Audio Transcript
Episode 186 of "E&P Reports" Vodcast Series
With Mike Blinder

A one-on-one with Trust Project CEO Sally Lehrman

In this 186th episode of "E&P Reports," we explore the nonprofit, nonpartisan Trust Project as we chat one-on-one with its founder and CEO, Peabody Award-winning journalist Sally Lehrman, who talks about the organizations founding in 2014 and the methods they employ today to: "Help news organizations make it clear that we do have standards and policies and rules that help journalists walk this path of independence and away from any kind of personal agenda, business agenda, or government agenda."

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0:00:03.6 Announcer: This is E&P Reports, a vodcast from Editor and Publisher Magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884, serving newspapers, broadcast, digital, and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:20.2 Mike Blinder: And a warm welcome once again, Mike Blinder, publisher of E&P Magazine. As always, we kick off the episode with housekeeping. If you're listening to us on your favorite podcast platform, we urge you to follow us. Watching on our YouTube channel, please go below me, hit that subscribe button, hit the bell to the right, or click them, hit them, and you'll get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of E&P Report. Sally Lerman, am I saying your name correctly?

0:00:46.7 Sally Lehrman: Well, close enough. [laughter]

0:00:49.8 MB: Well, Lehrman, is that about it?

0:00:52.3 SL: Thank you. You got it.

0:00:53.8 MB: I just wanted to make sure I had it right, Sally. How are you today? You're joining us from the Bay City, I assume San Francisco, am I correct?

0:01:02.5 SL: San Francisco Bay Area, yes. And we have a beautiful day today. We're so lucky.

0:01:03.8 MB: And you have been honored for, I think it's almost three years now, Chief Executive Officer of the Trust Project. And basically, when I went to your website and I did some digging, you're trying to help diverse publications to showcase their commitment to trustworthy journalism. Wow, Sally. This has obviously become a full-time gig for you.

0:01:28.5 SL: Well, that's for sure. Yeah. When I founded the Trust Project in about 2014, and at that time, people said, to your point, they said, that's ambitious, like, don't even try it, but I'd not be one always to listen to good advice. I guess I just continued the project. And now we have hundreds of news organizations participating from around the world, primarily Latin America, US, Canada, Europe. We also have a site in Hong Kong, and we have some others coming in from other regions that you'll hear about soon, I hope.

0:02:05.0 MB: And of course, you just announced a round of funding you got from Craig Newmark. But we're going to talk about that. We're going to explore the Trust Project, and we'll do all that on the backside of this message.

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0:03:23.9 MB: All right, Sally, not that I want to discuss my faith, but it's... At the time of this recording, it is Passover season. And I was the youngest child in my home, not that you may be aware of this, but during the Passover Seder, the youngest child says to the older person, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" So now I have to ask the question. We've had other organizations and projects on this program, the Journalism Trust Initiative, NewsGuard, Trust.Text [0:03:50.2] _____. Everybody seems to be clamoring. I don't want to say clamoring, trying for that one way that we can police ourselves. I mean, we are a... I know I'm doing a big preamble here, but it's my show, Sally, I can do whatever I want, but we are a Madisonian republic that has a free unfettered press. We don't give licenses to journalists. We have to figure it out on our own to somehow let the consuming public know what true journalism is. So here's the question: Why is the Trust Project different from all other initiatives, in your opinion, Sally?

0:04:25.3 SL: Thank you for that question. Yeah. Yes. Well, a lot of... There are a lot of ways that we're different, and if I can tell you a little bit of my... The founding story of the Trust Project, then I think we can get to that. I started the Trust Project. I'm a longtime journalist, myself, mostly covering science and social issues related to science, and at the same time, I've been very involved in helping hold journalism to its highest values, I'd say, and I just got kind of frustrated. I was in a faculty position at Santa Clara University, this five-year endowed chair, and I was bringing together news leaders that I had brought together before under the auspices of SPJ, and what I found was they were still making the same complaints that they had a decade before, and it was, why are we allowing the digital environment really to take over the values and some of the ways that we approach journalism? Why are we allowing that to happen, and as a result, harming our own values? Because in this digital space, we are seeing, as everybody knows who's watching, we're seeing journalism looks like everything else.

