

CHALLENGES

Public Trust In The News

A constructivist study of the
social life of the news

**Stephen Coleman, Scott Anthony
and David E. Morrison**



RISJ CHALLENGES

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Published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, 13 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PS
Tel: 01865 611090 Fax: 01865 611094
<http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk>

Typeset by the Medical Informatics Unit, NDCLS, University of Oxford. Tel: 01865 222746
Printed by Oxuniprint, Oxford. Tel: 01865 844916

Text © Stephen Coleman 2009

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© RISJ June 2009 -- ISBN 978-0-9558889-5-3

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Executive summary

We depend on trust as never before. You need only glance in the direction of the current global financial tumult to appreciate this. It is not possible to know every person our lives touch. It is not possible to understand all the processes on which our lives directly or indirectly depend.

For obvious reasons, academic studies that examine trust in the media have not been in short supply. How the news is produced, circulated and consumed weighs heavily on the form and force of citizenship. And yet much of the existing literature tends to reduce the tricky issue of trust to the appreciably more straightforward issue of accuracy.

At some level we all understand that trust in the media is about more than veracity. By telling stories the media frames and shapes a shared sense of the world, both distant and local. This recognition led us to take a different tack. We wanted to ask the public what they expected from the news. We wanted to know what journalists expected of the public. Their varied responses revealed that trustworthiness was even more complex than we had anticipated. We realised that trust in the media was better conceptualised as something like a swirling current of shared confidences than a simple matter of belief.

News connects our perception of the past, present and future. The appeal and quality of the news depends on how well journalists serve the public. During the month of March 2008, when our focus groups were taking place, the US primary elections were the biggest international news story in the British media. Every television news bulletin referred to them, every newspaper included campaign reports. Despite the blanket coverage no one in our focus groups had even a basic understanding of what was happening; in fact, not one person realised that Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton belonged to the same party. Incredibly, these findings neither dismayed nor surprised the majority of journalists we spoke to. Here was

one example of journalists either complacently trusting that it is enough for the general public to simply be exposed to a story, or not trusting the public with the wit to comprehend it.

Our focus groups generally distrusted coverage of issues like binge drinking. Against fashionable opinion, it quickly became apparent that members of the public in our focus groups did not generally think that journalists are dishonest. (Indeed, journalists were more likely to speak about stories being made up than focus group participants.) Instead, distrust in the media took more oblique forms. When we encountered distrust in the news—which we frequently did—it was because people felt that their expectations were not shared by news producers; that they were being told stories that were not properly explained; that their lives were being reported in ways that were not adequately researched; or that they could find more useful, reliable or amusing information elsewhere. Public trust in the media was lost when they were imagined and approached in ways that ignored or devalued their everyday experiences.

This is just a basic outline of the shape of our argument. *Public Trust in the News* is organised systematically. First the report addresses fundamental questions about the nature of public knowledge, and the scope and role of the news media's place within it. This is followed by three sections where we discuss concrete findings from our focus groups and the responses they prompted from news journalists, editors and bloggers. A final section summarises our conclusions and offers some proposals for improving the relationship between the news media and the public.

By linking trust to public expectations, we have tried to move away from panicky arguments about journalistic credibility. We have found public trust collapses when journalists are perceived to be reporting on social groups, areas and practices that they do not understand. Distrust happens when the news fails to address the world as the public recognise it, leaving them feeling like outsiders looking on at a drama that even the leading performers do not care if they really comprehend.

1. Introduction: what this study is about

The aim of this study is to explore the changing ways in which citizens encounter, evaluate and act upon news. Can news any longer be thought of as a single, authoritative account of what the public needs to know? Where do citizens go to find different types of news? How do they make up their minds about what is credible and what is unconvincing—what is significant and what is irrelevant? How confident do citizens feel about their understanding of events and issues in the news? Do they feel that their own experiences and environments are fairly represented in the news? Do citizens feel capable of challenging false information, entering into meaningful dialogue with journalists or politicians, and taking their own action to expand or influence the news agenda? As well as looking at these questions from the audience perspective, we invited a range of news editors and journalists to consider them as well. How far do the journalists' impressions of what they are providing match with those emerging from our discussions with readers, viewers, listeners and internet users? What are the terms of the contemporary relationship between news-producers and news-receivers? To what extent, indeed, does the dichotomy between news production and reception describe life within the digital media environment?

The study was driven by an acknowledgement of the vital importance of trust in complex, modern societies. Unlike pre-modern societies, where trust tended to be based upon personal contact and direct experience, the stability of modern societies is founded upon impersonal, abstract trust between distant actors who cannot form direct perceptions of one another. Trust performs three vital functions. First, it is what Pierre Rosanvallon¹ has called 'an institutional economizer' which 'eliminates the need for

¹ P. Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

various procedures of verification and proof. As not everyone can be everywhere, and some accounts about what affects us must be provided by reporting witnesses, we need to be able to rely upon the reputation of the reporter without having to check and recheck every single account that is given to us. Without some people or institutions that can be trusted to inform us, the task of informing ourselves would become so laborious and unwieldy that public knowledge would be mainly confined to narrow and parochial experience. Trust is a precondition of worldliness.

Secondly, the news media provide a key link between representative government and the represented. In the absence of such connection, the legitimacy of government would be very thin indeed, surrounded by public ignorance, rumour and speculation. Citizens would be reduced to irregular voting without being able to monitor, let alone influence, governance. At its best, trust facilitates democratic efficacy, enabling citizens not only to find out about how power is exercised, but to influence it. The ways in which news is produced, circulated and made sense of are intimately linked to the enactment of citizenship in confident, timid or withdrawn fashions.

Thirdly, trust is a key foundation of citizenship, which entails interacting with others (strangers) with whom one shares common space and rules, but whom one cannot hope to know or understand personally. Because citizenship only works on the basis of common knowledge, and shared agreement about ways to live, citizens not only need to become informed themselves, but to trust that others around them are similarly civically informed. Unless we can trust the news media to deliver common knowledge, the idea of the public—a collective entity possessing shared concerns—starts to fall apart.

For all of these reasons, it matters very much if there is a radical contrast between what the public expects from the news media and what journalists mean by serving the public. In recent years, doubts about the capacity of the news media to contribute to democratic life have assumed a central place in public discussion, generating a range of forceful polemical commentaries, such as John Lloyd's *What the Media are Doing to our Politics* (2004), Adrian Monck and Mike Hanley's *Can you Trust the Media?* (2008) and Nick Davies's *Flat Earth News* (2009). These build upon an academic research literature that has tended to address four types of question. First, they have asked how the media *ought* to perform in democratic societies. Writers such as Blumler and Gurevitch,² Lewis *et al.*,³

² J. G. Blumler and M. Gurevitch, *The Crisis of Public Communication* (London: Routledge, 1995).

³ J. Lewis, A. Williams and B. Franklin, 'A Compromised Fourth Estate?', *Journalism Studies*, 9/1 (2008): 1–20.

Newton,⁴ Silverstone⁵ and Schudson⁶ have outlined normative requirements for democratic public communication, addressing complex tensions between political economy and public service, news management and the visibility of power, journalistic professionalism and civic accountability, domestic agendas and moral distance. Others, such as Gerbner and Gross,⁷ Shah,⁸ Uslaner⁹ and Moy and Scheufele¹⁰ have explored the empirical relationships between patterns of media consumption and levels of interpersonal trust. They have argued that the media's depiction of society to itself has given rise to a 'mean-world syndrome' in which anti-social behaviour is exaggerated and some media consumers are led to fear or avoid their fellow citizens. A parallel strand of empirical research, conducted by scholars such as Robinson,¹¹ Patterson,¹² Fallows,¹³ Cappella and Jamieson,¹⁴ Newton,¹⁵ Moy and Pfau¹⁶ and Tsfati and Cappella¹⁷ considers media effects upon trust in political institutions. These scholars have shown how the domination of 'bad news' stories about politicians, governments and legislatures of all kinds results in a default public scepticism towards all institutional authority. More recently, a number of scholars, such as Cappella,¹⁸ Kavanaugh and Patterson,¹⁹

⁴ K. Newton, 'May the Weak Force be with you: The Power of the Mass Media in Modern Politics', *European Journal of Political Research*, 45/2 (2006): 209–34.

⁵ R. Silverstone, *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediaopolis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

⁶ M. Schudson, *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

⁷ G. Gerbner and L. Gross, (1976) 'Living with Television: The Violence Profile', *Journal of Communication*, 26/2 (1976): 172–94.

⁸ D. V. Shah, 'Civic Engagement, Interpersonal Trust, and Television Use: An Individual-Level Assessment of Social Capital', *Political Psychology*, 19/3 (1998): 469–96.

⁹ E. Uslaner, 'Social Capital, Television, and the "Mean World": Trust, Optimism, and Civic Participation', *Political Psychology*, 19/3 (1998): 441–68.

¹⁰ P. Moy and D. Scheufele, 'Media Effects on Political and Social Trust', *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 77/4 (2000): 774–59.

¹¹ M. Robinson, 'Public Affairs Television and the Growth of Political Malaise: The Case of "The Selling of the Pentagon"', *American Political Science Review*, 70/9 (1976): 409–32.

¹² T. Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Knopf, 1994).

¹³ J. Fallows, *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996).

¹⁴ J. Cappella and K. H. Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ K. Newton, 'Mass Media Effects: Mobilization or Media Malaise?', *British Journal of Political Science*, 29/4 (1999): 577–600.

