



News Media and Society: How to Restore the Public Trust

November 2002

Sensational. It's a word often used to describe the current state of news coverage in America. But, it's no compliment to journalists or the way they report the news. In fact, there is strong evidence to support the disquieting idea that many Americans do not trust the media. In 1985, more than 80 percent of newspaper readers thought their papers did a good job, but by the late 1990s less than half of Americans thought reporters were fair. The buck doesn't stop with print media either.

Manipulative, even vicious reporting techniques have become commonplace in today's television news coverage. Stations compete vehemently with each other to capture ratings and often focus too intently on an issue or story if it's considered a "hot button" with audiences. Some journalists have even been found to be downright deceptive.

Much of our public discourse is sparked by what the news reports about our lives. If people distrust the media, then it follows that the health of American democracy itself is at stake. While public concerns about journalism ethics date back to the late 1880s, there is currently a period of deep introspection under way about the state of news coverage. That's why it's pertinent that American citizens become involved in the dialogue and in the response taken to repair the distrust that currently exists between the public and the press.

APPROACH 1: Strengthen Journalists' Conduct

The field of journalism is a public service and news coverage will not improve until journalists and their organizations regain sight of their public responsibility. Clear and consistent standards must be developed for reporting the news. Journalists should be held accountable to these standards through certification methods.

APPROACH 2: Open Up the Marketplace

The relationship between the news media and citizens is at risk because the news media is made up of a relatively small number of corporate entities that are more concerned with profits than an obligation to inform citizens. If we take action to pry open the marketplace, we can guard against the concentration of ownership and ensure room for diverse voices and perspectives.

APPROACH 3: Get Citizens In

Good and fair reporting will not take place until the "wall" between citizens and journalists is torn down. The media needs to bring citizens more directly into the process of deciding on and reporting the news. If journalists don't cooperate, then citizens should find ways to bring down the wall themselves. Also, citizens frustrated by poor news coverage should "vote" by not reading or watching.

Approaches and Choices; Choice Work, and NIF

If you're preparing to moderate a National Issues Forum, then you've become familiar with the structure of deliberative dialogue that NIF supports. Discussion guides, starter tapes, and deliberative forums focus on approaches, sometimes also called "choices" in NIF material.

And you know that each approach represents a distinctly different way of approaching an issue, with its own set of benefits, drawbacks, and tradeoffs.

This structure undergirds the basic premise of public deliberation — that citizens in a democracy have a responsibility, and need opportunities, to make choices about how they want to live together, how they want to act together, how they want their government to function.

Sometimes, forum participants find these uses of the word "choice" confusing. Some assume that they are being asked to choose one of the approaches. And, of course, they are not.

Many moderators find it helpful to clarify, at the beginning of the forum, that the work of the forum is to weigh each approach, to "work through" consequences and tradeoffs, and to form a shared sense of what's at stake in the issue. They make it clear that by developing shared directions for public action, forum participants are laying the foundation for making public choices together.

If this is your first experience as a moderator:

You don't have to be an expert on the issue.

Reading the issue book thoroughly, considering questions that get to the heart of the issue, and thinking through the essence of each choice is the critical part of preparation.

Stay focused on what the forum is about — deliberation.

Your natural curiosity and your interest in understanding diverse views will be your greatest assets; they're probably what got you here in the first place. So use them to ask questions that probe the underlying motivations of each choice, the tradeoffs it might require, and the willingness of the participants to recognize them.

Keep the discussion moving and focused on the issue.

No matter the level of experience, most moderators find timekeeping to be a challenge. National Issues Forums examine complicated issues, worthy of deep discussion. Sometimes it's hard to move on to another approach with so much more that could be said. But in order to deliberate — to really make progress on the issue — participants need the opportunity to weigh all the major approaches.

Reserve ample time for reflections on the forum.

