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# How data can be used to build trust and combat misinformation in reporting







## When you're dealing with data, transparency is key.

Granted, there's a lot of complicated information out there, the numbers can be overwhelming. It's the job of journalists to distil that information and communicate it in an accurate, compelling way that is easily understandable for audiences.

Reuters News Agency's Digital Verification Editor Stephanie Burnett, Politics Editor Scott Malone, and Director of Emerging Products and Special Events Rob Schack share how data and trends can help cut through noise, how this work will feed into reporting, and ultimately, how it affects the trust audiences have in the news they consume.



**STEPHANIE BURNETT**  
Digital Verification Editor,  
Reuters News Agency



**SCOTT MALONE**  
Politics Editor,  
Reuters News Agency



**ROB SCHACK**  
Director of Emerging  
Products and Special Events  
Reuters News Agency

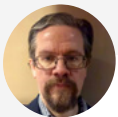
Using the US midterm elections as an example, Stephanie, Scott, and Rob continue to discuss and break down Reuters' work in the run-up to the elections, and how Reuters use data to help build trust with audiences.

This year has seen trust in the news fall to an historic low. In the US, it signals a deepening polarisation as political rhetoric spills into real-life consequences. But the impact of worsening trust in news is felt all over the world.

Despite this bleak picture, there are concrete steps news publishers can take to build and maintain trust in their reporting. One factor that is growing in significance is using data, infographics, maps and charts to add context and help audiences to understand what is going on.

Planning accurate coverage of big moments like elections involves more than just on-the-day data. For the US midterms reporting, planning started almost as soon as the 2020 election had finished.

**THE REUTERS INSTITUTE'S 2022 DIGITAL NEWS REPORT HIGHLIGHTED THIS WHEN REVEALING THAT 38% OF PEOPLE OFTEN OR SOMETIMES AVOID THE NEWS - UP FROM 29% IN 2017.**

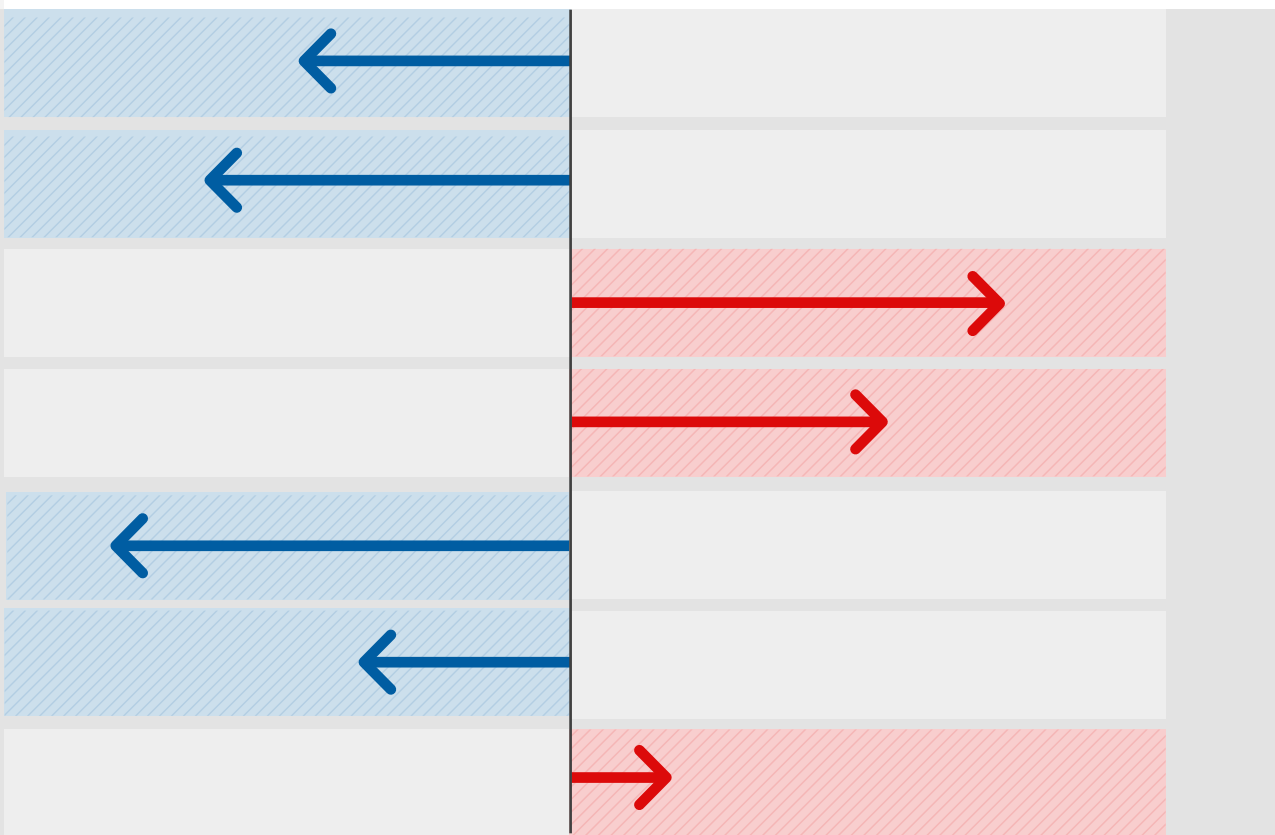


### SCOTT MALONE

Politics Editor, **Reuters News Agency**

“From early 2021 we were thinking about these midterms and the direction they would go in” says Politics Editor Scott Malone.

