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# Bolstering trust by 'letting them know who we are': How *New York Times* 'enhanced bios' signal expertise

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## Abstract

What do news organizations treat as expertise when detailing their staff's backgrounds and experiences? In this study, we apply the dual concepts of "connection-based reporting" and "political identity ownership" to examine *New York Times* "enhanced bios," the paper's initiative to publish more detailed information about newsroom staff highlighting what they describe as their "deep expertise," unique perspectives, and personal backgrounds. Using a large corpus of bios ($N = 1160$) scraped from the paper's website, we find that most bios stick to "safe" areas of identity disclosure including previous journalistic employment, awards won, books published, and academic credentials from often elite universities. In so doing, the initiative underscores the degree to which the paper's reporting staff overrepresents those with elite backgrounds and geographic connections to cosmopolitan communities where wealth and power is concentrated. We theorize that the absence of disclosure emphasizing alternative personal characteristics or social identities suggests an adherence to constraining professional norms around what "counts" as expertise as well as a hesitance within the profession around foregrounding particular aspects of identity presumed to be politically salient. At the same time, we argue that these patterns may further alienate some audiences, especially those on the right in the US, who may view conventional, institutional signals of expertise as ideologically liberal.

## Keywords

Connection-based reporting, journalism practice, political identity ownership, professional norms, trust in news

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How do news outlets cultivate personal connections in polarized societies where their political neutrality is increasingly questioned (Grierson, 2024; Mullin and Robertson, 2024)? In this critical case study, we apply "connection-based reporting" (Velloso, 2023) and "political identity ownership" (Kreiss et al., 2020) to a large corpus of journalist biographies scraped from the *New York Times* website ($N = 1160$). We ask what characteristics of "deep expertise" (New York Times Company, 2024) the paper and its journalists choose to highlight using "enhanced bios" (Benton, 2024; Tameez, 2023), a new initiative the paper has adopted in an effort to deepen their "audience's trust in our mission and in the credibility of our journalism" (New York Times Company, 2021). By systematically studying what this initiative looks like in practice, this article considers how a leading global newsroom signals expertise as it navigates questions of transparency in one of the most politically polarized places in the world.

Whereas prior studies have sought to test the *effects* of journalist self-disclosure strategies on audience perceptions of trustworthiness (Johnson & St. John, 2021; Karlsson, 2020; Koliska, 2022; Masullo et al., 2022), this descriptive study instead examines what particular characteristics *Times* journalists disclose about themselves when doing so as part of a newsroom-wide trust-building initiative. Specifically we find that most of this disclosure focuses on what we call presumed "safe" areas of identity: *Times* bios mainly emphasize professional credentials including previous journalistic employment, awards won, books published, and degrees collected from institutions of higher education—including a disproportionately high number of Ivy League schools. Likewise, few bios explicitly refer to other aspects of staffers' personal identities or backgrounds. Where connections to geographic communities are referenced, bios overwhelmingly signal cosmopolitanism with more than half referring to a past or present connection to New York City, Washington, DC, or Los Angeles. These findings reveal important tensions around how professional journalism communities of practice communicate "expertise" through alignment with elite institutions and places where wealth and power are concentrated—practices that may be increasingly at odds with how large and growing segments of the public may themselves define expertise. We argue that understanding these dynamics at a US news outlet whose practices are both emulated and widely critiqued offers a valuable window into the implicit challenges underling efforts that center journalists' personal biographies as a strategy for rebuilding the public's trust. Put simply, such efforts may depend on dubious assumptions that the public will define expertise in ways similar to the profession and view such symbols as politically neutral as journalists may perhaps assume.

## Literature review

In this section, we review relevant research on bylines and the role of journalistic identity within the profession, prior studies on transparency disclosure and the concept of "connection-based reporting," followed by relevant literature from political science around partisan stereotyping.

## Signaling journalistic identity

Journalistic identity, or "the aggregated self-perceptions of journalists as professionals," has been extensively theorized in journalism studies (Hanitzsch and Örnebring, 2019: 108) as widely shared professional understandings of the role of journalists in a democratic society. Adherence to this shared identity—often including roles such as "disseminator," "watchdog," and "advocate" (Hanitzsch and Örnebring, 2019: 108) and values (Deuze, 2005) such as public service and objectivity—helps journalists cope with an ever-changing industry (Grubenmann and Meckel, 2015) and combat threats to their legitimacy (Vos and Ferrucci, 2018).

However, without specific boundary markers delineating who is a journalist (e.g., entrance exams or professional licenses), professional legitimacy tends to be rhetorically constructed through intra-professional discourse (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017) and other credentials. Jenkins and Volz (2016), for example, conceptualized journalism awards as one form of cultural and economic capital that confers authority and influence. Degrees from elite universities have historically played a similar role in the US. Wai and Perina (2018) estimated that nearly half of journalists at *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* graduated from an elite university, while nearly 20% had Ivy League degrees.

