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What's left of trust in a network society? An evolutionary model and critical discussion of trust and societal communication

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Abstract

There seems to be dwindling trust in media and public authorities in highly developed, democratic societies, with a common fear that audiences are being manipulated. At the same time, people in these countries increasingly turn to alternative information sources, like social networks, blogs and other forms of online communication that they deem to be more authentic. This article discusses the role of trust in parallel to the development of society and media. On the basis of an evolutionary model of societal communication, the author develops a concept of network trust vis-a-vis institutionalized trust and personal trust. He argues that a widespread loss of trust in media and institutions might pose a danger to democratic societies – and that various forms of (participatory) network communication might not be an adequate solution to this problem.

Keywords

authenticity, evolution of communication, hypercomplex societies, institutionalized trust, network trust, participation

Introduction: Contradictory observations

Trust in media and public authorities seems to be shrinking in highly developed, democratic societies. Many survey studies reveal a widespread uneasiness about information being produced by a 'reality industry', and a vague feeling of being manipulated by media (and journalism in particular). With a digitization of information and a virtualization of experiences, there comes a growing feeling of people being part of a 'staged' reality (the so-called

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Truman-effect[1]). On the other hand, online users often turn to rather obscure internet sources for information, and reveal even the most personal facts in public forums. They expect such open, seemingly uncontrolled spaces to be more authentic, giving them direct access to information and revealing 'truth'.

But why is there such uneasiness about traditional media institutions on the one hand, and a sometimes surprising trust in complete strangers on the internet? And what is the logic behind such a seemingly contradictory situation?

Some of the reasons for this strange opposition between a produced media reality on the one hand and an 'authentic' user-generated reality on the other are discussed in this article, based on a (simplified) model of media and society evolution. The model describes trust and (societal) communication as related concepts that have been co-evolving in parallel to the expansion and growing complexity of societies.

From this discussion, it becomes apparent that the current situation – mistrust in institutions and journalism vs trust in networks and communities – is a problematic one, not only for the media, but society at large. This leads to the conclusion that, on the one hand, trust in communicative institutions needs to be strengthened, while, on the other hand, a critical debate of trust in networks is essential – among the public and in communication studies alike.

However, before discussing this co-evolution of trust and communication, it is first necessary to clarify some general aspects of what trust is, i.e. on what basis does it emerge, what forms can be differentiated, and what are its implications for the individual and society?

Trust in individuals, media and institutions: Conceptual differentiation

Trust is an essentially social and communicative concept, aimed at a specific connection between two or more actors. Numerous definitions can be found in sociology (e.g. Coleman, 1990; Giddens, 1990), social psychology (Deutsch, 1958), political science (Miller, 1974), economics (Williamson, 1993), communications studies (Kohring and Matthes, 2007) and other, related disciplines. Despite the sometimes contradictory definitions and viewpoints, there is a certain consensus on the basic meaning of trust: it is needed and occurs if actors (trustors) cannot or do not want to control the actions of other actors, but expect a certain action from these alteri (trustees). These expectations are primarily based on past experience – may it be personal, may it be more general expectations with similar actors and situations. Furthermore, trust usually means that the actions of the alteri do not have a negative impact on the trustor;[2] on the contrary, the effects are supposed to be beneficial.

But why do people need to trust others in the first place? The main reasons for this lie in the problem of societal complexity and contingency of events in social constellations.[3] As events cannot be fully controlled and previewed by ego, there is a need to develop expectations towards the outcome of events, and also towards the outcome of social actions in order to still be able to (re)act. So 'trust' is absolutely crucial for the functioning of society, out of logical reasons (and not, as it is very often depicted in

popular culture, out of emotional reasons[4]) – at least if not everything is controlled and controllable.

There are various types of trust mentioned in the literature. One of the most important differentiations can be made between the types of trustees: there is trust in people one knows very well, with a large amount of accompanying information making it 'easy' to trust (i.e. relatively risk free, with a high likelihood of the expected action of the alteri taking place). Interesting enough, a lot of theoretical works regard this as a less relevant form of trust. Putnam (2000) coined the term 'thin trust' for generalized trust in alteri largely unknown to us – be they persons or institutions. Generalized vs personal trust is also a central conceptual division needed for understanding what is happening with the media in Web 2.0 environments nowadays.

