MODULE 1
Truth, trust and journalism: why it matters
by Cherilyn Ireton

Synopsis

In many parts of the world, trust in media and journalism was fragile and weakening long before the advent of social media[14]. This trend is not separate from declining trust in institutions which has been a feature common in many societies. However, the sheer volume and reach of disinformation and misinformation, dressed up as news and distributed via social media, has inflicted a contagion that threatens further reputational damage to journalism. This has implications for journalists, news media, citizens and open societies[15].

In the high-speed information free-for-all on social media platforms and the internet, everyone can be a publisher. As a result, citizens struggle to discern what is true and what is false. Cynicism and distrust rule. Extreme views, conspiracy theories and populism flourish and once-accepted truths and institutions are questioned. In this world, newsrooms battle to claim and perform their historic role as gatekeepers[16] whose product can help to establish the truth. At the same time, the rise of marketplaces for "strategic communications" and "information operations", including active disinformation and mal-information, has become a major factor in the information ecosystem.[17]

> *As the scale and consequences of 'information disorder' for society have begun to materialise, even the architects of social media are concerned. Facebook's Product Manager Civic Engagement, Samidh Chakrabarti offered: "If there's one fundamental truth about social media's impact on democracy it's that it amplifies human intent — both good and bad. At its best, it allows us to express ourselves and take action. At its worst, it allows people to spread misinformation and corrode democracy".*[18]

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14 Edelman. (2017). Edelman Trust Barometer - Global Results. [online]. Available at: https://www.edelman.com/global-results/ [accessed 03/04/2018].

15 Viner, K. (2017). *A mission for journalism in a time of crisis.* [online] the Guardian.
Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/nov/16/a-mission-for-journalism-in-a-time-of-crisis [accessed 03/04/2018].

16 Singer, J. (2013). User-generated visibility: Secondary gatekeeping in a shared media space. *New Media & Society,* [online] 16(1), pp.55-73. Available at: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/od59/6a002c26a74cd45e15fbc20e64173cf2f912.pdf [accessed 0/03/04/2018].

17 See for example the cases described in Gu, L; Kropotov, V and Yarochkin, F. (nd). *The Fake News Machine How Propagandists Abuse the Internet and Manipulate the Public.* https://documents.trendmicro.com/assets/white_papers/wp-fake-news-machine-how-propagandists-abuse-the-internet.pdf [accessed 16/06/2018]. Another study is published by the Data & Society Research Institute, New York (2017) Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online, https://datasociety.net/output/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/ [accessed 15/06/2018].

18 Chakrabarti, S. (2018). *Hard Questions: What Effect Does Social Media Have on Democracy?* Facebook Newsroom. [online] Newsroom. fb.com. Available at: https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/01/effect-social-media-democracy/ [accessed 03/04/2018].

It has become clear that to tackle the problem, interventions, both big and small, are needed. One temptation is to try to fix the problem through regulation, and many countries are choosing this route[19], but freedom of expression advocates warn that this could hurt the openness and participation that new technologies have enabled.[20] Particularly if authoritarian-minded leaders come to office, they will find a powerful and ready legal weapon at hand to determine what is "fake" and what is not regarding any critical coverage of their performance.

Another option is that proposed by civil society and company initiatives, which focus on making audiences savvier and providing them with tools to interpret and evaluate the information they receive. From South Africa[21] to Mexico[22], examples abound. Fact-checking organisations are proliferating (as explained in this handbook).

In this context, journalists and student journalists need to know about such initiatives – and about the complementary roles they can play. Hence this handbook.

