

**The Opportunities
In The Trust Crisis**
**An Analysis of the Reuters Institute
2026 Digital News Report**

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Reassessing the crisis

The 2026 Reuters Institute DNR records trust in news at 37 per cent, the lowest since the survey began. This figure is commonly read as confirmation of a deepening, perhaps irretrievable, trust crisis.

However, closer scrutiny of the findings reveals a more nuanced and far less binary picture. A wider enquiry and body of evidence produces a different – and potentially far less discouraging – narrative of opportunity for news organisations.

Two key tensions of trust

Category vs brand

The headline statistic measures trust in news as a category. **And yet at the level of named news providers it looks quite different.** In Ireland, for example, trust in RTÉ, the main public service broadcaster, stands near 71 per cent, against a category figure close to 42. In Italy, trust in newspaper brands runs between 54 and 74 per cent, against 32 for news in general.

Some of the aggregate fall is not about journalism at all. As consumption shifts to the social and video channels that have always commanded less confidence, the average reported trust drops, even where opinions of any single source hold steady.

The report also rightly reads the decline against political and economic turbulence, with much of the distrust aimed at the state of the world, for which news is only the unfortunate messenger.

Response vs behaviour

The second finding is, on the surface, far less easy to digest. Television news and publishers' own sites and apps have lost 13 and 12 percentage points of use since 2020, while social media and video have become the most used route, at 54 per cent against 51, and the main source in 30 of the 48 markets. These are, paradoxically, the least trusted channels. **Audiences appear to be moving towards the least reliable sources.**

This alarming rupture is considerably softened, once the low declared trust is set against actual behaviour. News on these channels is typically met incidentally, while audiences are there for other reasons, with the news source playing a minor role. Only about four in a hundred ever click through to where a story came from. The lack of trust is stated and real, but changes almost nothing about what people do.

Clearly, therefore, trust – and, equally important, mistrust – are not what govern the choice here. This is far more about convenience, habit and the pull of the dominant platforms.

Societal shifts

Trust in tribes

The 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer finds trust not simply falling but relocating, as people withdraw from institutions into the near and familiar. Major news organisations are down eleven points in net trust, while neighbours, family and friends are up eleven. Edelman calls this fundamental trend “insularity”.

The same survey finds seventy per cent now unwilling or hesitant to trust those whose values or sources differ from their own. **People are not only trusting institutions less, they are trusting outside their own circle less, and that circle is shrinking.**

While the evident fact of continuing polarisation is, as always, disturbing, we should also note here the less dystopian move towards “trust in the tribe”. Whatever its clear concerns and limitations, human-to-human solidarity is a part of this picture, and it has important implications for news media’s interpretation of, and responses to, the trust crisis.

Trust as red herring

A public already retreating into the familiar is not waiting to be persuaded that a news brand is reliable. It has stopped looking to the brand for what the brand was for, and turned to the people it already knows. It turns out that this is far deeper than just a problem of trust in journalism.

What the report calls a loss of trust, and the discourse a trust crisis, is not primarily about trust at all. The word has been standing in for two larger things it never names. **Whether the news means anything to people, and whether it is worth anything to them.** Trust is often the smallest part of “what we talk about when we talk about trust”.

By refocusing on value, first taking into account the often-ignored topic of meaning, we can begin to find our way out of the trust bind.

Meaning

Meaning asks whether the news matters to a person at all, whether it bears on the life they live and helps them make sense of it. Trust is only one ingredient of that.

It enables a source to be believed, but being believed is not the same as mattering. Factors that also decide whether news matters are relevance, whether it touches the reader's own world, and agency, whether knowing it changes anything they think or do.

Much of what the 2026 DNR records as avoidance is surely more a verdict on meaning. Respondents report that the news does not bear on their lives, that it leaves them powerless, that it is trivial to them.

The "news-finds-me" belief is the same verdict in another flavour. If nothing one would miss matters enough to seek, the news has stopped meaning much. This is not distrust but indifference, which is harder to answer. Trust can in theory be re-earned, while indifference offers little to push against.

