

Crowd-Sourcing Opinion
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Jerusalem Chamber, Westminster Abbey

Speakers:

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Interlocutor and Chair:

Mark Easton, *Home Editor, BBC*

Mark Easton

Welcome to our discussion here. 'Crowd-sourcing Opinion' is the title and thank you all for coming to this extraordinary room; a room that has witnessed countless opinions and arguments over the almost six hundred and fifty years since it was built. The committee charged with writing the authorised Bible met in here. I'm not sure their deliberations could be described as 'crowd-sourcing opinion' but certainly they were after wisdom and unanimity and of course Henry IV, you may know, he died right there. Apparently he took ill in the Abbey and was brought in here and breathed his last on this ... it's quite weird actually to say, on this very spot right there. Prophecy had it that he would die in Jerusalem. In truth, he died in the Jerusalem Chamber. I say "*in truth*" but what is truth? You see the way I've done that? What is truth? Because of course in Shakespeare's fictional version of Henry IV's story, one scene of course famously set in this very room, that serial liar Falstaff asks Prince Hal, the future Henry V "*is not the truth the truth?*" while of course lying through his teeth. We live, we are told, in a post-truth society where fiction can become fact. What would Shakespeare have made of Donald Trump I wonder? A character who can, so his critics say, turn lies to truth and truth to lies through the power of modern media. Social media can become anti-social media. Reality television, unreality television. "*Forget the press, read the internet*" so Donald Trump said. He tweets dozens of times every day, dominating the political debate on Twitter and reaching millions of potential voters. "*The mainstream media are liars.*" he says. "*The truth*" he insists "*can only be found on social media*".

We live in a world where a simple fact, like where Barack Obama was born, can be denied. Giving birth to birtherism; a movement based on lies but which gains credibility and respectability through repetition and of course promotion on social media and elsewhere. The referendum campaign, this year, was marked by claim and counterclaim of lies and misinformation from each side. Expertise was dismissed as biased or just tiresome. Many people I met, again on both sides of the debate, simply thought that the other side were lying to them. It was, as one Liverpool cabby told me "*blindingly obvious*". Trust has evaporated. The vast range of media available means we can watch and listen and read only to those voices with which we agree. We can surround ourselves on Twitter and Facebook and other social media with like minded souls; an echo chamber of ignorance, of conspiracy and of prejudice if we want. But crowd-sourcing opinion need not be a negative consequence of the digital environment. The global internet offers undreamt off opportunities for research, for debate, for argument, for intellectual collaboration. For every conspiracy theorist, there is a fact checker. For every troll, there is a Wikipedia footnote editor. Our access to books, research, data, analysis and opinion is greater than at any time in history and it's all available at the touch of a button. Nevertheless our national conversation, it seems to me, our system of governance, our public life could become corrupted if debate is dominated by the kind of pre-enlightenment irrationalists and the propagandists. Our democracy faces an existential challenge if it rests not on the wisdom but the stupidity of crowds.

So, to begin our conversation here this evening on crowd-sourcing opinion, we have two experts. I'm trusting that we haven't given up on experts in this room at least. Barbara Speed is currently The I newspaper's comment editor, so plenty of opinion there, having previously worked at the New Statesmen as their technology and digital culture writer and for which she was shortlisted for the 'Words by Women' award for technology writer of the year. She was, as Donald Trump would say "you were robbed".

Barbara Speed

Should have been me.

Mark Easton

And Charlie Beckett is a professor in the department of Media and Communications at the LSE. He is author of "*SuperMedia*" that sets out how journalism is being transformed by technology and other factors and his second book "*WikiLeaks: News in the Networked Era*" describes the development of disruptive online journalism. I'm going to ask each of my guests to set out some initial thoughts before we widen our discussion. Let's start with Barbara. Barbara, crowd-sourcing opinion; should we be terrified, or excited?

Barbara Speed

Or both? I was looking into this topic and I came across a quote from someone who is President of the Knight Foundation, which is a body in America, a non-profit organisation which funds journalism and obviously has an interest in the kind of moral development of journalism and he said that, basically, social media is the biggest change to the written word since the invention of the printing press, which in 1440 was not quite as historical as this room but nearly and what he said about it was that after Gutenberg, any Tom, Dick or Martin Luther could print whatever they want and it took 100 years to sort it all out, which is quite a conservative way to view the invention of the printing press and that might be one counter to the worries we have now about anybody having access to self-publishing online and to making their opinion heard. But I think that he is right because what Gutenberg did was he changed fundamentally the relationship between the people who were writing and the people who were reading them. So, for the first time, if you were writing, it wasn't just the people that could get their hands on your hand-written manuscript; that writing could go to hundreds or even thousands of people, even in a different country and in a similar way, the rise of social media, which some people call "*Web 2.0*" which is dividing social media from the internet as it was before social media existed, is quite similar because, for the first time since Gutenberg, really you have a change in the dynamic between authors and readers because even on the early internet, just as with the printing press, you might publish something and people would read it and then that was the end of it. Whereas social media, which you could maybe include the rise of forums, of comments, all that two-way speech that you get on the internet, is a complete disruption of the way that knowledge works and the way that writing works and obviously I think journalists are very worried about this because for a long time they had a dominion over information and that not much could come back to haunt them. I edit a letters page as part of my job and it is hard to resist the temptation to just not publish the letters that you don't like. On the internet you can't really do that. You can delete comments but someone can go to Twitter and they can say whatever they want about you and I think journalists are scared about this and you can see why. I mean obviously the people hand-writing Shakespeare's plays would have been a bit upset by the fact that this can now happen mechanistically and for much cheaper.

