

# Trust in the Digital World

## The Return of the Kings of Old (\*)

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**Abstract:** Drawing principally on examples and literature from the Anglosphere, the author argues that the high salience given to "trust" and "trustworthiness" in recent scholarly literature, and which (notably in Putnam's work) attributes declining trust to a widely mistrusted mass media does not acknowledge the trustbuilding potential (realised in some instances) of interactive "Web 2.0" applications. Drawing on O'Neill's proposal that trust inheres in dialogue and mutual checking and verification, the author argues that "Web 2.0" media provide a variety of instances where the "dialogic" character of "Web 2.0" has established and enhanced trustworthiness. He argues normatively for a combination of "Web 2.0" interactivity and the adoption and implementation of self-regulatory codes in order to enhance the trustworthiness of the media.

**Key words:** trust, mass media, Web 2.0, self-regulation, trustworthiness.

"We live in an age of communication technologies. It should be easier than it used to be to check out strangers and institutions, to test credentials, to authenticate sources, and to place trust with discrimination. But unfortunately many of the new ways of communicating don't offer adequate, let alone easy, ways of doing so. The new information technologies are ideal for spreading reliable information, but they dislocate our ordinary ways of judging one another's claims and deciding where to place our trust." (O'NEILL, 2002) <sup>1</sup>.

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(\*) This article draws on the author's paper presented at the conference (Leipzig, May 2007) on European Union Media Policy organised by the Bundesregierung fuer Kultur und Medien as part of Germany's EU Presidency, and published as "Wer bietet in der digitalen Welt zuverlaessige und vielfaeltige Informationen, und wie koennen Nutzer darauf zugreifen? Unterscheidliche Arten von Anbietern und ihre Funktion fuer die oeffentliche Kommunikation", in SCHULZ W. & T. HELD (EDS), *Mehr Vertrauen in Inhalte*, 2008, Berlin, Vistas; and Duesseldorf, Landesanstalt fuer Medien, pp. 59-90.

<sup>1</sup> Citations from O'Neill 2002 are from the unpaginated online source.

**T**rust, or its absence, is a current high fashion topic in the social sciences<sup>2</sup>. As attention has focused on consent, rather than duress, as the prime factor in social cohesion so the putatively trust eroding threats to social cohesion posed by globalisation, movement of populations and the disruption of culturally, linguistically and historically embedded communicative communities (with the attendant, putative, erosion of the trust that is necessary for us to live socially) have risen in social scientific salience. It is with a certain amount of unease that any scholar will now cite Francis Fukuyama to sustain an argument but his claim that "Now that the question of ideology and institutions has been settled, the preservation and accumulation of social capital will occupy center stage" (FUKUYAMA, 1995: 362) makes the point eloquently. Onora O'NEILL (2005)<sup>3</sup> makes a similar point in reverse, claiming that there is:

"a 'crisis of trust' in developed societies. Many who note this crisis claim that trust is obsolete: we have eroded the social capital that traditional societies had accumulated, so now have to do without it. In complex and sophisticated societies, trust can no longer provide the cohesion and compliance that it provided in traditional societies".

## ■ Trust, social science and the media

Perhaps the most striking contemporary instance of the boom in trust related work is Robert Putnam's celebrated *Bowling Alone* (see PUTNAM, 2000 and <http://www.bowlingalone.com>). Indeed, REESKENS & HOOGHE (2008) claim that:

"The booming of research on social capital started with Robert Putnam's seminal work on civic traditions in modern Italy (1993). As is well known, Putnam argued that the presence of social capital (measured as the prevalence of generalized trust, norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement) determined the performance of local and regional government [...]. The concept gained further prominence in international literature when Putnam (2000) turned his attention to social capital in the United States [...]. Notoriously, Putnam

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<sup>2</sup> I found 212,760 hits in a keyword search using the search term "trust" in the "Social Sciences" section of Academic Search Complete; 254 hits in a keyword search using search term keywords of both "trust" and "economics" in both the "Social Sciences" and "Arts and Humanities" sections of Academic Search Complete on 15.6.2008.

<sup>3</sup> I quote from the original English language version supplied to me as a textfile by the author rather than from the German language published version.

argued that generalized trust is diminishing rapidly and systematically in the US, at least since the 1970s. Since then, the empirical validity of this pessimistic claim has been highly contested (Stolle and Hooghe, 2005)." (REESKENS & HOOGHE, 2008: 517).

Seymour Martin LIPSET & William SCHNEIDER's (1983) *The Confidence Gap* (which focused on Americans' dissatisfaction with American leaders and institutions) has a claim to have anticipated Putnam's concern and Eric USLANER's (2002) *The Moral Foundations of Trust* and Richard SENNETT's *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) provide further notable cases in point. Such concerns about trust and social capital<sup>4</sup> have powerful implications for economics as well as social and political studies generally, as USLANER recognised in claims such as these:

"High trusting societies have greater transfer payments, spend more on education, and have larger public sectors more generally. They also have more open markets - and "better" government more generally." (USLANER, 2002a: 26).

"Trust helps us solve collective action problems by reducing transaction costs." (USLANER, 2002a: 2).