¹⁶ P. Moy and M. Pfau, *With Malice toward All? The Media and Public Confidence in Democratic Institutions* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000).

¹⁷ Y. Tsfati and J. Cappella, 'Do People Watch What they do Not Trust? Exploring the Association between News Media Skepticism and Exposure', *Communication Research*, 20/5 (2003): 504–29.

¹⁸ J. Cappella, 'Cynicism and Social Trust in the New Media Environment', *Journal of Communication*, 52/1 (2002): 229–41.

¹⁹ A. Kavanaugh and S. Patterson, 'The Impact of Community Computer Networks on Social Capital and Community Involvement', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 41/3 (2001): 496–509.

Bimber,²⁰ Shah *et al.*,²¹ Dutton and Shepherd,²² Beaudoin,²³ and Coleman and Blumler²⁴ have considered ways in which the internet and other 'new' media are reconfiguring the terms of political communication by opening up new spaces for many-to-many interactive discourse.

Building upon the illuminating findings and reflections from this literature, the research reported here has taken three distinct approaches. First, while most studies of trust in the news media have focused on production (how news production engenders or limits public trust) or consumption (how audiences receive and evaluate the news), our study focuses upon production *and* consumption, encouraging news audiences and producers to address the same questions. The research began with a series of focus groups conducted in the Leeds area during the month of March 2008. These groups were recruited to reflect a broad range of news consumers.²⁵ The issues raised in these groups formed the basis of our interviews with fourteen news editors, journalists and bloggers. (The bloggers were selected from amongst the most widely read British news blogs.) As well as being questioned about their routine practices and working values, they were invited to reflect and comment upon the perceptions, concerns and wishes emanating from the focus groups. A key aim of our research has been to create a space in which news producers and consumers could engage in parallel reflection upon the strengths and shortcomings of media performance.

Secondly, rather than asking consumers how far they trust the news and journalists how far they feel they should be trusted, as if trust were a well-defined and unproblematic term, our research started by asking a different question. What is news? What does the public need to know? How should the news media be expected to perform? By shifting our investigation from trust, as a measurement of acceptance, to expectation, as a register of how the public thinks it should be served, we have allowed

²⁰ B. Bimber, (2003) *Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²¹ D. V. Shah, J. Cho, W. Eveland and N. Kwak, 'Information and Expression in a Digital Age: Modeling Internet Effects on Civic Participation', *Communication Research*, 32/5 (2005): 531–65.

²² W. Dutton and A. Shepherd, 'Trust in the Internet as an Experience Technology', *Information, Communication and Society*, 9/4 (2006): 433–51.

²³ C. Beaudoin, 'Explaining the Relationship between Internet Use and Interpersonal Trust: Taking into Account Motivation and Information Overload', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13/3 (2008): 550–68.

²⁴ S. Coleman and J. G. Blumler, *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice and Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²⁵ Group 1 was aged 30–65, regular viewers of TV news and newspaper readers; male. Group 2 was aged 30–65, regular viewers of TV news and newspaper readers; female. Group 3 was aged 30–65 with little interest in political news; female. Group 4 was aged 30–65, regular consumers of online news; mixed gender. Group 5 was aged 16–29, regular viewers of TV news and newspaper readers; mixed gender. Hereafter these focus groups are referred to as FG 1, FG 2, etc.

the public to elaborate a basis for confidence in the news. Our approach here is constructivist; the definitions of trust and news were constructed by the participants in the study rather than by the researchers. The intention was to reveal public and professional expectations of the performance of the news media. These expectations take two main forms: those of news consumers, who have their own ideas about what constitutes news, plausible information and authoritative analysis; and news producers (ranging from national newspaper editors to bloggers) who have views about what can be expected from their audiences. In relation to both groups, this brings to the surface usually unarticulated norms. Journalists operate on the basis of professional norms and assumptions that are widely shared, but infrequently declared. Citizens are hardly ever asked to speak about what they expect from the news. At the end of some of our focus groups people expressed a sense of pleasure at having had an opportunity to think aloud about their expectations of the news.

Our constructivist approach revealed that trust in the media amounts to rather more than confidence in journalistic accuracy. It involves feelings of a kind that accord the media a legitimate place in the social ordering of the world. Those who provide news do more than tell daily stories; they frame and shape a common sense of the world, both distant and local. Of course, journalistic inaccuracy or lack of commitment to the establishment of truth undermine trust, but they do not forswear trust. Trust in the veracity of the media, measured by surveys of the extent to which readers, listeners or viewers believe that various media tell the truth, is a relatively trivial exercise in understanding—and little enlightenment is added when such surveys are conducted longitudinally, for all such comparative data can possibly show is how responses to questions of trust have changed over time, leaving unclear what the responses actually represent. What is required is a critical examination of how people construct the function of the news media. From this understanding, the news media's performance can be evaluated within the constructed framework and we can begin to unravel what trust actually means. For this reason, our study focuses upon the ways in which various actors—news producers and consumers—expect the news media to perform.

Thirdly, our study is contextual. The news is always historically placed and incomplete. As John Durham Peters has observed, 'Potential communication about an event is never complete. There is always something more to say; a record, by definition, is never finished.'²⁶ To trust

²⁶ J. D. Peters, 'History as a Communication Problem', in B. Zelizer (ed.), *Explorations in Communication and History* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 22.

news is not only to believe that journalistic narrators are being honest and accurate about what can be witnessed in the present, but that they possess reputations for past veracity and can be expected to stay with the story wherever it might lead. This is particularly relevant to the research reported here, conducted at a moment when few focus group members knew who Barack Obama was (or why two American politicians from the same party were electoral rivals); most focus group members expressed unease about what they saw as the unfair portrayal of the parents of (the then still missing) Shannon Matthews; and the Al-Fayed court case against the Royal Family, British Intelligence and several others remained inconclusive. Looking back on those news stories with the benefit of hindsight, some might wish to dismiss the concerns of our focus group participants as the ramblings of the confused. But that would be a mistake: news is always received as a partial record of ongoing history. News serves to connect the present to the future—and those entrusted with making that connection have a duty to carry the public with them. As we shall see in what follows, people in our focus groups often felt that the news delivered to them on a daily basis failed to explain the world as they recognised it; failed, indeed, to explain its own priorities and preoccupations, often leaving them feeling like outsiders, looking on at a drama that even the leading performers do not expect them to understand.

The next two sections of the report address fundamental questions about the nature of authoritative public knowledge, and definitions and scope of the news. These are followed by three sections addressing specific findings from the focus groups and responses from news journalists, editors and bloggers. A concluding section summarises our findings and offers some proposals for the future relationship between news media and the public.

2. Public knowledge

The news is a form of public knowledge. Unlike personal or private knowledge (such as the health of one's friends and family; the conduct of a private hobby; a secret liaison), public knowledge increases in value as it is shared by more people. The date of an election and the claims of rival candidates; the causes and consequences of an environmental disaster; a debate about how to frame a particular law; the latest reports from a war zone—these are all examples of public knowledge that people are generally expected to know in order to be considered informed citizens. Thus, in contrast to personal or private knowledge, which is generally left to individuals to pursue or ignore, public knowledge is promoted even to those who might not think it matters to them. In short, the circulation of public knowledge, including the news, is generally regarded as a public good which cannot be solely demand-driven.

The production, circulation and reception of public knowledge is a complex process. It is generally accepted that public knowledge should be authoritative, but there is not always common agreement about what the public needs to know, who is best placed to relate and explain it, and how authoritative reputations should be determined and evaluated. Historically, newspapers such as *The Times* and broadcasters such as the BBC were widely regarded as the trusted shapers of authoritative agendas and conventional wisdom. They embodied the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of authority as the 'power over, or title to influence, the opinions of others'. As part of the general process of the transformation of authority whereby there has been a reluctance to uncritically accept traditional sources of public knowledge, the demand has been for all authority to make explicit the frames of value which determine their decisions. Centres of news production, as our focus groups show, have not been exempt from

this process. Not surprisingly perhaps some news journalists feel uneasy about this renegotiation of their authority:

Editors are increasingly casting a glance at the ‘most read’ lists on their own and other websites to work out which stories matter to readers and viewers. And now the audience—which used to know its place—is being asked to act as a kind of journalistic ombudsman, ruling on our credibility. (Broadcast journalist, 2008)

The result of democratising access to TV news could be political disengagement by the majority and a dumbing down through a popularity contest of stories. (Online news editor, 2007)

Despite the rhetorical bluster of these statements, they amount to more than straightforward professional defensiveness. In their reference to an audience ‘which used to know its place’ and conflation between democratisation and ‘dumbing down’, they are seeking to argue for a particular mode of public knowledge: one which is shaped by experts, immune from populist pressures; and disseminated to attentive, but mainly passive recipients. It is a view of citizenship that closes down opportunities for popular involvement in the making of public knowledge by reinforcing the professional claims of experts. The journalists quoted above are right to feel uneasy, for there is, at almost every institutional level in contemporary society, scepticism towards the epistemological authority of expert elites. There is a growing feeling, as expressed by several of our focus group participants, that the news media should be ‘informative rather than authoritative’ (FG1); the job of journalists should be to ‘give the news as raw as it is, without putting their slant on it’ (FG5) and people should be given ‘sufficient information’ from which ‘we would be able to form opinions of our own’ (FG1).

