

# Can You Trust The Media? by Adrian Monck (Book review)

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2008-4-27

Never mind the media, it's the public you can't trust. In short that is the counter-intuitive message of [Adrian Monck's](#) controversial new book, *Can You Trust The Media?* (Icon). [This article is part of this month's *Carnival of Journalism* blogfest – see the other articles at [Yoni Greenbaum's](#) host-blog]



I agree with much of Adrian's argument as he attempts to debunk the self-serving moral fudge that surrounds the 'trust' debate. But I draw different conclusions which I outline in my book *SuperMedia*.

Adrian deploys a series of case-studies and historical analyses to show how the debate around trust has clouded our view of what journalism actually does.

High-minded media commentators tend to assume that there is a 'crisis' of trust. This is because there are frequent surveys where the public tells pollsters or academics that they don't believe what journalists tell them. There is also plenty of evidence from the *Hitler Diaries* to the *McCanns* that mainstream journalists often tell lies.

Some analysts such as [Nick 'Flat Earth' Davies](#) blame capitalism. Others blame proprietorial influence. [John Lloyd](#) blamed the power-crazed arrogance of the journalists. [Andrew Keen](#) and [Tony Blair](#) say that New Media is making it worse.

They all assume that journalism is about telling the unvarnished truth and that the public want to consume detailed, intelligent and unbiased versions of reality. Adrian Monck disagrees.

He takes on some specific shibboleths. For example, he shows how the media didn't swallow the 'dodgy dossier' in the lead-up to the Iraq War. He shows how media moguls have often failed in their campaigns to use their newspapers to change government policies.

On the other hand he accepts that Murdoch is far more influential than a normal businessman and that public relations companies can get their products higher profiles by manipulating the media. But his deeper point is that the media has never been morally pure and that we are probably wrong to expect that it can be.

He points out that most journalism is fundamentally a way of using information to sell advertising. Throughout history what goes in to the news media tends to be a product of both commercial imperatives and the peculiar culture of the journalists themselves. Journalism is the art of the possible, produced with limited resources against deadlines. It is always flawed and so can never be entirely trustworthy.

The public lies and the public can be stupid. People say they want more serious, objective information but then they resolutely refuse to consume it when it is provided.

In this sense, Adrian is returning to the basic [Dewey-Lippman](#) debate about the public utility and social role of the news media. The cynical side of Adrian shares Lippman's assertion that modern life is too complex for the media to explain the whole truth and for the citizen to understand. Lippman wanted the media to manufacture consent based on expert opinion, but Monck says they don't even do that. In fact, he says, the media spends most of its time distracting us rather than informing us.

Even a newspaper like the earnest *Guardian/Observer* is packed full of lifestyle and human interest content in an effort to make the factual reporting and analysis palatable. Although that didn't stop their *Reader's Editor* taking to the high ground in his [review](#) of this book.

Adrian says that the idea that you can create good citizens through good media is a myth:

*"The idea that the public deserve the news in order for our democracy to flourish has little currency in political theory. Historically it is a radical myth. The informed citizen has replaced the honest worker has replaced the good Christian"*

But in the end Monck's analysis does give some succour to [John Dewey's](#) idea of [public journalism](#). His description of the challenge of reporting terror, for example, is an excellent demonstration of why we need better media coverage of community conflict and political extremism. It's just that Adrian doesn't see how the media we have can do that:

*I don't really think we can expect reporting as it is currently resourced to provide either the answers of the kind of public scrutiny that these important questions require. (I don't even know if we can ask the public en masse to be interested)*

Adrian is right to insist that if we want a more 'trustworthy' media then society has to help create it. As he says that means policy changes such as opening up government and other institutions like the courts to far greater information transparency.

But the most interesting idea is one that he doesn't quite follow through on. Adrian raises the more fundamental idea that 'trust' isn't the thing we should be worried about:

*"We are simply measuring the wrong thing. Perhaps trust simply doesn't matter – certainly not in the real world, the world of finance and power. Perhaps trust is a liberal preoccupation for journalists and editors, and certainly not one shared by those who matter in the media world – the owners and consumers."*

I would put it less cynically, but I think he is right. People do not use the media in a scientific way. They do not expect it to be empirically correct. They 'trust' a media outlet because generally it reflects or complements their experience of life. They find that it is relevant and useful to their lives. It is part of their imagined and real community. Trust is a relationship not a fact.

I think that the real crisis of mainstream media today is not a moral sense of trust. It is the more practical problem that mainstream media is no longer relevant to people.

The dangerous delusion (peddled in part by Nick Davies, Andrew Keen, John Lloyd etc) is to pretend that we journalists can make the old relationship work without involving the public in the production of news. I believe that this is especially true in a New Media environment where the citizen can create their own media and seek out information with minimal mainstream media packaging. This is where Monck's book ends (and [mine](#) begins):

*"we need to remind ourselves of the limits of the media in providing us with important information. Those boundaries can't be reshaped by some moral revolution, they need to be recognised. Where important information falls outside the media's retreating boundaries we need to think of new ways to keep it available, so that we can access it and act upon it"*

I think those 'new ways' are exactly what we should be worrying about rather than hoping to regulate or legislate for trust.

*"Can You Trust The Media"* is a very accessible history of the media and trust and a provocative attempt to prick some moral balloons. After a series of scandals about impartiality, honesty and accuracy it is a welcome breath of fresh air thinking.

[Professor Adrian Monck heads up [City University's](#) journalism department and has an excellent [blog](#). He's an award-winning TV journalist who has worked in America as well as the UK, including a spell at my former employer ITN. I should declare that we are friends but as everyone knows, we are cranky gits who will disagree with each other wherever possible.]

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