I think also that publications view social media in very different ways and a lot of the time you can relate those different strategies back to how scared they are about this development. So the very basic first way you might exist on social media, as a journalist or a publisher or journalism, would be to just broadcast what you're saying, which is exactly what people have done with books and what people did with the early internet and it ignores the existence of this entire secondary way of operating on the internet. Some publications have Twitter accounts and they put the headline of their article and

the link and then that's the end of it and that's all that they do. I think there's a second way that I think a lot of news organisations, especially in the UK, would approach social media which would be to use it as more like a source, or to use it as kind of a village hall where they pick up information, they pick up stories, they might find case studies and then they take those things away, they turn them into a story and then they put them back on social media and again, there's this sense that it's a broadcasting of important information which people on social media are divorced from. And there's also a negative side to this in that we talk about social media, and Trump talks about social media, as though it's this incredibly democratising force but I don't think you have to spend very long looking at it to realise that's not true. That most people with a public social media account, which is what journalists can tend to look at, obviously if you have a private Facebook page they're not going to get very far, they're a very small number of people, they're very self-selecting and most of them are journalists. So if you're a normal person on Twitter and you see a news event and you Tweet about it you'll probably be inundated with about fifty Tweets from different journalists from New Statesmen, from the BBC, who all desperately want your one piece of original information and I think that's where the risk lies; that if you start treating social media as the only source of your news, the circle just gets smaller and smaller. I think Twitter, at least now, has over a billion accounts but of those, less than one quarter are actually active so you've got this pyramid shaped structure where not many people are doing the talking and, again, the people doing the listening are listening to this very small proportion.

Then I think, going back to publications on social media, there is a third way to do this which is still not ideal, mostly because of the limitations I mentioned just now, but some journalism now happens on social media so there's a two-way conversation; live blogs are quite a good example of this where journalism sort of accepts that it's part of a wider conversation with lots of different agents and that they're not above everybody else who's talking. When The Guardian and other publications recently uncovered the Panama papers, they put out the Panama papers onto the internet and people could do what they wanted with them and this is quite a radical undermining of old journalism's view of power. Things like embargos or exclusives; these are all real hallmarks of traditional journalism and as soon as you say "*we found this information, it's for everybody, everyone can have it now*" that's a very different way of operating and I think it does match the way that journalism has become forced to be part of a long conversation on social media where everybody can speak and I think if you don't engage with that you risk losing out and maybe losing money, which is a reality for journalism now. But I think also, if you accept that journalists are just now part of this bigger conversation and they're not just the sole publishers anymore, there's a sort of niche you can fill because I think maybe it's part of Brexit, or part of the rise of Trump, but there's an increasing sense that verified or trusted sources online are very valuable and I think that if journalism can seek to be that among everyone else's voices they can still possibly have a USP. Facebook has a new segment on its homepage and it's increasingly moving away from algorithms and towards journalists to do this, which I think is quite interesting that there's the sense that you can't really gain authenticity, you need people who are gatekeepers of real facts. So I think that the only way that journalism really is going to get past this terrifying change in the nature of publishing is to engage with it on this level rather than stand back terrified. There's an online journalism professor at City University, where I studied, who recently wrote on his blog that readers and other people formerly known as the audience, which I think is probably true, that if you see people as your audience who are just reading your stuff and you can sit back happily then you're letting down everybody.

Mark Easton

Thank you very much, Barbara. Thank you

Ok Charlie; So do we live in a post-truth society or is that just another one of those mainstream media myths? You tell me.

Charles Beckett

Even when I was with you I was somewhat contrarian. I enjoyed working with Mark as his producer briefly at Channel 4 News and the BBC. One of the great things about Mark is that he does like to try and think back the other way. I like to do the same so as soon as I hear this phrase “*post-truths world*” too many times I think it must be wrong and so I’m going to argue against it in a way but I very much agree with Barbara’s summary there, it was absolutely brilliant, of where the journalist is and that slight sense of feeling somewhat cast adrift. Not because Barbara’s some sort of old hack who now feels threatened, quite the opposite; I’m the old hack who actually went through a strange bit of history. Again, we’ve big history here, but I’m thinking of very short history which is just the last decade, the last decade that I’ve been at the LSC, having left the newsroom and Mark was kind enough to mention a couple of books I wrote. Well the first one was a startled cry of help because journalism, back then and it’s got worse in many ways, was suffering a massive economic crisis and also this existential crisis of losing authority, as Barbara described so well, but I saw only opportunity. I was so excited by the extraordinary potential of technologies, not just the fact that this [mobile phone] famously has more computing power than the first Apollo landing or something, that technology itself is just quite amazing. You can never again say “*we can’t cover the story because we don’t know what’s going on there*”. Mark and I can remember saying “*well I’m sorry, we can’t cover that story, we haven’t got any pictures*”. Very difficult for that to happen anymore. We’ve got the opposite problem of abundance. So I was very excited but I was especially excited about... I like the moral approach about the kind of ethical, if you like, political possibilities that that opens up because, as Barbara says, if power shifts it’s going to go somewhere. It might just go to some nice people. It might go to the public in general. It might somehow empower citizens and, as discussed in my classes last week, we agreed that empirically, as we say, that is undeniable. You all have far more journalistic power than you’ve ever had before as audiences and even, I would argue in a way, as journalists. But obviously it’s what you do with it and those choices that you make. Choice can be a kind of tyranny. It can certainly be deeply confusing and it’s interesting then how we react, and I’m going to come back to journalism in a bit but first of all thinking about those other two very important players in this truth/post-truth debate. One of them is, as [Barbara] said, the people formerly described as the audience i.e. the people who are the consumers of news, often the producers of it. If you see something, you upload a picture, a journalist will steal that picture if it’s newsworthy or you will just share it and it becomes newsworthy without a journalist being involved. So there’s you as the public also participating throughout that process and here’s the critical bit which the public do and all that’s great and you do that for free; wonderful, journalism is being created for free. Fantastic but then you disseminate it, you spread it around online, even if it’s TV; you watched a TV programme, you’ve listened to a radio show, very often you will then share that, amplify the message of it through online sharing and the bit that’s really interesting when you do that, and it has a moral edge, is the fact you do it personally, you do it emotionally. I think emotion has become a really important driver of this kind of editorial, informational economy in all sorts of ways and by emotion I mean literally happy, sad, like, don’t like, literally on Facebook, but more generally the idea that you respond to information, you respond to news and you do stuff with it because, for example, of your identity. You say “*I am the sort of person who cares about those teenagers coming over from Calais to London so I’m going to share information about it*” and also a kind of information “*I’m going to share that information to people who are similar to me*”. Don’t kid yourself, you’re not consuming all that stuff because you needed to know. It’s very unusual that you do need to know most of the stuff you know. Ok you need to know whether the tube’s not going to be working tonight on your way home but, generally speaking, a lot of the stuff that you share and consume doesn’t have that utilitarian thing. It’s about that emotional response; you care, you’re angry, you’re sad and when you do that, especially online, you tend to share it with like minded communities, often in the nicest way and of course there’s that thing that “*my like-minded group of people, with whom I share interests; we’re a community. That other bunch of people who we don’t agree with; they’re a Twitter mob, they’re a crowd, an unthinking crowd*” but it’s definitely happening and we can start to see that evolve even in this very short period of history, largely because of those social networks or the platforms as we call them, which are becoming increasingly

