

The Complicated Pursuit of Truth

INTRODUCTION

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Telling the truth has always been the simplest and most complicated function of journalism. That critical but elusive task starts with describing what happened, sometimes based on a reporter's own eyewitness account (the first of the Twin Towers collapsed into a cloud of smoke and debris at 9:59 a.m. on Sept. 11, 2001), more often based on the accounts of others (when the tsunami hit East Asia in 2004, few if any journalists were present), and, in the case of investigative work, after the journalist has assembled enough accounts, documents and other evidence to declare something of significance with authority (the U.S. government deceived the American people about its early involvement in Vietnam and miscalculated and mismanaged the war, according to the Pentagon Papers).

When asked to consider the question philosophically, journalists sometimes struggle to articulate what they do. Are they capable of more than accuracy? We can point to exposés and analyses and answer: yes. Truth emerges not only in a single story but also in the sorting out that occurs over time as different accounts probe an event and its implications. This form of journalistic or practical truth is a living, continuing process, as co-editor Tom Rosenstiel and his colleague, Bill Kovach, have described it.

Journalism also may lend itself to some kinds of truths more easily than others. The media are on firmer footing, for instance, identifying what words the president said or how many people died in a fire than they are in describing the motivations that drive the people in the news.

Nonetheless, while acknowledging that getting the facts right remains journalism's core function—and that includes trying to get at “the truth about the fact,” as the Hutchins Commission put it in 1947—much of how we discern and articulate the truth is changing.

This section's first two authors, Clay Shirky and Roy Peter Clark, explore two dimensions of a long-standing debate: the degree to which truth is ascertainable.

They propose somewhat differing answers to the questions of how society knows what the truth is, how we designate truth-tellers and how technology and new forms of communication have impacted our ability to arrive at consensus. Together, they describe the spectrum of truth that journalism covers and how the process of fixing on truth on that spectrum is made both more challenging and richer today. The demands on journalists are higher. So is the need for journalism that goes beyond the stenographic task of simply describing the public argument.

Tom Huang then analyzes the principal means by which journalists have tried to describe truth: the story, which is being transformed by digital technology. Huang's essay offers a disciplined tour through the virtues and challenges of the main new storytelling forms possible today.

In the essays that follow, Steve Myers and Kenny Irby look at two even more precise developments in journalism's pursuit of truth: the growth of the fact-checking movement and the changing role that photographic storytelling plays in our understanding of the world.

These five chapters, arranged from the more abstract (Shirky and Clark) to the more specific (Huang, Myers and Irby), remind us that truth, at least as it relates to journalism, is not the same as meaning. We might, for instance, know who won the election, or even what occurred in a tragic school shooting. What it means to us is something more individual. On some level, journalism commands our attention because it tells us what to think about: what is new, what is changing, even perhaps what is important. But it does not, nor has it ever, tell us what to think.

As you read these essays, you will undoubtedly draw connections of your own to other phenomena occurring in journalism and the wider world of communications. Just as surely, the rapid pace of change will continue to alter the way we seek truths and tell stories.

Truth without Scarcity, Ethics without Force

Clay Shirky

The first item in the Society for Professional Journalist's Ethics Guide is "Seek truth and report it." This seems simple enough, yet the contemporary media environment has seen a dramatic increase in spurious claims about everything from hydraulic fracturing to the funding of Medicare to the president's birthplace and religious affiliation. With the Internet opening the floodgates to ideological actors of all persuasions, the exhortation to seek truth and report it seems less widely practiced than ever.

The Internet's effect on our respect for the truth has been frequently discussed in the last decade, in books such as *Republic.com* and *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society* and in any number of essays over the years. As an example, *The Atlantic* ran a piece just before the last elections called "Truth Lies Here," which suggested that the Internet, by allowing us to pick and choose what we listen to, is corroding our shared commitment to facts.¹

"Truth Lies Here" included the usual high points: the Daniel Patrick Moynihan quote ("Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts"), the observation that news consumers are replacing professional editors with our friends as arbiters of news, and frustrated wonderment that so many Americans have been willing to make, and so many media outlets willing to report, basic errors of fact, like the notion that President Obama is a Muslim.

This "post-fact" literature is certainly on to something; *the Internet is changing the conditions under which ordinary citizens are willing to regard any given statement as true*. There comes a moment, however, when anyone making this case has to employ what journalist William Safire used to call a "but of course" paragraph, a brief nod to a possible counterargument before setting it aside.