Between allowing time for participants to lay out their personal concerns about the issue at the beginning of the forum and the demanding work of deliberating in depth on each of the choices, it's easy to find yourself with little time left at the end of the forum to reflect on what's been said. But, in many ways, this is the most important work the group will do — if they have time to do it. Explain clearly at the outset that it is important to reserve this time, and then enlist the participants' support in working with you to preserve it.

Your Role as a Moderator:

- to provide an overview of the process of deliberation — the rationale for the kind of work the participants are getting ready to do.
- to ask questions that probe deeply into what's at stake in the issue and in each choice.
- to encourage participants to direct their responses and questions toward one another.
- to remain neutral throughout the discussion, while encouraging participants to explore all facets of their own and others' opinions.
- to keep track of the time, so participants can move through a discussion of each of the major approaches and into an ending period of reflections.

The Role of the Recorder:

- to support deliberation by reminding forum participants of their key concerns, the areas of greatest disagreement, and the benefits and tradeoffs their discussion highlighted.
- to serve as a written record of the group's work that might feed into future meetings of the group or additional forums.
- to help inform other members of the community about the outcomes of the deliberation.
- to capture the tensions, tradeoffs, and common ground for action.
- to express main ideas in clearly written, brief phrases.

Forums or Study Circles — or Both?

Many NIF convenors choose to organize single forums around issues of concern in their communities. Most single forums last two- to two-and-one-half hours.

Many others, however, arrange multiple sessions (study circles) to allow participants greater opportunities to examine issues in depth. Some groups set aside time for two meetings; others might devote a separate session for each choice. And some plan ahead of time for a session after the forum to come back together to consider next steps.

Some communities begin their examination of an issue in a large group forum and then break off into smaller groups for subsequent sessions. The reverse also can be helpful — starting in small groups and culminating in a larger community forum.

National Issues Forums is about encouraging public deliberation. The needs of your community will drive the schedule in which deliberation can best occur.

Guidelines for National Issues Forums and Study Circles

At the beginning of deliberative discussion, most moderators review these guidelines with participants. (A free poster with these guidelines is available to use in your forum. You may request a copy by calling 800-600-4060.)

The moderator will guide the discussion yet remain neutral. The moderator will make sure that —

- Everyone is encouraged to participate.
- No one or two individuals dominate.
- The discussion will focus on the choices.
- All the major choices or positions on the issue are considered.
- An atmosphere for discussion and analysis of the alternatives is maintained.
- We listen to each other.

The importance of the questionnaires

Questionnaires play an important role in your local forum — and in the national NIF Network. Filled out after the forum, it serves multiple purposes. It gives participants an opportunity to reconsider their views in light of the experience they have just had. And it gives them an opportunity to add to what they said or heard in the forum.

The questionnaires also serve a vital role outside of the forum. As a means of capturing what happened in the forum, they provide information that can be used to communicate participants' views to others — to officeholders, to the media, to other citizens.

Nationally, a report on the outcomes of the forums on a given issue is produced each year, based on extensive interviews with moderators and the questionnaires that forums generate. Some communities use questionnaires as part of reports on the outcomes of local forums.

So it is very important that you, as the forum moderator, take a few minutes to gather and return the questionnaires to the National Issues Forums Research. Please include the moderator response sheet on page 12 with your contact information so that follow-up for the national report is possible.

Return the completed questionnaires to:

**National Issues Forums Research
100 Commons Road
Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777**

Communicating about your forums

Another important role of the moderator is to communicate with the NIF Network about the forums you are conducting in your communities. Please post the dates and locations of your forums by E-mail at forums@nifi.org.

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Questions to Promote Deliberation of the Issue

It's easy to recall examples of news coverage that frustrated Americans: the O.J. Simpson trial, the Elian Gonzalez case, and the murder of Jon Benet Ramsey. Has the coverage of these stories led to public distrust of the media? Or, do Americans contribute directly to this type of coverage by being willing to watch it night after night? While participants will undoubtedly have strong emotions about these examples, it will be important not to let them derail the discussion about what should be done to address the bottom-line issues. The moderator needs to be sensitive yet probing. Encourage the group to relate their feelings to the approaches under consideration. Many moderators find it useful to identify broad questions ahead of time. Here are some possibilities:

APPROACH 1: Strengthen Journalists' Conduct

- Who should monitor the conduct of journalists? Would a joint venture between journalists, citizens, and owners of the media be effective? Or, is there another, better approach?
- What should happen to a journalist who is found to use poor judgment?
- What constitutes a good and fair news story? Is it possible to be completely objective when reporting the news?
- The power of a moving image is vast and expansive. Should there be different standards applied to print and TV journalism?

