



The virtual SciCon conference series | Transcript

**Tom Rosenstiel | Journalism and Democracy in the Digital Age
(1 October 2020, 3 pm CET)**

Mod.: Prof. Holger Wormer

[Holger Wormer] Okay, then let's go. Hello, good morning, good afternoon or good evening. Wherever you join us. My name is Holger Wormer. I am professor for science journalism at TU Dortmund university, and I'm your host for today. I'm not quite sure how embracing a welcome via videoconference can be, but I do my very best now to send you a warm welcome, to everyone at our kick off to the conference series "Science Journalism in the Digital Age", or SciCon. Well, SciCon is organized by the German Science Journalists Association "Wissenschaftspressekonferenz" WPK and acatec, the National Academy of Science and Engineering. SciCon is made possible by a funding of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Many thanks for that.

But just let me explain the concept of the whole conference.

First, the SciCon conference has two parts. A: the virtual SciCon Series. B: the SciCon real-life working conference later on in Freiburg. Well, Part A will start today with a lecture by Tom Rosenstiel, who is already there. Hello, Tom. Thank you so much for already being there in the early morning in the United States. And I will introduce you just in a few minutes.

It will be incomprehensible, so this lecture will be followed by 10 more lectures until mid-November by various international media experts.

The names can be found on the Web site, science-journalism.eu. At the end of November, part B – the SciCon working conference - will take place in Freiburg, where we want to discuss what we can do for the future of science journalism in Germany and around Europe. Maybe also in the whole world.

In practical terms, based on international experts' opinions. And one basis for this part B, of course, will be these video lectures of part A, which are recorded and transcribed, thus creating the kind of reservoir of knowledge on the questions we will discuss in Freiburg book later on. For the recording, of course, we need your consent, which fortunately does not have to be submitted signed in blood.

As some German poets or even German administrations might prefer it. But which you'll give simply by sticking with us now. So, the session is recorded. Thank you.

Well, after having clarified such a rather complicated organizational details, we can now address a rather simple question.

That is, what is journalism?

However, for many people, the issue seems to be much more complicated than it seems. School children often cannot answer it. And unfortunately, many, many scientists, whether biologists or others, often cannot either. It therefore makes sense to break down Journalism into its individual elements for analysis, probably similar to the work of an analytical chemist, maybe. Fortunately, we have someone who has already successfully tried this kind of elementary analysis with his book, "The Elements of Journalism", according to the Poynter Institute, the most important book on the relationship of journalism and democracy published in the last 50 years.

Tom Rosenstiel is the author of the book, together with Bill Kovach. And Tom Rosenstiel also founded and directed the "Project for Excellence in Journalism" for many years, continued in the Pew Research Center. In his career as a journalist, press critic and media researcher, he has written about politics, culture, technology, journalism, media and ethics. And he has lectured on journalism in the United States and overseas. And today, of course, it's a big pleasure, with us. He's currently executive director of the American Press Institute, a think tank on making news sustainable. And Tom, again, I'm very happy to have you here. The floor is yours for the next about 25, 30 minutes. And all other microphones, please, are switched off for this period. However, you can just give us some first questions in the chat. And later on, I hope we will have a vivid discussion. Tom, thank you very much.

[[Tom Rosenstiel](#)] Thank you, Holger. It is a pleasure to be talking to all of you. I wish I could see you. I wish I were in Germany. But this will have to do.

I have the advantage and the disadvantage of being the first speaker at your conference. So, I will not be repeating anything that anyone said. However, you may have high expectations that I may not meet. What I want to do in the next few minutes is talk about ... to confront the question of journalism and democracy in the digital age. I want to get elemental and start with the question of what does journalism do for a society?

What is journalism? Journalism, at its most fundamental level? Modern journalism began in Europe in the early, very early 17th century: around 1604, 1605, the first newspapers began to emerge. It took information that was held by a few, by the ruling elite, by the royal courts, and made it available to many. The first newspapers emerged from coffeehouses, that were usually just outside shipping ports or at shipping ports. People would come off ships and they would gossip in these coffee houses. And the first newspapers were people writing down what they heard in these coffee houses and distributing that kind of information, along with what came off the ships, further into towns. In other words, journalism created a larger public square and a common set of facts. The problem that we are confronting today, the problem that journalism and democracy faces in the digital age, is that our public square is shrinking.

We're fragmenting.