Clearly it is not just transaction costs that may be reduced by trust and high quotients of social capital but also security, audit, search and other costs (See GUERRA, ZIZZO, DUTTON & PELTU, 2003). Trust fills in for the incompleteness of contracts and thus both provides a rationale for internalising functions within a stable organisation, (because contact and mutual dependence is trust engendering), and/or for only externalising such functions to suppliers with whom long term and mutually dependent relationships exist or may be developed (see an extensive literature including COASE, 1937; WILLIAMSON, 1991; and LUHMANN, 1979). The large scale resonances of the putative decline in trust and trustworthiness are further manifested in the explosion of social scientific interest in risk and the "risk society" (see, *inter alia*, BECK, 1992<sup>5</sup>; GIDDENS, 1990, 1999). The perceived decline in trust is often attributed, at least in part, to the influence of the mass media. Putnam's *Bowling Alone* again is an outstanding

<sup>4</sup> I do not distinguish rigorously between the terms "social capital" and "trust", although, for some purposes, a distinction between the categories may be important I rely on precedent, not least O' Neill's who stated "Trust, it is constantly observed, is hard earned and easily dissipated. It is valuable social capital and not to be squandered". (O'NEILL, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Beck states "Risks experienced presume a normative horizon of lost security and broken trust (BECK, 1992: 28).

instance: Putnam argued that the privatisation of leisure, notably influenced by television, has hollowed out modern societies and eroded social capital.

Putnam's thesis has stimulated reassessment. Pippa NORRIS (2002, Citation from unpaginated web source; see also NORRIS, 1996) argues that Putnam like "claims that it is the pervasive spread of television and privatized leisure in postindustrial societies that is driving any long-term erosion in social capital in general, and social trust in particular, does not seem to be supported by [...]cross-national evidence"<sup>6</sup>. Martin Brookes, in his *Watching Alone. Social Capital and Public Service Broadcasting* (BROOKES, 2004), argues on similar lines and proposes that, contrary to Putnam's claims, television provides material for "water cooler" conversation and thus builds social capital. Further, ZHANG & CHIA's (2006) empirical testing of the thesis that the media are responsible for hollowing out society suggests that newspaper and television public affairs consumption was positively, not negatively, correlated with political participation (though they found the reverse in respect of Internet and entertainment).

This literature on trust, risk and the role of the media has focused on one way, offline, conventional mass media rather than online media and where online media are considered discussion does not probe the difference that interactive media (eg the Web 2.0 initiatives considered below) may make to media users' relationships of trust or the bases of such relationships of trust. Nonetheless, work by the "big guns" of contemporary social science (BECK, GIDDENS, PUTNAM, SENNETT *et al.*) on offline media complements a rather separate stream of work on trust and mistrust in cyberspace. The latter responds to and reflects what MANSELL & COLLINS identify as "considerable uncertainty about how trust in the offline world transfers into cyberspace and about the trustworthiness of elements of the cyberspace system" (MANSELL & COLLINS, 2005: 4). But here too there is some evidence of disconnection between alarm and evidence. Despite pervasive concern about the Internet as a Putnam like eroder of trust and a happy hunting ground for those who thrive on the abuse of trust, MANSELL &

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<sup>6</sup> Norris' scepticism about cross-national validity of Putnam's, and Putnam like, claims is echoed by REESKENS & HOOGHE (2008) who stated: "Various authors have also investigated the concept of generalized trust in a comparative manner, showing strong and significant differences between countries. When limiting ourselves to Europe, research routinely shows very high social trust levels in the Scandinavian countries, with lower levels in the Catholic countries of Western and Central Europe, and the lowest levels being recorded in Southern Europe (STOLLE, 1998; NEWTON, 1999). There is more disagreement, however, on how we could explain this pattern of differences" (REESKENS & HOOGHE, 2008: 517). See also NEWTON, 1995.

COLLINS (2005: 37) observe (drawing on findings from the first annual Oxford Internet Survey of 2003) that "Experience on the Internet tends to engender a higher level of cyber trust" and findings from the most recent Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS, 2007: 28) were consistent with those from 2003<sup>7</sup>.

Why such mismatches between pervasive social scientific (and public policy) concern about the media as a destroyer of trust and social capital and evidence (eg OxIS, 2007; ZHANG & CHIA, 2006) which suggests otherwise? A possible answer is that both on and offline media display characteristics which make them trustworthy. These, I propose, are both procedural (what I shall call "authoritativeness") and are applicable to both on and offline media and, in the case of online media only (and online media of a particular kind only), "dialogic", a term I adapt and appropriate from O'Neill's account of the traditional roots of trust.

## ■ Trust and dialogue

O'Neill argues in her Reith Lectures (O'NEILL, 2002) that trust is grounded in dialogue and face to face contact, that this direct personal contact was the basis of trust in pre-modern societies and that modernity (the "information age" as she names it) no longer enjoys these trust building rhythms and routines. She states:

"When Kings of old tested their daughters' suitors, most communication was face-to-face and two-way: in the information age it is often between strangers and one-way. Socrates worried about the written word, because it travelled beyond the possibility of question and revision, and so beyond trust. We may reasonably worry not only about the written word, but also about broadcast speech, film and television. These technologies are designed for one-way communication with minimal interaction. Those who control and use them may or may not be trustworthy. How are we to check what they tell us?" (O'NEILL, 2002).

