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**Street Cred: Are Media Consumers Craving More “Authenticity” in the
Digital Age?**

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Abstract

Street Cred: Are Media Consumers Craving More “Authenticity” in the Digital Age?

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Media organizations that provide news have traditionally relied on audience perceptions of truth and credibility to lure more readers, viewers, and listeners. The author explores whether authenticity has emerged in the digital age as an additional ingredient in media consumers’ daily decisions about where to turn – and where to return – for trustworthy information. As it becomes ever-more of a challenge for consumers to distinguish reliable information from “fake news” in the 21st century, audiences may be seeking content from media organizations that feels more authentic, genuine, and personalized. Three case studies drawn from new media, as well as legacy media, help illustrate what traditional and startup media institutions can do to better understand audience attitudes and behaviors: the HBO series “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver,” the online site Reddit, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning work of *Washington Post* reporter David Fahrenthold.

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Introduction

As radio technology emerged in the 1930s, newspaper executives began to worry that it represented a competitive threat to their industry. They approached communications scholars and asked them to conduct research on readers and listeners of the news, hoping to learn how much audience perceptions of truth and credibility gave them a competitive edge over increasingly popular radio. As television networks arrived 20 years later, newspapers were back knocking on the doors of communications researchers wanting to know how they ranked in the game of truth and credibility against visual broadcasting (Metzger and Flanagin 2013).

Today, however, communications scholars Edson Tandoc and Ryan Thomas call truthfulness and credibility an “unstable currency” for media organizations. “Journalism is constantly under attack from sources seeking to influence news content. State control and market pressures, for example, exert strong influences on the press across media systems. While news is a form of public service, it is also a commercial product. To pursue both service and sales, news organizations must remain credible in the eyes of sources and audiences” (2017).

Message credibility, they explain, historically relied on whether news content was perceived as *accurate* and *believable*; audiences hunted for heuristic cues based on socialization from traditional journalists, who articulated professional standards that audiences came to expect. The arrival of the internet has created unique new challenges for media entities seeking to balance audience size, revenue, and impact. Legacy broadcast and print media organizations have been losing not just audience but also credibility in the form of lower trust ratings (Tandoc and Johnson 2016). Meantime, modern

communications tools have enabled everyone and anyone to develop an audience of their own with the mere click of a mouse or tap of a smartphone.

While media organizations have depended on audience perceptions of truth and credibility to attract more readers, viewers, and listeners, the author here explores whether authenticity has emerged in the digital age as a new component in how media consumers decide where to turn – and where to return – for trustworthy information. As it becomes ever-more of a challenge for consumers to locate reliable and dependable information in the 21st century, consumers may be seeking content from media organizations that feels more personalized, authentic, and genuine. Three cases studies drawn from both new and legacy media institutions help illustrate what they can do to better understand audience attitudes and behaviors: the HBO series “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver,” the online site Reddit, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning work of *Washington Post* reporter David Fahrenthold.

A critical editorial choice is made each time a news story is aired or published that results in another story not finding an audience, and each such choice is a careful investment. Through this prism, the author examines whether media consumers in the digital age are demanding a greater sense of authenticity from news figures and media organizations when it seems ever-more difficult to distinguish credible information from online factories of hype and misinformation.

Since the election of Donald Trump, many media consumers have unexpectedly clung to or renewed relationships with legacy newspapers that boast significant brand credibility but have suffered dismal business forecasts in the past, namely the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* (Lee and Molla 2018; Fischer 2018). Simultaneously, many of those same consumers are turning to online communities like Reddit in greater numbers to participate in subreddit discussions with strangers or “Ask Me Anything”

sessions alongside celebrities and politicians. Reddit is now the fourth most popular site on the internet (Marantz 2018); HBO's "Last Week Tonight" watched its audience climb to four million viewers during its first season alone, as its host was forced to continually assert that he was a comedian and not a journalist (Staff Report 2014); and Fahrenthold recruited an audience over Twitter to help tell an important story about Trump's charitable giving (D. A. Fahrenthold 2016). Audiences may be hungering at a critical moment in history for news and information that feels as if it's delivered authentically, and more naturally finds its way to audiences online.