And the pool of common facts that we share, and that we would need to solve problems for science to advance, for many things to happen in democratic societies. The collection of common facts that we have in in our society, in any society, appears to be shrinking around the world. If I were an attorney, like my wife who is a law professor, I might put in evidence, as my first exhibit, the presidential debate in the US that we had in the United States this week.

The question, I think, that we have to address is why? What is causing the public square to shrink and a common set of facts to become smaller? This is what we would call a complex problem, a wicked problem, something that's caused by many things. Let me start with what those are, I think.

The first one is technology, which created media choice, more media choice for people. The trust crisis in the United States, for instance, began in the 1980s. Trust began to decline because of the television. When the television dial exploded from four channels of television in most in most cities in the United States, and a handful in most countries in the world, to many, many, more channels. And in the United States, the explosion of cable technology was accompanied by the deregulation of our media in the United States. We got rid of what we call the Fairness Doctrine, the equal time rules. And we had the rise of, first, talk radio programming, with people like Rush Limbaugh, and later, in 1996, about 15 years into the cable revolution, the advent of Fox News.

These channels would actually have been illegal in the United States under the regulations that we put in in the 1960s, but they were allowed when those regulations were taken away in the 1980s.

Second step, after you have deregulation and this new technology, is the market pressures that actually encourage partisan media, more partisan media. It's important to understand that in the United States, most of our media was local. We have fourteen hundred newspapers, we have six hundred television stations that do news, almost all of them were local. We're a very large country. Our media was financed by advertising and almost all of these media outlets were just focused on a community, like Philadelphia, Cincinnati.

Only a handful were national.

In 1980, we had – really – three national TV networks and two national newspapers, and that was it. Once you have this explosion of technology, the market pressures actually encourage partisan media, because it becomes very hard for a new entrant to say, well, we're more trustworthy. We have a legacy of trust. We have the most reporters. We have the most time to work on our stories. We make the fewest mistakes. Instead, Fox News came along and said, we are fair and balanced. We report, you decide. But in fact, they had very few reporters. They couldn't compete on that basis. They had popular hosts, but very few bureaus.

Talk radio, when it emerged, marketed itself as the antidote to a liberal, democratic-oriented media. You should trust us because we're telling you the truth and the mainstream media is biased.

So this – simply the technology and the marketing pressures – accelerated polarization, and half of the decline in trust in U.S. media occurred between 1980 and 1997, according to Gallup's data.

Before the invention of the Internet.

So the notion that somehow this is all caused by digital technology – the roots of this go much further back. We've had a drop in trust to according Gallup data from about 70 percent of people trusting the media to about 30 percent. And half of that – fully half – occurred before the Internet existed.

Now, add the Web. And the web brings in a number of filter bubbles because of the values of the technology companies that control the Web. Think of it this way: the architecture of the Web is targeted at advertising. They make money by identifying what makes each of us in these squares, in this video, all different from each other – by knowing what you've looked at online.

So, they've created an architecture that identifies what makes us different, because they finance themselves through targeted advertising. It became a very easy thing for political actors to say, I love this architecture separation, because I can use that to polarize people. And the platforms themselves use that so that they can make their targeting and their targeted advertising, which finances them, more precise, more specific.

The second important thing to understand about the technology platforms that control our information ecosystem is that their values are focused in a very different way than media companies were. Media companies, in American law, which codified that – media companies were applying editorial decisions to what they published. They would say, we're not going to publish this. It's not true. We're gonna vet this. And in American courts, it's part of law that, if something has been published in an American newspaper or on television, the courts presume that that an editorial process occurred, because the courts don't want to have to print and analyze for themselves what that might have been.

The platform companies actually eschew, avoid relentlessly, for legal reasons and for economic ones, imposing any editorial process. They will – after the fact – create rules, after the rules have been violated of things that they will not allow. But these are essentially small exceptions there. They believe in what they would call – the term they use is: "the open web," although it's not really open because it's dominated by a handful of monopolies. But the values that they espouse are not editorial. In fact, relentlessly non-editorial. Well, this encourages further polarization, political polarization.

And then, as I said, you have the trust problem. And the trust issues in the United States are very interesting. They first began with Republicans or conservatives distrusting the media as liberal. And that first wave of decline in trust was very heavily tilted towards Republicans' distrust in the press. And today, indeed, we have about 15, 20 percent of Republicans who say they have a fair amount of trust in what they see in the media. About 30 percent of political independents – or, no, about 40 to 50 percent of political independents – say they have a fair amount of trust.