0:05:44.6 SL: Journalism looks just like an ad. It looks just like something that is designed to convince you over to an idea or an issue, or even to incite you to violence, so at that time, I thought we really shouldn't just allow this to happen. We need to take control, really, as journalists, as you said, as leaders in the field, and I asked some people on the technology side that I knew, and they said, yeah, all you have to do is train the algorithm to surface journalism differently than these other kinds of information, and at the time, it seemed quite simple. I didn't know very much about algorithms at the time, so that was the beginning of a journey to really understand what it is and to find why is journalism different? What is it, really? And then how do we interact and respond more effectively to our audiences? So that was the very beginning. What's different about the Trust Project is we were the very first to take on this project, and I'm glad others have followed because I feel that there is a great need to address the problem of trust in news because as trust declined, we found that mis and disinformation just flooded in, and for among the many reasons that it's so hard

to maintain a news organization right now productively, successfully, this is a key one, is disinformation, misinformation and the loss of trust that interacts with that.

0:07:23.1 MB: People confuse, correct me if I'm wrong, bias with fairness, right? I mean, all journalism, in a way, if a human being is writing a story, there has to be... There is always a little bias in that, and there's nothing wrong as long as you have certain elements that make it a journalistic story, am I correct? And you've kind of listed those, which I like. [laughter] You say fairness and accuracy, right? Publishing corrections, disclosures that explain our mission sources. Is it that what we have to do first is define what journalism is as opposed to a blogger or just an opinion program on television? I mean, do you start with that first, Sally, and then figure out the algorithms?

0:08:08.5 SL: Well, I do think that is what we have to do and we had to do and what we didn't do as the news industry when the digital era came upon us, because instead, we tried to become more like everything else out there. We started using clickbait headlines. We started running like mug shots and things like that that made it really hard for people to tell the difference. So, yes, and we do need to do that and we need to continue to differentiate ourselves because we didn't differentiate ourselves very well. We have learned the hard ways in industry that that's very harmful to us. And then the Trust Project has done some research that I'll tell you about in a minute, if you'd like, that really elaborates on that, that we've learned how the public sees us and what we need to do. And to get your... To kind of tie it to your earlier question, well, there are other organizations that have sprung up in this space.

0:09:06.9 SL: I don't know that they're really trying to define journalism like we had to do because we were the first and we had to figure out, well, how do we train these algorithms to understand what journalism is? And then how do we, even as an industry, learn to step up and articulate those standards to the public as well? But what we do that's different is we're research based, we're evidence based. All of our work continues to build upon this original set of research that we did. We also... And we like to share that research with others so that others can benefit, too. We also... We work globally. We're not a certification entity. We really focus on public engagement, empowering the public to differentiate between true journalism and everything else. And then there's the algorithm side. So we also... That's a differentiating factor. We work... We do work with technology platforms so that Google and Facebook and the others can... That their machines can tell the difference between journalism that has integrity behind it and everything else. And then there are... Yeah.

0:10:29.1 MB: I was going to say, I'm anxious to hear the research, but now I want to first... Can you can you define that a little more? Put a little bit more meat on the bone?

0:10:35.2 SL: Yep.

0:10:36.1 MB: How will the audience help determine that is a credible news source? Just treat me like I'm a four year old for a second. And then how does that turn into an algorithm that is being read by the machines that may...

0:10:50.1 SL: Well, there's two... There's two pieces. So what we did when we went out and talked with people about what it is that they value in the journalism, how do they decide what to trust and what to trust? We asked those two questions and we heard back things like, well, we understand

everybody aims to be impartial in journalism, but nobody really is. So tell us your agenda. Or we heard a lot about people wanting to get more of a sense of connection to a news organization. They wanted to know about our sources and how we got that... Where we got our information from. They wanted to see a differentiation between opinion and news, because in their minds, it was blending all together. And they even said to our researchers, we don't even think journalists know the difference between news and opinion because we can't tell. So what we're trying to do is help news organizations make it clear that we do have standards and policies and rules, if you will, that help journalists walk this path of independence and away from any kind of personal agenda, business agenda, or government agenda.

