Journalist Fellowship Paper

A Finnish case study: declining trust in media in a traditionally consensual and stable society

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"We shall assume that what each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him."
– Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1922)

Introduction

The question of trust has been at the forefront of discussions regarding disruption within the media industry over the past few years. The spread of disinformation and propaganda is, by now, a well-known challenge in this context. But the cure to counter it is still missing. We are still fumbling in the dark.

And we are only beginning to grasp the profound change this decline in trust has had, and will have, on our societies. Trust is the very fabric which keeps us together, and the way information is spread, received and digested is an essential part of that fabric.

Across the countries surveyed as part of the Reuters Digital Media Report 2019, the general level of trust in the news is down 2 percentage points to 42%, and less than half (49%) agree that they trust the news media they themselves use[1].

According to the same report, even countries like Finland and Germany, which arguably have not even seen any dramatic polarising events, have seen falls of 9 and 13 percentage points respectively in just five years.

Finland has always topped surveys in terms of trust in the media, so a 9% drop over a few years must be considered a clear sign of change in sentiment.

[1] Nic Newman, Richard Fletcher and Rasmus Kleis Neilsen, 'Digital News Report 2019' (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism 2020) <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DNR_2019_FINAL.pdf> accessed 31 July 2020.

Given the general level of trust that has always characterised Finnish society (see the Eurobarometer[2]), this is a worrisome development deserving of more analysis – and perhaps pre-emptive measures to correct the trend.

After all, trust in the media is not an isolated metric; research shows that trust in the news media is strongly linked to the way a public regards its political institutions. The link between press trust and political trust is considerably stronger in politically polarized societies, and the relation between press trust and political trust is becoming stronger over time[3].

This has been proven accurate in a Finnish context – recent polling by EVA[4] (a Finnish business and policy think tank) shows the declining trust in the media goes hand in hand with a declining trust in political institutions.

The causes and consequences of media distrust are connected. Media research in the U.S. shows that because media distrust makes people resistant to new information, political parties almost always have an incentive to publicly criticise the press.

If conditions are running against a certain party, voters predisposed to support it will be more likely to continue their support if they resist new information. Thus the party generally prefers that its supporters remain uninformed, which can be achieved by publicly criticising the media.

A potentially vicious circle emerges: a more polarised political system coinciding with more economic strain that results in less media professionalism and more criticism of the media, which in turn leads to less media trust, more economic strain on the media, increasing political polarisation, and so on.

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[2] European Commission Public Opinion Data, https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2253, Accessed July 31, 2020

[3] Hanitzsch, T., Van Dalen, A., & Steindl, N. (2018). Caught in the Nexus: A Comparative and Longitudinal Analysis of Public Trust in the Press. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *23*(1), 3–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161217740695

[4] https://www.eva.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/eva-arvio-015.pdf

In other words: a lot is at stake here. Media distrust is not an isolated problem for self-absorbed journalists. It is crucial that we raise awareness about this threat if we are to safeguard one of the bedrocks of Finnish democracy.

My hope is that developments in other parts of the world might act as a warning and a deterrent. We do not want to head down the same path as others have, with societal hyper-polarization and toxic public discourse as a consequence.

Yet, for some years now, public discussion relating to this question in Finland has largely shrugged off these warning signs. Instead, journalists seem to have taken comfort in the fact that Finland continues to retain the top position in the media trust stakes. There is, in my view, an evident risk of both complacency or even self-delusion.

The fact that Finnish media has largely been able to withstand the challenge of mistrust is by all means worth celebrating. However, first and foremost this requires "professional maintenance" – continuous vigilance, self-criticism and introspection. It is not a moment for hysteria, nor is it time to be sanguine.

The question journalists should constantly ask themselves is whether we really are worthy of this trust? And if we are worthy of it, how will that trustworthiness continue to express itself in the way we work, so that we differentiate ourselves from the other cacophonous noise?
It is our ultimate challenge – our whole raison d´être. If we fail, we are essentially out of business.

