The Global Trust Deficit Disorder: A Communications Perspective on Trust in the Time of Global Pandemics

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There has been much discussion worldwide about the crisis of trust, with evidence of declining trust in social, economic, political and media institutions. The rise of populism, and the differing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic between nations, has been drawing attention to wider implications of pervasive distrust, including distrust of the media. In this article, I develop three propositions. First, I identify trust studies as a rich interdisciplinary field, linking communication to other branches of the social sciences and humanities. Second, I argue that we lack a comprehensive account of how trust has been understood in communication, and that doing so requires integrating macro-societal approaches with the "meso" level of institutions, and the "micro" level of interpersonal communication. Third, I propose that a focus upon trust would open up new perspectives on two important topics—the future of news media and journalism, and the global rise of populism.

Introduction: the global trust deficit disorder

There has been much discussion worldwide in recent years about what is referred to as the growing crisis of trust, particularly in the core institutions of government, business, and the media. The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, observed in September 2019 that "our world is suffering from a bad case of 'Trust Deficit Disorder' . . . people are losing faith in political establishments, polarization is on the rise and populism is on the march" (Guterres, 2019). Guterres has returned to this theme in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, observing what he termed a global "info-demic" of misinformation surrounding the virus, for which "the vaccine

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was trust," in science, in evidence-based public policies, and in fellow citizens (Guterres, 2020).

Survey data from a variety of sources has been pointing to declining levels of trust in social, economic and political institutions, in people that we do not know or who are culturally different, and in expert opinion. The best-known studies are the Edelman Trust Barometers, that have been gathered since 2000. Reflecting on the findings of 20 years of Edelman surveys, which are now conducted in 28 countries (as compared to five when first undertaken in 2000), the broad trends that have been identified over time have been:

1. A large and growing trust gap between segments of national societies, with those on higher incomes and with higher levels of education being consistently more likely to trust institutions;
2. There is less trust in government than in business, and in government officials than in CEOs, while NGOs are more trusted than both governments and business;
3. There are widespread and growing doubts about the truth claims of traditional media, as well as distrust of the objectivity and independence of journalists;
4. There has been a shift away from trust in institutions toward the "networking of trust," or what is referred to in the literature (e.g., Uslaner, 2002) as "particularized trust," or trust in "who you know," over "generalized trust," or trust in people in general;
5. There is a greater degree of fear than hope about both the present and the future, with drivers of fear including: concerns about corruption; rising economic inequalities; adverse impacts of globalization; eroding social values; and concerns about the impacts of rapid technological change (Edelman, 2020).

Other national surveys present comparable findings. In the United States, the Gallup Confidence in Institutions Survey shows a significant decline in trust from the 1970s to the 2010s in most social institutions, ranging from banks and big business to Congress, and from organized religion to news media in all forms. (Gallup, 2018). The Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy noted that fewer than half of U.S. respondents trusted newspapers in the late 2010s as compared with the late 1970s, and fewer than half trusted television news in the late 2010s as compared with the early 1990s (Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy, 2019).

The rise of mistrust has been a matter of growing concern for its economic as well as its political impacts. The 2019 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, identified the "trust deficit" as a barrier to economic growth, digital innovation and social cohesion, with trust being described as "the ultimate human currency" (McDermott, 2019). Crises of trust are also seen in civil unrest in many parts of the world. Protests in cities as otherwise diverse as Beirut, Santiago, Paris,

Hong Kong, Delhi and cities throughout the United States that dominated global media had diverse proximate causes, ranging from increases in bus and train fares in Chile, racially targeted police brutality in the United States, taxes on diesel fuel in France, farmers' protests against agricultural reforms in India, a proposed tax on use of the WhatsApp app in Lebanon, and the extradition bill between Hong Kong and China. But the diverse constellation of street actions—which were diminished, but never halted, as a result of COVID-related lockdowns—reflected widespread distrust of, and discontent with, practices of government-as-usual, and the demand for greater accountability on the part of the political classes in these places.

The rise of populist leaders in a number of otherwise disparate parts of the world has also been seen as symptomatic of a rise of distrust in institutional elites and established models of governance, as well as concerns about growing social inequality and a perceived decline in economic opportunities. Such populism can take a variety of political forms, from right-wing nativism and "illiberal democracy" as seen in countries such as Hungary, Italy, India, Poland, Brazil and the United States, to the "left-populism" of movements such as Podemos in Spain or the Bernie Sanders campaign in the United States (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Moffitt, 2020; Mouffe, 2018; Norris & Ingelhart, 2019). Importantly, as de Vresse *et al.* have observed, "populism is as much a communications phenomenon as a socio-political one, that has a communicative style as well as substantive content, and where the communicative tools used for spreading populist ideas are just as central as the populist ideas themselves" (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018, p. 425).

In this paper, I wish to focus upon three propositions. First, I will identify the study of trust as a rich interdisciplinary field, that links communication to other branches of the social sciences and humanities in distinctive and important ways. I follow the historian Geoffrey Hosking in defining trust as involving "attachment to a person, collective of persons or institution, based on the well-founded but not certain expectation that he/she/they will act for my good," that builds upon "the expectation, based on good but less than perfect evidence, that events will turn out in a way not harmful to me" (Hosking, 2014, p. 28). Second, I will argue that we lack a comprehensive and systematic account of how trust has been understood across the diverse field of communication, and that doing so would involve integrating macro-societal approaches with the meso level of institutions and organizations, and the micro level of interpersonal and intergroup communication. Third, I propose that a focus upon questions of trust would open up new perspectives on two important topics—the future of news media and journalism, and the global rise of populism— beyond the focus upon truth, falsehood and ideology that have been dominant framings within the field.

