Commonplace • Series 3.1: Tech, Tools, & Media

Paths into the Future of Trust

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Twenty million Americans believe that armed insurrection against the American government is warranted. Even more believe the most recent national elections were illegitimate. More that one million Americans are dead from COVID, many because they believed the disease wasn’t real and the vaccines were a hoax. How did we get here? To a point where so many people still believe that the market will fix the problems that unregulated markets cause? And to a point where an American president can lead a mob to storm the capitol and unleashing forces that propel an assassin into the home of the Speaker of the House?

In our call, we asked: “How can people apparently know so little when so much information surrounds us?” To be sure, what people know they learn from what they hear from family, in church, and at school. But overwhelmingly what people know comes from the information they hear, read, and see on television, radio, newspapers, magazines, the web, and social media. An information ecosystem populated by once reliable media outlets is no longer with us. Our increasingly fragmented communication universe has led us to what some call a state of “information disorder,” pervasive mis-and disinformation, and a profound lack of trust in institutions and even in other people.

This series explores and identifies how we might bolster trust and authenticity by building better technology, tools, and media designed for creating verifiable and authenticated communications. Given the mis-/disinformation landscape, we put special focus on exploring the shifting world of journalism. It is the role of journalism to provide the public with verified information. In theory, journalists are among our leading arbiters of facts and supporters of democracy, truth, and trust. To learn more, we reached out to journalists and photojournalists, academics and practitioners, legal experts and policy wonks, tapping into their particular areas of expertise.

The common theme that emerged throughout the dozen entries published here? The Future of Trust. Drilling down, we identified three other topic streams:

1. Perspectives on Trust: Three essays unpack the basic question: “To Trust or Not to Trust?”

In “The Challenge to the Photographic Record,” Fred Ritchin, Emeritus Dean of the International Center of Photography, reflects upon the fragmentary nature of photographic representation and how the advent of artificial intelligence – or synthetic AI-washing - jeopardizes photography as historical evidence and the role of the photographer as credible witness. “In Open We Trust?” Ashwin Ramaswami, The Stanford Daily’s first Chief Technology Officer now at Georgetown Law, analyzes the pros and cons of the Open Source software movement as it has grown from a “hobbyist” trend to a major force of innovation. Given that we need “trustworthy, safe, functional, secure, sustainable software and infrastructure,” he asks: “How do we build trust
in the open source software ecosystem?" In “Decentralized Digital Identities,” David Tomchak of Oxford’s Internet Institute and the Web3 Foundation’s Ursula O’Kuinglytons explore how new Web 3 technologies can be used to extract new value and bolster trust in the media industry while giving users and publishers more agency over their data.

2. Provenance in Praxis: Five essays take a look at technology and new tools actively being deployed in the field by journalists and media organizations to bolster the authenticity of their content.

In “It’s All about the Provenance,” former Associate Press photojournalist Santiago Lyon, now head of advocacy and education for the Content Authenticity Initiative at Adobe, makes the case for provenance as a solution to the problem of authenticating photojournalism and other media assets. “Proving where, when, and how those files were created, tracking any changes that they might undergo in the editing process, and ultimately sharing this information with the consumer is a hugely important way forward in helping us navigate this increasingly confusing media landscape,” he writes. Not so fast, counters Raquel Vazquez Llorente who in “Trusting Video in the Age of Generative AI,” analyzes myths and realities of building provenance and authenticity technology. Llorente, head of law and policy at WITNESS maintains that in critical situations where mis/disinformation is rampant, “authenticity technologies may unintendedly contribute to the ‘firehose of falsehood’ by producing content with confusing metadata.” She argues: “For provenance and authenticity technologies, no data is better than inaccurate data.” Meanwhile, as important historical sites continue to be destroyed in the war between Russia and Ukraine, Adri Kornfein and her Stanford student team have expanded their thinking around provenance models and the authentication of photogrammetry. In “Authenticity in 3-D: Verifying Photogrammetry Models,” the team introduces an interface that journalists can use to better authenticate photogrammetric models, along with other applications including journalistic reconstructions of war zone scenes, and 3-D authentication technology for emerging virtual worlds: crediting artists for their 3-D work, or proving authenticity for digital goods being traded, for example. “3-D authentication tactics are necessary for all of these features and will be the basis of trust between the virtual and real world,” they write. Speaking of the real world, Lena Arkawi and her team at Sourceable, present a new technological toolkit they contend can help journalists collect and verify information while reporting from the field. In “Revolutionizing News in Crisis Zones” they examine the current use-cases for their solution as well as its possible limitations. Finally, Maggie Hughes and her MIT-based team just want to talk. In “Personal Experience for Shared Sense of Understanding,” they outline their project Real Talk and make the case for leveraging digital technology and the use of facilitated conversations among often underheard communities to “enable shared understanding within and across divides through prioritization of personal experience over polarized opinion” fomenting “a new and grassroots means of authentic, experience-based media creation.”

3. The Magic of Alternatives: In our final section, four teams take a step back and ask us to re-assess our relationship with technology. Looking back and looking ahead, they ask hard questions about whether the
arguments for technological “progress” serve up solutions that actually address community – and individual – needs.

In his compelling video essay, “Five Tools for a Post-Trust World,” Ruby Thelot, researcher and founder of design studio 13101401 Inc., broaches “the topic of information resistance in a post-truth world.” He likens techno-evangelists – who have a vested interest in maintaining the mystification of technology - to “modern magicians.” With so few points of leverage against “the cloud,” he offers a 5-point mini-manifesto for navigating and combating the ever-complex “techno-magic.” Echoing Thelot, in “Friction in Cyborg Community,” the University of Colorado’s Boulder-based Sacred Stack team remind us that the so-called “tech stack” – server, network, apps, lines of code – doesn’t work without a “weaving-together of humans and machines.” They ask: “How do we make these things more applicable to a daily practice, as opposed to being merely a conversation that is going on in tech circles?” They remind us that the “sacred stack” can mystify – just like the tech stack, too. In her podcast “TransPose: Physical Media Access as an Act of Curiosity,” Christine Sweeney also turns to the human experience. She asks: “With so much automated digital curation, what would it look like if we followed our own curiosities?” Rather than being spoon-fed information based on “what an algorithm has decided we should know,” what if we followed our curiosity to find out “what we want to know?” Listen up! Finally, Macy MacDonald of the Fischer Center for the Study of Gender and Justice closes the conversation with relationship advice. In “Embracing Open Relationships with Our Network Tech,” MacDonald looks outside the box and suggests we adopt a feminist, polyamorous mindset towards tech. She encourages us to break out of traditional relationship thinking, just like any relationship columnist might. Doing so and “exploring how a commitment to mutual flourishing and responsiveness, would reconfigure networks and trust as we practice them,” she contends.

We hope you enjoy reading the articles in this series as much as we did. We encourage you to take advantage of PubPub’s commenting feature to let the authors know your thoughts and questions. Where did you agree or disagree? What did you find that you may put to use in your own organization? What did you find inspiring?

What did we find inspiring? Change, as change does, continues.

Thank you to all 28 contributors and to our managing editor Sarah Guilliford for a fascinating read. Peter and Ann also thank the Filecoin Foundation for introducing us to one another. Go forth and enjoy! ##

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