However, I would like to argue that one could conceptually define trust not only by the relationship between ego and alteri. There are some more aspects that differentiate between various types of trust (which are relevant for our discussion here; other differentiations are certainly conceivable) (see Table 1).

Societal and communicative evolution: Complexity and trust

As noted above, trust is a crucial concept for understanding societal communication, and it's closely connected to issues of complexity, contingency and control, among other aspects that further define and describe trust as a concept. Naturally, trust co-evolved with the growing complexity of societies, and new forms of trust (for example, in institutions, and also media as institutions and journalism as a profession) developed in parallel with societal constellations. Therefore, I propose to put trust in the context of a (very basic) network model of societal and communicative evolution (based on a model introduced and discussed in Quandt, 2011).

In the early stages of societal development, societies were relatively small and simple, as shown in Figure 1. In the face-to-face communication of such pre-modern societies, relevant information was shared between persons through direct speech, and there was no need for a large infrastructure to gather, select and exchange information. Communicative reach was also limited by the difficulty of storing and transporting information. Without durable forms of 'encoded' and stored information (like pictures or writing), people had to rely on human media, like storytellers, and orally reproduced information in face-to-face situations. Still, the reach of communication could be expanded in oral cultures via travelling messengers (like travelling troubadours and monks in the European Middle Ages; see also Ranawake, 2000). Such messengers represent weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) between the community networks.

In such early oral cultures, trust largely depended on individual features of trustee and trustor, and their personal relationship. However, even messengers could be regarded as being part of an institutionalized human 'media' system, and trust in them did not necessarily come from individual personal experience, but was based on their specific role and function. Therefore, there was already some form of generalized, 'thin' trust emerging in such early societies. As the messages from the travelling messengers couldn't be checked and controlled, trust was a prerequisite to the acceptance of the whole process – and this

Table 1. Differentiation of the concept 'trust'.

	Differentiation	Comments/Explanation
Ego	Individual Groups Institutions, organizations	Trust needs a trustor capable of assessing alteri, situations and possible actions. It can be argued that just human beings are able to do so; however, one could also regard parallel trust of individuals in groups as 'group trust', and similarly, organizations can trust others (although it just may be the trust of the CEO or certain groups of people).
Alteri	Individual Groups Institutions, organizations Societal fields/areas, generalized	Trustees can be either individuals, groups of people or specific organizations and institutions. Generalized trust can be also directed towards societal fields/areas. Trust can be limited to certain alteri and layers. For example, one can trust 'journalism' or 'the media' in general, but not a specific medium, and vice versa.
Relationship/ past experience	No experience Low level of experience High level of experience	Former experience and relationships between ego and alter influence trust. The lower the experience, the more trust is dependent on ego's capacity to accept uncertainty.
Situational aspects	Complexity/ contingency	Complexity refers to the number of elements making up a social situation, the possible interconnections of these elements and the contingency produced by these constellations.
	Control	Control not only depends on complexity and contingency, but also on the individual capacity of ego and alter to act (which, in turn, can be related to perception and cognition, but also to actual capability to act, either physical or social). Trust implies the trustor does not have full control over a given situation, and it implies some situational control of the situation handed over to the trustees.
Extension/ third parties	(In)Visible third, extension/ limits of situation	Control also depends on the potential existence of third parties that might influence the situation or the trustees. Trust usually depends on the lack of an external interest of the trustees that is invisible to the trustor. In other words: the trustor believes that there is no hidden agenda of the trustor, that there is no foreign interest involved, and that the situation does not extend beyond the situation to which trust is directed.
Expected future action	Centrality for ego and alteri	Trust is also based on the centrality of the actions for ego and alteri, i.e. the relevance of the future actions for the actors themselves. Trust is easy to achieve for peripheral actions, but much more difficult for central actions (naturally, this is also connected to the impact/effects of these actions).
Effects	Benefit for ego and alteri Costs for ego and alteri (Other) risks for ego and alteri	The 'weight' of trust also depends on the potential outcome – the effects and impact of the trustee's action on the trustor, but also on the trustees. In positive terms, these can be benefits, but there may also be costs and other risks involved. The ratio between the various constellations of trustor/trustee benefits and costs is central to 'evaluate' trust.