Digital platforms and the question of trust

The rise of populism as a political vehicle for harnessing distrust necessarily draws attention to the transformations of media itself, since, as John Keane has observed,

"populism is particularly suited to the contours of the 'new media galaxy' " (Keane, 2013). While the COVID-19 pandemic gave new life to conspiracy theories worldwide, their existence and flourishing was not dependent in and of itself on the pandemic: movements such as Q-Anon showed how conspiracies can incubate and spread in the social media hothouse. The storming by right-wing extremists of the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, DC on January 6, 2021, also showed how such online conspiracies take concrete form in the public domain.

Declining trust in mainstream newspapers and television news is not necessarily new. But a feature of the 2010s was that it coincided with a sharp growth in the number of people accessing their news from online sources, and the sharing of what has come to be known as "social news." At the same time, while the shift to social media as a primary source of news has occurred, particularly among younger users, survey findings also consistently find higher levels of mistrust of news sourced from major social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter than of mainstream news media (Entman & Usher, 2018; Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy, 2019; Newman et al., 2019). The extent to which digital platforms see themselves as being in the news business has also become a matter of contention. The debate around a Mandatory News Media Bargaining Code in Australia, whereby Google and Facebook would be required to pay Australian news publishers for news content that appears on their sites, has seen the platforms argue that news constitutes a tiny percentage of user interactions with their search and social media sites (Dwyer, 2021).

The relationship between digital platforms and news publishers around trust in news draws attention to the complex relationship between social media, digital platforms and trust. In the 2000s and early 2010s, we tended to view social media through the prism of decentralized networks and the economics of information. We focused upon the possibilities of open platforms, peer collaboration, content sharing, and bottom-up knowledge sharing as the core elements of digital society and culture. In terms of trust, what was implied by the networked information economy was that we could collectively verify information through access to multiple data sources, with the historic filters presented by mass media and other gatekeepers being significantly diminished. The newly networked and empowered "Fifth Estate" of digital citizens (Dutton, 2009) could challenge the entrenched authority of the mainstream news media, in a world where, as Yochai Benkler observed in *The Wealth of Networks*, "the removal of the physical constraints on effective information production has made human creativity and the economics of information . . . core structuring facts in the new networked information economy" (Benkler, 2006, p. 4). In short, Wikipedia meets Wikileaks.

The blind spot, in retrospect, was that this digital networking would occur through proprietary, commercial platforms. The political economy of digital capitalism meant that the "winner takes most" nature of network economics, combined with the competitive advantages accruing from access to multiple and diverse forms of digital data, enabled these platforms into some of the biggest and most powerful

companies the world has seen (Flew, 2018, 2019). In seeking to achieve greater accountability and transparency of other institutions through interactions enabled by digital platforms, we contributed to the building up of digital data that enabled this global expansion, engaging with other media on digital platforms whose algorithmic processes platform design and everyday operations remained utterly opaque. As the Google chief economist Hal Varian observed, computer mediated transactions allowed for "customization and personalization of the interactions by basing current transactions on earlier transactions or other relevant information. Instead of a 'one size fits all' model, the Web offers a 'market of one'" (Varian, 2010, p. 6). The behavioral insights derived through such interactions are less about whether the user posts cat videos, conspiracy theories or trenchant media critiques, as they are about the preparedness of users to post, to like, to comment and to share, and to give tangible shape to predictive data analytics (Hallsworth and Kirkman, 2020).

Trust and mistrust in an age of COVID-19

Many of the questions that have been raised about trust—in institutions, experts, government, and the media—have come into sharp focus with the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. It is important to note that the pandemic itself is not unprecedented: it is the fifth globally significant pandemic of the 21st century, after the SARS pandemic of 2002–04, the swine flu pandemic of 2009, the MERS pandemic of the 2010s, and the Ebola virus epidemic of 2013–16. But the global reach of COVID-19, and its enormous impact upon how we live, work, study, play and, indeed, hold conferences, gives it great significance as a unique event that sheds light on other phenomena.

The factors that have led to COVID-19 outbreaks in different countries have been many and varied, and are difficult to generalize about. We can, however, make some observations about those countries which have successfully "flattened the curve," or reduced the spread of the virus to near zero, and minimized fatalities resulting from acquiring the virus. Singapore, Finland, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Australia, and New Zealand are very different countries with quite varied systems of government, but all have managed to flatten the curve, in ways that suggest some common features of successful governance of the crisis. These include a preparedness to listen to and act upon expert advice on the part of political leaders, a robust public health infrastructure and, importantly, a degree of trust on the part of citizens to accept the advice of their governments and to act accordingly, as with the requirements for social distancing. We are reminded in these cases that governance incorporates far more than simply trust in the government, be it the political leaders or elected representatives. From this perspective, what is important is less whether we have Big Government or Small Government, or state regulation versus liberalized markets, but rather what the political scientist David Levi-Faur has termed "Big Governance," or the extension of regulatory functions into business organizations, co-regulatory agencies and civil society organizations, allowing for a