In the *Atlantic*, the "but of course . . ." was this:

None of this is to argue that we should—or could—return to the old order, wherein *The Times* or Walter Cronkite issued proclamations on the credibility and import of news from around the world.

This yearning for mainstream concurrence without cultural dominance is what gives that lament for lost consensus its poignant feel since these two desires

are mutually exclusive. It's not as if, in the mid-20th century, we Americans had a small group of white men who could speak to and for the public without fear of contradiction or amendment, and we also happened to have mainstream consensus about the news of the day. The latter state is impossible without the former; the former is how we got to the latter.

We have never all agreed with each other. What looks like a post-truth journalistic environment is actually a post-professional environment and a post-scarcity environment. Truth isn't a stable "thing," it's a judgment about what persuades us to believe a particular assertion. And for anything outside our direct personal experience, what persuades us is evidence of operative consensus among relevant actors. This journalistic formula for truth is far more difficult to attain in this new environment.

Of course, many truths are knowable, verifiable and undeniable, like the number of children (20) killed in the Newtown, Conn., shooting, or the amount of revenue your local city council collected last year in parking fines. These truths are the bulk of the substance in journalism.

What the Internet changes is how many different opinions are now in circulation when we try to determine the meaning of a truth, a change that in turn alters our idea of whose opinion is relevant and where consensus actually lies. People no longer have to shut up while Walter Cronkite tells them "that's the way it is," no longer have to sit alone, shouting at their televisions, wondering if they are the only ones who think that something has gone wrong with the country they live in.

It's tempting to want to make the shouters admit they are the ones who are wrong, to insist that facts are facts. The history of life in democratic societies, though, suggests our inability to shut the shouters up is fairly essential.

DISTINGUISHING CONSENSUS FROM TRUTH

Homosexuality is a mental illness; that assertion was just as factual as a fact could be, circa 1969. A group of professionals, the American Psychiatric Association, arrived together at a list of the conditions and behaviors that were evidence of mental imbalance. The APA's professional judgment was then published in the canonical psychological work, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*. Homosexuality was in the DSM.

Being gay is no longer an illness. Concern over same-sex attraction was progressively downgraded and finally removed altogether over several successive revisions of the DSM, starting in 1970. How did that happen?

It happened because people attracted to members of the same sex insisted, persistently and publicly, that the DSM diagnosis, almost universally reported as fact, was nothing but prejudice dressed up in clinical language. As the APA argued over the issue, its members came to agree.

This process of removing the sense of homosexuality as pathology is not over, of course; there are still people ready to say that it would be better if gay teens killed themselves than try to make a public place for themselves in society. But in the decades since the first person stood up to the cops at the Stonewall

Inn, the ability of gay-hating members of American society to speak or act as if their views represented an obvious truth has weakened with each passing year. This was in part because our sense of who the relevant actors are has changed, as with psychologists being increasingly willing to listen to the accounts of gay citizens themselves.

People fighting for the inclusion of gays in society have had to fight against many things. Some of the things they had to fight against were the facts, as constituted by society and regularly reported in the press.

We could try to rescue the virtue of mainstream consensus from our historically benighted views about homosexuality by insisting that its existence as an illness was never *really* a fact, that it was merely something people wrongly believed.

Unfortunately, the stray flick of that observation is enough to cause the whole majestic zeppelin of Truth to burst into flame. If some facts are not in fact facts, we need a way of separating these seemingly true but secretly false facts from real actually true facts. But, since we kick beliefs like homosexuality-as-illness out to the curb retroactively, any such mechanism is pretty clearly not going to be universal or fast-acting. Journalism, that famous first draft of history, is especially vulnerable to the damage to mainstream consensus.

The philosopher Richard Rorty described truth as whatever everybody declines to be arguing about at the moment. This is less nihilistic than it sounds, since it describes the progress of both social and scientific beliefs. People used to argue about whether photons had mass and about whether women should vote. Now those are settled questions. We used to have consensus on whether gay couples could marry and how many dimensions the universe has. Now people argue about those things all the time. Scientists and politicians have different rules for fighting, of course, and different standards for what constitutes a worthwhile argument, but in both cases, the process is one of competing claims adjudicated by argument and settled by consensus.

We could thus describe public expression without using the label truth at all by simply locating any given statement on a spectrum of agreement, running from "The sky is blue" through "Inflation is always and everywhere a monetary phenomenon" to "The Earth is flat." The statements we describe as true are the ones that enjoy operative consensus among relevant actors. As a consequence, any statement presented as true can also be described as an assertion; that the people who believe the statement are the people whose opinions on the subject matter, and those who don't, aren't.

