

ISOJ 2019: Day 1, Morning Session

Can media really rebuild trust with audiences?

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- Rob Bennett, editor-in-chief & general manager, global content operations, **Microsoft News**
 - Joy Mayer, director, **Trusting News**
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 - Charles Sykes, editor-in-chief, **The Bulwark**
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Rosental Alves: We moved directly to the next panel, so Tom Rosenstiel will be the man in charge here, please.

Tom Rosenstiel: We're going to talk about trust and I'm going to try and be the skeptic here. I should say that, I'd love to do a cage match with Henry Blodget and not give him a suntan, but something else. I take issue on a number of things he says, but anyway I'm going to take issue with a number of things that my panelists are going say, too. Let's talk about trust. I have to stand over here so I can see my slides. Okay. Good. Oh great. Okay.

So, first some stats about trust. There are some things about it that may be a little different than you may know. First, trust in the media has dropped by half since 1977. In 1977, 72% had a fair amount of trust and by 2016 it had dropped to 32%.

But, people don't often understand (knowing the history of this) is that half of that decline in trust in media in the United States happened before the Internet, OK? Really happened between 1977 and 1997. What was going on? Well, the first thing that happened was cable. And we think about the Internet as a pretty big thing, imagine your television dial goes from 4 to 400, that created choice.

That was followed by the Reagan administration deregulating our media so that things that you could do on television and radio by the mid 80s would have been

illegal in 1980 to do. That created an environment where partisan talk radio, filter bubble media, like we have on cable and talk radio, would not have been possible.

And with all that choice and all of that new media, talk radio and a lot of cable avidly marketed themselves as the alternative to the mainstream liberal media. And as we look deep into this, what we see is there is a significant partisan split.

So we've got 32 percent trust in media in 2016. Fourteen percent of Republicans have a fair level of trust, only 14%, versus 51% of Democrats, Independents are in the middle, so this is a significant thing. Part of this decline is about politics, but here's an ominous sign. What group trusts the media least after Republicans or is the most distrustful of the media aside from Republicans? It's the young, people under 50.

Why? Because these are folks who grew up in this time period with a lot of media choice and with all of this partisan media. They did not grow up with Walter Cronkite, they did not grow up with you know the media that we think of as sort of down the middle, trying to be disinterested, that's a minority of our media scape now.

So, what's next? As we think about these issues going forward and we think about the crisis in local media and all these other things, the next big thing is audio, and on audio, you're not going to get search choices, you're not going to say: "hey Google, give me 10-12 pages of options for such and such" you say to Google: "hey Google, what's the answer to this?" and you get one answer. Who's providing that? Who will become the single authority over our political rhetoric and our political knowledge going forward? And all that's before 2016.

Enter Trump. Let's look at his rhetoric, just briefly. News that's critical of him is "fake news." Meaning: the news media are unreliable. "Media are the enemy of the people." Meaning: the media are elitist, they're against you and me. "The media are failing, failing media, the failing New York Times." Meaning: "they're on the wrong side of history, unlike me, unlike us."

The goal of this rhetoric which is influencing distrust is not to make people believe the fake news, it's to make them doubt all the news, to doubt what's real. And then you say "Well, who can I trust? I trust the leader I like." To disbelieve fact and to put faith in the belief of their leader.

This creates existential challenge for journalists. Why? Well. first off, our whole notion of reality is built fact upon fact upon verified fact, and if we have enough of them we think we have the truth. That's kind of built into the religion we practice, the way our brains are wired. He challenges that. And the second existential challenge is how do you cover someone who says you're the enemy of the people. So, we're going to talk about these existential challenges.

Rob Bennett: I'm Rob Bennett. If Charlie is the token conservative then I'm the token platform representative, so much for how this is gonna go for me. See? I thought since this is our first year at ISOJ, thank you Rosental for having us, I'd just give a little context because even though it's our first year, Microsoft has been partnering with journalists and publishers for more than 20 years, most popularly probably through our Microsoft News and MSN portals that reach 500 million people around the world in 28 languages. But, when I think about Microsoft's contributions and the way that we work with journalists and publishers, I really think of in four different buckets, so I just wanted to give some context.

The first is providing technologies that enable people around the world to more easily consume news and other content. The most typical example would be the web browser.

The second is a set of technologies and products that journalists use and other creators use to do storytelling and we've seen advances over the years from simple text editors to now tools that enable great data journalism, and I'll just give a shameless plug to one of my colleagues - there's a breakfast tomorrow morning on data journalism and a number of technologies that we're providing so please go to Ben Rudolph's breakfast.