At stake here are two distinct conceptions of authority. The journalists we have quoted are resistant to the democratisation of news: the supremacy of the clickstream (according to which editors raise or lower the profile of stories according to the number of readers clicking on them online); the parity of popular culture with ‘serious’ news; the demands of some audience members for raw news rather than constructed narratives. In short, they maintain that authority for determining and telling news stories should rest with them. In contrast, some focus group participants seem to be asking for untreated news, without added interpretations and biases. They claim to want to remove the intermediary role of storytellers

and opinion shapers, leaving the public to produce its own news narratives. We doubt, however, whether more than a small and unrepresentative minority would be prepared to go to the trouble of sifting through and deciphering the entire news feed. Both the public and the journalists are expressing anxieties about the place of authority. The former are concerned about a gulf between public knowledge and public experience which has led over half of the British population to think that the news as presented to them does not seem relevant to their lives.²⁷ The latter are concerned that they are now regularly regarded as amongst the least trusted occupations in society.²⁸ At the heart of these anxieties is a conflict of views about what it means for news producers to serve the public.

A number of the focus group participants suggested that the media determined rather than reported the news. As the exercise of political power becomes more systemically mediated, with considerations of message impact often shaping policy decisions, the news media has come to be seen, certainly by academic observers, as implicated in the production of the stories they claim to be reporting upon.²⁹ Regarded as ‘insiders’, looking out from the citadels of power rather than outsiders looking in, journalists were perceived as being compromised by their proximity to social power:

You used to get reports of what had happened, but now the media tend to create the news rather than report on it ... (FG1)

I think a lot of the time they can be sat on the story a while and then decide to release it. (FG5)

Who is deciding of a morning what is decided through the TV or the newspaper? Is there a governing body who says ‘we won’t let this out’ ... ? (FG4)

It’s like the Budget—two days before you hear things that are going to happen in the Budget or they will tell you so and so is going to make a speech tonight and they tell you part of the speech before they’ve even made it. So they are making the news before it happens.(FG1)

²⁷ Ofcom, *New News, Future News: The Challenges for Television News After Digital Switch-Over* (London: Ofcom, 2007), 60.)

²⁸ See report on Bar Standards Board survey conducted in Mar. 2009: www.barstandardsboard.org.uk/news/press/689.html

²⁹ T. Cook, *Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998); T. Meyer, *Media Democracy: How the Media Colonize Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); M. Madianou, *Mediating the Nation: News, Audiences and the Politics of Identity* (London, UCL Press, 2005); S. Cottle, ‘Mediatized Rituals: Beyond Manufactured Consent’, *Media, Culture and Society*, 28/3 (2006): 411–32.

Before moving on to consider how focus group participants defined news, and the extent to which news producers share this definition, we should be clear about what we understand by trust in the news. Clearly, there were some concerns amongst focus group participants about the veracity of particular news stories—but these were not common. (Indeed, as we shall see in the next section, journalists were more likely to speak about stories being made up than were focus group participants.) Generally speaking, those in our focus groups did not consider journalists to be dishonest or accounts of the news to be inaccurate. Distrust took a more oblique form. The participants seemed to be questioning the institutional integrity of news production rather than individual news producers. They were concerned, as we shall see, about how news comes to be released; what is left out of the news; who news producers imagine they are talking to; and whether there are certain interpretations of social events that cannot be spoken. As one person put it when asked whether she trusted the news, ‘I don’t know; I always believe it until I get told otherwise’ (FG4). In another focus group, a participant concluded that ‘There comes a point where you have to believe something’, to which another participant responded, ‘Yes, but it depends who’s telling you’ (FG1). Trust, it would seem, is contingent and provisional. Authority is permanently vulnerable to refutation. Public knowledge, in such circumstances, can only ever be unstable, the latest news a mere fleeting episode in a relentless process of revision and redescription of reality.

3. Defining news: useful, reliable, amusing

Each focus group began by asking participants where they went to obtain news. Previous research has demonstrated the ways in which people have many different reasons (uses and gratifications) for encountering media news³⁰ and our participants confirmed this. For several of the participants, attention to news was quite casual:

I can't remember when I last bought [a newspaper], but if there is one lying around I will read it. Most of my news exposure is via the internet or the television. (FG1)

I can understand people not buying a national newspaper because it's on the news, in your car, telling you what's happening. I think the need for local papers keeps you in touch with local affairs, whereas with national things you have other means of finding out. (FG1)

Media convergence—a term which generally describes the integration of media platforms and content—also nicely captures what seems to be a common perception that news is now ubiquitously available and accessible in many different forms, each appropriate for delivering different types of information at different times. Focus group participants tended not to read

³⁰ J. G. Blumler and E. Katz, *The Uses of Mass Communications* (London: Sage, 1974); D. Swanson, 'The Uses and Misuses of Uses and Gratifications', *Human Communication Research*, 3/3 (1977): 214–21; W. Gantz, 'How Uses and Gratifications Affect Recall of Television News', *Journalism Quarterly*, 55/4 (1978): 664–72; P. Palmgreen, L. Wenner and J. Rayburn, 'Relations Between Gratifications Sought and Obtained: A Study of Television News', *Communication Research*, 7/2 (1980): 161–92; B. Kaye and T. Johnson, 'Online and in the Know: Uses and Gratifications of the Web for Political Information', *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 46/1 (2002): 54–71; C. Beaudoin and E. Thorson, 'Testing the Cognitive Mediation Model: The Roles of News Reliance and Three Gratifications Sought', *Communication Research*, 31/4 (2004): 446–71.

a single newspaper or watch regularly one news bulletin on a particular channel. In place of such loyalties, they described a crowded media environment stretching from online news to celebrity magazines, with newspapers, television and radio in between.

We observed focus group participants speaking about the meaning of news in three different ways: as useful, reliable and amusing. These three (often overlapping) conceptions of news suggested to us that there was far more ambivalence and contestation around questions of news trustworthiness than could be discerned from studies of whether people believe journalistic accounts.

Several focus group participants spoke of the news in a utilitarian fashion; they expected it to provide them with what was immediately relevant to their own lives, as and when they needed it:

We get the Daily Mail every day and Sunday I look for anything that will catch my interest because I'm doing a course at university—anything related to health. (FG2)

I just buy it if I need it. There are things in it like dogs for sale. (FG4)

I read the Daily Star and the Daily Sport. I don't read all of them, but we get them all at work so I just flick through them all. The lads bring them in from the shop, but they're easy reading and plus there are pictures which are nice. (FG3)

It depends on the headlines. I don't get a paper every day. (FG3)

I read the news if it catches my eye, but I get my stuff through my partner. She's on the internet quite a lot and she'll scan through different bits and pieces that she wants, and I get to know about bits that she's read. (FG3)

Asked to describe what they wanted the news to give them, several participants spoke of a requirement for 'useful information'. To some extent this seemed to include the traditional 'uses and gratifications' notion of a surveillant motive for following the news, with a view to keeping up with developments and/or issues in the world beyond one's immediate circumstances that might impinge on one's life or that of one's circle. But mixed in with this was a more pragmatic approach to news as a resource for dealing with immediate personal and social priorities. Those who spoke about news as 'useful information' did not trust everything that they were told in the news, but trusted in the expectation that they could find what they needed to know—somewhere—and that what did not concern them

could be easily avoided. As utilitarian news gatherers, they were attracted to the hybridity of a media ecology characterised by the pull of occasional demand rather than the push of regular service. While traditional notions of citizenship have been built upon the claim that there are universal interests that all should share, the conception of news as useful information suggests an individualised idea of social membership, which excludes feelings of all-embracing attachments of a traditional kind. The pragmatic search for useful news entails an abandonment of the idea of news-viewing as a social duty, in the sense that Graber noted twenty-five years ago that ‘Average Americans want to keep informed because they have been socialized to feel that this is a civic responsibility.’³¹ Utilitarian news-seekers value news as an individual aid rather than a social responsibility.

A second group of focus group participants spoke of their need for reliable information. Unlike seekers of useful information, which was largely seen as a convenient resource for individualised lifestyles, the function of reliable information is to offer assurance in a risky and complex world. An example of this appreciation of reliable information was described by one participant who spoke about a freak minor earthquake that had recently occurred locally:

A couple of weeks ago when there was that earthquake, I had just gone to bed and it was really windy. I thought we were losing the roof of the house and me and my husband thought ‘What was that?’ and we couldn’t get our heads round it being an earthquake. And I instantly turned the television on and there was nothing being reported. But within half an hour of me settling my little girl down there it was, coming up along the bottom of the screen on News 24—and by 2am it was filtering through the news ... It’s peace of mind. I felt loads better when I realised that was what it was. (FG2)

In another focus group there was the following exchange about the same subject:

*A: The earthquake was news.
B: Me bed was shaking.
A: I put telly on GMTV and that was the first I heard about it.
That’s what I call news. (FG4)*

³¹ D. Graber, *Processing the News* (New York: Longman, 1993), 203.

Several focus group participants spoke quite differently about local news than about national or global coverage, which they regarded as remote and not easily verifiable. Local newspapers and radio were closer to their personal experience and were seen to have fewer opportunities to abuse their journalistic authority:

I think local news is important to everybody, like in Leeds, wants to know what's happening: rates, schools, how our money's being spent, what councillors are going to be doing. I class that as news. (FG4)

And, because local news reports are more easily verified, they are seen as being worthy of public confidence. One woman explained that the only newspaper she reads regularly was one covering her immediate locality. She explained that, unlike the national, or even regional, press, 'I believe every word that is printed' because 'it's on your doorstep. Why would they lie—because they would be found out—if they say a building has been knocked down you can see if it has because you can walk past it' (FG2).

