

**Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy
New York City, October 12, 2017**

Rapporteur: Richard Adler

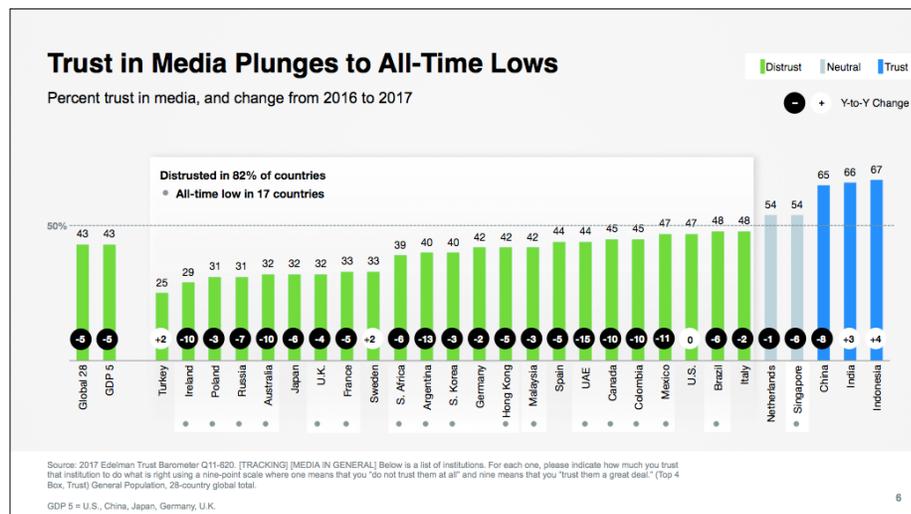
The Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy held its first official meeting at the New York Public Library on Thursday, October 12th, 2017. After opening remarks from Co-chairs Tony Marx and Jamie Woodson, the morning was devoted to a series of presentations. A summary of the public meeting follows.

Presentation by Ben Boyd on the 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer

For the past 17 years, Edelman has published an annual report on the state of trust globally. The survey focuses on trust in four institutions – NGOs, business, media and government – within two groups of individuals: *the informed public* (defined as “adults who are college-educated, in the top 25 percent income bracket for their age group in their country, report regular media consumption and are engaged in business news and public policy”) and *the mass population* (everyone else).

The [2017 report](#) is based on an online survey with 33,000+ respondents in 28 countries. Key findings include:

- A “crisis of trust” is a global phenomenon: The average level of trust in all four institutions included in the survey declined from 2016 to 2017, and the average of trust globally is below 50% for both media (43%) and government (41%).
- Trust in media globally has plunged to all-time lows, with a majority of respondents distrusting media in 82% of countries in the survey. Interestingly, trust in media is 18 points higher in China (65%) than in the U.S. (47%). Broadly, trust has declined in countries where economic growth has stalled, while it has increased in countries that have sustained growth.



Source: www.edelman.com/trust2017

- “Media” now includes search engines and social media as well as traditional print and broadcast sources. While a majority of the U.S. population (56%) continues to trust traditional media, online media are gaining trust while traditional media remain unchanged. Search engines, at 65%, have the highest level of trust of all media types.
- The credibility of experts of all sorts — academic, scientific — and leaders in government and business is falling, while trust in “a person like yourself” is highest of all sources (68%) and gaining credibility. Government officials, considered credible by just 35% of respondent, have the lowest rating of all.
- Bias is powerful: More than 50% of respondents say “I would support politicians I trust to make things better... even if they exaggerated the truth.” And 75% of respondents say they are likely to “ignore information that supports a position they don’t believe in.”

Panel 1: The Impact of Trust on Democracy

danah boyd, Principal Researcher, Microsoft Research: For many years, young people have delighted in “messing with media” to demonstrate their ability to influence the messages that media convey. From Captain Crunch and the phone phreakers in the 1960s to the teens who convinced Oprah in 2008 to warn her viewers about the danger of a nonexistent group of online pedophiles, these media pranks were mainly perpetrated for fun. More recently, these often anonymous interventions have gotten more serious, involving groups with a range of political agendas. Some believe that President Trump was elected as a result of online activists supporting his cause. And news about deliberate attempts by Russia to influence the U.S. election has increased concern about the power of outsiders to disrupt and exploit the media ecosystem.