There is also public meaning, a shared and reliable picture of the world from which to connect and make sense of each other, and it is fragmenting. Feeds sort and shift audiences into separate realities, synthetic content floods the common picture with things that were never real, and the insularity Edelman records pulls each person back to their own circle.

A public that cannot tell the real from the fabricated loses the capacity to collectively mean anything at all.

Value

Understanding the gap

The apparent trust differential between the category of news and named providers is more usefully interpreted as a gap in perceived value. The 37 per cent is the worth audiences place on news as a commodity, the general stream of what is happening. The 71 per cent quoted above is the worth they place on a source that gives them something the alternative streams do not.

This is actually brand equity – the reputation a news provider has earned, the premium it commands over the commodity behind it. That distinction becomes central to the present argument.

A critical counter-insight emerges. **Audiences do not value a masthead because they trust it. They trust it because it has long been worth something to them.**

Assessing trust by removing it from its “nest” within meaning and value not only leads us into a misdiagnosis of the problem we face, but blinds us to viable potential responses.

Key threats to value

Knowing what is happening is now abundant and free, and increasingly arrives without being sought. Panel research on this “news-finds-me” belief shows that those who hold it use traditional sources less, and grow less knowledgeable over time, while feeling better informed than they are.

Search and AI answer the question without sending audiences to the source. Zero-click behaviour now covers most queries. One study of 64 publishers found search traffic down more than 40 per cent from its pre-AI-overview level, on top of the earlier collapses in social referral.

Around four in ten people avoid news at least sometimes, the highest figure yet recorded, citing its effect on their mood, the volume of information, and, in the Reuters Institute’s own avoidance research, the sense that it lacks relevance or value to their lives. **When the perceived benefit is free elsewhere, and the perceived cost is rising, the perceived value of the news turns negative.**

The assets that remain resilient

Journalism’s premium is the depth, judgement and original reporting an automated stream cannot supply; this is also what people still pay for. Payment may be flat overall, but it’s concentrated in established brands, and almost half of those who pay give civic reasons, supporting journalism because it matters to society.

This premium is entirely real, but is too often encountered incidentally, in feeds that strip the source of its context and brand signifiers. In other words, both relevance and quality are directly undermined.

The industry has commonly framed all this as a loss of trust, and the category error has been costly. Trust does not return for the asking. Even if it did, while the meaning and value of news go untended, trust addressed in isolation – especially when so many dominant channel owners can no longer be seen as partners – will achieve little.

A call to two actions

Through the various dimensions of this more expansive lens, the appropriate responses become tangible. **A clear priority is an investment in competitive strategic marketing, with a particular emphasis on brand-building.**

The equity remains more or less intact, banked in names still rated far above the category. But the impacts of many brands, driven by the defensive hunt for reach, have slipped into invisibility, valued in principle but unseen in practice.

The challenges facing the industry, while extending beyond the much-discussed crisis of trust, also hold the potential to resolve it. Not mistrust, but indifference: the sense that the work does not bear on the lives of the audience. And a dormant but wide and fast-growing unease about what is, and what is not, real: **massive and growing latent demand, that is yet to be converted into preference.**

What there is to build on

The assets noted above lie in “what publishers make and what they are”, not in how they market or how they relate to audiences. This making and being continue to hold for now. But the marketing and the relating, the grounds on which news brands are now required to compete, remain broadly unaddressed.

Value that had been self-evident made strategic marketing appear unnecessary, so the requirement was rarely prioritised. Telling people what a title is for, making it feel consequential rather than assuming it does, generating demand rather than serving it. **What was sufficient when a brand stood out by definition, now needs to be consigned to a more forgiving past.**

An approach that seems to make sense – at least to news leadership following our argument so far – could be to invest the residual equity to buy time, while building what is missing before it runs out.

Two tasks follow. The first is to **win the audience back** – not merely by increasing advertising budgets, but doing the crucial upstream marketing work of proposition, positioning and refreshed relevance.

The other is to **defend both brand and audience** against the rising tsunami of fake media.

Winning the audience

Each of these directions rests on the shared foundation of the human-to-human factor. In the inevitably rocky journey into digital, **more than one media brand has sacrificed connection in the name of content.** The danger of this happening more frequently – and with far greater negative consequences – is exacerbated by the tempting efficiencies held out by Gen AI.