"growth . . . in the demand and supply of rules and regulation via hybrid modes of governance" (Levi-Faur, 2012, p. 13). In this paradigm, governments can be both smaller—or, more accurately, leaner—and more effective, as the model is one of partnership and policy co-design, rather than competition and political antagonism.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also thrown questions of trust into sharp relief. In some parts of the world, there have been highly visible civil disobedience against public lockdown edicts. But trust issues have arisen even in countries where the overall response of citizens to their government's handling of COVID-19 was generally positive. In the cases of Australia and Singapore, for example, controversies have arisen around contact tracing apps, promoted by governments to better detect the likelihood of infections spreading among people. Data privacy concerns have arisen in both countries, reinforced by prior activities by governments that have weakened trust around monitoring of technologies, including raids on the homes and offices of journalists and political critics, and perceived over-reach in anti-terrorism laws. COVID-19 has proven to be an important moment in considerations around the balance between personal digital privacy and public health, the role of public sector agencies as compared to private companies in contact tracing, and concerns about personal data being used beyond its stated purpose and beyond the period of public health crisis itself. It also drew attention to the different experiences, and degrees of vulnerability of diverse sections of the community. In the Australian case, the important leadership of figures such as Pat Turner, convenor of the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Peak Organisations and CEO of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, saw First Nations communities respond swiftly to the threat of the virus, averting what could have been dire consequences for vulnerable and at-risk populations (Turner, 2020).

Studying trust as an interdisciplinary project

As trust is such a core element of human interaction, there is an extensive literature across a range of fields concerning it, including contributions from philosophy and applied ethics, history, political theory, psychology, economics, and sociology. The sociologist Niklas Luhmann made the point that "a complete absence of trust would prevent one even getting up in the morning" (Luhmann, 1979, p. 4), while the philosopher Onora O'Neill observed that "each of us and every profession and every institution needs trust. We need it because we have to be able to rely on others acting as they say that they will, and because we need others to accept that we will act as we say we will" (O'Neill, 2010, p. 1). Trust can be studied at the level of the individual, at the level of social institutions, or that of societies as a whole. It points to both a degree of confidence in certain outcomes, but also to uncertainty as to whether they will be realized. It is not synonymous with truth, although truthful interactions characterize trustworthy people and are a pre-requisite for trust relations. Trust also needs to be differentiated from belief, since verification is always a contingent

dimension of trust: trust is only a meaningful variable when there is the possibility of its betrayal.

Trust is a foundational concept of both Western and Eastern philosophies. Thomas Hobbes understood trust as central to what he referred to what came to be known as the social contract "in which one or both parties are trusted to perform ... in future" (Baumgold, 2013, p. 845, quoting Hobbes, 2012). John Locke placed trust at the center of his conception of modern government, involving both a horizontal bond through which citizens trust in one another sufficiently to establish a political community, and a vertical bond between this political society and governmental powers (Dunn, 1984; Locke, 1988). For Immanuel Kant, trust is implicit in the "categorical imperative" since the autonomy of individuals is shaped by their dependency upon others i.e. we could not be autonomous subjects in the absence of trust in, and respect for, others (Kant, 1993; Mysjka, 2008). In *The Analects*, Confucius told his disciple Tzu-Kung that "The requisites of government are that there be sufficiency of food, sufficiency of military equipment, and the confidence of the people in their ruler." His further advice to Tzu-Kung when asked, "If one had to give up one of these three, which should one give up first?" "Give up arms." Confucius added when Tzu-kung said, "If one had to give up one of the remaining two, which should one give up first?"

> Give up food. Death has always been with us since the beginning of time, but when there is no trust, the common people will have nothing to stand on. (quoted in Ni, 2017, pp. 285–286).

Trust concerns personhood, or what it means to be both a trusting and a trustworthy individual. While trust can be a general attitude, it is also a form of situated or applied ethics: a person who is a medical professional, a lawyer or a journalist, for instance, has a professional code of ethics which they are obliged to adhere to, over and above questions of personal morality. Trust does not simply reside in whether another party is trustworthy, but has both objective and subjective dimensions. It may arise from institutional capacity, contractual obligation, a code of ethics, or a history of effectiveness and reliability, but it can also have a subjective dimension that is underpinned by the ethical character of individuals and institutions, and is dependent upon social context and lived experience.

An overarching institutional framework that maximises trust assumes that there is accountability on the part of those decision-makers in whom trust is placed, and that negative sanctions exist for breaches of trust. A persistent factor in the decline in political trust, or in political leaders, parties and elected representatives, is the loss of legitimacy arising from failures of trust, that can range from evidence of corruption and favoritism, the delegation of authority to unelected entities and experts, and to policy errors. The French political theorist Pierre Rosunvallon described trust as "an *institutional economizer*, in that it eliminates the need for various procedures of verification and proof" (Rosunvallon, 2008, p. 4).

Political and governmental institutions thus have to contend with various forms, and institutions, of what Rosunvallon terms "organized distrust." These can include oppositional political parties, organized interest groups, and—indeed—the media. An interesting feature of contemporary populist political movements is the extent to which they tie together a critique of established political elites with a critique of the media, accusing journalists and media organizations of foregoing their critical mission in order to become political "insiders." As such, social media is often championed by populist leaders as allowing for communication that is more authentic and unmediated than that which is directed through established news journalism and the mainstream media (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020). In the political sphere, social media can amplify the "paradox of authenticity" identified by Enli and Rosenberg, whereby "populism is characterized by anti-elitism, spontaneity, and outspokenness, which are also strategies to construct authenticity, and in a mediated environment which favors the authentic, populist politicians might get a strategic advantage" (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018, p. 9).

