

Journalism, Democracy & Trust: A Look Back and A Way Forward

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In 2015, Rev. Everett Mitchell sent out emails and made some phone calls to reporters in Madison, WI, excited to announce the first-ever gay wedding to take place between two African American women at a local Black church. None of the reporters showed up for the celebration, with editors explaining that the reporters were unavailable on weekends. A few months later, Rev. Mitchell was inundated with calls from some of these very same reporters eager to hear about the latest controversy happening in a Black community of the city. He declined to answer those calls, saying in an interview: “*Trust is not just handed over. Trust is earned.*” This example gives way to the complex concepts and demands associated with trust, particularly as it relates to the practice of journalism. A successful trusting relationship will tend to have a number of personally experienced characteristics, such as being consistently engaged and respecting difference. It will also include more abstract dynamics born from entrenched institutional authority over time. Any solution to the problem of debilitating distrust for our mainstream information sources must appreciate not only the economic crisis of the newsrooms today, but also the historic disdain for media among some groups of citizens. Moreover, it needs to also recognize the political/social polarization being spurred on by powerful actors in a digitally networked society.

Journalism today, however, practices as if it were still under the industrial model of an institutional press with a one-to-mass audience relationship. It often neglects the networked information society that has emerged where citizens hold more power over what, how and when they consume news. Not surprisingly, we see this manifest in research where views of the news media find 66 percent of survey respondents believe “stories are often inaccurate”¹ and, that Americans hold a “pervasive public suspicion that journalists are on the inside of ... ‘a charmed circle of knowledge and power,’”² destroying any feelings of belonging to a community. Coleman et. al (2009) elaborate, noting: “(T)he trends we have identified are undermining cultural integration, corroding public trust and sapping political efficacy. The pressing challenge is to reverse them.”³

Simply telling reporters to show up at events such as Rev. Mitchell’s gay wedding discounts the reasons why no reporter came in the first place. Tied up in what happened are implicit issues of power and privilege; fiscally constrained newsrooms; social changes and other factors that determine not only the production of news—such as whose voices are included in publication—but also the consumption of news. This essay explores the nature of the “problem” further from three viewpoints.

¹ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. “Press Widely Criticized, But Trusted More than Other Information Sources.” 22 Sept. 2011. Accessed 4 July 2017 from: <http://www.people-press.org/2011/09/22/press-widely-criticized-but-trusted-more-than-other-institutions>

² Coleman, Stephen, Scott Anthony, and David E. Morrison. *Public Trust in The News: A Constructivist Study of the Social Life of the News*. Oxford, UK: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2009, p. 40

³ Ibid, p. 43

- First, *it is the fault of the journalist*. This is a combination of resource issues coupled with long-standing newsroom routines and norms about what (and who) is news worthy. By 2016, newsrooms had lost 20,000 newsroom editorial jobs since 2000 and more than 100 daily newspapers had closed since 2004, with the hemorrhaging showing no sign of stopping.⁴ This has led to fewer hard-hitting stories, more “filler” content and an obsession with “click-bait,” which further undermines trust among audiences. Coverage of “others” has tended to be riddled with stereotypes, overly focused on binaries such as “good” versus “bad” and “poor” versus “rich,” or completely absent.⁵ Much of this has to do with both an inability to access diverse voices (a result of both homogenous newsrooms and dwindling resources) as well as misconceptions of people of color, rural people and working-class citizens.
- Second, *it is the fault of the citizens*. Again, this is a combination of complex issues around increased political, economic and cultural insularity; availability of distributed information streams; de-emphasis in public-affairs news and the disappearance of social rituals around news consumption. Paired with statistics that about two-thirds of Americans report getting news from family and friends, the press’ authority to inform citizens is in jeopardy.⁶ Other statistics show citizens are increasingly turning to more partisan and niche-focused outlets for news that they feel personally connected to.⁷
- Lastly, *it is the fault of politics*. Identity politics—enflamed by politicians—encourage polarization and inhibit trusting relationships with the press. Insular politics yield polemic schisms that keep people in their political bubbles and influences media habits. Moreover, from as far back as Roosevelt, through Obama and especially now Donald Trump, we can find evidence of presidents’ expressed suspicion and distrust of the press with limited press conferences and attempts to curtail transparency that have most likely exacerbated citizens’ perceptions that the media are not to be trusted.⁸ Indeed, in his unprecedented aggressive, personal attacks on journalists and what he calls “fake news,” Trump has imposed full blackouts on information to the press, denied admittance to