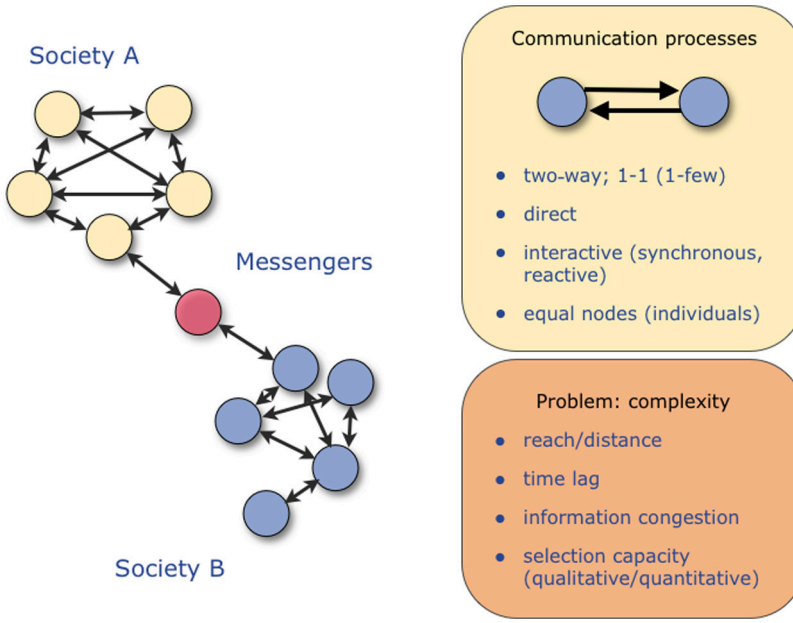

Figure 1. Simple societies / Face-to-face communication.

could probably be said of all types of 'news', as they contain unknown (and as such, uncontrolled) bits of information.[5]

With the expansion of societies and the inevitable complexity connected with social evolution, direct forms of (oral) communication between co-present actors became increasingly problematic. The reach of information and its storage became major problems – as the information degrades or is altered with each node in-between the original source and the recipient. If a story is passing 'through' many intermediaries, it might become something different in the end (hearsay/rumours are based on the same phenomenon). Other problems connected with the expansion of societies include the time lag between sending and receiving information, and the difficulty in selecting, processing and distributing an exploding amount of information (as the connections and communication processes between nodes are exponentially growing).

However, trust in information and communication partners relies on the expectation of information that is truthful to the original, and a certain level of completeness. Professionalized communicators and institutions for selecting, processing and publishing information developed as a solution to these problems – that's what we call 'the media' nowadays. Innis (1950, 1951) suggests that the institutionalization of communication processes wasn't necessarily a solution to a problem, but enabled societies to develop further in size and complexity (see also Carey, 1998). So media institutions were a remedy to the problems of complexity, but also enabled growth that leads to further complexity (see Figure 2).

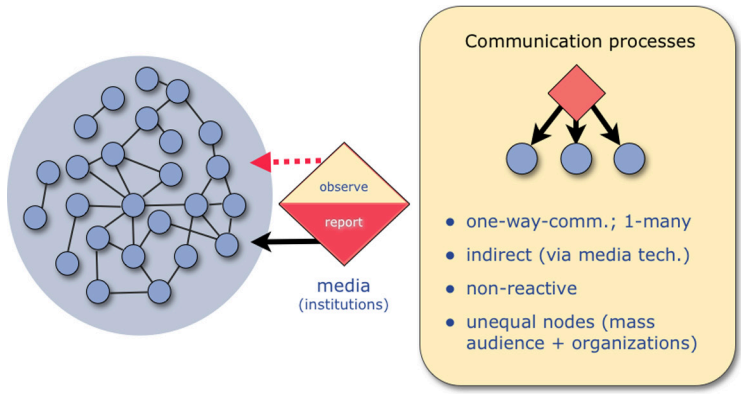

Figure 2. Modern societies / Media communication.