Sociologists have long focused on the concept of trust, to understand what binds—or fails to bind—individuals to a social order. In asking "How is society possible?", Georg Simmel observed that an individual in a society is both a person and the bearer of a social role (a merchant, a teacher, an artist, a politician, etc.), and is thus both a human subject and a "social individual." Moreover, each individual experiences the society in part as something that is external to them—the legal system, for instance, exists independently of the individuals that are subject to it (Möllering, 2001; Simmel, 1910). As a result, there is an intermediate level of trust between the trust that individuals have in one another, and trust in a society or a system, and that is trust in the institutions of a society. As trust is placed in both individual institutions and in an institutional order, there is interdependency in trust relationships between individuals, institutions, and society as a whole. Drawing upon the work of Max Weber, Nau has argued that "institutions represent the structuring principles of collective value systems. Ideas and interests manifest themselves in institutions" (Nau, 2005, p. 131). For Anthony Giddens, the problem of trust is more than individual confidence that a particular course of action will lead to a certain consequence (i.e., A trusts B to do X), but instead requires a "quality of faith," and "the faith that trust implies also tends to resist such calculative decision-making" (Giddens, 1990, p. 19). In Ulrich Beck's account, a characteristic of the "risk society" is endemic distrust of expert systems, and of the intellectuals and professionals associated with them, as "the discourse of risk begins where trust in our security and belief in progress ends . . . [and] where the perception of threatening risks determines thought and action" (Beck, 2010, p. 209).

Sociological work on trust complements philosophical analysis in drawing attention to three elements in conceptualizing trust (Banerjee et al., 2006; Levi, 2015). First, it draws attention to the limits of conceiving of trust as motivated entirely by either perceived instrumental gain or by morality or social bonds. Second, a distinction is made between dyadic trust, or trust between individuals or within small

groups, and embedded trust, which "rests in social networks and institutional arrangements that permit expectations about or social bonds based on the social roles, categorisation, and rules affecting others" (Levi, 2015, p. 666). The third contribution of sociology, and the one that is of most direct relevance to communication, is to draw attention to three levels of analysis: individual or interpersonal; institutional or organizational; and societal. Moreover, these are not separate levels of trust, as each interacts with the other, in both upwards and downwards directions (Fig. 1).[1]
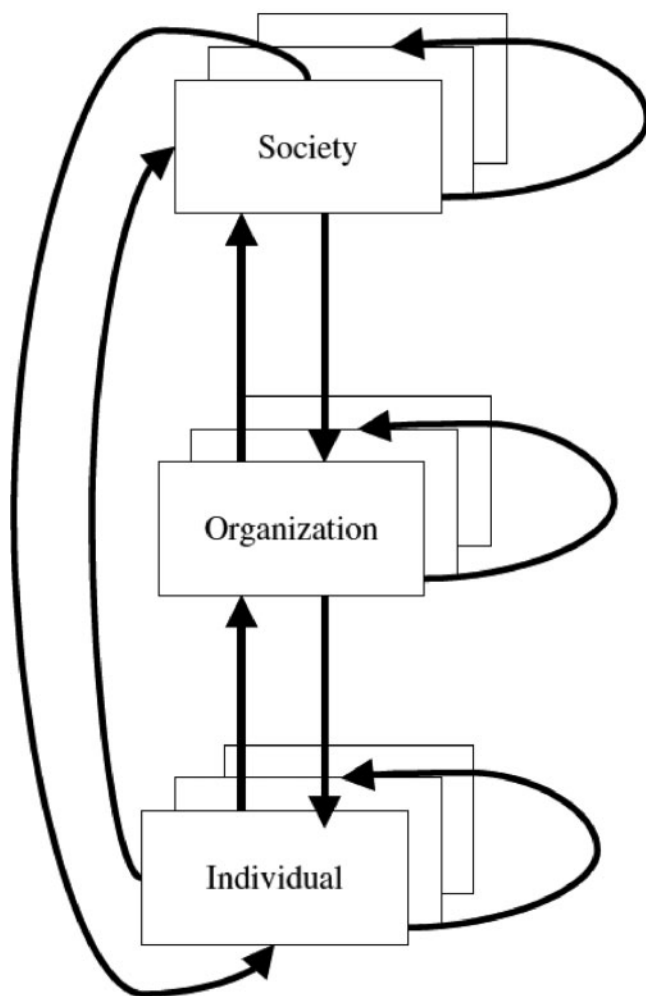
1 Three levels of trust: society, organizations and individuals. *Source*: (Banerjee et al., 2006).

The notion of there being three levels of trust also sits with recent work in economics, particularly theories associated with new institutional economics (North, 1990, 1994; Ostrom, 2010; Williamson, 2000). From the perspective of rational choice economics, trust is a strategic choice to cooperate towards shared goals, made by rational agents seeking to optimize outcomes in order to reduce transaction costs and manage uncertainty (Hardin, 2006; Tullock, 1985). But others—including economists—have contested this conflation of trust with rational and calculative behavior. The Nobel Laureate Kenneth Arrow identified trust as an "invisible institution" that made economies work more effectively, but which in itself "is not a commodity . . . if you have to buy it, you already have some doubts about what you've bought" (Arrow, 2013, p. 23). Oliver Williamson argued that an economic theory of trust required that attention be given to supervening social and cultural factors that promoted—or failed to promote—trust, that are over and above the strategic calculations of rational actors (Williamson, 1993).

