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Citation: Collins, R. (2009). Trust and trustworthiness in the fourth and fifth estates. *International Journal of Communication*, 3, pp. 61-86.

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Trust and Trustworthiness in the Fourth and Fifth Estates

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We live in an age of communication technologies.¹ 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. 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 at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/radio4/reith2002/lecture5.shtml?print>).²

Introduction

Trust, or its absence, is a current high fashion topic in the social sciences.³ 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 presumed erosion of the trust that is necessary for us to live socially) have risen in social scientific

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Date submitted: 2008-10-24

¹ 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., & Held, T. (Eds.) (2008). *Mehr Vertrauen in Inhalte*, Berlin. Vistas & Duesseldorf, Landesanstalt fuer Medien, pp. 59- 90. A shorter version is in *Communication et Strategies* 71/3; 57-78, 2008. The author is indebted to John Tulloch for his suggestions concerning citizen journalism.

² Citations from O'Neill 2002 are from the unpaginated online source accessed on Dec. 12, 2008.

³ 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 June 15, 2008.

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, p. 362) makes the point eloquently. Onora O'Neill (2005)⁴ 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.

But, despite its contemporary scholarly salience, trust is, curiously, a relatively new focus for social science — as Luhmann (1988) observed, trust was not a topic addressed in mainstream sociology.

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 and 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 the international literature when Putnam (2000) turned his attention to social capital in the United States . . . Notoriously, Putnam argued that generalized trust is diminishing rapidly and systematically in the U.S., at least since the 1970s. Since then, the empirical validity of this pessimistic claim has been highly contested [Stolle & Hooghe, 2005]. (Reeskens & Hooghe, 2008, p. 517)

Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider’s (1983) *The Confidence Gap* (which focused on Americans’ dissatisfaction with American leaders and institutions) has a claim to have anticipated the pervasive concern about erosion of trust attributed to Putnam’s insights and Eric Uslaner’s (2002) *The Moral Foundations of Trust*, and Richard Sennett’s *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) provides further evidence of widespread scholarly concern. The imputed erosion of trust and social capital in modern societies⁵ has powerful implications for economics as well as social and political studies generally, as Uslaner recognised in claims such as these:

⁴ I quote from the original English language version supplied to me as a text file by the author rather than from the German language published version.

⁵ 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 for not so doing, particularly O’Neill, who stated, “Trust, it is constantly observed, is hard earned and easily dissipated. It

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, p. 26).

Trust helps us solve collective action problems by reducing transaction costs (Uslaner 2002a, p. 2).

Clearly, it is not just transaction costs that trust and high quotients of social capital reduce but also security, audit, search, and other costs.⁶ Trust fills in for the incompleteness of contracts and thus provides a rationale for both 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, Luhmann, 1979, and Williamson, 1991). Onora O'Neill has rightly pointed both to the necessity of trust — somewhere in a system of accountability there has to be a locus of trust — and to the perils of alternatives to systems of trust, those she describes as the “abstract systems of control and audit” (O'Neill, 2002b, p. vii. See also Power, 1997). These control and audit systems, latterly, have come, in many instances, to supplant the “Traditional approaches to compliance [which] relied heavily on cultures of trust” (O'Neill, 2005, p. 1).

The large-scale resonances of the supposed 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, 1992,⁷ 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* presents an outstanding argument for this view: 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 (2002.⁸ 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.”⁹ Evidence is admittedly fragmentary and often commissioned and circulated by interested parties, but Norris' point is well made.

is valuable social capital and not to be squandered” (O'Neill, 2002:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/radio4/reith2002/lecture1.shtml?print> accessed on Dec.12, 2008).

⁶ See Guerra, G., Zizzo, D., Dutton, W., & Peltu, M. (2003).

⁷ Beck states “Risks experienced presume a *normative horizon* of lost security and broken trust (1992, p. 28).

⁸ Citation from unpaginated Web source.

⁹ Norris's scepticism about cross-national validity of Putnam's, and Putnam-like claims is echoed by Reeskens and 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

Despite O'Neill's claim, in her *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics*, that "reported levels of trust in newspaper journalists are generally far lower than levels of trust in all holders of public office . . . Even lower than levels of trust in politicians" (O'Neill, 2002a, p. 175), there is no consensus either that, on the one hand, trust and social capital have significantly and generally diminished or, on the other, that the media are either particularly mistrusted or are key agents in a general and serious decline in social trust.

