the Trust Framework. **This offers a foundational approach to understanding and nurturing trust, recognizing that good intentions or quality information isn't enough to forge meaningful connections with audiences.** This is not a recipe for blind trust. Encouraging blind trust is akin to building a house on shaky foundations—it may seem sturdy at first, but it's susceptible to collapse when faced with challenges. Blind trust can render individuals vulnerable to misinformation, manipulation, and exploitation. Conversely, fostering *informed trust* empowers people to **engage critically with information, encouraging questioning, debate, and the ability to make well-informed decisions autonomously.**

Introduction

In the pages that follow, we explore **four key elements that contribute to trust in an information source: accuracy, proximity, intention and agency.** By understanding the level of trust placed in us, we can identify areas for improvement, ultimately strengthening relationships and fostering a more informed and resilient community.

Is this for me?

Our toolkit is created to empower information providers, understanding the diverse forms they may take. Some guiding examples are:

- Journalists, broadcasters and media organisations
- Civil Society and community leaders
- Humanitarian aid providers and other emergency service providers
- Health workers and service providers
- Individual experts or influencers (e.g., scientists, journalists, bloggers)
- Teachers, educators and academic institutions
- Religious organizations
- Government agencies

This framework can be used as a guide by any individual or group that wants to explore their practices and the role they play in building trust.

How do I use this Framework?

This framework serves as the starting point for your exploration into understanding how your approaches may either bolster or diminish the trust communities place in your information. Within the following pages, we will delve into the four key elements that play pivotal roles in fostering trust in information provision. Through this exploration, we aim to equip you with insights and strategies to **cultivate stronger bonds of trust with your audience, paving the way for more meaningful and impactful engagement.**

We hope this framework will contribute to move journalists, public health, humanitarian aid and other information practitioners towards a more sophisticated understanding of what drives and solidifies trust, and the practical steps we can take to nurture trust in our work.

This introductory information may be enough for your purposes. You may choose to use this framework to inspire a self-reflection into your practices or perhaps incorporate it into a tabletop exercise with your teams. Or you may use the framework to design opportunities for your *audience* to play a role in assessing your performance on various elements. Ideally you do both - ask your audience how they perceive you, and use this "mirror" to critically evaluate your current or future approaches.

However you choose to integrate these concepts, we urge you to view them as a gauge of progress measured over time. Your initial assessment, approached with sincerity, may provoke discomfort, but we encourage you to regard it as a roadmap rather than a report card. **No information provider can expect perfection on every element—it's simply unattainable and not the aim.** Consider your score as an opportunity to embark on small, practical steps toward refining the way you gather, disseminate, and interact with information in your communities, gradually cultivating deeper and more trusting relationships over time.

Want more help? Internews has developed a set of related survey and assessment tools influences by the Trust Framework Approach. If you are interested in accessing these tools, collaborating on problem solving, or discussing these approaches further, please contact **info@internews.org**.

Internews

Acknowledgements

The Internews Trust Framework was developed by Stijn Aelbers in collaboration with Dareen Al-Khoury and the Internews Rooted in Trust-project team across ten different countries. Internews would like to extend their appreciation to all those who contributed to the guidelines.

When we started working on trust, one of the key-reports was the Trust Barometer by global communications firm Edelman. But rather than focusing on increased or decreased levels of trust, we needed to understand better "why" people trust certain sources – or not, at a certain moment in time, rather than over a certain amount of time. This to inform project design or provide the right support to information providers, as this would also allow us to do something about it, rather than just monitor it.

More research, tools and frameworks were circulating at the time within the private sector, in particular among public relations and reputation management professionals. While the goals and values of the private sector are quite different from media and non-profit work, the "trust equation" by Trusted Partners stood out, as it was one of the few that included "self-interest" as a core element, as such turning the mirror on the information provider and the inherent tension between good intentions and poor implementation. This insight meant that from an early stage, we wanted to avoid creating a finite "score", but preferred to map out what were at times shifting and competing priorities.

A final important insight, was borrowed from the Doughnut Economy - model, developed by Kate Raworth. She explains that an economy can be too small to feed/support enough people, but crucially, it can also overshoot its goals, by growing too much and in the process, go beyond what our planet can support. One could argue that the same is true for trust: one needs a minimum of trust to spur a willingness to listen, to accept a basic set of facts to have a conversation, and be able to speak of a "community" or society. But one can also overshoot and be misguided in thinking that the ultimate goal is total and complete trust, or a community that does not question, think critically or continually push information providers to nurture that trusting relationship through continued high standards.