The political economist Alfred Hirschman associated trust with morality, civic spirit, observance of ethical norms, love, and what Adam Smith termed "benevolence." Hirschman saw these attributes as a necessary element of any functioning political-economic system, but one that is consistently devalued in market economies, not least by economists who promote self-interest as a more powerful motivating force (Hirschman, 2013). Linda Steiner has proposed that a feminist media ethics questions a transactional approach to trust, arguing that "care is relevant to the political domain . . . it points to ways for radical restructuring of social, economic, and political policies" (Steiner, 2020, p. 439). From a First Nations perspective, Rigney (1999) argued for the necessity of recognizing racial standpoint as framing perspectives on matters such as truth and trust, and that "Indigenous people have the fundamental right to expect research and its epistemologies to address the issues and racializing practices that have been an inherent part of post-invasion history" (Rigney, 1999, p. 114).

The New Institutional Economics (NIE) advanced such discussions by broadening the definition of institutions to include informal as well as formal institutions. Douglass North defined institutions as "the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction" (North, 1994, p. 360). Institutions were understood by North as operating at two levels: (1) the *institutional arrangements* or governance structures through which resources are allocated within particular organizations, and which frame the ongoing market interactions between economic agents; and (2) the *institutional environment*, or the "rules of the game in a society . . . [and] the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction" (North, 1990, p. 3). Within the institutional environment, a further distinction is made between *formal institutions*, which include rules, laws, constitutions, allocations of property rights etc., and *informal institutions*, which include norms of behavior, conventions, and self-imposed codes of conduct.

Oliver Williamson proposed that the economics of institutions operated across four interconnected layers, which have their own discrete historical temporalities:

(1) historically and culturally embedded informal institutions, customs, traditions, norms and values; (2) the formal institutional environment, as manifested in constitutions, laws, bureaucracy, political institutions, etc.; (3) governance structures pertaining to contracts and the management of transaction costs within and between organizations; and (4) market transactions, which are best explained through neoclassical economic theories (Williamson, 2000). Trust relations are most clearly embedded in governance structures, but the effectiveness of such governance, and hence of the market system that operates through them, is contingent upon both the formal and informal institutions through which trust relations have come to be encapsulated over time. Understanding the interconnection between these layers, that operate in different forms of historical time, requires that close attention be given to the role played by communication in connecting individuals and societies, and institutions and cultures.

Communications and trust: a preliminary audit

A curious feature of the trust literature is the relative lack of reference to communication scholarship in the field.[2] Communication and the media tend to be referred to in functionalist terms, as contributing to interpersonal or societal trust, and scholarship on communication and trust rarely makes an appearance. For example, Barbara Misztal's *Trust in Modern Societies* presents the relationship between trust and communication from a functionalist sociological perspective, seeing communication as essentially a tool for building trust:

> Because in order to cultivate a trusting society there is a need for communication to be open and founded on trust, trust is both the fruit of good communication and its necessary precondition. Hence, to sustain the level of communication is essential for the existence of mutual trust (Misztal, 1996, p. 206).

Such a subsidiary positioning of communications by sociologists such as Misztal is in contrast to that of the philosopher John Dewey, who observed that "society exists not only by . . . communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in . . . communication" (Dewey, 1916, p. 5). In a similar vein, Raymond Williams rejected the proposition that communication is secondary to society, arguing that "society is a form of communication, through which experience is described, shared, modified, and preserved" (Williams, 1976, p. 10), while James Carey described communication as "the process whereby a culture is brought into existence" (Carey, 1989, p. 111). Most recently, Christian Fuchs has defined communication as "the process of the production and reproduction of sociality, social relations, social structures, social systems, and society" (Fuchs, 2020, p. 377).

Communication as a field brings considerable conceptual resources to questions of trust. Communications theories that advance our understanding of trust include theories of the public sphere (Habermas, 1974), the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1984), agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1993), the

concept of framing (Entman, 1993), semiotics and active audience theories (Fiske & Hartley, 1978; Hartley, 1982), the theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984; Strecker, 2018), cultivation analysis (Gerbner, 1998; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Morgan & Shanahan, 1997), and more. Recent work on post-truth (Waisbord, 2018), framing in networked environments (Entman & Usher, 2018), and affective news (Papacharissi, 2016) place communications scholarship at the forefront of debates around populism, misinformation and crises of generalized trust in liberal democracies. There is also a growing literature on trust in news media, advancing beyond general statements about "fake news" and "echo chambers" to systematic cross-national analyses of trust in different news brands (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

I have elsewhere undertaken a systematic literature review of uses of the concept of trust in six ICA journals: *Journal of Communication, Communication Theory, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, Human Communication Research, Communication, Culture & Critique* and *Annals of the International Communications Association* (Flew & Jiang, 2021; Flew & McWaters, 2020). A key finding of this literature review was that while use of the term "trust" itself is not high in the titles and abstracts of papers in these journals, the number of papers that develop trust frameworks and apply them empirically is quite high. Moreover, papers deal with trust at the interpersonal or intergroup (micro) levels, the level of organizations and professions (meso) and the macro-societal level.