Similarly, live coverage was regarded by some focus group participants as more authentic than reporting after the event:

When they are live, when they go somewhere like Afghanistan—you actually see what it's like. You're not just reading a story you think might be true in the paper. You are actually seeing it first hand—that's better. (FG1)
If you read somewhere a suicide bomber ran into something ... that could be fabrication. You wouldn't be sure. Whereas if you saw the footage on TV in front of you, in video form, you would be more inclined to believe it. (FG5)

Time and space may well be more compressed and shifted than ever before in history, but for those in our sample trust remained rooted in local experience. News reliability was primarily seen to be determined by its openness to experiential verification.

A third group of focus group participants looked to the news for amusement. Participants would often start out by referring rather coyly to their interests in celebrity news, as if this were some sort of guilty secret. For example, asked where they looked to find news, some women, in particular, listed celebrity gossip magazines and websites as their principal news sources, explaining in an almost embarrassed way that they liked to

follow stories that were not ‘real news’. At stake here was a tension between civic obligations and affective dispositions. Participants felt that they had to apologise for the latter. Asked whether *OK* or *Hello* magazines contained news, participants responded ‘No, it’s trash, it’s escapism, what celebs are doing’ (FG1) and ‘celebrity news isn’t really news’ (FG5). This anxiety about what constitutes ‘proper’ news was illuminated by a question in one focus group about whether Wayne Rooney’s wedding to Coleen McLoughlin was an important news story:

A: Don’t get me started ... to me, the Budget is news; the weather that has been happening is news; global news—those are news items. Things that affect everyday life.

B: Whether David Beckham has broken his toe isn’t news.

C: We don’t need to know it. And we don’t know if it’s proper news.

We asked whether the impact of Beckham’s injury on England’s chances of qualifying for the World Cup constituted news:

I suppose to people who are interested in sport, and I suppose if it has an influence on whether we win the World Cup or not—well, OK. Let’s go to his haircut—that is not news.

It would appear from this exchange that, for information to constitute news it has to have some social consequence. Thus, David Beckham breaking his toe qualifies as news since it might have repercussions for the outcome of the national side on the world stage, but information about his latest hair style, whilst perhaps interesting and enjoyable to read about, was not news in the sense that it had no significance beyond the fact of its occurrence.

We sensed, however, that some focus group members were conforming to a social script, telling us what they thought it was proper to say. They would describe ‘soft’ news as a pathological deviation from ‘real’ or ‘serious’ news, but then went on to tell us that ‘It’s ... not life changing, but it is news in a way’ (FG5) and ‘the difference between news and gossip is that with gossip there is always an element of truth in it, but it’s expanded’ (FG4). Acceptance of this dichotomy between ‘real’ and ‘popular news’ is based upon a moral perspective that news only becomes News when it is spoken about in certain ways, connected to remote and formidable institutions and entitled to command the attention of the otherwise disinterested. Hard news, in this sense, conforms to what

Nichols³² refers to as a discourse of sobriety: a media representation assumed to possess instrumental power; to be capable of and entitled to alter the world itself; to effect action and entail consequences. In short, there was what people thought of as newsworthy and what they thought of as permissible material for the sacred space of News.

Our constructivist approach to the discussion of news proved to be fruitful. Rather than telling us whether they believed the news, participants told us what they believed the news to be. Of course, the three broad conceptions of news we have identified were not mutually exclusive; some people wanted useful information to support them in their daily lives, but also reliable information that would help them to make sense of the personally inexplicable. Those who looked to news as a source of amusement were rarely totally uninterested in reliable information, even though they refused to accept that only such accounts constituted meaningful news.

By defining the news as a hybrid of useful, reliable and amusing information, focus group participants were telling us about how they determined what did and did not deserve their trust. When they said that they distrusted the news, they were rarely referring to journalists making things up. Indeed, several were eager to express the view that most of the news stories they came across could be believed and that most editors and journalists seemed to be doing a reasonable job. When distrust in the news was expressed—as it was in each of our focus groups—it was because people felt that their expectations of the news were not shared by news producers; that they were being told stories that were not adequately explained; that their lives were being reported in ways that were not adequately researched; or that new communicative spaces were opening up in which useful, reliable or amusing information could be accessed without having to subscribe to the authority of the mainstream media.

Unsurprisingly, news journalists were not inclined to spend much time pondering the nature of news. As Meijer found in her interviews with Dutch news journalists, ‘the typical defense was “news is news.”’³³ They know it when they see it and have little time for media scholars bent on constructivist inquiry. They were, however, more willing to talk about their views of public trust in the news that is delivered to them. As one broadsheet journalist put it,

³² B. Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1991), 3.

³³ I. Meijer, ‘The Public Quality of Popular Journalism: Developing a Normative Framework’, *Journalism Studies*, 2/2 (2001): 18.

Frankly speaking, if our opinion, or the information we convey, is no more reliable than what you hear over the garden fence or on the bus then there's not much point to having organisations such as ourselves. What we're dealing in is, we are brokers in information.

Journalists expressed two concerns about public distrust, both highly defensive. The first was to admit freely that some journalists (never themselves; never their own news organisation; always someone else) did not deserve to be trusted:

We all know journalists we think make stuff up or, you know, are pretty cavalier with the truth, but normally they're pretty embarra- they're embarrassed enough about it not to brag about it. I think there are large parts of the media where it's so ... where the news desks are so intolerant of anything short of what they've asked for that a reporter will give them what they want regardless of whether or not they've got it and I think that's terrible. (Tabloid journalist)

I think there are a lot of news organisations in Britain that don't care about being accurate at all. (Broadsheet journalist)

There's a lot of shitty journalism; there's a lot of bad journalists; there's a lot of people that don't care about their journalism; there's a lot of people who just dress up celebrity as news. There's a lot of lowest common denominator stuff out there, and I don't feel myself to be part of that. (Broadcast journalist)

Does it matter if people run things that aren't true because they know there's no comeback on them? If it's libellous, obviously, you're not going to run it, are you? But if there's no ... we can get away with this and no one can complain and we can't get sued. But if you do it too much then you would've thought that the reader would ... the penny would drop. But [a rival tabloid's] been serving up crap for a year because everything it says turns out not to be true, but people's memories are short. (Tabloid journalist)

One might have expected these sort of claims to have emanated from the allegedly cynical public rather than the journalists themselves. But, generally, those in our groups did trust the news to offer an accurate statement of events.

A second way in which journalists viewed public distrust in the news was to simply deny that it really existed. The suggestion was that people were being disingenuous when they claimed to doubt the authority of the news:

People believe almost everything they read in the newspapers and they may think they don't believe and they think they don't ... I mean it's almost double think ... one part of their brain is telling them 'you can't believe anything you read, these people are disreputable' and yet they believe everything they read.

(Broadsheet journalist)

People say they don't like trash and yet they're increasingly drawn to it in the paper ... and I think a newspaper made up of things that the public said they wanted would be a ... wouldn't necessarily be a wonderful product. (Broadsheet journalist)

Statements like these were supported by comments such as 'If people don't like what we're giving them, they stop buying us and we go out of business' (Broadsheet journalist) and 'If people trust you, they will consume your product' (Broadcast journalist). Given the sharp fall in news consumption in recent years, this is a dangerous argument, but behind it is the much bigger claim that journalists know their audiences; that what defines them as good communicators is an ability to speak to people in language they can understand:

You know, we understand who our readers are. We understand what we're writing about. We have ... we understand the people we talk to. (Broadsheet journalist)

But do they? Or is there something about the contemporary public that is eluding institutional authorities, such as the news media? Do the audiences that journalists imagine they are addressing feel understood? Is 'the national conversation', that the news media at its best facilitates, being increasingly conducted in two mutually incomprehensible languages? In his classical study of news production, Herbert Gans noted that he was surprised to find that journalists

had little knowledge about the actual audience and rejected feedback from it. Although they had a vague image of the audience, they paid little attention to it; instead they filmed and wrote for their superiors and for themselves, assuming ... that what interested them would interest the audience.³⁴

In the following sections we turn to specific news stories from the period of our research which cast doubt upon journalists' claims to understand their audience.

³⁴ H. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 230.

4. A story without a plot

During the month of March 2008, when our focus groups were taking place, the US primary elections were the biggest international news story in the British media. Every television news bulletin referred to them, often with pictures of campaign events involving Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Every newspaper included campaign reports. Even though the presidential candidates had not yet been nominated, it was clearly going to be a historic election, possibly electing the first black or woman President of the United States.

Asked whether they regarded this as the kind of news story that they needed to know about, responses from participants were ambivalent. Several took the view that there was too much coverage; that this was an election somewhere else which need not concern them:

Almost every night the American Presidential Election is on—do you follow it?

A: No.

B: No.

C: That's another thing that shouldn't be on.

Why?

B: It's not our country. We don't vote.

C: If the boot was on the other foot they wouldn't be interested. (FG1)

Have you been watching the coverage of the American election?

A: Yes, a bit of it on GMTV.