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<sup>7</sup> 2007 Internet users in the UK trusted the Internet more than did non-users (on a 10 point scale users rated the Internet at 6.8 whereas non-users rated it at 5.7). Perhaps too much importance should not be placed on this finding – it is intuitively likely that users will trust more than non-users and the greater credence that Internet users placed in both television (6.7 compared to non-Internet users 6.6) and newspapers (5.8 compared to non-Internet users 5.7) suggests that Internet users may also be slightly generally more disposed to grant credence to media claims than are non-users.

She thus images modern communication, that of the "information age", as one way and attributes two-wayness and interactivity (foundations of trust) as the exclusive prerogative of pre-modern, non-information age, media. This is, as I shall argue below, a mistaken conception but O'Neill's contention that in dialogue there is the possibility of trust enhancing mutual checking and verification is neither mistaken nor without application. And though this dialogic capacity is largely absent (a few mitigating factors such as the Readers' Letters pages in newspapers, 'phone-in radio programmes and the occasional viewer response television programmes such as the UK's *Right to Reply*<sup>8</sup>) in traditional "one to many" mass media it is potentially present in the "Web 2.0" generation of online media. "Web 2.0"<sup>9</sup>, user generated content, was well characterised by Tim O'Reilly, sometimes credited with first using the term "Web 2.0", as "applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them"<sup>10</sup>. Such applications often employ and foster collaboration and dialogue and the intrinsic character of Web 2.0 Internet practices may thus enhance trustworthiness and establish cyberspace, or at least an element of it, as no less, and perhaps more, trustworthy than its offline equivalent. This trust enhancing potential of "Web 2.0" was named by Jones as "participating user relationships" (JONES, 2007: 177). Slashdot provides an outstanding example of how such "participating user relationships" can build trust and authority.

Slashdot.org was one of the first sites to build trustworthiness on contributors' input. The main legitimising and trust building mechanism is the appointment of contributors as moderators who are empowered to award "karma" points to other contributors. The level of "karma" determines the salience of contributors' postings and karma scores may (if users of the site so wish) trigger filters enabling readers to exclude postings with low karma from those presented to them<sup>11</sup>. Slashdot has thus a self regulating and ranking system which is based on peer review and ranking. As Tony Curzon-Price, Chief Editor of OpenDemocracy stated (interview 27.6.2008) "something like this carries over to all successful online communities".

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<sup>8</sup> *Right to Reply* ran on Channel 4 from 1982 to 2001. Following racially offensive behaviour by one celebrity performing on Channel 4's *Big Brother* show, Channel 4 promised a return of *Right to Reply* (see Channel 4 Press Release of 24.5.2007 at: [http://www.channel4.com/about4/pdf/c4response\\_cbb\\_review.pdf](http://www.channel4.com/about4/pdf/c4response_cbb_review.pdf), on 16.5.2008).

<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web\\_2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2), on 6.3.2007

<sup>10</sup> *Web 2.0 Compact Definition: Trying Again*, at: [http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2006/12/web\\_20\\_compact.html](http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2006/12/web_20_compact.html), on 6.3.2007.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://slashdot.org/faq/com-mod.shtml#cm600>

O'Neill's focus on one to many offline mass media echoes Putnam et al and precludes her from considering the positive potential of Web 2.0, dialogic, media. Indeed she argues that "The new information technologies may be anti-authoritarian, but curiously they are often used in ways that are also anti-democratic. They undermine our capacities to judge others' claims and to place our trust" <sup>12</sup>. Rather, she argues <sup>13</sup> for changed media source behaviour in order to improve the authoritativeness and thus trustworthiness of media content. O'Neill's arguments lead her to propose a supply side solution, a strengthening of authoritativeness (notably through the implementation of stronger and more binding codes of journalistic practice). But O'Neill's empirical focus on offline media and embrace of supply side measures to improve the authoritativeness, and thereby the trustworthiness, of media does not negate the potential importance of her arguments in respect of some of the new media (in her words "new information technologies") although, I believe, she underestimates and misperceives these. New online media offer a dialogic capacity, and thus a potential for engendering trust, superior to the "one to many" mass media which form the main object of her attention. Interactive, Web 2.0, media thus potentially satisfy the normative criteria which may be derived from O'Neill's claim that:

"Well-placed trust grows out of active inquiry rather than blind acceptance. In traditional relations of trust, active inquiry was usually extended over time by talking and asking questions, by listening and seeing how well claims to know and undertakings to act held up. That was the world in which Socrates placed his trust-and his reservations about publishing. Where we can check the information we receive, and when we can go back to those who put it into circulation, we may gain confidence about placing or refusing trust." (O'NEILL, 2002, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/radio4/reith2002/lecture4.shtml?print>).

O'Neill makes some sensible and constructive supply side arguments, considered below, for enhancing the trustworthiness of conventional mass media. Similarly, contributors to MANSELL & COLLINS' (2005) collection also propose ways to make cyberspace more trustworthy (eg authentication and "transitivity" (See O'HARA & SHADBOLT, 2005: 132-134) – that is the authentication of an unknown by a trusted known) and less vulnerable to criminal abuse. Adoption of such recommendations is desirable but does not acknowledge Web 2.0 media's greater intrinsic potential trustworthiness (though, of course, whether this potential trustworthiness is realised is an

<sup>12</sup> O'NEILL, 2002, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/radio4/reith2002/lecture5.shtml?print#top>

<sup>13</sup> Her most persuasive and fully worked out arguments are to be found in her *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics* (O'NEILL, 2002a).

empirical matter). No more in the online than in the offline world are trust-building practices of the kind canvassed by O'Neill and by Mansell and Collins' collaborators irrelevant.