The first significant analytical framework in communication that approached trust issues in a systematic manner was cultivation analysis, first developed in the 1970s by George Gerbner, Larry Gross and the "Cultural Indicators" research group (Gerbner, 1998; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Cultivation analysis is important as the first communications research framework that seeks to integrate macro-level arguments about mass media and societal trust with micro-level behavioral and attitudinal case studies. In the 2000s, the influence of public sphere theories became more apparent, as did the use of framing and agenda-setting theories (Bennett et al., 2004; Druckman & Bolsen, 2011). This also the period where studies concerning the impact of the Internet on social trust at all levels become more prevalent, and as do studies of trust and social media (Nisbet et al., 2012), communications and social capital (Rojas et al., 2011), political communication in an age of disrupted public spheres (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018), populist communication (Hameleers et al., 2018), and how discrimination affects Muslim Americans trust in the U.S. government (Saleem et al., 2019). There is a rich literature on interpersonal and intergroup communication topics including deception in mobile dating and the role of partisan selective sharing in online fact-checking (Markowitz & Hancock, 2018; Shin & Thorson, 2017), as well as organizational communication work on topics such as transparency in organizational practices, public relations in organizational network ecologies, and breaking into collaborative organizational teams (Christensen & Cheney, 2015; Woo & Leonardi, 2018; Yang & Taylor, 2015).

The Habermasian contribution

An obvious starting point for consideration of trust with regards to communication is found in the work of Jürgen Habermas. Among the many contributions of Habermas to contemporary philosophy and social theory, two in particular stand out from the communications perspective: the theory of the public sphere, and the theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1974, 1984). As is well known, Habermas proposed a normative ideal of the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas, 1974, p. 49). While the institutional forms of communication that emerged in liberal democracies came in theory to approximate such a public sphere, in practice the liberal-capitalist public sphere tended to be weakened by the dominance of commercial interests over the media, the influence of state institutions and the political process, and the growth of institutions and professions that seek to manage public communication, and with it the public sphere. The liberal public sphere, then, offers both the possibility of the formation of public opinion into political authority that approximates rationality, while at the same time having its own conditions of existence undercut by various interests that distort communication and the public sphere.

With *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas generalized claims around communicative rationality, proposing that the conditions for truthful statements were threefold: that they are propositionally valid, normatively right, and expressively sincere (Habermas, 1984, 2018; Strecker, 2018) The "three worlds" of the objective, the social, and the subjective thus constitute the domains of communicative action and interaction. Habermas's theory is not one, as is often presumed, that privileges objective rationality over the social or the expressive or emotional. Rather, he views the three elements as a triad: the "truth" of statements arises not simply out of what he termed epistemic rationality, but also out of ethical and moral rationality (the commitment to justice) and empathetic understanding of the other to whom one is communicating (Habermas, 2018, pp. 87–90).

At the same time, the Habermasian tradition has strongly anchored the question of trust to the search for truth, which has shaped understanding of communication in particular ways. An example can be seen with the relationship of news media and journalism to notions of truth and to trust. The news media, and journalism as a professional field, are held to have an important relationship to truth, and hence to trust, particularly in liberal democracies. As Sophia Rosenfeld has observed, the "republican imaginary" that drove the formation of modern representative democracies, promised a form of governance where "a moral and epistemic commitment to truth would undergird the establishment of the new political order," while at the same time "participation in the political process would also . . . aid the cause of truth's discovery and expression" (Rosenfeld, 2019, pp. 25–26).

The promise, then, is for the existence of both an inductive approach to the discovery of truth, whereby facts are discovered through the application of practical

reason and principled contestation among competing ideas, interests and ideologies, and a mass commitment to the truth, whereby the population as a whole are empowered to seek truth and to act upon it, through popular sovereignty as expressed through participation in a democratic polity. Popular trust in the institutions of democratic governance can therefore arise from the mutually reinforcing intersection of two potentially competing notions of truth: truth that is derived from the empowerment of ordinary people to seek and act upon information in order to reach consensus on forms of collective action, and truth that arises from the generation of expert knowledge that can "supply, candidly and transparently, the preliminary factual truths that they needed to make well-reasoned judgements" (Rosenfeld, 2019, p. 30).

This points to an empirical conception of truth, insofar as news media are the primary providers of information that is used by people as the basis for reasoned deliberation on alternative courses of action. This is what Stephen Coleman has referred to as first-order trust in news, which "involves an expectation that news producers will do what they are supposed to do: that they will try to tell us true stories and not made-up ones; that they will strive to be accurate rather than approximate; and that they will deliver the news hourly or daily, in a regular fashion, rather than haphazardly" (Coleman, 2012, p. 36). The ability to trust the news, and to trust the journalists who produce news, is an "institutional economiser" (Rosunvallon, 2008, p. 4), as it allows individuals access to a wide amount of information without having to undertake independent verification and proof of its factual status. While such resources cannot in and of themselves guarantee trust in individuals, institutions and the social order, communication functions here as a kind of "plumbing" for the *body politic*: if information can flow freely and openly through the channels of communication, then the social entity will function more effectively, as this will have addressed the potential blockage presented by a lack of trust.

