

Can We Trust The Internet? (new book)

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2008-10-30

Can we trust the Internet? There is no more fundamental question about news media today. And yet it is mired in myth and misunderstanding. Here is a chapter I have written for a new book, *Beyond Trust*, edited by John Mair which has collected a variety of perspectives.

The Internet is now a significant and expanding space for news. It has not yet displaced or revolutionised traditional 'offline' journalism, but it is the most dynamic force in changing the way we make and consume news. Therefore, it is right that we should be properly sceptical about whether we can trust the information, analysis and comment that we get Online.

All new technologies evoke irrational fears. These dire warnings and dark forebodings are not usually based on experience but on cultural prejudice and pre-existing anxieties. The Internet and the issue of trust is no exception. The reaction to the Internet has produced panicked responses, which often conflate concepts and make confused ethical judgements.

Internet entrepreneur Andrew Keen[1] is the most outspoken but typical of those who believe that the Internet is innately untrustworthy. He argues that much news produced Online by non-traditional journalists is low in quality and unreliable. The 'monkies' of Online journalism don't have the skills and standards of mainstream journalists and so we can't trust them.

Journalist Nick Davies [2] adds the charge that the Internet is partly to blame for current cost cutting. In the hands of rapacious capitalist management, the efficiencies of digital production are used to reduce journalistic resources. The result is that we cannot trust what is produced anywhere anymore.

Jeremy Paxman's McTaggart lecture [3] warned of growing public scepticism fuelled by new technology. As the citizen is allowed to partake of media production, he argued, so they would lose any lingering reverence for the media's skills.

Former Prime Minister Tony Blair told us that he had hoped that New Media would end the bitter dogfight between journalists and politicians. However, the result of the Internet, he lamented in his 'feral beast' speech [4], was yet more conspiracy theories and gossip.

Even the great philosopher of the Public Sphere, Jurgen Habermass, has his doubts. His critique of the Internet underpins all those other criticisms regarding trust:

"The price we pay for the growth in egalitarianism offered by the Internet is the decentralised access to unedited stories. In this medium, contributions by intellectuals lose their power to create a focus." [5]

For years, the above people have been arguing and working for a trustworthy media. Yet it appears that what they are actually arguing for is a media controlled by an intellectual elite, a priesthood of politicians, experts and journalists. I am not sure that was ever a healthy ambition but it is certainly not a sustainable position anymore.

All the criticisms voiced above could, and have been, applied to mass media over the last 100 years. They are very similar to attacks made upon other new technological developments such as the arrival of radio or television when they threatened the status quo.

'Trust' was always a fig leaf for power. Now it is possible to see the real nature of the term. The Internet means that the journalists have lost their effective monopoly over news production. The means of production have changed and so too has the power relationship. This means that the trust itself has to be redefined.

In the past, we asked the audience for trust (and money). There was an exchange of news in return. Thus, the BBC points to 'trust' ratings as a way of sanctioning its public subsidy.

Yet, as Adrian Monck [6] has pointed out, this was not really the whole point of news. News has always been about entertainment, distraction, partisan persuasion, and relativism as well as 'truth'.

There was no Golden Age when journalists were seen as impartial conveyors of reality. Trust was always conditional. Along with politicians and most authority figures and institutions, journalism is questioned now to a greater degree than ever before. I welcome that. Too often in the past journalism has been partial, inaccurate, and downright false. It has been arrogant and complacent. A questioning approach by journalists is a job requirement, but the disdain for their subject and audience that some in the media have shown in the past was a disaster for its long-term credibility.

The Internet offers a new relationship with journalism that redefines trust into something more meaningful and less hypocritical. I think that this is much more valuable than the dangers it brings with it.

There are risks, of course. The fact is that the Internet is a vast space, much bigger than the Old Media area. Inevitably, there will be a lot more rubbish floating around, reflecting people's desire to communicate nonsense and spleen as well as facts and analysis.

However, there is more 'good' journalism around than before. This is partly thanks to the lower entry thresholds of Internet media. Both mainstream and 'amateur' journalists are creating a greater volume of material. Some of it is only aimed at a few people at the end of the Long Tail. Specialist bloggers, for example, are able to create small public networks that cover highly refined subject areas at low cost and high quality. While focusing on a niche audience they enjoy almost infinite potential reach thanks to the Internet. Opendemocracy.net, is a good example. Alternatively, 'good' journalism can also find a global mass audience. The Guardian now has more online readers in America, for example, than it does in the UK.

Journalism is now more accessible than ever before thanks to the Internet. Search means we can find data, comment, and reportage on a scale and with a precision that was unimaginable just a few years ago. But can we trust it?

What is interesting is how systems for establishing trust are being worked out Online in new and evolving ways. The Internet allows the public to become a part of news production in a way that can build trust. Crowd-sourcing allows the media and the public to access networks of expertise and experience. The public has experts and witnesses who know far more about stories than a small band of professional journalists can ever do.

This sharing of information builds trust through a process rather than through pre-ordained 'authority'. It works directly, peer-to-peer, through reference, linking and citation. Wikipedia is the classic example of this collective form of self-correction and validation.

