

A CONSTRUCTIVIST STUDY OF TRUST IN THE NEWS

Stephen Coleman, David E. Morrison, and Scott Anthony

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. The research reported here asked the public what they expected from the news and journalists expected of the public. The findings suggest that trust in the news is more complex and nuanced than mere questions of journalistic veracity.

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Introduction

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 (Davies, 2009; Lloyd, 2004; Monck and Hanley, 2008). These build upon an academic research literature that has addressed four types of question. Firstly, they have asked how the media *ought* to perform in democratic societies. Writers such as Blumler and Gurevitch (1995), Lewis et al. (2008), Newton (2006), Silverstone (2007) and Schudson (2008) 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 (1976), Shah (1998), Uslaner (1998) and Moy and Scheufele (2000), 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 (1976), Patterson (1994), Fallows (1996), Cappella and Jamieson (1997), Newton (1999), Moy and Pfau (2000) and Tsfaty and Cappella (2003), 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 (2002), Kavanaugh and Patterson (2001), Bimber (2003), Shah et al. (2005), Dutton and Shepherd (2006), Beaudoin (2008) and Coleman and Blumler (2009), 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 illuminating findings from this literature, our study adopted three distinct approaches. Firstly, 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 with a broad range of news consumers conducted in the Leeds area during the month of March 2008.¹ The issues raised in these groups formed the basis of our interviews with 14 news editors and journalists.² 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 was to create a space in which news producers and consumers could engage in parallel reflection upon the strengths and shortcomings of media performance.³

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 different questions: What is news? How should the news media be expected to perform? 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?

Citizens are hardly ever asked to speak about what they expect from the news. This constructivist approach revealed that trust in the media amounts to rather more than confidence in journalistic accuracy. For, 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. By conducting a critical examination of how people construct the function of the news media, the news media's performance could be evaluated on the terms set by its producers and consumers and we could begin to unravel what trust actually means.

Thirdly, the research reported here is contextual. The news is always historically placed and incomplete. As John Durham Peters (2008, p. 22) has observed, "Potential communication about an event is never complete. There is always something more to say; a record, by definition, is never finished". To trust 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, a child from a poor council estate in the north of England; and the Al-Fayed court case, in which the Royal family and British Intelligence were accused of killing Princess Diana, remained inconclusive. 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, often leaving them feeling like outsiders looking on at a drama that even the leading performers did not expect them to understand.

Defining News

A number of our focus group participants suggested that the media determined rather than reported the news. 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)

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)

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. 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.

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 news and our participants confirmed this (Beaudoin and Thorson, 2004; Blumler and Katz, 1974; Kaye and Johnson, 2002). 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)

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 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:

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. This pragmatic search for useful news entails an abandonment of the idea of news-viewing as a social duty, in the sense that Graber (1993, p. 203) noted 25 years ago that "Average Americans want to keep informed because they have been socialized to feel that this is a civic responsibility". 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, seekers of reliable information sought assurance in a risky and complex world. An example of this appreciation of reliable information was described by one participant who recalled 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 2 am 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)

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 less 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)

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 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* contained news, participants responded “No, it's trash, it's escapism, what celebs are doing” (FG1) and “celebrity news isn't really news” (FG5).

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 Nichols (1991, p. 3) 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 (2001, p. 18) found in her interviews with Dutch news journalists, “the typical defense was ‘news is news.’” 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 interviewed for our study put it,

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 embara- 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 sorts 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 (1979, p. 230) 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.

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

Stories Without Plots

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 an 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)

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 Whitehouse 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)

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 does not 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 spectator 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.

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, who were both medical doctors, 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)

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 (1995) 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” has been applied to such groups as welfare recipients (Asen, 2003; Sotirovic, 2000), asylum seekers (d’Haenens and de Lange, 2001; Lynn and Lea, 2003), muggers (Downing and Husband, 2005; McLaughlin, 2008) and the poor (Clawson and Trice, 2000; Entman, 1995). 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. Firstly, that they were outsiders looking into an exotic world that they were not interested in depicting on its own terms. As in day-time talk shows, such as *Tricia* 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 (1995, p. 60) 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”. 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”.⁴ 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, referring to such reporting as a “feeding frenzy” (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” (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii). Given the power of mediated representations to frame social action, and the immense difficulty of resisting against 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 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 referring to unruly, uneducated lower-class youths which was first used in 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 (Hayward and Yar, 2006). 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.

Believing Nothing; Believing Anything

The inquest into the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, that 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 that 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. One participant seemed to summarise this collective disposition: “Before, if you heard something, it was gospel absolutely true—now nothing is straightforward” (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 an unexpected event. The BBC continues to perform the role of trusted reporter and interpreter for some people; certainly more so than any other mainstream news institution, but less, we suspect, than would have been the case 20 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)

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 (Paterson, 2007), 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 (Coleman et al., 2008).

Some Conclusions

Providing “citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 16) 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. Judging by our focus groups—and, given the uniformity of agreement within and between the groups in relation to the coverage of the US primaries, it seems reasonable to generalise from these to the wider population—the media failed to supply a large section of the audience with 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

“producer’s 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 (1972) penetrating exposé of “the hidden injuries of class”, whereby some 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 often a scarce 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. 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, such reputed sources 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 accept traditional sources of public knowledge uncritically, the demand has been for all authority to make explicit the frames of value which determine their decisions. A growing feeling expressed by several of our focus group participants was 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 interviewed maintained 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 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 within the circulation of public knowledge. At the heart of these anxieties is a conflict of views about what it means for news-producers to serve the public—and this, we argue, can only be debated seriously once such expectations have been critically illuminated.

NOTES

1. Five groups were recruited from the Leeds area by a professional recruitment company. These comprised: FG1—aged 30–65, regular viewers of TV news and newspaper readers, male; FG2—aged 30–65, regular viewers of TV news and newspaper readers, female; FG3—aged 30–65, with little interest in political news, female; FG4—aged 30–65, regular

consumers of online news, mixed gender; FG5—aged 16–29, regular viewers of TV news and newspaper readers, mixed gender. All of the focus groups were conducted in a residential house in Leeds. They were tape recorded and transcribed. The same two researchers were present at all group meetings.

2. We also interviewed news bloggers, but that part of our study is omitted from this paper.
3. In their study of news concerning the Middle East conflict, Philo and Berry (2004) had mixed focus groups, including journalists and news consumers. We did not favour this option, believing that the immediate presence of the former would inhibit the latter.
4. This was officially launched by the New Labour Government on 10 January 2006, with the publication of the Respect Action Plan (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4598664.stm>). It aimed “to tackle anti-social behaviour by addressing it in every walk of life, tackling its causes through early intervention, providing support for parents and introducing new powers to ensure a robust response where necessary”.

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Stephen Coleman (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), The Institute of Communications Studies, Clothworkers Court North, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK. E-mail: S.Coleman@leeds.ac.uk

David E. Morrison, The Institute of Communications Studies, Clothworkers Court North, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK. E-mail: D.Morrison@leeds.ac.uk

Scott Anthony, Department of Modern History, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK

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