Communication, truth and trust

In the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic, and the proliferation of "fake news," conspiracy theories and misinformation online, are we all Habermasians now? Is it time for communication scholars to take to the digital pumps, root out the fake news and misinformation, and enhance the flow of more truthful information into the global *body politic*, restoring its faded vitality in the new afterglow of an open and deliberative public sphere, thereby promoting greater trust in social institutions? The global wave of fact-checking initiatives, and the rise of research into disinformation and fake news, would seem to point in that direction. It is interesting to note how, in contrast to the earlier concerns about fake news, digital platforms such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter have taken a lead on promoting public health information and downgrading disinformation in the context of COVID-19. The days of being merely the conduits for messages sent by others, ranked by popularity unbounded by truth-claims, have passed, and a more activist role is asserted

in managing and curating the distribution of information flows through digital plat-forms. The de-platforming of Donald Trump in the wake of the January 6, 2021 storming of the Capitol Building was in many ways a belated reaction to incendiary communication and the spreading of mistruths, but had been a logical trajectory of where such platforms were going in managing interactions on their sites. The days of Twitter CEO Dick Costolo proclaiming his platform to lead "the free speech wing of the free speech party" (Sydell, 2013), or Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg saying that his company "should not be the arbiters of truth" (Zuckerberg, quoted in Rabin-Havt, 2020), seemed a long time ago.

What I want to propose is that a focus upon questions of trust would provide, at the least, a useful complement to the many studies of truth and deception in com-munication studies. One reason why the study of truth has been important in com-munication has been its connection to theories of ideology. The Sender-Message-Receiver model of the communications process has always had within it the possibil-ity of miscommunication, or distorted communication, where the message as re-ceived is not the same as the message as sent, or at least as understood by its sender. The possibility of systematically distorted communication, or communication with embedded forms of bias, inaccuracy or ideological slant, connects communication to critical social theory through the concept of ideology.

At this point, we need to note that, conceptually, the study of ideology can branch in different directions, with the tradition associated with Jürgen Habermas and that associated with Michel Foucault being two distinct poles. In the Habermasian tradition, ideology exists in opposition to a universalist conception of reason, with which the search for truth is bound up (Porter, 2006). In contrast, in Foucault's account, truth, power and knowledge are bound together in complex and historically shifting ways. Foucault was less interested in ideology than in what Michele Barrett termed the "politics of truth" (Barrett, 1991), where "truth isn't out-side power, or deprived of power. . . . truth is of the world: it is produced by virtue of multiple constraints" (Foucault, 1980), p. 131). For Foucault "there can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth . . . We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercize power except through the production of truth" (Foucault, 1980, p. 93).

There is much here that is familiar to many readers, and I will not dwell further on the relationship between the work of Habermas and Foucault on questions of truth. I will, however, conclude by discussing two fields of research where a focus upon trust, and not simply upon truth, could be fruitful. One is news media and journalism. The 2000s and 2010s have been a thriving time for journalism research, in an almost inverse relationship to how actual news organizations have been faring as businesses around the world. There is now no shortage of critique of news media framing of stories, identification of how media elites align with political, economic and other elites, fact-checking and exposés, critical commentary on how the Internet challenges traditional news media gatekeeping models, and analyses of the new dynamism from the "peripheries" of the field.

Are we in danger, however, of "critiquing ourselves to death" with regards to news, to paraphrase Neil Postman? Have communication scholars set up journalism to fail, as Witschge and Deuze suggest (Witschge & Deuze, 2020), with a normative commitment to truth-telling that is unlikely to ever be met in practice, as there are not universally shared norms as to what the truth is? In the current context, we have a global crisis of commercially-funded news, which has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Flew, 2021). COVID-19 has seen a sharp upturn in news consumption as publics seek information about the pandemic, its societal impact, and the nature of restrictions on public activity and when they are likely to be lifted, while the decline in advertising revenues that has been taking place for some years has been accelerated by the resulting economic downturn. After many years of critique of the media establishment, economically sustainable alternatives to mainstream, advertiser-funded journalism have not emerged to the degree once anticipated. The new digital-only news publications have proven to be vulnerable to changes in digital platform algorithms, and cannot hire journalists on anything like the scale of traditional news media. It is also not apparent that the public has embraced alternative news sources to the degree that was once anticipated. The survey of election news consumption during the 2019 U.K. General Election undertaken by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that 67% of time spent on online news sites was spent on five sites (BBC News, *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, *The Sun* and *The Mirror*), and that at least 80% of time was spent on ten mainstream news media sites (Fletcher et al., 2020). It has become a consistent finding of surveys on trust in news that news content accessed from social media is trusted less on average than that accessed from established news media brands (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Flew et al., 2020; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

The association of journalism with the provision of factual information, with matters of opinion and interpretation left to others to determine, is inadequate from several angles. For instance, the media have long been players in the political arena. Max Weber observed in 1910, at the Congress of Sociologists in Frankfurt, that "one hundred and fifty years ago the British Parliament forced journalists to apologize on their knees for breach of privilege after they reported about its sessions; yet today a mere threat from the press not to print the speeches of representatives forces Parliament to its knees" (Weber, 1976, p. 97). The media also have an oversight role with regards to the power of governments, which includes questioning the truthfulness of statements, as the legitimacy of media can depend upon what Rosunvallon termed "encouraging society to subject itself to constant scrutiny. In this respect, distrust served as the basis of a demanding and constructive vision of politics" (Rosunvallon, 2008, p. 120). The media are also self-styled representatives of monitory democracy who do not scrutinize power for its own sake, but ostensibly on behalf of the citizenry. This has been a characteristic of popular journalism going back at least as far as the radical pamphlets of the French Revolution, as John Hartley has observed (Hartley, 1996), and it has acquired new energy in an age of digital media. John Keane has observed that "in the era of communicative abundance, no hidden

topic is protected unconditionally from media coverage, and from possible politicization; the more 'private' it is, the more 'publicity' it seems to get" (Keane, 2009, p. 740).