The last decade of public conversation on climate change has turned on this axle. Because journalists often aspire to report from a position of dispassionate arbitration, evidence of consensus is taken as evidence of truth, and lack of consensus signals an unsettled issue. This was a workable strategy only when people with views outside mainstream consensus were locked out of the mainstream media and thus had no way to make their opposing view known.

That strategy is now broken. The Internet broadens the range of publicly expressed opinions, to put the matter mildly, making it simple to find people who will vigorously contest any consensus view, no matter how widely held or

carefully tested. This has, in turn, allowed climate change deniers to exploit the press's discomfort with adjudicating disputes, a journalistic trope my colleague Jay Rosen calls "we have no idea who's right!"

There is no neutral position from which to stand; every assertion the press publishes is backstopped by the relevance of the community making that assertion, whether that means scientists, politicians, the Chamber of Commerce, or the *vox populi*. Even for something as tied to physical reality as climate change, the press is perforce in the business of refereeing community disputes, not merely ascertaining and then recording facts.

With the Internet's expansion of public speech, journalistic attempts to publish the truth must shift from reporting consensus to telling the public whose opinions are relevant and whose aren't. This shift in focus to describing who is and isn't a relevant actor is a return to an older pattern, more common in the days of the partisan press.

As Walter Lippmann put it nearly a century ago,²

There is no defense, no extenuation, no excuse whatsoever, for stating six times that Lenin is dead when the only information the paper possesses is a report that he is dead from a source repeatedly shown to be unreliable. . . . If there is one subject on which editors are most responsible it is in their judgment of the reliability of the source.

Yet reporters and editors working on climate change have often been unwilling to say, "These scientists are more credible than those scientists" or "This set of data was more relevant than that set of data." The perception that the press itself is an actor in the public conversation, not just a conduit for that conversation, can still produce discomfort in the nation's newsrooms (even though that perception is obviously correct).

WHEN BELIEFS AND FACTS COLLIDE

We are accustomed to the idea that certain beliefs are contained in particular communities, such as "Jesus is Lord" or "Tennessee barbecue is superior to Texas barbecue," but this is also the case for sentiments like "The world is round" or "Al Qaeda attacked the Cairo Embassy." As it is, of course, for sentiments like "Obama is a Muslim."

There is a story in my family of my father-in-law taking his fiancé (my future mother-in-law) home to Ethiopia to meet his family. His mother was charmed by my mother-in-law, who, even though she was white, seemed perfectly well behaved. She was, exclaimed his mother, "very nice—just like a Christian!"

Now my mother-in-law *was* a Christian by any American standard—a good Scots/German Protestant. But my grandmother-in-law, Ethiopian Orthodox, used "Just like a Christian" to mean "Just like us."

Depending on who's asking and how, up to one-fifth of U.S. citizens have been willing to say that Barack Obama is a Muslim. This despite the fact that

Obama was raised a Christian, calls himself Christian and worships in a Christian church. But as with my mother-in-law, the question isn't so straightforward. When conservatives say things like this, it's often as a form of protest, just as, during the Bush administration, liberals circulated obviously faked images of a gun-toting Sarah Palin in an American flag bikini as if they were real.

Furthermore, liberals generally think of religion as a personal choice—you are the religion you say you are and no other. Many of our fellow citizens, however, think we're wrong, and that religion is tied to family identity. In this view, the fact that Obama's father was Muslim and that he is named after a grandson of the Prophet counts for something. Reckoned this way, Obama is clearly the most Muslim president in history.

When liberals want those conservatives to admit that Obama is not a Muslim, we are not asking them to accept simple facts. We are asking them to replace their conception of religion with ours, a conception that says having a Muslim parent or an Arabic name says nothing whatsoever about religious identity. In presenting our sense of religious identity as factual and the conservative one as obviously false, we are asking them to agree that, in the ways that matter on the issue, Obama is just like them. And they don't agree.

In 2010, *Newsweek* ran an article, based on Pew Research, on the subject of the president's religious identity.³ A comment on that piece, by someone going by the nickname Bigfoot, highlights the issue: "I do not know what 'religion' he professes to be, but he definitely is NOT christian! I know that he is a 'Wolf' in sheeps clothing and do not buy any of his garbage for one second!" (sic)

Bigfoot doesn't deny the president is a Christian because he thinks Obama says the Shahada every day. He denies the president is Christian because he doesn't buy any of Obama's garbage for one second. As a consequence, he is unwilling to admit to *any* important similarities between the president and himself.