In 2006, a poll of media users in 10 countries (commissioned by the BBC, Reuters and the Media Center¹⁰ and conducted by GlobeScan) found that "media is trusted by an average of 61% compared to 52% for governments across the countries polled . . ." although respondents in the USA and Britain trusted their governments somewhat more than their media (but see the findings of YouGov's 2007 poll below). Indeed, this survey found that "Trust in media has increased overall over the last four years — in Britain, up from 29% to 47%, and in the U.S., from 52% to 59%" (BBC, 2006, p. 2), and also found that two-thirds of respondents thought the media reported the news accurately (BBC, 2006, p. 1). Martin Brookes, in his *Watching Alone. Social Capital and Public Service Broadcasting* (Brookes, 2004) lends support to this view — he proposed that, contrary to Putnam's claims, television provides material for "water cooler" conversation and thus builds, not diminishes, social capital. Further, Zhang and 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).

Although there may be scant evidence of a consistent and convincing match between a pervasive social scientific (and public policy) concern about the media as a destroyer of trust and social capital (see the *compte rendu* provided by Bakir & Barlow, 2007, around p. 5), there is evidence that UK respondents perceive there to be a hierarchy of media trustworthiness as a tabulation of 2007 YouGov poll evidence below suggests.

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, p. 517). See also Newton, 1995.

¹⁰ At the American Press Institute (see http://www.mediacenter.org/pages/mc/trust_in_media/ accessed on Dec. 12, 2008, for a range of pages of findings on trust and the media.

***% of respondents trusting a fair amount
or a great deal***

Family doctors	87
Judges	64
Journalists on "up market" newspapers	44
Television	35
Estate agents	11
Politicians	10
Second hand car salesmen	4

***% of respondents trusting a fair amount
or a great deal***

BBC news journalists	56
ITV news journalists	47
Sky news journalists	38

Source: <http://www.yougov.com/uk/archives/pdf/2007%2008%2008%20EMF.pdf> accessed on Dec. 12, 2008.

But whether or not the media are trusted more than governments and/or are notably responsible for a contemporary decline in trust, all of this presumes that trust is a good thing — as, indeed, it is when the object of trust is worthy of trust. But when trust is misplaced, reposed in an untrustworthy person, process, or institution, then there may be too much trust, too much of a good thing. The trust-infused system of "club governance" (Marquand, 1988, Moran, 2003), that is, governance based on shared understandings, assumptions, and trust between parties, was described by Marquand as:

The atmosphere of British government was that of a club, whose members trusted each other to observe the spirit of the club rules; the notion that the principles underlying the rules should be clearly defined and publicly proclaimed was profoundly alien. (Marquand, 1988, p. 178)

For Moran, it was epitomised by UK broadcasting governance. In both instances, the potential demerits of trust-based systems are exemplified.

This high-level scholarly literature on trust, risk, and the role of the media has focused on one-way, offline, conventional mass media rather than online media. 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 and 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, p. 4). But here, too, 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 and Collins (2005, p. 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.” Findings from the most recent Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS, 2007, p. 28) were consistent with those from 2003.¹¹ These findings, however, need to be considered in relation to Globescan’s finding (2006, p. 5) that only Internet blogs were trusted less than news Web sites as media news sources (intriguingly, the most mistrusted news source was family, friends, and colleagues).¹² Latterly, Dutton (2007) has argued that Internet-based information media have established themselves as a “fifth estate,” complementing and extending the fourth estate’s (i.e., the “legacy” mass media of the newspaper press and broadcasting) role of holding the powerful to account.

The Sources of Trust

What makes for trustworthiness in the media? Hewison and Holden (2004, pp. 33–34) propose that:

Trust is produced by a relationship between individuals or groups on the one hand, and public institutions where there is effective interaction and where the representatives of the institution are perceived to be straightforward and honest. Trust in an institution is enhanced where the institution is perceived to be independent, and trust increases the more ‘local’ the institution is perceived to be.

These criteria are roughly, if not completely compatible with the empirical findings of the YouGov poll previously cited. Although there is something tautological about identifying trustworthiness as a

¹¹ 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 while 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.

¹² Internet blogs were trusted by 25% and mistrusted by 23% of respondents; news Web sites were trusted by 38% and mistrusted by 17%; friends, family, and colleagues were trusted by 62% and mistrusted by 30% (Globescan, 2006, p. 5).

property of those “perceived to be straightforward and honest,” the criteria of effective interaction and localness seem likely to underpin the high perceived trustworthiness of family doctors; and the criterion of independence to underpin both the high ranking of judges and the relatively high ranking of BBC journalists when compared to ITV and Sky journalists.

O'Neill presents a different account of the sources of trust. She 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 time- honoured, 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 at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/radio4/reith2002/lecture5.shtml?print> accessed on Dec. 12, 2008)

O'Neill 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.¹³ This is, as I shall argue below, a misleading coconut of “information age2” communication and its trustworthiness. But O'Neill's contention that dialogue provides, through mutual checking and verification, possibilities of trust enhancement is potentially very productive. Although this dialogic capacity is largely absent (a few mitigating factors are 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*¹⁴) in traditional “one to many” mass media, it is potentially strongly present in the “Web 2.0” generation of online media. Web 2.0 postdates O'Neill's and Putnam's arguments (and those of their contemporaries) and, consequently, is not considered in the literature previously cited.¹⁵

Web 2.0¹⁶ 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

¹³ Clearly, contemporary life includes both face-to-face, two-way, and “information age” one-way, communication.