While social networks are connecting “everyone,” most users pay attention almost exclusively to their personal networks of people with similar viewpoints. We are in a volatile time where people with different ideologies are connecting to share tactics for destabilizing and dismantling existing media structures.

The most effective way to get people to change their world view is for them to engage in a serious conversation with someone they deeply admire and trust. That rarely happens online, where it is too easy to “avert your eyes” from things that are uncomfortable.

A key issue now is the power of the Internet to amplify the voices of all sorts of groups. We are confused about what is “speech” and what is “amplification,” and whether the same rules apply to both.

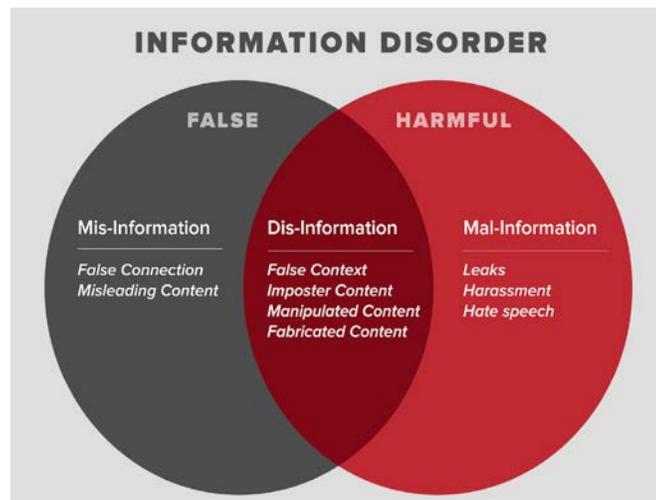
Ari Fleischer, President, Fleischer Communications: As White House Press Secretary, his role was to take the “hardest questions” from the press. The job could be uncomfortable, but he recognized that a free press is a vital part of the U.S. system of checks and balances, whose role is to hold the feet of elected officials to the fire.

The First Amendment remains indispensable, but he is concerned that today, “bias is killing journalism and is leading to distrust of the media.” Reporters are “overwhelmingly liberal,” and their reportage reflects their perspective. Much of media is adamantly opposed to Trump, which is helping to grow their readership. An example: when the *New York Times* reported on Vice President Pence leaving a football game when some players knelt for the national anthem, it was described as a “PR stunt” – in news coverage, not an editorial.

What is being lost is the journalistic tradition of objectivity. The result is that only 7% of respondents in a Politico poll described the press as nonpartisan [and in [a new Politico poll](#), 46% of voters said they believe that “the news media fabricate news stories about President Trump”], while a 2016 Gallup poll found that just 32% trusted that the mass media will cover the news fully, fairly and accurately. Fleischer’s request: “Give me the facts, and let me decide what I think about them.”

Claire Wardle, Research Director, First Draft News: First Draft is a coalition of 100 organizations whose mission is to improve skills and standards in the reporting and sharing of information that emerges online. She believes that “truth and trust are intertwined” and that we need to be clear about what is true and what is not. We also need to explore the impact that current reporting of mis- and dis-information is having on wider levels of trust in institutions.

The concept of “fake news” is not very helpful in analyzing the nature of the current “information disorder.” In fact there are nine distinct types of problematic information which can be false (mis-information), harmful (mal-information) or both (dis-information):



Source: Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan

We also need a better understanding of how good and bad information get spread: we need to identify who is the agent—human and non-human—creating and relaying messages; the characteristics of the messages themselves (content, duration, accuracy, and intended target); and how messages get interpreted and acted on by recipients.

Finally, journalists need better skills and tools to deal with information they find online. For example, there is growing body of research findings showing that fact-checking or labeling stories as “fake” are not very effective in combatting dis-information. In an industry that is so highly competitive, it is challenging but necessary to find better ways for getting newsrooms to collaborate on critical issues like this.

In the discussion that followed the presentations, Jonathan Zittrain said that he is developing a “taxonomy of bias” that differentiates between *strategic bias*, which determines what is and is not reported, and *tactical bias*, that involves injecting opinion about facts. But how are journalists supposed to respond when leaders make factually untrue statements? Ari Fleischer responded that reporters needed to find a source for disagreements and not communicate their own views. Deb Roy asked how journalists should respond to deliberate efforts to sow dis-information? Ari Fleischer suggested that a coalition of media from both the left and right that would jointly label stories as false would have more credibility than any single entity.