“It means having reporting teams that are on the ground and closely tracking key races. And it means having a great data set for election results so that you’re able to report things in real time.”



# Context and Transparency

Adding context is one of the most effective ways to use data to build trust. By itself, statistics and data can be used to support misinformation, being transparent about what figures mean and how those results have been achieved can help arm people against misleading narratives.



## STEPHANIE BURNETT

Digital Verification Editor, **Reuters News Agency**

When it comes to data, a lot of what we see is a false equivalence, so using data to manipulate the results, or to suggest that it confirms a narrative or information that is misleading or false.

Stephanie's team monitors various narratives on social media and other platforms to flag misinformation and give necessary context to misleading or false information.

"Whichever way you choose to illustrate the context of the data, transparency is key to building trust. There's a lot of complicated information out there, the numbers can be overwhelming. So it's the job of journalists to distil that information and communicate it in an accurate, compelling way that audiences can easily understand."

Portraying that data does help build trust for audiences because that gives them the information they need to say, "Ok, this is unbiased information because it's the numbers, it's the facts. And now I can take that next step to come up with my own conclusion, or take that next step to make a decision."

"It's not something organisations can be complacent about. Reuters' approach to data for the US elections is a cycle of constant evaluation and accurate analysis on what it means. Changes in voting behaviours in recent years — like the shift from people voting in person to casting their ballots by post — are an example of how some people can view such changes as suspicious."



## ROB SCHACK

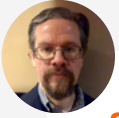
Director of Emerging Products and Special Events, **Reuters News Agency**

"The way we look at the polls, the way we look at the data, the way we report on the results has shifted. It's not something that stays the same from election to election. It requires constant attention to make sure we keep putting the election in context for our clients."



# Putting Neutrality into Practice

Audiences are increasingly seeking out neutral reporting, even if they don't always put this into practice. Reuters take steps to ensure all their reporting is neutral, even if customers use their data in ways that aren't neutral.



## SCOTT MALONE

Politics Editor, **Reuters News Agency**

"If somebody has made a claim, is there a reason to believe that they know what they're talking about? Can the claim be verified? Are there documents or other sorts of data that stand up? Then once you've heard somebody's argument, what other arguments are there? What are the other sides of the story?"

This approach doesn't mean getting blinded by both sides though, a story can be approached from both sides but reporters must remain rooted in fact.

"If you have a debate where part of it is based in fact, and part of the debate is not based in fact, you wouldn't give the weight to it that you would to an evidence-based argument."



## STEPHANIE BURNETT

Digital Verification Editor, **Reuters News Agency**

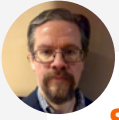
To remain neutral, journalists need to be aware of their own bias as individuals and how they shape opinions and values, says Stephanie.

"Unless you're a robot, you have some bias in you. Now to maintain neutrality in reporting, you need to be aware of your bias — that way you don't have tunnel vision. It's also important to know what those biases are [to be] aware of your blind spots."

Reuters takes neutrality seriously, and each story goes through two rounds of edits, to ensure that potential holes in the story are identified and changes are made in the interest of neutrality.



# Advice on Maintaining Trust



## SCOTT MALONE

Politics Editor, **Reuters News Agency**

“If a reader doesn’t trust what they’re reading, then there’s no real reason for them to read it any more”

Says Scott, emphasising the importance of always maintaining trustworthiness.

“All you can do is work as hard as you can, to be as insightful, as fast, and as fair as you can be. Show the reader how you know what you know and do that consistently over time.”

Responding to false or misleading information can at times feel like an impossible task to get on top of, especially given the speed at which misinformation can spread. One way to combat false and misleading information is through pre-bunking. By identifying disinformation narratives in advance, Reuters can stay ahead of the curve and reduce the risk of people falling for misinformation.



## STEPHANIE BURNETT

Digital Verification Editor, **Reuters News Agency**

With the data available, researchers have found that ‘pre-bunk’ articles - which aim to prevent misinformation before it rapidly spreads - are effective at reducing the risk of people falling for misinformation, Burnett notes.

“So you say what we know, here are the facts, and also what we don’t know - being transparent about that. But getting ahead of the curve is crucial.”

Pre-bunks inform readers on the facts about a certain topic before anticipated misinformation about the issue runs rampant. Burnett would like to see more publishers explore audience concerns and take them seriously. One example given was during COVID-19 reporting, where in the early days of the vaccines being approved there was a lot of vaccine hesitancy.

“It’s easy to say, ‘Well, the FDA approved it, the EU approved it, get on with it as it’s totally safe,’” she explained. “But if we take a step back and focus on what is a concern, there were a lot of questions around it having happened so fast.”

“If we tap into these kinds of questions that audiences have, and take them seriously - I’m not talking about indulging conspiracy theories and hateful rhetoric - but if we understand more about where audiences are coming from with these concerns, and we answer why the approval process was so much faster, then that can help build trust.”

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