

Trust: how to build public confidence in your journalism

This article is based on a speech given by me to a journalism conference in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia

Pretty much everywhere around the world *indicators* of trust in authority: politicians, business, journalism – appear to be heading down. I don't think you should pay too much attention to those headline figures. But that does not mean we should not strive to build and maintain more confidence. If we want to improve *public participation*, then improving confidence in journalism is key.

I was a journalist for 25 years before joining the LSE in 2006. So I am old enough to know that people have always been cynical about journalists. 'Don't believe what you read in the papers' was the axiom of that age. Now, of course, many people don't read physical newspapers at all!

The last 20-30 years has seen stupendous technological change with the internet, mobile telephony, digital tools, social media and now Artificial Intelligence. The information landscape has changed radically. Much of it is for the best: we can all now have a voice and the creative and accountability potential of information technology is astounding. We have more, better journalism than ever before. But of course, it has also brought sensational and false disinformation, offensive and hate speech, polarising propaganda and cheap clickbait. It's not surprising that people are confused – they are drowning in an ocean of good and bad information. Around the world – including Malaysia – news organisations are struggling for their lives.



Charlie Beckett speaking to the Sarawak Media Conference

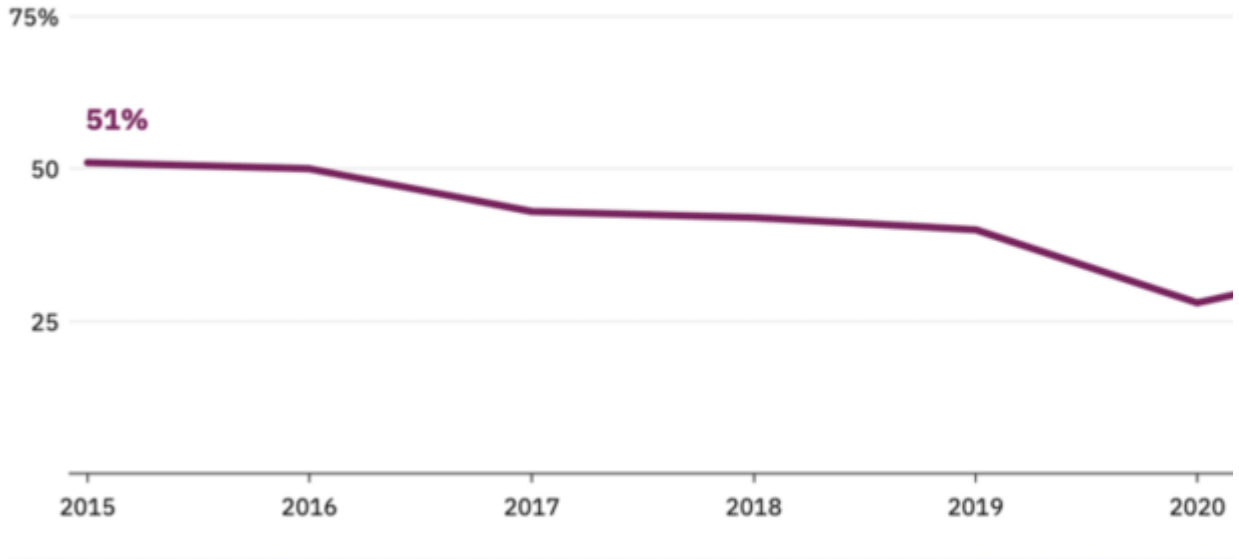
As this chart shows levels of trust measured by the Reuters Institute survey of online

news in the UK shows a decline in declared trust.

Overall trust score

Change over time 2015–2023

United Kingdom



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Although it's interesting that it goes up when people talk about the news they actually consume.

Trust



Overall trust score

But the problem is that the current measures can be used as a weapon against journalism. As Nobel Prize winning Philippine editor Maria Ressa has said, authoritarian politicians or corporations can cite those surveys to denigrate journalism. Those same surveys show that the country with the highest level of trust in its media is China and I am not sure that is a political model that I would advocate.

This ‘study’ is like giving a loaded gun to autocratic governments trying to silence independent journalists not just in the Philippines but in countries like Brazil and India, where information operations and the lawfare are used to persecute, harass, and chill.”

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I think those surveys are asking the wrong question. As a journalist (or professor) I never asked to be trusted automatically. I never trusted anyone else without good reason, so why should I ask the same of the public? I prefer the age of scepticism to the age of deference. At places like the LSE we tell people to think critically, so why are we surprised when they do?

So perhaps we don't need that kind of trust? Certainly, healthy societies need information pluralism and civil discourse. We need information to live our daily lives and to build productive and sustainable communities. Journalism can be part of that process. It gives us facts, it gives us analysis and it can help us have conversations about what

we want in life as citizens and a country. It can help us understand the world and connect to each other. All that makes for happier, thriving societies.

Don't Wait To Be Trusted

Mainstream media needs to stop waiting for the trust to return. There was no Golden Age of trust. In fact, I would suggest that every time you are tempted to use the word 'trust' you try to use a different word to describe what you really mean. Do you want people's trust or do you want their confidence, attention, respect or money?

Journalism spends a lot of time worrying about technology – the Internet has meant that legacy mainstream media faces more competition for attention and its old convenient source of funding, advertising, has drifted away to more effective platforms. People can get their information and debate without going to a news organisation.