B: I think there is too much coverage

C: Every time it comes on I switch it off. I don't have any interest in it, I can't understand why people in England would care about America. (FG5)

Others recognised that it was an election that would ultimately make a difference to their lives and they should therefore be informed about it:

It's the next leader of the world. Basically, whoever is president of America is supposed the leader of the free world. (FG1)

The leadership of America and their financial stability trade affects our country more than you can believe. (FG4)

I do see that the American elections have a relevance to us because there is a strong relationship between England and American politics, so it is important who gets chosen. But I don't really follow it. (FG5)

These responses were hardly surprising. We were, however, completely surprised by the universal lack of understanding amongst members of all the focus groups about how the primary elections worked. In each group we asked if *anyone* understood the process, even at the most basic level. Only one person in any of the groups said that she did understand how the process worked:

Each state have their own representative ... and once each state have chosen a representative the nation then choose from those representatives ... from each of the states. And the different parties have now got their representatives for the national elections. And now those representatives are going around to determine who is going to be in the running for the president thing ... (FG2)

When it was explained to this person that both Obama and Clinton were from the same party she was surprised. In none of the focus groups did anyone know that both candidates were Democrats. When this was explained to one group we were told

A: In work today two girls in the office were saying that it's Hillary versus Obama ... So whoever wins are going to be the President. And this other woman said 'No, it's not about that'. I don't understand that then—that totally threw me. It's a good job I haven't been discussing it with people.

B: I think we don't understand it

A: I just feel confused because I thought it was straightforward. I don't understand why they are going through the election. (FG4)

Such comments were common in all the groups. Participants openly confessed that they had little idea what the primaries were about. We asked whether they thought it should have been explained to them more clearly:

Maybe they are aiming it at a more mature group who knows exactly how it goes on. (FG3)

I've seen bits of it, but it's hard to follow. (FG5)

They are talking to the general public with an assumption that they understand it. (FG5)

As stated earlier, our approach to the question of trust was to widen it beyond simple judgements of whether or not the media could be relied upon to tell truth. Instead, we wanted to understand what people expected from news services. Not to be lied to is an obvious expectation, but so is the expectation of receiving from the news media a basic sense of what stories are about. In the coverage of the American primary elections the media failed to meet such expectations of those in our sample. These concerns were put to the editors and journalists, all of whom told us that they considered the US primaries to be an important story for them to cover:

We identified it at the beginning of this year as one of the two major stories of the year. The other one being the financial crisis that was going to dominate our coverage throughout the year. We were going to have a change in the White House regardless of what happened and we all expected ... we all thought there was a very high chance of a Democrat victory ... and this was a major campaign ... and an event that would change the whole world ... and we gave it enormous coverage. (Broadsheet journalist)

It was absolutely crucial. This is a US election that absolutely affects people in Britain ... And important to make it relevant and accessible to UK audiences. Which is quite hard. (Broadcast journalist)

Were news editors and journalists disturbed by the extent to which people did not understand what the primaries were about? If they were, they were certainly not particularly surprised:

No one's going to understand beyond a tiny minority of people who love America, or who know lots about American elections, the difference between primaries and caucuses. You know, why should you? We needed to explain some of the basic terminology. We needed to explain the system ... I think there is a lot of assumed knowledge that we journalists make. And I constantly feel I need to pull myself up on that. (Broadcast journalist)

No, because I don't think a large percentage of the British population understand the British electoral system and there's an extraordinary ignorance about politics, which the media sometimes forgets because we're so interested in it. (Broadsheet journalist)

I suppose people's understanding of American politics is not going to be that great ... as great as British politics, is it? And there were at times it got fairly uncomfortable and sometimes I had to tell [colleague's name] when he's writing ... he's got to explain things a bit more, because he's writing as if he's writing to Boston Massachusetts and not Boston Lincolnshire. (Tabloid journalist)

What happened was a lot of journalists ... decided it was important ... they found it really exciting and enjoyable and they kept on almost talking about it to themselves, to the extent that I some days just questioned ... is it really worth all this coverage? Is it really worth these big chunks of time in the news? (Tabloid journalist)

In one sense, these comments betray a profound lack of trust in the public's ability to understand the accounts of the US primaries that the media were offering on a daily basis. But in another they demonstrated a complacent trust that the public doesn't really need to understand very much about the political process; that it is sufficient for citizens to be exposed to the story rather than its context or meaning. As one focus group participant put it, 'It's all of a sudden, it was on the news and I'm thinking, "Eh? When was all this decided? Get us involved in it"' (FG4). If a majority of news consumers are left feeling like outsiders, hearing words and seeing images, without any meaningful context or realistic expectation that they will be able to act upon such information, not only news consumption, but democratic citizenship itself, comes to be experienced as a spectatorial act. As we shall argue in our conclusion, this has serious consequences for political efficacy, leaving citizens both exposed to news and incapable of discussing, evaluating or acting upon it.

5. The streets where we live

When we asked our focus group comprising young male tabloid readers (FG5) what they thought news editors thought of them, they said:

They would say we are everything that's wrong with Britain.

I think they think we're stupid.

They know their audience. they know it's people who like the headlines, get a little information and look at the pictures.

We are the statistics that are not voting—apathetic and cynical maybe. They might think they are giving us the truth, but don't bank on us being so cynical and challenging them.

They maybe think we can be spoon-fed and believe everything.

As a group, these were the least interested in the US primaries or other aspects of 'hard' news. They tended to look to the news for sports reports and local stories. All expressed a clear sense that their social environments, experiences and values were poorly represented by the news media. At the time, Madeleine McCann had been missing for some months and Shannon Matthews—a local girl from a council estate in Dewsbury—was still missing, believed kidnapped. Participants in FG5 felt that the coverage of the two stories was disparate and disrespectful to the local family:

A: The way they wrote it was 'They are working class commoners'

...

B: They always emphasise that her mother's got different children to different fathers and I don't see how that makes any difference.

C: They emphasise the class.

A: Yes, they are basically saying she slept around, she's got loads of kids from different people ...

B: They are basically saying she goes around with dodgy characters, it's got to be something to do with the missing child. They are not saying it outright.

A: The media are very judgy. They make a lot of accusations, but sometimes you see the accusations they are making are asking people to judge. (FG5)

In other focus groups, similar concerns were expressed. Participants felt that the McCanns had benefited from being from a similar social background to the journalists who were covering the story, and able to create a network of media publicity that would be beyond the confidence and resources of people like themselves. In retrospect, journalists may feel justified in having been more sceptical about one missing child than another. But we sense that the unease expressed in the focus groups was not specific to this story; it pointed to a failure of the news media to recognise or understand a range of places and experiences without which public knowledge is somehow incomplete.

A second story that had been in and out of the news for some months concerned inner-city 'binge drinking'. It was being presented as a new problem; a sign of the times. Focus group participants were generally unconvinced. Their experience was that inner-city streets on Friday and Saturday nights had been like this for years. The 'binge drinking' stories in the media were regarded as something of a feeding frenzy:

I think they sensationalise things. I think the problem has always been there but they have now just caught it and report it and say thing like 'inner cities are awful and this is what happens every night of the week'. It's been happening for a long time. (FG2)

They will find somebody who goes out and drinks 16 pints every night and do a two page spread on it and say we are going to report this and say this is what happens in inner cities every night of the week. (FG2)

It's a subject that makes peoples ears stick up and then in a few weeks it's something else ... Throughout time people have always drunk and fought. (FG3)

The perception that certain social groups, areas and practices were being unfavourably stereotyped by media reporting was raised repeatedly in the focus groups. The framing of certain social groups as standing outside of

the norms and values approved of by editors and journalists has been the focus of much scholarly study. Entman's definition of framing as 'selecting and highlighting some elements of reality and suppressing of others, in a way that constructs a story about a social problem, its causes, its moral nature and its possible remedies'³⁵ has been applied to such groups as welfare recipients,³⁶ asylum seekers,³⁷ muggers³⁸ and the poor.³⁹ In their rather censorious coverage of inner-city binge drinking and of the Dewsbury estate from which Shannon Matthews was believed to have been abducted, news producers opened themselves to two broad accusations. First, that they were outsiders looking into an exotic world that they were not interested in depicting on its own terms. As in daytime talk shows, such as *Trisha* and *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, the emphasis seemed to be upon the inexplicably deviant and dysfunctional characteristics of the poor and under-educated. As Entman has observed, in the absence of any kind of explanatory framework, viewers are left to conclude that 'inexplicably, some people choose to live in deteriorated neighbourhoods where they frequently either commit or become victims of crime'.⁴⁰ Some focus group participants felt that they were being invited to sit in judgement over others—and members of the two lower social-status focus groups feared that they were being subjected to a form of public judgement that would weaken them further in the eyes of others. Secondly, the media were accused of jumping on a bandwagon, possibly driven forward by the government's 'Respect agenda'. Once news journalists identified a moral problem, it seemed as if there was a temptation to search for as many examples as possible, even if they distorted the social picture. Some of the journalists interviewed sympathised with these lines of criticism:

³⁵ R. Entman, 'Framing: Towards Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm', *Journal of Communication*, 43/4 (1993): 51–8.

³⁶ M. Sotirovic, 'Effects of Media Use on Audience Framing and Support for Welfare', *Mass Communication and Society*, 3/2–3 (2000): 269–96; R. Asen, 'Women, Work, Welfare: A Rhetorical History of Images of Poor Women in Welfare Policy Debates', *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 6/2 (2003): 285–312.

³⁷ L. d'Haenens and M. de Lange, 'Framing of Asylum Seekers in Dutch Regional Newspapers', *Media, Culture and Society*, 23/6 (2001): 847–60; N. Lynn and S. Lea, 'A Phantom Menace and the New Apartheid: The Social Construction of Asylum-Seekers in the United Kingdom', *Discourse and Society*, 14/4 (2003): 425–52.