John Thornton offered a distinction between two types of communication: *transmission*, which is the simple conveyance of information, and *ritual*, which involves “performative” messages primarily intended to shape and communicate our identities. Fact-checking is not particularly relevant or effective for the latter type of communication, which is increasingly common. danah boyd added that labeling things as “fake” just encourages people to tune out or (as was the case with “Pizzagate”) to increase interest in and circulation of a story. boyd also suggested that what matters most is not what is happening with a particular story or news outlet, but what is happening to the whole media ecosystem, the ongoing efforts to use media to create chaos and uncertainty.

Panel 2: Media and Technology

Emily Bell, Founding Director, Tow Center for Digital Journalism: Asking what the Internet has done to journalism is like asking what the sun has done to the earth. Positive effects include “blowing open” the bottleneck of distribution, increasing diversity of voices, unleashing more data, and making journalism more lively. Negatives include the relentless pressure from readers on journalists to come up with new stories and the weakening of traditional institutions due to declining ad revenues.

The online platforms, which now are responsible for delivering 70% of traffic to news sites, are “bending and reshaping journalism”: today, every newsroom is concerned about “what works on Facebook,” and Twitter is rapidly becoming more important as a force in journalism (and politics).

Journalism is a broken business model. Media companies should have created Facebook, but they missed the opportunity. Big national news organizations with strong brands will be OK, but local news will not be.

Good investigative journalism is still needed and is still being done, but most journalists are not being properly supported. “Deep journalism” can never pay for itself. What is missing is “patient capital” that will invest in good journalism, allow reporters the time to follow stories. Just as the UK government did when it established the BBC in 1922, we need to build new institutions, perhaps with the support of tech companies, to sustain high caliber journalism. “Good journalism is inherently unprofitable.”

Eve Burton, SVP and General Counsel, Hearst: The platform companies are killing content companies by not paying enough for the content that is helping them grow and prosper. Content companies are caught between two bad alternatives: they are being disintermediated by the platforms, but without the platforms, they don’t have effective distribution channels.

She has two proposals for big new initiatives:

1. *A news foundation or commission* with \$1 billion in funding to hire curators and engineers who will find more effective ways to advance the best, most reliable news stories in different categories (health, climate change). (One potential model is the [Science Surveyor](#), developed with support from the Brown Institute for Media Innovation, which is intended to be “Google for science.”)
2. *An American News Corporation* (a U.S. equivalent of the BBC) that is voluntarily founded and supported by the major platform companies.

Theodore B. Olson, Partner, Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLP: There is no question that the Internet can be a force for good, but great newspapers, magazines and bookstores are disappearing, and journalism is shrinking in “a fast moving death spiral.” The Internet has opened a Pandora’s Box of questions: What is media? Who is a publisher? How can the First Amendment protect journalists without a clear definition of who is a journalist?

The audience is hooked on sound bytes and everyone is turning to platforms for news. But with people believing something “because it’s on the Internet,” it’s gotten harder to know what is really true.

In the ensuing discussion, Nuala O’Connor suggested that we need to explore the legal underpinnings of platforms. Perhaps the most important current law is Section 230 of the CDA,¹ which provides ISPs and platforms with immunity from liability for third party content that they host or convey. While the law allows platforms to provide access to a wide range of speech without incurring liability for the content, it also permits them to restrict or filter materials they deem to be offensive or objectionable. Emily Bell stated that CDA 230 needs reform, perhaps requiring more transparency in how decisions are made about allowing

¹ CDA Section 230 states that “No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider” (47 U.S.C. § 230).

or blocking content, rather than providing blanket protection. [Eric Goldman, “the dean of CDA 230 law,” warns that “[it remains highly imperiled](#).”] Ted Olson suggested that we also may need to re-look at copyright law to protect people who are creating stories but not getting paid for it.

Eduardo Padrón asked about how journalists are being trained for this new hybrid world. According to Emily Bell, there used to be no data-based courses taught at [Columbia Journalism School](#), but today 20-30 such courses are being offered. For example a course on Digital Forensics is being taught by a world-class statistician. (Other classes include Algorithms; Data & Databases; Data Visualization.) Most journalists will need quantitative skills, but “it is easier to teach journalism to an engineer than to teach engineering to a journalist.” Eve Burton noted that the [Brown Institute for Media Innovation](#) at Columbia and Stanford is putting computer scientists together with journalism students to collaborate on creating innovative applications.