To adapt to this journalism has to change. And a lot of this has little to do with technology and more to do with culture and editorial policy. Mainstream media is still too out of touch. It lacks connection to its audience. The people who work in newsrooms don't reflect their audiences. It lacks a sense of mission and public purpose. It is still too focused on its own agenda and its own profit rather than what serves its audience best.

Paradox of Power

Journalism is caught up in a paradox of power. As we've seen, journalism collectively is weaker than before: politically, commercially, and culturally. And yet journalists individually or as a team have more technological power than ever before. Thanks to digital technologies and the internet we can reach more people. We have dozens of networks and channels to connect to people in new and more powerful ways. A newspaper like the Guardian that used to have hundreds of thousands of readers in the UK now has tens of millions of online readers around the world. We have amazing tools such as mobile phones, digital editing, and online search. We have more formats, from podcasts to Instagram videos to report with.

So what's the recipe for surviving this paradox?

Any solution to digital disruption has to put AI at its centre, but let's leave that for another article. Let's look at other steps. If you want to counter digital disruption here is the

double challenge. You have to use the same technologies that are disrupting you. But you also have to find non-technological solutions.

Every news organisation is different. If I had an easy universal answer I would not be standing here. I would be a massively rich consultant. But here is my strategy:

1.

Firstly, journalists are too undiverse: we don't reflect the communities we serve. In every sense: class, race, and background. But especially in our interests: we are too isolated with our own agendas rather than responding to what people need to know or care about. We are still too attached to elites and unconcerned about how the public uses journalism. In the UK we have newsrooms full of people obsessed by Westminster politics and not interested enough in health, families, culture, arts, sports, business, work, careers, environment, and all the things that make up people's real lives. *So hire differently and think differently.*

1. 2.

2. Secondly, the news industry is terrible at professional development and nurturing its workers. News management is still at a Victorian factory level. It has not learnt the lessons of influencers, creative industries, and the service sector. New technologies offer amazing potential for creativity and new ways to find stories, create content and connect to people but journalism is always behind the curve. We need to think of newsrooms as laboratories not factories. *We need to think of the people who make the news as a resource for investment.*

1. 3.

2. Thirdly, on disinformation. There is a lot of bad information out there. New technologies make it easier to create and spread it. But it is humans who choose to create it and it is humans, very often, who are happy to consume it and share it, even when they know it's not true. So it is vital that journalists offer an alternative. Firstly, use the same technologies to filter and fact-check and to help people find reliable news. *Challenge the source of disinfo which is often overt disinformation*

from politicians, powerful people as well as citizens and, of course, other journalists.

1. 4.

2. Fourthly, there will always be an appetite for reliable information and informed analysis. We saw that during the pandemic. There was a lot of fake news about vaccines but traffic to reliable news organisations also went up. It's not the job of journalism to clean up the Internet but at least we can stop amplifying it. We need to be more transparent, rigorous and better informed. We need more data journalism and explainers. *That means more real expertise in newsrooms.*

1. 5.

2. Fifthly, we need to focus much harder on audiences. We need new ways to bring young people into contact with our journalism. We need to work harder to provide optimised and diverse information services to our subscribers or users. Look at how the New York Times now gets more income from games and recipes than news – nothing wrong with that – news has always been subsidised – don't kid yourself that more than 10% of people will pay for news. *So engage more with your audiences and diversify your revenue sources.*

1. 6.

2. Consider the UX – the user experience. This sounds technical but it's essential. People are always just a click or a swipe away from ignoring your journalism. And if people don't access your journalism, if it doesn't fit their lives, then it won't be able to compete in a networked world. Offer them the right format for their lifestyle. Offer them added value: your content has to stand out. Give them hard news but also more constructive news or content that can be useful or give serendipity and joy. *Help people to have a healthy news diet*

We are at the start of another wave of technological change with AI. It's a good moment

to spend some precious time facing up to what might be an existential threat. Legacy media has actually been much more resilient than we thought. Fewer news organisations have disappeared than we feared. I am glad that traditional journalism values can endure: independence, critical thinking, compassion, anger, curiosity, the ability to communicate what is happening in our complex and risky world. But go back to basics and ask yourself some hard questions. *Why are YOU doing journalism? What is YOUR news organisation for? Why should anyone want your journalism?*

And finally, it's about society fostering good journalism. The news industry is relatively small. It needs to collaborate much more: with each other, but also with universities, start-ups, tech companies and communities. The state can help, too. That means removing restrictive legislation, relaxing regulation, ending threats to journalists who are critical of those in power and supporting innovation and training. It means investing in media literacy and the promotion of transparency in government, law, finance and business. Politicians and other leaders in society are not likely to love journalism because when it works, it holds them to account, but ultimately we all benefit.

So to end. Every day I speak to journalists around the world. I know that they work incredibly hard for scant reward in a precarious profession. They are subjected to endless criticism, abuse and, in many parts of the world, personal, physical danger and the threat of imprisonment. So it is not surprising they crave some kind of affirmation. Those surveys of public Trust suggest that it is possible to build public confidence. Certainly, news organisations need public support, revenue and engagement. But they also need to be independent, professional and prepared to tell unpleasant truths. Our world needs better journalism more than ever as we face the challenges of climate change and geopolitical threats and I hope I can do my bit to help it go forwards.

This article by Charlie Beckett