## ■ Trust, accountability and on and offline media

If realised, the positive potentiality of Web 2.0 media may mitigate, if not solve, some of the problems of trust which seem endemic in "one to many" mass media. To make such a claim may seem unusual in the context of the general emphasis of Internet studies which predominantly addresses the perceived problems and damaging potentiality of the media and the Internet in particular. There can be no doubt that there are significant negative issues to be addressed: fraud, spam, phishing and the dissemination of potentially harmful and/or offensive material (see, *inter alia*, BYRON, 2008, MANSELL & COLLINS, 2005) but I consider here a different question: "What is the basis of trust on which consumers can use confidently digital content?"

Trust hitherto has rested with established media brands. Because information is an "experience good" <sup>14</sup> the reputation of providers is likely to be decisive in determining consumption and use. There are thus formidable advantages for incumbents for, almost by definition, it's "legacy" providers that currently enjoy the highest levels of public trust. Trust in the BBC by the UK public, for example, is very high. The BBC's own claim that "The public trusts BBC news more than that of any other news provider" (BBC, 2004: 45) was supported by a YouGov poll which found <sup>15</sup>, (in a poll conducted in January 2005), that the BBC is "still the most trusted for news" (but see AITKEN, 2007). The BBC has proposed that the trust it currently enjoys is fungible and provides a basis for assuming a role as gatekeeper in filtering other providers' content: as the wider UK news environment is becoming more crowded and confusing the BBC has claimed that its role as a 'trusted guide' will become increasingly important" (BBC, 2004: 8). The Alexa

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<sup>14</sup> A term attributed to NELSON (1970) but which signifies a much used concept, referring to information gaps or deficits, particularly in information economics and policy (see, for example DAVIES, 1999 and 2005; GRAHAM & DAVIES, 1997 in respect of public service broadcasting). de LONG & FROOMKIN (1999) develop a similar notion contending that a key element in the difference between "new" (information) and "old" (tangible goods) economics is the inherent lack of transparency in new economics.

<sup>15</sup> YouGov press release at: [http://www.yougov.com/archives/pdf/OMI050101003\\_2.pdf](http://www.yougov.com/archives/pdf/OMI050101003_2.pdf), on 27.2.2006.



rankings for UK Internet "top sites" on 19.6.2008<sup>16</sup> identified the BBC as the top media site (ranked seventh following search and virtual community sites such as Google and Facebook) followed by well established and generally well reputed sites established by UK national daily newspapers: that is the *Guardian Unlimited* (ranked twenty fourth) and *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph* (ranked forty second and forty third) suggesting both the importance of incumbency and its fungibility across platforms.

As stated, O'Neill constructs trust as a product of dialogue, as an attribute engendered through contact and the resulting ability to check and verify propositions and to hold trust claimants to account. Moreover, O'Neill sensibly remarks that at some point there has to be trust – somewhere someone in an accountability chain has to be trusted. However, she also distinguishes between traditional notions and practices of trust – based on the accumulation of social capital that traditional societies were deemed to have, akin to those in the family (she refers to a baby's "blind trust" in its mother) - and modern ones which she proposes are based on formal structures of accountability and powers of sanction. This is so because large scale societies cannot generate a generalised trust through the face to face contact assumed to underpin its generation in families and traditional societies.

The mass media are generally seen as one of the main contemporary agencies through which power holders are held to account. They do the checking out of strangers and institutions, test credentials, authenticate sources, and enable us, at best, "to place trust with discrimination". (O'NEILL, 2002, at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/radio4/reith2002/lecture5.shtml?print>). They are, at their best, trust testing, and thus potentially trust building, agencies. At its most sober (and therefore little known) this holding to account may be seen in the UK television channel's, Channel 4, excellent fact checking web site where the evidence stated, or implied, in politicians' claims is subjected to verification – see: <http://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/>. And it can be seen manifested more vivaciously in headlines such as those sported in the UK "tabloid", *The Sun*, for example, (2.9.1995) *I was bedded by head, Vice girl Sally tells all*, and (8.2.2008) *What a Burkha, Archbishop wants Muslim law in UK*. These examples suggest too that trust can be differential and conditional: I may trust *The Sun* when it reports cricket scores but be more cautious about its claims when they assert *Archbishop wants Muslim law in UK*.

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.alexa.com/site/ds/top\\_sites?cc=GB&ts\\_mode=country&lang=none](http://www.alexa.com/site/ds/top_sites?cc=GB&ts_mode=country&lang=none)

But the extent to which the media may be effective, because trusted, institutions through which social actors are held to account depends on how far the media themselves are trusted. Trusted media are media to whose account of the world over the long term users give credence. And though this credence and credibility resides principally in the extent to which media's representations of the world consistently are found to be reliable, the extent to which and manner by which the media are themselves held to account also sustains, or undermines, their credibility and thus their trustworthiness. Such holding of the media to account may be through any or all of the institutions of law, competition, regulation, professional norms and self-regulation and through the media creating means, such as readers' editors and media ombudsmen, through which stakeholders can hold them to account and through which they may give an account of themselves. But all such mechanisms correspond to O'Neill's "modern" paradigm where trustworthiness is constructed through formal, institutional and specialised structures of holding to account and exercising sanctions. They do not acknowledge the possibilities of a return to what O'Neill called the methods of the "Kings of old" permitted by the dialogic character of Web 2.0 applications.