Acknowledgements

Much of the development occurred in collaboration with Internews' The Rooted in Trust project, which provided an opportunity to dig a bit deeper and contrast and compare dynamics in communities across more than 10 countries and contexts. The project was designed to provide locally relevant and reliable information as an alternative for misinformation circulating during the COVID-19 pandemic. It built local networks of community-based organisations, local media, humanitarian agencies, and experts to collect community concerns, questions, and criticism, identify and increase access to preferred communication channels and create locally relevant and reliable information in return.

This set-up allowed us to develop a new framework, within the community, together with local experts, that would not just allow us to measure which information providers are trusted, but also help to understand why or why it is not the case. It also generated insights on what could be done to improve trust and as such, make information and services more likely to be used and acted upon. With Focus Group Discussions, Key informant Interviews, data analysis of the ongoing "rumour tracking" activities within the project, a few themes emerged from these exercises that seemed to be recurrent and relevant, regardless of context we were working in, or the topics that were discussed.

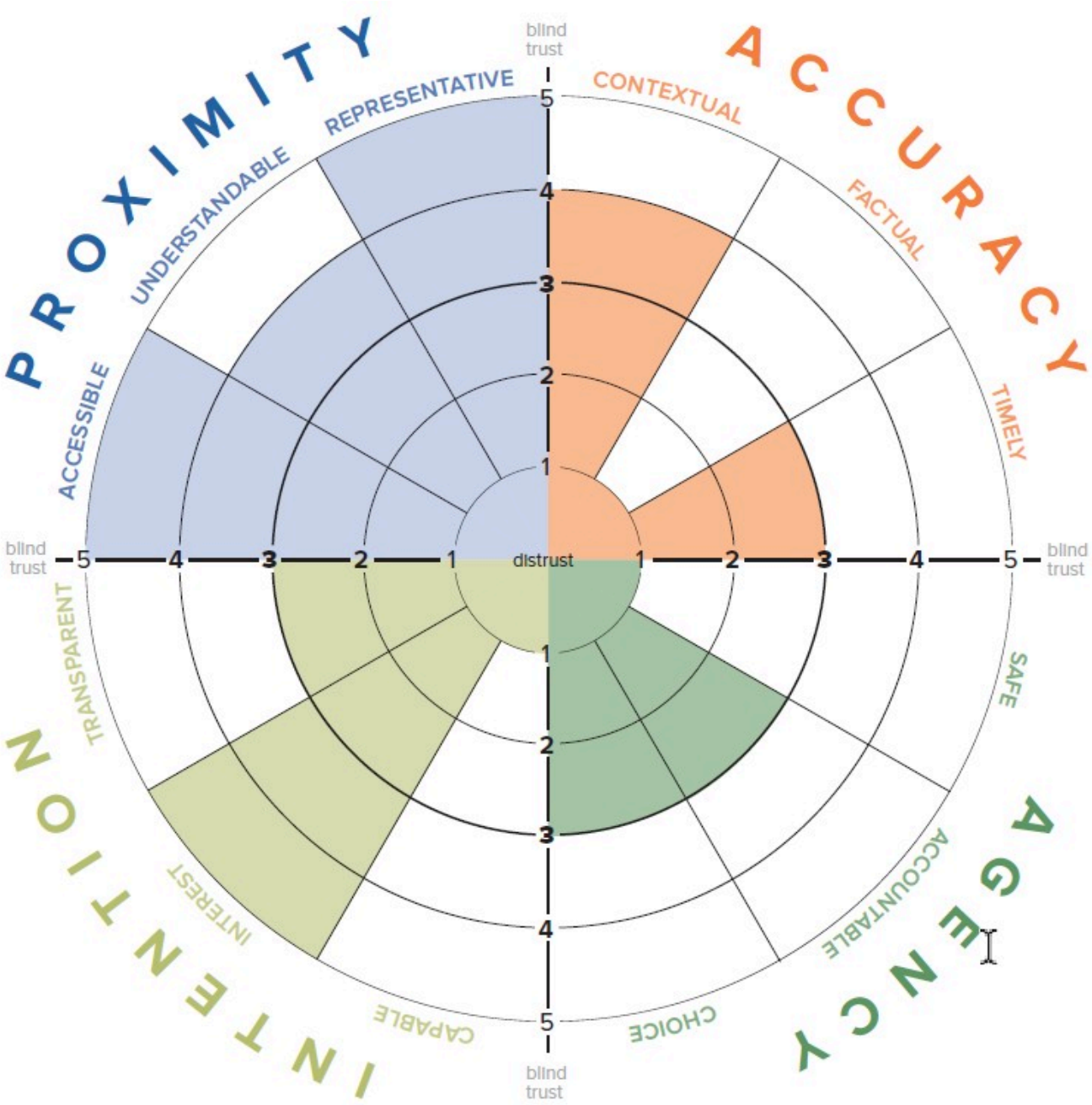
For feedback or suggestions for the improvement of these guidelines, please contact the Internews Humanitarian Team through **info@internews.org**