Credibility Research in Communications

As an area of communications scholarship, credibility has been much more deeply researched than authenticity, but the two share an important relationship. Some view authenticity as a social construct, something that requires the perception of inauthenticity for anyone to know what is. Such distinctions are necessary for understanding what audiences may want and not want in the digital age, if inauthenticity isn't universally interpreted the same way. For Tandoc and Thomas (2017), message credibility relies on whether audiences perceive news content as believable and accurate. Accuracy, in particular, is a consistent news value that has pervaded legacy journalism. After conducting an online experiment, Tandoc and Thomas found that social norms and past experiences inform what audiences have come to expect from the news. "This set of heuristics in credibility and newsworthiness judgments is plausibly a product of media socialization. Citizen-journalism blogs have mushroomed, but credible journalism has so far been mostly associated with traditional journalism, a by-product of many years of socialization. It appears that standards associated with traditional journalism are being used to assess other forms of mass communication" (Tandoc and Thomas 2017).

Studying Yelp reviewers and credibility, Van Der Heide and Lim (2016) found that as a result of the extraordinary abundance of information online available to audiences, users rely on "consensus heuristics" when they're unfamiliar with a platform like Yelp to determine if a reviewer is credible. "On the internet, the number of sources present is very high, and the barriers of access are significantly diminished. ... Online credibility has gained so much research attention because the research question – How do we know who to believe in an environment where anyone can say anything about anyone to everyone? – has proven to be exceptionally captivating."

The physical quality of a platform can also have an impact on perceived credibility. In their haste to reach young consumers online, many traditional newspapers have rushed to produce more videos. But Chen et al (2017) found that low-quality news videos from newspapers resulted in younger news consumers seeing the news organization overall as less credible and lacking in value – perceived “organizational source credibility” is damaged, in other words. Drawing from S. Shyman Sundar’s Modality, Agency, Interactivity, and Navigability model and other research (Holton and Chyi 2012; Metzger and Flanagin 2013), experts say audiences again turn to cognitive heuristics, “a cue that signals to a news consumer whether to view content as credible.” Researchers have found that newspapers are perceived as more credible by audiences than TV or online news, and perceptions of credibility can depend of the reputation of the media entity from which it originated. “Because today’s online environment provides an overload of information, people become even more reliant on [heuristic] cues as they sort through the plethora of offerings. Young people in particular are likely to make quick decisions about credibility based on these cognitive heuristics or cues” (Chen et al. 2017).

It's still unclear how much credibility affects the critical decision of a user to pursue a certain media outlet, but research shows credibility can predict the use of blogs and social network sites. Specifically, Kaye and Johnson (2017) found first that while “reliance” was one important measure of media use, “interactivity is a strong and significant influence on [social networking sites] and Twitter but only weakly affects blog use.” Reliance is defined by how important the consumer views the social media outlet to her or his life (or how consumers once viewed newspapers before the internet), while interactivity is defined as the ability of users to communicate in real time and post to their own followers, as well as navigate among links and destinations on their own.

“The quality of information on [social networking sites] varies greatly from dubious news feeds and reports to well-vetted articles (Johnson and Kaye 2014). It has long been known that trustworthiness and expertise are two key predictors of source credibility (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953). It still holds in today’s social media world that information that comes from ‘friends’ is regarded as more credible and trustworthy than reports that come from strangers or from outside of a network (Johnson and Kaye 2014). It follows then that credibility would be a strong predictor of gratifications for [social networking sites] for political information” (Kaye and Johnson 2017).

Tondoc and Johnson (2016) found that college students turned first to Twitter for breaking news by stunning margins over any other major news platform, but Twitter also led them to legacy news organizations online, whose content was interpreted as more credible than what appeared on Twitter itself. Through an online survey of 224 students in the United States, they found that “Twitter is a platform vulnerable to misinformation, and credibility ratings by the participants in this study show that users are aware of this weakness. News consumption on Twitter might be incidental, but even incidental news consumption exerts cognitive effects” (Tewksbury, Weaver, and Maddex 2001; Tandoc and Johnson 2016). In other words, if a piece of content is extremely popular on Twitter and one is “seeing” it “everywhere,” it could still have a psychic impact on the individual, even if the content isn’t absorbed in its entirety, such as a lengthy, online print news story.