For journalists, who have long regarded themselves as essential support players in democratic and open societies, disinformation and misinformation challenge more than their reputation. 'Information disorder' questions their purpose and effectiveness. It highlights the fundamental importance of the need for independence of journalism and high professional standards. This is not to assume that journalism is free of dominant ideology or bias born of gender, ethnicity, linguistic grouping, class etc. or background of those who produce it. Nor does it ignore the systemic issues of the influence of institutional contexts of ownership, business models, audience interests, the news "net" of predictable bureaucratic and public relations sources, etc. However, it is to uphold the importance of editorial ethics as a beacon for coverage, and for self-reflection by journalists about their worldviews and contexts. It is to signal that journalism is not a "view from nowhere", but a practice that needs transparency if the public is to trust that there is compliance with broad standards of verifiability and public interest, no matter the range of subjects covered and perspectives entailed.[23]

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19 Funke, D. (2018) *A guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world* Poynter https://www.poynter.org/news/guide-anti-misinformation-actions-around-world [accessed 22/05/2018].

20 Nossel, S. (2017). *Faking News: Fraudulent News and the Fight for Truth*. [ebook] PEN America. Available at: https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/PEN-America_Faking-News-Report_10-17.pdf [accessed 03/04/2018].

21 #KnowNews is a web browser extension developed by South Africa's Media Monitoring Africa NGO, which seeks to help audiences identify if the site they are browsing contains credible news: https://chrome.google.com/webstore/search/KnowNews [accessed 15/06/2018].

22 See the website https://verificado.mx/ representing a coalition of 60 media, civil society and university institutions focusing on verification of contested content during the 2018 Mexican election. [accessed 15/06/2018]; https://knightcenter.utexas.edu/blog/00-19906-media-collaboration-and-citizen-input-fueled-verificado-2018-fact-checking-mexican-ele [accessed 04/07/2018].

23 See Rosen, J. (2010). The View from Nowhere: Questions and Answers. *PressThink.* http://pressthink.org/2010/11/the-view-from-nowhere-questions-and-answers/ [accessed 15/06/2018].

In this lesson, instructors should encourage participants to consider critically how journalism can serve society and democracy; how 'information disorder' is affecting - and risks further affecting - democracy and open societies; how journalism can do better and, in the process, rebuild trust that its methods and standards do indeed stand out as distinctive with regard to generating verifiable information in the public interest. This is not about blind trust in purveyors of journalism, but about recognising their character and distinctiveness, and aspiration for alignment with processes and standards of verified information in the public interest, and assessing them accordingly. This implies recognising the value of scepticism, as opposed to cynicism, and a corresponding ability of members of the public to distinguish between those masquerading as journalism practitioners, and those who genuinely strive to do journalism (and who manifest the requisite transparency, self-regulatory accountability, and quality reputation that goes with this). For journalists and journalism students, it means understanding the changing information environment and how to respond to the challenges.

Outline

To understand the consequences of 'information disorder' for journalists, and the societies they serve, it is important that participants consider the profound change for journalism and legacy media, at a structural, cultural and normative level, that has followed the rapid advance in digital technology and Internet-enabled personal devices. Most important is the relationship between the accelerated problems of trust in journalism and engagement with social media.[24]

To blame all of journalism's woes on social media would be incorrect. Trust is directly linked to journalistic capacity – and there is also a correlation with diminishing trust in governments, business and institutions in many parts of the world.[25]

The structural changes to the way news is collected and distributed, and the collapse of legacy news companies' main business model, have denuded the news industry of journalistic capacity in newsrooms, affecting the depth, breadth and quality of news coverage.[26] Declining funds for public media newsrooms and continued governmental control in much of this sector have also weakened news offerings.

While digital transformation brought welcome new ways of storytelling and greater involvement of the audience in the news process, so too, it brought greater challenges

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24   See Module Three

25   Edelman. (2017) op cit

26   See Module Three

for already weakened legacy news producers. Digital-only news organisations, generally, have not yet developed the journalistic mass to stop the degradation of journalism.[27]

In the democratised, more diverse information ecosystem, preventing the harmful effects of disinformation and misinformation is proving a challenge, not just to those invested in journalism, but to all of society.[28]

Pre-digital journalistic practice and method included professional standards, and layers of centralised checks and controls to manage the accuracy, quality and fairness of news. Field reporters were backed by a newsroom team who verified content before it was published. This 'gatekeeper' model instilled a sense of professionalism in journalists.[29]

Through coverage of public affairs and community issues, investigations, commentary and analysis, journalists had effective tools for holding politicians and officials to account. They helped citizens make choices about how they were governed and ruled. To be sure, some news media institutions have not lived up to the ideals and standards of journalism. But, generally, their business has been centred on real news, selected and presented in a particular interested narrative indeed, but far from made-up facts created for political, commercial or entertainment purposes.

