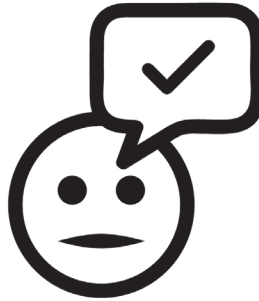


4

TRUTHING



What's the Trend?

As a consequence of eroding trust in media and institutions, people are engaging in a personal quest for the truth based on direct observation and face-to-face interaction.

I remember once browsing the Internet I encountered a headline that seemed too ridiculous to be true: “Harry Potter Books Spark Rise In Satanism Among Children.” Indeed it turned out to be a joke – and it was one of the first times that I read *The Onion*, a comedy news site that takes modern stories and creates intentionally hilarious twists on them designed to entertain. At the time that story was quickly uncovered to be a work of satire. Today the line between truth, lies, satire and fiction has become much harder to distinguish.

The truth has a media problem.

The term *fake news*, which had no meaning two years ago, has become one of the most popular accusations traded back and forth between politicians and media personalities alike. We are surrounded by routine sensationalism peddled by 24-hour news channels desperate to invent a perpetual stream of “breaking news.” Lost in the midst of all this televised finger wagging is a shared sense of reality. Thankfully, that hasn’t stopped one underappreciated group of truth seekers.

On July 5, 2017, a dedicated group of 190 top fact-checkers from 54 countries attended the Poynter Institute’s fourth annual Global Fact-Checking Summit (Global Fact). Their mission never felt more urgent. In the time since they had last met, Donald Trump had taken office, fake news had become an everyday term, and casual indifference toward the truth seemed to be growing.

Only a month earlier, a widely shared study found that around 59 percent of links shared on social media had never been clicked, including links that went viral and were shared thousands of times.¹ The conclusion: People were actively sharing stories based on headlines alone, without reading the article. But even a headline can mislead a large group of people, sparking a growing need for objective ways to confirm the accuracy of the news we read.

“Forget clickbait. We’re living in the age of sharebait now.”

CAITLIN DEWEY, *Washington Post*

At Global Fact, participants celebrated the international growth of fact-checking as a discipline. The participating organizations were impressive and spanned the globe. Faktisk, for example, is an independent group founded by journalists from four competing Norwegian media organizations. La Silla Vacía is a Colombian news site that uses the messaging app WhatsApp to distribute fact-checked media and track false content or stories. Julien Pain, the editor-in-chief of France 24’s program *Observateurs*, started an online live streaming program called *Instant Détox* to talk to people about media,

misinformation, and rumors on the street. The goal is to debunk them in real time and to provide unbiased, transparent corrections.

This global quest for truth through fact-checking and on-demand transparency is also attracting some wealthy sponsors. Philanthropic investment firm the Omidyar Network announced that it would donate \$100 million to support investigative journalism, fight misinformation, and take on hate speech. In one of his first projects since leaving Microsoft, former CEO Steve Ballmer led the creation of USAFacts.org, a comprehensive database of facts that is designed to offer more transparency regarding how the US government spends its money.

All of these organizations are responding, in various ways, to the reality of a world in which people are forced to doubt everything they see on social and mainstream media, hear from companies, politicians, and are told by their own social connections. The defining question of media today has become who can you believe?

Considering this context, the average person looks around and decides that the only trustworthy person is themselves. This makes things even worse. As more of us look inward for our own definitions of the truth, the result is a trend we call *Truthing*, when the personal quest for facts leads each of us (for better and worse) to rely on direct observation, personal experience, face-to-face-interactions, and the opinions of those who look, talk, and think like we do.

Reengineered Media Diets and the Rise of Curators

Some of these seemingly trustworthy opinions come from intellectually superior cable news hosts who specialize in delivering a steady stream of sound bites taken severed from their context, and outrage-inducing monologues (see Chapter 10 on *Manipulated Outrage*). In response, people are turning to more approachable curators of news to help explain the world in a more human voice—like a slightly opinionated but non-judgmental big sibling who is always in-the-know.

The continued popularity of curated daily email newsletter theSkimm is a perfect example of this. theSkimm essentially offers “all the news you need

to start your day,” and founders, former TV news producers Danielle Weisberg and Carly Zakin, strike a conversational tone that invites trust from their readers, many of whom are female Millennials as well. This large audience feels comfortable relying on them for their news, and in a little over five years, their newsletter has attracted more than 5 million subscribers.

