

Before trust in media: Trust in facts, institutions and each other

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Asking how to bring trust to American media may be the wrong question and perhaps only a collateral outcome of the real tasks at hand. To protect democracy and society, we must first restore citizens' trust in facts, diminishing the influence of those who would manipulate information and emotions. We must restore trust and respect among communities so citizens might conduct civil, credible, and productive public conversation. We also need to restore trust in certain challenged institutions — from science to education, government to democracy. Then, rather than changing citizens' attitudes toward the institution of media, isn't it media that should change to earn back public trust?

It is a mistake to view “fake news” and “hate speech” as commodities — like content — that can be controlled by media, technology platforms, or government. Our problem is human behavior. Data & Society's excellent report, “[Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online](#),”¹ catalogues the manipulators: trolls, the alt-right, gamergaters, the so-called men's rights movement. Their methods have much in common with Russian manipulation as laid out in NATO's “[Handbook of Russian Information Warfare](#).”² Their motives are also similar: “Our media, our tools, and our politics are being leveraged to help breed polarization,” [says](#)³ Data & Society founder danah boyd. “Sometimes, it's for the lulz. Sometimes, the goals are much more disturbing.” Sometimes, it is to bring down institutions, even nations.

At the highest level, these manipulators attack truth. “Multiple untruths, not necessarily consistent, are in part *designed to undermine trust in the existence of objective truth*, whether from media or from official sources,” says NATO [with my emphasis]. “This contributes to eroding the comparative advantages of liberal democratic societies when seeking to counter disinformation.”

How do we fight a war for truth? Fact-checking is necessary but insufficient. As Data & Society cautions, the bad guys feed on the fight. When we debunk them, we play into their hands by simultaneously spreading their message. This is the insidious paradox of fake news. As the RAND Corporation points out in “[The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model](#),”⁴ the forces of fake have the advantage of speed (it takes no time to make up lies) and volume (it costs nothing to spread them). Thus, they set the public agenda and we are stuck playing catch up in their game.

¹ Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online,” Data & Society Research Institute. https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline.pdf

² Keir Giles, “Handbook of Russian Information Warfare,” Nato Defense College, November 2016. <http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=506>

³ danah boyd, “Google and Facebook Can't Just Make Fake News Disappear,” *Wired*, March 27, 2017. <https://www.wired.com/2017/03/google-and-facebook-cant-just-make-fake-news-disappear/>

⁴ Christopher Paul and Miriam Mathews, “The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model,” RAND, 2016. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>

News literacy is another weapon often called upon today, but I will argue that it, too, is inadequate. News literacy is media-centric and often self-serving. It does not grapple with the harsh truth that vast swaths of America — for various reasons — do not trust news or its purveyors.

So where do we turn? What do can citizens, platforms, and media do?

With citizens, I am coming to believe that our ultimate goal is to promote civility. Can we, in Dan Gillmor's [words](#),⁵ make spreading lies uncool? Can we promote responsible sharing? The internet is yet young and society is just beginning to renegotiate social norms around it. Will people come to understand the impact of their twisted ways before it is too late? (Witness courtroom [photos](#)⁶ of sobbing Americans caught spewing racist hate; it is as if they are transported back to a land of decency from a nation hypnotized by manipulation of fear.) Such a civil impulse is a necessary precondition to the exercise of critical judgment fed by fact and journalism.

What can technology platforms do? They can no more fix the problem with magic algorithms than they caused it. The internet has been a conduit for the release of perhaps centuries of frustration with institutions that did not listen to, represent, and serve communities whose members have been lumped together as a faceless, voiceless mass. The mass, let us confess, is media's creation.

As we make demands of the technologists, we need to keep in mind all the good the net unleashes: connections, creativity, empowerment, a magnificent symphony of diverse voices that only some see as a fearsome challenge to their dwindling power. We must not descend into a moral technopanic, blaming technology for revealing society's ills and attempting to limit its opportunities before we even know what they could be.

