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Relationship Building as a Metacognitive News Literacy Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Trust is strained by polarization, platform distortion, and misinformation, and journalists are repeatedly told to "build relationships" with communities. But relationship building is usually framed as an engagement aspiration rather than as a professional practice with concrete decision points, risks, and constraints. This article asks: How do journalists describe and enact relationship building as a metacognitive news literacy behavior, and how do these practices shape reporting decisions and public-facing accountability? Drawing on newsroom-reconstruction interviews with 30 U.S. journalists, we conceptualize relationship building as an applied performance of news literacy across Context, Creation, Content, Circulation, and Consumption. Journalists describe relationship work as reflexive accountability: making knowledge-making legible (by showing verification and documenting choices), protecting access through representational care, building durable channels for reciprocal contact, and setting boundaries to manage independence and safety. They also identify enabling and inhibiting conditions—skills, orientations, professional norms, time scarcity, and platform incentives—that determine feasibility and can make relationship work uneven or counterproductive. Rather than treating trust as definitional, we position relationship building as a proximate craft and judgment work that newsrooms and journalism educators can operationalize.

Public confidence in news media has been strained by digital disruption, political polarization, and pervasive misinformation. In response, relationship building between journalists and their audiences is increasingly described as both an ethical imperative and a practical necessity. Journalists are urged to foster genuine connections with communities, attend to the needs of individuals and groups, and honor diversity as part of rebuilding legitimacy and sustaining the profession's public service mission (Wenzel 2019). At the same time, relationship work is not uniformly possible or uniformly welcomed. It is shaped by unequal power, constrained time, safety concerns, and the reality that some publics approach journalism with suspicion or hostility. These conditions make relationship building an important site for examining not only what journalists should do, but how journalists describe the reasoning that guides what they do.

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Such responsiveness and adaptability could steer journalism back to its public-oriented roots (Schudson 2003), fostering an informed and engaged citizenry. Engagement journalism, rooted in care-based practices, offers an appropriate framework for navigating this terrain of eroding trust (Robinson and Johnson 2024). By moving from a one-directional, detached style of reporting to more collaborative and responsive approaches, journalists can become not just informers but trusted partners in civic discourse. When audiences witness journalists making an authentic effort to connect and be transparent, it can lead to renewed trust, even across political divides and among those inclined to avoid the news. Journalism researchers thus proposed transparency and visible commitment to the public as antidotes to the pervasive doubts plaguing the profession (Karlsson 2010).

This turn toward reciprocal engagement envisions audiences not as passive consumers but as actors who shape, contest, and respond to journalistic work. Through strategies such as integrating audience feedback, hosting community dialogues, and opening up editorial processes, journalists can demystify the news-making process and make their role more legible. Such efforts are frequently framed as responses to misinformation and to news avoidance, and they also reaffirm journalism's civic mission. This argument is at the heart of contemporary news literacy discussions, particularly the concept of News Literacy Behaviors (NLBs), which are actions and habits that exemplify a literate approach to news.

In this paper, we focus on *relationship building* as an NLB that emerged from interviews with 30 American journalists. We conceptualize this behavior not only as an ethical, care-based journalistic strategy, but also as a metacognitive, news-literate practice: a way journalists reflect on and adapt their processes in response to credibility risks, informational needs, and relational consequences. Put differently, relationship building can serve as both professional practice and public-facing modeling, as journalists' visible commitments, follow-through, and responsiveness can teach audiences how journalism works and why it makes the choices it does. Relationship building as an NLB is closely tied to the project of rebuilding trust and modeling news-literate journalism (Johnson 2025a), in which journalists themselves embody the literacy skills often demanded of audiences, helping bridge the gap between news producers and the public.

Literature Review

News Literacy as a Journalistic Concern

News literacy is traditionally understood as a subset of media literacy that equips citizens with skills to critically interpret news and participate in democracy (Morris and Yeoman 2023). Early news literacy initiatives focused on teaching audiences to *think like journalists,* emphasizing the evaluation of information by applying knowledge of journalistic norms and practices (Malik, Cortesi, and Gasser 2013). This approach, sometimes termed as news appreciation model, assumes that if the public adopts journalistic habits (such as verification and critical thinking), they will be more resilient to misinformation and better informed. Indeed, news literacy has been promoted as a remedy against fake news and the post-truth era by empowering people to discern credible information (Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook 2017). However, the traditional audience-centric model of news literacy

has been criticized for its one-way nature. Scholars (Tully et al. 2022) have begun advocating an ecosystem approach that situates news literacy within the broader information environment. Tully et al. (2022) conceptualize news literacy across five domains (the "5Cs": Context, Creation, Content, Circulation, and Consumption), highlighting that understanding news requires insight into how news is produced, distributed, and consumed as a whole system. They developed this framework into measurable scales of knowledge and skills (Ashley et al. 2023), underscoring the multifaceted nature of news literacy.

Within this broader framework, researchers have called for greater attention to news literacy behaviors (NLBs) among audiences. Vraga et al. (2021) theorize NLBs as concrete actions that reflect a person's news literacy, such as verifying information, seeking credible sources, or reflecting on one's biases. Importantly, these behaviors were largely discussed as practices for audiences. Our approach, instead, examines these behaviors among journalists themselves, addressing a key gap in understanding the broader field of news literacy (Johnson, 2025a, 2025b). Our approach responds to the implicit assumption in news literacy education that audiences alone must change. If we expect the public to behave like journalists and be news-literate, it is equally reasonable to scrutinize whether journalists are modeling those behaviors in their work. Recent research has started to push back on the idea that only audiences bear responsibility for news literacy; instead, it frames news literacy as a shared project between journalists and the public (Morris and Yeoman 2023; author). This study serves that call by exploring the practices of professional journalists as exemplars of news literacy behaviors. By identifying how journalists enact NLBs in practice, we aim to refine the concept of NLBs and highlight their potential to make journalism itself more reflective and literate. Ultimately, fostering these behaviors among journalists could improve the profession's connection with communities and help educate the public through example (Johnson 2025a; Johnson, Gran, and Cohn 2025).