CHAPTER 2

ELEMENTS OF TRUST

The Elements of trust

The Internews Trust Framework provides a lens that helps to understand not just if trust is there, but more importantly why some information providers might have more, or less trust. By breaking it down into 4 elements, each with 3 components, it allows to assess, monitor, design and evaluate with an eye to enable, increase, or nurture trust.

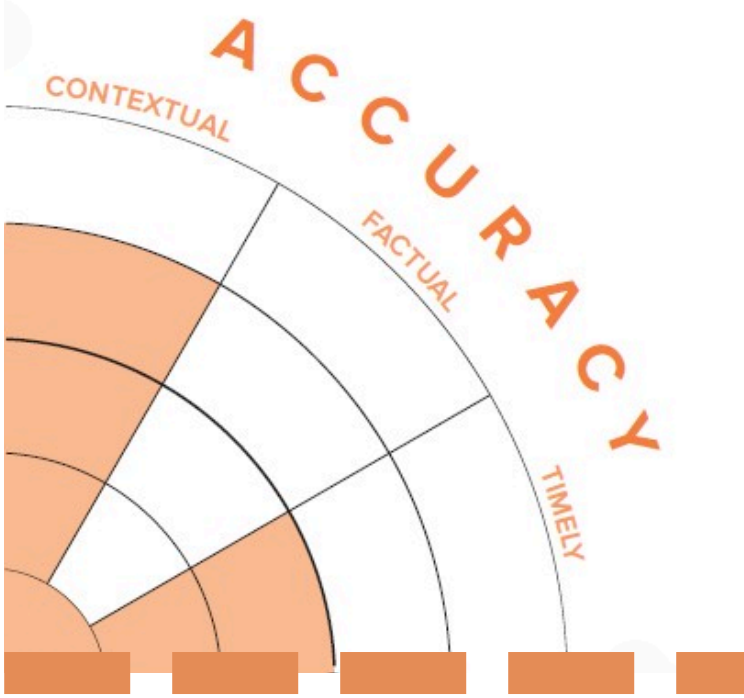


Element 1: Accuracy

While there's often an important emphasis on providing information that is factually correct, less attention is given to the idea that while information might be factually correct, it can still be irrelevant to people in a certain context, at a certain time. As a result, it may feel "out of touch" with their needs and realities. This can create a perception similar to factual inaccuracies, suggesting that the information provider lacks understanding and may not be as knowledgeable as they believe themselves to be.

There are three components that contribute to achieving accuracy:

- Contextual
- Factual
- Timely



Contextual

Information can be factual, but irrelevant to the audience's interests or needs. Being in tune with your audience's needs, information priorities and gaps is important to ensure the information you provide is locally relevant and useful in their lives. There are many ways of doing this, from audience research, to call-in radio shows or simply being actively involved in community spaces and discussions.

Social media has also provided a lot more opportunities to listen and engage with your audience in a continual way, both through direct two-way communication, or social media listening or analysis. Regardless of the approach you choose, the goal is to grasp the diversity of perspectives and priorities within your audience, while also identifying unifying issues that resonate with everyone.

Is it CONTEXTUAL?

Below, find example questions to aid in self-assessing the information you share.

- Does it include local historical context, previous experiences?
- Is it relevant in this context?
- Does it include your audience perspectives?

This will ensure information is locally relevant, useful, and addressing the real needs of your audience or the communities you are working in. Providing information that is out of touch with people's realities, may come across as uninformed and tone-deaf, which undermines the credibility of the otherwise factual information you provide.

Factual

Factual accuracy serves as the foundation of all trustworthy information provision. It's essential to have a shared body of knowledge gathered through transparent processes, with checks and double-checks that are verifiable by anyone.

