Against the Grain

Op Ed-Epistemology — A Matter of Trust

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Epistemology — A Matter of Trust

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"The first development is the ability to fabricate audio and video evidence." So says **Clifford Lynch**, whose short article "Managing the Cultural Record in the Information Warfare Era" was published on October 29 in the *Educause Review*.[1] In it, **Lynch** outlines several emerging threats that will require "memory institutions" (libraries and archives) to "reconsider the documentation and contextualization of the cultural record."

Lynch appeared even more prescient than usual when, on November 7, the White House suspended the press pass of CNN reporter **Jim Acosta** following a combative press conference during which **Acosta** tangled with the President. The White House justified the suspension on the grounds that **Acosta** had aggressively "laid his hands" on a White House intern who was trying to take the microphone away from him. They released a video as evidence. It was quickly demonstrated that the video had been manipulated to make the encounter appear more aggressive than it actually was. Confronted with this, **Kellyanne Conway** nonsensically maintained the video hadn't been "altered" but only sped up a bit, which was fine because they "do it all the time in sports."[2]

The doctored video was controversial for a couple of days. The press argued that the video was a big deal; the President's defenders said it wasn't. Interest in the controversy faded. No minds were changed. People chose what to believe based on whose side they were on. That the video had been manipulated wasn't at issue, only whether or not the manipulation mattered. That depended on which side you trusted.

How do you persuade someone of the objective truth of your facts when they don't have any trust in your objectivity? How do you convince someone that their beliefs are inconsistent with the facts when they don't believe in your definition of "fact" in the first place?

In between the two incidents described above, on November 5, I participated in one of the **Charleston Conference** Trendlab discussions. Our topic was "Who Really Knows Anyway," and the Trendlab leader, **Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe**, stated the problem this way:

> There is a growing tide of resentment toward "experts" who profess to know more about a subject than most people, and thus think themselves qualified to speak knowledgably. In some cases, this seems to lead some people to want to believe that anything

other than what the experts say is true, especially when it serves their personal or commercial interests. However, the impact of these inclinations on society has generally been held in check by a majority trust in civil institutions such as the press, universities, libraries, and government, which have generally been seen as acting in the public interest and worthy of support. In recent years, however, fueled in large part by social media, the tendency of distrust in civil institutions has been on the rise. More darkly, misinformation and disinformation has been embraced as a tool of oppression and social control by some elites.

This lack of trust, this resentment of experts, isn't new. It's always existed in pockets. The populist movements that have risen and fallen in the United States have always tapped into this suspicion that the experts were manipulating the truth for their own ends. The internet didn't invent conspiracy theorists — but it has given them a marvelously powerful platform.

The Trendlab discussion took place the day before the midterm elections and naturally the focus for some of the people participating was on the **Trump** faithful who are unmoved by the disconnect between what the president says and what his opponents believe to be objective reality. This mystifies the opponents. Their tendency is to label the faithful uneducated, or so consumed with resentment and racism that they've lost touch with reality. But the demographics and the polling are clear — such a simplistic version does not adequately characterize the range of people who are willing to go where **Trump** leads. There's something deeper at play.

About every five years, **Lynn** and I take a trip to **Grinnell College** for her college reunion. One of the best parts of the visit is "alumni college," a series of lectures that takes place in the days immediately preceding reunion weekend proper. This year, the theme of the lectures was, appropriately for the times, "What Is Truth?" The lectures touched, among other things, on the development of the philosophy of pragmatism in the 19th century, the curatorial choices

involved in building memorial sites for the Holocaust, **Janelle Monáe** and her predecessors' use of neo-soul and hip-hop to speak truth to power, and the challenges of teaching critical thinking to undergraduates in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. The series was a reminder that, as much as we might wish it to be the case, there is no universally accepted understanding of how one arrives at "truth."

The majority trust in civic institutions mentioned above is rooted in a rationalist approach that assumes there is an objective truth and that we can use the tools of reason to come close to it. We trust that those civic institutions are applying those assumptions more or less honestly, for the sake of the greater good. But that's a lot of assumptions. In the early years of the 20th century, mathematicians like **Gödel** and **Tarski** developed theorems showing the limitations of mathematical proofs. Crudely put, the notion is that the tools of arithmetic are insufficient to prove the truth of arithmetic as a system. The analogy here is that you can't prove the validity of the Enlightenment understanding of truth without relying on the assumption of that validity. To someone who questions that validity in the first place, no such proof is possible.