0:12:07.6 SL: So, yeah, we have an agenda, but it's just sort of the public. And so there is a trust indicator that says these are our policies and practices. It's called best practices and explains things like... Beyond ethics, it explains, for instance, why do we not name sources sometimes? What are our rules about that? Or what are our rules about running corrections or not? So that's one trust indicator out of eight. Another is explaining who the journalist is and showing that on the article page and then going deeper, where you actually have a journalist page about everyone and you provide specific things that we know the public is looking for, including something like, well, what is this person's topic expertise and what languages do they speak? Because we're a multicultural country and that helps people build trust. If they speak my language, then maybe they understand me better. So that's the various ways that we try to define journalism and show it to the public across all the dimensions that we learned were important to the public in this first round of user research. And then everything's connected to machine readable code. And that's how it connects up with those machines. They are able to... Google's algorithms and also their... Other systems are able to look at that and know, okay, this is coming from a journalistic enterprise.

0:13:35.5 MB: So essentially, you're giving it a kind of a good housekeeping seal of approval, which is read by the algorithms. Where is it policed?

0:13:43.7 SL: Well, that is something I worry about all the time. And from day one, it was a really big question from the public and from other news organizations. And in fact, Richard Gingras, Vice President of News at Google, told me once there is like you cannot police the Internet. So like that should be the goal is to get rid of everybody. But what we do is we vet everyone very carefully. So if a news organization wants to be part of the Trust Project, they need to tell us they want to. I explain what it means to do that, like the commitment involved. And then we work with the news organizations to implement these trust indicators. So and actually I'm skipping a really important step there, which is they must once they apply. So they let us know they're interested. They have to apply. They give us a whole set of information. We do some research and then we determine, through some peer review, are they really a qualified candidate? And then once we've determined that they are a qualified candidate, then we bring them into a process of implementation and we work with them through training and coaches to put the trust indicators in place and also apply that machine readable code.

0:15:04.1 MB: Sally, I got to tell you, I believe... I looked at your background. You're pretty darn smart. [chuckle] You got Stanford. You got... You got... You got Harvard, and not to mention that your board of directors is the most amazing I've ever seen. So let's assume I believe in my heart of hearts, your best of breed before I ask this question, because I don't want to... But let me just just say this now, because I have to be the devil's advocate on this program. What say you to a, I'm going to say his name, Ted Cruz, who says, how dare you be we? You're just a bunch of, and I'm

just making this up as I go. Ted, if you're watching, I didn't mean you're really going to say this, but someone that looks like, how dare you far left, left bringing whatever, whether, how can you judge what is good and bad? What say you? How is this we going to make sure it is fair and unbiased, even in today's very polarized, which is our country so we seem to be, culture warrior world?

0:16:04.9 SL: Yeah, well, and we also think about that. So we're not a partisan organization. We're very strongly nonpartisan. And I know that we get a lot of... Often get accusations that we meaning the news industry of being partisan. But we do have... We have structures in place that prevent that. Journalism is meant to engender democratic debate. So as a news... As an organization serving the broader news industry, what we aim to do is provide or invite in a diverse set of news participants as long as they adhere to the fundamental journalistic values. And that is the crux of it. So if a news organization that leans right or leans left and we can have a debate in the industry, whether that's even acceptable. But let's say that we do lean left and right. I think you said that earlier, then as long as the individual... One, they need to disclose that. So that's a Trust Project requirement is that if you have a political leaning, then you need to make that clear in your mission statement to your users. And then in your individual stories, it's important to provide a diversity of perspectives on an issue so that a user can make their own opinion.