dominant and the way that you act upon them is in this way where you tend to, you know, birds of a feather flocking together and that can be wonderful, that can mean you can have extraordinary campaigns like 'Black Lives Matter'; an extraordinary campaign which took a real life situation and, partly through social networks, partly through things like Facebook Live where people can literally, without any journalists being involved, show you what's happening when a policeman had shot a black man in the States and people reacted to that and something became visible and those people were given voice. As Mark said, it can be wonderful, and yet it can also be so emotional, so much about identity that, I think this is the point; it's not so much that you may ignore the facts but you may ignore other people's contested view of the facts or contested view of reality. Now, the platforms are, in many ways, a miracle. Alright they don't pay much in taxes, that's not a great thing, but in terms of their provision of moral opportunity I think it's quite extraordinary. Our ability to connect all sorts of... and let's be honest ninety percent of it is fairly humdrum but lovely, it's the little stuff that goes to make life worthwhile; families, friends, that quotidian socialness that's so important but in that mix, and this is really important, that the kind of commentary about Trump and the elections, the serious stuff that Barbara and Mark knock out, you discover that...

Mark Easton

Craft.

Charles Bennett

Craft. Lovingly hone, sorry. You know, often appears... I mean often increasingly on this phone, for example, and even if it's on your laptop a similar thing applies, and the problem with this phone, even if you're not an addict, you're all sensible people who are not internet digital addicts, ha ha, but increasingly that's the case, and what is important about this is it's blended into your personal lives; the same message that Mark gets from his son about his tennis injury, the next message on that, with Facebook, may be something appalling that Trump says or some ghastly picture from Aleppo and then it'll be a picture of his dog or something and the fact that it's blended into your private, personal lives I think accentuates that emotional, personal response that you make for both good or bad and it's certainly going to trend that way because those algorithms that make Facebook and Google and Twitter and Apple so much money like to give you what you like and so it will continue to do that and I think it's really important, finally, that journalists understand that. That they actually also have a kind of moral opportunity here. Without getting too pious, it's also a business opportunity frankly, and boy does journalism need business opportunities right now. There's an opportunity there, I think, for journalists certainly to do appalling stuff that is clickbait; that panders to the worst impulses of those people and can be successful although frankly most of those people can do that nasty stuff quite happily by themselves. I think there is an opportunity firstly for journalists to be better curators, filters, guides in that ocean, that tidal wave of over abundance of information, of bad information. Journalists can be so much better at verifying what is believable, what is credible, if not true, and help people give the evidence that they need in those confused lives but they can also be more than that. I think they can be people who can do quite traditional things; be more critical, they can be myth busters, they can be contextualisers, they can offer people ways out, if you like, of that emotional scrum but the paradox of this, just to end on, is that journalists, to get that kind of trust, certainly they have to be accurate, they also have to have a sense that they are contributing to the good life, if you like, to a good society, that they are trying to help those people as individuals and that, funnily enough, means that journalists have to respond at a more emotional level; that they have to adopt a language, they have to adopt the understanding of the public as individuals working within families and communities and that means discovering a new sense of human interest and also perhaps being more transparent about their own views and their own, if you like, biases or their own perspectives on things and I think that is the future for good journalism anyway which is that it's authoritative, that it struggles towards evidence if not a truth, certainly an approach to evidence where people can in fact make judgements for themselves.

Mark Easton

Great, thank you. Thank you very much indeed for two fantastic introductions to our topic and I wanted to pick up on the two words that I think dominated both your opening thoughts. One is “*truth*” and the other is “*trust*” and I’m just thinking that if we see it as important to maintain a high quality national conversation that will drive up our democracy and improve the lives of everyone based on trust and based on facts and truth and evidence well, how bad a place are we in? How worried should we be that actually we’re abandoning that and we’re going to end up with a national conversation, and we can all pull examples from America or from the Brexit campaign and say “*look it’s all going to hell in a hand cart*”. What do you think?