To be sure, there are exceptions where disclosure of journalists' personal characteristics is more commonplace. Journalists' personal identities, for example, are more evident in broadcast and audio, narrowing the imagined space between reporter and audience in these domains in contrast to bylines. That has also made broadcast journalists "more susceptible to threats, sexual advances, stalkers, and other forms of hostility" (Miller and Lewis, 2020: 79). The visibility of individual journalists on social media has likewise prompted similar concerns about the professional roles and expectations of journalists (e.g., Mellado and Hermida, 2021; Xia et al., 2020). In particular, the increase in direct engagement on social media has led to an emphasis on journalists promoting themselves as individual brands (Bossio and Holton, 2018; Mellado and Hermida, 2021)—a shift away from the conventional view of journalist as disembodied extensions of news organizations.

*Bylines, journalistic identity, and identity signaling.* Journalistic identity in the U.S. can be traced to the early 20th century when major shifts in the industry prompted journalism's professionalization project. As newspapers transitioned from party-funded, partisan outlets to independent, commercial products funded by readers and advertisers, journalists began to conceive of their roles as neutral and nonpartisan chroniclers in order to appeal to the widest possible audience (Kaplan, 2009). The development of bylines in U.S. journalism during this period represented a significant development in the professionalization of journalistic identity (Reich and Boudana, 2014). As Reich (2010) noted, news production evolved from a mostly anonymous endeavor to one which emphasized the individuality of those behind it. Crediting individual reporters enabled journalists to achieve a certain degree of eminence and social capital. However, while bylining practices also introduced more transparency in the reporting process, they paradoxically resulted in underscoring the human-centered nature of reporting, and thus

"the limits of objectivity…presenting the news as an all too human endeavor rather than a transcendent truth…a specific reporter's version rather than an institutional report" (Reich, 2010: 708).

Several studies have scrutinized the signals bylines transmit, particularly regarding audience perceptions of gender and other identity markers (e.g., Burkhart and Sigelman, 1990; Mitchelstein et al., 2019). While Burkhard and Sigelman (1990) found little difference between how college students perceived male-coded and female-coded bylines, Dogruel et al. (2023: 560) found that bias against female-coded bylines depends "on content and context characteristics and only become activated when gender cues are clearly visible." Bylines have thus both facilitated the transformation of journalists into public figures (Reich, 2010), strengthening professional identity formation, but also introduced greater transparency and a human element to journalism, enabling audiences to develop perceptions—and expectations—of individual reporters.

## *Why disclosing personal characteristics could signal expertise and build trust*

Here we focus on the stated rationale from the *Times* when it announced the initiative as well as extensive prior research on transparency and "connection-based reporting."

*Helping readers understand 'the people behind our work'.* We focus in this study on a specific form of digital bylines, what the *New York Times* refers to as "enhanced bios," a new initiative the paper launched in 2023 to more explicitly foreground journalists' identities (Benton, 2024; Tameez, 2023). Enhanced bios appear on the newspaper's website (see example in supplemental appendices) as unique author pages when readers click through from an article page's more conventional byline. Most contain photos as well as sections describing what authors cover, their background, their ethics, and information about the best way to contact them.

The *Times* described enhanced bios as an extension of a previously announced effort (2021) to develop "innovative ways of deepening our audience's trust in our mission and in the credibility of our journalism." As the *Times* noted in its press release about the bios (2024), the effort seeks to highlight the "deep expertise," unique perspectives, and diverse backgrounds of the paper's reporting staff. "Research has shown that the more readers know about our reporters, the more likely they are to understand the rigors of our journalistic process and trust the results," that same press release noted.[1] While the announcement also references an additional motivation behind the initiative—a desire to emphasize "the people behind our work" in light of "the increasing prospect of more A.I.-generated content filling the internet"—it is also clear that the paper deems certain identity characteristics as more salient or noteworthy than others beyond merely highlighting the role of human journalists in newsgathering and reporting. The press release speculates that "readers may be surprised to learn" that "some of us served in the military" and that others "once pastored a church." Evaluating whether such efforts are effective in actually increasing trust is beyond the scope of this study.[2] Instead we focus more narrowly on describing what this trust-building effort looks like in practice.