The third is with publishers at-large that are trying to deliver content at scale to people around the world. We think it's important for us to be able to provide cheap

services that publishers can use to deliver content to millions and millions and billions of people around the world.

And then fourth is our news distribution and monetization platform Microsoft News, which is where I spend most of my time. And so we've been working on a lot of these technologies over the past 20 years. Recently, in the last year, we started a program out of our corporate external and legal affairs group called Defending Democracy. The intent is to work with governments and other technology providers to ensure the safety of our electoral process.

And there's a lot of different efforts that are happening across the industry, many of you have been part of that. There's a key pillar that I think is relevant here around disinformation defense. And we think that it's super critical for Microsoft as a technology leader to work with other technology companies to provide our skills in developing A.I. and scale computing to help journalism and consumers get to a world of rich, trusted, fact-based journalism.

So, that's a big effort that we're focused on and I'm happy to talk more about that. I'm breaking with tradition of any technology company and I only have two slides and one of them is this one, so we're already halfway through. Microsoft News - the area that I spend most of my time on - we work with publishers and journalists around the world.

I wanted to give you some context on the way we think about our mission. And I think it's helpful for a platform to provide some transparency into the way that we think about things and the way my team thinks about things. And coincidentally a lot of the things that we came up with align very nicely to the commission report, which I was very thankful for.

We believe fundamentally in five things on my team. The first and most important: we think that a free, well-funded press plays a critical role in society, I hope everyone here believes that. We've been working to create revenue models and business models over the past 20 years that fund journalism and now, over the last five years, we've given away more than \$750 million back to publishers in the form

of real top line revenue. We want to reward publishers for great journalism that appears on our sites and our platforms.

Secondly, we believe in delivering unparalleled breadth and depth of high quality fact-based journalism. We work with 1,200 publishing partners around the world, that equates to about 4,500 publishing brands in 28 languages, 50 different editions around the world. So, we really embrace the breadth and depth of journalism- from rich markets like the United States to smaller markets like Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia, where I just was. And we think that having the diversity of voices is critical in establishing trust with consumers.

We believe that trustworthy and diverse perspectives matter. We work again with a variety of publishers, we work with a variety of journalists internally and we really strive to publish diverse perspectives through new features that we're shipping like our spotlight feature that shows multiple perspectives on a story or in our Bing search engine where we have multiple perspectives on answers. So, even if you ask a very mundane question like: "Is kale good for me?" we can provide different perspectives on that and make sure that people are seeing a depth and breadth of information.

We believe in the power of combining human and machine curation. This is sort of interesting. There is a spectrum of when we curate news, when different providers, platform providers, curate news. Some people are on the all-human side, some people are on the all-search and A.I. side. We actually think neither one is completely right and the power is really combined in the middle. So we have more than 800 editors around the world in 50 locations. I'm very proud of that team and the work that they do every day to select high-quality content.

They couldn't do that without the assistance of machine learning and A.I. We receive more than 170,000 pieces of content every day from our publishing partners. There's no way that our editorial team can go through all that and choose the best content for our audiences, so we use M.L., we use A.I., to try to categorize, qualify, make sure that the content is error free, it doesn't contain objectionable content, and we're doing things like starting to trace news

provenance and understand where stories actually came from other sources to assist our human editors in curating the best possible experience for our audience.

And finally, we believe that user choice and personalization are essential to the experience. This is critical, it's a sort of a must have feature today, you have to be able to personalize your experience, and you have to avoid filter bubbles.

And this is something that is a constant tension and we're continuing to work on and I don't think we've quite got it right yet, and we're going back and forth between the editorial team and the A.I. team to try to strike that balance, and we're continuing to work on it along with the rest of the industry, but we think that this is critical for establishing trust not only with audiences, but with publishers. So, thank you!

Joy Mayer: I think it's really useful to think about... I spend a lot of time thinking about ways to dissect what trust is, and one model suggests that we think about it in terms of competence, benevolence and integrity. And I think journalists feel pretty comfortable with competence like when we talk about transparency and telling the story of what we do and why it's credible, we're really good at thinking about like well here's the outline, I'm going gonna build you that shows that I know what I'm doing.

We don't spend as much time thinking about integrity and benevolence and if people don't believe that we're on their side and that we're here because society needs us and we have good intentions, then what's the point? When we think about shining a light on journalism, the transparency that the Knight Commission has recommended, a few challenges of that are that sometimes journalism is really boring. How journalism works is really, really boring.