Barbara Speed

I think it’s going the other direction to that. I think this idea that it was a free-for-all when the internet started is actually to some extent true and the real tragedy is that people thought that was what was brilliant about it and, in a way, I think it is and you can maintain some of that whilst understanding that... I mean verification is a good example that actually, when you find something on Twitter, especially journalists maybe six or seven years ago, there was this feeling that it was so authentic and it came from the people and it was therefore right and actually during the Arab Spring, which is often cited as a place where journalism went to social media and there was this amazing uprising of the people, tonnes and tonnes of the stuff they reported on turned out not to be true; it was footage of protests from months before and journalists were sort of tricked into thinking it was authentic by its context. So I think as soon as technology and the internet is seen again as just a normal tool that you actually bring all of your old skills to; you check what’s going on, you doubt what’s going on, you do what you would do with a source in the street, I think you can pull it back. That’s from a journalist’s point of view but then the other problem is that the person who views footage from a protest on Twitter, from its source, equally doesn’t know where it comes from. I think that everybody needs to be more cynical and that might develop with time.

Mark Easton

Well you used a phrase, you talked about the “*gatekeepers of real facts*” and you might be right that people actually just don’t want that emotional hit. They do in the end want to have something that they can hold onto, a stick in the shifting sand. I like to think the BBC takes that role to an extent in this country but I wonder whether actually those sticks may soon just be ignored and people would be quite happy just to be shifted around and that would be very troubling, wouldn’t it?

Barbara Speed

I think so yeah. It’s a classic thing where you have cynicism for things you don’t believe in. So you look at Trump’s propaganda and you think “*this is obviously all rubbish*” and then you think “*how much do I question that of people who I like and agree with*” and maybe you like them because they are full of facts but that often isn’t the case. I don’t know if maybe more people will eventually make this realisation. It might not happen and it might be that you need the press to remove itself slightly because I think the problem at the moment is someone sees a link shared and they don’t really look at whether it’s the BBC or whether it’s something else that looks a lot like a journalism site but really has no kind of ethics in that direction.

Mark Easton

Charlie, that point about trusted sources, to what extent we’ve seen with the Trump campaign and to some extent even during the course of the Brexit campaign here, this idea of “*oh the media, the press they’re all just lying and pulling the wool over your eyes*” including the BBC of course in some respects. At some point, actually if we don’t believe anybody, the only person we can believe is the bloke down the pub isn’t it? I mean that’s where you end up.

Charles Beckett

The problem isn't belief, nor is it an absence of facts. There were tonnes of facts during the referendum campaign but people had beliefs and in the end, in a way quite rightly, their beliefs systems overrode the array of facts and there was a problem with the facts which was that both sides were lying or misrepresenting, both sides were lying but in the end politics isn't just about facts, it's about moral choices. So if your moral choice is that you don't want immigrants, you want greater national control then I'm afraid you're not interested if you're going to lose a few bankers or a bit of trade. You're actually making quite an idealistic, personally driven, perhaps emotional but you know, emotion also drove the people who fought against Franco and Hitler.

Mark Easton

Well I was going to make this point, you mentioned emotion as the opposite of truth but you could argue that that emotion is the truth...

Charles Beckett

No, I'm not saying it is the opposite.

Mark Easton

That actually our experience of the world is emotional and in the end...

Charles Beckett

Exactly

Mark Easton

you can throw facts at me but if I feel this way that is the real truth.

Charles Beckett

And I think emotions are terribly important. I think emotions of love and pity and fear are all incredibly important to us as humans and I think one of the problems has been, I didn't quite get to the point in my little bit before, my point where I think that the post-truth thing stinks somewhat of people, God I'm sounding like a Trump supporter here, people in the establishment i.e. people like me who just don't like the idea of these other views that they're hearing so they're saying "*well look, I've shown you the facts and you've still got these idiotic, sceptical views or nationalistic views. Perforce you must be a moron*" instead of, and we've been particularly bad I think, including me, that we have, in this country and in the States, we have, I'm afraid the 'Trumpists' are right. We have a very homogenous, mainstream media, who I think are fabulous and actually do a fantastic job and the coverage and analysis of the referendum and the Brexit thing have been fantastic, sumptuous journalism that you can go and look at in The Economist and FT and The Telegraph etc and The I, he said quickly, is a fantastic amount of... but it's actually remarkably homogenous. I mean literally in the sense of Oxbridge people.

Mark Easton

So is that where the revolution comes? Barbara, you talked about important information, actually what is important? And maybe that's what the revolution is. If we're going to see a more emotional engagement with media, with the stuff, so if a kitten falling off a table becomes as important as what Theresa May said, well I... God knows where we end up, I mean that's just too frightening but...

Barbara Speed

Well yeah, I think to an extent that's happening and I think you're right that there's this danger of saying "*your facts aren't facts and my facts are facts*". I think people love this thing about the three hundred and fifty million to the NHS because that's one thing where you can say "*great, they definitely lied, you wanted that and it went wrong*" and actually they can't find that many other examples like that and I think a lot of it is that they don't want to accept that the fact is that some people don't want

migration and they say *“well there are lots of facts about how great migration is”* and the question is whether those facts are quite opinionated anyway that we have this problem... we're an impartial newspaper which is actually a very hard thing to do, I feel quite homogeneous as we probably are really and with, for example Brexit, it's very easy with all this economy stuff post-Brexit, post the referendum, to say *“oh well obviously this is because of the referendum. This has happened because of this”* and to almost miss those smaller stories about consumer confidence. It's actually very hard to be impartial even when you are looking at facts and they're very mixed up with emotion anyway so maybe it's wrong to say that that's the only way forward.

