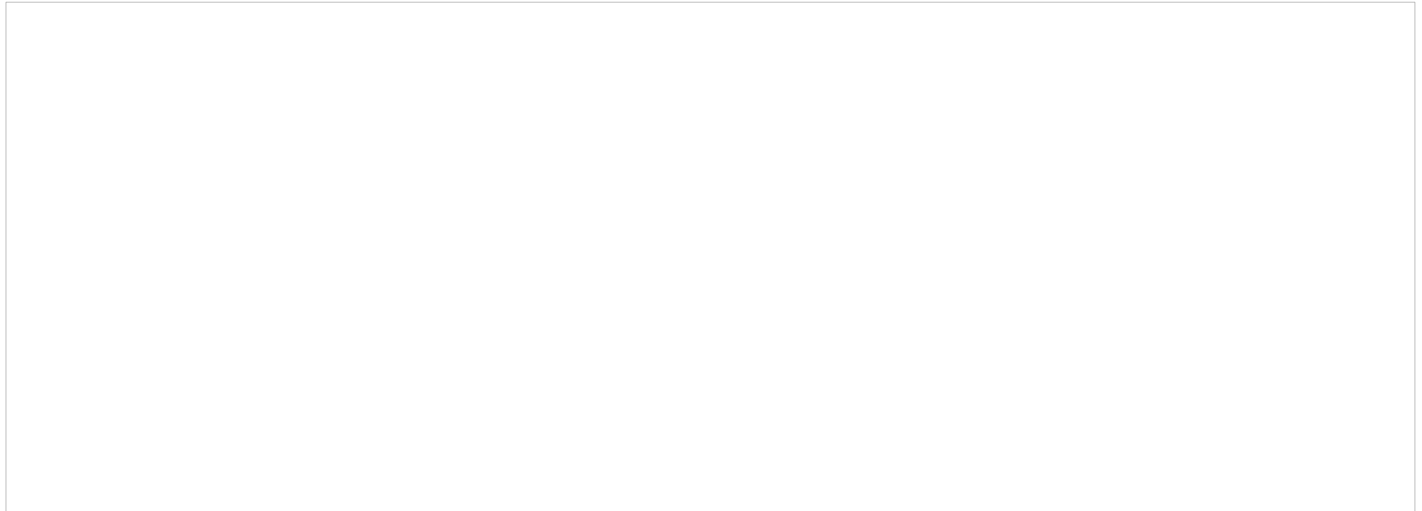# The deep roots of the trust crisis

Sigmund Freud, the public affairs industry and the internet may all have played a part in declining levels of public trust, write **Isabelle Stanley** *and* **Rod Dowler***. Measures to restore trust could include independent media fact-checking and research and greater transparency in political donations.*

Picture: [1894 illustration](#) by [Frederick Burr Opper](#), Public domain

We all depend in our social, business, financial, and political affairs, on a shared currency of trust. But we have somehow devalued this currency and breaches of public trust have recently grown to epidemic proportions. Donald Trump, the President of the United States, is perhaps the most worrying example of this, with unfounded statements and poorly researched policies the hallmark of his administration. A significant example is Trump's denial of the reported 2975-person death toll caused by Hurricane Maria in September, 2017, in the US territory of Puerto Rico. This figure was produced by public health experts at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., in a report commissioned by the territory's governor, Ricardo Rossello. According to President Trump, however, the figure appeared "like magic", and was invented by his opponents to damage his reputation.

The erosion of trust is not an illusion. A leading public affairs firm, Edelman, has for eighteen years conducted an annual international survey tracking trust in four major institutions: government, the media, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and business. Edelman titled the 2017 survey report 'Trust in Crisis', and the 2018 version, 'The Battle for Truth'. The 2018 report showed all four of these institutions to have extremely low trust scores.

At the highest level, the distrust with which we live is problematic because it hinders international cooperation. Without trust, societies cannot tackle issues that require long-term planning or concerted action such as disarmament, climate change and tax avoidance. Another result of this climate of distrust is the growth of populist politics. Populist politicians garner support by targeting emotions, stirring up fear and public anger, resulting in policies which are both changeable and aggressive, in order to maintain their anti-establishment stance. These politics are divisive and unproductive, exploiting instead of remedying public fear.

Distrust in institutions is hardly a new problem. Historically, institutions and their representatives have been able to suppress the instability arising from distrust of them by using fear and censorship. Charles II famously banned coffee houses on the grounds that they were meeting places for dissenting intellectuals. Institutions in modern democracies cannot use such tactics; instead, they must rely on persuasion to keep the public onside.

Freud's nephew and the rise of the focus group

Early in the 20th century, Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud, used Freud's theories to refine the art of public persuasion; in so doing he laid the foundations of the modern public affairs industry. In 2002, this was explored by the influential documentary filmmaker, Adam Curtis, in a documentary series, 'The Century of the Self'. In four films he described how, in developing public affairs, which manages the relationship between organisations and their stakeholders, Edward Bernays found ways to identify people's unconscious desires and thoughts, and consequently market to them. He taught institutions to manipulate the public, in order to increase rates of consumption, and to value individuals solely as consumers.

Bernays devised the focus group approach to uncover people's hidden desires using psychoanalytic techniques. It was the first time psychoanalysis had been used in business, and Bernays's techniques were very successful: they even convinced American women to associate cigarettes with female emancipation, and consequently to start smoking.