Engagement as an Ethic of Care

A significant body of literature links audience engagement efforts with trust, legitimacy, and democratic outcomes. As such engaged journalism has emerged as an umbrella term for practices that involve publics in the news process through forums, listening sessions, feedback loops, and collaborative forms of reporting (Robinson, Orozco, and Darr 2025). These practices are often framed as responses to fractured trust and as efforts to make journalism more responsive and relevant (Robinson 2023; Robinson and Johnson 2024; Wenzel 2019). Yet engagement does more than "build trust." It changes the relationship between journalists and publics by creating expectations for responsiveness, follow-through, and accountability, and it foregrounds the unequal conditions under which relationships are formed. If engagement invites the public into the journalistic process, it also raises ethical questions about what obligations journalists assume, how they manage boundaries, and what happens when relationship work is constrained by time, institutional pressure, or hostility.

One key concept that is especially helpful here is journalistic reflexivity – the idea that journalists should critically analyze their practices and assumptions. Reflexivity and transparency have become essential professional values aimed at enhancing legitimacy. Carlson (2016) explains how metajournalistic discourse (when journalists talk about

journalism) helps negotiate the profession's boundaries and meaning. By openly reflecting on their decisions and roles, journalists perform boundary work that can boost their legitimacy in the public's perception. Transparency practices – such as explaining reporting steps, revealing source material, or publicly correcting errors – are often seen as ways to foster trust (Karlsson 2010; Johnson, Gran, and Cohn 2025). Research shows that audiences respond positively to transparency signals, which can clarify reporting and reduce doubts about bias (Karlsson 2010). However, transparency alone can become an empty gesture if not paired with genuine relationship-building (Vos and Craft 2017). Our study links these ideas by proposing that *relationship building* is a form of transparency-in-action: it's not just about explaining how the news is made but about demonstrating it through ongoing interaction.

By being reflexive (self-critical and open about their work) and actively nurturing relationships, journalists practice a form of metacognitive journalism; they reflect on their thinking and share that process with others (Johnson 2025a; Johnson, Gran, and Cohn 2025). Journalists must constantly ask why certain stories resonate and whether high engagement means meaningful impact or just sensationalism (Johnson, Gran, and Cohn 2025). Increasingly, journalists are seen not only as providers of information but also as those who ensure it is understood and can be effectively used by citizens (Wenzel 2019). This demands a reflective mindset: a shift from simply transmitting facts to acting as a sense-maker or educator. That's where an ethic of care becomes valuable: it frames trust and legitimacy not as outcomes of disclosure alone but as relational responsibilities maintained through attentiveness, responsiveness, and boundary-setting.

An ethic of care provides a theoretical perspective for understanding why relationship building has become a central aspect of journalistic accountability. Care ethics highlights relationality and responsiveness, emphasizing that obligations develop through contact and interdependence rather than solely through abstract principles. Applied to journalism, a care perspective underscores the responsibilities that arise when journalists engage with communities, solicit stories, and direct public attention (Robinson and Johnson 2024). In this view, relationship building is not just a strategy for gaining access or managing reputation; it is an ethical practice involving listening, follow-through, and sensitivity to harm, along with the boundary-setting needed to stay independent and safe. Importantly, care does not mean agreement, deference, or unlimited availability. Relationship work can be refused, challenged, or even weaponized, and journalists must consider when responsiveness is possible, when it becomes exploitative, or when it poses unacceptable risks. This framework helps conceptualize relationship building as a practice that is both moral and limited, aligning with the study's focus on how journalists describe the reasoning they use to navigate relational work in real-world situations.

Care ethics scholarship identifies several core obligations that emerge through relational engagement: attentiveness to others' needs and contexts, responsiveness to those needs, competence in meeting them, and the willingness to be vulnerable by accepting that care involves risk and dependency (Tronto 2020). These obligations are not abstract duties but emerge from the particularity of relationships and the power dynamics within them. Noddings (2013) emphasizes that caring requires genuine receptivity– attending to the others' expressed needs rather than imposing one's own interpretation of what care should look like. Applied to journalism, this suggests

obligations extend beyond accurate reporting to include understanding how communities experience coverage, what harm might result, and how journalists' presence and departure affect those they engage with.

The relational nature of these obligations connects directly to journalistic reflexivity. Reflexivity demands that journalists examine not only their reporting practices but also their positionality- how their identity, institutional power, and resources shape interactions with sources and communities (Witschge and Nygren 2009). This critical self-examination becomes particularly important in community-engaged reporting, where journalists must acknowledge asymmetries – they can leave communities, control narrative framing, and benefit professionally from others' stories (Carlson and Lewis 2015). Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) argues that journalism's emotional labor – the work of building rapport, managing trauma, and navigating conflict – constitutes a form of care work that has been undertheorized despite being essential to critical practice. Recognizing relationship building as behavior makes visible the resources, time, and emotional investment required, challenging assumptions that engagement is cost-free or always appropriate.