Authenticity Research in Communications

On the subject of authenticity, Holt (2012) asks whether living a more “existential” life as reporters would enable journalists to create more authentic journalism. This can include not following traditional paths to information or reporting conclusions. Or it could include choosing not to adopt certain practices that professional journalists might, by and large, consider essential to their jobs. Holt recognizes that some critics may view authenticity as a social construct, “a matter of appearance that is constantly in need of negotiation between the individual who has claims to authenticity and the surrounding world. ... Many regard authenticity as something that is manufactured and then approved by others, rather than an intrinsic quality of the free individual” (Holt 2012). Reporters, nonetheless, often operate in structured newsrooms or follow profession-wide standard operating procedures that make it difficult to showcase a more “authentic” version of themselves as purveyors of insightful and new information, according to this thinking.

Writes Holt citing John C. Merrill, a journalism professor and philosopher, “In newsrooms and journalism schools, journalists and students are often hindered in their pursuit of authentic selfhood because they are required to yield to ‘traditional and routine ways of doing things’ ... More often than not, the students who graduate from journalism schools and who are seeking employment are ‘gladly sacrificing individual authenticity to adapt nicely to the highly regimented, depersonalized corporate structure’” (2012).

Existing approaches to story structure that journalists have used for generations in the form of first-person storytelling could lend themselves to more perceived authenticity if the audience felt that writers were willing to reveal more about themselves personally, (or conversely, identify more universally personal themes in stories and characters). Culture critic Lionel Trilling wrote in the 1970s that authenticity emerged from the virtue

of sincerity and amounts to “the degree of correspondence between the principle avowed by a society and its actual conduct” (Malone 2014). Authenticity was established as a concept we could turn to in order to understand the desire to “be true to oneself” rather than conform to certain social expectations.

“Authenticity is only discerned by its absence. ... The act of writing is an attempt to express and demonstrate authenticity. There are specific techniques in writing that produce authenticity. (Philosophy Professor Jacob) Golomb argues that writers utilize irony to challenge the reader’s acceptance of literal, ostensible meaning and instead look for the contradictory or covert meaning; Irony can help challenge the reader to question dogmatic understandings of truth and objectivity and lead to the understanding that most ‘truths’ and states of being are in flux” (Malone 2014).

Not appearing to be the target of marketing and advertising campaigns is a key feature for Generation X and the generations that came after it. Once young people understood that they were the relentless targets of corporate advertising, they began expecting it at every turn. This isn’t a new feature just of Millennials. Gen Xers – now parents in their forties with money to spend – are wary of corporate brands shamelessly appealing to them. They want purchasing experiences that feel more authentic. Citing Connecticut-based marketing consultant, Gary Stibel, Jennings writes that Gen Xers are the first generation to have been exposed to modern marketing and advertising their whole lives. “Authenticity is very important to Gen X. ... Most seniors don’t even know what a focus group is. ... And while Baby Boomers grew up with notions of mass marketing, the Gen Xers that followed are even more sophisticated” (Jennings 2012).

Authenticity doesn’t always immediately appear as something that might be of value to newsrooms. Without fully understanding audience desires, newsrooms have tended to focus on their own fear that young media consumers are drifting ever-further

away from traditional news organizations. Zerba (2011) convened focus groups in three cities to understand more about why young people ages 18-29 avoid newspapers and find out what ideas they have for improving the delivery of the news. The groups were divided into younger and older pairs, and the results showed that among the reasons young people avoided newspapers was inconvenience and the lack of time.

“Participants in every focus group repeatedly said print newspapers are inconvenient, a major nonuse reason. Inconvenience – from physically getting the printed newspaper, to not being able to multitask, to recycling – consumed the most discussion of any topic. ‘Inconvenience’ was divided into five dimensions: effort to access; physical nature of print; effort to recycle; non-instant news; and inability to multitask” (Zerba 2011).

David Simon, a one-time newspaper reporter who became a high-profile HBO television producer, is well-known for creating popular and authentic-seeming shows – from “The Wire” about street violence and city politics in Baltimore, to “Generation Kill” about young U.S. Marines in Iraq to “Treme” about life in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Fuqua argues that Simon deftly injects a sense of authenticity into his shows by blending in real-life characters from the places being portrayed (Fuqua 2012). Culture critic and professor Hsu argues that a sort of challenge and reward is taking place for audiences who want to feel like they are a part of something authentic but also wish to simultaneously view and interpret the content as bigger than themselves. “The Wire,” Hsu states, is a “gritty, meticulous, and therefore more realistic, alternative to traditional tele-visual representations of police work and urban turmoil – the series rewards its most careful viewers with access to what we presume to be a trustworthy, unfiltered experience of life in Baltimore. We not only understand ‘The Wire,’ then, as somehow more authentic in its

representation of reality, but we understand this quality in relation to other, inferior, presumably negligent attempts at the same” (Hsu 2010).