¹⁴ *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 accessed on May 16, 2008).

¹⁵ Although *Wikipedia*, an outstanding instance of Web 2.0 media, dates from 2001.

¹⁶ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2 accessed on March 6, 2007.

people use them.”¹⁷ Such applications often employ and foster collaboration and dialogue, and the intrinsic character of Web 2.0 Internet practices may, if O'Neill is right about the trust-fostering attributes of dialogue, thus enhance trustworthiness and establish cyberspace, or at least an element of it, as no less, and perhaps more, trustworthy than its offline equivalent. O'Neill's focus on one to many offline mass media echoes Putnam (and others) and precludes her from considering the positive potential of Web 2.0 dialogic media. Indeed, she argues “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” (O'Neill, 2002, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/radio4/reith2002/lecture5.shtml?print#top> accessed on Dec. 12, 2008). Moreover, she argues¹⁸ 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 to 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 that form the main object of her attention. Interactive Web 2.0 media may thus potentially satisfy the normative criteria implicit in 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 at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/radio4/reith2002/lecture4.shtml?print> accessed on Dec. 12, 2008)

O'Neill makes some sensible and constructive supply-side arguments, considered below, for enhancing the trustworthiness of conventional mass media. Similarly, contributors to Mansell and Collins' (2005) collection also propose ways to make cyberspace more trustworthy (e.g., by improving authentication and “transitivity”¹⁹ — that is, the authentication of an unknown by a trusted known) and thus less vulnerable to criminal abuse. Adoption of such recommendations is desirable and potentially applicable to both on and offline media. But such arguments do not acknowledge Web 2.0 media's greater intrinsic potential trustworthiness (though, of course, whether this potential trustworthiness is realised is

¹⁷ *Web 2.0 Compact Definition: Trying Again*. At

http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2006/12/web_20_compact.html accessed on March 6, 2007.

¹⁸ Her most persuasive and fully worked out arguments are to be found in her *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics* (O'Neill, 2002a).

¹⁹ See O'Hara and Shadbolt, 2005, pp. 132-134.

an 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.

A plurality of sources of trust is thus proposed. Hewison and Holden, non-tautologically, identify:

- Source independence
- Localism
- Effective interaction

Their criterion of "effective interaction" is synonymous with O'Neill's prescription of a dialogic relationship and their criterion of "localism" also maps onto O'Neill's notion of dialogue. However, Hewison and Holden's notion of source independence is not implicit in O'Neill's notion of dialogue, but is a principle that she affirms elsewhere. See, for example, O'Neill 2004a:

Reuters have taken various measures to back their 'Independence and Trust' principles,²⁰ which include freedom from bias . . . Their approach to self-regulation both prescribes standards and establishes certain structures and disciplines to support adherence to those standards . . . They impose some routine disciplines on their financial journalists, by requiring them to declare shareholdings in companies on which they report to their managers, and to refrain from dealing in those shares during the time in which they report. Reuters' journalists therefore face disciplines that those who work for the BBC . . . do not face. Journalists and editors working for . . . the BBC do not routinely have to declare their interests, or their conflicts of interest to their managers (let alone their audiences) or to withdraw from broadcasting on topics in which they have a financial interest. (O'Neill, 2004a, np)

"Independence" thus inheres both in institutional status (e.g., the prohibition of Reuters passing "into the hands of any one interest, group or faction") and in the practices of content sources (notably journalists and editors). These are procedural measures, designed to foster what I shall call "authoritativeness," and though considered in the context of Reuters' offline activities, are potentially applicable to both on and offline media.

²⁰ See the Reuters "Independence and Trust" principles: "Reuters shall at no time pass into the hands of any one interest, group or faction"; "the integrity, independence and freedom from bias of Reuters shall at all times be fully preserved"; and "Reuters shall supply unbiased and reliable news." See <http://about.reuters.com/aboutus/editorial/independence.asp> accessed on Feb. 16, 2006.

Trust, Accountability and On and Offline Media

Trust hitherto has rested with established media brands. Because information is an “experience good,”²¹ 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. The UK public, for example, tends to trust the BBC more than other media. The BBC’s own claim that “The public trusts BBC news more than that of any other news provider” (BBC, 2004, p. 45) was supported by a YouGov poll (conducted in January 2005) which found²² that the BBC is “still the most trusted for news.”²³ The 2005 YouGov finding was itself echoed by the greater trust invested in BBC journalists (when compared to ITV and Sky journalists) found by YouGov’s 2007 poll cited earlier.