The societal evolution also meant an extension of the concept of 'trust' towards institutions. Necessarily, experience with institutionalized trustees cannot be based on personal contacts, but on past contacts with the institutions or similar types of institutions (for example, 'the media'). Therefore, this is a more generalized, 'thin' trust in institutions, or even 'systemic' trust (as in the belief of the general functioning of the whole network, its rules and its actors). However, as with personal contacts, trust still relies on the acceptance of the various aspects outlined in the previous section – i.e. no hidden agenda, the expectation of a benevolent other, an imbalance in control between trustor and trustees, etc.

In parallel with the growing complexity and the institutionalization of communication roles and the advent of media, the communication network has changed considerably. Media communication also means a hierarchical communication where the power is distributed unequally (the discussion about the appropriation of messages and the power of the audience through different 'readings' notwithstanding; see De Certeau, 1984). In contrast to the earlier, oral communication system, the communicator/recipient roles do not switch dynamically, so the institutionalized media do have significant power and control over the communication process.

As long as the media fulfil that function, and as long as there is no doubt about them doing so impartially, this power does not necessarily pose a problem. However, some criticism arose from the observation that journalism might not serve all parts of society equally, and might focus too much on political and economic elites (Hachten, 2001; Harwood, 1995). Furthermore, the economic side of institutionalized media means that professionals might select information that attracts the largest audience or are even susceptible to outside economic influence. This led to concerns that media's power in a hierarchical communication process can be abused, for example by manipulation of information and the taking of sides instead of impartially reporting about events in society.

Such doubts are problematic to the communication system sketched out here, as the actual communication and production processes inside media institutions remain largely

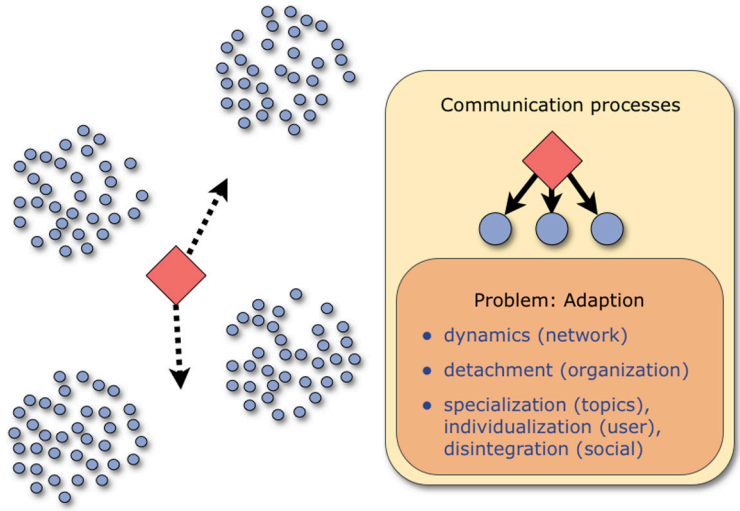

Figure 3. Hypercomplex societies / Shortcomings of media communication.

invisible to the public – so the system depends on a high level of generalized trust in media, which is undermined by such doubts.

With further growth and complexity, the problems of a 'traditional' media system become exacerbated: if the social structure becomes more fragmented into segregated subgroups, without a larger unified core (mainstream), it becomes harder for media to address all the interests and communication needs (see Figure 3).

In such 'hypercomplex' societies, institutionalized media (as organizational entities) cannot address all of these interests in a limited number of publications without losing their focus. From the perspective of the audience(s), this might look like the media becoming detached from the people, not being sufficiently responsive to their needs. Furthermore, small sub-networks (which might also influence each other) are more likely to change quickly than large centralized networks with a stronger 'gravitational core' – so the dynamics of the network structure are accelerating, which is also a challenge to institutionalized media. At a certain point of fragmentation, even a high number of media won't be able to address all the needs of the subgroups; and as institutionalized media are economically dependent on larger audiences (both through direct sales/fees and advertising), the number of organizational units surviving in a given market is limited.