Other email newsletters like Brain Pickings, which is published every Sunday by writer Maria Popova, the daily *NextDraft*, which is published by writer Dave Pell, are also examples of people’s growing reliance on trusted curators to help them make sense of the news. The Coral Project is an open-source organization created to help journalists get closer to the communities they serve by offering tools for better interaction (including curating more valuable stories).²

These efforts even inspired me to write a curated newsletter, where I share non-obvious ideas and underappreciated innovation, marketing, and business stories every week. Each week I try to offer a fresh take on the stories of the week along with a quick insight about why it matters for my readers.

What these personal news sources aim to do is help each of us to reshape our media diets from something sensationalist to something more relatable. It is an example of *Truthing* because people are seeking out new sources of information to inform their perception of the world instead of ceding control of their news flow to the mainstream media.

Activism 2.0: User-Generated Truth (UGT)

For years people have talked about the power of user-generated content (UGC) as a way for real voices to break through the clutter of media. The exaggerated potential for UGC was even predicted by some to lead to a demise of advertising agencies, an idea that was bolstered as more brands featured user-created content in Super Bowl ads.

Today, UGC is being augmented by something my team and I have started describing as user-generated truth (UGT), a phenomenon where content is shared from some of the most underrepresented parts of the world to tell the story of what those places are really like. One recent example of UGT and its potential to empower people to search for the truth is the United Nations’ “Not

a Target” campaign. In it, the UN leveraged Facebook’s newest live streaming technology to let citizens and humanitarian workers in conflict zones tell their stories directly to an online audience. The videos they shared through live streaming were haunting and eye-opening. Civilians in Syria reclaimed the stories being told about their homelands and declared themselves “Not A Target” through sharing personal, unfiltered stories.

The result of widespread access to this type of technology increases awareness of issues that don’t make the front page, which, in turn, shows people that if they want the truth, they will have to go beyond mainstream media.

As Witness (witness.org) program manager Jackie Zammuto explains: “More and more people, not just in the US, are using video to document police violence, especially in places like Brazil, Mexico and all across Latin America. Of the refugees that are coming through Europe, a lot more people are taking to social media and live video to document their voyage.”

This documenting of human suffering is more difficult to ignore, shaping people’s understanding of the truth about the world around them and prompting them to ask more questions. (This point is also further explored in Chapter 12 on *Virtual Empathy*).

*“This is happening. You cannot deny that this is happening
because it’s happening live in front of your face.”*

JACKIE ZAMMUTO, Witness.org Program Manager³

Live streaming technology is also changing news media coverage. *The Guardian* newspaper in the UK launched a 360-degree virtual film called “Limbo” to take users inside the process that asylum seekers go through while waiting for a decision about whether they can stay in the UK.

Free video on-demand news channel Euronews expanded its climate reporting with a 360-degree video view of several of Europe’s climate change hot spots to provide real-time access to a visual representation of the effects of global warming. In the coming years, virtual tools like this will continue to

bring the actions of people, corporations, governments to our computer or mobile screens in more visceral, real and unfiltered ways, which in turn feeds both our need and ability to seek out the truth for ourselves.

Tech-Enabled Truth Warriors

At the core of the rise in this UGT are improvements in the tools that are now available to tell our stories to the world. As part of its annual coverage of “10 Breakthrough Technologies,” the *MIT Technology Review* routinely covers topics like the future of gene therapy and cyberwar. Last year, the review featured something that seemed a bit out of place alongside deeply scientific topics: 360-degree cameras.

Thanks to technology, 360-degree cameras are increasingly available to a public eager to share stories in a new way. The *Technology Review* cited examples as varied as videos that share a virtual forest experience and a livestream of a medical procedure used to create an interactive learning experience for surgical residents.⁴ Each of these take us a little further toward the truth by presenting the world as unfiltered as it can possibly be... with nothing but a live stream from a camera trained upon it.