To help us to better answer these questions, I will analyse the figures regarding trust in media in relation to different parameters such as sex, age, education and political values. Among which part of the Finnish population is the trust eroding, and what conclusions can be drawn on the basis of these figures?

Secondly, I will discuss additional features in the change of public attitudes that I think could lie behind this development.

This requires consideration of Finland in a wider context, especially with regard to so-called identity politics and the emergence of an opinion landscape shaped by what American political philosopher Francis Fukuyama described as "individuals demanding public recognition of their worth"[5], rather than a reflection of economic conflicts "fights over the shares of the pie".

As we shall see, the equation of trust turns out to be a complex one. Mere factfulness or veracity of our work will not suffice; other aspects have to be factored in if we want to understand how trust is shaped.

Finally, I will put forward a few proposals as to what can be done about it, and define the questions we need to continue to discuss in the Finnish public sphere. Solutions will entail not only actions relating to the transparency of our work, but also to the broader narrative around journalism and its place in society.

I will draw largely on my personal experiences as head of quality control and audience dialogue at the Finnish Broadcasting Company *Yle*, a position which has involved handling a great amount of (overwhelmingly critical) feedback from the audience.

I do not in any way claim this feedback to be statistically representative, but since there are certain recurring themes and arguments in this criticism, it merits a closer look.

[5] Francis Fukuyama, *Identity* (2nd edn, Profile Books Ltd 2019).

What happened to trust in Finland?

Finnish society has been characterised by high levels of trust in institutions for several decades – be these media-related institutions or other.

There is a history that explains this. The foundations were laid after WWII: to call Finland's post-war recovery efforts a success story is not an exaggeration. In the space of five decades, Finland turned from a war-ravaged agrarian society into one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world.

At the same time, a generous system of welfare benefits was developed and has come to include everything from unemployment insurance and maternity benefits to family allowances and day-care centers.

Finland's geopolitical position between the East and the West has also had an impact. For a small neutral country which has always had to get along with an external authority (above all, Russia), it has been beneficial to stay internally united, or at least to appear united.

Furthermore, Finland has operated a true multi-party system for decades: no large, dominant parties, but three or four middle-sized ones. This has meant that in order to achieve a majority government coalition, each party has had to compromise. Finland has even had so-called rainbow coalitions, made up of parties from all parts of Finland's political spectrum - left to right.

In a country with only five million inhabitants, the political elite is small. It is not wise to break off contact with your rivals, because you will probably have to work with them later. This has made consensus a political virtue and necessity.

This attitude transcends the political arena: in the labour market and social policy, employers, employees, trade unions and public authorities have collaborated closely for decades. It has been regarded as a central contributing factor in the creation of the welfare state.

The general effect of all this cooperation has been not only equality between the citizens and a relatively high standard of living, but also that the potential sources of discontent have largely been removed.

In other words: there has not been any clear "breeding ground" for societal mistrust, no polarisation which would feed resentment and anger.

According to recent surveys, the most trusted institutions in Finnish society today are the president, the police, the defence forces and the education system.

The president is seen as a figure above day-to-day politics, and the incumbent Sauli Niinistö has record-high popularity ratings, making the institution itself more trusted.

The evident explanation for the high levels of trust in the police and the defence forces is that they represent the inner core of the state which is ultimately responsible for the security of people. And since the state itself is largely perceived as a reliable actor, favour extends to them.

The legacy of the war also has an effect: Finns have enormous respect for veterans, and all the sacrifices they made for our independence. The defence forces are still viewed partly through that patriotic lense.

It is in this context that the media (especially *Yle*) has traditionally found itself to be trusted – possibly even more so than the government, political parties or the church.
This level of trust, we can hypothesise, is thanks in part to the following factors:

Firstly, there is a strong culture of professionalism within the business. This culture is manifested in the form of a self-regulating committee (The Council for Mass Media, CMM, established in 1968) tasked with monitoring and adjudicating good professional practice. Those who are affiliated to the CMM have committed themselves to advancing and upholding the ethical principles of the profession.