Community-centered journalism scholarship further illuminates why these obligations matter for democratic function. Ferrucci, Nelson, and Davis (2020) demonstrate that journalists working closely with marginalized communities develop heightened awareness of representational harm and adopt practices prioritizing community benefit over organizational metrics. Robinson (2023) shows that sustained community relationships enable journalists to recognize when standard practices, such as publishing names or seeking official sources first, may perpetuate harm or exclude affected voices. These relational obligations thus become mechanisms through which journalists operationalize democratic ideals of inclusion and accountability.

The ideas discussed above establish relationship building as both ethically demanding and democratically essential, creating a foundation for understanding it as a News Literature Journalism (NLJ) behavior. NLJ reframes professional practices as publicly legible demonstration of credibility work rather than internal virtues (Johnson 2025a, 2025b). Recent work in NLJ explains why relationship building should be part of discussions on news literacy behaviors. Instead of viewing news literacy only as an audience skill, NLJ redefines it as a set of professional actions that journalists themselves describe, practice, and defend as part of producing credible, publicly accountable work (Johnson 2025a). In this view, metacognition is not just an abstract addition; it acts as the link that connects journalistic ideals with the everyday judgments that support them, including how journalists reflect on their work conditions, manage routines under constraints, and adapt practices when credibility, harm, or misunderstanding become immediate risks (Johnson 2025a; Johnson, Gran, and Cohn 2025). This perspective allows relationship-building to be seen not only as an engagement strategy or a professional virtue, but also as a form of reflective practice through which journalists create, revise, and publicly justify their responsibilities to communities.

Building on this foundation, the article explores relationship-building as a metacognitive news-literacy behavior practiced by working journalists. While often described as a professional virtue or an engagement strategy, these framings can obscure the reflective and self-regulating thinking involved in relational work. Journalists do not simply "have relationships." They continuously assess how relationships influence what they can

know, verify, responsibly publish, and the obligations that arise once focus is on a person or community. When viewed as a news literacy behavior, relationship building reveals itself as a conscious judgment about access, credibility, reciprocity, and accountability, all made under conditions of uneven power, limited time, and contested trust.

Guided by this focus, the study asks: *How do journalists describe and enact relationship-building as a metacognitive news literacy behavior, and how do these relational practices shape reporting decisions and public-facing accountability?*

To answer this question, the article draws on interview data with 30 American journalists working in various roles and beats to identify the practices they associate with relationship building, the reasoning they use to justify and adjust these practices, and the constraints and tradeoffs that influence when relationship building is possible, sustainable, or ethically complicated. The findings position relationship building not as a feel-good addition to journalism but as reflective professional work through which journalists attempt to secure knowledge, mitigate harm, and make accountability more legible to publics.

Method

This study explores how journalists engage in news literacy behaviors by examining how journalists conceive, develop, and present news stories in practice through a newsroom reconstruction, interview-based approach. The newsroom reconstruction approach involves having journalists walk through the production of specific news items in retrospect (Reich and Barnoy 2020). By articulating their decision-making processes step by step, journalists reveal both the cognitive and structural influences on their work, bridging the gap between stated norms and actual practice (Reich and Barnoy 2020; Johnson 2025c). We conducted in-depth interviews with 30 journalists from diverse backgrounds and newsrooms. Journalists were recruited via an initial survey distributed through professional journalism organizations and industry networks. Journalists were purposively selected to capture variation in professional role (e.g., reporters, editors, anchors, newsroom directors), media format (print, broadcast, digital), geographic location, and personal demographics. This ensured the representation of voices across different newsroom environments and audience contexts.

Interviews were conducted one-on-one via Zoom and were semi-structured. Each session lasted 90 min to 2 h. The interview was organized into two parts, each using a reconstruction exercise: First, journalists were asked to select a recent news story they had worked on. Journalists recounted how the story was conceived, how they gathered information and vetted sources, the editorial decisions made, and how the piece was ultimately presented to the public. Throughout this process, the researcher probed for instances where news literacy principles came into play, including how journalists verified facts (Creation), considered context and potential impact (Context), decided what to include or exclude (Content), and made decisions about dissemination, follow-through, and interaction with publics (Circulation/Consumption).

Second, each journalist was presented with a brief scenario exercise: a generic news item (a text-only Associated Press (AP) wire story about the banning of a horror film in Hong Kong). The story was outside the journalists' usual beat to observe how they apply news literacy skills when encountering unfamiliar content. Journalists were asked to evaluate

the story's credibility, newsworthiness, and what further information or context might be needed before publishing it. This exercise prompted them to adopt the dual perspective of a news consumer and news producer. They critically analyzed a news piece as if verifying it themselves (a news literacy task) and considered how their audience might perceive it.

Reflection and metacognitive commentary were encouraged throughout both parts of the interview. After describing each step or decision, journalists were asked why they made certain choices and how confident they were in those choices. They were also asked how they might explain those decisions to the public or to another journalist. This not only provided insight into their internal reasoning but also touched on their sense of accountability and transparency with audiences. All interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. Journalists were assured that their identities would remain confidential; therefore, we refer to them by role descriptors (e.g., "an anchor") in our reporting.

Data Analysis

Themes were derived from multiple rounds of inductive coding. In the first coding cycle, the focus was on the journalists' own words, identifying concrete actions or beliefs (e.g., "seeks audience feedback before finalizing story," "mentions explaining process to readers," and "frustration with metrics"). This resulted in a comprehensive list of first-order concepts, encompassing everything from trust-building efforts to ethical dilemmas and time constraints. The goal here was not to impose preconceived categories but to let the journalists' experiences dictate the coding labels (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). By doing so, the analysis remained grounded in journalists' perspectives. Second-cycle coding identified relationships and patterns among the open codes. Related concepts were grouped into second-order themes, leading to several news literacy behaviors. In this paper, we focus on one: relationship building.