We may even somehow regard shows like “The Wire” as more authentic than reality television. South Carolina University professors in 2005 wanted to know how much audiences understood that much of the content they see in “reality television” is actually scripted and whether or not they cared (Rose and Wood 2005). Curiously, the researchers found that audiences came up with ways to reconcile reality TV content into a more authentic experience for themselves as viewers. The professors refer to Trilling’s work on authenticity and wonder if the success of reality television is a reflection of our desire for authenticity, even if we know a version of it we desire is unattainable in the digital age. It’s an act of defiance, so to speak, to embrace reality television knowing it’s fundamentally absurd.

“The ravages of inauthenticity (e.g., the sense of a meaningless, superficial, or performative existence) have been a common theme in literary and philosophical works since the late nineteenth century (e.g., Flaubert, Sartre, Nietzsche). In the environment of plastic humanity, only ‘the poor, the oppressed, the violent, and the primitive’ were credited as real (Trilling 2009). ... Thus, within the apparent obsession with authenticity lies a postmodern paradox. Although authenticity is desired and earnestly promoted, consumers of reality television revel in the ironic mixture of the factitious and the spontaneous” (Rose and Wood 2005).

Social media companies are far ahead of news organizations in an attempt to brand themselves as the most authentic, compared with their peers. Twitter, Snapchat, Facebook and others continually attempt to outdo each other as newer, more urgent, and more hip, and as a result, more authentic (i.e. less phony) than the social media giant to come before

it, according to Salisbury et al (2017). Authenticity, they point out, is always relative to something else. Once something becomes “cool,” its authenticity slips away.

As Salisbury and Polley (2017) write, once again citing Trilling on authenticity, “the response to the ‘coercive inauthenticity of society’ is to flee to deeper kinds of authenticity. When these, too, are returned to the promotional fold – when punk themes adorn billboards – the search for an untainted authentic begins anew. The engine of the cooptation cycle is the market itself – which is merely answering our yearning for the authentic in an inauthentic culture. ... Profit-maximizing firms search out air pockets of intact meaning, even especially market-allergic subcultures and artistic movements whose self-anointed authenticity depends on the contrast. ... The companies’ tight embrace then suffocates out the sense of the authentic, leading to a fresh contrast with the now-tainted original. That too proves attractive to marketers, and the cycle repeats itself” (Salisbury and Polley 2016).

Harwood adds that authenticity doesn’t come from journalists artificially attempting to present news institutions as “kinder and gentler.” Instead, “it comes from the care journalists bring to everyday journalism.” But some critics, according to Harwood, conclude that news organizations forced to generate profits will target the worst of our fears and desires with “sensational and simplistic journalism” (Harwood 2004). One way to distinguish authenticity from trustworthiness may be to consider social media. Ali argues that authenticity could depend on the part of the globe one is referring to. “Despite the growth of social media, it continues to remain on the fringes of news trustworthiness and credibility. However, in regards to authenticity, social media may take on a stronger presence. In the Middle East protests, traditional media, most of which are owned by governments, were not considered a trustworthy or even credible source (Ali and Fahmy 2013). Those media systems were considered mouthpieces of the government, hence the

reliance on social media platforms” (Ali 2014). Ali acknowledges later that authenticity is complicated and difficult to define, but he writes that legacy media organizations have at times distrusted social media or been slow to utilize it directly in their own reporting, although social media became a critical platform for the expression of ideas during the Arab Spring protests that began in 2011.

“Authenticity matters for many reasons. It has direct ties to the concepts of credibility and trust in that sources of information that are considered ‘inauthentic’ generally are also considered sources that are not credible and untrustworthy. ... [But] For something to be interpreted as truthful it also needs to be seen as believable. The addition of truth is how authenticity is different than trust and credibility. ... Audiences will perceive authenticity in anchors and the modality of the information if these sources are truthful and believable” (Ali 2014).