Because consensus on some issues might shift and evolve, you can further contribute to accuracy when you are transparent about information gaps (I.e., be clear about what is known and what is not yet known), what is still uncertain or developing and what information might change. By emphasizing the process, and presenting information with the caveat that it represents the *current* understanding, you can avoid appearing inconsistent or being labeled as "wrong" or "deceptive" when new information emerges later on. This approach helps maintain trust and credibility with your audience.

Is it FACTUAL?

Below, find example questions to aid in self-assessing the information you share.

- Does it include more than one source?
- Does it include first-hand accounts or observations?
- Does it include the "unknowns"?

Timely

Timeliness is a crucial aspect of accuracy when sharing information. It can refer to the information itself - whether it's up to date - or the speed of communication, such as how quickly organizations respond to questions or update information in response to changes in the situation or in policies?).

Is it TIMELY?

Below, find example questions to aid in self-assessing the information you share.

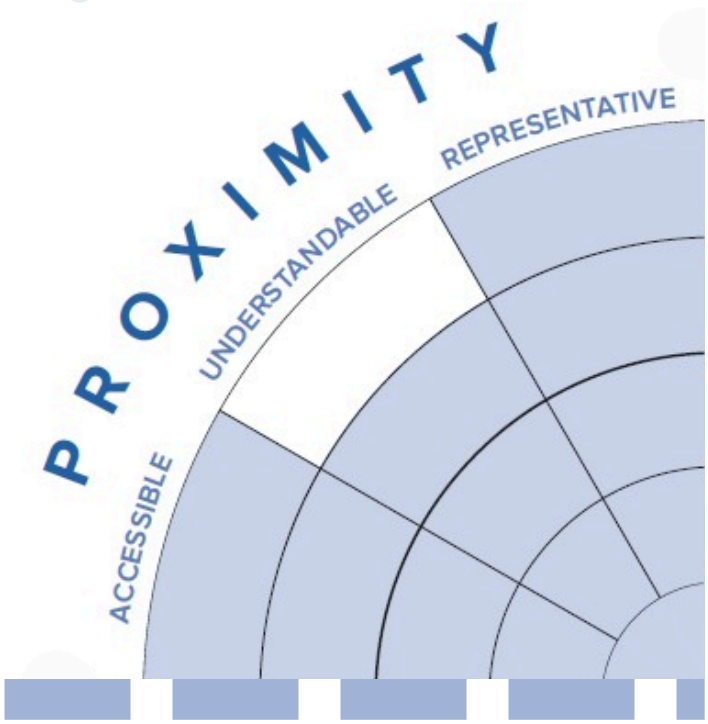
- Is the information based on community priorities?
- Does the information include a range of perspectives?
- Are you able to respond to urgent information needs?

The editorial process set up to create, approve and release content can have a big impact on the type of information available and the way that is shared. If editorial and information sharing processes are not responsive to the communities needs, it can result in information being shared that is outdated or no longer relevant.

A lengthy editorial process may also result in a conservative selection of topics, focusing on institutional and generic content to minimize the risk of information becoming outdated too quickly. Exceptions are of course investigative journalism that ideally can set the news-agenda and as such, create "momentum".

Element 2: Proximity

There is a clear physical aspect to proximity, living locally and being part of a community, speaking their language, being visible and being approachable. But proximity also has psychological aspects, like feeling close to the people who are sharing information with you, whether they be on a screen, talking to you on the radio or maybe standing right in front of you.



Someone can also feel close, without being physically close. Maybe you recognize yourself in them and feel they understand your experience or identity. Or maybe they speak not just a language you understand, but the language you are most comfortable using to express yourself or talk about personal or sensitive topics.

There are three components that contribute to achieving proximity:

- Accessible
- Understandable
- Representative

Accessible

Simply put, proximity is about being or feeling close. Proximity is achieved when the audience or community members sense the physical or virtual presence of the organisation or information provider and feel they can easily reach and communicate with them. This could mean, for example, they feel it is easy to find a pathway to make suggestions or complaints, to give a tip-off for a story or to discuss the priorities of the organisation either face to face, or via a phone line or reliably responsive emails or online chats.

Is it ACCESSIBLE?

Below, find example questions to aid in self-assessing the information you share.

- How much time do you spend engaging with your audience/ community?
- Do you have different options for audience interaction?
- How quickly do you respond to feedback, questions and criticism?

Proximity to, and therefore trust in, such entities is enhanced through accessibility to one-on-one communication channels to interact with these organizations, group activities, and the potential to engage in public.