Mark Easton

This idea of the emotion during the dissemination, Charlie seemed to be suggesting that this is just an emotional thing...

Charles Beckett

Not just. It's fantastically powerful because it's an emotional thing.

Mark Easton

Well my point is that you could say *“it's just clickbait”* or *“it's just some kind of emotional thing”* but actually all of this does have a point. It's not just like the tube lines not working. It doesn't really matter what it is because it all shapes us, it shapes the conversation and it might in the end make us... openness must be a good thing, maybe even stacked full of emotion, my personal emotion but in the end it might help inform the way that I'm going to vote even if you and I might think it's the wrong way.

Barbara Speed

Yeah, even if it's a kitten falling off a table.

Mark Easton

Even if it's voting for a kitten falling off the table. Let's open up the discussion now. So much to discuss. I'm particularly interested in this idea of what's at stake here, particularly in terms of the national conversation and our democracy and the way that we run our lives. Who's going to start us off with a question. Yep, gentleman here.

Audience Member

Two things I suppose. Firstly, are we seeing almost too much change? If you go back to the 17th century, as a history graduate I always end up doing, you look at broadsides from the sort of civil war period and you've got complete nonsense stories of, you know, Henrietta Marie doing various things with various members of her family and odd stories about people who are breeding goats or complete nonsense stories then that kind of fell out and that continues through the 19th century, it's always been part of the journalistic fodder and the second thing is that when I was growing up my parents would buy a paper, I now read probably six or seven papers a day because I can just go onto the website of The I and then I get onto The Guardian, BBC and so on. So actually are we overstating how much this has changed? Instead of narrowing, and possibly I'm a bit weird by reading quite that much, but there is actually more opportunity for more opinions because people are accessing more information.

Mark Easton

Barbara, you opened your introduction with the idea that social media may be on a par with the printing press. Are we overstating this maybe?

Barbara Speed

I think possibly. I think that the second part of your question to me is a huge change; that people can dip in and around all in different places and what is interesting is that despite that we're seeing

people's opinions crystallising more. I think that's quite an interesting unexamined fact but I think the fact people do that, I suppose there's a problem where there's an illusion of choice. The publications you've named, I don't know if you would include The Daily Star in that list and maybe you do and that would be brilliant but unfortunately most people don't have... they are one way or the other

Mark Easton

Did you include the Daily Star?

Audience Member

I feel probably not....

Mark Easton

He's passing on that

Barbara Speed

Some days

Mark Easton

Not on a daily basis. The app's hopeless, that's the problem.

Barbara Speed

Yeah and there's nothing wrong with that but I think maybe the problem is that there's this illusion that we're all seeing everything and really we're seeing things that are kind of catered to us and [Charles] talked about algorithms and obviously they're choosing everything we see now anyway.

Mark Easton

Charlie, do you think it's history repeating itself?

Charles Beckett

No I don't think it's history repeating itself in the sense that I think we are in a remarkable phase technologically where this kind of abundance of information is unprecedented and the instability and speed of change I think again is unprecedented but you're quite right for example to say, this is a real problem for researches, how can you tell that somehow media was more diverse before? Or people's views were? You know there's that famous picture of all the people reading the newspaper on the train and the idea that after ten minutes they'd all stand up and swap newspapers is nonsense so in many ways I think Barbara is completely right that there is this opportunity for us. Certainly there's a sort of blurring at the edges, we're more likely to be promiscuous, if you like, even if the algorithms and human nature drives us back. I think it's also important to remember that, yes, what's happening with media technology is amazing but at the same time there are huge social, economic factors that are driving political change. The idea that Trump is Trump because of Twitter or Corbyn is Corbyn because of Facebook or The Canary, God forbid, is nonsense. There are these huge changes in education, in gender, in globalisation, growth of individualism, decline in some faiths and not others and the resurgence of nationalism which have got so many other things driving them and that are making people more conscious of their identity and their attempt at self-realisation, that kind of thing. The fact we're richer and cleverer. Media, in a sense, is caught up on that tide rather than driving those changes itself.

Mark Easton

Ok, let's take another question. Yes?

Audience Member

This might be quite controversial

Mark Easton

Oh go for it, definitely

Charles Beckett

Good

Audience Member

Do you feel that the internet, the emotional fragmented internet environment, has decreased the merits of democracy because right now I see people when they vote, they are more emotional and less considerate about the utilitarian value and as you said that the internet is a marvellous place, it provides a platform for everyone but I do also feel that everyone has become more bigoted, holding onto their own ideas and less open to others ideas because they all find their own groups. Trump's lovers find a Trump group and that reinforces their own original idea instead of being open to other ideas. I'm not blaming anyone but this is what human nature is

Mark Easton

Yeah

Audience Member

And I do feel that they are less capable of making good decisions.

Mark Easton

Very good, thank you for that. Charlie, I introduced our discussion tonight talking about that echo chamber idea where you can now just surround yourself with people who share your views and that could be a breeding ground for prejudice and bigotry and could be very seriously undermining for democracy because people aren't prepared to entertain an alternative view, or certainly won't have it in their sphere of reference. Is that a real worry? Do people really behave like that?