Findings

To conceptualize relationship building as a news literacy behavior, the analysis adapts the structure proposed by Vraga et al. (2021). We treat relationship building as an applied performance of news literacy across the 5Cs (Tully et al. 2022) and use those domains to specify what journalists describe doing and why those actions "count" as news literate. We also attend to the conditions that shape whether and how relationship work is performed: relevant knowledge and skills, orientations toward the work, professional and newsroom norms, and practical constraints that affect feasibility (including time, resources, safety, and platform conditions). Throughout, we foreground relationship building as a critical engagement, emphasizing the conscious, reflexive judgments through which journalists assess credibility, anticipate harm, and render accountability legible. Finally, we distinguish relationship building as the proximate behavior from downstream outcomes such as trust, engagement, or civic learning.

Mapping Relationship Building with the 5Cs

To begin conceptualizing relationship building as a metacognitive news literacy behavior, we map journalists' descriptions of relationship work across the five domains of news

literacy: Context, Creation, Content, Circulation, and Consumption. The 5Cs are useful here because they specify where relationship building looks like applied news literacy, meaning the performance of knowledge about how news is situated, produced, evidenced, circulated, and judged, rather than an abstract professional virtue or a guaranteed outcome like trust.

Relationship building appears in Context when journalists describe how polarized climates, extractive histories, and credibility cues shape whether relationships are possible and what professional self-presentation is required. John, a newspaper reporter, captured the reputational inheritance journalists must work inside: "Most people haven't interacted with a journalist before … all they think is that they're there to poach information, and then they leave." Another local news reporter, Chris, described how quickly contextual signals can assign partisan identity and fracture credibility: "If you have Fox News above your head, you're saying to Democrats that, hey, I'm biased … you have to cover them exactly the same as you cover everybody else." In this domain, relationship building is enacted through situational diagnosis and self-regulation, with journalists reflecting on the conditions that make access, cooperation, and accountability feasible.

Relationship building appears in Creation when journalists use reporting routines and professional judgment to protect credibility, sustain access, and determine what counts as publishable under constraints. Dom, a national TV reporter, framed relationship durability as dependent on repeated demonstrations of accuracy and fairness across encounters: "You got to build a relationship with that mayor because you can't just do this one interview," because for Dom, if "you misquoted them or you took their quote out of context" then "you're cut off." Here, relationship building is enacted through choices about verification, pacing, and how journalists manage the risks that a single reporting lapse will foreclose future knowledge-gathering.

Relationship building appears in Content when journalists describe making verification, integrity, and correction visible in ways that help others evaluate journalism's "news-ness" and credibility. Dom also described the relational importance of making evidence legible: "If you can show [your work] to the public, comparing that to a blog site that doesn't have any of those primary sources, that helps them recognize what reputable information looks like." He tied this to routinized transparency that lets publics audit knowledge claims: "I always hyperlink because I want people to see the credibility of my stories." Ellis, a regional breaking news reporter, framed corrections as a boundary marker that sustains accountability: "If they're making corrections, then that's what separates them from, you know, propaganda." In this domain, relationship building becomes news-literate through representational discipline and visible evidentiary practice.

Relationship building appears in Circulation when journalists describe creating durable channels for contact, follow-through, and feedback that persist beyond a single story. Ally emphasized in-person circulation as relational presence: "go in person, go to the library, and do little pop-up newsrooms to put themselves out there." She also described formal mechanisms for two-way exchange as part of her work as an audience engagement manager, such as "putting together a community advisory board and feedback surveys." Brandy, an editor of an internet-native lifestyle publication, framed newsletters as a relationship tool rather than a distribution tool: "We try to build relationships as opposed to just like throwing information at them." In this domain, relationship building

is enacted through the infrastructures that make journalists reachable and accountable over time.

Relationship building appears in Consumption when journalists anticipate how people will interpret their journalism, what they will treat as usable, and how credibility claims will be filtered through prior beliefs and constraints. Non-profit newsroom leader Jack articulated journalism's civic function as meeting information needs: "Journalism is the way that people meet information needs of the people in their community." Adam, the editor-in-chief of a national news agency, encouraged "transmit[ting] that information in a digestible format." In this domain, relationship building is enacted through reflexive calibration, as journalists adjust their explanations, context, and boundary-setting based on how they expect their work will be received, misunderstood, or rejected.

Conceptualizing the Behavior

The next conceptual move is to specify what journalists describe as shaping whether relationship work is possible, sustainable, and professionally legitimate. Following Vraga et al.'s (2021) behavioral structure, we do not treat relationship building as a stable disposition that journalists either "have" or "lack." Instead, journalists' accounts portray relationship building as a practice enabled or constrained by four interlocking factors: the knowledge and skills required to do relationship work well; journalists' orientations toward the value, obligation, and risk of relationship work; the social and professional norms that authorize or discourage it; and perceived feasibility under real constraints. These factors help explain variation in how relationship building is enacted, how it is rationalized, and why it sometimes fails or becomes counterproductive.