It can also be done through what I call Networked Journalism. This is where amateur and professional journalists work together. The most successful Internet news providers are the ones that understand the new nature of trust Online. Some of these will be familiar brands such as the BBC or The New York Times. The BBC, for example, has managed to integrate vast amounts of user-generated content (UGC) in to its work without surrendering any authority. They make a virtue of their ability to provide a filter for the vast amounts of data and comment circulating Online. Networked Journalism means changing from being branded institutions to branded communities built on a trust relationship.

Then there are the independent New Media journalists who also have the trust of their audience. Paul Staines (aka Guido Fawkes [7]) is a right-wing blogger who is patently 'biased'. But he can be trusted. He is very clear about his views and corrects mistakes publicly. Staines and his readers are highly self-conscious about Guido's role as a critic of mainstream media and politicians. He plays a Networked Journalism role as an intermediary between

professional journalism, the political system and the Online public. In his own way, he is as 'trustworthy' as the BBC's Nick Robinson.

In this way, the Internet builds up a kind of 'radical impartiality' to use Peter Horrock's intriguing phrase. Previously, we had a monolithic, imposed version of reality modulated between a selection of media companies. Now, we have a network of constantly competing narratives in a virtual market place of ideas.

Aspects of the Internet undermine trust. Writers can hide behind anonymity. Falsehoods can reverberate in cyberspace long after corrections have been made at the place of original publication. There is a tendency towards subjectivity and relativism that makes conventional ideas of the truth or objectivity even more unstable. But this is the price of giving the public power and choice. It is a price that any progressive democratic civilisation should see as an investment worth making.

The challenge for those in the news media industry is to build new structures of trust with the public for the Internet. There is nothing wrong with codes for websites or moderation as long as they are transparent. There are plenty of ways that Internet users can protect themselves or their children. But old-fashioned methods of prior regulation are based on censorship. They are simply not practical for the Internet. Where they are possible, they kill the very creativity that we benefit from.

Take just one example. The photo-sharing site Flickr [8] is a huge new resource with great journalistic value. It enables the public to report visually upon their lives and the world and creates an awesome repository of photographic material. Thousands of new photos are uploaded every minute. Imagine if you had to pre-check the 'veracity' of every one? It would be impossible and undesirable.

Instead, Internet journalism builds trust through the process. Whether amateur or professional the Networked Journalist must understand that if they want an audience they must have trust. I actually prefer the word "relevance". By this I mean it in a very broad sense to describe how "pertinent, connected, or applicable something is to a given matter." This does not necessarily mean useful or personal. It can apply to ideas or arguments as much as information. "Relevant" in this context means that the public is proximate to the information. They trust it because it has been mediated through a network which connects the consumer directly with its production. It may be as simple as the opportunity to email a comment or as complicated as a wiki. It is something more tangible than the old paternalistic idealised sense of trust which was effectively a claim asserted without negotiation.

For Internet journalism to be relevant or 'trusted' there are some practical and policy issues. Media organisations need to redevelop their systems and re-skill their staff. They need to become facilitators and connectors as well as editors and producers. They will still need to report, analyse and comment. But they should work openly with the public if they want to build in a network of trust.

News media managers need to promote editorial diversity that connects their companies with the vast range of communities and interests that make up our lives and our societies.

Governments need to protect 'net neutrality' and encourage creative commons. They need to build greater media literacy in to all aspects of education. This should include a political and editorial understanding of issues such as 'trust' as well as practical skills to use and produce media for the citizen.

And it means better technology such as Text Mining Engines harnessed to intelligent search. Verification and authentication could be built into the very process of engagement through the Internet.

But ultimately it will be about competition and power. Journalists were always creators of their own version of 'truth'. It was one forged in the heat of commercial competition and institutional power. 'Trust' as an abstract ideal was never essential to professional news media. Journalism requires attention not faith.

This is why Internet journalism will be judged on its 'relevance' not an idealised notion of 'truth'. There is nothing

innately democratic about the Internet. There is no inevitably progressive or humane outcome of its work. I recognise that there are those who make greater claims for Online communication. But I put my trust in the more modest hope of Networked Journalism, where the mainstream news media working with the public creates a more open and connected form of reporting our world.

Footnote:

1: Keen, Andrew *The Cult Of The Amateur* (Doubleday, 2007)

2: Davis, Nick *Flat Earth News* (Chatto and Windus, 2008)

3: Jeremy Paxman's lecture of August 2007 full text accessible here:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/2007/08/the_james_mactaggart_memorial_lecture.html

4: Tony Blair's June 2007 Reuters Speech accessible here:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6744581.stm

5: Habermas, J., 2006, *Towards a United States of Europe* (acceptance speech at Bruno Kreisky Prize), March 27, viewed July 30, 2007, <http://www.signandsight.com/features/676.html>

6: Monck, Adrian. *Can You Trust The Media* (Icon Books, 2008)

7: Paul Staines blog is at: www.order-order.com

8: Flickr is at www.flickr.com

Beyond Trust (ISBN 978 1 84549 341 7) is edited by John Mair, senior lecturer in journalism at Coventry University and a former producer and director for BBC, ITV and Channel Four, and Richard Lance Keeble, professor of journalism at the University of Lincoln and joint editor of *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics*. It is published by Arima Publishing, of Bury St Edmunds (www.abramis.co.uk; £14.95)

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