³⁸ R. Entman, 'Representation and Reality in the Portrayal of Blacks on Network Television News', *Journalism Quarterly*, 71/3 (1994): 509–21; J. Downing and C. Husband, *Representing Race: Racisms, Ethnicities and Media* (London: Sage, 2005); E. McLaughlin, 'Hitting the Panic Button: Policing/"Mugging"/Media/Crisis', *Crime, Media, Culture*, 4/1 (2008): 145–54.

³⁹ S. Iyengar, 'Framing Responsibility for Political Issues: The Case of Poverty', *Political Behavior*, 12/1 (1990): 19–40; Entman, 'Framing' (1993); R. Clawson and R. Trice, 'Poverty as we Know it: Media Portrayals of the Poor', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 64/1 (2000): 53–64.

⁴⁰ Entman, 'Framing' (1993).

You have these phenomena in news where ... a very good example is dangerous dogs. I remember being a junior reporter at the time the dangerous dogs flared up as a story with people being ... children being attacked by rottweilers ... and what happens is you get one or two stories where ... which are interesting and are widely reported and then everything that is of a similar ilk becomes a bigger story because it fits a pattern. So these things have a sort of momentum of their own, they have a lifespan and I remember receiving, you know, agency copy from all around Britain of every dog attack that happened. Everyone got bitten by a dog and it didn't matter whether it was a sort of rottweiler or a cocker spaniel, it was a dog attack and these things gather momentum and they become more interesting because that's the third incident this week. (Broadsheet journalist)

I think a 'feeding frenzy' can develop around certain stories, most recently knife crime, which can blur our understanding of ... the numbers. You know, violent crime goes down generally; there's been a spike in knife crime amongst a certain part of the population, younger men; and all of a sudden you have, you know, a Sky News newsflash: '42 year-old teenager stabbed in, you know, Doncaster', so every incident is reported and there's an overreaction, and I think that is always a concern. The same thing with binge drinking as well. (Broadcast journalist)

The concerns of the focus group participants and journalists we have quoted relate to the fundamental role of the news media in constituting representations of social reality. Social representations 'establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world' and 'enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history'.⁴¹ Given the power of mediated representations to frame social action, and the immense difficulty of resisting misrepresentation, it is understandable that there is public sensitivity to what are seen as excessively negative depictions of groups, areas or practices. When focus group participants expressed anxieties about the simplistic accounts of people living on a

⁴¹ S. Moscovici, Foreword to C. Herzlich (ed.), *Health and Illness: A Social Psychological Analysis* (New York: Academic Press, 1973), p. xiii.

Dewsbury council estate or weekend rowdiness in their local neighbourhoods, they were not so much questioning journalistic veracity as the motives of media institutions in pathologising particular people and selective practices. The frequency of media references to ‘chavs’—a label that was not used until 2003—reflects the ease with which news producers can ascribe dysfunctionality to a social stratum which had hitherto been described in other, less offensive ways.⁴² Distrust in the news, in this sense, entails a refusal to collude with such descriptions; a disengagement from a certain vocabulary for constructing social meaning.

⁴² K. Hayward and M. Yar, ‘The “Chav” Phenomenon: Consumption, Media and the Construction of a New Underclass’, *Crime, Media, Culture*, 2/1 (2006): 9–28.

6. Believing nothing; believing anything

The inquest into the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, which had recently taken place in the Old Bailey, led some focus group participants to ponder the possibility that she had been murdered by the British state. As one person put it, 'I think it probably was an accident, but the media has made me think it wasn't an accident' (FG2). This was not an exceptional comment. Time after time, participants would tell us that 'it wouldn't surprise me if there are conspiracies' (FG5), 'there is a lot of things that go on this country that we don't and won't get to know about' (FG1) and 'I think there is a bigger thing than the left and the right, I think there is something like the establishment' (FG1). Few people fully subscribed to conspiracy theories, but many refused to rule them out. For example, talking about the 9/11 conspiracy claims that are widely circulated online, several participants in one group expressed their doubts about whether there had actually been a terrorist attack:

A: It's when you watch these things they are pointing out, things you've never heard or thought about, and it makes you think 'Why did this and that happen' and you think 'Why was one of President Bush's colleagues out having a meal and the next day the twin towers blow up?'

B: I believe that America are the most deceitful country in the whole world and I believe they would have done it just to justify wars in Iraq.

C: That and the fact that it cost Twin Towers millions to run and with it being knocked down and not there it must have saved a fortune.

B: It justified a war. It justifies tax increases in America for security.

A: I think every government—some more than others—are corrupt and it wouldn't surprise me if there are conspiracies ...

D: As time goes on and they find out more, that's when it all comes out. (FG3)

These were not the wild statements of unreasoning people, but the considered views of a group of middle-aged men who seem to have reached a point of default scepticism about any official account of the news. One participant seemed to summarise this collective disposition: 'Before, if you heard something, it was gospel absolutely true—now nothing is straight forward' (FG1). This condition of permanent doubt and suspicion makes it difficult to draw any kind of firm conclusions from the news. But, as another participant said, 'There comes a point where you have to believe something' (FG1).

In their search for something to believe, where do people go? We put this question to each of our focus groups, asking them where, for example, they would look if they wanted an authoritative explanation of how the US primaries worked or a reliable analysis of an unexpected event. The BBC continues to perform the role of trusted reporter and interpreter for some people; certainly more so than any other news institution, but less, we suspect, than would have been the case twenty years ago. We were struck by the confidence that people expressed in the internet generally and Google specifically as the most trusted source of explanation and analysis. It was very clear from all of the groups that there is a pervasive trust in online resources as providers of the kinds of useful, reliable and amusing information that they defined as news:

There's isn't much you can't find out from Google if you wanted to. Just ask it a question. (FG3)

Google will tell you everything you want to know. (FG4)

It makes sure you don't take anything for granted because, at the end of the day, it usually tells you anything and everything. (FG1)

Everything that goes into Wikipedia gets checked ... it's more in-depth, more to it, and it's getting added to all the time. You could go back to the Iraq page and get more—I identify with it and read it at the pace I want to. (FG5)

We wanted to probe why people felt that they could believe what they read and saw online more than what was in their newspapers or on television screens. It was not the technology that they were trusting, but its open

method of gathering information, allowing public comment and making contestation visible. Of course, most Google searches prioritise mainstream media news sources,⁴³ so online searches often merely serve as a more expedient route to the mass media. But, beyond the realm of official news sources, participants were looking online for perspectives and clues that would help them to make sense of the complexities of rapid and unexplained social changes. A pervasive belief was that the internet is produced by ‘people like us’—whose lay and local knowledge would be uninflected by political or professional interests. Speaking in favour of YouTube as a news resource, one participant explained that ‘You talk to the man in the street, he will usually give you his honest opinion’ (FG1). Such statements of trust in vernacular wisdom tended to be accompanied by a representation of the man or woman in the street as ‘ignored’, ‘forgotten’ or ‘disrespected’. Unimpressed by the controlling language and values of ‘political correctness’ and willing to share freely the benefits of hard-earned experience, a somewhat romantic figure of ‘the average citizen’ was contrasted in focus group discussions with professional journalists, perceived as too close to power, preoccupied by a narrow range of interests and somehow frightened of letting the public set its own agenda.

The above notwithstanding, those in our focus groups did not see the internet as a substitute for mainstream news, but a supplement, providing expanded space for the social circulation of public comment and feedback to authorities. Quantitatively, this expanded space exposed them to more sources, opportunities to discuss and pathways to explore aspects of the news that ‘they’ (elites/the establishment) would prefer to remain inconspicuous. Qualitatively, they felt that online interaction gave them access to a more expressive mode of citizenship. While there was no great confidence that those in authority would listen to what they had to say, there was a widespread feeling that opportunities to communicate about news across dispersed, lateral networks strengthened public voice.⁴⁴ In this sense, news blogs, wikis, YouTube videos and online forums had less to do with the production of news than the democratic realisation of news reception.

⁴³ C. Paterson, ‘International News on the Internet: Why More is Less’, *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics*, 4/1 (2007): 57–66.

⁴⁴ S. Coleman, D. E. Morrison and M. Svennevig, ‘New Media and Political Efficacy’, *International Journal of Communication*, 2 (2008): 771–91.

The journalists interviewed had a much more ambivalent attitude to the internet. Several journalists saw the blogosphere as an important source of news stories, but, in a generally defensive fashion, they negatively contrasted the trustworthiness of bloggers with their own proclaimed professionalism:

As far as I can see, most of the blogs are rubbish. ... I think the importance of blogs is overdone. I think that blogs generally, although there are some sites that I think are useful ... 'politicalbetting' would be one of them ... I think generally blogs are the equivalent of extended letters to the newspapers. They're people expressing their opinion. They are not, by and large, people giving you information. (Broadcast journalist)

Well, it's not that I don't trust them, they might have something interesting to say. But I wouldn't trust a blog to get to the bottom of a news story, of something happening ... but just generally they don't do any research, they don't speak to people, they rely on other printed matter, mainly on the internet. They look at it, take selective quotes from it, they don't go on the ground. I mean, I take selective quotes from people all the time, but I do tend to go and speak to people, phone them up, and knock on their door, more importantly, sit down in their living room and speak to them. And those are good things that traditional media still do. (Tabloid newspaper)

I treat them as opinion rather than news, because that's what they are. I mean I read Guido Fawkes or whatever, the Westminster ones, and you treat them a little bit like you treat a story that somebody would tell you in the pub, you know, you ... it's the same as Private Eye, and Private Eye is obviously now very well established as a place where sometimes they're right, sometimes they're wrong, but some very big stories come from there and other people read them, they stand them up ... And stories have to develop, have to start somewhere, and blogs are the way that lots of stories there start; in the same way as emails to us, and they're the way that stories start. (Broadcast journalist)

The bloggers we interviewed tended to distinguish between their own output and news, sharing in many ways the journalists' characterisation of their activities. One blogger told us that his blog was 'just a soapbox really for me to stand up and pontificate to the world about my views' and

that he did not expect people ‘to read me and see me as some kind of perfect media news source’. Another compared blogs to ‘the old scandal sheets that went around in the early nineteenth century ... People like that kind of stuff and in politics ... that’s what people want.’