There are also good reasons why we're seeing a dramatic rise in interest – on both sides of the screen – in creator journalism. Furthermore, we noted earlier in our brief analysis of societal trust an ongoing shift to people and tribes.

To create, communicate and sustain the fresh and differentiated meaning, trust and value that effective and efficient ongoing competition and growth demand, news organisations need to balance the clear benefits of automation on offer, with consciously moving the human out from behind the machine.

The job in hand is to reactivate and reenergise the equity already there, with a proposition that asserts what only this source gives, and why it bears on a reader's life.

The most urgent competition from here on is no longer with other news providers, but with the undifferentiated streams and the habitual convenience of the feeds.

Defence against disinformation

Fabricated articles run under the names of real journalists, whole sites are cloned to imitate established titles, synthetic audio and video put words in the mouths of trusted figures. Around six in ten people now worry about telling real from fake online, and Edelman finds misinformation cited by half the public as a leading reason their trust has eroded, behind only the cost of living.

The same migration that leaves the audience unsure of the source lets any actor steal a publisher's identity. A byline, a masthead or a recognisable voice can be forged in minutes at almost no cost, and placed into a feed where a national broadcaster and an anonymous account can already be made to look identical.

The provider whose masthead or anchor is spoofed carries the weight of claims it never made, with no way to chase down, let alone credibly rebut, every counterfeit. The audience absorbs fabrication under a name it trusted, with no way to tell it has been deceived. Both feed the larger loss, a public that can no longer separate the real from the fabricated.

Hunting fakes after they spread cannot keep up with making them, and in a feed stripped of the cues that once marked a source, the audience has nothing with which to detect them.

The defence that does work runs the other way. **Let a genuine piece prove it is genuine, and thereby expose the counterfeit that cannot.**

A foundation of proof

The trust crisis, as we can now see, can be productively expanded and reframed as a problem of meaning and value. Neither lies beyond the reach of news media, if we can accept the two proposed responses outlined above.

The provenance standards now being built, chief among them C2PA, track the file. Which device made it, which software touched it, and whether it has been altered. That is machine-to-machine, one system vouching to another for an asset.

It leaves the human imperative – on which so much of the delivery and defence of journalism's value relies – untouched.

Any plausible fabrication can carry a spotless record of its own making. What matters runs the other way. Human-to-human, real and verifiable professionals answerable to the reader, not a machine wearing a byline.

This approach delivers two foundational benefits. The first is authenticity, that a real human is behind the work, with the judgement and the voice a synthetic stream cannot supply. The second is accountability, that a reputable brand can be held responsible.

Authenticity, therefore, is who made the work. Accountability is who answers for it.

What Authentitas Does

Authentitas binds verified human identity to content at the point of creation, through **government-grade biometric verification, cryptographic provenance tracking, and immutable audit records.**

This makes the accountability chain of any critical information institution – who created this, who approved it, when and where, and under what institutional authority – provable, rather than merely asserted.

No institution can credibly authenticate its own content. Authentitas operates as independent, neutral infrastructure. The same principle that makes a hallmark valuable, a pharmaceutical seal trustworthy, and a notarised document legally binding.

We begin with journalism, where the need is most immediate. The same infrastructure extends and scales across the information sectors most in need of authentication.

In A Nutshell

Many institutional news providers, across all channels and formats retain – as the Reuters DNR has stressed – robust levels of trust. This asset is best interpreted as potent brand equity. The present opportunity is to bring it back into view, now standing for the meaning, trust and value that only real journalism can offer.

While defence against the various drivers of the trust crisis has to date proved to be complex and frustrating, we argue here for a more accessible picture, within which two imperatives clearly and quite logically emerge.

First, a refreshed and more competitive marketing strategy, with a particular focus on propositions and positionings that address the changed and still-changing drivers of meaning and value for audiences.

And second, the defence of both brands and audiences against the growing and accelerating societal and economic threats posed by an epidemic of disinformation.

Both of the responses proposed here rest on the same foundation of proof. That a reputable human being, supported by a responsible institution, stands behind what is published.

Authenticity and accountability, backed up by auditability.

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authentitas.com

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