The CMM has no formal jurisdiction within the field of publishing, but is still considered to be an authoritative body that affiliated media outlets obey and respect. Newsrooms acknowledge and adhere to its decisions, despite there being no legal obligation to do so.

There is a sense of solidarity among Finnish journalists, too. They tend to support each other and instinctively rally together against any measures that could threaten press freedom and editorial independence.

Perhaps most importantly, Finnish legacy media does not have any particular political affiliation. Certainly there are nuances in reporting, but the vast part of established media tends to be what was once positively referred to as mainstream. Some political parties have published their own official newspapers, but they have remained largely on the outskirts of the media landscape with limited reach.

This political neutrality has meant there has not yet been a need for media players to aggressively position themselves in relation to others, as is now the case in heavily polarized media environments like the US.

The audience has not been forced to tailor their news consumption on the basis of political affiliation. In other words: no matter which news outlet you have chosen (among the more established ones), you have, as a media consumer, been served a fairly balanced and non-partisan view of the world.

The changes we are now seeing regarding trust must be assessed against the backdrop of this prolonged and favorable status quo. Are we just seeing small ruptures in the facade, or is this a sign of something bigger?

There is a slight difference in trust when it comes to the exact wording of the question. Those polled have a higher trust in the news that they themselves use (only a 2 point drop from 2015 to 2019). The larger drop (9% for the same period) in trust concerns a question about trust in news in general.

This suspicion in news in general may well stem from all the recent publicity regarding fake news and disinformation, which has rattled the media landscape over the past few years and culminated in the 2016 U.S. election result.

Even if one has not personally experienced any major flaws or shortcomings from one's preferred news outlet, this level of global criticism and fear of misinformation would foster a general suspicion of the media and journalists.

But is this necessarily a bad thing? A certain amount of skepticism is necessary and healthy in today's information environment. Finland is repeatedly ranked as a global leader in media literacy by the European Policies Initiative's annual Media Literacy Index[6] – a measure of a population's resilience to misinformation.

We know news literacy may in fact also go hand-in-hand with a high degree of scepticism[7]. The more people know about how the news is made, the more knowledgeable they will be about its limitations and imperfections.

[6] Marin Lessenski, 'Just Think About It. Findings Of The Media Literacy Index 2019' (Open Society Institute Sofia 2019) <https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/MediaLiteracyIndex2019_-ENG.pdf> accessed 4 August 2020.
[7] Richard Fletcher, 'The Impact Of Greater News Literacy' (Digital News Report, 2020) <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2018/the-impact-of-greater-news-literacy/> accessed 4 August 2020.

Media literacy can thus, paradoxically, also increase mistrust. But where doubting everything may work for an individual, it is poison for society and civilization as a whole.

The difference in how people responded to the questions of trust in the survey points to another interesting possibility. When you trust the media outlets you follow more than you trust the media overall, it might imply a movement towards a more polarized and politicized media consumption pattern. In other words, trust is an attribute of the specific media outlet one has chosen, not of the media environment as a whole.

We can see that change manifesting itself in Finland in supporters of the populist right-wing party, who have much less trust in the established media than the supporters of the Green party.

A closer look at how the figures regarding trust relate to age, sex, socio-economic status and education point to a familiar pattern: well-educated, affluent and older audiences tend to have higher levels of trust. Furthermore, women tend to trust slightly more than men (72% and 68% respectively).

The narrowness of this point difference came as a surprise to me. In my work, the vast majority of distrustful responses submitted via our audience services, emails to the public editor and in comments under online articles seem to come from older men. Research backs up that online commenting is dominated by men[8], something which is also apparent at Yle. Men are also more likely to follow the small nationalist and anti-immigration alternative media scene in Finland, which actively engenders distrust in legacy media.