## ■ Web 2.0.

Barriers to entry have fallen, new providers have entered the digital world and a new form of provision<sup>17</sup>, variously called interactive<sup>18</sup>, "Web 2.0"<sup>19</sup>, user generated content, or "pull" content, which exhibits O'Reilly's network effect "to get better the more people use them"<sup>20</sup> is now becoming pervasive and indispensable. The most striking example of such an application/service is, of course, Wikipedia. Alexa testifies to the extent to which UK Internet users have adopted Wikipedia ranking it (21.6.2008) as

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<sup>17</sup> Whereby users can post and amend content.

<sup>18</sup> Although it focuses on established "legacy" media, music, films, television, games, radio, magazine newspaper and book publishing (reflecting the authors' remit to consider the "exploitation of digital content" (p 11), ie of established media, see the study for the European Commission "*Interactive content and convergence: Implications for the information society*", at: [http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/europe/i2010/docs/studies/interactive\\_content\\_ec2006\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/europe/i2010/docs/studies/interactive_content_ec2006_final_report.pdf), on 10.3.2007.

<sup>19</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web\\_2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2), on 6.3.2007.

<sup>20</sup> *Web 2.0 Compact Definition: Trying Again*, at: [http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2006/12/web\\_20\\_compact.html](http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2006/12/web_20_compact.html) on 6.3.2007.

the tenth most visited Internet site. At its best Wikipedia accelerates and makes more extensive and inclusive the collaborative processes of peer review, critique, factual correction and consensus building that underpin offline scholarship. It has, at least potentially, an intrinsic self-correcting capacity. But at its worst (though this worst seems scarcely different to similarly abusive behaviour offline) Wikipedia is prey to systematic falsification and bias. Not surprisingly, controversy over how far Wikipedia (and user generated content in general) can be trusted is rife<sup>21</sup>. See, for example, the recent comments of Richard Dixon, the revise (sic) editor of the highly legitimised offline medium "The Times", who stated his "default position" to be "every article on Wikipedia is rubbish". "Why" he asked "trust the vagaries of Wikipedia when there are web stalwarts such as the BBC, Know UK, the Internet Movie Data Base and the Ordnance Survey"?

Dixon perhaps spoils his case by citing the Internet Movie Data Base (at: <http://imdb.com>) which, though now owned by Amazon, began as a "Web 2.0" "wiki" type collaboration and uses a database which was, to a significant extent, user generated. Moreover, few of the sources Dixon cites are as readily accessible as Wikipedia: in theory "KnowUK" is available to any registered user of a public library in the UK but its log on and security procedures have defeated more than one potential user. The Ordnance Survey makes its maps available free online (but non-printable) only up to scale 1:25000 – in many respects Google's free at the point of use maps and satellite imagery<sup>22</sup> serve users better. And the BBC's massive (estimated at 6m pages) website is fully accessible only to users with a UK IP address – even though BBC licence fee payers sometimes travel beyond the borders of the UK! However, Dixon is surely right to point to institutions such as these, each with well established supply side norms of professional practice in information collection, processing and presentation, providing a potentially authoritative alternative to Web 2.0 sources of content – though the Ordnance Survey's exclusion of "sensitive" locations (such as military establishments) from its maps and a succession of challenges to the BBC's

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<sup>21</sup> Cited in "You couldn't make it up" by Jenny KLEEMAN, first published in hard copy in "Times2" on March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2007, at:

[http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life\\_and\\_style/women/the\\_way\\_we\\_live/article1457697.ece](http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/the_way_we_live/article1457697.ece), on 7.3.2007. See also the BBC's report of Jaron Lanier's charge that contributors to "Web 2.0" sites adopt a "mob mentality", at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/6379621.stm>, on 15.3.2007.

<sup>22</sup> Eg at <http://maps.google.co.uk/maps?ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&hl=en&tab=wl&q=>, on 14.5.2007.

authority<sup>23</sup> suggest that "gold standard" sources are not always unimpeachable.

An issue of general importance arises from this discussion: we may identify two sources of authority, and potential trustworthiness, in information: the first employing user review to establish authority (with a corresponding commitment of authors to revise and amend in the light of peer commentary), and the supply side biased second type deriving from authors' adherence to proven procedures and practices to ensure a high level of correspondence between the real world and their representation of it.

## ■ Authority and trustworthiness

The first type of authority can conveniently be labelled as "academic" and the second "journalistic" though academics and journalists, in varying degrees, generally acknowledge and are subject to both "academic" and "journalistic" sets of norms of authentication. In the first type of authentication authority derives from user consensus and in the second from an expert consensus embodied in standard procedures and practices which have been found consistently to secure authoritative representations of the world and thus to provide trustworthy content. There is no necessary incompatibility between "Web 2.0", "wiki", information generation and authentication and use of the procedures that have underpinned successful operations such as the BBC's and the *Ordnance Survey*'s. Information may both be user generated and also be compiled and produced using procedures deemed likely to engender trustworthiness. Indeed, many sites including the *IMDb*, *Wikipedia* and a noteworthy UK based content site [www.OpenDemocracy.net](http://www.OpenDemocracy.net) combine user generated content with expert editorial origination and amendment of content.