At a cultural level, the empowerment of other actors to witness, record, comment and publish news on social media channels forced change not only to the centralised model – but also to public-square debates.[30] Social media platforms are now the key infrastructure for public and political discourse. Some argue that this has put democracies and open societies into a 'democratic deficit'.[31]

By insisting they are not news publishers, the technology companies and social platforms have sidestepped the normative obligations to which journalists and publishers are held accountable.[32] While these actors do not employ journalists to produce news, their curation and editing significance are increasingly distancing them from the role of being 'mere conduits' or simple intermediaries.

27   Greenspon, E. (2017). *The Shattered Mirror: News, Democracy and Trust in the Digital Age*. [ebook] Ottowa: Public Policy Forum, Canada. Available at: https://shatteredmirror.ca/download-report/ [accessed 03/04/2018].

28   Ansip, A. (2017). *Hate speech, populism and fake news on social media – towards an EU response*. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/ansip/announcements/statement-vice-president-ansip-european-parliament-strasbourg-plenary-debate-hate-speech-populism [accessed 03/04/2018].

29   Kovach, B. and Rosenstiel, T. (2010). *Blur: How To Know What's True In The Age of Information Overload*. 1st ed. New York: Bloomsbury, pp.171-184.

30   Nossel, S. (2017). *Faking News: Fraudulent News and the Fight for Truth*. [ebook] PEN America. Available at: https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/PEN-America_Faking-News-Report_10-17.pdf [accessed 03/04/2018].

31   Howard, P. (2017) Ibid

32   Howard, P. (2017) Ibid. See also Module Three

Driving much of the disinformation and misinformation, or "junk" as the Oxford Institute for Computational Science calls it, are the social media platforms and search engines' algorithms. By tapping into the family and friends' networks of the user, they provide structure and legitimacy to disinformation and misinformation.[33]

Thus, the intentionally misleading content spread on these platforms is affecting citizens' understanding of reality[34] and undermining trust, informed dialogue, a shared sense of reality, mutual consent, and participation.[35] Other ways in which social media is accused of undermining democracy include:

▶ Creating echo chambers, polarisation and hyper-partisanship

▶ Converting popularity into legitimacy

▶ Allowing manipulation by populist leaders, governments and fringe actors

▶ Encouraging personal data capture and targeted micro-messaging/ advertising below the radar[36]

▶ Disrupting the public square.[37]

It does not have to be this way. Social media can be a major platform to engage society with journalism and to promote debate, civic values, and democratic participation in an environment that strengthens human rights, cultural diversity, science, knowledge and rational decision-making. To this end, journalism – on any platform – should, for example, report complex issues to the general public without losing scientific accuracy and without simplifying context that could mislead the public. Especially in the field of advanced medical treatment (e.g. cloning) and new scientific advances (e.g. artificial intelligence), challenges for journalists are to verify accuracy, avoid sensationalism, be cautious about reporting future impact, and be able to digest and balance different views or findings of credible experts.

Then there are the many ways that journalism can respond directly to disinformation and misinformation. These include resisting manipulation, through to investigating and direct exposing disinformation campaigns. But these have to be accompanied by major efforts to improve journalism in general (see below).

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33   Pariser, E. (2011). The filter bubble: what the Internet is hiding from you. London, Viking/Penguin Press.

34   European Commission (2017). Next steps against fake news: Commission sets up High-Level Expert Group and launches public consultation. [online] Available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-4481_en.htm [accessed 13/06/2018].