And about 70 to 80 percent of Democrats say they have a fair amount of trust. The numbers vibrate from year to year. So, there's a total ideological skew to this. And the more conservative you are, the more distrustful you are. However, there are two interesting wrinkles to this.

One is: the group that is second-most distrustful after conservatives are people under 40. Regardless of their ideology. And these are people who grew up in this much more partisan media age, following 1980 and following the Internet, where there were many more political and partisan outlets, and outlets, by the way, who are not news organizations, but pretend to be. That our political advocacy groups, that are faux journalistic enterprises. All of this creates an atmosphere that encourages – that is rich soil for a despotic leader, an authoritarian leader, to come along and say, you cannot trust anything.

You see. You should trust me.

You should not trust these institutions. You should not trust the media. You should not trust the courts. You should not trust the institutions of democratic society. They do not work for you.

One essential ingredient that I haven't mentioned and that doesn't relate to media *per se* is, of course, growing income equality, at least in an atmosphere like this. Economic elites from all political sides say: "I am going to get a bigger part of the pie because we've entered a period of deregulation and I can do that". So, income equality? grows. And that is part of the rich soil that makes room for an authoritarian leader and weakens democracy.

I don't know if you've read the book "Democracy in Twilight" by an Anne Applebaum, an American journalist who's married to a Polish politician. Fascinating book. Quick read. She talks about how she's an American conservative and was part of it, you know, American and European anticommunists in the 1980s, who were euphoric at the end of the Cold War because they saw a much better future. She says half of her friends no longer speak to each other, because half of them – half of these anticommunists – have fallen into the thrall of authoritarian leaders throughout Europe, including in England, and in the United States.

And in the book, she cites research that shows that at any given moment in any country across ideologies, there is about a third of people who are so poor, kind of nihilistic, who believe that democratic institutions won't really work because of the naivete, the naive idea, or think that they won't work for them because the system is rigged. She calls these people the "30 percent people who are susceptible to authoritarianism". They're not necessarily anti-democratic in an active way, but they are nihilistic. They are skeptical, or worse, and then become a base for an authoritarian leader. Why am I talking about authoritarianism?

Because if we go back to the very first thing I said, journalism – like science, but journalism even more so – is inherently democratic.

The more journalism you have in a society, the stronger and healthier a journalistic system is, the more democratic your society will be.

Journalism's purpose, its function, as I said at the top, is to make information more widely available to a larger number of people. So, we are going through, in the United States, a moment of authoritarian rule. And we are also going through a moment of reexamination of the norms of journalism, a reckoning about whether journalism is fundamentally too elitist, too racist, too white, too old, too male. And a reconsideration of whether the concept of objectivity, which is, I think, widely misunderstood to mean objective consciousness, that I have no objective, that I have no consciousness of views, that I'm a blank slate, and not properly understood as

journalist objectivity, as a method – as in science – for understanding the world. But if you take this definition of objectivity, the sort of unsophisticated, misconstrued definition, that objectivity means you're a cipher. It becomes very easy to say: "Well, that's not true". So, objectivity as a concept, it is foolish, and a delusion and we should abandon it. That encourages more people in journalism to say, let's just become partisan. Let's just write what we think.

Let's replace this deluded notion of objectivity with subjectivity.

Isn't that the antonym of objectivity? Subjectivity? Yes. If you're using that wrong definition. And if I can just write what I believe, that my journalism will be more morally true, I'll have moral clarity to my journalism. I won't have to go through this annoying process of trying to understand multiple points of view.

So that leads to the question of...

...how structural are these problems?

Well, you know, is it a matter – is it inevitable, because of technology and what technology does, and the ideological state of the world, a declining global economy, rising inequality, economic inequality, and later on a pandemic?

Is it then just inevitable that we will continue to have a shrinking public square and a shrinking common set of facts?

Add to this, by the way, one thing I've forgotten – that we all know – that the economic model for journalism has been broken. And so, you have a hobbled press. My answer to this question of inevitability is that it is not inevitable and that social and economic factors can change it.

And now I am about to head out on a plank where you know more than I do.

In the United States, the pandemic offered President Trump an enormous opportunity, a golden opportunity to unify the country. If he had chosen a more scientific path, if the country had unified around masks, more social distancing. If he had said, as countries and leaders often do in wartime situations, "we are all in this together. Let's join hands and do these things to protect ourselves." And that has happened in other countries. And here's the plank I shouldn't walk out on: my sense from reading in the United States is that that has happened to a much greater degree in Germany, for instance, than it has happened in the United States. So, I'd be curious whether you think your public square and common set of facts have become enlarged by that. It has certainly happened in some other countries. But the point of this is that leaders can make a difference in this. This is not a matter of simply technology. That is not what has happened. And so now it will be up in the United States to our election and to the public themselves to decide: are we going to embrace a more scientific-oriented approach to this crisis, or are we going to continue on the path that we've been in, with a leader who really can only rule through divisiveness, because he already has minority support. He's never really been above about 40 percent, 45 percent approval in the United States. So, he has to play this game of alienation and polarization to sustain his power.