The BBC has proposed that the trust it 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, p. 8). The Alexa rankings for UK Internet “top sites” (http://www.alexa.com/site/ds/top_sites?cc=GB&ts_mode=country&lang=none accessed on June 19, 2008) identified the BBC as the top media site (ranked seventh, after 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, by the *Guardian Unlimited* (ranked 24th) and *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* (ranked 42nd and 43rd). The “page strength” ranking site SEOmoz²⁴ rated the BBC and online *Daily Telegraph* sites 10/10, while the online *Guardian* earned a rating of 9/10, and *The Times* 8.5/10. All were, therefore, “Among the most popular and important sites/pages on the Web; you’ve achieved near legendary status.” These ratings suggest both the importance of incumbency and its fungibility across platforms.

Although O’Neill constructs trust as a product of dialogue, that is, as an attribute engendered through contact and the resulting ability to check and verify propositions and to hold trust claimants to account, she distinguishes between traditional and modern practices of trust. Dialogue is characteristic of trust construction in traditional societies whereas trust building, in modern societies, is based on formal

²¹ 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 and Davies, 1997, in respect to public service broadcasting). de Long and 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.

²² YouGov press release at http://www.yougov.com/archives/pdf/OMI050101003_2.pdf accessed on Feb. 27, 2006.

²³ But see Aitken, 2007.

²⁴ See www.seomoz.org. Page Strength scores are determined by collecting data from external sources such as Yahoo, Alexa, and Google. SEOmoz collects this data tens of thousands of times a day . . . See <http://www.seomoz.org/dp/page-strength-faq> accessed on Dec. 12, 2008.

structures of accountability and powers of sanction. This is because large-scale (modern) societies cannot generate a generalised trust through the face-to-face contact assumed to underpin its generation in families and in traditional societies. The mass media are thus seen as one of the main contemporary agencies through which power holders are held to account and through which trust is, or ought to be, built. They stand in for the face-to-face, dialogic contact deemed to underpin trust in traditional societies and do the checking out of strangers and institutions, testing of credentials, and authentication of sources that enable us, at best, “to place trust with discrimination.” (O’Neill, 2002 at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/radio4/reith2002/lecture5.shtml?print> accessed on Dec. 12, 2008). At its most sober (and, therefore, little known), this holding to account may be seen on Channel 4’s (a UK public service television channel) 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/> accessed on Dec. 12, 2008. The media’s function of holding to account can be seen manifested more vividly in headlines such as those sported in the UK “tabloid” *The Sun*: for example, (Feb. 9, 1995) *I was bedded by head. Vice girl Sally tells all*. Also, (Feb. 8, 2008) *What a Burkha. Archbishop wants Muslim law in UK*. The examples of Channel 4 and *The Sun* suggest that trust can be differential and conditional: I may trust Channel 4 more than *The Sun*, though I may trust *The Sun* completely when it reports cricket scores, but be more cautious when it asserts that *Archbishop wants Muslim law in UK*.

But the extent to which the media may be effective instruments through which social actors can be held to account depends on how far the media themselves are trusted. Trusted media are those to whose account of the world users give credence over the long term. 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. Here I draw on Warnock’s (1974) distinction between giving an account and being held to account as separate and complementary aspects of accountability. Such holding of the media to account may be through any or all of the institutions of law, competition, and regulation external to the media, as well as through endogenous professional norms, self-regulatory practices and institutions such as readers’ editors and media ombudsmen through which stakeholders can hold the media to account (and through which the media may give an account of themselves). Such mechanisms correspond to O’Neill’s “modern” paradigm, where trustworthiness is constructed through formal institutional structures of holding to account, including through the exercise of 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.

Barriers to entry have fallen, new providers have entered the digital world, and a new form of provision,²⁵ variously called interactive,²⁶ “Web 2.0”²⁷ user-generated content, or “pull” content, (which

²⁵ Whereby users can post and amend content.

²⁶ Although it focuses on established “legacy” media such as music, films, television, games, radio, magazine newspaper and book publishing (reflecting the authors’ remit to consider the “exploitation of digital content” (p 11), i.e., of established media, see the study for the European Commission “*Interactive content and convergence: Implications for the information society*.” At

exhibits O'Reilly's network effect "to get better the more people use them"²⁸) is now becoming both pervasive and indispensable. The dialogic potentiality of Web 2.0 media may mitigate, if not solve, some of the problems of trust that beset "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 attention to these has masked general recognition of the positive potential of the Internet and the trust-enhancing capabilities of networked online collaboration.

Slashdot provides an outstanding example of how these network effects, or "participating user relationships" (Jones, 2007, p. 177), can build trust and authority.