Charles Beckett

Well it's that eternal dilemma; were those nasty people always out there, thinking those things and the internet has just given them a platform to say it? There is a bit of evidence and I've just done a paper on terrorism and journalism and there is some really clear research evidence that new media, the internet, whatever, does stimulate people, trigger people to commit extreme acts of violence. You can see that, that when there's a lot of coverage of a terrorist incident, there's a much stronger possibility of another one occurring. So again it doesn't quite solve the causation/correlation problem but I'd say I think you can definitely see phenomena. So, for example, Jeremy Corbyn has been fantastically successful at getting re-elected in the Labour party by mobilising a core support and yet at the same time you can observe empirically that he's doing disastrously with the wider public so the sort of things you're talking about we can see that they are happening but it's arguable that they are also "good" for democracy. It's good that there are five hundred thousand members of the Labour party at one level, certainly if you're Jeremy Corbyn and they're all supporting you. It's better than not having them. I think in the end you're talking about people having to make political choices and again I think the real problem here is not the internet, the real problem is that when people said they want to take back control it wasn't because they read that on Twitter, it's because they do genuinely feel, I think with some justification, that they have been disempowered. That the European Union, Westminster, even their local councils are less empowering to them, have given them less real choice. You think about voting in this country; it's only a tiny fraction of votes in this country and even worse in America where you'll actually make any difference. Ninety percent of people need not bother turning up to vote, it won't make any difference. So democracy has already got problems before the internet.

Mark Easton

Fewer marginal seats now than ever I'm told.

Charles Beckett

That's right.

Mark Easton

Barbara, younger people growing up in this environment; the new voters, are they fundamentally any different from the way that their parents think about their democratic involvement?

Barbara Speed

There's a huge amount of evidence that young people are very politically engaged online. I think in the last election there was more engagement from young people on the internet than ever and there was the lowest turnout ever of that same age group of people, which is very depressing, but then again you might think "*what do we mean by politics?*". Maybe they are engaged in one and not the other, maybe that's how they feel, maybe they're lazy, maybe they didn't wake up, who knows? But I think the feature of the internet is that it offers a space in which you can fully have your own incredibly specific identity which you've chosen for yourself, which I think is very exciting and, for a lot of people, was extremely liberating when it first came about and people do that within their politics so they have these specific groups, it's amazing, and they can stay in that specific group and I think part of the reason for that as well is that the internet offers all this choice and all this mass of information and you need an anchoring point or a steering point and feeling that you're part of one community is very important. I think the kind of passive politics that lots of people used to be involved in, so say if you think about Jeremy Corbyn's voters compared to Theresa May's voters you have a core of very engaged people and then you have a lot of possibly less-engaged people and those kind of passive forms of politics that you might call tribal, they might be from your family or your community, those links are getting weaker just as the internet is getting stronger so you have a slight fragmentation of community, you have this confused national identity and then you have this place you can go and find people who seem that they're just like you and you, maybe in your terror, grip onto them.

Mark Easton

That idea of the echo chamber, is it true?.

Barbara Speed

Yeah

Mark Easton

Do people really surround themselves only with people who are like them on Facebook, on Twitter etc?

Barbara Speed

Yes and this is a huge change from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 that Facebook is bigger than Google. People do not go out and look at even their own search on Google, they see what people are doing on Facebook and they've self-selected those specific people. You can try and counteract it and maybe some people do but I don't think many of us go out looking for people that think differently to us.

Mark Easton

And if that's right is that a threat to our democracy?

Barbara Speed

It is. Actually communities used to be a bit threatening, countries are a bit threatening. You have groups of people who look inwards and then there are other people who are there and they don't like them and it's the same on the internet except actually you live everyday with the people who are different to you and that you don't like and that's, I think, where the tension comes from that you have all these Corbyn voters just among everybody else who thinks "*who is this man? what is he doing?*" and it's a real kind of tension. I don't know if it's negative or if we'll find a way through it but it is a very strange phenomenon.

Mark Easton

Yes, gentleman there.

Audience Member

Just thinking about economics so just agreeing that good journalism is needed around fact checking, pointing out propaganda and maybe investigative journalism and many other things in this world of emotional user-generated content. So our economic models of the past; The Scott Trust, the BBC licence fee, advertising, the new ones of pay walls, in the world of ad blockers and things like that do you think the economic basis of good journalism will figure out a way or are figuring out a way to keep good journalism alive and thriving or do you worry about that?

Mark Easton

Charlie.

Charles Beckett

Yeah I worry hugely. Depends where you are, obviously. You have to bear in mind that a lot of legacy media around the world is still turning a profit, even in this country. It's mainly doing that by slashing the number of staff it has but, again, the digital technologies give you greater efficiencies but basically, if you want the long and short of it in this country, for newspapers especially, I mean the BBC's got a nice funding model, don't for one second think The Scott Trust is a great solution to this. It's actually been disastrous. Specifically, The Guardian got that lovely windfall from Autotrader and they all breathed a sigh of relief and commissioned extra staff without thinking about how they're going to pay for it. No, they're really in trouble because this lovely thing, including when I worked with Mark at Channel 4 News. Channel 4 News, how is that paid for? You guys don't pay for it directly. It was paid for with adverts around Big Brother when we worked there. Now Gogglebox or whatever and that's how it's paid for. That advertising thing is going big time. I think it may plateau. It may come back because people need to sell stuff somehow but God, twenty percent revenue drop last year, fifteen percent revenue drop, something like that. You can't lose that amount of revenue and not be really hit. The digital stuff isn't working, why? Because you all hate, as you say, ad blockers. The beauty of the internet is it's fast, it's quick, it lets you get access to content and then some idiot tries to sell you underwear or hiking books or whatever your algorithm tells you that you're into. So it just doesn't work. Subscriptions; a massive boom in subscriptions for people like the FT and The Economist over the last year but that was because of Brexit and the General Election and even that, they're really struggling, they're not paying enough. It's proving extraordinarily difficult and expensive to maintain so there are huge problems. I think the bottom line is you're going to see far fewer journalists and that's partly because too many journalists are doing the same kind of stuff and they're not doing very good stuff. You can see far fewer of them. You can see far fewer of other people, like me, universities, public relations companies creating content because we've got a different funding model. My funding model is students so we can afford to do that stuff. So there is going to be this massive structural shakedown and I think that the best journalists are going to be much more niche. All the news organisations tell me they're doing fewer stories but they're trying to go deeper. Obviously they're going to be able to try and do stuff like commentary and analysis but just doing glib commentary isn't good enough, you have to do informed, provocative, thoughtful stuff as well. Be nice to journalists because they're really up against it.