I will stop there and hope that that inspires some questions. I am fundamentally an optimist because journalists are fundamentally optimists, as I think scientists are fundamentally optimists. We have our bad days.

And with good reason.

But if you engage in journalism as a profession, if you get this bug when you're young and decide that you believe you want to tell true stories and that you are going to dedicate your life to accurate information and an open-minded inquiry, and not prejudicial inquiry, then you are fundamentally someone who thinks that if I give people more accurate information in the world, that we will have a better world.

[Tom Rosenstiel] And that is an optimistic place to be.
Thank you.

[Holger Wormer] Thank you so much for this overview and also this, well, optimistic outlook. We will see where we end after discussion. I've always some questions which came up during your talks. So, let's start with Hristio Boytchev who asked the question: "How come media trust sank while choice was rising and everyone taste was catered to?"

So that's something what you mentioned. So, before the cable, during the cable revolution.

And another question from the same person: "You mentioned that the more journalism there is, the more democratic is the society in Europe.

However, it is being discussed that investigative journalism that shows flaws in institutions actually feeds right wing populist that undermine them". So, can you comment on also on this?

[Tom Rosenstiel] Yeah. So, I mean, I think this question of why choice correlated to declining trust is important.

I tend to be a structuralist. I think that when we had a handful, a small handful, of news organizations in the United States that were national, they had to be very moderate to sustain a large audience. They had to be very careful. They were conscious of that.

For instance, Walter Cronkite, the most popular journalist in the United States in the 1970s, was also the last journalist to decide that the United States probably could not win the war in Vietnam. He was very conscious of not getting ahead of the kind of Midwest audience that he imagined was relying on him.

Another thing that happens when you have only a handful of outlets is that if you want to be a journalist, you work in those, you will work in those outlets. So, you had ideological diversity in places like CBS News at The New York Times and elsewhere.

And as you have more fragmented media, people who were conservatives, literally, they exited those larger mainstream newsrooms and went to work for more ideological newsrooms where they felt like they were more welcome.

They felt that some sense of fighting a dominant culture. And they left. And there are many, many examples of that. And that's documented in academic research coming out of the University of Colorado and a book that's annually produced – um, I mean, produced every 10 years, that looks at the makeup of newsrooms called "The American Journalists."

There are just fewer conservatives in American newsrooms than there used to be 30 years ago, in mainstream newsrooms. And they've gone off to work in their own places. And that, you know, that probably has led to a content that is not as strong.

And then to the question of what does journalism ... fact resistance, confirmation bias. We are only now, I think, learning about the process, the psychological and brain process by which people take in information. Media studies are slow on that. For the first 50 years of media studies, we thought media was hypodermic, you know, if you publish something, it was like giving someone a drug and that's just what they would think. The way you wrote it is what they would think.

And then the second 50 years of media research basically found – repudiated that, and came to the conclusion that the media doesn't tell people what to think. It tells them what to think about. It has an agenda setting influence. But it does not act. People do not actually take it in like a hypodermic influence. Now we're trying to figure out, well, are there different ways of presenting information that people are more receptive? That different audiences will believe?

Non narrative, more visual. This is research that is only now beginning. But we have learned that repetition can make people believe things that are not true. There's a famous study out of Indiana that shows that you can persuade people that Scottish men wear saris, not kilts. If you repeat that they wear saris enough times, that in an experiment, people say, "oh, you know, I thought I was kilts, but I must have been wrong about that."

And the folks who are engaged in disinformation and misinformation campaigns honestly know more about the science of persuasion than do journalists, who spend their time trying to find out things and not spend their time trying to figure out the science of how to make people believe.

[Holger Wormer] Actually, just not to give Tom and me the idea that we are just alone in the whole virtual world of the Internet, I would suggest that you switch on your video now, all the other participants and also there are some people posing some questions, and I think you could do it by yourselves. That would be a little bit more vivid. And Tom and me do not feel so alone in the in the big, big Internet virtual world. Thank you very much. So, the next question I have read in the chat, but maybe you could repeat it, Franco, is a question of Franko Zotta.