Journalists described relationship building as dependent on knowledge and skills that make credibility, fairness, and care actionable. Relationship work was rarely framed as interpersonal warmth or generic "community engagement." It was embedded in craft competence, especially the ability to produce and communicate verifiable knowledge claims under conditions of skepticism. When Dom described showing primary sources and hyperlinking documentation, the emphasis was not on transparency as a moral posture but on the skill of constructing an evidentiary trail that others can inspect. Relationship building, in this sense, depends on translating professional routines into public-facing cues that can withstand doubt. Journalists also treated relationship work as a representational discipline: quoting accurately, contextualizing fairly, and avoiding preventable misrepresentation. Dom's warning that misquoting a mayor can lead to being "cut off" makes the relational stakes of basic reporting competence explicit. Kevin, a reporter from a regional trade publication, shared that protecting a sensitive source's contact information frames relational skill as judgment about vulnerability and exposure. In the interviews, relationship-building was inseparable from the day-to-day practice of journalism as a careful, defensible practice. Journalists also pointed to communicative competencies that are often dismissed as "soft skills" but function as professional resources for access and accountability. Several accounts emphasize learning how to explain intentions, clarify one's angle, and make oneself legible to sources and publics who do not share newsroom assumptions about what journalists do and why. Across the interviews, relationship building requires articulation, listening, and calibration, not only for better sourcing but also for public-facing accountability.

Journalists' orientations toward relationship building shaped whether it was framed as obligation, strategy, or risk. Some accounts treat relationship work as central to journalism's civic purpose. Jack's definition of journalism as "the way that people meet information needs of the people in their community" frames relationship building as service rather than branding. Adam similarly emphasized transmitting information in "a digestible format" for people with limited time or access, reflecting an orientation toward usability and responsiveness that supports relational continuity. Other accounts position relationship work as an intentional response to mistrust and the erosion of presumed legitimacy. At the same time, journalists also described relationship work as risky or easily weaponized. Political polarization and hostility shaped whether relationship building was pursued broadly, selectively, or with strict limits. International reporter Eamon's diagnosis that "politics may be the greatest barrier to news literacy" signals an interpretive stance in which relationships are formed amid entrenched filters rather than open invitations to dialogue. In that framing, relationship work often becomes more procedural and more bounded, oriented toward defensible practice rather than mutuality.

Journalists emphasized that journalism norms authorize some forms of relationship work and cast others as improper. Relationship building was negotiated not only against external skepticism but also within professional expectations about independence, neutrality, and legitimacy. National trade reporter Ryan also sees norms surface in the boundary management that journalists described with sources, especially with politics. To him, relationship building was understood as necessary for access and understanding, yet constrained by the fear of appearing too close, compromised, or extractive. This emphasis on returning "over and over" while avoiding misrepresentation positions relationship work as operating within an ethic of fairness and accuracy rather than personal loyalty. Kevin's decision not to share a source's contact information similarly reflects a norm of restraint and protection, even when that restraint could reduce competitive advantage. Journalists also described how newsroom cultures can legitimate relationship work as part of "real reporting" or treat it as extra labor that competes with production demands. Advisory boards, pop-up newsrooms, and newsletters may be framed as valued institutional practices, but they can be discounted if they lack staffing, adequate workloads, and alignment with editorial priorities. Norms, in other words, shape what kinds of relationship work are rewarded, made visible, and sustained.

Hostile climates further constrained the feasibility by raising the costs and risks of relationship work. Ryan's characterization of politics as a barrier and Kevin's emphasis on how restraint can trigger distrust indicate that relationship building is not uniformly welcomed and is sometimes interpreted through antagonistic frames. Safety concerns sharpen this constraint, especially when reporting is reframed through sensational headlines or circulated in ways that intensify anger. Regional reporter Lynn's observation that "because of the headline, they've gotten death threats and it's scary" shows that relationship work is vulnerable to organizational and platform dynamics journalists do not fully control. Lynn also described the disconnect between journalists' intentions and the public-facing presentation of their work: "The reporters … have made comments about their headlines that they submit, which are far more reflective of the story they wrote, but aren't what end up showing up." Even when journalists attempt relationship building through accurate framing and careful explanation, distribution choices can trigger

backlash, erode credibility, or heighten risk. Feasibility, then, is not only an individual constraint. It is institutional and infrastructural.

Feasibility constraints often determined whether relationship work could be performed at all, even when journalists valued it. The most persistent constraint was time under shrinking staff and accelerated output expectations. Local radio producer Aaron's observation that "The reporters are stretched too thin, and the quality is suffering from all of that" frames relationship building as labor that competes directly with production volume. When time is scarce, it becomes harder to enact relationship work through careful verification, ongoing presence, and follow-through, even as those practices become more necessary under mistrust. Journalists also described technical and infrastructural barriers as feasibility constraints that drain time and attention away from accountability and engagement. Chris's comment that "Every second you have to waste fighting with your Internet or your content management system to work is time you don't have. You're not going to be able to [spend time] interacting with community or being transparent" positions technology as an active limiter of relationship work. This account also underscores a practical feature of relationship building as a news literacy behavior: practices that make journalism legible, such as linking sources or explaining processes, require additional labor that is often invisible in newsroom planning.

The mapping, enabling, and inhibiting conditions support a definition of relationship building that is behavioral, reflexive, and analytically separable from its downstream effects. Journalists described relationship building as requiring competencies that make accountability actionable; orientations that frame the work as obligation, strategy, or risk; norms that authorize and limit relational conduct; and feasibility conditions that can render relationship work fragile or counterproductive. We therefore define relationship building as a metacognitive news literacy behavior: *a patterned set of journalistic practices through which journalists cultivate, sustain, and regulate relationships with sources and publics by reflecting on their routines and assumptions, evaluating credibility and harm risks, and adapting their practices to make knowledge-making and accountability legible to others.* Relationship building is news-literate insofar as it functions as an applied performance of the 5Cs, and it is metacognitive insofar as it involves ongoing monitoring, regulation, and adaptation of how journalists engage others. Consistent with Vraga et al.'s (2021) approach, we treat relationship building as the proximate behavior itself; outcomes such as trust, engagement, or civic learning remain possible consequences rather than definitional features. This prepares the next conceptual step in the findings: specifying how relationship building operates as critical engagement, where journalists' reflective judgment is most visible in their diagnosis of situations, setting boundaries, and adapting relational practice amid contested trust and constraint.