That said, there is much the platforms can and should do, and they are beginning to do it. Google's head of search engineering, Ben Gomes, recently [said](#)⁷ that search's ranking algorithm will now take into account the reliability, authority, and quality of sources. That is, in responding to the query, "is climate change real?" the search engine now favors the institution of science over the speculations of conspiracy theorists. Mark Zuckerberg has said that he [wants](#)⁸ Facebook to favor good over bad as it now turns its attention to helping build communities. Both companies — along with brands, agencies, and ad networks — promise to help cut off the economic air supply to hate and fraud. We can support this flight to quality.

I also want to see all the platforms transparently map the manipulation aimed at them — thus us — by sharing data with researchers and media so that we can all compensate for and deflect its impact on the news. I want to see Facebook and especially Twitter wipe out the ability to create the fake accounts and bots manipulators enlist to spread their bile. Though no one — least of all

⁵ Dan Gillmor, "News Literacy Working Group; Initial Thoughts," March 9, 2017.

<http://dangillmor.com/2017/03/09/news-literacy-working-group-initial-thoughts/>

⁶ See <https://twitter.com/briskwalk/status/885576468822151170>

⁷ Ben Gomes, "Our latest quality improvements for Search," Google blog, April 25, 2017.

<https://www.blog.google/products/search/our-latest-quality-improvements-search/>

⁸ Mark Zuckerberg, "Building Global Community," Facebook, February 16, 2017.

<https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634>

the platforms — wants technologists to become the editors and censors of the world, I do want them to recognize their public responsibility in the rules they make, favoring civility when possible. Finally, I dream that Facebook could create a safe space in which people of every background and worldview could tell their stories so we could meet each other, making the stranger less strange and robbing the manipulators of their most lethal weapon: fear of the Other.

As for media, we have the most work to do.

Like the platforms, we need to better understand the manipulation aimed at us so we avoid supporting it.

We must learn to listen to the great diversity of communities that have not been reflected and heard through our pages and screens, understanding, empathizing with, and serving their needs and goals. That is the path to trust.

I believe we should concentrate on building diversity not just in newsrooms but in the larger news ecosystem, investing in and supporting new news outlets that serve many communities: African-American youth, Latino workers, LGBTQ families, and, yes, the conservatives who lost their trust in news media starting in the '70s, whom liberal media (let us please concede our worldview) abandoned to a vacuum filled by talk radio, Fox News, Breitbart, Drudge, InfoWars, and worse.

We need to share power with the people — to borrow Jay Rosen's [phrase](#)⁹ — formerly known as the audience, recognizing that journalism is a service to them that begins with their needs. (See, for example, [Hearken](#),¹⁰ a platform that allows the public to assign journalists to answer their information needs.)

We should learn new skills in convening communities in conflict into civil and informed conversation. (See Spaceship Media's [experiment](#)¹¹ with AL.com, using Facebook to convene Trump voters and Clinton voters to conversation. They still disagreed, but they came to ask journalists for facts to inform their conversation; they *trusted* journalism.)

We need to learn how to take journalism to the public conversation where it occurs, no longer depending on the notion that we control media as destinations. Through this, we will learn how to share journalism in many new forms: as tools, data bases, classes, convenings, and fact-filled memes.

Rather than playing catch up to the manipulators, RAND suggests we must get ahead of them, making it our mission to educate and inform the public so well that we inoculate them against lies. (See, for example, how the manipulators are starting to attack the Census.)

We must leave the presumptions of mass media behind, abandoning the moral corruption of clickbait as we seek new forms that serve people as individuals and members of communities

⁹ Jay Rosen, "The People Formerly Known as the Audience," *Pressthink*, June 27, 2006.

http://archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr_p.html

¹⁰ See <https://www.wearehearken.com/>

¹¹ See <http://spaceshipmedia.org/projects/>

and new business models that reward relevance, value, and quality, without building walls around journalism to serve only the privileged elite.

Finally, we in media will never regain trust until we recognize our responsibility in losing it, separating ourselves from the public we serve. The question, then, is not how to bring trust to American media but how to teach American media to trust the public again.