*Transparency in journalism and its relationship to trust-building.* In response to steady declines in trust in news in the U.S. and other parts of the world (Fletcher et al., 2025; Mont'Alverne et al., 2022; Toff et al., 2021), scholars and practitioners have focused on strategies to restore the public's confidence (Banerjee, 2023; Fisher, 2016; SPJ, 2014) including through transparency initiatives (Vos and Craft, 2017) that foreground how news is gathered, produced, and funded (Allen, 2008; Craft and Heim, 2008; Karlsson, 2010, 2020). Many argue that transparency fosters more ethical media practices as well as stronger connection between journalists and their audiences (Allen, 2008; Carvalho et al., 2021; SPJ, 2014). The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics, for example, links transparency with accountability (SPJ, 2014; see also Karlsson, 2020; Vos and Craft, 2017). As Craft and Heim (2008: 314) assert, "This linkage among citizens' ability to witness, to evaluate, and, therefore, to trust, indicates the valued role transparency plays in facilitating journalistic accountability."

Karlsson (2010) makes a distinction between two forms of transparency: (1) disclosure transparency, which involves publishing all materials used in the newsgathering and writing and clarifying editorial standards; and (2) participation transparency, which involves inviting news consumers to engage directly in the news production process. Each are believed to help establish trust through a demonstration of ethical virtue and a logical demonstration of the processes through which news is constructed, establishing legitimacy and authority (Allen, 2008). Enhanced bios are arguably an example of both forms of transparency since they include information that contextualizes the reporting as well as ways to contact the staffer.

*Connection-based reporting.* Disclosing aspects of personal identities may be one means of signaling transparency and subsequently building trust, but journalists may also emphasize these characteristics to signal expertise (Cha and Roberts, 2019). This trend toward identity disclosure may be partly a response to normative journalistic values that long emphasized objectivity through distance (Smith, 2018). Growing numbers of journalists now question these normative values, which overwhelmingly benefited white men who historically comprised (and remain) the majority (Ross and Padovani, 2019). According to Steiner (2002), it was easy for white men journalists to preach disembodiment and objectivity when their viewpoints were perceived as the default, but for women and minority journalists, who routinely face gender- and race-based discrimination in their daily and professional lives, the ability to cleanly separate out their personal identities from their professional ones is often impossible (Schmidt, 2023; Steiner, 2018).

Velloso (2023) has theorized the term "connection-based reporting" to describe "reporting produced by [journalists] who share some identity or embodied experience with the issue or group they covered." In other words, rather than treating disclosure of one's standpoint as signaling a disqualifying bias, many journalists argue that harnessing their backgrounds during the reporting process in fact makes them more authoritative. Reporting on issues or groups with which they share a connection—as in, for example, Minnesota Public Radio's Native News Project ("Native News," n.d) or the nonprofit outlet *The 19th** ("Our Team," n.d)—affords journalists many advantages, including

being able to more quickly identify stories as newsworthy, building deeper trust with sources, and producing more nuanced coverage of sensitive issues (Velloso, 2023).[3]

Studies have shown that younger audiences are more likely to prefer forms of journalism where journalists are upfront about their own perspectives (Downie and Heyward, 2023). Pluralities of the public in surveys also express a desire to know more about the identities of the individuals responsible for reporting the news, voicing concerns about the lack of diversity in newsrooms (Banerjee et al., 2023). When asked directly how important it is to know a reporter's race, gender, or religion, nearly one-in-5 Americans said it was "very" or "extremely important" (Toff et al., 2021). About twice as many said knowing about reporters' "political leanings" was very or extremely important. Such findings reinforce why the *Times* may well have good reason for encouraging staffers to highlight aspects of their personal backgrounds in online bios.

### *Reasons for reluctance to disclose personal identity characteristics*

Foregrounding personal identity characteristics, however, does come with risk. Audiences may map particular identity markers to partisan or ideological lines, jeopardizing the appearance of impartial neutrality. This may be especially true in the U.S. where political identities are increasingly intertwined with demographic, geographic, or other personal characteristics (Mason, 2018). There is, for example, an extensive literature in political science about the extent to which voters frequently stereotype candidates for political office on the basis of their race, religion, and gender (Dolan, 2014; McDermott, 1998; Sanbonmatsu, 2002), perceiving them as more or less liberal or conservative according to heuristics about how personal characteristics indicate political orientations. Although no prior study to date has examined the tendency among news audiences to do the same for journalists, recent work on harassment of women journalists and journalists of color in digital spaces has suggested that sexist or racist audiences may be particularly likely to do so (Miller, 2023; Miller and Lewis, 2020). Likewise, longstanding research on the higher standards women and nonwhite journalists are often held to on the radio or on television also point to industry concerns around the ways (some) audiences may perceive personal identity characteristics as reasons for discounting coverage rather than a source of connection for others (Garbes, 2022; Powers, 2024).