APPROACH 2: Open Up the Marketplace

- Who would get to decide how many stations or newspapers can be owned in one market? How would this limit on ownership be monitored?
- Should we insist on reducing the concentration of ownership in the media, even if it interferes with the tradition of ensuring a free marketplace in America?
- Can owners of the media retain an obligation to American democracy if they are also making a profit?
- If organizations such as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting are to expand their news coverage where would the additional funding come from?

APPROACH 3: Get Citizens In

- What kinds of activities and approaches should be used to tear down the wall that exists between journalists and the public?
- If members of the media don't cooperate, how should citizens respond? Can you think of any boycotts that have been successful in the long run?
- What qualifies citizens to help monitor and improve news coverage? Should ordinary citizens get involved in reporting the news themselves?
- What would a positive give-and-take relationship between the public and the media look like? Is there a point at which citizen involvement would become detrimental?

Comparing th

Just like the process involved in pursuing and creating a good news story, the discussion about what is fair in journalism is likely to be both visceral and complex. Most Americans report a high level of dissatisfaction about the media but ideas on how to bring about change will vary greatly. And, there is no single approach that will work to swiftly solve the problems in news coverage. By taking time to compare ideas — and especially taking note of any tradeoffs linked to the various choices presented — the overall discussion will be more relevant. When participants take the time to review a position that opposes their own, the outcome of discussion is likely to be altered in a positive way. The following material outlines such choices, tradeoffs, and drawbacks.

Approach 1

Strengthen Journalists' Conduct

Negative influences in journalism have been allowed to flourish because journalists have been working without identified standards of conduct. They have lost sight of journalism as a public service. Many professions, such as accounting, law, and teaching, require ongoing certification for participation in the field. Journalists should be subject to this kind of scrutiny, especially given their unique role in our society.

What Should Be Done?

- Journalists should develop and post standards that help citizens discern fair and accurate news coverage.
- Once standards are devised, journalists should be officially tested and certified in these new standards.
- A greater commitment should be given to training journalists — in newsrooms and journalism schools — so they develop skills with the tradition of American democracy in mind.

Drawbacks

- Standards don't guarantee good behavior. Consider the recent Enron scandal. In this case, professional accounting standards were simply ignored.
- Journalism standards are a constantly moving target. Acceptable and nonacceptable behavior by journalists cannot be completely identified.
- While the behavior of journalists remains in question, we can't afford to wait for established standards. We must find quicker ways to address the problems.

Tradeoffs

- If the conduct of journalists is monitored, it could limit the innovative thinking and risk-taking that leads to groundbreaking stories. It could also lead to censorship.
- If there is to be ongoing certification of journalists and continued monitoring of their conduct, it will require a huge commitment of both time and money. Also, opinions will differ on how best to execute this plan.

Three Approaches

Approach 2

Open Up the Marketplace

It has been said that freedom of speech only applies to those who own the printing press. The reason news coverage has declined in quality is because the media is made up of corporate entities that are more concerned about profits than anything else. Too much ownership exists in the hands of a few large companies. This squeezes out diverse opinions and coverage. We must guard against the type of ownership that big conglomerates such as AOL/Time Warner and Disney have garnered in the marketplace.

What Should Be Done?

- Place limits on how much ownership can exist in a market by one company, and lower the expectation of profit for news companies.
- Clearly define “public interest” and hold the media accountable to serve that interest.
- Help boost alternative broadcasting by funding independent productions, public affairs programming, and other similar avenues.