However, despite the precarious economic position of some online content providers, the translation of dominant "legacy media" from the analogue world to the digital world co-exists with the emergence of some striking new entrants. New voices range from individual blogs, contributions to social networking (see, *inter alia*, <http://www.bebo.com/> and

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the Hutton Report (HUTTON, 2004) and studies commissioned by the BBC Governors such as the Review of European Union coverage, Israeli-Palestinian impartiality review etc. See <http://www.bbcgovernorsarchive.co.uk/docs/reviews.html>, on 12.3.2007.

<http://technorati.com/>), user generated content sites (see, *inter alia*, [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) to online media modelled on offline equivalents (for example "The First Post" at: <http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk/>). However despite the rapid proliferation of user generated sites, only a small proportion of UK Internet users actually post content<sup>24</sup> and only 15% use "newspapers or news services" different from those they use offline (OxIS, 2007: 69).

Interesting intermediate content sites, with neither the idiosyncratic character of blogs nor the traditional one to many, "push" character of sites such as "The First Post", include sites which collectively construct authoritative content through deliberation and/or "natural selection". A well established group blog of this kind, which creatively expands a public sphere of expert (often nerdy) comment and debate on media regulation and policy, is *OfcomWatch* ([www.ofcomwatch.co.uk](http://www.ofcomwatch.co.uk)). Another comparable instance is the blog on European media and communications policy *contentandcarrier* ([www.contentandcarrier.eu](http://www.contentandcarrier.eu)). The UK Citizens Online Democracy (UKCOD), a charity, provides another type of hybrid website "mysociety" ([www.mysociety.org.uk](http://www.mysociety.org.uk)) which, in turn, enables people to build "websites which give people simple, tangible benefits in the civic and community aspects of their lives"<sup>25</sup>, notably by enhancing citizens' ability to secure information so that they can act more effectively as citizens and hold their representatives (including Members of Parliament) to account. "Wiki" sites, and the multilingual<sup>26</sup> *Wikipedia* ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)) are further deservedly well known examples of this intermediate type of content site.

## ■ Dialogue in online content provision

### Some UK examples

*Wikipedia* strikingly exemplifies the possibilities of the so-called "Web 2.0" whereby the interaction of users generates content, exchange, collective deliberation and debate. "Wiki", essentially, speeds up and opens up the processes of peer review and construction of an expert consensus

<sup>24</sup> The Oxford Internet Survey for 2007 found that 28% of UK users have posted images on the web, 16% have tried to establish a website, 15% have a website and 12% write a blog (OxIS, 2007: 54 and 61).

<sup>25</sup> From [http://www.ukcod.org.uk/UK\\_Citizens\\_Online\\_Democracy](http://www.ukcod.org.uk/UK_Citizens_Online_Democracy), on 19.6.2007.

<sup>26</sup> *Wikipedia* claims entries in 250 languages (including the constructed language Klingon [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klingon\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klingon_language), on 27.2.2007, Bavarian, Cornish, Lombard, Occitan, Sorbian and Veneta, <http://www.wikipedia.org/>, on 27.2.2007).

that has underpinned the production and sanctification of knowledge. It remains to be seen how far the "wiki" model of open access will supplant the more orderly and structured construction of expert consensus which has characterised established expert repositories of knowledge such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* <sup>27</sup> but though there have been egregious cases of abuse <sup>28</sup> of the open-ness of the wiki process there seems no reason to doubt the robustness of the general model as a variety of new entrants, which have seized the opportunities of digital online provision, have demonstrated and have settled on varying mixes between dialogic, Web 2.0, and formal, supply side systems of authority and trustworthiness generation. Consider the following examples currently operating in the UK <sup>29</sup> variously using text, audio and video <sup>30</sup>:

- *The Independent Media Centre UK (Indymedia)*
- *Interworld Radio (IWR)*
- *OpenDemocracy*
- *18 Doughty Street*

*The Independent Media Centre UK (Indymedia)* runs a moderated "Web 2.0" site with a commitment to "a world based on freedom, cooperation, justice and solidarity, and against environmental degradation, neoliberal exploitation, racism and patriarchy" <sup>31</sup>. *Indymedia* is a moderated site but one which invites everybody to add their own comments at the end of each article. Comments can be used to:

- state an opinion about any given posting,
- add information,
- correct inaccurate or malicious information,
- rectify misinformation <sup>32</sup>.

*Indymedia* is a global movement and, as the UK site claims "Independent DIY media projects are spreading around the planet at unprecedented

<sup>27</sup> See the report of "Nature"'s comparative evaluation of the accuracy of Wikipedia and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, at <http://www.nature.com/news/2005/051212/full/438900a.html>, on 14.5.2007. *Nature* found "the difference in accuracy was not particularly great".

<sup>28</sup> See, inter alia, [http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2006/01/wikipeding\\_cong.html](http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2006/01/wikipeding_cong.html), and/or <http://blogs.zdnet.com/Ou/?p=152>, on 27.2.2007.

<sup>29</sup> The absence of systematic international comparative data on the issues addressed in this paper makes many of my arguments reliant on anecdotal and possibly unrepresentative data.