As Kreiss, Lawrence and McGregor (2020) argue in their work on what they call "political identity ownership," candidates for political office often seek to "construct, maintain, and leverage" markers of identity, "portraying themselves as fitting with varied social groups' characteristics, values, and norms" (p. 3) in order to signal in-group allegiances and demarcate differences with out-groups. This identity signaling has become so commonplace in political communication that many aspects of identity are politically charged regardless of intent, and news organizations, including *The Times* have often been implicated. One memorable political ad for example from 2003 dismissed supporters of then-Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean as part of a "tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, *New York Times*-reading, body-piercing, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show" (Ehrenreich, 2004). As then-*Times* public editor Daniel Okrent (2004) wrote reflecting on reasons why the paper

tends to be perceived in this light, the staff's urban, cultural sensibilities may play a role in shaping these perceptions, "You can take the paper out of the city, but without an effort to take the city and all its attendant provocations, experiments and attitudes out of the paper, readers with a different worldview will find *The Times* an alien beast."

For these reasons, we might expect a reluctance among *Times* journalists to emphasize certain aspects of personal identities while downplaying or even disregarding others—presumably avoiding areas perceived as indicating a political orientation. That said, not all journalists may be so guarded. Understanding professional practices when it comes to journalists' identity disclosure offers a window into how newsrooms navigate these complex waters. It also helps to reveal how news organizations are approaching the task of building trust with their audiences—*which* audiences and in what ways. To the extent that certain forms of expertise are prioritized over others, we argue that disclosure may reveal blind spots around what the profession values as key credentials, which may not align with the broader public's view of such matters.

*Research questions.* This study focuses on two main research questions as we investigate what specific aspects of both professional and personal identities are on display when *Times* journalists describe themselves in enhanced bios. We ask (RQ1): What identity characteristics are disclosed when journalists and news organizations publish enhanced bios? In addition, we consider a secondary research question about variation across the newsroom, whether the specific type of job or coverage area a given journalist holds is associated with differences in the personal identity characteristics referenced. We ask: (RQ2) how does disclosure or nondisclosure vary in relation to job type or coverage area?

## Methods and data

We draw on a corpus of bios systematically scraped from the *New York Times* website ($N$ = 1160) during an 8-month span between October 2023 and May 2024, a period corresponding to the newspaper's introduction of this initiative. Within this corpus, we excluded bio pages that contained only feeds of prior stories without any additional information. That left a smaller sample ($N$ = 875) from which we randomly selected a subset ($N$ = 350) for hand-coding.

Enhanced bios typically contain several distinct elements. In addition to the staffer's full name and photo ($N$ = 883), most include a one-sentence description of the author's identity (e.g., "I am an investigative reporter for The New York Time based in London") followed by several additional sections under specific headings, "What I Cover," "My Background," and "Journalistic Ethics."[4] Many bios also contain concluding sections for contacting the staffer. For purposes of this study, we focused primarily on the text describing the staffer's identity, what they said they covered, and their "background." The authors developed a codebook following an inductive, iterative process reading through a subset of bios. Intercoder reliability was assessed by comparing coding by the three authors using the first 50 randomly selected bios (see appendix). Each coder then coded the remaining 300 bios independently and results were combined for descriptive analysis.

We focus in this study on (a) staffers' professional and educational credentials, (b) references to prior work experiences, (c) specific identity categories, (d) geographic characteristics mentioned, and (e) inclusion of other personal details. We generally limited our coding only to the stated information of the text itself, even if we could infer other aspects of identities from photos or names. To be sure, visual communication scholarship has repeatedly established the role of images, in conjunction with text, as transmitters of information, as "there are latent sociological, political, and cultural cues embedded within visual messages" (Gustafson and Kenix, 2016: 149). However, other concerns emerge when attempting to systematically categorize aspects of identity from visual sources, including the fact that some identities of interest to this study—such as race and gender—are more discernable from images compared to other identities—such as sexuality, social class, and nationality (Beatty and Kirby, 2006). Therefore, as the focus of our study is on disclosure, we generally limited our coding of bios only to the overt, stated information of the text itself. That said, to further supplement portions of our analyses, we do use first and last names to predict gender and racial identities, which allowed us to investigate differences in rates of disclosure for these categories.[5] Among the 350 bios coded, this method produced predictions for 94% of coded staffers' gender and 80% of staffers' race, indicating a slight gender divide (53% male vs 47% female) but much less diversity by race/ethnicity (80% white, 14% Asian, 5% Hispanic, and 2% Black). The overwhelming majority were classified as current employees (89.4%) compared to just 2.6% identified as contributors or 7.7% as former employees. Most were also editorial newsroom employees: mainly reporters (64%), editors (12%), or producers for the web or audio products (7.1%).[6]