Drawbacks

- To adequately cover the world’s news, we need big media entities. Many important stories have been reported because these companies had the resources to support the pursuit of them.
- Free speech is paramount but it does mean we may sometimes have to watch and read things we don’t like. After all, the media is simply feeding the public appetite as they continue to pay close attention to sensational stories.
- The marketplace is working. Americans have more choice than ever before and media corporations have used profits to create new programming such as The Learning Channel. They also earned no income during the aftermath of the September 11 attacks when they chose to broadcast commercial-free news coverage.

Tradeoffs

- Without the money and resources of large corporations, the variety and quality of news could drop.
- More regulation could stifle free speech and make it harder for the media to respond to what we want. It would also take control away from journalists and give it to the government, as well as lead to regulation of both the Internet and cable TV.

Approach 3

Get Citizens In

To regain the trust between the public and the media, citizens and journalists must find ways to relate as equals. When citizens take bold steps to impact the actions of the media, they will be more in control of how news stories are presented. They can also help to define newsworthy stories by becoming involved in the process of reporting them.

What Should Be Done?

- Citizen councils should be created that meet regularly with members of the media and serve as an arbitrator between the press and the public.
- Citizens should create their own news sources to cover stories they feel are missing in the mainstream media.
- Citizens should also boycott media coverage when they feel it is inadequate.

Drawbacks

- Ordinary citizens do not have the savvy, resources, or training to cover the news. If they tried, coverage would get worse.
- A news council was attempted at the national level and failed due to a lack of interest. These approaches won’t last in the long run.
- There should be separation between the media and the public in order for the news to be accurately pursued and reported. Newspaper and TV stations cannot be run like Rotary Clubs.

Tradeoffs

- By tearing down the wall that exists between the press and the public, members of the media would end up getting more involved in our daily lives.
- Councils and boycotts run by citizens are difficult to organize and sustain and require a great deal of money to publicize.

Suggested Format for an NIF Forum or Study Circle

Welcome

Let participants know who is sponsoring the forum/study circle. Stress the cosponsorship if several organizations are involved.

Ground Rules

MAKE CLEAR THAT THE FORUM IS NOT A DEBATE. Stress that there is work to do, and that the work is to move toward making a choice on a public policy issue. The work will be done through deliberation. Review the paragraph “How Do We Do It?” (see page 11). The responsibility for doing the work of deliberation belongs to the group. Deliberation is necessary because there are competing approaches to solving the problem.

Starter Video

Explain that the video reviews the problems underlying the issue, then briefly examines three or four public policy alternatives. In so doing, it sets the stage for deliberation. (Starter videos for each issue book are available from Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company at 1-800-228-0810.)

Personal Stake

Connect the issues to people’s lives and concerns — in the first few minutes — by getting participants to talk about their personal experiences with the issue, and to tell their stories. This makes the issue genuine, human rather than abstract. Some questions you might ask include: “Has anyone had a personal experience that illustrates the problems associated with this issue?” “Within your family, or circle of friends, is this an important issue?” “What aspects of the issue are most important to you?” “How does the issue affect people?”

The Forum/Study Circle Deliberation

Consistent with what deliberation is, moderators ask basic types of questions in a forum:

What Is Valuable to Us?

This question gets at why making public choices is so difficult: the approaches turn on things that people care about very deeply, such as being secure or being treated fairly. This question can take many forms:

- How has this issue affected you personally? (Usually asked at the beginning.)
 - What things are most valuable to people who support this option?
 - What is appealing about this approach?
 - What makes this choice a good idea — or a bad one?
-

What Are the Costs or Consequences Associated with the Various Approaches?

This question can take as long as it prompts people to think about the likely effects of various approaches on what is valuable to them. Examples include:

- What would result from doing what this approach proposes?
 - What could be the consequences of doing what you are suggesting?
 - Can you give an example of what you think would happen?
 - Does anyone have a different estimate of costs or consequences?
-

What Are the Tensions or Conflicts in This Issue That We Have to “Work Through”?