Mark Easton

That's not going to happen. Barbara, there is another way of looking at this which is that in this world of, as I described it, the shifting sands, if you can genuinely be that stick in the sand that people will go to, you can be that trusted source, this should be really the good times shouldn't it? People find themselves increasingly desperate; *"just tell me the truth"*.

Barbara Speed

Yeah. I think if you can do a good thing it works but that is a hard thing.

Mark Easton

Because "good journalism" was the question.

Barbara Speed

Yeah. I think a lot of news organisations see exactly the same thing, which is day in, day out doing a lot of short articles to which they bring absolutely nothing. Those do bring in numbers and then at the end of the year they look at their list; the top five, the top ten will all be things which were incredibly expensive to do, took a really long time and people do see that...

Mark Easton

Quality they know...

Barbara Speed

but not always. It's obviously a huge risk and it's a huge investment but I think, as you say, over time I think that is where journalists will end up going just because otherwise it's just a race to the bottom and you're all writing the same story and then trying to put a better key word on it. That's very depressing.

Mark Easton

So frightening. Lady there, yes.

Audience Member

I wanted to ask about the role of political correctness which is in the eye of the beholder, it's subjective depending on which bubble you're looking out from. How does that impact your ability to get to truth and accuracy in some kind of an economic environment that we all live in?

Mark Easton

Barbara, is that something that you worry about in your daily journalism?

Barbara Speed

Yeah, it's an interesting question. I increasingly think that political correctness is what people call left-wing discourse. We've seen something quite interesting recently, we had a column on this today where Gary Lineker was talking about migration and actually the response of the tabloids to that was exactly like you would get from the political correctness brigade were it something that the right-wing was saying but I think sometimes just whichever group feels they're the orthodoxy at that one time, they'll call what the other people are doing out and they'll say *"don't do that"* and it's really just a form of power and I think that is what political correctness was. That maybe because we had maybe a left-wing government for a while in this country or there was this rise of liberalism that it's just a name for the orthodoxy but I think that the other problem is that what you'll find on the internet is that there are these two groups, or many groups, and within each there are things you absolutely cannot say and that's what the bad other people say and it is hard to cut across that because you'll see someone

coming into a Facebook group about feminism and they'll say the one wrong word for something and that is just the end of the world, you can't do that.

Audience Member

And then how does that link to funding in a question about economics? And then I'm thinking about the most recent debate in America and climate change wasn't mentioned which seems to be a pretty pressing issue but they cover off a lot of things that were more trivial, in my opinion.

Mark Easton

Ok, Charlie, just picking up on the funding issue around political correctness and whether certain parts of the debate effectively get sidelined?

Charles Beckett

Yeah I think it actually sort of works the other way. It's not so much political correctness that's the hindrance I think political correctness is a good thing in the sense that twenty years ago people said racist things that they don't say anymore and I think that's, generally speaking, a good thing.

Mark Easton

They say it below the line now don't they, in the comments section.

Charles Beckett

Yeah, well I was about to say that the danger is that it's not so much political correctness, it's more political deafness and this, I think, is an economic thing. It's not just that you should be listening to the deplorables, it's actually that you should be listening, for example, this is going to sound terribly politically correct, but you should be listening to, for example, the young Muslims of somewhere like Luton or Molenbeek. I'm more worried about a deafness to a diversity of people and views, which may include views that I find unpleasant and in that case I think there's definitely a business opportunity and poor comment editors and moderators struggle with this where you want to have people who are saying things that other people might find offensive but not in an offensive way. I think you can disagree violently but civilly.

Mark Easton

Ok, I'm going to take the question from over there.

Audience Member

Charlie's coming onto it really and I've been following your work, Charlie, on the terrorism stuff which is fascinating. I'm just wondering what your observations are about people having a voice now who maybe haven't before because of digital; with the referendum, with terrorism, people having a voice or being able to get hold of information which leads to action that changes something but who do you think still doesn't have a voice, either because they're not online, digitally illiterate or because they're in a country that's not as digitally engaged as others? Which voices are still not being heard?

Mark Easton

Charlie, do you want to pick that up?

Charles Beckett

Need to remember there are still a lot of people who aren't online.

Mark Easton

Is it something like fifteen million adults have never been on the... well they don't think they've been on the internet. They probably have but they don't realise that they have.

Charles Beckett

Well it's true. You talk to a lot of Millennials and you say "where do you get your news? Do you get it online?" They say "no I don't get it online, I get it from Google News". The internet is so ubiquitous that it's just 'boomph', there, but it's not ubiquitous and it's very unevenly distributed. Not everyone has [mobile phones], not everyone has the time or the media literacy so the access to it is very uneven but I meant more that even when people have, so for example, those kids in that Brussels suburb, those Muslim kids in Luton are actually incredibly active online. My point is that authorities don't include them in those conversations as much as they should do. That's the point. It's not that they don't have a voice. The art of listening; I wrote a blog post about this, I still haven't quite worked out what it means but it's to do with engagement and one of the things journalism has to do is be a little bit more receptive and it's something that journalism has always failed to do; not getting out enough physically, intellectually getting out enough and here's the thing that despite all the filter bubble stuff, one of the other key drivers of people paying attention to news is this thing called 'surprise'. We also like to be told things we didn't know or that we find "oh ok, that's interesting. That's a bit counterintuitive". People quite like that as well. So we need to try and freshen up.