It's easy to characterize our contempt for Bigfoot and his ilk as high-minded concern for their grasp of the facts, but that's fairly obviously not the case. If we really cared that much about people's grasp of the facts, we'd have lain awake for decades fretting about the alien abduction people. We don't, though, because we're perfectly willing to regard them as harmless morons, alongside the flat earthers and that time cube guy.

The alien abduction people don't upset us because we simply refuse to account for their beliefs in our beliefs. The way people talk about their abduction by aliens doesn't strike us as legitimate, so we simply ignore their claims. With people like Bigfoot, however, we can't ignore them as easily because, in an inexplicable turn of events, *Newsweek* has handed Bigfoot a megaphone.

The thing that alarms us about people like Bigfoot isn't their beliefs, it's their right to assert those beliefs in our newly expanded public sphere and their ability to act on those beliefs in ways that affect us. When people disagree with us about things like the president's religion, we say we wish they wouldn't deny the facts, but really, we just wish they were more liberal or that their definition of religion was the same as ours. Failing that, we sometimes wish that public speech was still restricted to the pros.

THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF NEWS

In a technical sense, journalism is a trade, not a profession. Its core skills are not arcane, and there are no requirements for either formal studies or certification. (Indeed, in the United States, any certification that barred amateurs and novices from competing with incumbents would be not just illegal, but unconstitutional.)

Curiously, much of the 20th century was marked by impulses toward professionalization—from trade associations to journalism schools, and the second half of the century created a situation in the news ecosystem that looked very like professionalization. Federal Communications Commission decisions favoring large broadcast areas and national networks created a television cartel. The death of the evening newspaper at the hands of the evening news strengthened the remaining metro dailies, which achieved something like a monopoly on local display ads. The postwar economic boom turned these scarcities into persistent and sizable income growth.

Newspaper chains standardized hiring and training practices across huge swaths of the country, and their hiring preferences increasingly turned to college-educated members of the middle class. In symbiotic adaptation, the country's journalism schools began training their students in the current professional practices of existing businesses, turning out graduates ready to plug into increasingly complex production processes.

The roots of nonpartisan centrism as a press ideology go back to the 19th century and grew with the spread of advertising as a means of financing journalism in the 20th. But the twin postwar forces of large scale and lack of competition helped push the national press even further away from partisan argumentation. Moderate centrism became the house ideology of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and CBS News. On the national stage, truth was whatever educated, straight, white men declined to be arguing about at the moment, a consensus view of reality that included the views of Walter Cronkite but excluded those of a large number of his viewers.

In an environment like this, industry self-regulation proved a powerful force for censoring journalists who didn't adhere to shared standards. Reporters couldn't have their licenses revoked, as doctors or lawyers can, but in an industry whose senior leadership could fit in a hotel ballroom, an informal blackballing, as in "Don't hire Janet Cooke," was enough.⁴

The Internet does not alter this model. It destroys it. No matter how many news outlets continue to hew to moderate centrism, there is no longer any way to keep partisans and fabulists out of the public sphere, nor is there any way to revoke access after heinous affronts to truth-telling. Even the challenge presented by the openly partisan Fox News is nothing like the explosion of reporting and opinion from across the political spectrum the Internet is ushering in.

It's tempting to conclude that this stuff doesn't count, precisely because the people publishing it don't abide by the methods or norms favored by mainstream journalists, but the people in the news industry no longer get to decide

what the public counts as news. In this environment, the definition of news has much more to do with demand than supply. When the New York Police Department raided Zuccotti Park in November of 2011 to oust the Occupy Wall Street protesters who had been living there to draw attention to their cause, the event was better documented by the occupiers themselves than by the press, since the police went out of their way to block traditional reporters. In contrast to reporting from people with press passes, largely operating behind police barricades, first-hand accounts from people like Tim Pool, who streamed the police activity and the occupier's reactions live from his phone, constituted the news as many observers experienced it.

Similarly, the passionate and knowledgeable cyclists at NYVelocity did more to unmask Lance Armstrong's years-long doping regime, though they were journalistic amateurs, than all the professional sports journalists covering Armstrong combined.

We are now watching the quasi-professionalization of journalism in the 20th century run in reverse. It is certainly possible to tell the difference between Tim Pool and Scott Pelley or NYVelocity and *The New York Times*; it is no longer possible to find a sharp discontinuity at some midpoint between them, where *amateur* stops and *professional* starts.

The old gap separating journalists from the public, producers from consumers, has turned into a gradient. At the same time, public consensus has shrunk dramatically, and the ability of mainstream outlets to limit public voices to mainstream values has collapsed altogether. We are entering a world where the consensus view of truth no longer rests on scarcity of public speech and one where ethical norms can't be backed up by force.