Franco Zotta was just logged off, so maybe I just I help him with the question, but maybe later on we could just try to have the questions posed by the people themselves. So, Franco Zotta tried to ask you:

"You reported that very many people distrust journalism. Isn't that an indication that journalism itself has many problems that have made him untrustworthy?"

And, second question: "For example, an unclear self-conception; too much "he-says-she-says"-journalism, too much opinion journalism, and too little evidenced based reporting.

What would you have to change in the self-concept in order to gain credibility in journalism?"

[Tom Rosenstiel] Yeah. This is a question that I like a lot, it's near and dear to my heart and the research that I've done over the years. So, one study we've done is where we've asked – we've split a sample in a survey, and repeated the trust questions, but then asked a different sample, half the sample. Not about the media in general, but the media that they use most often, to see whether –

- and we published this at API, my organization, in a study we called "The Media, My Media – to see whether people hated the media, but actually had media that they used and relied on that they liked more.

And whether that was local and, you know ... because there is a lot of media out there and some of it's pretty popular. So how is it possible that people use the media and hate it at the same time?

What we found was that there is a difference. That when we ask people, you know, "what do you think of the media", these traditional questions that have existed for 50 years, they have in their mind cable. National cable channels that are very polarized and very political. And they're usually political. They don't think of their favorite sports publication that writes about the team that they love and things like that, and that there is a split.

When you ask people about the media they use most often (which is usually local, but not always), they like it better.

About twice as much. But they don't love it.

So, there is still a trust issue that spills out over everything.

To the second dimensions of this. Yes, I think there are a lot of problems in the way that traditional journalism has worked. Journalism for many years. And certainly, when I came into it, it was a tautology. Journalism was whatever journalists did and we didn't think about it very much.

What we did was what we were taught to do by other people, or forced to do, because that city editor was very scary. And if you didn't do it, you'd be in trouble.

And the kind of examination that we're going through now, you know, didn't always happen. It is not unusual for there to be reexamination of journalism.

My good friend and coauthor of "Elements", Bill Kovach, says: every generation invents its own journalism. Now, it doesn't do that continuously. There are moments where we examine it more thoroughly than others. Nineteen forty-seven, at the birth of – at the end of the war – television was about to come on. We had an exercise that's called the "Hutchins' Commission", where a series of intellectuals tried to identify the responsibilities of the press. The work that Bill and I led at the end of the twentieth century, right around 1998, 1999, 2000, we re-created some of that,

and that led to the book "The Elements of Journalism," which has had an impact. So, you know, a quarter of a million copies or more around the world, many, many languages, 30 languages, where we broke down. We did this analytical, elemental approach. We're going through that kind of reexamination now.

This kind of reckoning – a lot of it over race and default culture, questioning things that I honestly think that in sophisticated newsrooms, both-sideism and false balance are concepts people know. And no one is running out and doing "he-said-she-said"-journalism on major stories, whether it's on climate change or on a number of matters.

You know, we've gone beyond that. However, I think it's important to note that, and even actually the platform companies are wrestling with this because there's a lot of false information on YouTube and Facebook and they're trying to figure out how to reckon with that.

I think that where we are in the arc of a story makes it. You can get beyond this "he-said-she-said"-journalism more or less [depending on] where you are the arc of the story.

What do I mean by that? On climate change, after 40 years of research, it is easy. And if you read major publications, you will see. They will say: "Climate change is real. It is human influenced". I mean, what Trump says about this is, you know, is disproven. But it took time to get there. On a story that is fast-moving, where the information has only been out there for a week or less, and there's a lot more uncertainty, you will see more "he-said-she-said"-stories because we don't have as much certain knowledge on the risks of mail-in voting in the United States, which the president of the United States is making a big issue of.

Yes, it would be unusual to see a story that quoted him and did not follow this by saying there is no evidence of this fraud that he is talking about. You know, I can't remember, even in The Wall Street Journal, which is appeals largely to conservatives, those remarks are followed by "There's no proof. There's no evidence to support his claims."

So that's a long answer. Journalism needs to change to rebuild trust. It can, but it's very hard and it takes time. And that pressure will come from within and without. I would also say one last thing to a very long answer, and that is that diversity in newsrooms needs to be ideological as well as racial and gender. If it just becomes a matter of making our newsrooms look more diverse, it will fail.