Slashdot.org was one of the first sites to build trustworthiness on contributors' input by appointing 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 (see <http://slashdot.org/faq/com-mod.shtml#cm600> accessed on Dec. 12, 2008). *Slashdot* has thus a self-regulating and ranking system that is based on peer review and ranking. As Tony Curzon-Price, Chief Editor of *openDemocracy*,²⁹ stated, (interview June 27, 2008) "something like this carries over to all successful online communities." The buyer ranking of sellers on eBay also exemplifies such network effects or "participating user relationships" (Jones, 2007, p. 177).

Although procedurally different, this Web 2.0 peer review and ranking system is analogous to badging — long established in the scholarly community. Badging identifies those most strongly legitimised in the scholarly community: professors outrank readers, readers outrank lecturers, doctors outrank masters and Harvard, Princeton, Cambridge, and so on outrank the Open University. Such badging systems are fallible, but perhaps no less fallible than other, generally well-merited ranking systems. Just as the generally high esteem ceded to the journalism of *The New York Times* (NYT) does not invariably mean that NYT journalists adhere to the highest professional standards, so a Harvard professorial pedigree does not mean infallibility. But such peer-reviewed badging systems are often rightly successful in building and maintaining trust.

http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/eeurope/i2010/docs/studies/interactive_content_ec2006_final_report.pdf accessed on March 10, 2007.

²⁷ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2 accessed on March 6, 2007.

²⁸ *Web 2.0 Compact Definition: Trying Again*. At

http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2006/12/web_20_compact.html accessed on March 6, 2007.

²⁹ A highly reputed UK-based e-zine. See www.openDemocracy.net

Web 2.0

Dutton (2007, p. 2) has referred to the Internet as a “fifth estate,” providing a “new form of social accountability,” and the rhetorical power of his metaphor directs attention to its substantive, dialogic root in what he names as the fifth estate’s “online interaction between ever-changing networks of individuals” (Dutton, 2007, p. 16): an interaction characteristic of Web 2.0. The most striking example of a Web 2.0 application/service is *Wikipedia*. Alexa testifies to the extent to which UK Internet users have adopted *Wikipedia*, ranking it (March 21, 2008) as the 10th most visited Internet site; SEOmoz rates it at 9/10. 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,³⁰ and it has been the object of much odium expressed by professional journalists.

The UK House of Lords’ Communications Select Committee Inquiry on the Ownership of the News of 2007/8 elicited the comment from Pierre Le Sourd, the London Bureau Editor for *Agence France Presse*: “We have a written rule inside our company which forbids any journalist from using Wikipedia. We have the same thing, which has been updated last week, for Facebook because there was an incident last week with Bilawal Bhutto in Oxford where some newspaper picked up some pictures on the Facebook site about Mr Bhutto which turned out to be fake” (House of Lords, 2008, p. 30). M. Le Sourd’s judgment was foreshadowed by Richard Dixon, the revise (*sic*) editor of *The Times*, who stated his “default position” to be “every article on Wikipedia is rubbish.” He asked, “Why 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 imagery³¹ serve users better. And the BBC’s massive (estimated at 6m pages) Web site is fully accessible only to users with a UK IP address — even

³⁰ Cited in “*You couldn’t make it up*” by Jenny Kleeman, first published in hard copy in “*times2*” on March 2, 2007. At http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/the_way_we_live/article1457697.ece accessed on March 7, 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> accessed on March 15, 2007.

³¹ For example, at <http://maps.google.co.uk/maps?ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&hl=en&tab=wl&q=> accessed on May 14, 2007.

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 authority³² suggest that “gold standard” sources are not always unimpeachable.

Le Sourd's and Dixon's statements represent a familiar negative professional journalistic reflex, as “networked”³³ or “distributed”³⁴ journalism changes news consumption as well as news gathering and editorial practices, and exemplify both an understandable defensive interest — well-captured in Greenslade's speculation that “We are surely moving towards a situation in which relatively small ‘core’ staffs will process material from freelances and/or citizen journalists, bloggers, whatever” (Greenslade, 2007) — and a proper professional concern for the quality of news. Their responses represent one perspective in an often thoughtful and usually vigorous debate among journalists,³⁵ but only one perspective. Others have embraced the networked Web 2.0 model anathematised by Le Sourd and Dixon. An issue of general importance arises from this discussion: we may identify two sources of authority, and potential trustworthiness, in information, both of which are, in different ways, reliant on peer consensus. The first employs user review to establish authority (with a corresponding expectation that authors will revise and amend in the light of convincing peer commentary). The supply-side, biased second type of authority derives from authors' status as experts, a status which is, in turn, based on adherence to proven procedures and practices which have been found to promote a high level of correspondence between the real world and its representation. In fact, there are seldom pure instances of either form of authentication — most public information is authenticated through a combination, in varying degrees, of both methods.

Authority and Trustworthiness

There is thus 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 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

³² 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> accessed on March 12, 2007.