From our constructivist perspective, we were less interested in whether blogging was thought to meet the standards of journalism than whether new online spaces contribute to the social construction and circulation of news. Our impression is that, far from replacing the newsroom, the internet is supplementing the living room; that is to say, whereas in the past news tended to be received and evaluated within domestic settings, those spaces have expanded into a much more complex sphere of circulation within which news is discussed, recirculated and rearticulated. In terms of traditional media theories of social influence, the range of mediated influence has broadened beyond immediate family, friends and neighbourhood circles.⁴⁵ This has important implications for trust. The e-enabled growth of expansive social networks characterised by ‘weak ties’⁴⁶ has meant that people have more access to more people and more information, but that their dependence upon the credibility of distant others is more abstract than ever before. In short, the social flow of news has become less linear and more sinuous. The cultural dynamics of public knowledge have changed, in ways that have profound implications for trust in the news media.

⁴⁵ E. Katz and P. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence* (New York: Free Press, 1955); V. Price and J. Zaller, ‘Who Gets the News? Alternative Measures of News Reception and their Implications for Research’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 57/2 (1993): 133–46. R. Huckfeldt and J. Sprague, *Citizens, Politics, and Social Communication: Information and Influence in an Election Campaign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); D. Mutz, *Impersonal Influence: How Perceptions of Mass Collectives Affect Political Attitudes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); D. Scheufele, M. Nisbet, D. Brossard and E. Nisbet, ‘Social Structure and Citizenship: Examining the Impacts of Social Setting, Network Heterogeneity, and Informational Variables on Political Participation’, *Political Communication*, 21/3 (2004): 315–38; L. Feldman and V. Price, ‘*Communication Research*, 35/1 (2008): 61–87.

⁴⁶ M. Granovetter, ‘The Strength of Weak Ties’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 78/6 (1973): 1360–80.

7. A mission to connect

Providing ‘citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing’⁴⁷ is the *sine qua non* of democratic media. But what do citizens need in order to be free and self-governing? Our work with focus groups suggests that people have several expectations from the news, including the provision of useful information that supports them in their personal and civic lives, reliable information that provides ontological assurance in an insecure world and amusing information that offers guilty distraction from the anxieties of the serious world. News is valued to the extent that it meets some or all of these expectations. The news fails when it devalues these expectations.

Some examples of news failures have been outlined. Coverage of the US primaries was truthful, fair and in many cases imaginative. But it failed to supply a large section of the audience (if our focus groups are anything to go by) with the most fundamental characteristic of useful information: a clear explanation of what the elections were about. When we put this to journalists, they were unsurprised. What are the likely effects of daily reports in the news that most people cannot understand? One effect will be for people to switch off; another will be for them to stay tuned, but take the view that this is ‘their news’—a narrative directed at a public from which they are excluded. Media coverage of the Shannon Matthews case, and of the alleged outbreak of binge drinking in British cities, was perceived by some focus group participants to be skewed and caricatured; a misrepresentation of a social reality that they felt they understood better than the news producers. What long-term impact is there likely to be if certain sections of the news audience feels slighted in this way? Sennett and Cobb’s brilliant exposé of ‘the hidden injuries of class’,⁴⁸ whereby some

⁴⁷ B. Kovach and T. Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople should Know and the Public should Expect* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 16.

⁴⁸ R. Sennett and J. Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Knopf, 1972).

social groups come to feel institutionally disrespected and shamed because of their status and reputation, captures the sense in which the news (often inadvertently) frames reality in ways that hurt and undermine people's confidence. We observed, particularly in relation to media coverage of the Princess Diana inquest, that people often did not know what or who to believe. In an age of escape from authoritative accounts, conspiracy theories are widespread. Reliable information is a rare commodity and people are increasingly turning to others like themselves, rather than editors and journalists, to get at 'the truth'. The internet is increasingly used to seek out unofficial accounts and piece together vernacular explanations. To describe these various examples as news failures is not to cast blame upon journalists, but to recognise the ways in which contemporary trends in the production, circulation and reception of public knowledge raise problems of trust.

Two apparently contradictory cultural trends are central to an understanding of what is happening to the relationship between news producers and the public. First, there is a nagging and pervasive public suspicion that journalists are on the inside of what Mark Thompson, the Director General of the BBC, in a speech on public trust in institutions, has referred to as 'a charmed circle of knowledge and power'. According to Thompson:

Modern public policy is fiendishly complex and debates about it are conducted in a mysterious, technocratic language which—despite the best efforts of the BBC and some of the rest of the media—many people find hard to understand. This by the way may be why ... the modern mechanisms of accountability, which are riddled with this impenetrable language, have not only failed to arrest the decline in trust but may have accelerated it. It's not that people ... feel that all politicians are liars. It's rather that they find much of what politicians say, not just unverifiable, but unintelligible; and that they fear that the system drives politicians and others to distort the truth—and to leave critical parts of it out.⁴⁹

Thompson's astute analysis accords with the tone and perspective adopted by our focus group participants. They were irritated by the language of power: by its opacity, which they suspected was a shield to protect mendacity; by its confidence, which often contrasted with its

⁴⁹ M. Thompson, 'The Trouble with Trust: Building Confidence in Institutions', speech given at QE2 Conference Centre, 15 Jan. 2008.

empirical record of imperfect judgement; and by its frequent interference with vernacular expression, which was interpreted as a fear of straight talking. When politicians and expert commentators spoke, there was a default assumption that what was being said was rehearsed, regulated and stripped of meaning. There was an embarrassment at not being able to understand stories that seemed to have started long ago, involving plots, themes and characters that had escaped public notice. There was guilt about failure to engage with the discourse of sobriety that made the news 'serious' and 'important' rather than just interesting and worth knowing about. And, above all, there were feelings of being left out; of being outsiders to a circle that was not only charmed, but omnipotent; all-encompassing in its influence, but not in arriving at its judgements.

What Thompson is describing, and our focus groups were articulating, is a crisis of political efficacy. To experience a sense of political efficacy is to believe that a communicative relationship exists between oneself and the institutions that govern society. As Easton and Dennis put it, to be politically efficacious an individual must be able 'to construct a psychic map of the political world with strong lines of force running from himself to the places of officialdom'.⁵⁰ Much political efficacy research since the 1960s has used survey and experimental analysis to locate convincing chains of cause and effect between exposure to broadcast media and an individual's sense of political efficacy. Robinson's conclusion that watching television news serves to 'frustrate subjects, forcing them to turn inward and doubt their own ability to comprehend and cope with politics'⁵¹ was consistent with a tradition initiated by Kurt and Gladys Lang⁵² and pursued in later years by other scholars.⁵³ Other scholars have found a positive relationship between some forms of media use, particularly for news consumption, and political efficacy.⁵⁴ Without entering into that empirical

⁵⁰ D. Easton and J. Dennis, 'The Child's Acquisition of Regime Norms: Political Efficacy', *American Political Science Review*, 61/1 (1967): 25–38.

⁵¹ M. Robinson, 'Public Affairs Television and the Growth of Political Malaise: The Case of the Selling of the President', *American Political Science Review*, 70 (1976): 417.

⁵² K. and G. Lang, 'The Unique Perspective of Television and its Effect: A Pilot Study', *American Sociological Review*, 18 (1953): 3–12.

⁵³ K. Newton, 'The Mass Media and Democracy: Mobilisation, Political Malaise, and Social Capital', *British Journal of Political Science* (1999): 25–47; R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

⁵⁴ M. Delli Carpini and S. Keeter, 'The Public's Knowledge of Politics', in J. Kenammer (ed.), *Public Opinion, the Press and Public Policy* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 19–40; J. McLeod, K. Daily, Z. Guo, W. Eveland, J. Bayer, S. Yang and H. Wang, 'Community Integration, Local Media Use, and Democratic Processes', *Communication Research*, 23 (1996): 179–209; P. Norris, *A Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet in Democratic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); P. Moy, M. Torres, K. Tanaka and M. R. McCluskey, 'Knowledge or Trust? Investigating Linkages between Media Reliance and Participation', *Communication Research*, 32/1 (2005), 59–86.

debate at this stage, we note that there is an obvious relationship between the world as represented through news and people's sense of their capacity to influence the world around them. In our focus groups, inefficacy rather than distrust was the persistent theme. A healthy democracy, in which the voice of the public is supposed to be politically central, cannot afford such atrophied civic efficacy.