[8] Fiona Martin, 'Getting My Two Cents Worth In' (*#ISOJ*, 2020) <https://isojjournal.wordpress.com/2015/04/15/getting-my-two-cents-worth-in-access-interaction-participation-and-social-inclusion-in-online-news-commenting/> accessed 4 August 2020.

The distrustful men I encounter in my work seem to spend a lot of time sifting through news content. They are generally both knowledgeable and up-to-date with what is happening in society. It is difficult to establish what their social, economic or professional background is, but it certainly seems as if scrutinising the media is like a leisure activity for them.

Many put a lot of effort into looking for evidence showing that we journalists pursue an agenda in our reporting. And they clearly find satisfaction in finding mistakes and shortcomings in what we do.

I would have expected this – disproportionate growing distrust among men – to show clearly in surveys on Finnish media consumption. But it was a false presumption. In fact, studies of the impact of gender on media trust have produced quite inconsistent results: they have variously found that women trust the media more than men, that men trust the media more than women, and that gender was insignificant.

So I stand corrected on this issue, but the question remains: what are these “grumpy old men” a symptom of? And are they an indicator of something bigger in the making?

Engaged, Interested But Distrustful

A certain tension between the sender and the receiver of news is a natural part of journalism. We stir up emotions, particularly in those subjected to critical evaluation. This is, in principle, both logical and sound.

For my own employer *Yle* (a tax-funded public service company), there is an additional element of tension: because their taxes fund our content, there is a perceived "ownership" of the product.

This perceived ownership comes with a perceived entitlement to influence editorial decisions, or at least have a stronger say in what to expect from our reporting.

The cornerstone of our profession is editorial independence, so it is natural that the instinct is to dismiss these demands as unacceptable. But they do signal something valuable, which is engagement and interest. And, insofar as such demands concern factual errors or other obvious flaws in the reporting, they should be taken seriously and acted upon accordingly. Critique should be appreciated.

However, over the past few years critique has shifted from content quality to content themes – particularly where the theme concerns Finland's position in a global context. There has been a surge of men, often middle-aged or older, who are very engaged in our content, but have a strong suspicion about both bias and so-called political correctness of our content.

This seems to echo the sentiments in Sweden, and to an extent, the U.S. The themes, arguments, terminology and jargon used in these critiques seems to be imported from elsewhere and repurposed to fit the domestic scene. A "globalised opinion environment" if you will.

Here are some of the themes that tend to stir up emotions, often due only to the fact that they were reported on at all (i.e. no complaint beyond the granting of coverage):

- Immigration (involving both asylum-seekers as well as refugees and so-called economic migrants)
- Climate change. This mistrust is often intertwined with a more general suspicion towards institutions and the so-called "establishment" (of which science is also considered a part when it contradicts one's own beliefs)
- Feminism and gender equality issues (with the #MeToo movement being the most evident irritant, followed by pay, professional opportunities, etc.)
- The rights of sexual minorities anything relating to LGTBQ+-rights)
- Food and dietary trends (especially veganism)
- Urban vs. rural lifestyle (e.g. wolves, the fur industry, hunting of certain invasive species)

What explains the apparent sensitivities with this particular set of issues?

Firstly, I think there is a public misapprehension that coverage of a theme is the same as having a favourable opinion of the theme being reported – if we deem it worthy of coverage, we favour it. But from a journalistic perspective, the intention is far simpler: if it is new – "previously unknown information" – it is worth telling the audience. Or through a more concrete example: trains that go according to schedule is not news, the ones that do not run on time are.

All the abovementioned themes can be placed in that news category. They are expressions of major shifts in public opinion and values, and therefore fulfill conventional news criteria. Nonetheless, our reporting on them is often viewed as a form of opinionated content. The ire for the development becomes ire for the journalists reporting the them – they are "shooting the messenger".