35   Deb, A., Donohue, S. & Glaisyer, T. (2017). *Is Social Media A Threat To Democracy?* [ebook] Omidyar Group. Available at: https://www.omidyargroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Social-Media-and-Democracy-October-5-2017.pdf [accessed on 03/04/2018].

36   Cadwalladr, C. and Graham-Harrison, E. (2018). How Cambridge Analytica turned Facebook 'likes' into a lucrative political tool. The Guardian. [online] Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/mar/2017/facebook-cambridge-analytica-kogan-data-algorithm [accessed 03/04/2018].

37   Deb, A., Donohue, S. & Glaisyer, T. (2017) Ibid

Societal responses to 'information disorder' and challenges thrown up by social media platforms are varied and take place on multiple levels. Solutions are evolving – some rapidly. Many originate in the U .S., where the social media companies and Google are headquartered. Some evolving tech-related initiatives to address misinformation include:

▷ A commitment to engineering out of search results and news feeds what the company (not without controversy) deems to be fraudulent news[38] [39] [40]

▷ Starving disinformation providers of click-driven advertising revenue[41]

▷ Providing tech-driven solutions for verifying digital content and images[42]

▷ Funding of supportive journalism initiatives that are at the intersection of journalism, technology and academic research [43]

▷ The development and use of technical standards, or trust signals, to help consumers (and algorithms) identify news emanating from credible providers.[44]

At the time of writing at the start of 2018, one of the most significant of the technical standards initiatives for news organisations was The Trust Project, a consortium that works hand-in-hand with the big search engines, social media platforms and over 70 media companies around the world. Its mission is to make it easy for the public to identify news that is "accurate, accountable and ethically produced" by recognition of a trust mark. It has created eight initial technical standards[45] that a news provider should satisfy and make easily identifiable within their online design environment in order to be considered a trustworthy provider. The Trust Project's Trust Indicators[46] are:

▷ **Best Practices:**
  › What are your standards?

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38 Ling, J. (2017). *Eric Schmidt Says Google News Will 'Engineer' Russian Propaganda Out of the Feed*. Motherboard Vice.com. [online] Available at: https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/pa39vv/eric-schmidt-says-google-news-will-delist-rt-sputnik-russia-fake-news?utm_campaign=buffer&utm_content=buffer41cba&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com+Motherboard [accessed on 03/04/2018]; https://www.rt.com/news/411081-google-russia-answer-rt/

39 Mosseri, A. (2018). *Helping ensure news on Facebook is from trusted sources*. Facebook. https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/01/trusted-sources/ [accessed on 03/04/2018].

40 Stamos, A. (2018) *Authenticity matters: Why IRA has no place on Facebook*. Facebook. https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/04/authenticity-matters/ [accessed on 03/04/2018].

41 Love, J. & Cooke, C. (2017). *Google, Facebook move to restrict ads on fake news sites*. Reuters. [online] Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-alphabet-advertising/google-facebook-move-to-restrict-ads-on-fake-news-sites-idUSKBN1392MM [accessed 15/06/2018].

42 See Module Six. An example is http://www.truly.media/ [accessed 15/06/2018].

43 See Module Five

44 The Trust Project (2017). *The Trust Project – News with Integrity*. [online] Available at: https://thetrustproject.org/?nr=0 [accessed on 03/04/2018].

45 The Trust Project (2017). Ibid

46 The Trust Project (2017). Ibid

> › Who funds the news outlet?
> › What is the outlet's mission?
> › Commitments to ethics, diverse voices, accuracy, making corrections and other standards.'

▶ **Author/Reporter Expertise:** Who made this? Details about the journalist, including their expertise and other stories they have worked on.

▶ **Type of Work:** What is this? Labels to distinguish opinion, analysis and advertiser (or sponsored/'native') content from news reports.

▶ **Citations and References:** For investigative or in-depth stories, access to the sources behind the facts and assertions.