I listen to a podcast that I love that I'm not going to name because I am criticizing it and there was a behind the scenes episode lately and I got really excited because I'd heard the episode that they were talking about and they had a whole other episode about how that first episode came together, but you guys it was like it was like the challenges that the journalists faced, and the obstacles in getting the interviews and stuff.

It wasn't about the things that I tuned in that I cared about the subject of the podcast. So too often when we shine a light on ourselves we're boring. Also, sometimes there's a lot of irresponsible and unethical things done in the name of journalism and when we think about defending and explaining journalism we're not dwelling enough in the stuff we don't want to defend.

There's also a lot of journalism that is to Charlie's point, dishonest about its agenda and its purpose. So, there are three things, in the work that I do, places we recommend journalists begin.

The first is to really understand mistrust. Spend enough time with your critics to figure out what about you they don't trust. It's so easy to blow off negative comments, but within there you'll find things like "man, they really do have all these assumptions about why we did a story, They really do think that money influences what we do. They really do doubt that we're here to do good work. They think we're out to get people. They think we're not on the side of our community."

So first, journalists really need to spend time figuring out what the mistrust is all about. And then make a list of what the misassumptions are. Sometimes the mistrust is based on things that are really valid, they're really mad at you about something you did or something the industry does that makes a lot of sense.

Sometimes the mistrust is based in misassumptions. The list of mis assumptions is crazy long. The thing is there's a lot that I don't understand about other industries and other businesses, and yet, I'm surprised when people aren't intimately familiar with how I do my job.

My dad said something to me recently, I gave an interview for something and he's like "Oh I hope they paid you for your time" and I'm like "Dad that's not how this works" and he's a pretty educated news consumer. So, we're not spending time thinking about, figuring out what those misassumptions are and addressing them.

And the third thing I think it's really important for us to be thinking about is expanding people's definition of what journalism even is. Very often when I talk to

people about what I do, even when I'm talking to like you know the audience of a local community newspaper, the conversation switches to national politics. And just people's perception of what journalism is has gotten narrower and narrower and we've allowed that to happen.

So I think there's a very important conversation that needs to happen about trust in national political journalism, and I look forward to doing some of that, but also journalism is traffic, and business, and sports, and education, and all of these things, that when I talk to people about trust in their local newspaper, their local radio, their local TV, especially, and national news about other things, that's just like not even on their radar.

So, I run the Trusting News Project and we've done a lot of really interesting research. There's a link here at the bottom in case the research-minded of you would like to dig into some of it. Recently we did some research with the Center for Media Engagement based here at UT that showed that building some transparency into stories, turns out it actually does build trust, nice to have data, right?

We've worked with 53 newsroom partners so far and are launching another round of experiments now. There we go, yep. And two things that Trusting News is doing now that I'll just briefly mention is thanks to some funding from Democracy Fund we're offering free coaching sessions for journalists so anybody can request a session to talk to us about...to talk about how to use specific projects to build trust or how to better tell the story of your work. And then we also have a weekly newsletter that's one trust tip per week. So, thank you.

Mizell Stewart: Good morning everybody, I'm Mizell Stewart and I'm a member of the Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy. And the Knight Commission is a group of 27 people that was convened by the Knight Foundation and the Aspen Institute. The commission is a group of 27 people convened by the Knight Foundation and the Aspen Institute. We worked together for nearly two years to examine the issues behind the decline of trust in media and in government and to recommend solutions for reform.

Tom ably laid out some of the backstory in terms of the historical decline in trust, but I want to point to the issue of trust in government because what we've seen over the same period of time is what we like to call the weaponization of mistrust, the weaponization of mistrust in government, in saying that big government cannot be trusted, to say that media cannot be trusted, and so we're seeing these attitudes play themselves out in society.

And fundamentally, we believe that trust in institutions is essential to democracy and that holding the powerful accountable is critical to a democratic republic. And so trust in media and in government are intertwined. Some of the reasons for the loss of trust in government: when institutions perform poorly, when people have a sense that government is not meeting their needs, people lose trust in government and in institutions, and so that manifests itself in the growth and political polarization.

Decline of trust in media. We've talked about the proliferation of new sources, but one very critical element is the conflation of news and opinion. I often talk about what we've seen in the cable news universe and the fact that opinion programming takes up more time than actual news reporting and so you've got four hours of actual news in a day and 20 hours of people talking about the news of the day and offering their opinions.

The decline of local news, another critical factor. It is less likely that people in local communities will actually say, "I know a journalist, that I know that person to be a good person." And then again there's the politicized criticism of the media. But the assault on truth which Tom alluded to and what we are seeing coming out of the White House and other out of major political institutions, it's a fundamental attack on our ability to self-govern.