To assess our first research question, we report topline results assessing the classification of the referenced categories and performed *t*-tests for statistically significant differences by gender and race with respect to disclosure of specific identity categories and credentials. In addition, when analyzing the subset of bios that referenced graduate or undergraduate degrees, we used a text matching process to automatically code for whether relevant bios referenced prior lists of "Ivy Plus" institutions (as in Baker et al., 2023), selective private universities, or selective liberal arts colleges.[7] To investigate our second research question, we conducted additional *t*-tests to examine rates of disclosure according to different job types. We also used an automated method for assessing the coverage areas of journalists, coding those who referred to a specific set of relevant keywords ("politics," "government," "presidential," or "election") in their coverage areas as more politically focused.

## Findings

We find an overwhelming emphasis on professional and educational credentials when analyzing what identity characteristics get disclosed in enhanced bios. Few journalists referenced other aspects of their identities or backgrounds. We also find few differences between bios when examining differences by job types or coverage area.

## (RQ1) what gets treated as 'expertise?'

When we analyzed bios for explicitly stated personal identity characteristics, in contrast to "connection-based reporting" practices, we find relatively few examples. The most frequently mentioned personal characteristics were limited to marital and parental status, which approximately 6% of bios referred to (Figure 1). Male-coded staffers were slightly less likely to mention their marital status (6.3% vs 7.1%) and more likely to reference having kids (6.3% vs 5.8%), but neither difference was statistically significant. Just 2% referenced race or ethnicity and even fewer made reference to preferred pronouns or sexual orientation. None of the analyzed bios mentioned religious identity.

Where staffers did reference race or ethnicity, most often disclosures were embedded in broader statements about professional achievements. For example, Michelle Agins described herself as "the newspaper's second Black female staff photographer." Troy Closson noted being recognized as the "National Association of Black Journalists' Emerging Journalist of the Year in 2023." A handful of others noted race or ethnicity in

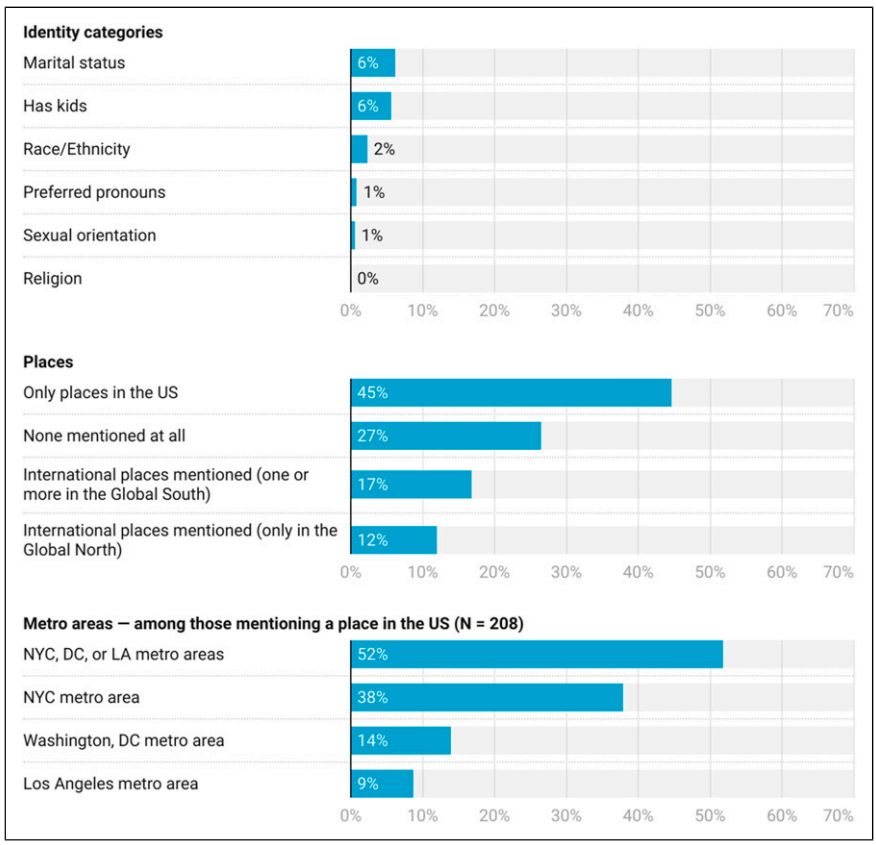


**Figure 1.** Percent of bios referencing identity characteristics and places.

relation to their reporting. Matt Stevens for example described how "as a Korean adoptee, I have particular interest in Asian American stories." Art and pop culture critic Wesley Morris wrote more expansively about his racial identity, noting that "not infrequently, my work also requires thinking through the way race functions in the work and actions of individuals and the decision of institutions," adding that "race isn't the only window through which I view the world… but as an African American, I do consider it an illuminating lens." Such examples were, however, unique.