▶ **Methods:** Also for in-depth stories, information about why reporters chose to pursue a story and how they went about the process (this aids transparency).

▶ **Locally Sourced?** Lets you know when the story has local origin or expertise. Was the reporting done on the scene, with deep knowledge about the local situation or community?

▶ **Diverse Voices:** A newsroom's efforts and commitment to bringing in diverse perspectives. (Readers/viewers/listeners notice when certain voices, ethnicities, or political persuasions are missing)

▶ **Actionable Feedback:** A newsroom's efforts to engage the public's help in setting coverage priorities, contributing to the reporting process, ensuring accuracy and other areas. Readers/viewers/listeners want to participate and provide feedback that might alter or expand a story.

Trust in journalistic work also helps increase the number, diversity, and quality of sources available to journalists, with flow-on effects for audiences.

Governments, civil society and educators' responses include a greater focus on media and information literacy, dealt with in more detail in a later lesson[47].

These points were also taken up in 2017 by the World Editors Forum, whose President, Marcelo Rech, proposed that editors worldwide embrace the following five principles[48]:

▶ In a world of hyper-information, *credibility, independence, accuracy, professional ethics, transparency* and *pluralism* are the **values** that will confirm **a relationship of trust** with the public.

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47   See Module Four

48   Ireton, C. (2016). *World Editors Forum asks editors to embrace 5 principles to build trust* https://blog.wan-ifra.org/2016/06/14/world-editors-forum-asks-editors-to-embrace-5-principles-to-build-trust [accessed 15/06/2018].

▷ Next-level journalism is **distinguished** from other content by the vigilant and diligent **questioning and verification** of material circulating on social media. It acknowledges social media as a source of information for further fact-checking and as a platform for leveraging professional content.

▷ The **mission** of journalism at this next level is to **serve society** by providing high-quality verified information and to establish news brands as a trusted certificate of origin for content.

▷ A **requirement** of next-level journalism is that it **goes beyond basic facts** and enables and encourages analysis, contextual and investigative reporting, and informed expression of opinion, moving from the provision of news to knowledge that empowers.

▷ Next-level journalism should be driven by trust and the guiding **principles of social relevance, legitimate interest and truthfulness.**

For journalists and newsrooms, more attention is given to promoting quality by improving:

▷ Accountable, ethical journalism practices and evidence-based reporting [49]

▷ Fact checking and the calling out of disinformation and misinformation.[50]

▷ Verification of data, sources, digital images[51]

▷ Engagement with the communities that journalists engage and ensuring the news agenda is in tune with societies' needs.[52]

On this last bullet point above, evidence of a disconnect between much mainstream media and their publics was highlighted during the UK vote to exit the European Union, Brexit, and in the US 2016 Election. The strength of social media communication is direct engagement. Instructors should explore how media can better serve their audiences and thereby build trust, strengthening their relationship and the broader community.

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[49] Wales, J. (2017). *What do we mean by evidence-based journalism?* Wikitribune. https://medium.com/wikitribune/what-do-we-mean-by-evidence-based-journalism-3fd7113102d3 [accessed on 03/04/2018].

[50] See Module Five

[51] Bell, F. (2018). In an age of data-journalism, verification is all the more complex. For instance, in cases of massive data troves it is likely that not just inaccurate information exists, but also that it is entirely possible that deliberately planned disinformation may be included within the records. See also Module Six of this course

[52] Batsell, J. (2015). Engaged journalism: connecting with digitally empowered news audiences. New York. Columbia University Press.

Schudson's *Six or Seven Things News Can Do for Democracy*[53] provides a good framework for discussion:

1. Information: provide fair and full information so citizens can make sound political choices;

2. Investigation: investigate concentrated sources of power, particularly governmental power;

3. Analysis: provide coherent frameworks of interpretation to help citizens comprehend a complex world;

4. Social empathy: tell people about others in their society and their world so that they come to appreciate the viewpoints and lives of other people, especially those less advantaged than themselves;

5. Public forum: provide a forum for dialogue among citizens, through pluralistic and interdisciplinary approaches to issues, and serve as a common carrier of the perspectives of varied groups in society;

6. Mobilisation: serve (where so desired) as advocates for political programmes and perspectives and mobilise people to act in support of these programmes, without however compromising verification standards and public interest.