Relationship Building as Critical Engagement

The next step is to show why relationship building qualifies as critical engagement rather than generic rapport, outreach, or customer service. In the interviews, relationship building became most clearly news-literate and metacognitive when journalists described the reflexive judgments that accompany relational work: monitoring how credibility is earned or lost; interrogating what counts as fair, extractive, or ethically defensible; anticipating harm; and deciding what to disclose, what to refuse, and what boundaries must hold.

Journalists did not describe relationship building as a stable posture of friendliness. They described it as reflexive reasoning about how relationships condition what can be known, what can be said, and what accountability requires in a specific situation.

A recurring feature of relationship work was the claim that credibility must be actively produced and defended in an environment where skepticism is often the default. Regional reporter Anne framed "show[ing] that to the public" as a way to let audiences compare reporting grounded in "primary sources" with sources that lack evidentiary standards. Her orientation treats relationship building as instruction-by-demonstration: journalists make standards visible not only to be believed, but to invite scrutiny. This is critical engagement because it requires deliberate processing about what legitimacy looks like to others and how newsroom routines can be translated into public-facing cues of accountability. Relatedly, the "sound" threshold that appeared in the interview material reflects a preemptive internal check against speed, pressure, and anticipated backlash. Journalists described holding stories, corroborating further, or slowing publication because they were reasoning forward: What will endure once contested? What will appear fair rather than evasive? That anticipatory regulation is the metacognitive core of the behavior.

Correction practices also surfaced as a form of relational accountability rather than a private quality-control mechanism. Ellis's distinction, "if they're making corrections, then that's what separates them from, you know, propaganda," frames corrections as a repeated public action that sustains the conditions under which people may continue to treat journalism as good-faith knowledge work, even after error. The relationship function is not the apology itself; it is the ongoing demonstration that claims remain answerable to evidence and revision. Relationship work is not closeness for its own sake. It is the ongoing regulation of one's practices to ensure future access, candor, and cooperation remain possible. The implicit question is: What will count as fair treatment, and what will be experienced as betrayal or extraction?

That reasoning extends to journalists' recognition that many publics interpret reporting encounters through an extractive frame. International magazine reporter Lane's observation that people often think journalists arrive "with forgone conclusions or answers, and they just want the information they came for" points to the interpretive context that relationship-building must confront. Under those conditions, relationship building becomes news-literate when journalists name the history of extraction and deliberately reorient conduct toward presence, follow-through, and reciprocity. The critical work is not sentimental connection, but self-interrogation about obligation: What do I take on when I initiate contact, ask for testimony, and direct attention? This is also where a care-ethics framing can later clarify how obligations arise through contact without collapsing them into agreement, deference, or unlimited availability.

Journalists also framed relationship building as critical engagement when they described designing and maintaining spaces where journalism can be encountered, questioned, and contested. Ally's encouragement to "go in person … go to the library and do little pop-up newsrooms" treats relationship work as a deliberate reconfiguration of journalistic presence. The goal is not popularity. It is creating conditions where people can ask questions and witness journalists as accountable actors. Brandy's distinction between "build[ing] relationships" and "just like throwing information" similarly positions newsletters as relationship infrastructure rather than distribution alone. Ally's advisory board and feedback surveys extend this logic by formalizing listening in moments when a newsroom

is "weighing an opinion and thinking about an issue." These infrastructures require continual calibration: what kinds of participation are meaningful, what gets integrated, what is performative, and what forms of openness create risk.

The interviews also make clear that critical engagement includes diagnosing when relationship work becomes unsafe, distorted, or counterproductive. In polarized climates, journalists described having to anticipate how symbolic cues or perceived affiliations would be read, and to regulate their professional performance accordingly. Lynn's account of death threats "because of the headline," alongside the observation that reporters' preferred headlines often "aren't what end up showing up," underscores that relationship work can be undermined by forces outside a reporter's control. When editorial choices, platform incentives, or circulation dynamics distort framing, relationship-building efforts can backfire by intensifying anger, increasing risk, and eroding credibility.

Relationship building qualifies as critical engagement, then, because it is enacted through reflexive reasoning about credibility, obligation, and harm. Journalists describe monitoring their own routines and assumptions, regulating boundaries with sources and publics, and adapting strategies as interactional conditions shift. The costs of miscalibration are concrete: loss of access, erosion of legitimacy, and in some contexts, threats to personal safety. This is what makes relationship building not simply interpersonal, but metacognitive and news-literate in practice.

Distinguishing Relationship Building as a Proximate Behavior from Downstream Outcomes

The final conceptual step is to separate relationship building as the behavior itself from the outcomes often rhetorically attached to it. Journalists described relationship building as proximate, enacted practice that can be performed even when outcomes do not follow, and that can produce negligible, uneven, or negative results depending on context, power, and constraints. Keeping outcomes outside the definition makes the metacognitive work visible: journalists must diagnose fit, regulate boundaries, and adapt practice amid contested trust.

Across the interviews, journalists described relationship building as what they do to maintain relational continuity and make professional judgment legible to sources and publics. Those proximate practices include evidentiary transparency and process visibility (showing primary sources; hyperlinking documentation), correction and revision protocols, and decisions that protect sources and manage representation. Dom's account of showing audiences what "reputable information looks like and sound[s] like," and his routine of hyperlinking so readers can "see the credibility," frame relationship building as enacted commitment to verifiability rather than a claim to be trusted. Ellis's emphasis that public and explained corrections distinguish journalism from "propaganda" similarly positions relationship work as a repeated, public-facing performance of accountability over time.

