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The Politics of (Post) Truth

Journalism and (Post) Truth

Journalism and journalists sit at the intersection between politics, facts and truth. Reporters are taught to use facts to make an argument, to let the facts do the talking. But what happens when just the facts aren't enough? Lucas Greaves, author of [Deciding What's True: The Rise of Political Fact-Checking in American Journalism](#), describes how this can be less straightforward than it looks:

'Fact-checkers very much want to reject the tradition of "he said, she said" reporting...but at the same time, facts are slippery things so we have to recognise that people aren't always going to agree with their conclusions.'

Fact themselves exist in what [Matthew D'Ancona](#) calls 'incommensurable realities' where 'prudent conduct consists in choosing sides rather than evaluating evidence'. People choose sides and therefore the facts that are aligned with it. The most common link between this new (post) truth world order and journalism are 'fake news', and 'alternative facts'.

But how did this level of misinformation creep its way into the media? Heather Bryan outlined the challenges for newsrooms in an article for [NiemanLab: media organisations have to](#) 'to identify sophisticated manipulations, educate audiences without inducing apathy and deepening mistrust, and keep the growth of this technology from casting doubt on legitimate and truthful stories.'

The media itself has helped to establish a narrative that 'fake news' is the product of clever algorithms manipulated by computer hackers locked away in a random basement; however, scientists disagree. An [MIT study from 2018](#) proved that 'false news spreads more than the truth because humans, not robots, are more likely to spread it'. We spread what we share. And we share it mostly online.

However, according to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, the use of social media for news has started to fall in a number of key markets after years of continuous growth. Regardless of our chosen platform to interact with real and fake news sites, our trust relationship with the media as a concept has suffered in the process.

The [Edelman trust barometer](#) 'found that large portions of the audience are cutting back on or abandoning news entirely'. As the LSE's Charlie Beckett put it as early as 2008: '[Trust is a relationship, not a fact](#)'. Relationships require constant effort to be upheld and cannot be taken for granted. Where did we start losing people's trust? Tech giants changed how traditional



media takes in revenue from advertising, and no one seems to have found a new solid way of profitably making news. According to the *Press Gazette* almost [200 local papers closed across the UK between 2005 and 2016](#).

Money isn't their only problem: diversity is also an issue. People don't trust media organisations that they don't feel represent them -especially if that feeling is linked to distrust in certain segments of the political elite. No wonder that the perception of collusion between government and the media is particularly acute during elections.

Journalists the world over have decided to fight misinformation with fact-checking. As early as 2009, [Politifact won the Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting](#) for their fact-checking coverage of the 2008 election. In the UK, [FullFact](#), [Channel 4](#) and the [BBC](#) have all launched fact-checking initiatives. The [BBC has funded](#) 150 new local democracy reporters to work in other news organisations across the UK to try and foster accountability at a local level. Cardiff University has established a [centre](#) to train and support community and local news.

In the case of the Mexican presidential elections in July of this year, [VerificadoMX](#) brought together 70+ news organisations, including Al Jazeera in Spanish, set up a Whatsapp service where people could message in a story and the team would reply whether it was true or false. They used these stories to build a comprehensive database online that anybody could consult. [Comprova](#), in Brazil, is copying this model ahead of their own elections. Even the UN has got involved. They recently released [a manual with steps and tips](#) on how to fight what they call 'our current information disorder'.

Nevertheless quality journalism has a history of survival. Why? [Professor Jackie Harrison from the University of Sheffield](#) argues that the public, according to most audience surveys, 'persistently value accurate, sincere and objective news – news that they believe displays editorial integrity'. Here's hoping journalism cracks the business model so that journalism with 'editorial integrity' survives long enough to re-establish our trust relationship with our audience.

Laura Garcia

Lecturer in Television and Multimedia Journalism and PhD Candidate, University of Kent
L.Garcia@kent.ac.uk

Want to know more?

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