Understandable

Language is an important indicator of proximity, of how "close" information may feel to the audience. When information is shared in the **preferred language of the target audience,** it enhances understanding, fosters familiarity, and promotes two-way conversations.

This extends beyond merely choosing a language that is easy to understand, it is about using the language that encourages people to feel comfortable to talk and share their perspectives. For example, it may be choosing between using a lingua franca or national language and choosing a local dialect or mother tongue that fosters a connection to someone's roots and culture. However, it's important to note that it may not be possible to communicate using every individual community members preferred language. There may be instances where communicating in a unifying language is chosen to bridge divides within a community, or to communicate to a larger audience.

Is it UNDERSTANDABLE?

Below, find example questions to aid in self-assessing the information you share.

- Are you communicating in the preferred language of your audience?
- Have you avoided or explained technical jargon & complex terms?
- Is your information inclusive of diverse needs?

Representative

For anyone to feel comfortable approaching someone, it helps to recognize themselves in their counterpart: will they understand where I'm coming from, are they like me? Seeing someone who is "like you" reduces the distance you feel you must bridge, when talking with that person. This can relate to religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, physical abilities, or more abstract things like shared experiences, like being a migrant, etc. This could include, for instance, prioritising choosing staff who are hired from that local area, or a diverse range of staff that may reflect the diversity in your audience or community.

Is it REPRESENTATIVE?

Below, find example questions to aid in self-assessing the information you share.

- How representative is your team of your audience?
- Is all information respectful of different religions/ ethnicities/ socio-economic backgrounds?
- How do you engage different communities in the decision-making processes of your organisation?

Element 3: Agency

"Agency" is the simple notion that everyone should be free to make their own decisions. While most people might agree, in reality a lot of interventions and communication seems to assume that knowledge sits solely with institutions and experts. Some information providers can have a tendency to believe that because they act with good intentions, this allows for them to decide what is needed on behalf of others. They then present information as final, directive, or top-down, without explanation or presenting a diverse range of options.

To avoid framing the audience as passive recipients of information, agency also implies that the information shared enhances people's ability to make informed and autonomous decisions.

There are three components that contribute to achieving agency:

- Safe
- Accountable
- Choice

Safe

Collecting data to understand our target communities has never been easier, leading more and more organisations to conduct surveys, assessments, and other ways of understanding their audience, clients, or users. While there might often be disclaimers, written in small print that nobody reads, people often are often unaware of what data they are sharing, or what is happening with that data afterwards. In a humanitarian context

Is it SAFE?

Below, find example questions to aid in self-assessing the information you share.

- What personal details do you collect? Can you keep it safe?
- How safe are the environments you use for audience participation (social media, real-world events ...)?
- Are you moderating harmful speech in your online spaces?

particularly, they might also feel they have no choice but to "consent" to share personal information in order to access lifesaving services due to lack of alternatives. Therefore, it is important that organizations think carefully about the data they collect and provide clear information to the community about their rights, data processes and options.

Accountable

To be credible, also means to be accountable. Mistakes happen, and attempting to hide them does not make one look more trustworthy. Being open and transparent about errors, limitations, or misunderstandings demonstrates trust in your audience's ability to make informed judgments about your work. But there is more: treating people as important collaborators when developing information also creates a space for information providers to encourage their audience to contribute, scrutinise, and offer their perspectives and insights. This shifts the dynamic from information providers as the ones who "have" information sharing with those who don't, to recognizing information and knowledge as resources generated by and accessible to all members and actors within the community.

Is it ACCOUNTABLE?

Below, find example questions to aid in self-assessing the information you share.

- Do you actively ask for input & scrutiny of your information?
- Do you publicly correct mistakes?
- Do you provide safe channels for people to share criticism of powerful actors?

Choice

Is the information provided as directive, final and unquestionable? Or does it communicate a range of different options, and acknowledge , various equally reliable sources that may provide different perspectives? Is it framed as "the truth" as if there is only one selection of facts possible, or does it present facts, but emphasises its particular limitations, including possible different interpretations? Does it acknowledge that different people might have different perspectives and are juggling different priorities? Ignoring these nuances and creating single-issue, top-down communication strategies, risks patronizing people, does not encourage informed and critical thinking skills and risks building up a resistance to the information you provide.

Is there CHOICE?

Below, find example questions to aid in self-assessing the information you share.

- Do you point towards other reliable information sources?
- Do you respect and acknowledge people's priorities and preferences, even when they are not yours?
- Do you support and advocate for the presence of other independent information providers?