At the same time, there is a seemingly quite opposite cultural trend at work, installing peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, user-generated news content and grass-roots mashing-up of official information at the democratic epicentre of public knowledge. The traditional Production–Distribution–Reception model of news transmission has been radically disrupted by notions of co-production,⁵⁵ dispersed circulation⁵⁶ and vernacular rearticulation.⁵⁷ While online spaces of new news have significantly enhanced political efficacy for some people, by providing a route around the usual forms and channels of institutional storytelling,⁵⁸ for others (and this certainly applies to a majority of our focus group participants) the vastness of the internet, the abundance of news sources and the fragmentation of online public space has left them more uncertain than ever about their capacity to access or act upon the kind of information that might help them to become free and self-governing citizens.

A key mediatory role remains for intelligent and sensitive news journalism. But it is a changed and changing role—one which cannot be performed well without responding directly to the two cultural trends we have identified. Historically, the most important contribution of news to modernity was in enabling dispersed citizens to imagine themselves as members of an interdependent community.⁵⁹ The eighteenth-century news correspondents, whose letters from afar (literally, *correspondence*) provided sources of information and discussion for the salons and coffee

⁵⁵ A. Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Producership* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008); M. Deuze, 'Participation, Remediation, Bricolage: Considering Principal Components of a Digital Culture', *Information Society*, 22/2 (2006): 63–75.

⁵⁶ M. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002); B. Lee and E. LiPuma, 'Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of Modernity', *Public Culture*, 14/1 (2002): 191–214.

⁵⁷ S. Howard-Spink, 'Grey Tuesday, Online Cultural Activism and the Mashup of Music and Politics', *firstmonday* (4 July 2005).

⁵⁸ T. Harcup, "'I'm Doing This to Change the World": Journalism in Alternative and Mainstream Media', *Journalism Studies*, 6/3 (2005), 361–74; J. Nip, 'Exploring the Second Phase of Public Journalism', *Journalism Studies*, 7/2 (2006): 212–36; J. Burgess, (2006) 'Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling', *Continuum* 20/2 (2006): 201–14; N. Thumim, 'Mediated Self-Representations: "Ordinary People" in "Communities"', *Critical Studies*, 28 (2006): 255–74; N. Couldry, 'Mediatization or Mediation? Alternative Understandings of the Emergent Space of Digital Storytelling', *New Media and Society*, 10/3 (2008): 373–92.

⁵⁹ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

houses of the great European municipalities, played a major role in constituting a public sphere as an intermediary zone between domestic privacy and state publicity. The news brought people together, gave them something to talk about in common and made hitherto disconnected national and global events feel like a related and relevant narrative. It expanded the scope for moral action across time and space. Public service broadcasting, at its best, has performed this connecting and integrating function to a greater extent than almost any other secular institution. But the trends we have identified are undermining cultural integration, corroding public trust and sapping political efficacy. The pressing challenge is to reverse them.

To speak of a journalistic mission *to connect* is controversial in two senses. First, it presumes to suggest that there are social, even moral, charges which journalists ought to carry out. And secondly, it defines that mission in broader terms than informing, educating and entertaining audiences. Why should both of these normative principles be accepted? To be sure, the term ‘mission’ is unfashionable, calling up memories of earnest Reithian moralising and worse. The truth is that journalists have always had anxieties about their relationship with the public. Back in 1977, when Elihu Katz produced his seminal report, *Social Research on Broadcasting: Proposals for Further Development*, he noted that BBC journalists rested their own notions of professionalism ‘not only on the legitimacy and autonomy of peer judgements, but also on the idea of service’.⁶⁰ Service to whom and on which terms? Answering this question entails a definition of mission. We favour returning this question of journalistic mission to centre stage, as part of a debate about how democracies handle public knowledge. And if we are to think about such a mission in terms that exceed the vision of the early twentieth century—as the BBC tried to do in its 2004 policy document, *Building Public Value*—the remit of journalism can no longer be conceived in the paternalistic terms of early public service broadcasting, when the myth of a homogeneous public sphere was still in vogue.

The mission to connect for contemporary journalists involves four principal linkages: between contextual back stories and current events; between citizens and institutional processes of policy-making; between citizens and the confusing mass of online as well as offline information sources; and between communities and communities. These are not

⁶⁰ E. Katz, *Social Research on Broadcasting: Proposals for Further Development: A Report to the British Broadcasting Corporation* (London: BBC, 1977), 16.

entirely new tasks, but all entail recognition that both the media ecology and democratic citizenship itself are being reconfigured in ways that reshape the terms of political communication.⁶¹

As our findings regarding the US primaries made clear, journalists cannot assume that people know the back story. Nor should they depend upon directing their audiences to informative web texts as a substitute for explaining the context within reports. Research needs to be undertaken to establish how many people go online to read such context-setting material. We suspect that only few are doing so. This means that within news stories in the press and the broadcast media more effort must be made to explain historical contexts, political processes and abstruse terminology. This is not dumbing down. A couple of our focus group participants told us that when they really needed to understand what a news story was about they would go to the BBC *Newsround* site (which is aimed at children) which helped them to get to grips with confusing issues. Why not establish such a site for adults? Or introduce online pop-ups in news reports which explain the meaning of confusing terms? Or invite news viewers to push the red button to access basic background material relating to complex news stories? Sports viewers are regularly presented with reminders of past records and explanations of how the rules work. News journalists seeking to address mass audiences need to be innovative in following a similar path.

A second connection that has to be made is between citizens and public institutions, such as local councils, parliaments, government departments and agencies and the vast range of regional and supranational bodies that affect people's lives, but are rarely encountered directly. In an age of pervasive media interactivity, institutional legitimacy cannot be maintained in splendid isolation from ongoing conversation with the public. This means more than governmental institutions accepting emails, legislatures running occasional online consultations, politicians establishing marketing blogs or news organisations putting up message boards in which people speak to themselves. Journalism needs to play a key role in facilitating and moderating intelligent and meaningful interaction between the public and their representatives. Without this, contemporary democracies will face a crisis of political efficacy, with most rather than some citizens concluding that there is little they can say or do to influence the way the world is run. Inefficacy immobilises people, leading them to lose trust in their capacity as democratic citizens. Rather

⁶¹ M. Gurevitch, S. Coleman and J. G. Blumler, 'Political Communication: Old and New Relationships', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (forthcoming).

than attempting to measure trust in the news, which, as we have suggested, is not open to quantitative accuracy, media organisations should be working with researchers to monitor the effects of different news-reporting strategies upon political efficacy. We are convinced that there are sound ways of establishing such links and conducting research that evaluates which approaches to news production and circulation are most likely to enhance civic confidence.

Thirdly, there is an important role for journalists to perform in helping people to connect with and make sense of the vast range of online and offline news sources that did not exist a decade or so ago. Education for media literacy now entails more than helping to dissect newspaper articles and news bulletins. One policy that could be adopted would be the promotion of newsgroups, comprising perhaps eight to twelve people in a particular area or online, who meet regularly to discuss the news. News organisations could play a role in helping these groups navigate news sources and determine their credibility. It is quite clear that traditional patterns of news consumption have changed for good and fewer people than ever look to single, regular news sources for their daily accounts of the world. In this new situation, journalism must perform a meta-mediating function, not only connecting people to public knowledge, but helping them to cope with the fractured and fragmented sources of such knowledge. The future of the news industry lies with trusted aggregators rather than authoritative originators.

A final aspect of social connection for news journalism to nurture is between communities, often physically close to one another, but divided by high walls of incomprehension and resentment. Irresponsible journalism feeds on such mutual distrust and contributes to a culture of default distrust. As well as criticising this tendency—which is by far the most glaring failure of the contemporary British press—we would like to see the adoption of imaginative strategies that enable communities to share and confront different perspectives on the news.

The mission for journalism that we have in mind reflects both what we have learnt from this study about how audiences and journalists think of news as a public service, and our own normative commitment to a form of democratic citizenship that nurtures rather than gnaws away at political efficacy. We are strengthened in our conclusions by survey research that two of us have conducted recently which suggests strongly that public conceptions of democratic citizenship and political activity are much

broader than most newspaper editors, news producers and indeed political scientists would recognise.⁶² By linking trust to public expectations, this report has endeavoured to move away from panicky discourses about journalistic credibility and emphasise instead the notion of news as a civic resource, the quality of which can never be independent from public propensities and aspirations.

⁶² S. Coleman, D. E. Morrison and S. Yates, 'Defining Political Acts' (forthcoming).

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the Scott Trust for supporting this research and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and Institute for Communications Studies for facilitating it. In conducting this research, we have been helped greatly by the willingness of editors, journalists, bloggers and focus group members, all of whom agreed to share their experience and expertise with us. We are grateful to John Lloyd, David Levy, Tim Gardam, Tim Garton-Ash, Jay Blumler and Jean Seaton for editorial comments and to Alex Reid and Jane Robson for editorial support. Any errors are our own responsibility.

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“This is a tremendous piece of work, enormously helpful and articulate and very eloquently written. It unpacks trust and vividly captures the ‘not completeness’ of the news and the way people themselves understand this. The research is fascinating: they display a genuine problem in trust and show there is a dis-connect between personal experience and media stories which has many origins ...”

Jean Seaton, Professor of Media History at the University of Westminster and the Official Historian of the BBC

The issue of trust in our institutions has never been higher in the public agenda. In this pathbreaking study, the question of how far the news media are trusted has been posed in a unique way—to ordinary people in focus groups. Their response is that they find the news often incomprehensible, and demeaning of their experience. The study carries large implications for journalists, and proposes ways in which this deficit of understanding and acceptance of journalism by much of its audience may be addressed.

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ISBN 978-0-9558889-5-3



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