



Teaching Trust through Audio Process Boxes

Leigh Landini Wright
Murray State University

Abstract:

In a world where trust in journalism has dropped to the second-lowest level ever at 36 percent, journalists have an obligation to lift the curtain to show their audiences how the story came to be. As journalism educators, though, we have to find tools that will equip future journalists to better tell their own stories about how the story came to be. This classroom exercise uses an audio process box, or an explanation either in text, audio or video, that gives the audience a glimpse into how the reporter crafted the story and chose their sources. Students largely appreciated the chance to tell their story and shed transparency on their reporting process.

Introduction

One of the tenets of the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics calls for journalists to "be accountable and transparent"; under that subheading, journalists need to "explain ethical choices and processes to audiences" (Society of Professional Journalists, 2021).

Journalists face an increasingly mistrustful audience. A Gallup survey in the fall of 2021 showed that the trust level had dipped to the second-lowest ever, with only 36 percent of Americans saying that they trust the media "to report the news fully, accurately and fairly" (Gallup, 2021). Knowing that Americans have little trust in the media, we, as journalism educators, must prepare students to better explain their reporting process. We need to teach them how to lift the curtain and let people see their reporting process. One of those methods is a process box, or an explanation either in words, audio or video that gives the audience a glimpse into the reporter's process of producing the story (2019a).

The Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy (2019) called for journalists to "practice radical transparency" or standards in which journalists disclose how they "collect, report and disseminate the news." Mayer (2019b) wrote in a *Medium* post about a research project, *Trusting News*, conducted with the Center for Media Engagement. Two newsroom partners – the *Tennessean* and *USA Today* – added information that explained their reporting process to their stories. Results showed that the "explain your process" box increased readers' perceptions of the news organization (Masullo, Curry and Whipple, 2019). Mayer (2019b) wrote that if the public doesn't understand journalists' process, motivation and ethics, then journalists are the ones who need to educate them.

Assignment

Using resources from the [Trusting News](#) project (Masullo et al, 2019), the instructor crafted an assignment in an in-depth reporting class for students to explain their reporting process through an audio explainer.

Keywords: Process Box, Trust, Audio, Journalism Education, Journalism, Transparency

Known as a process box in print reporting, this tool gives the audience details about the reporter's choices. Audio was chosen because it allowed the students to think through their process and then script and record it.

The assignment was based on a print process box assignment from a Trusting News educators' training session. Video and print examples from Trusting News were shown to help students conceptualize the intent of a process box. Students were asked to record a one- to two-minute audio in which they told their story of their reporting process. Students were asked to consider how they chose their idea, the angle, their sources for interviews, their research, and ultimately their decision-making in regard to ethics, framing, and context. Students also were asked about their next step with the story and if they would have done anything differently.

Students recorded their audio file in the audio bays and edited in Adobe Audition allowing them to get additional behind-the-microphone practice and confidence, as well as ensuring that their audio process box sounded professional, yet sincere. Music was not allowed as it might have taken the emphasis away from their voice, and music often conveys emotion that might conflict with the message. Students had to script their responses, using this suggested template:

Ex: Hi, I'm _____, and I'm a student enrolled in JMC 397 In-Depth Reporting. As part of this course, we examine and report on issues around the campus and the community. One of the stories I wrote concerned XYZ ...

The audio file had to be between one to two minutes but not longer than two minutes. Students had to save their file as a .wav or an mp3. Then they had to locate their original story on the class Substack site and embed the audio process box. A 50-point rubric evaluated students on professionalism (5 points), the process box content (35 points) and delivery (10 points). Students (n=11) were asked to reflect on their experiences of creating an audio process box and their views about process boxes. Two students chose not to complete the reflection even though they completed the process box.

The reflection prompt contained three questions:

1. Do you think reporters should include process boxes with selected stories? Why or why not?
2. After completing this exercise, how do you think that you can include elements such as

process boxes in your media work?

3. What is your greatest takeaway about completing a process box to explain your reporting process?

Process boxes might not be feasible for every assignment, but nine students recognized that these boxes can help an audience understand the reporting process. One student wrote that routine stories probably don't rise to the level of needing explanation, but stories involving investigations or in-depth reporting do.

Many reasons reporters should include process boxes is when information in the article would benefit from clarification and help with public trust in the author's choice of presenting information. This is beneficial for articles that discuss hot-button issues, high-profile crimes, stories that have multiple articles, or with instances where sources won't cooperate or might be confusing.

Another student recognized that process boxes could be a starting point to rebuild the lost trust with the audience:

Writing process boxes, and especially posting audio versions where the public can physically hear our voices, allows us to begin to break down the barriers the public has built between us.

Students who work for campus or community media recognized that including process boxes with their in-depth stories would allow them to explain their reporting. One discussed a story that involved the campus administration's lack of usage of timely warnings through the Clery Act and why using a process box could have shown his audience the sources that he used. Another student wrote that she could have used the process box to explain coverage of a murder of a student.

One student wisely recognized that process boxes take time to complete because "so many reporters are already struggling to complete their daily spot stories." The same student, though, wrote that he wished that reporters could include process boxes for two reasons: "the public would greatly benefit from the information and these would not be unlike the special features I so enjoy on DVDs and Blu-Rays."

While the students could have made a process box in written form, one student spoke to the authenticity of hearing the reporter's voice.

When doing a process box, I will most always

do it in an audio or visual form. I believe a sense of sincerity is built when someone can hear one's voice inflection or facial expressions. Human beings are intuitive. They read people. They know when people lie. There is something to be said when a public figure makes an in-person apology rather than tweeting their apology or posting it on their Instagram story. I think the same applies to process boxes.

Eight of the 11 students recognized that explaining their process is needed in today's environment, and they mentioned the need to show transparency in their reporting. One put it bluntly: "Transparency is key."

Conclusion

Today's journalists face an increasing amount of pressure in their jobs. Print newsrooms have cut staff by 57 percent over the past 12 years, while digital-native newsroom employees rose 144 percent in that same span (Walker, 2021). Journalists no longer just write and report, they increasingly are producing multimedia and social media content.

Because the public's trust has eroded, it's imperative that journalists must be willing to show how their stories are made. Researchers like Masullo, Curry and Whipple (2019) found during a study of *USA Today* and *Tennessean* stories that readers who viewed news articles with process boxes perceived the organizations as more reliable. They also found that the stories with process boxes ranked higher in 11 of 12 attributes linked to trust compared to stories that did not have the boxes.

Given that students will soon join newsrooms, we, as educators, need to instill the sense of trust language through items like process boxes so that these reporters can better tell how they got their stories and shine light on transparent journalism practices. With the twist on process boxes as audio, this exercise helped students to have to tell and then narrate their own story behind the story, and as one student put it, it lent authenticity to the process because of the ability to hear a voice. Educators need to instill this type of trust-building experiences to better prepare students to re-earn the audience's trust.

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Leigh Landini Wright is an associate professor of journalism and curriculum coordinator for the journalism sequence at Murray State University. Wright's background includes a 16-year career as a reporter and section editor at The Paducah (Ky.) Sun. Her research interests include journalism pedagogy, social media practices, emerging technology and community journalism.