In the case of this devolution of trust, there's a tendency to fall back on more education, as if the problem is just that "the uneducated" haven't been presented with sufficient well-grounded facts. One of the participants in our group discussion suggested that we just need to maintain a rigorous objectivity, with well-sourced evidence for real facts. But this won't be at all effective when dealing with people whose distrust has led them to reject the very notion of objectivity.

Writing in *The Guardian* recently, **William Davies** emphasizes the need to focus on the nature of trust. "It is tempting to indulge the fantasy that we can reverse the forces that have undermined it, or else batter them into retreat with an even bigger arsenal of facts. But this is to ignore the more fundamental ways in which the nature of trust is changing."[3]
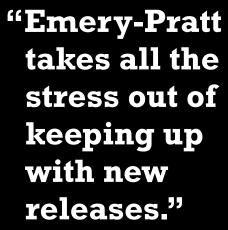
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So where does it leave those of us who labor in what **Lynch** refers to as society's "memory institutions"? (And I'd include publishers and journalists with the librarians and archivists that he points to.) One of the things that Lynch emphasizes is the need to archive and provide context. Is someone keeping both of those versions of the **Acosta** clip? Certainly part of our obligation to society is to help separate the true from the false. But to the extent that we and our institutions are trusted, it's because we are committed to preserving and displaying and discovering all of it.

The goal of the Trendlab discussions is to identify the impacts of significant social trends on the information industry, to try to predict the best and worst possible outcomes. And then, what can we do to nudge things toward the former and away from the latter?

It was depressingly easy to come up with worst case scenarios — the public trust in science, in institutions of higher education, in objective journalism, in scholarly publishing, in the collection policies of libraries, continues to erode and with it the willingness to provide funding, in whatever fashion, for those institutions. Then we're left with advocacy journalism at its most outrageous, clickbait websites that rake in advertising dollars, an educational system that can no longer afford to support the humanities and basic research, libraries and archives gathering dust.

Harder to imagine what the best outcome might be. Most of us in the library and publishing fields believe that we play a critical role in society, that our best efforts are fundamental to keeping democracy alive and to advancing the causes of justice and equality. Our ability to do that is dependent on being trusted. If we act in ways that give our critics room to claim that we're manipulating the facts in order to promote a hidden or partisan agenda, we cripple our ability to function at all. Recognizing the limits of objectivity is important, but we can't let the recognition of those limitations lead us to abandoning the ideal.

One of the members of our group suggested that perhaps it would turn out that those of us in the "elites" might start to do a better job of listening to the views of people who view us with distrust. That perhaps instead of writing them off as uneducated and ignorant, we would start to work harder to understand the multiplicity of worldviews and influences that are in play. That perhaps we would remember to apply a bit of healthy skepticism to our own certainties and a greater willingness to come clean about our failures. And that from this we might be able to establish some connections that would provide a basis for reawakening trust. 🌲

Endnotes

1. **Lynch, Clifford**. "Managing the Cultural Record in the Information Warfare Era." *Educause Review.* October 29, 2018. *https://er.educause.edu/articles/2018/10/managing-the-cultural-record-in-the-information-warfare-era*

2. **Chiu, Allyson**. "Kellyanne Conway on Jim Acosta Video." *The Washington Post.* November 12, 2018. *https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/11/12/kellyanne-conway-acosta-video-thats-not-altered-thats-sped-up-they-do-it-all-time-sports/*

3. **Davies, William**. "Why we stopped trusting elites." *The Guardian.* November 29, 2018. *https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/nov/29/why-we-stopped-trusting-elites-the-new-populism*

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stand out since Smith was such a common name) was one of the first if not the first code-breaker in American history. "**Fagone** unveils America's code-breaking history through the prism of her life, bringing into focus the unforgettable events and colorful personalities that would help shape modern intelligence." **What a book!**