Trust and verification in an age of misinformation_Jay Rosen Interview

Transcript Module 1.3

[Music]

Craig Silverman: Hi everyone welcome to week one of the MOOC. We've got a great sort of guest speaker with us this week. Jay Rosen is here this week. We're talking about how journalists have traditionally built trust and performed verification and Jay is a professor of journalism at New York University. He's also been involved as a consultant and in other journalism projects as well. So Jay thank you for joining us this week.

Jay Rosen: My pleasure hello MOOC.

Craig Silverman: Yes hello to the world of MOOC. So you know Jay you've you know I mentioned obviously you're a professor, but also you know you're involved in a project right now. I thought just quickly telling people what you're working on might be of interest to folks as well.

Jay Rosen: Sure, well I've been teaching journalism at New York University for 32 years. I'm especially interested in what I call press think, which is the ideas or the common sense of the journalism profession in the U.S. I'm also very good in public participation in journalism and the way that the readers, viewers, listeners can play a part. And in that connection I'm working with the De Correspondent, which is a Dutch startup that began in 2013 and is the world's most successful member funded new site. Where the members not only support the site financially but also participate with their knowledge in the journalism which is something that's always interested me. So I am their advisor and their ambassador to the United States market and we're trying to figure out how to launch a English-language version of the correspondent yeah in the US which is something we hope to do sometime or begin to do sometime in 2018.

Craig Silverman: Excellent, I think I think that that project kind of relates to this topic because there seems to be a lot around trust at they De Correspondent. On building it with readers to get them to pay. Building it with readers to get them to participate to contribute and that's you know the paying part isn't so new. The real active contribution and element of transparency that's there is really new. Before we get to that sort of current piece. I'm just wondering historically for you when you think about how an organization has kind of built trust with an audience over time to get them to pay to get them you know to to read or pay attention. What do you think of as some of the core things that have typically built been those building blocks for trust in journalism?

Jay Rose: Well before the internet the simple fact that you had a media channel. That you were a television station. That you were the CBC. You were the local newspaper. The fact that you had enough money in capital and reputation and history to sort of be a player in the media marketplace that itself was a sign of trust because it was a capital intensive media environment in which there weren't that many providers. So that was part of it. Another big part of it was professionalism. We we are pros at this. We know what we're doing and in the broadcast space, professionalism was often signaled by very high production values. I remember during the 70s and 80s the United States experiment of something called public access television, which was kind of like a space and the cable dial where anyone could come and put on their own television show. And it was something that was kind of forced on cable companies by the franchise agreements they had in local communities. They had to provide a certain amount of channels for the public to broadcast. And it ended up being kind of meaningless because while it was possible for anyone to put on a show the production values were so low that it looked kind of crappy. And that was a signal that you couldn't really trust it and so production values have a lot to do with with trust. Professionalism. Simply having a franchise and of course professional habits of mind like both sides. And kind of avoiding excess displays of emotion. Being calm. Being in control. Delivering news in a print environment in a sort of very factual way. So for example journalism students during this era were taught to like lose the adjectives you know don't put adjectives into your copy remove the word 'I.' And other other sorts of writing rules like this that were presented as part of the professional model but we're also connected to to trust. People will trust us if we don't put up too much attitude into our our news copy. People will trust us if we don't put ourselves into the story too much. So those were some of the ideas that dominated during that period. Be professional. The simple fact that you have a franchise in the news market which was extremely valuable an extremely rare was part of it. Not displaying too much attitude too much emotion. Being calm and under control like that's what a typical anchor person is, right? There they're always in control and I think messages like that were a big part of trust.

Craig Silverman: There was also also an element I find a lot of the the large media entities or even smaller ones too. They actually used the word a lot like they emphasized it overtly. They would say the most trusted name in news or what have you. Right? And so it was almost like listen we're here, we've got a big TV studio, we've got big printing presses and trucks. And you can see our newspaper on every corner. We're trusted. It was almost like you know they manifested it just by being there and saying it in some ways.

Jay Rosen: Yeah CNN still has that slogan the most trusted name in news. Another interesting idea was in in New York City there's a there's an all news radio station 10 10 Wins that says you give us 22 minutes, we give you the world. Gou give us 22 minutes we give you the world. So the idea there is that is that the whole world is given to you by news. Right, we don't edit anything out. Just like all the news that's fit to print. Right. We give you all the news the whole world. That idea of the you know like the world. The globe is such a common image in news like the Toronto Globe and Mail. Right. The idea of the globe is not just that it's about what's happening in our planet work Earth. It's that it's all the globe. It's not a part of the globe, which is

a fiction but it's a fiction related to the campaign or the bid for trust that media made during that era.