[Holger Wormer] Actually, just before we move a little bit more to two issues specific, maybe, to science journalism, I would like to address another question and add something by myself. So my colleague Holger Hettwer asks: "What effect does the constant fake news accusation from Donald Trump and others has on journalistic self-image and role models?" And I would like to add: "How would you comment on the problem that usually a short lie or just a saying of fake news, well, that just needs one sentence and the debunking of a lie, usually, that's what I tell my students, usually needs maybe 10 sentence. And that's the kind of imbalance that is not so easy to win. So, what do you think concerning these complex questions on the fake news?"

[Tom Rosenstiel] Yeah, so, I mean, I think it's important, you know, the whole notion of fake news, the vocabulary around that, the accusation, it's not designed to get people to believe what's fake. It's designed to get them to doubt.

And in everything, it's designed to increase the sense of nihilism. And that doubt works very well for an authoritarian leader to say: "This is all fake. You should believe me. We have this relationship. I talk to you. You like me. The way I talk, the style, you know, I'll tell you the truth."

And that's why I think that, you know, sort of the fractured syntax of some of these folks is very powerful. It's an app. It's: "They talk like me. They think like me." It would be hard to imagine, you know, Franklin Roosevelt and with his upper-class accent kind of working in this kind of environment.

The second thing I think to understand is, yes, in a fast-moving environment, false information moves very quickly.

You know, that old saying "A lie goes round the world before the truth can get its pants on." And Google has even said that, during fast-moving events such as school shootings, which we have an alarming number of in the United States, they are going to change their search algorithm so that what they call "recency" – or new information – is not actually elevated the way it normally would be, because they know, and they've seen, that lies are much easier to surface and surface much faster during breaking news events, whereas organizations like The New York Times or, you know, other American news outlets covering these things take much more time to publish because they have to check their facts.

On the other side of the scale, while lies move fast and fake news and the accusations of fake news create doubt, facts have a staying power. They linger. They are. They don't go away. They stick around for years. Lies do not. They tend to fall apart. They need the context of a certain leader. So that's the advantage – come time, they will be out. You just don't know when, how long time is. But, you know, as we move away from journalism toward a writing of history and then a second draft of history and a third draft of history, we get closer to the truth. What will it help us in our own lives? That's a hard thing to say.

Martin Luther King says: "The long arc of history bends towards justice." And I would say "The long arc of science bends towards a more accurate knowledge of things." And journalism, which is not science, is, you know, a rough craft, that's part of that.

[Holger Wormer] However, there are a lot of scientific myths, for example, concerning vaccination or other things which, well, stick for a long time.

So I'm not so optimistic about that.

[Tom Rosenstiel] Yeah, well, I you know, as if we're going to get into science.

I mean, one of the things that has to happen is ... by my unscientific view, science should actually create a discipline about science communication, where we teach a group of scientists – not all scientists will be good at this – but we teach a group of

scientists to understand how to speak to a general population. A good deal more than we do now, that that becomes a real discipline. That I could get a degree in that. Maybe you have that in Germany.

[Holger Wormer] We don't really have that, but actually, there are some people in these circles just working hard on it. So this may be a little bit good news for them.

But let's stick for a moment on science and science communication and science journalism. That's one question: "Do you think that journalism on science has a special significance in democracy? And the reason for this could be that central conflicts of modern societies are debated with reference to science. And science has just become a political and ideological battlefield."

So, is there a special significance of science, journalism or journalism on science in a democracy is the question?

[Tom Rosenstiel] Yes, I think so.

First of all, I think science has – in different disciplines – has a method of arriving at the truth, a language and an approach that is held in common. And so the disagreements over science can be and should be in a spirit that is toward a common purpose, and a little less susceptible to *ad-hominem* attacks, where I'm just gonna attack Holger as a bad guy and that's a way of discrediting anything he might say. I also think that the communication of science by science journalists is a critical element where a large portion of the population – it is one of those things, as I said, where we can enlarge the public square, whether it's ... -Let's just take the weather. Is it going to rain tomorrow or not?

You know, I'm not bringing a lot of confirmation bias to this, I might add, up to climate change, potentially. But I do want to know whether it's going to rain tomorrow. What kind of coat I should wear? I do want to know certain basic things about why this is happening.

[Tom Rosenstiel] You know, why are the days getting shorter? I want to know.

And, you know, and when I get sick, or in my own life, enter some moment where I'm interacting directly with science, I am very open. I think people become very open: "Help me figure out how to get well, Doctor."