Beyond Factfulness And Bias

Beyond the impact of factfulness and perceived bias on media trust, there is a broader factor to consider that involves identity politics – in my view, a very useful conceptual tool for explaining what we see playing out.

Critics tend to lump together the themes I outlined above as the "leftist" agenda. Whether there is actually anything particularly leftist in them is questionable, but it is certainly fair to say that all these themes concern values and ideologies that are of interest to a younger, urban, well-educated, liberal-leaning and cosmopolitan audience.

Above all, they are arguably all issues where identity (rather than a classical, political right-left divide) expresses itself.

This development is not unique to Finland: we see it in the U.S. and in the UK, with Brexit the clearest illustration of politics beginning to polarise around issues of culture and identity. Politics is no longer about who gets what (which is always a matter of compromise), but around profound questions of identity (which is not a matter of compromise).

Who I am becomes a more defining issue than *what I have*. The dynamic playing out here resembles the rallying slogan of the student movement and second-wave Feminists from the late 1960s: "the personal is the political."

Fukuyama writes: "The dynamic of identity politics is to stimulate more of the same, as identity groups begin to see one another as threats. Unlike fights over economic resources, identity claims are usually non negotiable: rights to social recognition based on race, ethnicity, or gender are based on fixed biological characteristics and cannot be traded for other goods or abridged in any way."

This gives meaning to why the above-mentioned themes are so emotionally charged. One can empathise with what must be a powerful underlying psychological mechanism: a sense of being left behind while the world around is changing at a breathtaking pace, and hence, a struggle for recognition and renewed self-esteem.

“A humiliated group seeking restitution of its dignity,” writes Fukuyama, “carries far more emotional weight than people simply pursuing their economic advantage”.

British author David Goodhart believes old distinctions of class and economic interest have been “overlaid” by a larger fault line[9]. That line runs between what he calls the “Anywheres” (those citizens who place a high value on autonomy, mobility and novelty, and comfortably surf social change) and “Somewheres” (those who are more rooted, less well educated and care more about group identity, familiarity, tradition and place).

It goes without saying that this fault line will affect the way news is perceived.

This would also explain why so-called alternative news outlets gain so much traction, despite their often clear and unhinged bias. Researchers at Helsinki University have found that alternative news outlets (or countermedia as they choose to call them) primarily “operate within the realm of identification, rather than information”[10], encouraging their audiences to identify as the disenfranchised collective and a counterforce to “the elite”. Emotions are therefore a significant feature in this rhetoric.

To further add to the complexities involved in this issue, it is also worth problematizing the very concept of trust.

As professor Emily Bell from Columbia Journalism School has said: trust is a “poor metric” for quality journalism. “Breitbart optimizes for trust,” she said on Twitter. “So does the Daily Mail.”

In other words: even heavily biased news sites can be perceived as trustworthy when they support your existing beliefs. It is a classic case of so-called confirmation bias.

There are so many aspects to trust, ranging from how the audience perceives the selection of topics to the accuracy of what is depicted and how the journalist assesses the facts he or she reports on.

[9] Goodhart, David (2017) ‘The road to somewhere: the new tribes shaping British politics’. London: Penguin Books.
[10] Petter Groning, 'Forget “Fake News” – We Need A Smarter Approach To Countermedia | University Of Helsinki' (University of Helsinki, 2020) <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/news/nordic-welfare-news/forget-fake-news-we-need-a-smarter-approach-to-countermedia> accessed 4 August 2020.

There are also certain presumptions made about the semantics of trust too: we may be surveying for a concept that we regard as trustworthiness, which the audience might experience as relevance, or even expectation. Does this news outlet fulfill the expectations I had on how this particular subject was going to be reported on?

In other words, trust is a more complicated and fluid concept than we might think. It is quite logical that without any meaning to the audience, the news becomes irrelevant, and as a consequence, it is perceived as unreliable. As one of my audience once complained to me: "It's not what you report on, it's what you leave out".