³³ Charlie Beckett's term; see Beckett, 2008 and 2008a.

³⁴ Paul Bradshaw's term; see <http://onlinejournalismblog.com/2007/10/02/a-model-for-the-21st-century-newsroom-pt2-distributed-journalism/> accessed on Dec. 12, 2008.

³⁵ See, for example, Roy Greenslade's and Paul Bradshaw's blogs at <http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/greenslade> and <http://onlinejournalismblog.files.wordpress.com> accessed on Dec. 12, 2008.

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 <http://technorati.com/>), user-generated content sites (see, *inter alia*, 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 content³⁶ and only 15% use “newspapers or news services” different from those they use offline (OxIS, 2007, p. 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). Another comparable example is the blog on European media and communications policy *contentandcarrier* (www.contentandcarrier.eu). The UK Citizens Online Democracy (UKCOD), a charity, provides another type of hybrid Web site “mysociety” (www.mysociety.org.uk), which, in turn, enables people to build “Web sites which give people simple, tangible benefits in the civic and community aspects of their lives” (from http://www.ukcod.org.uk/UK_Citizens_Online_Democracy on June 19, 2007), 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 multilingual³⁷ *Wikipedia* (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 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*,”³⁸ but, though there have been egregious cases of abuse³⁹ of the openness of the wiki process,

³⁶ The Oxford Internet Survey for 2007 found that 28% of UK users have posted images on the Web, 16% have tried to establish a Web site, 15% have a Web site, and 12% write a blog (OxIS, 2007, pp. 54 & 61).

³⁷ *Wikipedia* claims entries in 250 languages (including the constructed language Klingon http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klingon_language accessed on Feb. 27, 2007, Bavarian, Cornish, Lombard, Occitan, Sorbian & Veneta <http://www.wikipedia.org/> accessed on Feb. 27, 2007).

³⁸ 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> accessed on May 14, 2007. “*Nature*” found “the difference in accuracy was not particularly great.”

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. These have settled on varying mixes between dialogic, Web 2.0, and formal, supply-side systems of authority and trustworthiness generation.

Consider these examples of current UK online providers⁴⁰ variously using text, audio, and video.⁴¹

- *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.”⁴² *Indymedia* is a moderated site, but 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.⁴³

This invests *Indymedia* content with the transparency claimed by Malter (2001): “Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions.” *Indymedia* is a global movement and, as the UK site claims:

Independent DIY media projects are spreading around the planet at unprecedented 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

³⁹ See, *inter alia*, http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2006/01/wikipeding_cong.html and/or <http://blogs.zdnet.com/Ou/?p=152> accessed on Feb. 27, 2007.

⁴⁰ 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.

⁴¹ These examples are not necessarily representative — they are cited because they are known to the author and have not been selected as a representative sample of the total population of similar sites.

⁴² From <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/static/mission.html> accessed on March 8, 2007.

⁴³ From <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/static/editorial.html> accessed on March 8, 2007.

interests.⁴⁴ By eliminating the classic division between professional producers and passive audience, many issues and discussions that were previously suppressed become visible and available.⁴⁵

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."⁴⁶ Nonetheless, *Indymedia* is clearly a media source with a *parti pris* — transparency may be necessary for trustworthiness, but is not necessarily sufficient for it.

A further case in point is the UK news and comment site *openDemocracy* (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, Feb. 7, 2007⁴⁷). SEOmoz ranked *openDemocracy* 9/10 and Alexa ranked the site 3,071 among UK users.

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 Feb. 7, 2007) identified only one further European exemplar: *Safe Democracy* (see <http://english.safe-democracy.org/> on Feb. 7, 2007) in Spain, but *Safe Democracy* appears, at least in the English language version, to be less interactive and dialogic than *openDemocracy*.

Wikinews provides much better grounds for critiques such as those of Le Sourd and Dixon than does *Wikipedia*. *Wikinews* has not attained the salience of its parent — the SEOmoz ranking for en.wikinews.org is 5.5/10 with the comment: "Your site is having an impact and may even be a leader in your field (depending on how big or small that field is). Keep on this path; it's clear that the effort you've put in is producing results" — nor *Wikipedia*'s reputation (albeit disputed by those such as Le Sourd and Dixon). As Tony Curzon-Price stated (interview June 27, 2008), *Wikipedia* has "the luxury of moving slowly." *Wikipedia* has c5, 000 fact checkers (though fewer than 30 paid staff) who flag items in reports as requiring corroboration or their source identified, and who lock pages when abuse is suspected. It is, for Curzon-Price, "a self-regulatory, self-selecting and self-validating community," operating a "quasi-industrialised clearly defined process." Whereas *Wikinews* has many fewer such quality controllers and

⁴⁴ *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> accessed on March 8, 2007.

⁴⁵ From http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/static/about_us.html accessed on March 8, 2007.