It's also extremely important for us to have authoritative science figures whom people recognize, trust and understand. We don't have that many of them in the United States. Anthony Fauci has become a national hero. But most people don't see scientists that they recognize anywhere on television or anywhere else. There have been a few in our public television, but it's is a pretty isolated thing. I can name you 100 politicians who I think are disreputable bums, but I could not name you 100 scientists.

And I've got a college degree. So that's something that I think is sort of a critical intersection. If science is going to – There will always be people who doubt vaccinations.

And partly that is actually an organized, you know, movement that is involved with persuasion.

But the science community is not, you know, has not done a good job of understanding persuasion.

So, yes, it's a special zone and it can actually be a place where we can enlarge the public square and teach ourselves how to understand and embrace facts. If science can be better at this, it can help cure our politics or make it a little better.

[Holger Wormer] I will try to be a good guy now, Tom, you mentioned me as an example for a bad guy. I will try to do otherwise, and I'm very happy that I have somebody in this circle who will be willing just to ask her question by herself. So, it's Cordula Kleidt that I can see. She's in the federal Ministry of Education and Research.

Cordula, could you please give us your question.

[Cordula Kleidt] Yes. Thank you. Thank you, Tom, for your wonderful start of this wonderful [incomprehensible], science and journalism in the digital age. I'm very happy and delighted for your PMA, for your positive mental attitude, which cannot be taken for granted at these times, because the presidential debates showed us really what is at stake and what it all has come to, and how important science journalism is and what you just underlined.

Also, scientists who really are willing to speak to the public. And I think that's what we experience here in Germany, too. We need both. We need a functioning journalism and the scientists to speak up.

My question is, during the Trump presidency, subscription numbers for The New York Times, for instance, have gone up. But the readers of The New York Times reach only a certain group of people.

You mentioned a few things already, but how can the other parts of society be reached? That is one question, and the other question is aiming at the willingness of people, institutions and other figures in society who are willing to fund journalism. That's one question we're thinking about and also why we have a conference like this. It's very difficult for a governmental institution like our ministry to directly fund journalism because what is at stake, it's the independence, which is the most one of the most important aspects.

Do you have any insights on that question?

[Tom Rosenstiel] Yes, again, thank you.

So I think it's very important, particularly as a journalist, to go through this reckoning over objectivity, and how to tell the truth, and what language and vocabulary to use to tell the truth, that they not slip into partisanship out of a misguided idea that "My moral truth is more - more real, more truthful - than a journalistic truth that I might be able to arrive at."

We have that problem at our cable channels. If you see CNN in the United States, it's really become an anti-Trump channel. They're so angry – even more so than MSNBC,

which was, kind of, the liberal analogue to Fox before Trump. The New York Times at times suffers from what more conservative friend of mine calls "Trump derangement syndrome," where they're so frightened and livid at his behavior that even liberals, even liberal friends of mine say, "Man, this is really biased."

I need to go read The Wall Street Journal now to see and then create my own sense of where the plumb line might be between these angry, angry accounts."

So it's very important that we have institutions journalistically that – And, you know, I don't I don't speak German.

My family left there too long ago for me to know any of that stuff. And so, I can't speak to the style of German publications. But, you know, in the United States, where we really embrace this idea of disinterested, nonpartisan media, we're losing that when it comes to national politics.

And that, you know, that is part of the threat. Media are contributing to polarization if they abandon that. We also don't have government funded media much. We have public media. It's very small. There's no tradition like the BBC, our electronic media in the United States, by and large, tend to be more down-market, you know, whereas in Great Britain, you know, people say "Oh, the BBC, that's very elevated. Our newspapers are pretty tabloid and sensationalized." Here in the US, it's very different. Our print media are more elite, more careful, more deeply reported. And that just has to do with history and a lot of other things. It's important that those publications do work that is so thorough that it cannot be ignored.

An example would be Trump's ... The New York Times reporting on Trump's taxes. That was published this week. The reporting was so deep that I think it was an example of facts having an enduring quality. They can be denied on the edges. It could say that it's riddled with inaccuracies or whatever. There's been no real repudiation of that reporting because it's just so thorough.

There are parts of that reporting that go too far. Language in that reporting where I would have said I would have used a different verb there. I think they've let their Trump derangement syndrome get the better of them here and there. But by and large, I think it was an achievement. And that's how journalism will find its way by presenting more information that is so deeply done that it cannot be ignored, even if you think it's imperfect. Imagine – and I'll stop so other people can ask other questions – and I haven't even answered it! But imagine a book that you read, and you think, wow, this a great book. I disagree with the conclusions of the author.