"POST-FACT" JOURNALISM

Here's what the "post-fact" literature has right: The Internet allows us to see what other people actually think. This has turned out to be a huge disappointment. When anyone can say anything, we can't even pretend most of us agree on the truth of most assertions any more.

The post-fact literature is built in part on nostalgia for the world before people like Bigfoot showed up in the public sphere, for the days when *Newsweek* reflected moderately liberal consensus without also providing a platform for orthographically challenged wingnuts to rant about the president. People who want those days back tell themselves (and anyone else who will listen) that they don't want to impose their views on anybody. They just want agreement on the facts.

But what would that look like, an America where there was broad agreement on the facts? It would look like public discussion was limited to the beliefs held by straight, white, Christian men. If the views of the public at large didn't hew to the views of that group, the result wouldn't be agreement. It would be argument.

Argument, of course, is the human condition, but public argument is not. Indeed, in most places for most of history, publicly available statements have been either made or vetted by the ruling class, with the right of reply rendered

impractical, illegal or both. Expansion of public speech, for both participants and topics, is generally won only after considerable struggle, and of course, any such victory pollutes the sense of what constitutes truth from the previous era, a story that runs from Martin Luther through Ida Tarbell to Mario Savio, the drag queens outside Stonewall, and Julian Assange.

There's no way to get Cronkite-like consensus without someone like Cronkite, and there's no way to get someone like Cronkite in a world with an Internet; there will be no more men like him because there will be no more jobs like his. To assume that this situation can be reversed, that everyone else will voluntarily sign on to the beliefs of some culturally dominant group, is a fantasy. To assume that they should sign on, or at least that they should hold their tongue when they don't, is Napoleonic in its self-regard. Yet, this is what the people who long for the clarity of the old days are longing for.

Seeing claims that the CIA staged the 9/11 attacks or that oil is an unlimited by-product of volcanism is enough to make the dear dead days of limited public speech seem like a paradise, but there are compensating virtues in our bumptious public sphere.

Consider three acts of mainstream media malfeasance unmasked by outsiders: Philip Elmer-DeWitt's 1995 *Time Magazine* cover story⁵ on the prevalence of Internet porn, which relied on faked data; CBS News⁶ 2004 accusations that President George W. Bush dodged military service, which was based on forged National Guard memos; and Jonah Lehrer's⁷ recycling and plagiarism in work he did for the *New Yorker* and *Wired*, as well as the fabrication of material in his books. In all three cases, the ethical lapses were committed by mainstream journalists and unmasked by others working on the Internet, but with very different responses by the institutions that initially published the erroneous material.

In Elmer-DeWitt's case, he was given what seemed to be an explosive study that claimed, among other things, that 85 percent of the images on the Internet were pornographic. This was the basis for a *Time* cover story, his first. But the conclusions he drew seemed fishy, and a distributed fact-checking effort formed in response, largely organized on the digital bulletin board system called Usenet. It quickly became apparent that the research was junk; that the researcher who had given the report to Elmer-DeWitt was an undergraduate who faked the data; that the professors listed as sponsors had had little to do with it, and so on. The study was in fact largely faked, and Elmer-DeWitt and the *Time* staff did not vet it carefully.

Elmer-DeWitt apologized forthrightly:

I don't know how else to say it, so I'll just repeat what I've said before. I screwed up. The cover story was my idea, I pushed for it, and it ran pretty much the way I wrote it. It was my mistake, and my mistake alone. I do hope other reporters will learn from it. I know I have.

Almost no one saw this apology, however, because he said it only online; the correction run by *Time* sought to downplay, rather than apologize for, misleading

their readers, even though the core facts reported in the story were faked: “It would be a shame, however, if the damaging flaws in [the] study obscured the larger and more important debate about hard-core porn on the Internet.”

In 1995, *Time* could count on very little overlap between its readership and the country’s Internet users, so Elmer-DeWitt’s ethical lapse and subsequent apology could be waved away with little fear that anyone else could dramatize the seriousness of the article’s failings.

Contrast the situation a decade later, in 2004, when CBS News aired a “60 Minutes Wednesday” story about President Bush’s time in the National Guard. Like the Elmer-DeWitt story, the CBS story was based on faked documents; as with that story, the forgery was discovered not by CBS itself or another professional media outlet, but by media outsiders working on the Internet; like *Time* in the Elmer-DeWitt case, CBS spent most of its energy trying to minimize its lapse.