The editorial selection process has lent itself to both legitimate criticism and conspiratorial theories about bias. It is not unfair to say journalists have over-used and under-explained "editorial judgment" as a one-size-fits-all excuse for what is and is not published.

It is a convenient way of brushing aside accusations about bias, but is neither transparent nor does it build confidence.

As Melissa Bell, publisher and co-founder of Vox, puts it:"the media once had a monopoly on information and the means to distribute it, but that made us a bit too comfortable, sinking us into a sanctimonious belief that we were the truth holders instead of truth seekers. We used 'editorial judgement' as a code for 'what we think is important and think you should know'."[11]

This is not only a condescending approach, it has also completely lost its meaning in a situation where legacy media's sovereignty is greatly reduced, if not wiped out. The audience now has access to vast oceans of information and are able to compose their own tailor-made media diet (often reinforcing their pre-existing views and values).

There is, it seems, an asymmetry regarding trust in media. Not only is it emotionally driven and influenced by socioeconomic status, it is also influenced by identity and a perceived loss of recognition. These aspects, combined with the problem of confirmation bias, makes restoration of trust in media a tall order.

[11] Melissa Bell, 'Viewpoint: We Broke The News Media, How Can We Fix Them?' (Digital News Report, 2020) <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2017/viewpoint-we-broke-the-news-2017/> accessed 4 August 2020.

Authenticity, Humility And Pride: What is the Story of Journalism?

A few years have passed since the 2016 U.S. elections, which pushed the discussion of misinformation, media polarisation and trust from academic circles into the public realm. Questions surrounding what has become known as the "post-truth" era are not new in any way. "Identity politics" has been a catchall phrase for even longer. If voters are electing their politicians on the basis of tribal loyalty, rather than whether they are telling the truth, then we are in a pretty grim place.

Finland has been largely spared from these global trends. We have been lucky to observe rather than experience the problem. Misinformation (in the form of clearly fabricated falsehoods) did not at any point pose a real threat to Finnish legacy media. And the changes media trust have been subtle.

No matter how you juggle the figures, the differences in how each respective news outlet is viewed are still quite small. The big picture in terms of trust is still one of majority consensus.

And as to how public service media (PSM) scores in this sense, research shows that – despite frequent claims to the opposite – most PSM´s are relatively successful at reaching politically diverse audiences across the left-right political spectrum[12]. This is certainly true for *Yle*.

But I do believe we should prepare for any further development of these trends by answering the following questions: what does impartiality look like in the age of

[12] Anne Schulz, David Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, 'Old, Educated, And Politically Diverse: The Audience Of Public Service News' (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2020) <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/old-educated-and-politically-diverse-audience-public-service-news> accessed 4 August 2020.

identity politics? And consequently: how is trust preserved in the age of identity politics?

One of the most debated issues in the fall of 2019 in Finland was the decision by the Helsinki University cafeterias to eliminate beef from lunches and provide more vegetarian and vegan fare.

The decision caused an uproar among sections of the Finnish political class. One MP called the decision a travesty perpetrated by the “veggie mafia”. The Agriculture Minister chimed in to say he didn't think the decision was “sensible” and another prominent MP said the menu adjustment was part of a “culture war”.

On the surface this uproar was about beef or dietary trends, but in reality it was a conflict about identity, recognition and perceived threats against one’s own group.

Similar conflicts arise on a regular basis. The ensuing reactions follow a tiresome and predictable pattern.

How should Finnish media report these culture wars, in which the lines and trenches of the battlefield seem to be drawn in advance?

Transparency

Identity politics in no way changes the need for more transparency as our guiding principle.

Much has been said and written over the past years about the preservation of trust. There are numerous journalistic projects, like the The Trust Project, relating to transparency standards within the newsrooms. These standards also serve the purpose of increasing public understanding about the nuts and bolts of journalism and the challenges and dilemmas involved in day-to-day operations.