And so the commission looked at recommendations in three areas: media and journalism, technology, and citizenship, with the idea that we need to make progress in all of those areas to restore trust in the media and in democracy. And just at a very high level, our focus is to recommit to the ideals of journalism holding the powerful accountable and pursuing the truth with a foundation of what we like to call radical transparency.

The idea that journalists over time assume that consumers know that we operate with good intentions. Journalists assume that people know what “off the record” means, what “on background” means, journalists assume that people know that we operate ethically. We can no longer take those assumptions for granted and we'll talk about these a little bit more.

The crisis in local news is also worthy of investment and worthy of attention. How do we rebuild the economic infrastructure for local news? And thinking about it this way: is the market going to solve this problem? I would argue that the market will not, and the commission strongly recommends blended funding models and an increase in philanthropy in order to help restore capacity for local accountability journalism.

Also, technology solutions as it relates to how we employ technology to make sure that diverse viewpoints are represented, that news and information across platforms and across distribution channels is clearly labeled so that readers understand where that information came from, and to prioritize diversity, and to recommit to a journalism industry that reflects America.

We have technology representatives on the committee and we believe that free expression, the open Internet and inclusion are key values that should be represented in technology platforms, but also that our approach to rebuilding trust in the platforms - whether it be Facebook, Google, Twitter - be technology agnostic, giving people, for example, the opportunity to actually own their user profiles, so that they have control over their personal information. To ask technology companies, to actually put their responsibility to the user and becoming an information fiduciary, putting the privacy interests of users first. And also to invest in technology solutions to fight the spread of misinformation.

And then finally there's citizenship because we believe everyone has a role to play in restoring trust in institutions. And part of part of the element of citizenship is restoring a sense of national service, that we're all in this together, that we revitalize civics education, and that we rededicate ourselves as a society to the ideals of holding the powerful accountable and pursuing the truth.

Now I'll turn it over to Joy. Or, Charlie's next. My good friend and fellow commissioner Charlie Sykes.

Charles Sykes: Well thank you, and thank you for the invitation, and thank you for using my caricature a little bit earlier. So, very briefly what I want to say is that I am here as sort of a token conservative to talk about the problem of conservatives not trusting the media.

And if the question is how do you turn that around? How do you get conservatives to trust the media more? My first answer would be well stop digging the hole, stop making it actually worse. We have a problem of bias, but also I think we have a problem of contempt and a problem of blind spots, by which I mean (and I would strongly urge people to read Arthur Brooks' new book) he says:

"Look you and I can argue about an issue, and we can have actually a very significant difference of opinion on issues, but the moment I express contempt for you, the moment I dismiss you as a person, the moment I assume that you are dealing in bad faith, we're done, I'm not going to persuade you."

And I think that there is a long-term problem of the media having contempt for certain groups. I'm going to try to put that in some perspective here. There's also another point that I, that I hope we make during this conference that actually came up during one of the Knight forums that Mizell and I were doing down in Miami, where somebody said you know we keep talking about media, is it time to break apart or distinguish between media and journalism?

There are so many media out there that have nothing to do with journalism, and sometimes I think we confuse the terms when we lump in The Washington Post and The New York Times with the people who put the cat videos up on a regular basis. They're not the same thing. And I think that one of the things that you're seeing in Tom's slideshow, the decline in trust among younger people is a generation that has really not been exposed to journalism, but has been marinating in media.

Now, and I want to put some of my comments in context here because I'm kind of schizophrenic. I would prefer to be described as somebody with a foot in both worlds. I run a center-right website, I'm a contributor to the center-left, far left MSNBC, I live in different worlds. For 23 years, I was part of this alternative

media, a conservative talk show host who is now not really part of the conservative movement because of Donald Trump.

So, when I say that I'm schizophrenic, I've experienced what it's like to be a conservative dealing with the media, but find myself appalled by the attacks on the media now. That my experience is to try to explain to people you can be critical of the media without delegitimizing all fact-based media.

And this is one of the problems that years and years and years of attacks on the media and the media's lack of serious introspection led to this delegitimization of all of media outlets, the idea of facts and truth, and I always hate to be the guy to say this, but as bad as Tom's scenario is, I think it's worse than we realize. Because I think a lot of us think that people use information and facts to determine what is true, but maybe we're not wired that way. Maybe we use facts and information to strengthen our bonds to our tribes, and therefore we look for things that confirm our bias, that confirm our identity and think of the world we're living in right now that you want to believe something, you're one click away. You find a fact that is perhaps inconvenient, like the fact that the president lies all the time, you can find a safe space that will assure you that this is not a problem within seconds.