Unlike the Elmer-DeWitt story, however, the strategy didn’t work. Charles Johnson, blogging at Little Green Footballs, produced an animated graphic⁸ demonstrating that the nominally typewritten documents from the early 1970s were actually produced using the default font in Microsoft Word. By 2004, Internet use had become so widespread that the *Time Magazine* tactic of writing off Internet users as a cranky niche was ineffective; Johnson’s work was so widely discussed that CBS couldn’t ignore it. When the network finally did respond, CBS spokesmen admitted that the documents were questionable, that members of the news staff did not check their authenticity carefully enough, that their defense of the reporters involved compounded the error, and that the lapse was serious enough to constitute a firing offense for the senior people involved, including producer Mary Mapes; Dan Rather resigned after some delay.⁹

A more recent example of this pattern, almost a decade after the National Guard memos, was the science writer Jonah Lehrer’s use of recycled, plagiarized and fabricated material, including, most famously, invented quotes from Bob Dylan.¹⁰ Again journalistic ethics were breached in mainstream publications—in Lehrer’s case, in writings for *Wired* and the *New Yorker*, and in his book, *Imagine*. His lapses were uncovered not by anyone at publisher Conde Nast, however. His most serious lapse was uncovered by Michael Moynihan, a writer and editor at *Reason and Vice*, who published his discovery of the Dylan fabrication in *Tablet*,¹¹ an online-only magazine of Jewish life and culture. Moynihan’s revelations, the most damning of the criticisms Lehrer was then facing, precipitated his resignation from the *New Yorker*.

The Lehrer example demonstrates the completion of a pattern that we might call “after-the-fact checking,” visible public scrutiny of journalistic work after it is published. After-the-fact checking is not just knowledgeable insiders identifying journalistic lapses; that has always happened. Instead, the new pattern involves those insiders being able to identify one another and collaborate on public complaint. Group action, even loosely coordinated, has always been more visible and powerful than disaggregated instances of individual action; the rise of loose, yet collaborative networks of fact-checking

creates a concomitant weakening of strategies by traditional media for minimizing the effects of such lapses.

The difference between Elmer-DeWitt and Lehrer isn't that the latter's lapses were worse, it's that the ability to hide the lapses has shrunk. The nominal ethics of journalism remain as they were, but the mechanisms of observation and accountability have been transformed as the public's role in the landscape has moved from passive to active, and the kind of self-scrutiny the press is accustomed to gives way to considerably more persistent and withering after-the-fact checking.

"THE INTERNET IS A TRUTH SERUM"

The truth is not dead. Those who issue such laments have correctly identified the changes in the landscape of public speech but often misdiagnose their causes. We are indeed less willing to agree on what constitutes truth, but not because we have recently become pigheaded, naysaying zealots. We were always like that. It's just that we didn't know how many other people were like that as well. And, as Ben McConnell and Jackie Huba put it long ago, the Internet is a truth serum.

The current loss of consensus is a better reflection of the real beliefs of the American polity than the older centrism. Several names can be applied to what constitutes acceptable argument in a society—the Overton window, the sphere of legitimate controversy—but whatever label you use, the range of things people are willing to argue about has grown.

There seems to be less respect for consensus today because there is indeed less respect for consensus. This change is not good or bad per se; it has simply made agreement a scarcer commodity across all issues of public interest. The erosion of controls on public speech have enabled birthers to make their accusations against the president public; it also allows newly emboldened groups—feminists, atheists, Muslims, Mormons—to press their issues in public, in opposition to traditional public beliefs, a process similar to gay rights post-Stonewall, but now on a faster and more national scale. There's no going back.

One of the common ways journalists identify truth is by looking for operative consensus among relevant actors. For the last two generations of journalism, the emphasis has been on the question of consensus; the question of who constituted a relevant actor was largely solved by scarcity. It was easy to find mainstream voices and hard to find marginal or heterodox ones. With that scarcity undone, all such consensus will be destroyed unless journalists start telling the audience which voices aren't worth listening to.

A world where all utterances are putatively available makes "he said, she said" journalism an increasingly irresponsible form, less a way of balancing reasonable debate and more a way of evading the responsibility for informing the public. "Seeking truth and reporting it" is becoming less about finding consensus, which has become rarer, and more about publicly sorting the relevant actors from the irrelevant ones. The shrinking professional class of

journalists can no longer fall back on experts, as if every professor or researcher is equally trustworthy.

