

# The Impact of Labelling Journalistic Content on Readership

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## 1. Introduction

In the past decade, the digitization has been driven by narrowing the distance between the media industries and their audiences, which has completely changed consumer behaviours and expectations. The digital tools, such as social media, have enabled everyone to create content, anytime and anywhere. Nevertheless, huge amounts of data and multiple sources of unverified information derived from untraceable sources are a critical problem in the context of data processing, source verification, and information quality, among others. This indicates that social network platforms that have, in some ways, democratized news more than ever before, are allowing the public to be deceived every day by false news that scrolls across their screens. As a distribution channel, the internet has replaced traditional media for most people, and breaks down barriers to content creation and dissemination, such that the line between users generate content and traditional media content has become blurred increasingly. Due to its serious threats of misleading information, researchers, governments, journalists and fact-checking volunteers are working together to address the fake news issue and increase the accountability of digital media.

In this study, we focused on contributing an empirical understanding of the impact of establishment the label for journalistic contents on readership to against the fake news. To accomplish this goal, we applied several focus-group interviews. We aim to answer the following research questions: does the establishment of a label promote the quality of digital journalistic online text-based content, and/or increase the trust among the readership? What type of labels has the strongest impacts on readership?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Sample description

This study analysed the mechanisms of information consumption and trust of the readership in French-speaking part of Switzerland. We intended to identify the differentiating factors between original and non-original journalistic content.

To do so, we conducted six focus group interviews with participants from different age ranges and backgrounds. In total, 24 people took part in this study: 13 of these were females and 11 were males. All subjects ranged in age between 21 and 79 years old, with an average age of 50.1 years. Most of the participants (58%) have a University degree, 38% of them have a high school degree, and 4% of them have an elementary school diploma. Among the participants, 37% indicated that they subscribed to a French-speaking daily newspaper. The rest 63% did not, but they obtained information from mobile application or social media on a daily base. During each focus group interview, we asked questions about their perception and experiences relating to label and journalistic content. For the sake of clarity, we recall that focus groups are a form of group interview where the focus of investigation is on participant communication within the group rather than on alternating questions and responses between the researcher and respondents. They have been proven an effective research technique for investigating individual's perceptions and attitudes, as well as exploring the reasons behind these participants. Hence, we think that it is an appropriate research method to fulfil our objective.

### 2.2 Data collection and analysis

The method of data collection has been favoured to evaluate the experiences, needs, expectations and representations of the readership, especially to identify the specific and complex issue of readership confidence to measure the impact of a label for the journalistic content. To archive this objective, the participants were subjected to a series of semi-directive questions and a reflective "user-centered design"<sup>1</sup> process. In fact, we submitted them four mock-ups of

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<sup>1</sup> Abras, C., Maloney-Krichmar, D., & Preece, J. (2004). User-centered design. Bainbridge, W. Encyclopedia of Human-Computer Interaction. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 37(4), 445-456.

articles with different labels in order to stimulate debate the process of building confidence. This step allowed us to identify which label format has the most optimal impact on the readership.

The focus groups were accompanied by a moderator and an observer, all conversations were recorded. We applied K-J method<sup>2</sup> in the analysis step, the affinity diagram was used to group the verbatims in different categories of topics. Finally, we crossed these results with our previously defined analysis plan in order to answer our research questions.

### 3. Findings and discussion

In this section, we presented the primarily qualitative analysis results of the focus group discussions. Our findings have been classified into five themes with different categories of each theme as shown in Figure 1. Each theme was shortly described in the next paragraph. These results allowed us to evaluate participants' perceptions on various medias, including traditional and digital ones, and more importantly, to identify elements that increase readership confidence. Moreover, readers' perceptions on different formats of labelling were also discussed.

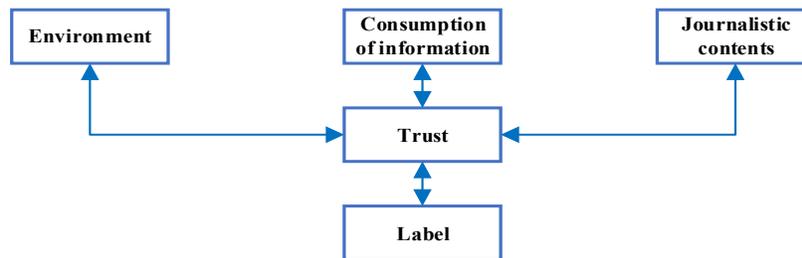


Figure 1: Findings of readership perception from focus group discussions

The *environment* of the reporting in journalism was the first theme that appeared during most of the discussions. Participants generally expressed that they trusted the Swiss journalistic contents, and fake news rarely exist in Switzerland. However, as social media is altering the perception of reality, sometimes they had difficulties distinguishing information received from different channels. Concerns about the *consumption of information* were different between the groups of adults (older than 30) and young people (30 years old or younger). The adults group had general interests in the press, and they followed the news continuously almost every day. In contrast, young people tended to gather information when needed via social networks from their mobile phones. They were not willingness to pay for journalistic content because of their limited budget. Therefore, the lack of authentication of content from social media made them difficult to distinguish between real and fake news. Our focus group have also shown concerns on *journalistic contents*. This theme was focused on the discussion surrounding the originality of content. Essentially, they preferred to read original content, especially journalists' commentary stories. The reputation of journalist has a significant positive impact on readership, half of the participants believed that a well-known journalist served a better trustable source than a famous media brand. However, young people didn't see it in this way they preferred the journalistic content with an official certification, such as a certificate from government offices.

Furthermore, participants mentioned often about *trust*. This refers to the degree of confidence in the existing media news content. They mentioned that a media brand or a journalist reputation tended to build a trust readership. Even in cases that they could not validate the content sources, the confidence could be fostered by a certification from an expert or an official institution. Finally, award a *label* to journalistic original content was also frequently discussed. A common opinion among all participants was that in general they valued a label issued by an official media association who regulated the originality and quality of the journalistic content. They believed that this effort would improve the quality of journalistic work. Moreover, a label could be considered as an official certificate to increase readers' confidence and to some extent, reduce the spreading of fake news. Meanwhile, some participants expressed concerns regarding the cost associated with such labelling control mechanism: it would increase the cost but may not significantly encourage readers to consume more contents.

To conclude, while the establishment of a label would both promote the quality of journalistic content, and increase the trust among the readership, cost is also an issue. Among all types of labels, labels that granted by united media associations, or governmental authorities were perceived as the most reliable trustable sources, rather than that granted by media brands on their owns.

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<sup>2</sup> Scupin, R. (1997). The KJ method: A technique for analyzing data derived from Japanese ethnology. *Human organization*, 233-237.