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Peter Golding, Helena Sousa and Liesbet van Zoonen

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Introduction

On several occasions, in recent years, we have published a special issue of the *European Journal of Communication* (EJC) containing a number of commissioned articles on a common topic. On each occasion, we have brought the authors together to discuss their ideas and to enable them to share themes and concerns that emerge from debating the issues explored in the theme. This issue is based on such a symposium held at the University of Vienna in May 2011.

At the symposium, an invited group of authors was asked to address the theme of ‘trust and the media’. This broad topic embraced at least two related but distinct concerns. The first was the evidence of declining faith in the efficacy or relevance of a whole range of institutions, from parliaments and parties to the police and economic corporations, which was appearing in empirical research across a range of European societies. Much discussed in the context of political disengagement, whether illustrated by diminishing electoral turnout or declining party membership, the more general phenomenon has been widely canvassed as peculiar to modernity, and especially in very recent times. Most especially, it has been argued that such cynicism, or perhaps scepticism, arises not least from the insistent exposure of institutional failings by the mass media.

The second concern was with trust in the media themselves. We invited our authors to consider the extent to which there was evidence of growing distrust in the media. And if there was such evidence, what should we make of it? Would it require a substantial revisiting of some of the familiar and established nostrums of media research and scholarship? For example, should we rethink such concepts as opinion leadership or question our long held assumptions about audience response and reception? Was the growing use of ‘social media’ and the widening availability of the internet creating significant detachment from reliance on or credence in the mainstream media of press and broadcasting?

Of course the very notion of trust is a complex one. In many ways, the history of media and communications research is one in which the veracity and systematic formation of mediated accounts of social process and structure have been questioned or laid bare. Whether of violence, politics, gender, deviance and crime, ethnicity or any other aspect of social affairs, the contrast between the media account and that of ‘extra media data’ has been a staple of research and debate. How such accounts arise, and with what consequences, are the questions at the heart of our field, such that distrust is almost a given.

But if that is both the tenor and driving presumption of scholarship, it has not, until recent times, been a popular and widespread response to mainstream media. It is to that apparent shift that our contributors were addressed.

The fall in popular faith in major institutions is palpable. According to the spring 2011 Eurobarometer survey, across the European Union (EU), 63% distrust their governments and 60% distrust their parliament. Of course, the overall averages disguise considerable local variation. Indeed, some have argued that the pattern of drops and continuities in confidence in government suggests that, far from indicating a generic and systemic decline, rather what Norris calls 'performance-based explanations' are the most plausible candidates in elucidating the evidence – in other words, there is no systemic and secular shift in cultural values and expression, only particular events with short-term consequences. Over the last decade, a significant growth in cynicism towards political institutions in some countries (e.g. Portugal and the UK) can be contrasted with sustained faith in other countries (such as Denmark and Finland). Yet in many countries, the public perception of political leaders has become increasingly sceptical – by 2011 only 40% of German electors felt Angela Merkel was performing satisfactorily, while in France, the comparable figure for President Sarkozy was just over 20%, and in Italy and Greece, the leaderships of Berlusconi and Papandreou were suffering diminishing satisfaction scores well before they were expelled from the scene.

Decline in trust in the media has also become notable. Again, evidence from Eurobarometer is instructive. In the 2010 survey, it was found that 'trust in the media remains relatively fragile and limited'. Across the EU, 52% said they tend not to trust the press and 45% said they tend not to trust the television. The press found its lowest levels of trust in the United Kingdom (79%) and Greece (71%). In the United Kingdom, the collapse of trust has been especially savage and dramatic. A series of high-profile cases of illegal phone hacking by leading titles to get material for stories eventually led to the closure of the leading culprit, Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World*. A former editor of the *News of the World*, Andy Coulson, was appointed by the incoming Prime Minister, David Cameron, as his head of communications in 2010, even though Coulson had resigned from his editorial post three years previously following the first wave of phone-hacking revelations and the subsequent imprisonment of the journalists involved. In January 2011, Coulson succumbed to pressure and resigned from his public post. In July 2011, the Prime Minister announced a two-part inquiry under Lord Justice Leveson investigating the role of the press and police in the phone-hacking scandal. These dispiriting events and their ramifications are discussed in the article by Coleman in this issue. While particular to the structure and doings of the UK press, their roots in the Murdoch empire, with its long and extensive links in a variety of global media, and their deep embeddedness in the complexities of state–corporate–public relations, gave cause for thought in any national context. As the Leveson Inquiry rumbled on, regular revelations of dubious media mores further dented public trust in the media. In November 2011, a *Yougov* survey found that only 38% of Britons believed what they read in newspapers and nearly three-quarters (74%) felt newspapers sometimes or frequently lie to their audiences.