⁴ Mitchell, Amy, Gottfried, Jeffrey, Barthel, Michael & Shearer, Elisa. *Pathways to News*. Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2016

⁵ Reid-Brinkley, Shanara Rose. “Ghetto Kids Gone Good: Race, Representation, and Authority in the Scripting of Inner-City Youths in the Urban Debate League.” *Argumentation & Advocacy* 49.2 (2012): 77–99; See also: Squires, Catherine R., and Sarah J. Jackson. “Reducing Race: News Themes in the 2008 Primaries.” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 15.4 (2010): 375–400; Martindale, Carolyn. “Coverage of Black Americans in Four Major Newspapers, 1950-1989.” *Newspaper Research Journal* 11.3 (1990): 96–112.

⁶ Mitchell, Amy, and Jesse Holcomb. “State of the News Media 2016.” Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project. 15 June 2016; See also: Mitchell, Amy, Gottfried, Jeffrey, Barthel, Michael & Shearer, Elisa. *Pathways to News*. Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2016; Carlson, Matt. *Journalistic Authority: A Relational Approach*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

⁷ Mindich, David T. Z. *Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don’t Follow the News*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004; See also: Mitchell, Amy, Jeffrey Gottfried, Jocelyn Kiley, et al. “Political Polarization & Media Habits.” Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project. 21 Oct. 2014.; Poindexter, Paula M. *Millennials, News, and Social Media: Is News Engagement a Thing of the Past?* New York: Peter Lang Inc., 2012.

⁸ Kramer, Melody. “Is media bias really rampant? Ask the man who studies it for a living.” Poynter. October 24, 2016. Accessed 4 July 2017 from: <https://www.poynter.org/2016/is-media-bias-really-rampant-ask-the-man-who-studies-it-for-a-living/435840/>

mainstream reporters to White House press briefings⁹ and even released a video of himself pretending to pummel CNN in July 2017. This politically-infused stalemate in the free flow of public affairs information impedes cross-collaboration as well as, ultimately, democracy.

We know the “problem” to be an amalgamation of all of this. Any solution must be multivariate and strive toward those pre-conditions of any trusting relationship including: flexibility, forthrightness, engagement, heedfulness, respect, competence, personal regard for others, integrity, benevolence, a history of good deeds and risk-taking. Solutions must be considerate of existing power dynamics as well as the tripartite macro-meso-micro levels of relationships at work: institutional, organizational and individual. Ultimately, we must remember that trust is innately a *relational* concept and to center responses on relationships between those producing content and those reading content as well as our relationships with our communities and with concrete information itself. For example, a Pew Center report found that Americans feel that *news brands they use* are more trustworthy than news media in general and in May 2017 Nieman Lab similarly reported: “Just 24 percent of Americans said they regard ‘the news media’ as ‘moral,’ but that number jumps to 53 percent for the media they consume often.”¹⁰ This is further complicated with the understanding that different groups of people hold different historic relationships with the press and that these perceptions of mainstream media need to be accounted for. As danah boyd (2017) recently wrote in a brilliant essay: “The short version of it all is that we have a cultural problem, one that is shaped by disconnects in values, relationships and social fabric.”¹¹

But, not all is lost. The profession is experimenting with trust-building projects. In 2017, a Reynolds-Institute project worked with 30 newsrooms around the country to experiment with a series of trust-building exercises and found that the most effective strategies included: being present on social platforms for conversations, detailing why specific reporters hold the necessary credibility to tell the story at hand, explaining the processes behind high-interest newsroom decisions or projects, following up with any reaction or impact of big stories, giving behind-the-scenes reporting glimpses, using the collective “we” to situate the journalists within the community and using language that highlighted shared values and common ground for the community.¹²

Monica Guzmán wrote a series for the American Press Institute looking at how newsrooms commit to real engagement with citizens, reporting from within community, collaborating with readers and focusing on solutions. Her opening paragraph stated:

People don’t just consume news today. They participate in it. People have access to vast and varied information. They pursue news on their own time, and on their own terms, connecting with others who share and help satisfy their curiosity about their world. This presents an opportunity for news publishers strained by shrinking resources and growing

⁹ Media Matters Staff. “The Trump Administration’s War on The Press.” Media Matters for America. 1 Feb. 2017.