That's the highest compliment to our work of reporting, because you've said I believe the reporting, and I've learned so much that I'm actually able to come to a different conclusion than the author did about some of these facts.

I think he's been unfair. She's been unfair. She's gone too far. That's the ultimate compliment. And we need more reporting that is so rich that we can have that experience.

On funding, I would say this. There is no model for media that will save it. The most important element in the quality of any news organization are the values of the owner, not the structure of the ownership. And so, if you have a good owner who

believes in these things and puts the right people in charge, that can happen in a commercial setting.

It does at The New York Times. It could be a solo billionaire, which happens at The Washington Post. It could be a weird, strange, dictatorial, political magnate, which happens at The Wall Street Journal.

It could be a nonprofit which happens at the Texas Tribune in our country. The notion that there's a panacea structure was never true. There were always – back in the day when media was very lucrative – there were horrible local owners that were private. There were good, enlightened companies that were public, publicly traded. And nonprofit funding, charitable funding, which we have a lot of in the United States, can probably come along and help in areas. You could have funds for investigative reporting or work to cover science or something like that. But covering a civic institution's community, covering the town of Philadelphia, just with civic money: there isn't enough of it.

You need many different... I mean, there's no one economic solution. You're going to need as many revenue sources as you can have. And so the idea that nonprofit is the answer I'm skeptical of, but a profit that also takes in nonprofit and raises money by subject and sells subscriptions and does events and, you know, maybe it comes up with a database that makes them a lot of money.

I think, you know, you just need to be open to as much as you can. That's how commercial media evolved in the first place. It wasn't like anybody said, "Oh, well, we're going to use a classified advertising." They didn't know what classified advertising was, and all of that that economic base just evolved and then it devolved.

[Holger Wormer] Actually, Tom, we have time for one last question. So, we address the different actors who address journalists, scientists, the role of politicians and there was now one question of Henriette Löwisch that was addressing some other actors we have not really mentioned yet. So, the question is, "Would you talk a bit more about the role of the platforms of Google, Facebook, Amazon, et cetera? Suppose they offered to help restore trust in journalism and science. What would be your own big ask?"

[Tom Rosenstiel] Yeah, I don't trust them. I think they do a lot of harm. They do a lot of evil. And they do that because they become invested in their own economic self-perpetuation.

They're too big. And I do not think they are capable of saving journalism. I don't even believe that they believe it. I mean, they may believe it in some vague, abstract way, but I interact with these companies a lot. And when Google says they want to help journalism, it means they, you know, they want to help.

They think they have answers that will help Google. They think their engineers can come up with some things. But if it weren't in Google's economic interest or when it crosses Google's economic interests, they're not interested in it. And the amount of money that they put toward this, which they make sound like it's a lot, is not.

And Facebook, fundamentally, is not interested in this. There are some people in the company who are, but they keep continually losing out in power struggles. These companies are not evil people, but they are, in the end, they will be structured in a way that is not in the interest of a public common square as they entered it.

Part of it is the people who, you know, they do not understand the system that they helped perpetuate. They don't grasp its implications. And when it's pointed out to them what the implications are, they are only willing to accept that to a degree because they are so invested in a set of values that has created this system, that they can't fully abandon it.

They would have to essentially become, you know, Catholics who have become anti-Catholic to arrive at the place that we're talking about, or, you know, Buddhists who decide that they need to become Episcopalians. I mean, it really has to be a repudiation of the things that they deeply believe.

For them to ... there is an element of naivete and sociopathy that is built into the values of these companies and how they make their money. It makes it very hard for them to recognize that what they're doing is damaging to democracy. And they don't. They don't. There is an arrogance about what journalism was and a naivete about what journalism was. And, you know, and I've been dealing with it for 20 years. So, color me not with a positive mental attitude about dealing with the with the platforms. There are great people there. But they always lose.

Hey, thank you so much. That's a very clear statement at the end and well, I've announced a kind of elementary analysis of journalism. Within one hour, of course, we could only address some first elements of this analysis. And thank you so much for this. Tom Rosenstiel, maybe you would be interested to join us in the following lectures, which will continue with a lecture given by Professor Victor Pickard on October seventh, so next week. And all the other speakers announced on the SciCon Website. Thank you very much for your interesting insights in journalism and science and also polarization in American politics. And I hope that we will meet next time, maybe in this virtual conference room or in a real-life working room in Freiburg at the end of November.

Thank you very much. Thank you, all the participants. Have a nice day, Tom. Bye bye. Thank you.

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