Mark Easton

Barbara, another group I think who could potentially lose out here are people who just find that whole environment on social media, on Twitter particularly, so hostile and so difficult that they just give up on it and if that is where a lot of the conversation is going to happen in the future, that's a worry too. Is there a policing issue here?

Barbara Speed

Yeah I think so and I think also the assumption ever that we were all going to be on Twitter is quite a suspect one. It asks you to put your opinions in the public sphere forever and allow anybody to talk to you about them which I think certain people love but obviously everybody isn't going to love that. So I think that really the future of the internet is in private social media and that's the places we can't access. There are terrorists groups on Facebook, there are paedophile groups on Facebook and this is all happening completely beyond what we can see or what reporters can see. I think you have to maybe physically go places, especially within journalism, to hear people because a lot of people don't want to put themselves into those... I mean Twitter is kind of an establishment place. This is where, with the birth of Twitter that you would go and you'd talk to Obama on Twitter has obviously not happened. That Obama doesn't reply to you and no one will really if you're a nobody on Twitter.

Mark Easton

He clearly doesn't.

Charles Beckett

And there's not just one social media, we keep talking about social media and often, because we're journalists, we mean Twitter by that. There's so many different platforms now. Some of them, they're becoming more homogenous in some ways but there are so many different platforms and places that people occupy as well as real life

Barbara Speed

And..

Mark Easton

Yeah. Time for one more... I'll take one more question if I may Barbara, yes, gentleman there?

Audience Member

You mentioned truth and that has been a casualty of the warfare. We no longer can rely on Milton saying "*truth be in the field*" and it's okay, because there are so many occasions when facts have just got completely submerged and there are fact checkers but you may look for them to confirm what you think you're believing but in the referendum campaign things like the economic effect of migration got completely lost. Most people still think that the Labour government caused the international financial crash because it was a brilliant move of spin by the other side and the Trump campaign; truth is lost completely and that's surprising to those of us who watched this in the beginning thinking that when you had everybody in there, truth would somehow come to the top.

Mark Easton

We come back to where we started really. Charlie, are we just deluding ourselves that there is some kind of truth that we can portray and people are going to be able to soak it up and say "*oh now I get it*" or actually are we in danger of losing something really precious?

Charles Beckett

Well I think it's a sort of philosophical question. I said before that I don't really buy into the 'post-truth' argument. I think there are still definitely facts, there's still definitely evidence and people will have different arguments. It's interesting that you cite a bunch of people who I suspect you don't agree with, I suspect you voted remain and that you would probably vote for Hillary.

Audience Member

Mind reader as well.

Charles Beckett

Yeah and somebody else would say the opposite so there is an obvious thing that truth is contested. What worries me, if I can use a different word to 'post-truth' is a kind of extreme relativism and by that I mean a kind of proactive relativism, not just "*yeah it's all relative, you've got one view, I've got another*". It's where you've got people like Russia Today and other organisations who are deliberately putting fake information that they know to be fake information out there

Mark Easton

That's just propaganda isn't it?

Charles Beckett

Well it's worse than propaganda in fact because the idea of propaganda was to try and convince you of my point of view. All they're interested in is undermining the idea that there is a point of view, or that some point of view has any greater authority over another and you do see that a lot with a kind of reflex scepticism and that's very prevalent on social media, or Twitter especially. A kind of reflex scepticism about everything; that nothing has got any greater substance than anything else. I think that is a much worse problem because, as I say, it's proactive, it's people deliberately trying to do it and it's a kind of intellectual laziness because, for me, the political fun is not that Trump is necessarily true or false but he's got a point of view that I can argue with and I think the real problem is, it's not just that I disagree with Trump as well, where his campaign is deliberately trying to undermine any basis for proper debate.

Mark Easton

Barbara, final thought from you on where we are with truth.

Barbara Speed

I was talking about this to someone the other day and we were saying that you'd imagine that with having Google on your phone that something that would be completely standard would be that everything we'd say would be accurate and you could check if someone in front of you was saying

something that was rubbish but I think oddly the opposite has happened because you assume that because everyone has access to the facts they are using them and that facts are kind of devalued so you lose the sense where maybe if you were sitting in a pub talking to someone fifty years ago you would think *"am I going to listen to what they say or not because I don't really have the means to go and check everything but I either trust them or I don't"* whereas now that maybe has disappeared slightly that it would be their opinion that you would trust or not trust and that the facts get a bit lost along the way and that people like Trump have realised that he can stand on national television and say *"that's a lie"* and everyone sitting there could get their phones out and check and they just don't, they believe him, which is fairly horrendous and I suppose the thing that [Mark was] saying, this idea that maybe people will return to thinking that facts are important because once they do the resources are all there. And you do it yourself and you think *"well that sounds convincing"* and you don't check it.

Mark Easton

Thank you very much and it's been an absolutely fascinating evening for me anyway, I hope you agree. Your questions have been terrific, thank you for those. Brilliant from both Barbara and from Charlie. Barbara, you used a wonderful line and it picks up perfectly on what you've just said now. You said *"I don't know if it's negative or we're just living through it"* and maybe that's it.

Barbara Speed

It's my memoir

Mark Easton

Maybe we're just living through it and give it ten, twenty... well we'll be long dead maybe but someone will come out and they'll go *"actually it was rather interesting that period of history and they're all a bit crazy but now it's all sorted"*. Thank you very much indeed to everyone.