It has been argued that this leads to a further stage of societal development, to something that could be coined a 'network society' (Castells, 2000). While institutionalized media seem to be inadequate to further serve the central communication role in such a scenario, user-driven content becomes a solution to the problems sketched above, based on networked (online) communication. Through the participation of individual members of the network in the communication process, and enabled by the internet and easily accessible, computer-based communication tools, interest-driven sub-networks can communicate, despite spatial and, sometimes, temporal distance. In a way, such a '2.0' society based on

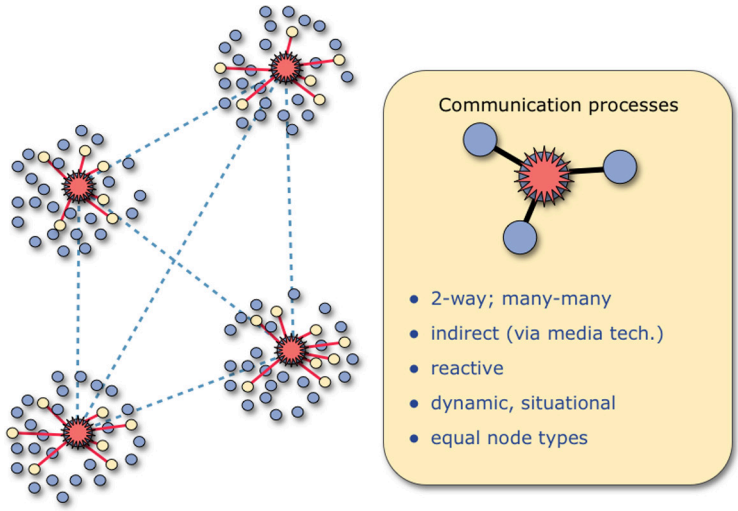

Figure 4. Participatory network society.
Note: 'Star' nodes depict network 'hubs'. In contrast to institutionalized media, they primarily serve the purpose of exchanging, not producing information, and are mostly seen as a communicative infrastructure, rather than a communicator themselves (however, see the critical discussion in section titled 'Network vs institutionalized trust and the question of "authenticity" ' for an alternative view).

'social media' incorporates elements of the early, small communication structures described above, by enabling two-way reactive, dynamic communication among (seemingly) equal peers, supported by infrastructure providers that enable the information exchange between members and sub-networks (see Figure 4).

Does this solve the problems of 'traditional' media? In an *ideal case*, the social media principle brings people together based on interest and opportunity. Depending on topic and interest area, sub-networks will be reconfigured, dissolve, or be reconstituted, only limited by access and language. Consistent with that idealized notion, social media are often labelled as being 'more authentic' and 'true' than traditional media. In this perspective, and in contrast to the generalized trust directed towards institutions, the trust in social media (which might be called 'network trust') is based on an accumulated perception of 'personalized', individual trust. Users of social media generally do not expect the participants of social media to have a hidden agenda or to be 'puppets' of a larger institutionalized entity in the background (see also the article by Stef Aupers in this issue). And even if there are some doubts about individual motivations, the background of the participants in social media is not expected to be a uniform one – even though individuals might have certain interests and might be influenced by third parties, this is expected to be levelled out by the difference of voices in the 'networked' discussion. Basically, participants of social media regard the other participants as equal peers in a shared communication process – so in a way, trust in social networks mirrors trust in face-to-face situations of early societies.

However, this widespread idealized notion of networked communication and network trust seems to miss some problems of social media and a 'participatory' network society – leading to a rather contradictory situation, where trust is given to mostly unknown,

anonymous voices on the web, whereas there is a lingering suspicion that institutionalized media are manipulative and not trustworthy (as described in the first section).

Network vs institutionalized trust and the question of 'authenticity'

So why is there a problem with social media and the model of a participatory network society vis-a-vis the traditional model of institutionalized media communication? And how is that connected to the concept of 'trust'? Basically, there are some misconceptions about network trust, as it is confused with personal trust in both public discussion and in individual perception.

On the level of the individual community member, and depending on the respective social medium, forum or blog, more often than not there is no personal background given. Postings may be anonymous, and if they are not, the information connected to the (nick) names generally is socially 'thin'. Even long-time posters in social media networks often just reveal limited (mostly topic-related) opinions and facts, and limited, selected personal information, so that there is next to no possibility of checking for a 'hidden agenda' or influence by a third party.[6] This becomes obvious when cases of 'astroturfing'[7] of community members are revealed – which is not only regarded as being a 'normal' breach of trust (i.e. to be expected in the frame of possible events), but very often is perceived as a shocking event by community members, unsettling the confidence in the very basis of the communication in the communities (see Boyd, 2007; Cutillo et al., 2010).