Photo: Samsung Gear 360 Spherical Camera

Live streaming is another new form of storytelling emerging through the same trend; YouTube and Facebook are in a race to add more live streaming features to their platforms. According to one analyst, the market for video streaming could top \$70 billion by 2021 (more than double its current size).⁵

For at least half a decade the business world has been talking about the potential of UGC. The term typically describes the growing ranks of amateur content creators who make everything from Super Bowl ad competition submissions to online makeup tutorials. With 360-degree video and live streaming technology, these creators are increasingly moving from sharing entertainment to recording the truth.

Why We Trust Older Products

In our personal quests for the truth, nostalgia is a powerful force. Historian Gary Cross explores this idea in his book *Consumed Nostalgia*, in which he looks at the intersection of what we buy and the sense of nostalgia and returning to our past that those products offer. Cross writes that this nostalgia allows us to “recall a ‘naïve’ simpler time when there were fewer goods that lasted longer and still played an important part in family life.”⁶

Why is nostalgia such a meaningful method for us to seek out the truth today? As psychologist and nostalgia expert Constantine Sedikides says, “in difficult situations it appears that nostalgia grounds you. It gives you a base on which to evaluate the present.”⁷

Anytime truth feels out of reach, people tend to look into the past to products and services that were more trustworthy. In 2016 we first wrote about a trend we called *Strategic Downgrading* to describe how people sometimes opt for the older and less digital versions of products because they prefer the experience. Nostalgia in this sense, offers a powerful emotional metric for whether a product or experience is “telling the truth.” Evoking this sense of nostalgia, when done right, can help consumers decide what to trust or believe.

Truth Seeking Through Nostalgia

This year Kodak announced that it would bring back its iconic Ektachrome film, and excited photographers went wild with speculation. Given the popularity of Kodak’s rereleased Super 8 video camera the year before, a return to Ektachrome seemed like the natural next step. Capitalizing on the resurgent popularity of the analog camera, Kodak even published a new magazine called *Kodachrome*, which focuses quarterly on the rise of analog culture.

When Nintendo launched its throwback Nintendo Classic gaming system last year, it was in such demand that some consumers took to Ebay with an intent to sell it for 10 times the original retail price.

Sales of vinyl records over the past year hit a 25-year high, fueled by a return to tangible music and the recent death of several music legends,

including David Bowie and Prince.⁸

Nokia even relaunched its iconic 3310 phone in 2017 as the ultimate backup phone, with a battery life that lasts for days and features that allow you to complete only the most necessary of mobile phone activities: calling and texting.

All of these nostalgic products are popular in part because they remind people of a simpler time when the world seemed more trustworthy, choices seemed fewer, and everything was simpler. This may or may not be true—but it certainly feels true for most people, and ultimately that is what *Truthing* drives each of us to seek: not a perfect truth, but rather one that we find more palatable and believable, and that fits our own view of the world, even if that view might be different than the person right next door.



Photo: Nokia 3310
(new edition)

Why It Matters

The truth has perhaps never been so openly debated as it is today. To navigate this, people are exercising a behavior we call *Truthing*, and this has serious consequences for anyone who must earn the trust of audiences or consumers. Retailers must acknowledge people's skepticism and allow consumers to uncover your brands trustworthiness on their own. This creates a need for far deeper transparency about sourcing, manufacturing and environmental records—even in some cases offering direct connections with the real people making those products.

Organizations of all kinds must be prepared for these more informed customers. Health-care providers must cater to the empowered patient. Media companies must take on the challenge of regaining the public's trust. The ultimate result of *Truthing* means that the new metric for engagement is no longer determined by providing the best information or selling the best solution. Instead, companies and organizations of all kinds will need to focus on *proving* the truth of their claims with an audience that is increasingly training itself in how to spot dishonesty.

How to Use This Trend

- ✓ **Curate a media diet.** Just as you would never have the same food at every meal, your media diet needs to have enough variety. The problem is, people often fall back into the same sources of media—or tend to respect the same forms of media as organizations—when it comes to developing media outreach programs or advertising plans. Finding the right range in a media diet is something that organizations and people alike can do, but it requires you to start with the decision to do it.
- ✓ **Make it easy for customers to find truth.** Every organization needs to find new ways to win over a skeptical audience. When it comes to *Truthing*, this means finding the information sources people are most likely to trust and connecting with them. This could mean seeking out peer-to-peer validation or sharing testimonials, or finding the right influencers (or more niche *microinfluencers*) who believe in your business and are willing to speak out on your behalf.