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The tussle with trust: Trust in the news media ecology

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Journalism
Online news media
Trust
Quality
Devaluation
Dematerialisation
Interactivity
User participation
Authenticity
Contextual integrity
Reconciliation

This article offers a conceptual exploration of the changing notion of trust and distrust in today's news media ecology. Central is the question whether the relationship between the traditional media actors, media organisations, journalists and news users, can be increasingly characterised by distrust. Do we really notice a decline in trust in the news media? And moreover, are these feelings of distrust grounded? In order to answer these questions, we look at the changing economic, technological and societal context and how this might explain the strained relationship between these actors. We find that to a large extent the goals of the media actors diverge or even conflict. Mutually bridging these goals is difficult as they boil down to ideological and normative choices. This requires us to reconsider our ways of looking at trust. Therefore, this article's central argument is that a trusted relationship between the media actors is unlikely to result from a definitive settlement between the actor's conflicting goals. Rather, maintaining a trusted relationship is likely to become a matter of constant renegotiation. For this renegotiation to succeed, transparency and integrity are key. We find inspiration in the recent work of Solove (2001), Nissenbaum (2004) and Mansell (2008, forthcoming) to take a different, more contextual approach towards the notion of trust. As regards the relationship between news organisations and users, we suggest these norms should be negotiated in a balanced and transparent way, giving users an equal say in the process. The relationship between journalists and news users should be guided by a mutual interest in truth telling, whereby users are not only merely seen as consumers, but also as potential contributors to news stories. Policy makers in turn should act as facilitators of such spaces of renegotiation.

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1. Introduction

For some time now, the news sector is believed to be in a crisis, or at least, in a period of *deep-seated change* (Preston, 2009): a continuously dropping audience, an evolution towards free news, failing alternative revenue models, a slow migration of advertisers to the online medium reinforced by the current economic crisis, changes in the news production process and changing patterns of news use. The news media companies, the journalists and the news consumers, entangled in an unavoidable triangle relationship, need to find ways

to cope with these changes and make the news sector digital future proof.

As in any sort of relationship, building trust amongst the stakeholders is key. There is no difference in the news media ecology. But current changes deeply affect the trusted relationship between news companies, journalists and news users. Of course this relationship has been in troubled water for decades (Bakir and Barlow, 2007a). Today, it is believed to be even more pressured. News organisations point their finger towards their customers who have grown a habit of consulting news for free and are hard to convince to pay for the

product. User advocates point out the various scandals and the poor journalistic quality of many news outlets as a reason for users not paying for news content. Journalists in turn pass the buck for the poor quality to their hardened working conditions due to cost-cutting initiatives imposed by their management. A desperate situation? Or is there a way out?

In this article, we explore empirical evidence of the state of trust and distrust between news companies, journalists and news users. We are especially interested to see whether trust in the news media has been affected by the techno-economical evolutions in recent years. We therefore look at the changed relationship within the triangle. If indeed we can conclude that the protagonists in the news media ecology would be entangled in a situation of distrust, two important questions remain. Are these claims of mistrust well-grounded, and if so, is there a way out? First, however, we want to address the notion of trust in the news ecology in order to contextualise these questions and embed them in a broader theoretical framework.

2. Trust: a concept to be distrusted

Trust is a central notion in everyday life. At the macro-level, it acts as social glue, enabling peaceful economic and political cooperation. At the micro-level, it acts as a mechanism for individuals to deal with risks and fears in their relationships with others and in the development of their self-identity (Bakir and Barlow, 2007b; Giddens, 1991). Although we can agree upon the centrality as well as necessity of the notion of trust, the literature dealing with trust is fragmented due to competing definitions (Bakir and Barlow, 2007b). ‘Trust’ has become a catchall term, rendering it unsuited for analytical purposes. Without claiming to settle the score as to the definition of trust, it is important to clarify the notion if we want to assess its role in today’s news media ecology.

Trust is certainly *a complex phenomenon, comprising many subtleties centred around a relationship between two entities, the trustor and the trustee* (Bakir and Barlow, 2007b). In such a relationship, trust from one party in the other is achieved when there is:

- 1) A *rational knowledge* that the parties involved will perform a particular action and,
- 2) An *element of commitment* that momentarily brackets out uncertainty due to lack of rational knowledge in order to take leaps to favourable (or unfavourable) expectations (Bakir and Barlow, 2007b referring to Giddens, 1990; Gambetta, 1988; Misztal, 1996; O’hara, 2004; Simmel, 1990 [1900]; Möllering, 2001).

Applying this notion of trust to the news media ecology allows us to critically conceptualise and analyse the relationship between media companies, journalists and users. A trusted relationship between those parties would imply a mutual expectancy as regards the actions undertaken by each and every stakeholder in the triangle, as well as a commitment towards each other. The complexity of assessing trust in this context is however intensified by two elements. First, we cannot discern a clear role of trustor or

trustee amongst the media actors. All of them need to trust and be trusted mutually for the relationship to work. Second, the relationship between media companies, journalists and users has historically been characterised by a power struggle: between structure and agency, between commercial goals and democratic values, between commodification and empowerment, etc.

The coming of age of the Internet has intensified the tussle between those parties. According to Clark et al. (2005) it is precisely the outcome of such tussles arising amongst various parties with divergent interests that will define the future of the Internet. The Internet is no longer solely shaped by engineers striving for a robust, scalable and manageable architecture. Today, the Internet is – as with all systems embedded in societies – defined by a series of ongoing tussles between players with contrasting and even conflicting goals and the way these tussles are controlled or managed by mechanisms such as laws, judges, social opinion, shared values and the like (Clark et al., 2005).

Consequently, assessing trust within a relationship will also have to take into account factors external to that relationship. The tussle between media companies, journalists and users has been controlled by various mechanisms, like the freedom of information and the freedom of expression principles, copyright regulation, privacy and data protection, etc. To a certain extent, however, the parties have always tried to bypass these mechanisms in order to achieve their own pursued goals. Hence, trust between media actors has always been a matter of concern. Trust keeping has therefore been embedded in different control mechanisms to create the right context for trusted relationships to be developed.

While trust is essential, it is important to remain wary towards trust, both as a practice and a conceptual notion. Striving for trusted relationship should not result in blind trust from one party in the other. Blind trust would indeed lead to an unbalanced, biased and dependent relationship. Hence, a critical stance towards the other is equally necessary, which implies a good share of distrust. *Distrust isn’t the opposite of trust, but an essential part of its practice* (Cerra and James, 2011). Also on a conceptual level, we need to remind ourselves of the complexity of the notion, and the impact of external, historically grown mechanism on the way trust is externalised in the news media ecology, and by extension, the whole of society.

3. Trust in the news ecology

Since the mid-1970s there has clearly been some erosion of American and European trust in the media, although with significant differences in trust levels according to medium and country (Bakir and Barlow, 2007a). For the United States, a 2011 study by The Pew Research Center for the People & The Press (2011) reveals that current attitudes towards the news organisations are overtly negative: 66% of Americans says news stories often are inaccurate, 77% thinks that news organisations tend to favour one-sided information and 80% of the people say news organisations are often influenced by powerful people and organisations. This must certainly be nuanced, as the same study also shows that trust in people’s

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