The major problem here is the expectation of communication being 'authentic', as is expected in a face-to-face situation. However, the 'authenticity' of face-to-face situations does not necessarily lie in the alteri being truthful, but in the 'thickness' of social information surrounding the communication – which is a means of judging the situation and the alteri's motivations and credibility (see earlier section). So even if the alter is deceiving ego in a face-to-face situation, that 'authenticity' – in the sense of a social 'thickness' – is still given. Misinterpreting communication in social networks as personal communication means an expectation of social thickness that isn't there.

However, there is one bigger misconception about network communication, which seems to be somewhat prevalent within the public debate around the phenomenon. This is connected to a 'common sense' concept of representation. As the voices in social networks are supposed to be 'real' representatives of their communities (as opposed to 'produced' content of media), it is often assumed that they represent the community opinions, at least in their summation. Furthermore, even if individual trust regarding one voice is low, the overall network trust will be high due to that summation of voices; so mistrust in single individuals usually does not destroy the trust in the collective (as the other members of the collective are supposed to be independent from that one 'exceptional', non-credible voice). In this sense, network trust follows a similar logic to Anderson's (2004) long tail concept.[8]

Obviously, such idealistic notions about social networks are mostly based on some broad – and often misleading – assumptions: from empirical studies (von Pape and Quandt 2010), we know that the level of active participation in networks is very low (in most cases even below 1% of the overall number of users; see Nielsen, 2006). Furthermore, the members of that self-selective, active group show specific personality features, making

them a special group that is absolutely not representative of the majority of community members. And discussions among homogeneous, interest-based groups of self-selected, active posters will most likely suffer from confirmation bias (Wason, 1968). To put it in a nutshell: posts in social networks, forums, blogs, etc. are certainly *not* based on a random sample of opinions, but are systematically skewed when holding them against the overall summation of individual opinions – they do not represent the society at large (and not even the overall community, but just highly active members).

Despite all of these concerns, there still seems to be trust in web communities being a reflection of 'the real' people, as network trust is largely regarded as a form of additive 'personal' trust. That's misleading with regard to another aspect, too: the selection logic of infrastructure providers (in the broad sense of entities providing the technologies and 'places' where the discussion can happen, or 'hubs' allowing for the exchange of information). Technology providers aren't usually supposed to have a hidden political agenda, and most users probably don't suspect them to be a third party modifying what is accessible via the network – actually, most people probably do not even realize that the infrastructure providers are a relevant force in the communication process. Again, the assumption of neutrality is not always correct. It has been discussed in relation to search engine providers that even the very basic search and access of information via the net can be filtered and manipulated by providers of such basic net services (Introna and Nissenbaum, 2000). Interestingly, these service providers refer to institutional trust, like some of the traditional media, but without reference to professional (journalistic) rules, traditions and legal regulations that emerged from a historic development of social communication (as sketched out in the previous section). This becomes obvious through this quote from (former) Google CEO Eric Schmidt: 'And the reason that you should trust us is that if we were to violate that trust people would move immediately to someone else' (Richmond, 2010). In short, this means: 'trust us because others trust us as well'.

It's not only access that might be influenced by the providers of infrastructure. Also, the actual content provided by users does not always remain untouched. Moderators in forums and social media can visibly or invisibly alter and modify the opinions expressed in these communications. Censorship and content checking is not uncommon, and in some countries, even necessary based on legal demands (like in Germany, where the provider has some responsibility to check the content of public forums: see the so-called 'Niggemeier' court case).

This gives the infrastructure providers (in the above mentioned broad sense) a powerful position in the communication process. Control can be exerted on the process without another third party being able to check or limit this control, as the interference of the infrastructure provider remains largely invisible to the user. And some data protection and data collection scandals in recent times raise serious doubts about the 'neutrality' and controllability of such companies. The trust in them, as demanded by the Schmidt quote, needs to be seriously questioned on that basis.