The author of this paper conducted unpublished focus group research in the spring of 2017 that included four men and three women ranging in age from 19 to 22 at the University of Texas at Austin. The students were asked to complete a background questionnaire requesting three adjectives that sprang to mind when they heard the phrase “investigative reporting.” They were then asked to elaborate on the adjectives. Many times the participants offered the word “authentic” and returned to a theme of authenticity throughout a focus-group discussion.

One student said that major marketers and advertisers spent too much time trying to gain the attention of young people with sensationalized content and flashy graphics but that older people didn’t fully know what youth wanted as an audience. “I think there are a lot of youth who want a good solid story and who are willing to read it. And I don’t think investigative journalists should shy away from making things factual and informative, just

because they're trying to appeal to a certain audience. I think that they should write the best story they can write.”

Case Studies and Discussion

CASE STUDY 1: HBO'S "LAST WEEK TONIGHT WITH JOHN OLIVER"

John Oliver is the British comedian who first gained popularity on the Comedy Central program "The Daily Show" as a performer and guest host, and he's since been given his own program on HBO called "Last Week Tonight" that's similarly structured to "The Daily Show." The weekly, commercial-free program airs for 30 minutes but is arguably more aggressive about tackling controversial subjects with a heavy satirical hand than even "The Daily Show," and Oliver's upstart quickly grew to some 4 million viewers during its first season (Staff Report 2014). The show also boasts numerous successful viral videos that have individually reached tens of millions of viewers online and led to documented instances of impact on the policymaking process. After Oliver and the show aired a segment on the subject of net neutrality in the summer of 2013, federal communications regulators were inundated with hundreds of thousands of comments from citizens concerned about changes to net neutrality policy (Purcell 2017). After seeing Oliver's success with viral videos on weighty public-policy matters, a lawmaker in Washington state proposed a bill that would make it easier for citizens to upload videos criticizing or praising pending legislation. And in July of 2015, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio announced after an Oliver monologue went viral online that "unfair" bail requirements for impoverished arrestees would be relaxed (Luckerson 2015).

Some observers argue that media consumers will adjust their behavior if the content proves to be attractive enough, which could mean the reach of a message's distribution channels is at least as important as the content itself. Oliver's program has demonstrated that despite abundant evidence of extremely short attention spans online, viewers can be convinced to continue watching videos that are up to 15 and 20 minutes long (Purcell

2017). “Like him or not, if President Donald Trump decided to use an email newsletter instead of his usual tweets, we’d have no choice but to subscribe if we wanted to be informed of his comments and rants. The same goes for Kim Kardashian West – she has built one of the strongest personal brands across nearly all communications platforms” (Hyrkin 2017, para. 2).

Despite being a comedy program, it exhibits news values by demonstrating a process of research and verification, growing its audience size, showing measurable policy impacts, achieving ratings successes for HBO, and even producing exclusive news reporting. “When (The Daily Show host John) Stewart was asked whether viewers got their news from him, he always demurred. ... Oliver followed suit last year, insisting that he is a comedian, not a journalist. But he did acknowledge: ‘We have very aggressive fact checkers and very thorough researchers, so that we’re not wrong. Because if you make a joke about something that is factually inaccurate, the joke collapses’” (Edmonds 2016).

Indeed, Comedy Central’s wildly successful “The Daily Show” also insisted for years that it was a comedy program and not a news organization, but against its will, the show was treated as such when Politifact.com chose to conduct 80 different fact-checks of the program across six years via its PunditFact initiative. PunditFact points out that according to a 2014 Pew Research Center poll, as many people regularly received news about politics and elections from “The Daily Show” as from *USA Today* and the *New York Times*, and more people turned to “The Daily Show” than Rush Limbaugh’s radio show and Politico (Sharockman 2015).

“To be honest, we at times wondered whether we should fact-check claims coming from Stewart’s show at all; was there room for serious analysis of what is described as a comedy show? ... From our vantage point, Stewart made a real effort to present information in an accurate way. ... He also — and this is not a habit of many news pundits

— apologized when he made a mistake, as we caught him doing a few times” (Sharockman 2015). Despite Oliver’s own protestations that he is not making news, some have called the program “investigative comedy” (Steinberg 2018). The show has even hired former journalists to be part of its staff (Staff report 2015), but Oliver has nonetheless sought to distance himself from any comparisons to journalism, in part out of deference to traditional local newspapers, on which Oliver says the show and its researchers heavily rely (Huddleston Jr. 2016).