Relationship building also appears in how journalists manage access and sustain sourcing relationships. Local reporter Meghan's refusal to "share a source's contact information willy nilly" exemplifies relational protection as practice. Dom's warning that misquoting a mayor can lead to being "cut off" underscores that representational integrity is not an abstract value. It is a behavioral stake with immediate consequences for what

information can be gathered and responsibly sustained. These are observable actions and judgments that can be named and analyzed without presuming they will yield any particular shift in audience attitudes.

At the same time, the interviews clarify why outcomes such as trust, engagement, or civic learning remain contingent, heterogeneous, and sometimes negative. Political polarization and hostile interpretive frames can make journalistic intent irrelevant or suspect. Eamon's diagnosis that "politics may be the greatest barrier to news literacy" points to a problem that relationship work alone cannot resolve. National reporter Spencer's observation that an affiliation cue like "Fox News" can signal bias to Democrats also underscores how trust judgments are shaped by symbolic environments and partisan heuristics that go beyond any single interaction or transparency gesture.

Resource constraints further shape whether relationship-building can be enacted at the intensity and frequency needed to plausibly shift outcomes. Aaron's comment that reporters are "stretched too thin" and that "quality is suffering" suggests that even when journalists value relationship work, they may not consistently perform it enough for publics to experience durable responsiveness. Chris's account that time lost to technological struggle reduces the ability to be "interacting with community or being transparent" reinforces that outcomes are partly a function of newsroom capacity. Under these conditions, relationship work may still occur as meaningful acts, but the structural environment undermines follow-through.

The interviews also offer negative or counterproductive cases that further justify keeping outcomes outside the definition. Lynn's observation that journalists received death threats "because of the headline" highlights how circulation dynamics can intensify hostility and personal risk even when reporting practices are careful. Lynn also noted that reporters' submitted headlines, "far more reflective of the story they wrote," often "aren't what end up showing up." When editorial or platform pressures push framing toward attention capture, relationship work can be undermined and even reversed: publics may encounter a story in a distorted form that triggers anger, reinforces distrust, or escalates threats regardless of a journalist's underlying intent or process transparency. Relationship outcomes can also be fragile and easily destroyed by a single perceived violation. Dom's account that misquoting or taking a quote "out of context" can lead to being "cut off" shows how access and trust can collapse quickly, even after sustained effort. John's description of publics viewing journalism as extractive "poach[ing] information … and then they leave" points to an interpretive context in which relationship building may be read cynically unless paired with long-term presence and follow-through.

One implication of these accounts is that journalists often approach relationship building reflexively, even when they do not label it as such. They assess whether relational strategies fit the situation; whether transparency will clarify or inflame; whether engagement mechanisms will attract good-faith participation or harassment; and whether institutional constraints allow meaningful follow-through. This reflexive orientation is part of what makes relationship building metacognitive and news-literate: journalists are evaluating not only what they know and what they can verify, but the relational consequences of how knowledge is produced, framed, and circulated. This also clarifies why platform power and audience heterogeneity matter for outcomes. Journalists described operating inside ecosystems where distribution logics, headline optimization, and polarized communities shape how accountability signals are received. Under these conditions,

relationship building is best understood as proximate professional work: the applied performance of accountability under constraint.

Discussion

This study advances research on news literacy behaviors by conceptualizing *relationship building* as a metacognitive news literacy behavior enacted by journalists. Drawing on interviews with 30 U.S. journalists, we show that relationship building is not best understood as a generalized professional virtue, nor as a synonym for engagement or trust. Instead, journalists describe relationship building as proximate, enacted work that makes knowledge-making and accountability legible: calibrating what counts as credible, anticipating how credibility will be judged, regulating harm exposure, and sustaining access and responsiveness through decisions about process visibility, representation, and boundaries.

To make the findings actionable, Table 1 synthesizes relationship building as a metacognitive news literacy behavior into (a) core components of the proximate behavior, (b) representative strategies journalists described, (c) checks that reflect metacognitive regulation, and (d) boundary conditions that shape when relationship work becomes constrained, unsafe, or counterproductive.

The components in the table show that relationship building is not reducible to being personable or to "doing engagement." Relationship building functions as reflexive accountability work: journalists monitor credibility and harm risks, set and renegotiate boundaries, and adapt transparency and contact practices to the relational and platform conditions of the moment. The table also makes visible why downstream outcomes cannot be assumed. In polarized or hostile environments, and under conditions of platform distortion or newsroom scarcity, the same relationship strategy can yield minimal benefit or generate additional labor, exposure, or backlash. This is where an ethic of care is analytically useful, not as a call for deference, but as a way to theorize how obligations, attentiveness, and limits emerge through contact and are continuously recalibrated (Tronto 2020).

The findings also clarify how relationship building shapes reporting decisions and public-facing accountability (Johnson, Gran, and Cohn 2025). In journalists' accounts, relationship work is embedded in decisions that determine what can be known and what can be responsibly said. This includes the evidentiary infrastructure of reporting (making verification visible through documentation practices), representational discipline (correction and contextualization as accountability protocols), and boundary-setting that preserves both independence and safety. These are epistemic and ethical judgments that structure reporting trajectories, including whether journalists pursue a claim, how they decide a threshold of "soundness," what they communicate about uncertainty, and how they regulate exposure for sources, themselves, and their publics. Relationship building is not an add-on after reporting is complete. It is part of the judgment work that shapes reporting practice from inception through publication and circulation.