So, we are in a world where people have alternative reality silos. We've moved from the world that I thought we were creating which was to have alternative voices, to have alternative realities, alternative issues, alternative narratives, and they're intensely difficult to break through. And this was my experience as a conservative talk show host. That after a while, I would get emails, I would get the tweets of information that I knew was bogus, I knew it was hoaxes, and for years I would push back and say, "You know, that's not true, let's stick to the actual facts."

And for years that actually worked until 2016 when people began to say, "You know what? You've sent me an article from The New York Times or you've sent me an article from The Washington Post or NPR or NBC or factcheck.org, and these are all liberal rags, I don't believe them." So, you found it was impenetrable. And I'll also tell you just one experience that I have, and I have tremendous respect for much of the media as it exists now. We are in the best of times and the worst of times, some of the best reporting that we've ever seen in my lifetime and that includes going back to Watergate, and yet we're also living in a time where 40 percent of Americans don't believe it or perhaps don't care, the don't caring is actually a little bit more disturbing.

So, for 23 years when I was a conservative talk show host in Wisconsin - and

Wisconsin's a very interesting state politically and it made a massive transition from left to right - and for that 23 years I had to deal with the media as a conservative and let's just say that, you know I worked for a radio station, a television station, we were owned by the newspaper, for about 23 years, they never called me up, they never interviewed me, they never asked what are conservatives thinking in Wisconsin until the morning of March 28, 2016 when Donald Trump called into my radio show and we had a rather intense back and forth.

I didn't think it was that intense because I thought this is what journalists do, they ask people tough questions and you get a response. So, at 8:30 in the morning, when my radio show began, which was every day for 23 years, at 8:30 in the morning, I was a right-wing radio hack who was completely ignored by the media. By 11:00 that morning, I was one of the deepest thinkers in American politics.

I've written for The New York Times, The Atlantic, I'm on cable television, people call up and say "what are conservatives thinking about all of this?" Which I enjoy, I get it, but I'm also under no illusions that there is a bright line in my life with, like "You have nothing to say that we're interested in" versus "Really tell us more." Now what changed? Well, obviously I'd become an acceptable conservative and experienced this strange new respect.

So, what I have experience is in the last three years is that I've never been misquoted in the news media, I have never been taken out of context unfairly, I have said some things that I wish I had not said, that's true, but that's on me, and my sense of the sincerity, the intelligence and the storytelling abilities of the media has never been higher, but I don't forget what it was like when they thought I was one of those conservatives.

And so you have to understand how conservatives see it. I'm sorry I'm going on a little too long. I started off saying, "What is my advice to the media on getting conservatives back?" Stop, stop making it worse, and start asking yourself some tough questions, you know? You don't think you're biased, fish don't think they're wet, ok?

If you were to go to conservative media today and say, "Okay, let's talk about the media, they would say...remember three narratives? I'll just give you three narratives. Remember the Covington kids at the Right to Life March, those were the kids who became a YouTube sensation? Remember Jussie Smollet when he said he was a victim? Remember Michael Avenatti? OK.

Covington kids, media immediately declared they were guilty of being the worst people in the world. Jussie Smollet was believed as being an innocent victim. Michael Avenatti became this massive media sensation as the hero lawyer. All of those narratives turn out not to be true, and yet they were embraced by the media.

Now of course among conservative circles they will also think that much of the coverage of Trump and Russia was unfair, I disagree with that, but I think we're in an environment where the distrust is built-in, the sense of bad faith is so built-in that it is going to take years, extraordinary effort to restore that trust because credibility once lost is very different, particularly when no one has to read the daily newspaper, nobody has to watch CBS News, nobody has to watch me on Hardball tonight.

They just click it off. Once they think you are no longer credible, that's it, that's done. And I also have to say, and I said this at a previous forum, that as much as I love aggressive journalism, and I do think that a journalist should be as aggressive as possible in speaking truth to power, but also understand that if you have contempt for certain groups, if you label people that you think of as "the bad people," they will tune you out, and you know... I could multiply the examples of that almost endlessly.

And so when someone like me comes along and says, "You know, Donald Trump lies all the time." "Well, why do you say that?" "Well, look at these stories that he's telling." "Well, why should I believe those? Why should I believe the media? Who knows what is truth?"

You know, what Tom's saying, you know... the point of all of this is not to make you believe anything, the point of all of this is to make you think I don't know what to believe, and so I'll believe the Dear Leader, and I think that's the dangerous moment we're in. Thank you.