Especially, in the United Kingdom, this loss of trust was set in a context in which the probity and integrity of a whole raft of previously sanctified institutions have been coming into rapid and very visible question. Exposure of the extent of exploitation of expenses claims, much of it cynical and trivial, some of it substantial and illegal, corroded trust in

parliamentarians to the point where, by 2010, only 26% had faith in their elected representatives, accelerating a decline in such figures that had been continuous since 2004. Rising vilification of bankers, not least for their part in the evident collapse of the economic order, their evidently unabating capacity to command eye-watering levels of remuneration and bonuses, and the increasing evidence of inequity as recession and public expenditure cuts eroded most people's living standards (while in 2011 came the news that the directors of FTSE 100 companies had seen their earnings rise 55% in the year to June 2010 and another 49% in the following 12 months) all played their part in fostering a culture of distrust in and scepticism about previously respected institutions. Major riots in several UK cities in the summer of 2011, while insistently dismissed by ministers as 'mindless thuggery and looting', were increasingly found by subsequent research, to be significantly related to economic deprivation and a growing sense of distrust in the efficacy and justice of prevailing institutions and order. More widely of course, the impact of the 'Occupy' movement in nearly 1000 cities across the world reflected an unprecedented level of reduced trust in political and economic institutions as perceived and experienced by many.

All this and more posed major questions for our contributors. Their focus, and indeed the task they were set, was much sharper and more limited than a request to comprehend and explain the entire social order and its current dynamic. Nonetheless their essays suggest some intriguing and provocative approaches. Quandt contrasts faith in traditional media with the use of networked communications, and roots the origin of trust in broader social processes. His focus is growing complexity, and in particular, he raises the thorny issue of authenticity, and how this is vulnerable in any form of mediated communication. Aupers queries the nature, origins and explanation of the widespread and apparently growing phenomenon of conspiracy theory, and the evidence of persistent and rising public perception of the distortion or manipulated construction of key events and processes. For him, conspiracy culture, as he describes it, 'is a response to existential insecurity in a disenchanted world'.

Coleman addresses the relationship of trust and citizenship. The problem is to what extent diminishing faith in the validity and comprehensiveness of the information we receive or have access to, itself circumscribes our ability to act as citizens. In the United Kingdom examples he describes, key institutions – banks, parliament and press – have all been subject to prolonged and intense inquiry and accusation. He interrogates, in this new world, the key concept of political efficacy. Campus is also concerned with how citizens can act in a world of only partially creditable political information. She addresses the role of interpersonal discussion as an alternative, and in doing so, invites us to return to, though not unquestioningly, the classic concept of 'opinion leadership', and asks whether bloggers now also inhabit this role.

In van Zoonen's article, she argues that epistemological suspicion – believe no one – has become a dominant mindset, at least in northern Europe and the United States. In response, we learn to focus on the personal, the experience of the individual. Sandvoss explores how the evolution of fandom, not least in the political arena, is interrelated with the disappearance of trust. Using empirical evidence from studies of the Liberal-Democrats in the United Kingdom, and also Obama in the United States, he contrasts decline of trust in leadership with the role of fandom as a catalyst in fostering intensive yet measured relationships with political parties and causes.

All these articles raise as well as answer questions, perhaps inevitably so. The relationship of people with the institutions that shape their lives, and the role of the media in informing that relationship, all sit at the heart of the questions we continue to pose as communications researchers and scholars. Asking our contributors to consider such a key concept as trust, in the face of important yet inconclusive evidence about its decline in relation to both dominant institutions and the media, was and is a tall order.

Not the least of the dimensions we could, and probably should explore, is the trust enjoyed by research and scholarship as a vehicle for posing and answering important questions, just as the academy and the world of research are, in so many European countries, facing major redefinitions of their role and purpose, which test to the limits the value and resilience of independent and critical scholarship. It is to those ends that this issue, and indeed the EJC, are committed.

Peter Golding, Northumbria University, UK
Helena Sousa, University of Minho, Portugal
Liesbet van Zoonen, Loughborough University, UK