One personal characteristic with higher rates of disclosure pertained to connections to geographic place: 43% referred to where the staffer was born. Even more referred to currently or previously residing in particular places (73%). Most of these references to geographic place were domestic in nature (45%). When references to international places were made, both countries in the Global North (12%) and South (17%) were often among them. However, just 5% referred to experiences navigating international immigration in some form or another with another 8% referring to knowledge of specific foreign languages as a form of expertise.

When bios referred to a geographic place in the US, all but nine states were represented (Figure 2); however, such references overwhelmingly were to major population centers—places where wealth and power tend to be most concentrated. Northeastern and Western states were mentioned most often (65% and 27% of bios, respectively)—with Pacific coast states accounting for most of the references in the West. About a fifth of bios referred

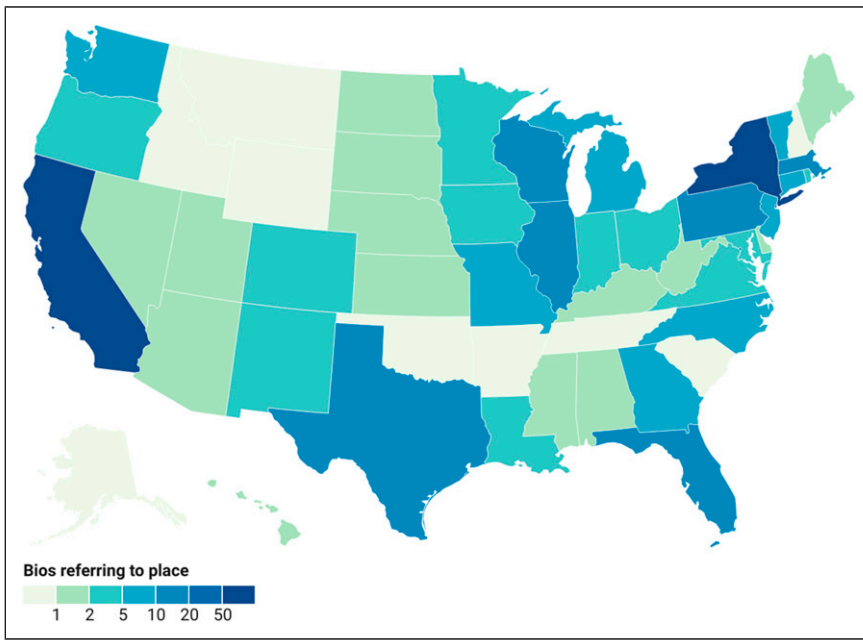


**Figure 2.** Map of U.S. states containing locations mentioned in bios. A complete table is provided in supplemental appendices.

to a Southern (22%) or Midwestern (21%) state.[8] More than half (52%) specifically referred to currently or previously living in New York City, Washington, DC, or Los Angeles metro areas. Just 7.4% of bios that named a place in the US included a reference to places that could be categorized as small towns; another 10.5% named a suburb. Almost none (0.8%) made reference to a rural US community.

Instead of other references to personal identity characteristics, bios were far more likely to refer to professional credentials and educational backgrounds (Figure 3). Nearly two-thirds referred to a specific university degree program. Another third referred to awards won (such as a Pulitzer or an Emmy). An additional quarter of bios referred to a graduate degree program or authoring one or more books. More bios referred to experiences participating in fellowship programs (10%) or prior teaching experience (7%) than the comparable percentage who mentioned marital status. We found only minor differences in rates of disclosure around these characteristics according to staffers' predicted race or gender. On average men referred to more of these credentials than women (1.7 vs 1.6) but the differences were not statistically significant. Staffers coded as white, however, were significantly more likely to refer to awards won (37% vs 25%, $p < 0.1$) or having published a book (30% vs 7%, $p < 0.001$) compared to staffers predicted to be non-white.

When we specifically broke down the types of universities mentioned in bios among the subset who referred to an undergraduate or graduate degree program ($N = 232$), we found nearly three-in-10 mentioned an "Ivy Plus" institution in their bio. Selective private schools and selective liberal arts colleges were mentioned in smaller numbers as well.

Exceptions to these patterns stood out because they contrasted with other bios. Two reporters, for example, and one graphics editor mentioned attending community colleges.

