

# News in the Age of Trump: A Re-evaluation of Journalistic Ethics

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*Sanaya Chanda is a candidate of the MSc in Global Media and Communications at LSE*



## Journalism's Existential Crisis

BuzzFeed's publication of an unverified dossier containing compromising details of the forty-fifth President's campaign activities and his alleged collusion with the Russian government, and CNN's consequent report of the President's briefing of this dossier by the CIA prompted Donald Trump to call CNN a "fake news" organisation and BuzzFeed a "failing pile of garbage". Accusing a well-respected news organisation of being fake news for reporting on a story which was evidently true and properly sourced has created a "moral crisis" for journalism according to Charlie Beckett, Director of Polis, LSE's journalism think tank.



At a recent event organised by Polis along with the London Press Club on January 25, CNN's Brian Stelter admitted

that the crisis for journalists in America has become “existential”. Stelter maintains that this has forced journalists to confront just how confusing the news landscape is for people, especially when terms like “fake news” are being used flippantly to describe a news story that one doesn’t agree with. The nature of news is also changing with a sizeable number of stories reporting on the President’s frequent tweets, tweets that Stelter insists cannot be ignored due to their hyperbole and inaccuracy. Journalists now have to call out a lie when they see it and make a conscious effort to engage with those people who may feel uncomfortable when confronted with the truth.

John Rentoul of The Independent, however, disagreed that journalists should call out lies or run newspaper headlines that explicitly make accusations of lies. “Once you start accusing people of lying, you’ve lost the argument” said Rentoul. He argues that an accusation implies a questioning of motives, of intent, something that journalists can never be absolutely certain of. This is in support of the journalistic convention of stating facts as plainly as possible in the quest for a perceived objectivity.



### **A Call for Greater Engagement**

These are times of intense polarisation, not only in the electorate, but also among corporate media. Alex Sundstrom of Republicans Overseas remarked that public trust in the American news media has dropped drastically from 55 per cent in the 70s to only 20 per cent today; republicans’ trust has dropped from 32 per cent to 14 per cent. These numbers call for a removal of the ideological lens from media coverage of a presidency. Sundstrom noted that there was a blind dislike of Donald Trump in the liberal media, something that could be countered by liberal news organisations employing more people who voted for Trump. Anne McElvoy from The Economist corroborated this argument by advocating a curiosity for understanding other perspectives. It was important for journalists to keep an open mind and consider the possibility that Trump *may* have a point.

James Ball of BuzzFeed suggested a novel approach to engaging the public: one of clear, simple messaging as opposed to the obscure, guarded language usually adopted by journalists to avoid defamation charges. Ball maintains that BuzzFeed is the only organisation that admitted that the information contained in the dossier was unverified before publishing it, while other organisations simply made several allusions to it. BuzzFeed publication of the dossier made a hazy situation a little clearer and was in line with its strategy of straightforward, lucid messaging. Ball emphasises the need for journalists to ask themselves the question: is the public sophisticated enough to grasp



complex argumentation? His is a new brand of journalism that attempts to talk “to people and not about people” through simplified content that gives precedence to clarity. “Just because you know nuance, doesn’t mean you have to explain every bit of it” Ball said. Whether journalism evolves in line with BuzzFeed’s methods or holds fast to its hallowed conventions is yet to be seen. It will be an interesting four years for journalism in America.

**Truth, trust and the news media was hosted by Polis and the London Press Club.**

**Professor Charlie Beckett, Director of Polis, was in discussion with Brian Stelter (CNN), Alex Sundstrom (Rupublicans Overseas), John Rentoul (The Independent), Anne McElvoy (The Economist) and James Ball (BuzzFeed).**

You can listen to podcasts of the discussion [here](#).



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