Other proposals have also been outlined in the Reuters Institute report *Bias, Bullshit and Lies*[13]. They suggest differentiating the news media from information that has not gone through the same professional checking processes.

How to "label" qualitative content is at the centre of this question. The reasoning for each label will need to be an integral part of this solution – not just a graphic or logo slapped on reports.

The same report suggests we do a better job of separating facts from opinion, and news from comment. I would be inclined to go even further than that. In today's turbocharged opinion climate, the inherent risk is that comment and analysis will be misconstrued if it is published within the same context as news.

Yes, part of our job is to further the audience's understanding about a subject. But it seems more general and neutral explainers or fact boxes in articles are more preferable than commentaries.

While the above-mentioned actions are rather concrete and technical, trust will require less tangible steps to build a deeper, reciprocal relationship with our readers, viewers and listeners. Journalism must become a relationship, not a product.

As I have realised through my own work, the public editor role is not a one-person panacea to the reader trust problem either.

In his book *Post truth - the new war on truth and how to fight back*, the journalist and author Matthew D´Ancona[14] argues that in a post-truth world it is not enough to

[13] Nic Newman and Richard Fletcher, 'Bias, Bullshit And Lies' (2017) <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-11/Nic%20Newman%20and%20Richard%20Fletcher%20-%20Bias%2C%20Bullshit%20and%20Lies%20-%20Report.pdf> accessed 4 August 2020.
[14] Matthew D'Ancona, Post-Truth (Ebury Press 2017).

make an intellectual case. In many contexts, he writes, facts need to be communicated "in a way that recognises emotional as well as rational imperatives".

In other words, today's truth-tellers must speak to both head and heart, that we must find powerful counter-narratives – resonant stories, as opposed to just facts and data – to defend the truth.

So what is the story about journalism that best explains why it is worthy of continued trust? I propose that the story we tell will have to be built around at least three elements: authenticity, humility and pride.

Authenticity

For a tax-funded public service media organisation this is arguably the hardest part of building a relationship with the audience, because authenticity can seem – at least partly – at odds with the notion of impartiality.

Consider the enormously popular YouTubers, bloggers and influencers of today. Their recipe for success is quite evidently rooted in a sense of authenticity – genuine and unpolished voices of individuals, not brands or institutions.

Their success is also heavily centered on personality. Trustworthiness and relevance comes through the person producing the content, not by virtue of some legacy brand at the weight of its history. Indeed, one might even argue that it is the absence of an institution which adds to the perceived authenticity.

But above all, the authenticity in this vivid sphere is clearly opinionated. Regardless of what theme they cover – fashion, gaming, humour, politics – they are taking a stand on issues, they are voicing opinions, sometimes even pushing boundaries.

This is in sharp relief to the mission of public service journalism, i.e. neutrality and a pluralism of voices.

To further add to the authenticity dilemma, it is also a central feature in populism as a communication strategy. Populism is characterised by anti-elitism, spontaneity, and outspokenness, which are also strategies to construct authenticity, and in a mediated environment which favours the authentic, populist politicians might get a strategic advantage[15].

Despite authenticity being an obvious path to success, it carries with it lots of risks. PSMs must be cautious regarding how it is used as a means of reaching new audiences. If it means more opinionated journalism, it may backfire.

Does this mean we are doomed to dull and, at times, flavourless reporting? Quite possibly, and maybe that is the price we have to pay for preserving a sense of impartiality.

Humility and soul-searching

One could argue that our problem is that we are still obsessed with story-telling and less with listening. A reciprocal relationship with our audience demands openly admitting mistakes and embracing any feedback that can improve the product.