0:17:31.0 MB: And I hope you didn't resent my questioning because making this sausage has been hard for everybody. But we put... You and I and I think everyone in this industry agrees, we've got to do something, and we have to start policing ourselves. By the way, if we can get this done right, a lot of the legislation that we're trying to get through would go through better, because one of the questions someone who's got their... Some political figures got their hand on the purse strings is asking is how do you define journalism? I'm going to help you support it without being involved in unfettered press. You better start telling us what journalism is because we can't. Again, we don't give licenses in our society. All right, I could go on and on in this, but I want to go back to what you just said. Now, you have research. It's fascinating what's starting to show now about how the public is starting to, if I may use the metaphor, news desert. I've been saying, well, then when you're in a news desert, you're getting thirsty and you want your news and people are starting... This is what I'm seeing. We just came back from a conference in Texas that showed new research that people respect local journalism no matter what their political party. What does the Trust Project have that shows a public desire for this truth?

0:18:45.0 SL: Well, yeah, I think that it's actually quite encouraging our research. So we see the data and I know it's hard to look at that more than half of people feel that the news industry isn't or that news organizations aren't holding the public interest as their primary motive, that they're actually just trying to serve their own business. We've seen declines in trust over years, but those are one, they're macro figures. So it's kind of looking at the highest level. And we saw it shift a lot during COVID too, going up and down in trust. What we see when we go out and talk to individuals, and that's how we do our research. It's a user-centered design approach, which publishers will know because you often use it in your own design approaches to your pages or what have you, your new initiatives. But we went out and talked to people one-on-one about what they value in the news, how they decide whether to trust it for themselves. And again, out of that, and then through a series of meetings with news executives and workshops we did, we came up with the eight trust indicators.

0:20:00.4 SL: Then we have continued to do more research in the intervening years, including one, the most recent batch was around... Was in the summer of 2020. We went out and same thing,

talked to people. And what we heard over and over was how much people did value the news. And we had four user categories. We had the avid news user who's out there checking, cross-checking the news, sharing it. We had the informed who's maybe your regular subscriber, but feels a little overwhelmed and also needing more. The opportunistic who is just there when the news washes over them, if they're in the break room or the airport. And then the... What then was the angry disengaged at our very beginning.

0:20:45.0 SL: Now in 2020, everyone became more engaged with news. Everyone across those categories said, "We see, like, we need to know what's going on in our world and in our communities. We need this for our own personal decisions and because we want to make our communities better." Now there is the angry disengaged. They became engaged with the wrong thing and they're still engaged. But there's this middle group that I call the anxious middle. And I call them anxious because, well, I'll tell you that in a second, but they are ready and open for news they can trust. And it's just for us to walk into... In through the door that's open for us by them.

0:21:30.5 SL: What we heard in this latest round of interviews, and I don't think anyone will be surprised by this, but was a lot of anxiety. People were so... They were upset about what they were reading in the news and anxious about that. They were worried that they'd heard about all this mis and disinformation. They were worried that one, they would get fooled by it and in a time of COVID, for instance, read something that's wrong and go do something that would be harmful to themselves and their families. And then worse yet in their minds was to become part of the whole cycle of dis and misinformation. As responsible people, they did not want that. So again, this is the anxious middle. This is our opportunity. This is where the eight trust indicators can come into play. We can teach them. These are the eight things you can look for based on what you've told us matter to you and we know is distinct to journalism and then news organizations can do a better job of communicating across all of those eight parameters and separating news from opinion.

0:22:38.6 MB: Sally Lehrman, Chief Executive Officer for the Trust Project. People want more information. You got a very easy URL. It's the trustproject.org, correct?

0:22:49.7 SL: Yes, that's right.

0:22:51.1 MB: It's very simple to find. And I urge everyone to at least read your Trust Project principles, because I think you guys did a great job of bulleting them out without being too ethereal. Here, I think our industry needs to see a place where we make sure we're policing ourselves. And this could be a solution that we should all take a look at. Sally, I appreciate your valuable time and your organization's hard work, and we'll be keeping an eye on it here at E&P.

0:23:20.7 SL: Well, thank you for the opportunity. I really appreciate it and enjoyed the conversation.

[music]