⁴⁶ From <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/static/mission.html> accessed on March 8, 2007.

⁴⁷ Isabel Hilton was editor in chief of *openDemocracy* at the time of the interview.

lacks the “luxury of moving slowly” and is of “extremely variable quality” and “falls apart quite quickly.” Moreover, as McIntosh (2008, pp. 206-207) relates, *Wikinews* has been subject to egregious “troll”ish behaviour by partisan interveners such as “Neutralizer” and “MrMiscellaneous.” (*sic*)

Both *Wikipedia* and *Wikinews* are more transparent in important respects than are most offline media: readers of all stories can “go behind” the stories to see the history of their editing, their source, and the sources on which contributors have drawn.⁴⁸ Transparency does not necessarily establish authority; for example, it does little to enhance *Wikinews*’ authority and often reveals no more than *Wikinews*’ reliance on established offline news sources. For example, on June 27, 2008 (timelined at 1500 UTC time) *Wikinews* Main (front) page stories and sources were as follows: [U.S. Supreme Court rules DC gun ban unconstitutional](#) (sourced from CNN and ABC news and the transcripts of “[District of Columbia et al. v. Heller](#),” [Supreme Court of the United States](#), June 26, 2008; “[Shelly Parker, et al., v. District of Columbia and Adrian M. Fenty, Mayor of the District of Columbia](#),” [United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit](#), March 9, 2007; “[Government Reform to Review D.C.’s Handgun Ban](#),” [Congressman Tom Davis](#), June 28, 2005) [U.S. will remove ‘terror’ tag on North Korea](#) (sourced from Fox and Al Jazeera English news). [Mugabe says he’s open to talks with Zimbabwe opposition](#) (sourced from [Associated Press](#), [Bloomberg](#), [Agence France-Presse](#), [The Times](#) and the [Ghana Broadcasting Corporation](#)). [EU regulation prevents sale of ‘small’ kiwi fruit in Bristol shop](#) (sourced from BBC News Online and [The Daily Telegraph](#)).

Nonetheless, the growth of “citizen” or “networked” journalism (see *inter alia* Beckett, 2008), where both the contributions of non-professional journalists to news gathering and formulation and, crucially, the “wiki”-like fact checking and dialogic verification of the output of professional journalists, can, Beckett claims, “help the news media address the crisis of trust in journalism as a way of re-building its relevance and authority” (Beckett, 2008, p. 62). Beckett gives a powerful instance of this process, referring to Reuters’ response to that revelation, on the political blog *Little Green Footballs* ([www.littlegreenfootballs.com](#)), that a Reuters’ news photograph had been faked (see Beckett, 2008, p. 63). Reuters’ own internal verification processes had not identified this falsification, but once it had been identified by *Little Green Footballs*, Reuters rectified the error and revised its own procedures.

Supply-Side Measures to Foster Trust

Parallel to successful Web 2.0 content services based on dialogic models of trust building, other supply-side initiatives to enhance 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, p. 3) and the successful establishment of the self-regulatory

⁴⁸ An intriguing, but uncommon, equivalent is the Webcast of the editorial conference of the *Liverpool Daily Post* editorial news conference. Accessed on Dec. 12, 2008 from <http://www.journalism.co.uk/2/articles/531562.php>

Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) are cases in point.⁴⁹ But there have been few equivalents in online media to the (slow) growth in offline media of supply-side measures such as editorial and journalistic codes, independent spokespersons, and readers' editors/media ombudsman to enhance the authority and trustworthiness of news and other information services.

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 is most evident in offline media, though it has to be acknowledged that their growth in the UK is both uneven and poorly generalised.⁵⁰ Indeed, Onora O'Neill has argued that "newspaper journalists face few disciplines that support public trust" (2002a, p. 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, p. 176). And where more exacting norms are mandated (e.g., 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, p. 176). Fundamental is the obligation to "reject deception" (O'Neill, 2002a, p. 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, p. 186).

O'Neill's fingering of the potential deficiencies of the BBC's norms was prescient. In July 2008, Ofcom fined the BBC £400,000 for eight separate breaches of the Ofcom programme codes.⁵¹ Ofcom commented, "In each of these cases the BBC deceived its audience by faking winners of competitions and

⁴⁹ See www.iwf.org.uk

⁵⁰ For example, the first UK readers' editor/media ombudsman elsewhere was appointed in 1997 to *The Guardian*, which, along with its sister paper *The Observer*, are the only UK newspapers to adhere to the Organization of News Ombudsmen, and ombudsmen are established in various European newspapers and broadcasters, for example, in France, the Netherlands, Spain, and elsewhere (see <http://www.newsombudsmen.org/what.htm> on March 14, 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/> accessed on March 10, 2007).