<sup>30</sup> These examples are not necessarily representative – they are cited because known to the author and have not been selected as a representative sample of the total population of similar sites.

<sup>31</sup> From <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/static/mission.html> on 8.3.2007.

<sup>32</sup> From <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/static/editorial.html> on 8.3.2007.

speed. Triggered by discontent with the mainstream media and supported by the widespread availability of media technologies, groups all over the world are creating their own channels of information and distribution in order to bypass the (mainstream) corporate media. The idea behind most of these projects is to create open platforms to which everyone can contribute - not only a small media elite with their particular interests<sup>33</sup>. By eliminating the classic division between professional producers and passive audience, many issues and discussions that were previously suppressed become visible and available"<sup>34</sup>. In classic "Web 2.0" fashion Indymedia claims that its open, interactive, site "erodes the dividing line between reporters and reported, between active producers and passive audience: people are enabled to speak for themselves"<sup>35</sup>.

A further case in point is the UK news and comment site *OpenDemocracy* ([www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net)), which began in 2001, as a non-profit interactive news, comment and deliberation site. *OpenDemocracy* is distinguished by its use of writers from the localities under consideration "we use African writers when an African issue is under consideration", by its commitment to "non metropolitan voices" – "we don't publish on the basis of a metropolitan outlook" and by its dialogic and debate format: "we typically commission more than one piece" and "we still regard ourselves as a debate site" (Hilton interview, 7.2.2007<sup>36</sup>).

*OpenDemocracy* is, of course, not the only new voice to find expression through digital interactive media. But there are few other new digital content sites of the range and authoritativeness of *OpenDemocracy* which so successfully utilise the potential of the Internet for dialogue and collective deliberation. Hilton (interviewed 7.2.2007) identified only one further European exemplar: *Safe Democracy*<sup>37</sup> in Spain but *Safe Democracy* appears, at least in the English language version, to be less interactive and dialogic than *OpenDemocracy*.

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<sup>33</sup> Interworld Radio (IWR) provides a similar service to Indymedia using the web to distribute sound based information aimed at making "a difference to people's lives by giving them access to information, stimulating debate, and improving communication".From <http://www.interworldradio.net/about/mission.asp> on 8.3.2007.

<sup>34</sup> From [http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/static/about\\_us.html](http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/static/about_us.html) on 8.3.2007.

<sup>35</sup> From <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/static/mission.html> on 8.3.2007.

<sup>36</sup> Isabel Hilton was editor in chief of *OpenDemocracy* at the time of the interview.

<sup>37</sup> See <http://english.safe-democracy.org/>, on 27.2.2007.

The politics website, 18 Doughty Street <sup>38</sup> (named after its address in London "a place where leading conservatives from around the world can come to work, study, relax and stay" <sup>39</sup>) is more of a "push", Web 1.0, site featuring both video and text but does not strongly feature user generated content, interaction or "wiki" construction of content. But 18 Doughty Street exemplifies how the Internet has enhanced opportunities for political debate and dissemination and extended the range of televised political material available to users. 18 Doughty Street proposes to extend its range of coverage through a qualified embrace of user generated content, that is by enlisting and supporting a group of "citizen journalists". It states: "In a groundbreaking initiative the station is building a network of 100 nationwide and worldwide citizen journalist reporters, each equipped with their own camcorder, which they can use to film reports for 18 DoughtyStreet to broadcast" <sup>40</sup>.

## ■ Supply side measures to foster trust

Parallel to successful Web 2.0 content services based on dialogic models of trust building supply side initiatives to enhance the trustworthiness of on and offline media have also grown. In the online domain these have largely responded to public disquiet about the perceived potential of the Internet to expose children and young people to harmful content and contacts. The UK Byron Review's proposal for "better self regulation" (BYRON, 2008: 3) is a striking exemplar as is the successful establishment of the self-regulatory Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) <sup>41</sup>. But there has been scant equivalent to the (slow) growth of supply side measures to enhance the authority and trustworthiness of news and other information services that holds power to account. Whereas the institutionalisation of editorial and journalistic codes and an establishment of independent spokespersons, readers' editors/media ombudsman, for the users' interest within (some) news organisations points towards the enhancement and deepening of offline self-regulation to foster trustworthiness there are few equivalents in online information media – there it is dialogic trust building and enhancement that is to the fore.

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<sup>38</sup> See <http://www.18doughtystreet.com/> on 9.3.2007.

<sup>39</sup> From [http://www.18doughtystreet.com/come\\_inside](http://www.18doughtystreet.com/come_inside) on 9.3.2007.

<sup>40</sup> See [http://www.18doughtystreet.com/citizen\\_journalists](http://www.18doughtystreet.com/citizen_journalists), on 9.3.2007.

<sup>41</sup> [www.iwf.org.uk](http://www.iwf.org.uk).