Module Aims

▷ To encourage participants to think critically about journalism and social media

▷ To encourage participants to assess their place within the 'information disorder' ecosystem

▷ To help participants to think critically about the impact of 'information disorder' on society.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this module, participants should have:

1. Deepened their critical understanding of how journalism can better serve democracy and open societies in a vastly expanded media environment, and the risks of 'information disorder' to democracy

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53 Schudson, M. (2008). *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press*. Polity. Chapter Two: Six or Seven Things News Can Do For Democracy. Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=hmYGMe9ecKUC&printsec=frontcover&dq=schduson+michael+6+or+seven+ways&hl=en&sa=X&ved=oahUKEwju_ZGI6ozZAhWELsAKHcovBlUQ6AEIKTAA - v=onepage&q&f=false [accessed on 03/04/2018].

2. Understood the factors that drive trust in journalism and how such trust can be sustained or rebuilt

3. Be able to explain to someone else why journalism matters.

Module Format

The information in the outline of this module could form the basis for a 30-minute lecture, coupled with a 30-minute tutorial or round-table discussion on why journalism matters and how it serves the public. A 90-minute practical exercise could, through a structured conversation, explore how sceptics who do not trust journalism, might be persuaded that not all information is equally untrustworthy; what could a news medium do to make its case for credibility within a social media environment where all information looks equal?

Linking Plan to Learning Outcomes

A. Theoretical

Module Plan	Number of hours	Learning Outcomes
Lecture and interactive discussion on truth and trust	30 mins	1, 2
Round-table discussion on why journalism matters and how it serves the public	30 mins	1, 2, 3

B. Practical

Module Plan	Number of hours	Learning Outcomes
Practical exercise	90 mins	3

Suggested Assignment

The assignment has three elements and requires participants to work in pairs or small groups:

▷ Ask participants (working in small groups or pairs) to interview a news consumer and ask them to identify their most trusted sources of local or national news and civic information. Using Schudson's model of *"Six or Seven Things News*

Can Do for Democracy" as a frame, they should then study a single edition of a publication, or themed stories in the named media, to identify and analyse how effectively these are serving their community through their journalism. Content Analysis techniques would be a useful methodology for this approach. A secondary element will be to identify which, if any, of the Trust Project's eight trust indicators can be identified. Thirdly, the findings could form the basis for a news report or editorial comment - in writing, or as a short video or audio story which makes a case for why journalism matters.

Reading

Deb, A., Donohue, S. & Glaisyer, T. (2017). *Is Social Media A Threat To Democracy?* [ebook] Omidyar Group. Available at: https://www.omidyargroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Social-Media-and-Democracy-October-5-2017.pdf

Edelman. (2017). *2017 Edelman TRUST BAROMETER - Global Results*. [online] Available at: https://www.edelman.com/global-results/

Howard, P. (2017) *Is social media killing democracy?* Oxford. Available at https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/videos/is-social-media-killing-democracy-computational-propaganda-algorithms-automation-and-public-life/

Nossel, S. (2017). *FAKING NEWS: Fraudulent News and the Fight for Truth*. [ebook] PEN America. Available at: https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/PEN-America_Faking-News-Report_10-17.pdf

Schudson, M. (2008). *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press*. Polity. Chapter 5: Six or Seven Things News can do for Democracies, Available at https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=hmYGMe9ecKUC&printsec=frontcover&dq=schduson+michael+6+or+seven+ways&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwju_ZGI6ozZAhWELsAKHcovBlUQ6AEIKTAA - v=onepage&q&f=false

Viner, K. (2017). *A mission for journalism in a time of crisis*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/nov/16/a-mission-for-journalism-in-a-time-of-crisis