This – admittedly overcritical and necessarily simplified – discussion of network trust should point out an important aspect of the discussion about trust: trust in participatory forms of communication on the net is based on some plausible, but probably misleading assumptions; and these assumptions are based on an anthropologically explainable misconception of network trust as being something very similar to personal trust in face-to-face situations. It needs to be pointed out that network communication is not 'natural', but 'constructed' – and in many ways severely biased, manipulated and even 'produced'.

Table 2. Personal vs institutionalized vs network trust (in respective communication situations).

	Personal trust	Institutionalized trust	Network trust
Alter/trustee	Individual, co-present	(Media) institution, (impersonal) organization	Seeming multiplicity of individuals in a network
Past experience/ basis	Depending on alter, can be enduring and personal, 'thick' experience, but also rather limited	Generalized experience with 'the' media of a certain type, experience with institution/'brand'	Generalized 'personal' experience, often no actual individual basis, 'thin' experience
Perception of situational aspects	Individual reporting/ information processing, personal judgement of alter and communication situation (perceivable)	Rule-based institutionalized reporting/information processing, structured, hierarchical communication situation	Individual and collective reporting/information processing, unknown situational complexity, limited field of perception
Extension (expectation)	No hidden agenda, limited to situation	'Brand' and professional rules as a guarantee of impartiality, still common fear of hidden agenda and ulterior motives (conspiracy theories)	Seemingly limited to individual communication situation (no ulterior motives); however, third parties often present, but invisible
Expectations	Depending on situation, relevance can be high	Relevance for everyday life, unified public discussion, broad information	Depending on situation, usually specialized/ limited to interest
Problems/ misconceptions	Personal/situational	Mistrust in institutions and produced reality, missing 'authenticity', detachment from individuals	Representation, bias, anonymity, misconception as individualized, 'authentic' communication

Interestingly, this has been the primary criticism of institutionalized media in the past: that they 'produce' a faked reality and that they are biased and/or susceptible to the influence of third parties. Obviously, there are some parallels here (see Table 2) – however, the above mentioned critical aspects of network communication are still not as dominant in the public discussion as the mistrust in public and media institutions, despite recent scandals (see Brown, 2009; Morozov, 2011; Rettberg, 2008). This imbalance leads to a rather paradoxical situation. To exaggerate it a bit: media houses – and journalistic media in particular – rely on trust in their content which is produced according to professional rules and tries to be 'truthful' to the actual events (factuality); however, the institutionalized, rule-based 'production' – which is supposed to guarantee factuality – actually feeds doubts about the 'authenticity' of the content. Social network media, on the other hand, rely on largely unchecked communication of a very peculiar group of self-selected, anonymous persons, which might be filtered and altered by invisible infrastructure providers – but this type of communication is regarded as being more 'authentic' and 'real'.

Loss of trust as a danger to media and society

While the above discussion purposely exaggerates the differences in trust between network communication and institutionalized media communication, it is not unfounded – and is also being reflected by professionals in the field. In a recent project on 'participatory journalism' (Singer et al., 2011), the author interviewed journalists who were responsible for the online offsprings of newspapers and the embedded social media parts of these online news. A lot of the interviewees expressed some fear of social media, and their potential impact on the field. Their argumentation often revolved around trust as the crucial concept. An editor at *Süddeutsche Zeitung* put it this way:

> The Internet will provide a crazy richness of voices, opinions and facts. At the same time, the need for orientation and pillars is growing. Journalistic brands . . . and authors that can be trusted, that you know and that are credible will develop their very own force. These are contradicting tendencies. It will be more anarchic on the one hand and more centralized on the other. . . . The last pillar of credibility . . . actually needs to be preserved. That won't be done by Web 2.0. That is not a pillar of credibility, but overall adds to the confusion. (cited in Quandt, 2011: 165–166)

Another journalist at *FAZ* described user participation and open forums as an 'avalanche overrunning you' (cited in Quandt, 2011: 169). So are media (and journalism in particular) in danger – and being replaced by (non-credible) network sources?