As a forum progresses, moderators will ask questions that draw out conflicts or tensions that people have to “work through.” They might ask:

- What do you see as the tension between the approaches?
- Where are the conflicts that grow out of what we’ve said about this issue?
- Why is this issue so difficult to decide?
- What are the “gray areas”?
- What remains unsolved for this group?

Ending A Forum/Study Circle

Before ending a forum take a few minutes to reflect both individually and as a group on what has been accomplished. Questions like the following have been useful:

I. Individual Reflections

- How has your thinking about the issue changed?
- How has your thinking about other people's views changed?
- How has your perspective changed as a result of what you heard in this forum?

II. Group Reflections

- What didn't we work through?
- Can we identify any shared sense of purpose or direction?
- What tradeoffs are we, or are we not, willing to make to move in a shared direction?

III. Next-Step Reflections

- What do we still need to talk about?
- How can we use what we learned about ourselves in this forum?
- Do we want to meet again?

Questionnaire (Post-Forum)

The questionnaire is a way to face the conflict within ourselves. Often we discover aspects of each choice we hold most valuable. Yet, the things we care deeply about are often in conflict. Please return the questionnaires and the Moderator Response sheet on page 12 after the forum.

Suggested Time Line

	Stages of a Forum/Study Circle
15% for Opening	<p>Welcome — The convenor or moderator introduces NIF program.</p> <p>Ground Rules — Participants review desired outcomes of forum.</p> <p>Starter Video — The starter video sets the tone for the discussion.</p> <p>Personal Stake — Connect the issue to people's lives and concerns.</p> <p>The Deliberation — Participants examine all the choices.</p>
65% for Deliberation	
20% for Ending the Forum/Study Circle	<p>Ending the Forum — Reflect on what has been accomplished.</p> <p>Questionnaire — Participants complete questionnaire.</p>

NIF Forums and Study Circles

Why Are We Here? What Are We Going to Do?

We are here to move toward a public decision or CHOICE on a difficult issue through CHOICE WORK.

How Do We Do It?

Through a deliberative dialogue in which we:

- Understand the PROS and CONS of each approach, its BENEFITS, DRAWBACKS, and TRADEOFFS.
- Know the STRATEGIC FACTS and how they affect the way the group thinks about each option.
- Get beyond the initial positions people hold to their deeper motivations — the things people consider to be most valuable in everyday life.
- Weigh carefully the views of others; appreciate the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable.
- WORK THROUGH the conflicting emotions that arise when various options pull and tug on what people consider valuable.

How Can We Know If We Are Making Progress?

By constantly testing your group:

- Can your group make the best case for the approach least favored?
- Can it identify the negative effects of the approach most favored?

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To order the *News Media and Society* issue book and starter tape call 800-600-4060, fax 937-435-7367 or mail to National Issues Forums publications, P.O. Box 41626, Dayton, OH 45441.

Moderator guides and forum posters are also available.

Other tapes may be ordered by calling Kendall/Hunt at 800-228-0810.

For other information and comments, visit the NIF Web site at nifi.org or call NIF Research at 1-800-433-7834.

To post the dates and locations of your forums, E-mail: forums@nifi.org.

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Moderator Response

After the forum, please complete this brief response sheet and return it with the questionnaires from the forum.

Moderator's Name _____

Phone _____ **Date and location of forum** _____

Briefly describe the audience of your forum including city and state, diversity, age of participants, number of participants.

What elements of this issue seemed most difficult to the participants?

What common concerns were most apparent?

Were there tradeoffs most participants would accept? Describe.

Were there tradeoffs most participants would not accept? Describe.

Did the group identify shared directions for action?

Return with questionnaires to:
National Issues Forums Research
100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777
www.nifi.org

News Media and Society: How to Restore the Public Trust **In Your Community . . .**

Please share a story that illustrates how well, or poorly, your community is served by the local media.

Can you think of ways to improve local news coverage?

Can you think of an instance in which citizen action has had an effect on the media that serve your community?