Journalists now have to operate in a world where no statement, however trivial, will be completely secured from public gainsaying. At the same time, public production of speech, not just consumption, means that the policing of ethical failures has passed out of the hands of the quasi-professional group of journalists employed in those outlets and has become another form of public argument. This alters the public sphere in important ways.

The old days, where marginal opinions meant marginal availability, have given way to a world where all utterances, true or false, are a click away. Journalists have always had to make a call about what constitutes legitimate consensus and who constitutes relevant actors. They just didn't used to have to work so hard to do so. An environment where public speech was scarce, and where access was generally limited to people with mainstream views, was an environment where the visible actors were the relevant ones and vice versa. It was also an environment where the absence of dissent was a rough and ready metric for measuring consensus.

Now, public speech is accessible to brilliant people and crazy people and cantankerous people and iconoclastic people. No assertion more complex than "the cat is on the mat" generates universal assent. In this environment, journalists have to get practiced at sorting relevant from irrelevant actors and legitimate from illegitimate objections.

In an even more significant rupture with the past, they have to get practiced at explaining to their readers why they are making the choices they are making. Prior to now, when a news outlet didn't publish the opinion of someone whose views it considered irrelevant, there was almost no way that person could reach those readers on his or her own. Also prior to now, only the people creating the weather page had to admit to the readers that there was a specific probability connected to their assertions.

Now, though, both of those traits have broken down. Views not covered in mainstream outlets can nevertheless find large audiences. The public thus operates with increased awareness that some voices are being intentionally ignored by some media outlets. (Indeed, all media outlets ignore at least some voices.) This means not just including some voices and excluding others but explaining why you are doing so.

This is destroying the nominally neutral position of many mainstream outlets. Consider, as an example, Arthur Brisbane's constitutional inability, as public editor of *The New York Times*, to process universal public disdain for his proposed methods of fact-checking politicians.¹² His firm commitment to avoiding accusations of partisanship, even at the expense of rigorous checks on putative facts, helped raise the visibility of the fact-checking movement in the 2012 presidential campaign, as pioneered by PolitiFact and its peers. These fact-checking services have now become a new nexus of media power in the realm of political speech.

Yet Brisbane is onto something, though it may have more to do with self-preservation than with commitment to truth: A world where even mainstream news outlets tell their readers when politicians lie, or publicly assess various speakers' relevance on any given issue, is a world where neither powerful public actors nor advertisers will be automatically willing to trust or even cooperate with the press.

Even as the erosion of consensus makes for an unavoidable increase in oppositional reporting, it also makes the scrutiny journalists face from their audience far greater than the scrutiny they face from their employers or peers. Trust in the press has fallen precipitously¹³ in the last generation, even as the press itself increasingly took on the trappings of a profession.

One possible explanation is that what pollsters and respondents characterized as *trust* was really *scarcity*—like the man with one watch, a public that got its news from a politically narrow range might have been more willing to regard those reinforced views as accurate. Since Watergate, however, along with increasingly partisan campaigning and governance, the lack of shared outlook among existing newsmakers, coupled with the spread of new, still more partisan newsmakers, makes this sort of trust impossible.

There's no going back here either. The era when there was something called "the press," and it had a reputation among something called "the public," is over. Each organization will have to try to convince each member of its audience that it is trustworthy. Any commitment to ethics will involve not just being more reactive to outsiders' post-hoc review, but also being more willing to attack other outlets for ethical lapses in public, more ready to publicly defend their own internal policies, rather than simply regarding ethical lapses as a matter for internal policing.

The philosophy of journalism ethics—tell the truth to the degree that you can, 'fess up when you get it wrong—doesn't change in the switch from analog to digital. What does change, enormously, is the individual and organizational adaptations required to tell the truth without relying on scarcity and while hewing to ethical norms without reliance on a small group of similar institutions that can all coordinate around those norms.

This will make for a far more divisive public sphere, a process that is already under way. It's tempting to divide these changes into win-loss columns to see whether this is a change for the better or the worse—birthers bad, new atheists good (relabel to taste)—but this sort of bookkeeping is a dead end. The effects of digital abundance are not trivially separable—the birthers and the new atheists used similar tools and techniques to enter the public sphere, as did the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street. More important, the effects are not reversible. Even if we conclude that the collapse of moderate centrism is bad for the United States, there's no way to stop or reverse the exploded range of publicly available opinion.

Now, and from now on, journalists are going to be participants in a far more argumentative sphere than anything anyone alive has ever seen. The question for us is not whether we want this increase in argumentation—no one

is asking us, and there's no one who could—but rather how we should adapt ourselves to it as it unfolds.