A key implication is that relationship building is enacted through reasoning rather than rapport. Journalists do not describe relationship building primarily as friendliness or customer service. They describe a continuous process of evaluating credibility, fairness, and harm, then adapting practice in response, much as Robinson and Johnson (2024) learned

Table 1. Relationship building as a metacognitive news literacy behavior: Components, strategies, reflexive checks, and constraints.

Component of *relationship building* as an NLB (proximate)	What journalists do (strategies/actions)	Metacognitive/reflexive checks (examples)	Primary 5C domain(s)	Common constraints/ downsides (boundary conditions)
Making knowledge-making legible (process visibility)	"Show the work" (link to primary sources; explain verification; document attempts to reach sources); clarify angle; explain editorial choices	What would a reasonable skeptic need to see to evaluate this claim? What can I disclose without increasing harm?	Creation, Content, Context	Time cost; "transparency" can be weaponized; disclosure can increase harassment risk; CMS/tech friction
Sustaining trust with sources through representational care	Protect sensitive contact info; avoid out-of-context quoting; follow up and check understanding; maintain fairness even under deadline	Have I accurately represented this person's meaning? What would feel extractive or betrayal-like here?	Content, Creation	Misquote/out-of-context can end access; pressure for speed; editorial framing can distort intent
Building community presence and reciprocal contact	Pop-up newsrooms; in-person events; listening sessions; newsletters as relationship channels; Q&As; community advisory boards/ surveys	Is this engagement reciprocal or performative? Are we resourcing follow-through, or inviting expectations we cannot meet?	Circulation, Consumption, Context	Moderator labor; burnout; hostility/ bad-faith engagement; uneven participation (not representative)
Boundary-setting and safety regulation	Decide when not to engage; set norms for comments; avoid personal disclosure; manage political symbols/identity cues; de-escalate	When does responsiveness become unsafe, manipulative, or professionally compromising? What boundaries preserve independence and safety?	Consumption, Circulation, Context	Polarized climates; threats; identity-based hostility; platform amplification of conflict
Adapting relationship work under constraints	Prioritize relationship actions that are sustainable (templates for transparency; routinized follow-up; team roles); resist clickbait distortions where possible	What is feasible given the workload and newsroom capacity? What relationship practice can be routinized without eroding reporting depth?	Creation, Circulation	Staffing shortages; metrics pressure; headline optimization; less time for in-depth reporting

in their work on care-based journalism practices. This is where metacognition is most visible: the behavior involves anticipating how others will read one's routines and institutional procedures and regulating them accordingly (Johnson 2025a; Johnson, Gran, and Cohn 2025). The emphasis is less on transparency as a stable posture, much as some noted (Karlsson 2010; Vos and Craft 2017) and more on process legibility as an accountable response to contested legitimacy.

The study also shows why it is analytically necessary to separate relationship-building from engagement outcomes such as trust, engagement, and civic learning (Ferrucci, Nelson, and Davis 2020). Journalists often hope relationship work will support those outcomes, but their accounts show why outcomes remain contingent: polarized interpretive

environments can override journalistic intent, platform distribution and headline dynamics can distort accountability signals, and constrained newsroom capacity can prevent sustained follow-through. Under such conditions, the same strategy that is framed as accountable in one setting can be read as biased, manipulative, or insufficient in another. In some cases, relationship work creates added labor, intensifies exposure to harassment, and heightens burnout. Treating relationship building as a proximate behavior allows scholarship to specify what journalists actually do, the reflexive checks that organize the work, and the boundary conditions that structure feasibility, without assuming that outcomes necessarily follow.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conceptualizing relationship building as a metacognitive news literacy behavior carries implications for journalism practice, journalism education, and future research. For practice, the findings suggest that relationship work is most productively understood as an accountable routine rather than episodic outreach. Newsrooms that want to support relationship building should focus less on exhortations to "engage" and more on enabling the conditions that make accountable relationship work feasible and safe. That includes routinizing forms of process visibility that do not depend on individual heroics, distributing relational labor across roles rather than loading it onto reporters already stretched thin, and developing explicit protocols for boundary-setting and safety regulation in hostile environments. The reflexive checks surfaced in this study can be translated into newsroom tools: when transparency clarifies rather than inflames, what disclosure increases harm, what feedback channels are meaningful rather than performative, and what follow-through is realistic given capacity.

For journalism education, the findings indicate that relationship building should be taught as part of journalistic craft and judgment, not as an optional specialization. Students need practice translating knowledge-making into publicly legible accountability cues, making defensible decisions about representation and correction, and learning how to set boundaries that preserve independence and safety. They also need structured opportunities to develop metacognitive habits that are central to relationship work: naming assumptions about audiences and sources, anticipating how legitimacy will be judged, and reflecting on how reporting routines can become extractive under deadline and institutional pressure. Instruction can operationalize these aims by building assignments around process documentation, explanation of editorial choices, scenario-based boundary decisions, and prompts keyed to the reflexive checks in Table 1.

For future research should extend this conceptualization in three directions. First, studies can examine variation across beats, newsroom sizes, and political environments to specify how boundary conditions shape which relationship practices are feasible and which are most vulnerable to distortion or backlash. Second, scholarship can examine how platform power and distribution dynamics shape whether accountability signals are preserved, altered, or inverted as stories circulate, particularly where headlines, excerpts, or algorithmic logics reshape what publics encounter. Third, research can test links between proximate relationship practices and downstream outcomes, without treating those outcomes as definitional. Longitudinal and comparative designs can assess when relationship building is experienced as a credible accountability practice, when it is dismissed or

weaponized, and how newsrooms can structure relationship work to support both journalistic sustainability and public-facing accountability.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Patrick R. Johnson:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Sohana Nasrin:** Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure Statement

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