As Jennings (2012) pointed out, Gen Xers and Millennials are wary of over-eager attempts by corporate brands to attract their attention. What Oliver does is court a version of authenticity that could loosely be called “street credibility” by attracting Millennial and Gen Xers in significant numbers while simultaneously mocking and satirizing those desperate for audience attention – from politicians to the mainstream media (arguably of which he is a part) to corporate brands (Bonazzo 2018; Grant 2016). Harwood (2004) argued further yet that writing itself (including satire) “is an attempt to express and demonstrate authenticity.”

CASE STUDY 2: REDDIT

Self-styled as the “front page of the internet,” many older Americans still don’t know about or regularly use Reddit, but it’s highly popular among young audiences sought by advertisers (Madrighal 2013). According to the Pew Research Center, the site is equally popular among all income earners, and an exceptional number of its users have college degrees or additional education (Madrighal 2013). The site has become the fourth most visited on the internet (Marantz 2018), a fact that’s largely gone overlooked, and while it’s independently operated in California, its largest shareholder is the parent company of

Condé Nast, which also counts *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Wired* among its media properties.

But it is Reddit's performance statistics that make it astonishing compared to legacy media. The site works by enabling users to post links or images and then vote each other's content up or down to improve the positioning of the content on the site's home page. Users can also create and manage "subreddits" on virtually any subject and establish new discussions with others around the world who share their interests. Its monthly unique visitors have steadily climbed in recent years until reaching roughly 40 million today (Staff report n.d.). The site boasts some 250 million users, 850,000 subreddits, users in 217 countries and 8 billion page views per month. Users spend on average 13 or more minutes at a time on the site, leave 5 million comments daily, and the site is valued at roughly \$1.8 billion, vastly more than what was paid by Jeff Bezos for *The Washington Post* (Smith 2014).

Particularly popular are the site's highly personalized "Ask Me Anything" discussions, in which users can type questions and hear directly in response from celebrities and high-profile politicians with little editorial oversight, including former President Obama, an event that caused the site to crash (Garber 2012). Other AMAs have featured people from all walks of life including a Jeopardy! champion, news network personalities, a Columbine survivor, and "a gay guy who married a straight girl" (Shepherd 2011). Some Reddit "AMAs" are lighter-hearted tails of human experience, but others are insightful discussions held directly with powerful people (Shepherd 2011).

To be sure, a major shortcoming of the site is that new research shows many of the links to news articles voted up or down by users on Reddit are not actually read, and nearly three quarters of links are voted on without the content being viewed first. "I think we can mostly agree that this is bad," wrote one commentator about the research findings. "As

those of us that click through to the articles know well enough, headlines are very often poor representations of the substance of the content within. Moreover, it adds an interesting twist to discussions of fake news sites. ... One might even say that headline browsers are in some part responsible for giving the US its headline president” (Byrne 2017).

A major possibility, on the other hand, is that Reddit users – in particular, Millennials who have only known a world with the internet – interpret Reddit as a more authentic, personalized experience. The fact that the site is largely built on content produced by users, including legacy news organizations, could be the most important component of its success, since users can share and comment on content with people around the world in a personalized way they never could before. As Kaye and Johnson (2017) noted, interactivity and reliance are both important measures of media use. Users and audiences alike appear drawn to the unfiltered conversations represented by Reddit’s Ask Me Anythings, and the personalized experiences they can share inside subreddits.

CASE STUDY 3: *WASHINGTON POST* REPORTER DAVID FAHRENTHOLD

David Farenthold has worked as a journalist at the *Washington Post* since 2000, but he catapulted to national fame during the 2016 presidential election. It started that year with one particular claim by Donald Trump of a \$100,000 charitable donation. Farenthold began unraveling other claims by Trump about millions in charity donations supposedly made out of the real estate developer’s own pockets. As he reported the story seeking evidence to back up Trump’s claims, Farenthold posted images of his reporting notes on Twitter, listing some 400 major charities he was attempting to confirm had ever received a personal contribution from Trump (D. Farenthold and Rindler 2016). He was largely unable to do so. Farenthold didn’t stop there and has since dug into Trump’s business

debts, the cost to taxpayers when the president visits Mar-a-Lago, and how much the government has spent on Trump properties (Umansky and Marritz 2018).