In his book *Breaking the News*, Alan Rusbridger talks about "*finding a journalistic voice that was sometimes less declamatory, less certain, more tentative, more collaborative, more involving, more enlisting.*"

I would suggest we add: less dramatising. This certainly applies to those themes that trigger identity issues. The stories come pre-loaded with every ingredient necessary for a juicy and traffic-driving report – conflicts that are easy to portray, simple disputes revolving around emotionally charged symbolic issues. When some new

[15] Enli, Gunn & Rosenberg, Therese (2018). Trust in the Age of Social Media: Populist Politicians Seem More Authentic. Social Media + Society. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2056305118764430

outrage or flavour-of-the-day controversy pops up, the temptation for journalists to go along can be impossible to resist.

But by going along without question, we are not merely reporting on a culture wars; we are actively perpetrating them and throwing more gasoline on the flames. Identity-related conflicts provide cheap fodder for clickbait content which drives audience engagement (and revenue), but for a responsible public service media outlet the bar must be raised considerably.

We must have the courage to step back, take a deep breath and return to reporting on the subject once the dust has settled. Not when the dust prevents us from clearly seeing the context.

In a column for The Guardian[16], Gary Younge writes that some people mistake the mantra "the personal is political" for the "emotional is empirical", confusing their discomfort, disgust or sense of isolation for a political event in itself [...] and reducing politics to individual feelings.

We must get better at distinguishing what illustrates something generally relevant and what is just arbitrary noise.

Pride (in our profession)

Pride and humility may seem like awkward bedfellows, but they are in no way mutually exclusive. In fact, they complement and can even strengthen each other when properly practised.

[16] Melissa Bell, 'Viewpoint: We Broke The News Media, How Can We Fix Them?' (*Digital News Report*, 2020) <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2017/viewpoint-we-broke-the-news-2017/> accessed 4 August 2020.

For all the endless talk about the need for the media to embrace change and face the reality of a radically changing audience behaviour, I still think "back to basics" must take centrestage.

Journalism is a handicraft involving professional expertise as anything else. Most of us still command a special set of skills for digesting and presenting information.

Being overly anxious about how we are perceived carries with it the risk that the most dystopian scenarios regarding mistrust become self-fulfilling prophecies. Well-intentioned displays of self-scrutiny can also play into the hands of forces that want to discredit us as journalists.

We do an enormous amount of truth-seeking work based on classical principles of responsible journalism, and there is no need to be excessively modest about that.

I still – naively perhaps – believe in legendary journalist Carl Bernstein's definition of journalism as "*the best obtainable version of truth*"[17].

If it is just the best "version" of the truth that was "obtainable" within the confines of time and space and wisdom, and within the talents of those assembling it on a given day, then you might well argue that it is a humble approach. Not grand and pompous, but realistic and pragmatic.

We can never settle for anything less than at least a quest for the truth. Likewise, if we dilute the concept of objectivity, we might as well pack our bags and scrap the profession of journalism.

I feel these virtues of veracity and objectivity have largely vanished from the public discourse about the media. It is in no way self-evident that media consumers

[17] Eric Black and Brian Lambert, 'Carl Bernstein Makes The Case For 'The Best Obtainable Version Of The Truth' | Minnpost' (MinnPost, 2020) <https://www.minnpost.com/eric-black-ink/2015/04/carl-bernstein-makes-case-best-obtainable-version-truth/> accessed 4 August 2020.

(especially younger ones) are familiar with the principles underpinning responsible journalism.

In their book about science denial in the realm of health issues titled *Denying to the grave*, Sara and Jack Gorman argue that scientists must raise their voices in the public sphere in order to counter all the disinformation. They propose that scientists "join the conversation in a much more active way".

I believe the same applies for us journalists. For too long we have been on the defensive about the work we do. We should be more assertive about why journalism, properly executed, is a more reliable guide to the world. Defending journalism is the most important form of media education.

And let's be clear: all ways of handling and publishing information are simply not equal. Some opinions (or in this case: methods) are, in the words of Douglas Adams, "a very great deal more robust, sophisticated and well supported in logic and argument than others".

Let us take pride in the fact that we represent the latter.

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