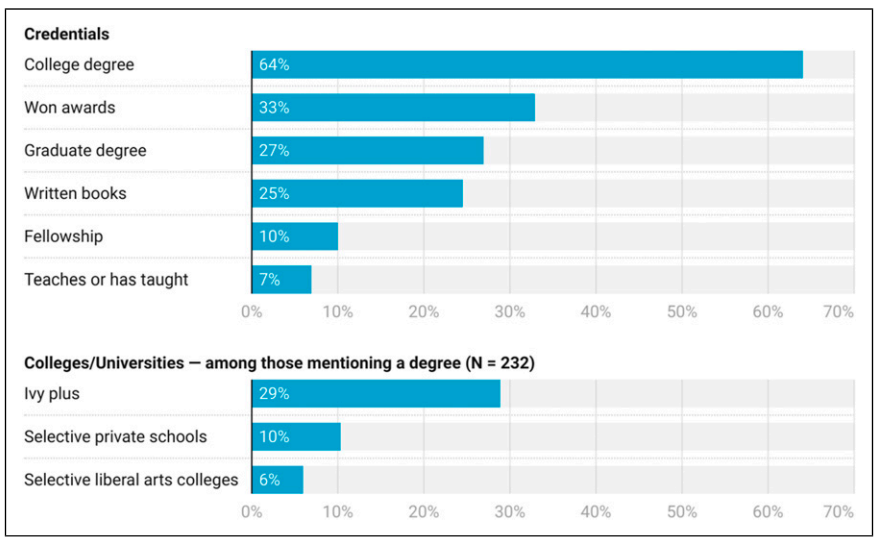


**Figure 3.** Percent of bios referencing professional credentials.

Two others referred to dropping out of college altogether. An additional seven bios (2%) specifically mentioned that staffers were active members of the newspaper's union, the Times Guild. These exceptions signaled associations with a socioeconomic class identity that differed from the vast majority of other bios analyzed.

A second area of expertise emphasized in the bios pertained to specific prior professional experiences where individuals had previously worked. Mostly and overwhelmingly these professional experiences were journalistic in nature (72%). Bios often included lists of past employers nationally (e.g., *Wall Street Journal*, NBC News) and locally (e.g., *Dallas Morning News*, *Chicago Tribune*). Just 16% of bios referred to any other forms of professional work experience.

A handful of bios did refer to specific, even unique, personal information including hobbies. For example, Neil Genzlinger, a former Obituaries writer, described performing onstage at storytelling venues and writing plays performed at theater festivals. Reporter Ivan Penn mentioned a love of roller-skating and playing the trumpet. A very small number referred to favorite sports teams, a love of the outdoors, or some other personal interest. These examples stood out precisely because they differed from the vast majority of bios examined.

### *(RQ2) how does disclosure vary in relation to type of position within newsrooms or coverage area?*

To examine our second research question, we subdivided our sample in two ways. First, we looked at differences depending on whether bios were captured for specific job categories (reporters and editors) versus other types of positions within the news organization. Second, we considered whether patterns of identity disclosure might differ for journalists whose current coverage area involves political coverage from those whose work involves other areas.

In general, we found few statistically significant differences. The lone exception in our analysis involved references to race/ethnicity. Reporters and editors were somewhat less likely to mention these characteristics than other job types ($b = -0.03$, $p < 0.10$). No differences were found by coverage area, although our sample size limits more thorough investigation of these differences.

## Discussion

This study focused on a unique case of a *New York Times* initiative to foreground journalists' backgrounds and biographies through "enhanced bios" as an approach to trust-building trust. Using the dual theoretical lenses of "connection-based reporting" and "political identity ownership," we found that most bios were limited to disclosure about professional and scholarly achievements, with very few underscoring the role that personal characteristics might have as a source of expertise in its own right. While few differences in disclosure were observed by job category or coverage area, our findings point to a professional tendency to stick to "safe" characteristics of conventional

expertise—a limited willingness to engage with the growing movement toward viewing subjective identity-based experiences as a critical source of knowledge and authority.

Does the limited emphasis on personal characteristics constitute a missed opportunity to bolster trust by "letting them know who we are," as the *Times* described the initiative in its press release about the initiative? Evaluating impact on audiences is beyond the scope of this study, but our findings do raise such questions. On the one hand, to the extent that readers may map political orientations onto identity characteristics (Kreiss et al., 2020), it may be reasonable that staffers have focused on areas of disclosure presumed "safe." On the other hand, while awards, professional credentials, and higher education degrees, especially associations with elite Ivy League institutions, may confer a certain kind of legitimacy within and among the profession (Deuze, 2005), it is far less clear whether such details will cultivate trust among the broader public, especially those on the right who are increasingly skeptical of such institutions (Motta, 2024). What's more, the degree to which other identity characteristics were so persistently unacknowledged—for example, whiteness, religiosity (or lack thereof), or a host of other highly influential characteristics—may well rub some audiences the wrong way. The overrepresentation of staffers connected to cosmopolitan urban centers may further underscore to some readers a lack of understanding about their lived experiences interpreted as a deficit of expertise (see Cramer, 2016).