The intrinsic properties of one to many, one way, offline mass media mean that there are few opportunities for trust building through the dialogic Web 2.0 like methods that are available online. It is therefore unsurprising that development of supply side measures of trust enhancement are most evident in offline media, though it has to be acknowledged that their growth is both uneven and poorly generalised in the UK<sup>42</sup>. Indeed Onora O'Neill has argued that "newspaper journalists face few disciplines that support public trust" (O'NEILL, 2002a: 175): "there are no enforceable requirements for accuracy or coverage and balance; there are no enforceable requirements to refrain from writing on subjects of which they are ignorant; there are no enforceable requirements to distinguish reporting from commentary [...]. There is a well-guarded 'right' to hide sources, that can be used to obstruct the reader's ability to tell whether there is any sources whatsoever, or (if there is) whether it can be trusted" (O'NEILL, 2002a: 176). And where more exacting norms are mandated (eg in the BBC), O'Neill argues that these are "less demanding than those that apply in the professions or the public sector" (O'NEILL, 2002a: 176). Fundamental is the obligation to "reject deception" (O'NEILL, 2002a: 185) and "the habitual failure" of the media to provide readers (sic) with the "means of checking and interpreting what they are reading" (O'NEILL, 2002a: 186).

O'Neill points out the failure of offline media to engender trust both by listing the deficiencies of their performance and their norms and by comparing them adversely to her talismanic norm of face-to-face exchange. Dialogue, she claims, enables interlocutors to "assess what we are told by backtracking and asking questions, by cross-checking and testing our understanding and our interlocutors" (O'NEILL, 2002a: 186). And "Because written and broadcast communication is almost exclusively one way" writers and broadcasters should adhere to supply side "conventions and standards" (O'NEILL, 2002a: 186-7) in order to establish their trustworthiness. Here it's important to signal the importance of the one way character of offline media for O'Neill's argument. They lack the dialogic character which enabled the Kings of old to assess their daughters' suitors and which underpin the

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<sup>42</sup> For example, the first UK readers' editor/media ombudsman elsewhere was appointed in 1997 to The Guardian and its sister paper The Observer are the only UK newspaper to adhere to the Organization of News Ombudsmen and ombudsmen are established in various European newspapers and broadcasters eg in France, the Netherlands, Spain and elsewhere (see <http://www.newsombudsmen.org/what.htm>, on 14.3.2007). Moreover, the self-regulatory code of the UK Press Complaints Commission (PCC) has been held to be both less stringent than other comparable codes and less adhered to (see, inter alia, the compilation of European codes of journalistic ethics at <http://www.uta.fi/ethicnet/>, on 10.3.2007).

notable strengths and achievements of Web 2.0 applications. Accordingly, to redress the deficiencies intrinsic to one way media, she (2002a: 190) proposes these norms:

- declaration of "relevant interests and conflicts of interest",
- declaration of "relations with lobbyists, political parties, companies and campaigning organisations",
- publication of "credentials of reporters writing on technical topics" and warning if reporters "lacking the relevant competence" are assigned to a particular topic,
- declaration of "full financial information about payments made to obtain material relevant to 'stories'",
- publication of corrections "of equal length and prominence, perhaps written by third parties",
- penalties for "recirculating 'stories' shown to be libellous or invented.

All of these ethical and procedural norms seem sensible, constructive and equally applicable to both online and offline reporting. Indeed, O'Neill's proposals are congruent with the scrutiny, transparency, transfer of ownership from experts to stakeholders, evidence of identity etc.<sup>43</sup> counselled by O' HARA & SHADBOLT in the online domain (2005: 113, 130-137). However, they are proposed in the content of one way conventional broadcasting and newspapers – circumstances where the opportunities that exist in dialogic, face-to-face, exchanges do not prevail. Whereas "Web 2.0" content offers many (but not all) of the opportunities for authentication, interrogation, revision and consensus building absent in one way mass communication and present in face-to-face communication. Intrinsically, therefore, there are opportunities to establish the trustworthiness of information and comment mediated through "Web 2.0" dialogic, co-operative, collaborations on content production that are absent in the contemporary and conventional mass media.

To be sure, just as in face-to-face communication contributors to "Web 2.0" content can lie, act in bad faith, mislead and so on. This means that the norms and procedures which O'Neill and others propose for the conventional mass media are no less applicable to online digital content production and dissemination. But "Web 2.0" offers possibilities of establishing trustworthiness that are absent in offline and "Web 1.0" media and thus the

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<sup>43</sup> O' Hara and Shadbolt also refer to "transitivity" of trust (see O' HARA & SHADBOLT, 2005: 132-134).

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potentially beneficial combination of both dialogic and procedural (academic and journalistic) routes to trustworthiness.

## ■ Conclusion

There can never be too much well founded trust. Contemporary social science has characterised modernity as trust deficient and has fingered the mass media, particularly television, as a prime cause of modernity's bankruptcy in social capital. O'Neill follows this current in situating the erosion of trust in the decline of face to faceness and dialogue (not many opportunities for chat if *Bowling Alone!*) but she is unusual in identifying persuasive measures to redress the deficiencies of offline, one to many (as she names them "one way") media. These procedural measures are applicable to online media but the potential of online media to provide for a return to the dialogic methods of the "Kings of old", collaborative construction of knowledge and understanding, collective fact checking and correction and the Socratic apparatus of "question and revision" to which O'Neill referred<sup>44</sup> have not been acknowledged. True, this potential may take a long time to realise in a context where few UK Internet users actually post content (OxIS, 2007: 54 and 61). But, both procedural and dialogic means to foster and augment authority and trustworthiness are applicable to online media though only the procedural are effectively accessible to offline media. Web 2.0 applications thus offer an unrecognised, and only fragmentarily realised potential to rebuild social capital and augment trust and trustworthiness.

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<sup>44</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/radio4/reith2002/lecture5.shtml?print>

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