Again, that fear expressed by some professionals might be exaggerated – out of personal interest or fear of the new 2.0 competition. However, the loss of trust in the media as institutions is problematic – the above discussion should have pointed out that institutionalized production cannot be replaced by networked communication for obvious reasons. So if trust in media is dwindling, this also becomes a danger to society at large, as there is no other reliable structure that could provide the necessary reduction of complexity for society.

So what could be done to improve the current situation? Based on the discussion above, both measures directed towards (a) institutionalized media and (b) the perception of social media in society seem to be conceivable.

For institutionalized media and journalism, it seems to be time to realize the challenges posed by network communication, and to actively work against some of the misconceptions and problems connected to institutionalized trust (see Table 2). Certainly, countries could strengthen 'their' journalistic system, and also try to foster a 'public service' character of media (as this would remedy some of the problems related to 'detachment' from the audience). However, some of the change has to come from institutionalized media themselves – reinventing and reconstructing public communication and journalism to adapt it to the new situation. Obviously, this would mean new solutions and ideas, what journalism could and should be in hypercomplex societies – beyond a simple embrace of participatory formats under the roof of 'old' journalistic outlets and concepts (see Singer et al., 2011).

However, the discussion should not only be about institutionalized media, but also participatory forms of communication and network trust. Obviously, there needs to be more transparency as to who the providers of the infrastructure and who the communicators are. This implies a critical discussion and learning process in societies. This learning process could even be supported by communication studies – if the discipline can offer

independent, trustworthy (!) information on the people and companies 'behind' social media. What is more important in the first place, however, is public awareness of the differences between personal, institutionalized and network trust. The members of hyper-complex societies need a level of understanding communication that is adequate to the level of complexity arising from the evolution of societies. If this goal can be reached, at least partially, then informed people might become empowered and critical citizens: since they might realize that communicative reality is always a 'construction', whether it is institutionalized or network based. And they will realize that, depending on the individual situation and interest, network or media generated information might be more or less useful.

In an ideal world, both types of communication will contribute their strengths to the everyday use by – more or less participating – audiences, while neutralizing the weaknesses of the other. However, it remains crucial that trust in communication is preserved, as society cannot exist without it.

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Notes

1. The term is based on the popular movie *The Truman Show* (see also Deuze, 2011).
2. One might even 'trust' in a non-beneficial action of the alteri (i.e. ego expects the alteri to negatively act against ego), but this stretches the concept very far and is outside most definitions, which usually include benevolence and honesty on the side of the alteri. Furthermore, it could be argued that in such a case, ego does not trust the alteri, but just expects a specific situation to turn out in a specific way (and so ego trusts something else – it trusts its own perception! – which, in this sense, is 'honest' and 'benevolent' as a means of judging the situation).
3. Contingency is one of the most relevant aspects for the formation of the social, as described in one form or other in some of the 'grand' theories of sociology (one example being Luhmann and systems theory; however, the concept is also central for action theories, etc.).
4. However, it could be argued that (positive) emotions are needed as a means of counter-balancing the tension of trust being a necessary, but yet uncontrollable element in society. Form this perspective, trust can be seen as inherently paradoxical, as it means a loss of individual autonomy in order to gain the ability to act autonomously.
5. One could argue that information essentially needs to be different from what is known, and therefore it must contain unknown elements – and as such, requires trust.
6. The level of 'thickness' is massively different between various social networks. Facebook users sometimes give insights into their most personal feelings and their everyday life, while participants in discussion forums often reveal no personal information beyond their topical posts. Still, some information channels are missing *by principle*, even in 'deeper' social network sites with a lot of background information (see also media richness theory for a related discussion; Daft and Lengel, 1984).
7. The term refers to fake community/grassroots opinions expressed by persons pretending to be 'real' community members, but who, in fact, are members of third entities (for example working for a PR department) trying to influence communities by supporting the interests and opinions of these entities through the voice of 'authentic' community members. Astroturfing can be connected to Noelle-Neumann's concept of the 'spiral of silence' (1984), as the influencing entities try to create a favourable, perceived public opinion in the community and give the community members the wrong impression of the distribution of opinions in the community.

8. The notion of the long tail (when applied to network communication) is based on the assumption that a multitude of sites with minimal impact and focus might form a relevant force in public opinion when added up, equal to the impact of the relatively few sites with large traffic.

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