Fahrenheit went on to win the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting, attributed to the uniquely transparent reporting steps he took publicly online, compared to how newsrooms have historically held work close to their chests. Ultimately Fahrenheit's work led to a tip that a video existed showing Trump describing women, and his treatment of them, crudely. His resulting article about the existence of the video became the most viewed in the history of the *Washington Post's* site as of October 2016 (Gold 2016).

"Fahrenheit's Twitter account has become one of the surprise sensations of the election year," wrote one media critic at the time. "Six months ago he turned to Twitter while trying to verify that Trump had, as promised, given away \$1 million to veterans organizations. He wanted the search to be as public as possible, believing that would help him get answers. Other reporters, and regular readers, amplified his tweets. In May, as the pressure mounted, Trump donated \$1 million" (Stelter 2016). The Pulitzer judges pointed out that Fahrenheit, through his persistent reporting, had "created a model for transparent journalism in political-campaign coverage while casting doubt on Donald Trump's assertions of generosity toward charities" (Staff Report n.d.).

"It is something I had never done before," Fahrenheit said of crowdsourcing on social media. "Stories I had done in 2013-2014 were about government waste and bureaucracy, and I would do them in traditional way. Then in 2015 I did profiles of presidential candidates, like Scott Walker and Bobby Jindal. Using social media this way got started in May of this year (2016). ... I did it for a day, tweeting, and thought it was initially a waste. But Trump did a tweetstorm, and then gave the money after I asked for it on Twitter. So I then realized that I could do it (use social media) in broader way, looking for all the money he had given away — not just to veterans" (Warren 2016).

The challenge Fahrenthold presents to others is to take audience interests into greater consideration. Researchers in the Netherlands found that journalists paid lip service to audience interests but ultimately didn't regard the requests of audiences to be that important (Wurff and Schoenbach 2014). Harwood (2004) takes the position in his commentary on authenticity in journalism that it's the "relevance and relationship of news to people's personal context that creates meaning for them." In other words, people judge the media through a personalized context, and the more personalized the news becomes, the more authentic it has a chance to be perceived. But as Holt argued, citing Merrill, experiments similar to Fahrenthold's could prove difficult if "journalists and students are often hindered in their pursuit of authentic selfhood, because they are required to yield to 'traditional and routine ways of doing things'" (2012).

Conclusion

These case studies help illustrate how media organizations may be able to achieve new successes by more deeply understanding the relationship audiences have with perceived authenticity in the digital age when experiences feel more personalized and interactive online. Audiences are drawn to the relentless satire and irony of Oliver, who is seemingly willing to target anyone with ridicule, including himself and the program. Reddit's extraordinary user numbers and average length of time spent on the site strongly suggest modern internet users are attracted to the site's deeply interactive and personalized qualities. And Fahrenthold showed that crowd-sourcing and transparency in the reporting process can create a greater sense of authenticity when audiences are invited to participate in the process.

Among the counterpoints to consider is the seeming clash between authenticity and credibility in the era of Donald Trump. While the president may experience a more personalized and authentic direct experience with his base of political supporters on Twitter (and the equal number of people who follow him just to see what he'll tweet next), is it possible to say Trump's use of Twitter has resulted in net gains, or net losses, for his audience since his trajectory into the White House?

The fact remains that the emergence of the internet has fractured and disrupted the ability of media organizations to reach their traditional audiences. Youth, for example, are quickly turning to new avenues for information, and according to Mindich, Americans under the age of 40 have been consuming less and less traditional news in the digital age. But he argues the numbers don't mean young people are uncaring. Instead, Mindich says, "despite their disengagement with news, young people are as thoughtful and passionate

and self-reflective as they have ever been, ready to interact with news if we just provide the right conditions for them to do so” (Mindich 2005).

Future research could explore how a perceived need for authenticity from the media has altered our political expectations. Do self-identified conservatives view their “interactions” with Trump on Twitter more or less authentic than self-identified liberals? What are the unintended consequences of always trying to seem authentic? There’s also evidence in the digital age that users can turn against internet-based media figures in a matter of hours, in some cases, causing one’s digital “street credibility,” or authenticity, to vanish with lightning speed.

Additional focus group research could examine how audiences interpret the concept of authenticity and whether they think it informs where they go for information. Other avenues of exploration include survey research utilizing larger numbers of people to better understand audience interpretations of authenticity in media. Yet another possibility is digging more deeply into what adjectives come to mind when media consumers are asked to describe their perceptions of certain types of media.

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