⁵¹ The BBC was not alone: in December 2007, Ofcom fined Channel 4 £1.5m and had previously fined *five* £300,000. It had also fined GMTV, the advertising financed but formally public service broadcaster, £2m. And the largest advertising-funded, for profit, but formally public service broadcaster, ITV, was fined £5.68m by Ofcom for misconduct in conducting "phone in" competitions (see http://www.ofcom.org.uk/media/news/2008/05/nr_20080508 accessed on Dec. 12, 2008). Each and everyone (the tiny S4C excepted) of the UK's public service broadcasters were thus found deficient in trustworthiness by Ofcom in the period 2007-2008.

deliberately conducting competitions unfairly" (See http://www.ofcom.org.uk/media/news/2008/07/nr_20080730 accessed on Dec. 12, 2008). A year earlier, Ofcom had fined the BBC £50,000 for falsifying the results of a competition on the iconic children's programme *Blue Peter*.⁵²

O'Neill points up the general 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, p. 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, pp. 186-187) 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 notable strengths and achievements of Web 2.0 applications. Accordingly, to redress the deficiencies intrinsic to one-way media, she (2002a, p. 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 proportionate – and relevant to public service broadcasting (as well as more generally) as the sad litany of Ofcom fines suggests.

The convergence of BBC values with those of the UK media more generally are interestingly evidenced by the BBC's own online instructional site designed to address the problems which have compromised the BBC's trustworthiness and occasioned Ofcom's fines (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/safeguardingtrust/interactive/index.shtml> accessed on Dec. 12, 2008). One exercise on the BBC instructional site asks the student whether it is permissible to publish a statement under a "star" name if the star in question has not actually written it. The question is posed in a self-

⁵² The BBC Trust (the governing body of the BBC) stated that these "were particularly serious as they resulted in children being misled to participate in a competition they had no chance of winning and in a child in the studio being involved in deceiving the audience." Accessed on Dec. 12, 2008 from http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2007/ofcom_blue_peter.html

instruction/self test on issues of trust in an online context. We are asked to imagine a celebrity chef whose online statement (feature article) was written by a researcher after a telephone talk with the chef, and the draft vetted by the chef before publication. And we're asked to decide whether this is acceptable. The "right answer" is provided: the BBC states explicitly "There isn't a problem with anything that happened here." Would we so conclude if the context was academic publication (a PhD thesis written by a retired professor after a talk with the PhD candidate)? Or a medical (a paramedic drafts and a doctor signs?) or legal (an intern drafts and a judge signs?) report? I think not. Doubtless, all of these practices occur, but few members of the professional communities in question would endorse them. The BBC exercise continues with further examples (e.g., the legitimacy of "spoof" Web sites) where, I think, reasonable people might also reasonably form different judgments as to what's acceptable practice by those who seek to be regarded as trustworthy to those which are defined, by the BBC in its instructional exercises, as the "right" answers.

All this is not to suggest that academic (or legal and medical) norms are "right" and the BBC's "wrong" — only to state that the evidence is that professional criteria of trustworthiness are different in different professions and that broadcasters' and the BBC's criteria are not always the most stringent. Indeed, the BBC's "right" answer in the example considered above is on all fours with the widespread "ghosting" of articles in UK newspapers: few articles purporting to be authored by Gordon Brown are likely to have been written by the Prime Minister and so, too, may one reasonably doubt whether Matthew Hoggard (to name a personal favourite) or many other sports stars write the articles which regularly appear under their names.

O'Neill's proposals are congruent with the scrutiny, transparency, transfer of ownership from experts to stakeholders, evidence of identity, etc.⁵³ counselled by O'Hara and Shadbolt in the online domain (2005, pp. 113, 130-137). However, they are proposed in the context 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, cooperative 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 that 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 potentially beneficial combination of both dialogic and procedural (academic and journalistic) routes to trustworthiness. This dialogic potentiality is realised, albeit in different degrees, in a number of contemporary instances: *Wikinews* gives an account of its sources; *Slashdot*'s content is explicitly peer ranked through the "karma" point system; *openDemocracy*'s content is characterised by debate, dialogue, and collective deliberation, and so on. True, the trustworthiness of

⁵³ O'Hara and Shadbolt also refer to "transitivity" of trust (see O'Hara & Shadbolt, 2005, pp. 132-134).

few of these Web 2.0 media is supported by the stringent (albeit fallible) procedural practices of the best legacy media professional journalism (such as those which O'Neill identifies in Reuters' codes). But there are no reasons in principle why the dialogic legitimation of Web 2.0 content may not be further enhanced through appropriate procedural means — the “moderation” of sites such as *Wikipedia* and *Indymedia*, imperfect and halting though it may be, suggest how this might be developed.

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-face 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 (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/radio4/reith2002/lecture5.shtml?print> accessed on Dec. 12, 2008) 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, pp 54 & 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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