Craig Silverman: And it's I mean it's almost in a lot of the things that we've just talked about you could basically list the opposite and that characterizes the media environment were in now. Where before it cost a lot of money to build a studio. And production value is really matter and it was very hard to get them. And it was very hard to create and distribute a newspaper. Today distribution is easy. Right. Quality of you know how good something looks easy to achieve but also stuff that just looks kind of average or whatever performs extremely well. And so we've reversed or at least you know broken down a lot of the things that before were actually you know pretty big signifiers of trust.

Jay Rosen: Totally, I mean now it's it's easy to become a publisher. It's easy to become a broadcaster. The the most famous words ever written about freedom of the press of course are in the United States Constitution. Freedom of the press she'll not be a page by Congress but or Congress shall make no law abridging freedom of the press. The second most famous words ever written about freedom press where AJ Liebling the press critics famous remark freedom of the press belongs to those who own one. That was the reality for more than a century. Now anyone could own one. And so we're at a very different era where it's easy to become a publisher. It's easy to broadcast. Anybody can be a radio person. That's called pod casting. Anyone can be a TV broadcaster that's called YouTube. Anyone can be a publisher that's called blogging. Anyone can connect horizontally with an audience. That's called social media. And so changes in the underlying media system obviously result in changes in practice and also in changes in things like trust, reputation, credibility, etc.

Craig Silverman: One of the things there was a period of time in the early 10th century particularly in the United States, where there were a lot of structures around trust and professionalism that started to kind of take hold. You would have newspapers and The Associated Press creating like a statement of ethics or principles to lay out their rules of the road. You suddenly saw Ombudsman starting to to appear at places early on. In some cases from places that that were known for a lack of accuracy all of a sudden they brought in a an Ombudsman or someone like that to kind of talk about their their trust elements and building it. That period seems pretty important in terms of formalizing kind of structures around transparency and accountability and the thinking around it as well I guess.

Jay Rosen: Well the professionalization of journalism in the first half of the twentieth century is a very important moment in press history. And what we mean by professionalism is a bunch of things that happen at once. You have, first of all, you have the emergence of a style of reporting and writing the news in which blatant acts of partisanship are discouraged. You have news sources competing for trust and loyalty by claiming how independent they are from political parties and from partisan forces. And then you have the growth of professional associations, like the American Society of newspaper editors, which dates from the 1920s and other sorts of professional associations of people who not only do the same kind of work but have an interest

in driving the standards of that of that occupational group up. In the same period of time you have the first journalism schools starting. And journalism schools are of course a way of professionalizing the work of the journalists. And you have the emergence of codes of ethics in professional societies like the Society of Professional Journalists in the US and you could have I'm sure there are similar types of organizations in Canada and and Europe that emerge in the 20th century. And then the status of the occupation begins to change from what one time was a working class trade that was one step away from the printers trade and the truck drivers who delivered the newspaper to something that's much more white-collar and tracks educated people which really that takes until the 1950s and 1960s for that to happen. And then it really takes off in the United States in the 1970s after Woodward and Bernstein and the tremendous increase in prestige of the journalism profession. Which after the Woodward and Bernstein begins to attract the people at the very top of the social hierarchy Ivy League graduates and and people who could who could go into any line of work. Choose to go into journalism because it's not only seen as a as a proper trade but it's as a way to have cultural influence and even political power. And so all those things are connected to professionalism and in fact the high point for trust in journalism. Where in the news media as an institution is in the early 70s mid 70s.

Craig Silverman: Right, uh, so the second piece of what we talked about this week was was verification and we're gonna have an in-depth look at that in week 3. Where we really get into more of some of the kind of digital techniques and what-have-you. But I think it's it's one of the things that's interesting to me is looking at verification. One of the things that I often say about it is that when you talk to journalists and when you look historically at what journalists are supposed to do and what you know the act of journalism is. You know verification and checking facts and gathering facts at the top of the list. But if you actually look in a lot of cases to like textbooks and other things of how journalists are taught, it wasn't really a systematic thing. It was more almost like a concept or a ritual some people had talked about it. So I'm wondering for you somebody who's been teaching journalism for a long time. Like how do you think, how is verification been taught? How is it sort of, you know, saying that you need to check your facts or was there often for a long time very specific direction for journalists about how you do this.

Jay Rosen: Um well one of the reasons that I study what I call press thing is because if you look carefully at what journalists believe and what they're taught. What they pass on to the next generation. A lot of it is contradictory or it it contains contradictions. So, for example, one of the things you hear most in journal school and when more experienced journalists talk to younger journalists is this line is cracked it's kind of a joke it's not very funny but it's it's presented as a joke which is 'if your mother says she loves you check it out.' Right. That idea is it's very much a kind of a clue to culture of profession of journalism. And of course what it's suggesting if we take it literally. Is that you can't trust anything. Everything has to be verified. Right? To the point where your mother says she loves you which ought to be the kind of thing you could take for granted, you should check it. Right? That's the joke of it. And yet at the same time if you're a young journalist and you work in newspaper in newsroom in the 1970s or 80s, you might hear another common phrase. Which was 'go with what you got.' 'Go with what you got,' which is a

statement about deadlines. And deadlines, in many ways, create journalism. If you don't have a deadline. You would, if you wanted to check everything out. Your story would take sort of an endless number of days to complete because there's always something else that you can add. There's always another interview you can do. There's always another fact you can check. Right.