¹⁰ Mitchell, Amy, Gottfried, Jeffrey, Barthel, Michael & Shearer, Elisa. Pathways to News. Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2016; See also: Wang, Shan. *Americans Don’t Really like the Media Much — Unless It’s Their Go-to News Outlets You’re Asking about*. Nieman Reports, 2017. NiemanLab

¹¹ boyd, danah. “Google and Facebook Can’t Just Make Fake News Disappear.” Backchannel. 27 Mar. 2017.

¹² Moyer, Jan. *Trusting News Final Report*. Columbia, MO: Reynolds Institute, 2017. The Trusting Project.

competition: Now more than ever, journalists can engage their audiences as contributors, advisors, advocates, collaborators and partners.¹³

Turning back to another example in Madison, WI, a news editor invited members of the community to write first-person pieces that ran on the front page on issues of race, helping to take the very white, very progressive community through its own racial journey. One participant said in an interview about that news organization:

The key thing that [the editor] did was he let me write my story myself. He didn't interview me. There was no ghostwriter.... They let me to tell my story without censoring me, and that was huge. I will not forget the *CapTimes* for that. That was risky.

The important thing about these trust-building activities is the *product* of news becomes *community*. For any solution to be effective, journalists *and* citizens must jointly undertake trust-building tasks. Remembering that *individuals* trump *institutions* when it comes to trust, our answers to the question of how to restore trust must privilege the one-to-one relationship throughout the news ecosystem. In this pursuit, we are left with a litany of outstanding questions to consider:

- How do we convince citizens to put aside their feelings of cynicism and vulnerability given long histories of past injustices?
- How do we encourage the creation of content that will be consumed by all citizens, regardless of political identity, in order to build a foundation of common knowledge to help govern?
- At what levels of community must these restorations take place? In other words, is it enough for a grassroots realigning of the journalist-citizen relationship to happen or do organizations, institutions, structures and systems must also make sea changes for any improvement to happen?

Bringing a critical mass of people to the table at the beginning of some news initiative and visiting them where they live can start a trust-building process. One technique is to recommit to an engagement- or connective-oriented mission, while following through with citizen-based collaborations.¹⁴ Content producers should refocus away from superficial products and toward processes of community building through risk-taking, collaborating and networking. Lastly, journalists must be trained to connect with all kinds of citizens, and citizens must be taught media literacy that includes learning the importance of amplifying their own voices through a wide variety of methods as well as how to connect with journalists. boyd and others¹⁵ (Anderson;

¹³ Guzmán, Mónica. "How to Build Audiences by Engaging Your Community." *American Press Institute*. 2 May 2016.

¹⁴ Robinson, Sue. *Networked News, Racial Divides: How Power & Privilege Shape Public Discourse in Progressive Cities*. Malden, MA: Cambridge University Press. 2018

¹⁵ Anderson, C.W. "What an Academic Hoax Can Teach Us about Journalism in the Age of Trump." *Nieman Lab*. 23 May 2017; See also: Broersma, Marcel, and Chris Peters. "Introduction: Rethinking Journalism: The Structural Transformation of the Public Good" in *Rethinking Journalism: Trust and Participation in a Transformed News Landscape*. New York: Routledge, 2013. 1–12

Broersma and Peters) note that the solutions are within us as well as within the infrastructure we have built, the companies we fund, the institutions that we follow and the social circles that we trust. *These solutions must grow organically from the roots of diminished distrust.* At the core of revitalization must be a reconceptualization of both the structures of newswork and journalism (as it is practiced) itself. Any solutions must incorporate significant changes in our growing hesitancy to engage with those who are different—as producers of content, as news consumers, as funders of media, and as citizens in a democracy.