His success brought him to the attention of politicians, who employed him to improve their images. Bernays evolved the concept of the 'all-consuming self', which turned people from rational buyers into consumers, who would buy a product because of how it made them feel. Focus groups began to inform all politicians' decisions and policies; politics thus became reactive. This approach gradually permeated politics, business, and interpersonal relations throughout the 20th century. Politicians and institutions mastered the power of sending messages tailored to the subconscious desires of an audience, rather than presenting a balanced factual case. These techniques have been used to dispute overwhelming scientific evidence, in the cases of tobacco smoking, evolution, and climate change.

Today, public affairs techniques are used by many major institutions to shape the public's thoughts and play to their unconscious desires. Bernays named this approach 'the engineering of consent'. The problem with this is that it devalues rational arguments, and promotes decision-making based on emotional response. This initially increases the power of the elite, giving them the ability to manipulate the public. In the longer term, as people come to understand the techniques employed to manipulate their thoughts and choices, the approach generates suspicion of all institutions. Through increasing the power of the elite and public distrust in institutions, the public affairs approach may thus have become a major contributor to the current trust crisis.

21st-century mass communications technologies are making the situation worse. New media technologies, and the proliferation of mass-produced communications devices, have increased the reach and effectiveness of the public affairs industry. The most significant recent technological development is the Internet. Online, organisations and individuals can market more efficiently than ever, using data tracking, contextual references, and profiling to produce tailored news stories and advertisements. Subliminal persuasion and manipulation, central to the public affairs approach, are present in all of these activities.

Any plan to re-establish trust would be a massive undertaking and would involve reexamining the social values we admire and teach. To be successful, a plan must encompass all levels of society, from interpersonal to international relationships. There is little incentive for politicians, businesses, and the media to act honestly in a dishonest system; there is equally little reason for people to believe they can trust institutions if they cannot trust each other.

Increase transparency of political donations

There are several initial steps that could be taken to increase trustworthiness in politics. First, increasing the transparency of political donations, would enable the public to see and understand the influence of donors on politicians. The influence of political lobbyists should also be curtailed through new regulation. In the same way as donors, lobbyists can have disproportionate influence on politics, which should be exposed and regulated; when the public feels that politicians serve them, rather than corporations or wealthy individuals, a more trusting relationship can be established. Another step for the UK would be increasing the power of parliamentary select committees to act on their findings, thus lending more weight to parliamentary investigations into untrustworthy behaviour. This would reduce the impression that there is no effective check on the executive power of the government.

Fact checking to counter the manipulation of public opinion

Of all institutions, the media has undergone the most changes in recent years. The problems it faces are therefore the most unfamiliar, and require the most innovative solutions. Two issues that create distrust in the media are the presentation of incorrect or manipulative information, and the unsanctioned sharing of personal data. The first of these could be addressed using fact-checking tools. Such tools are already being developed by Facebook and YouTube, but these companies will potentially face the criticism of marking their own homework. Some long-established media organisations such as the New Yorker magazine have fine reputations for thorough and objective fact checking and also some university departments are increasing their focus on this issue. There is therefore credible hope that countervailing forces will develop to balance the effect of the mass manipulation of opinion. This would allow individuals to feel more confident that the media they receive is verifiable and accurate. There remains the major problem that better facts will not help if opinion leaders manage to convince the public that they are fake news or concocted by untrustworthy 'experts'. To combat the other major fear, improper data sharing, there must be tighter legislation on information distribution, with more widespread education about the consequences of data sharing. Giving people the tools to understand how their data is used, and tightening legislation, would help the public to feel more confident when interacting with the media.

Research needs to be de-commercialised

A further measure to improve trust in the media might be to encourage more investigative journalism, and ensure that such research is not suppressed or buried. This would act to reassure the public that the media are on their side, and potentially help to expose misconduct in other institutions. There is also a need to de-commercialise research. Too often, papers are written for the revenue they will bring in rather than for their content; this leads to a poor standard of research, including sometimes the omission of facts and opinions unacceptable to sponsors or media proprietors. If research could be separated from profit, trust in accuracy and objectivity could be restored but the big stumbling block would be finding the money to fund such work.

Practical steps such as these, taken in conjunction with serious efforts to re-prioritise trust, could help to limit and eventually end the current trust crisis. The challenge of effecting this change of direction is as enormous as the change is urgent. If it began, the public affairs industry could perhaps have a big role in leading our major institutions and politicians away from the temptations of fake news and engineered consent, towards the benefits of verifiable information, real solutions and rigorous follow-through on commitments. This sounds highly optimistic but how much further must trust deteriorate before there is an overwhelming consensus about the value of truth?

The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published on LSE Business Review.

About the authors

Isabelle Stanley is a third-year undergraduate reading philosophy and psychology at the University of Oxford. In previous research work, for the National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, Isabelle has used quantitative and qualitative methods to advise the NHS on projects for community mental health and advancing equality in mental health. This opinion piece summarises the output from a student teaching project at the Industry Forum, a London think tank focused on dialogue between public policy makers and business. After graduation, Isabelle hopes to pursue a career in research with particular interests in social policy, psychology and politics.

Rod Dowler is one of the founders of the Industry Forum, of which he is the chair/CEO. A former KPMG consultancy partner, he has recently worked on public policy projects including the establishment of a Standing Commission on Responsible Capitalism, the establishment of a UK National Investment Bank, and the Kerslake Review of the Treasury. He is currently interested in how the shortcomings of economic thinking hamper management of the economy and the development of an effective UK industrial strategy.

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