

# Polis – You don't trust TV

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Our public trial of TV ended with a vote in which our audience voted 60/40 that they did *not* trust TV. This is probably a good thing. Most of the TV great and good that we put in the dock admitted that a high degree of scepticism is a desirable qualification for anyone watching the box.

Our group of witnesses have produced some of the best TV news and current affairs over the last couple of decades at the BBC and the commercial channels. They all accepted that there is a crisis of confidence in broadcast journalism but they gave very different reasons and solutions.

Veteran left-wing investigative journalist [Laurie Flynn](#) blamed a lack of resources for serious research as budgets are slashed to make profits and cut costs. He said that journalists are now forgetting that “Evidence is more important than entertainment.”

But independent producer [Anne Lapping](#), who has produced great documentaries like *Fall Of Yugoslavia*, said it was not a question of money but of judgement. She said that we should not blame young journalists or a ratings war. She claimed that this was about a failure of editing.

Former *BBC Today* programme editor [Phil Harding](#) agreed that it was about editorial policy and practice. He said there was a commissioning culture that encouraged a fear of failure. He said journalists should be allowed to try for stories that might not make it to air. Diplomatically he said that he thought that BBC boss Mark Thompson had got the balance right now, but that during the summer the Director General had over-reacted to the mistakes made over ‘TV fakery’ and had overdone the ‘sackcloth and ashes.’ He called for an increase in public media literacy so that the audience understands how TV is produced.

The non-TV person on the panel, [Neil Midgley](#) from the *Daily Telegraph*, was surprisingly supportive of the BBC and broadcasters, considering his paper’s campaign against bias at the Corporation. He said that there was now a ‘culture of neurosis’ but he pointed out that most of the problems stemmed from ‘interactive TV’. In other words the faking was done by people who were dealing with the public, such as the phone-ins, rather than traditional broadcasters. He said that the public had lost trust in the people who run the networks not the producers and so people like Mark Thompson had to show more leadership and defend their staff and the good work they do.

Former BBC editorial policy director, [Stephen Whittle](#) said he thought that the new generation of TV producers are under more pressure. He described the current furore as a ‘wake up call’ to the people who run TV to make sure that their staff are trained to cope with the demands put upon them. He said that better training should be seen as a core need, not an extra. He also called on broadcasters to stop patronising their audience. “At a time when University education is more widespread than ever before, why don’t we offer people more quality TV?” he asked.

But it was [David Elstein](#), a former editorial manager at Thames TV, BSkyB and Five, who was most critical of the broadcasters themselves – or rather the BBC in particular. He described a ‘culture of immunity and impunity’ at the BBC. He said there was contempt for the audience and that he couldn’t believe that managers allowed the phone-in fakery. He said that this was ‘serious stuff’ because it showed how the BBC could not be trusted and needed much tougher regulation by a beefed up independent body.

Elstein’s criticisms were obviously shared by many in the audience – although the BBC was not seen as uniquely at fault. One thing that everyone seemed to agree upon was the [Alan Yentob ‘Noddy’ scandal](#) was a classic example of a deceit that should have been punished. It is a sign that things are not being dealt with when a senior BBC executive can get away with faking it but junior producers get sacked.

Our speakers were all great journalists who made some vital contributions to this debate. But they and the rest of TV

are still waking up to the new facts of life. The audience has changed and it wants more transparency and honesty. The news media is going to have to work harder and invest more in good quality TV to compete with the internet. But it is also going to have to change the way that it works. It is time for TV to share power with the public.

There will be more on broadcasting at [POLIS](#) later this autumn. We debate Impartiality on November 8th and Ofcom boss Ed Richards speaks on November 21st. Get in touch with us at [POLIS@lse.ac.uk](mailto:POLIS@lse.ac.uk) if you want to join the debate.

There will be a podcast of the event on the POLIS website at: [www.lse.ac.uk/POLIS](http://www.lse.ac.uk/POLIS)

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