Element 4: Intention

Intention is the fourth trust parameter. At an individual level, people may be influenced by the opinions of other individuals, such as family members, friends, or religious and community leaders, as people believe such figures care about their best interests. Similarly, social media influencers, field experts, and journalists can also sway community opinions. This principle of intention extends to institutions as well. Transparency, and honesty about interests, plans, agendas, and activities is vital. Maintaining open communication, involving stakeholders in decision making, setting clear and deliverable goals, discussing assessments and findings and addressing emerging issues identified by the community or local partners - all guided by clear ethical values - can help reinforce a long-lasting and trust-based relationship.

There are three components that contribute to achieving intention:

- Capable
- Interest
- Transparent

Capable

Even with good intentions, practical constraints can limit what can be achieved. These limitations can be financial or contextual (geography, legal limitations, …) or it can be a deliberately chosen, like having a deliberate editorial focus on particular group within the community. These factors can influence the quantity, frequency, or kind of

Are you CAPABLE?

Below, find example questions to aid in self-assessing the information you share.

- Do you have the resources to deliver on your ambitions?
- Have you clearly communicated your editorial scope & principles?
- Do you have access to experts and expertise to respond to audience questions and concerns?

content you produce or choose to prioritize. This may not always be clear to the audience and could be perceived as a lack of capability or credibility. Especially at a time of crisis, these limitations might create frustration and undermine the trust people have in the information provided.

Interest

What are your COMMITMENTS?

Below, find example questions to aid in self-assessing the information you share.

- Are you clear about what your scope is - and is not? (e.g. Geographically or thematically)
- How involved is the community in deciding/designing/adapting editorial agenda?
- How well is your editorial independence protected from external or internal influence?

Information is particularly prone to be assessed based on the perceived interests of the one providing it. These reasons could be financial, political, or downright selfish, but when people are suspicious about these intentions, they are unlikely to believe, share or act upon the information provided.

To avoid assumptions, unfounded accusations, or misconceptions, it is important that affiliations, funding, and ownership are clearly communicated. And when decisions are communicated, it helps not just to share the conclusions, but also what criteria were used, who was involved in the process and what the goals and limitations are that informed these decisions.

Transparent

While privacy and data protection is important, it is equally important to be transparent about all of the above: what the incentives are (like how impact is measured), what the scope and limitations are of an organization or project (including the editorial guidelines), but also affiliations, how decisions are being made, what is happening with the data collected and how people can reach out and hold the organization to account.

Is it TRANSPARENT?

Below, find example questions to aid in self-assessing the information you share.

- Are you clear about your limitations?
- Does the audience know who is involved in the editorial process?
- Does the audience know who you are sharing information/data with?

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

Trust is a dynamic force, shaped by countless factors and evolving over time. Through this framework, we've offered a pathway to measure trust, recognizing its complexities and nuances. At the same time, it is an effort to demystify trust as something you almost have no control over. While there might always be contextual challenges and tough choices and compromises to be made, using this framework, you can be considerate about the impact of those choices and try to compensate or mitigate. At the very least, communicate those choices to avoid misunderstandings, manage expectations, and ultimately, avoid being ignored or, indeed, distrusted. **But remember, trust-building is not a destination reached in a single stride.** It is not built and then perpetually indestructible. It's a continuous process requiring commitment and humility.

In today's information ecosystem, you can not assume people will trust your information just because your intentions are *good* or your information is *accurate*. Competition from "unaffiliated" sources, perceived as less influenced by established powers, adds complexity. In this environment, claiming to provide "all the information" people need, can easily backfire. It is rarely true, and assumes audiences are somehow homogenic, without a diversity of priorities, experience and needs.

Embrace the process with an openness and determination, dare to look in the mirror knowing that each attempt to change the way we engage with, acknowledge and respect our audience, moves us closer to deeper, more meaningful relationships with our communities. Let's forge ahead, guided by the belief that through genuine engagement and transparent communication, we can foster trust, empower change, and build more resilient communities.

OTHER INTERNEWS RESOURCES ON TRUST:

- Inequity Driven Mistrust: Its Impacts to Infodemic Management and Health Response and what to do about it
- Trust Crisis: Misinformation in Humanitarian Settings
- Understanding Trust: Global Conversations & Local Realities during the COVID-19 Pandemic
- The Space Between Us: Trust, Communication, and Collaboration between Media and Humanitarian Organizations in Public Health Emergencies