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Case Study 1: Covering Fluoride

Caitlin Johnston

In his essay, Clay Shirky suggests that it has become more difficult to determine “operative consensus among relevant actors” and, therefore, more difficult to discern the truth. This case study illustrates how professional newsrooms might shift their approach to covering a story in response to that new reality.

Pinellas County (Fla.) Commissioner Norm Roche led an effort in 2011 to eliminate fluoride from the county water supply. The county government had been adding fluoride since 2004, a common practice throughout the United States that had been lauded as one of the greatest public health achievements of the 20th century.

The treatment, which cost the county roughly 30 cents per person per year, was widely reported by dentists and medical professionals to help prevent tooth decay. But critics used research showing that too much fluoride could have side effects on young children, such as causing white spots on their teeth, as a foothold to argue that the government should not force its citizens to consume the supplement. Members of the Tea Party compared the government-backed fluoride treatment to Soviet and Nazi practices.

“Fluoride is a toxic substance,” said Tea Party activist Tony Caso in a *Tampa Bay Times* article about the commission’s decision. “This is all part of an agenda that’s being pushed forth by the so-called globalists in our government and the world government to keep the people stupid so they don’t realize what’s going on . . . This is the U.S. of A., not the Soviet Socialist Republic.”¹

In a 4-3 vote in October 2011, the county commission passed the law eliminating the treatment from county water. The backlash was immediate.

Commissioner Ken Welch, who voted to keep the fluoride in the water, voiced his outrage over a minority group’s ability to override the majority of public opinion.

“We are going to the backwoods of urban counties with this move,” Welch said in a *Tampa Bay Times* article.²

The four commissioners had ignored the voices of most of the county’s dentists, pediatricians, medical groups, health officials and the public in order to pass legislation supporting a minority-held belief. Welch told the *Tampa Bay Times* that professionals supporting the use of fluoride outnumbered critical ones before the commission 20-1. But that didn’t faze his fellow commissioners.

In the year that followed, the *Tampa Bay Times* ran more than a dozen editorials and columns about the fluoride battle, excoriating the county commission for failing to protect public health. The news side of the staff covered the debate vigorously throughout the year as residents struggled with how to

compensate for the now fluoride-free water. Apart from writing articles before and after commission meetings, they also included the issue in articles surrounding the 2012 re-election campaign of two commissioners who had voted to remove fluoride from the water supply.

In their news stories, *Times* reporters characterized the opinions and studies supporting fluoride supplements in water as solid, well-accepted science. They questioned or ignored the few studies that contradicted the belief that fluoride should be added to public water supplies. In the run-up to the 2012 election, the *Times* editorial staff advocated strongly for citizens to vote out of office two of the commissioners who were up for re-election.

“Two of the Fluoride Four are on the ballot Tuesday seeking re-election to their countywide seats: Nancy Bostock and Neil Brickfield,” the editorial board wrote. “Their challengers, Charlie Justice and Janet Long, support restoring fluoride to the county’s drinking water. It only takes one new commissioner to reverse the backward decision—and save Pinellas County families time, money and frustration.”³

Both Bostock and Brickfield were voted out of office, by significant majorities.

Their successors brought the fluoride issue back on the commission agenda. During the subsequent hearing the chamber was once again packed with vocal opponents to fluoride. The law restoring fluoride to the water passed 6-1, with Roche again voting against fluoride.

The paper’s strong coverage seemed to influence the election and the fluoride vote. The *Times* would go on to win the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing.

QUESTIONS

- How should journalists determine if a group’s arguments should be characterized as legitimate or illegitimate? In this case, what evidence would you use to counter the claims that fluoride is potentially harmful?

- Journalists are frequently criticized for quoting opposing sides as if they had equal standing. Assume that you have determined that those who oppose fluoride in public water supplies do not have equal or substantial scientific evidence for their arguments compared with those who support the addition of fluoride. Identify three strategies you could use in your news coverage to ensure that opposition voices are heard by the audience in context. Would you quote them directly? Would you openly challenge the accuracy of their claims on the air or in text? Would you ignore them altogether? What are the advantages and disadvantages to each of your strategies?

- Name another topic on which there is significant opposition to mainstream beliefs. Find an example of a story where the two sides are presented equally. And find an example of a story where the reporter gives more weight to one side or the other. What techniques does each reporter use? Can you

identify the audience for each story? Why might news organizations opt for one approach or the other?

Editors' Note: The Tampa Bay Times is owned by The Poynter Institute, which employs this book's co-editor and several contributors.

CASE NOTES

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