So the fact that you don't have infinite time. You have a deadline is actually what creates journalism in the first place. If there weren't any deadline, we would never publish anything. So 'your mother says she loves you check it out' says one thing. 'Go with what you got,' says something very different. Right. Journalists will preach both of them, without actually noticing the contradiction between those two things. So, for example, when we think about fact-checking. The truth of the matter was that there wasn't a separate act called fact-checking in newspaper journalism, daily journalism. Because when you get an assignment at noon and your deadline is five o'clock, you don't have time for a separate stage and a separate desk called the fact checkers. But you are responsible for making your story accurate, which in practice means as accurate as possible within the constraints you face for the deadline. Right?

So that is what gives rise to practices like he says, she said. Where we don't actually have the time to check it out and tell you who's right. And so instead, what we do is we provide a quote from the other side that says this is a terrible regulation it's going to cost jobs. And we put a quote from the other side that says this is great. This is progress in protecting the environment. And we let you figure it out. Right. Which we don't teach that in journalism school. We don't teach that we're letting you figure out. But what we teach is get both sides. Right. So the reality is in daily journalism there never was a stage or a desk or a department called fact-checking, but in magazine journalism which runs on a weekly or a monthly clock like the New Yorker or MacLean's or something like that. There is a separate stage called fact-checking which has been a part of magazine journalism New Yorker, Rolling Stone, Esquire Magazine, GQ for a long time. And so, so fact-checking was always a kind of function of how much time you had, the bureaucracy of the newsroom, whether you were able to do research that would be required to nail something down. It was always provisional. It was never perfect, but good enough. Uh and yet it was entirely contained within the professional routine and the culture of the newsroom. It wasn't something for example that you shared with readers. Their only job was to consume the product. With the internet, we have a totally different situation.

Craig Silverman: Well that so the last thing I wanted to get into that's a perfect segway to it is so you talking about how you don't really let the readers in on that process. One of the other things that I think characterize you know the previous media environment and contrast with what we have now is also how newsrooms dealt with information that was found to be false. And it sort of seems like in the past if you were a journalist and you were given a tip or you came across something that turned out to be false the reaction was okay great I'm just gonna leave that alone and I'm not gonna tell anyone about it. Because why would I tell people about something that's false. And yet today we have we now have it seems a different relationship with that. Where you have more and more news organizations that feel like they have to warn people about what's false because the false stuff is out there and people are encountering it. Whereas before rumors

and falsehoods might make their way into a newsroom, but journalists would just assume well if I don't tell people about it then they're not going to hear about it. So I'm gonna keep quiet. And that seems to highlight kind of a contrast be in a bridge between the previous environment and the one we're in now.

Jay Rosen: Yeah we have a perfect term for that. Before the Internet, journalists were the gatekeepers. That that says it all. They either opened the gate for things to flow through into the public sphere or they didn't. And if they found something that was false, they didn't open the gate and that was their power. The power was they were the gatekeeper. And if and there was a reality to it which which was if you had for example a charge to make about a public figure, an accusation, especially above wrongdoing. The only way that that could get into the public sphere into public debate is if you could get journalists to run it, to print it, broadcast it. And if you couldn't, it effectively didn't exist.

And we can actually pinpoint the moment when this changed in American life which was 2004 during the Kerry/Bush campaign. When the Swift Boat Veterans for truth came out with a series of accusations about John Kerry's behavior in Vietnam, which showed him to be not the war hero that his biography said he was. But a person of essentially ill repute. And in the media environment, prior to a world of blogging and social media, if political journalists decided not to talk about these accusations that was it. It was over. But by 2004 the media system was is open enough and it had many more players in it. And the people pushing these accusations against John Kerry, which most people who looked at them consider them false were able to get that story into play even if it was only rumors, acquisitions presented as you know may be true may be false. The fact is that got around. It got into the debate and and was that was the moment where it was obvious that this gatekeeper role where you just dealt with false information by keeping it out of the public sphere was no longer real.

Craig Silverman: Well that's I think a perfect segway for us to get into week two where we dive into this new media environment. Where the gatekeepers still exist, but can't keep the gate as well as they once did and there's a lot more voices and a lot more information for everyone to deal with. So thank you very much for joining us Jay it was great to have you here.

Jay Rosen: Craig, you're so welcome and keep the MOOC going.

Craig Silverman: Thank you

[Music]