To be sure, there are exceptions within this dataset of individuals who did choose to foreground their unique backgrounds and identities in their bios. Although we do not find much evidence for systematic patterns around this variation, we do see this as an area ripe for future research, most likely through in-depth interviews to assess how journalists think about when and to what degree and in what context they ought to reveal such details. After all, the small percentage of journalists who identified as community college graduates, college dropouts, or members of the guild likely speaks to intentional efforts to counter stereotypes about the newsroom's otherwise overly privileged profile (Wai and Perina, 2018). It should also be noted, at a moment in which the use of generative A.I. is proliferating across the media environment, there are reasons to suspect that the newspaper's broader rationale for publishing enhanced bios may be more fundamentally around simply reminding readers about the existence of human journalists behind the *New York Times* reporting. In that sense, the paper may ascribe greater importance to underscoring that actual humans were responsible for reporting and producing the coverage more than anything they hope to achieve through emphasizing the specific identities and backgrounds of their staffers. At the same time, these findings also raise questions about equity. Certainly not all journalists feel equally secure in their ability to disclose aspects of their identities given audience tendencies toward stereotyping about political bias. Straight, white, cisgendered journalists may face limited professional consequences for foregrounding their identities; the same may not be true for staffers whose otherness both within and outside of newsrooms makes their positionality a persistent source of suspicion rather than perceived expertise.

Our study does contain several limitations. In the bios we have analyzed, we are generally not able to distinguish between deliberate disclosure (or lack thereof) and journalists' actual identities or backgrounds—with the exception of where we have

inferred gender and race from staffers' names. Limited references to personal characteristics like race/ethnicity or LGBTQ status may be due to an underlying lack of newsroom diversity, not merely a reluctance to foreground politically sensitive characteristics. It is also true that some aspects of identity may be disclosed implicitly through photos—while others are not—leaving staffers in the position of weighing when and under what circumstances to draw additional attention to these details. Although not a focus of our analysis, we do think it meaningful that staffers whose race and gender were predicted to be white and male were significantly more likely to include a photo in their bios compared to staffers predicted to be female or non-white.[9] These differences point to the importance of photos as a key facet of identity disclosure that we hope will be taken up in future studies. Lastly, we are limited in our ability to interpret findings given that we do not know how this initiative was framed within the *Times* or how journalists thought about imagined audiences for the biographical information they drafted. Understanding these perspectives requires interviewing or surveying staffers.

Although this study focuses on a singular case study of a lone news organization, our findings point to broader insights about the profession itself and how journalists navigate tensions around their personal and professional identities. After all, practices enacted by the *Times* are frequently emulated (Muchna and Walsh, 2024)—if also widely critiqued (e.g., Frost, 2019; Meeks, 2020). Understanding the bounded manner in which journalists center personal biographies when explicitly invited to do so, highlights the considerable challenges this strategy may have as an approach to rebuilding the public's trust in professional journalism.

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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. The paper provided no citations for this research.
2. Transparency as a strategy for trust-building has been tested empirically (Craft and Heim, 2008; Curry and Stroud, 2021) but with sometimes inconsistent results. Tandoc and Thomas (2017), for example, did not find a correlation between transparency and news credibility. Koliska (2022), likewise, suggests that while audiences generally value transparency, they struggle to assess quality on the basis of transparency elements.
3. The 19th* also makes use of enhanced bylines for all its reporters and staff.
4. A small number of bios did not contain these sections and may have been imported from a legacy format, consisting merely of a single paragraph description of the author.
5. To classify staffers by race and gender, we used the "predictrace" package in R, which uses data on first names from the U.S. Social Security Administration to make predictions about gender identity and data on last names in U.S. Census records to predict race. These predictions may differ from how staffers self-identify.
6. Additional information is provided in the supplementary online appendices (Figure A-2).
7. To generate these additional lists of institutions we relied on the US News and World Report rankings for the top 25 selective private universities and selective liberal arts colleges.
8. The District of Columbia was classified as Northeastern for this analysis. For reference, 39% of Americans live in the South with the remainder split between the West (24%), the Midwest (21%), and the Northeast (17%).
9. Eighty percent of male-coded bylines included a photo in the full dataset of bios scraped from the *Times* website compared to 73% of female-coded bylines ($p < 0.001$). Likewise, 78% of bylines coded as belonging to a white staffer included a photo versus 70% of non-white staffers ($p < 0.05$).

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