Demands that journalists tell the truth, engage in fact-checking, and avoid misinformation, are at the core of expectations of the news media in a liberal democracy. At the same time, the expectation that such measures will fully address trust issues with the news comes up against the problem that the provision of factual information is not the only function sought from news media. As we know from studies of "fake news," the supply of misinformation would not be a significant an issue were it not for the two reasons why we seek out news: to derive benefits from accurate and up-to-date information, and to derive psychic benefit from consuming stories that conform to our already existing "shared mental models" of how the world does or should work (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Denzau & North, 1994). If there is a turn from commercial news media being primarily advertiser-financed to being increasingly funded by its users as subscribers—a trend that was occurring well in advance of COVID-19, and will no doubt be accelerated by it—then we are likely to see both a rise in partisan news media and commercial success for those news brands perceived to be most trusted by their users. In this respect, understanding the bases of trust in news, and in different news brands, is as important a goal for communication scholars as exposing untruths and misinformation, as truth is a necessary but not sufficient condition for gaining trust.

The other issue to consider when discussing communication, truth and trust is the global rise of populism. Populism has been a topic that moved quickly from the relative margins of social theory to the centre in the wake of events such as the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President and the "Brexit" referendum which saw the U.K. vote to leave the European Union (both in 2016). As Benjamin Moffitt has observed, the legacies of populism will continue to animate political life long after the current wave of populist leaders, since "while a populist actor can disappear from the political landscape, he or she can have significant long-term cultural and institutional effects—effects that, say, a post-Trump Republican Party (and US politics more generally) will surely have to grapple with" (Moffitt, 2020, p. 9). Amidst the many and varied definitions of populism now in circulation, three features seem to be relatively consistent: a distrust of national and (particularly) global elites; a championing of "the people" and the "popular will" against such elites; and a propensity towards conspiracy theories, or—more favourably viewed—alternative explanations of social phenomena to those which are dominant among the most prominent "official" decision-makers in government, business, academia, the media, etc.

It is the last of these which has become a particular pre-occupation in the age of COVID-19, as public health officials and (some) political leaders find themselves facing off against a byzantine series of theories on the sources of the virus, the interests that lie behind current public policy towards the pandemic, and the implications of the lockdown. Take a bat from Wuhan, a 5G phone tower, Bill Gates, the Chinese Communist Party, three lizards, add water, blend for 15 seconds and . . .

voilá. As with disinformation and fake news generally, considerable academic and other resources are being devoted to addressing the spread of COVID-19 conspiracy theories, and—in contrast to the patchy and belated response to the spread of fake news in 2015-2016—digital platform companies have been at the forefront of responding to its spread.

But again, the roots of the circulation of conspiracy theories are not necessarily to be found in the conspiracy theories themselves. A focus on trust, and both the sources and the consequences of distrust, can be useful here. Charles Tilly observed that "trust networks" have been one way in which groups have banded together historically in the face of rulers and institutions that they distrust, and that such groups require stories that bind them together in the face of adversity (Tilly, 2005). It may be that conspiracy theories are one of those integrative devices that bind groups and communities who perceive themselves to be removed from existing elites and power networks. In which case, rather than playing "whack-a-mole" and trying to drive conspiracy theories off the Internet—which is surely a Sisyphean labour since social media is an archetypal incubator of in-group identities (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020)—we could instead be looking at the factors that are promoting distrust of social, economic and political institutions. Evidence of political and business corruption, lack of accountability and transparency of key institutions, poor governance practices, rising social and economic inequality, a gap between the "winners" and "losers" from economic globalization, failure to adequately scrutinize powerful institutions by the media: all suggest themselves as factors that would catalyze rising levels of mistrust, which extends in its outer reaches to conspiracy theories and populist movements.

As communications scholars, and in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic, we have some unique challenges, and contributions to be made. The response to COVID-19 has been a large-scale, real time experiment in reconfiguring relations between face-to-face interactions and mediated communication, and our field is well placed to analyse the implications of such shifts. We also have a great deal to say about the sources of societal mistrust, and the role played by communications in this: we need to go beyond the ethics of the exposé, where we critically reveal the operations of power—the villains behind the curtains—to the ethics of community, shared responsibility, and care. This would distinguish our critical work from the stew of angry populism and conspiracy theories, all of whom lay their own claims to the truth. Finally, COVID-19 has drawn attention to important questions of governance, and the relationship of trust to effective stewardship of resources and harnessing of collective effort. Lessons learnt from the pandemic, both positive and negative, will be invaluable to the other pressing challenges that we face, most notably addressing the global implications of climate change.

Endnotes

1. While Banerjee *et al.* point to upwards and downwards flows, and hence to nine levels of analysis, for reasons of simplification in this study we are focusing on seven, and treating studies that move from micro to macro, or macro to micro, as having a similar cross-field focus.
2. Key texts such as Hardin (2002, 2006) and Uslaner (2002) contain no references to media or communication at all, although Hardin briefly discusses television in the context of Robert Putnam's theory of social capital (Hardin, 2006), pp. 110–111). Misztal (1996) does discuss communication at several points, but does so primarily in terms of how mediated communication compares to face-to-face interaction (Misztal, 1996, pp. 180–181), or its functional contribution to the formation of social capital (Misztal, 1996, pp. 206, 214).

Acknowledgements

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