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AN EXAMINATION OF TRUST IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIETY

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BACKGROUND: THE IMPORTANCE AND FRAGILITY OF TRUST

It is hard to imagine a society functioning in the absence of trust. From the smallest incident—crossing the street when the light is green—to the most consequential events—a government fulfilling its pledge to pay Social Security—individuals must be able to rely on individuals and institutions to behave in a reliable and trustworthy manner. When trust is absent, chaos ensues. Of course, trust should not be given blindly; authentic trust needs to be earned and renewed (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000).

In some societies, trust has been given quite freely to those in elite positions—indeed, in the totalitarian societies of the twentieth century, leaders like Adolf Hitler or Mao Zeodong were trusted by the masses even when they should have been banished or executed. Throughout the history of the United States, leaders have rarely been afforded blind trust: indeed, the country was founded upon the rejection of the leaders—the King, the ministers, the military—of imperial Britain. Nonetheless, as recently as the middle of the last century, certain individuals (often called wise men) and certain institutions (e.g., CBS News) were seen as trustees: well known, widely respected, and considered to be disinterested rather than partisan (Isaacson & Thomas, 1986; Judis, 2001; Kabaservice, 2004). Large numbers of ordinary citizens turned readily to the ideas and recommendations of such persons. In the era of Jon Stewart (the American most trusted by young persons), Edward R Murrow and Walter Cronkite seem like figures from the distant past.

This assumption of trust in leading personalities and institutions did not survive the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. Different reasons—ranging from scandals like Watergate or events like the Vietnam War to the bewildering number of sources that purport to provide information today—have been offered for the decline of trust. In any event, it is uncontroversial to assert that trust is at a low level in contemporary American society. In poll after poll, most Americans indicate little trust in major institutions, particularly the government and the news media. Even in areas where some trust endures—for example, trust of certain professions, trust of some leaders at the local level—the level of trust is well below that recorded in earlier eras.

We recognize that there are different forms of trust. For example, the trust that family members exhibit toward one another differs from the public trust that individuals give or withhold from political figures or news media. Individuals may also trust selectively. For instance, one may trust Alan Greenspan's views about the economy but not his views about foreign policy. Trust is established in different ways for different persons (e.g., word of mouth, kin relations, analysis of deeds over time) and may also be abandoned for a variety of reasons (e.g., broken promises, new allegiances). In our research, however, we have avoided presuppositions about the ways in which trust should be conceptualized. Instead, we have listened carefully to the individuals whom we have interviewed in order to determine how they conceptualize trust. We focused particular attention on the extent to which they identified leaders of any sort as worthy of trust; and, if not, which institutions, agents, or sources of information merited their trust.

In our initial pilot investigation, carried out in the summer of 2004, we conducted substantial interviews with 50 citizens living in the Northeast (average age: 50). Half of them were leading members of the community; the remaining half were ordinary citizens who were approached at a shopping mall. These subjects confirmed the decline of trust in recent years. We noted a greater regret among older individuals (those above age fifty) and among members of the élite (as compared to ordinary citizens). Intriguingly, we found that individuals typically blame the media for the loss of trust; and yet, at the same time, these informants mention media personalities (e.g., Oprah Winfrey, Tom Brokaw, Rush Limbaugh) as the individuals whom they most trust. On probing, it turns out that some citizens are nostalgic for a

time when certain persons (e.g., the President) and certain outlets (e.g., CBS News) were unreservedly trusted and accorded the status of "trustees." Others, in contrast, favor an environment where partisans state their opinions boldly, and then leave it to the individual citizen to decide which party or person is more worthy of trust.

This initial study raised a whole raft of questions, having to do with the nature and type of trust and mistrust found throughout various sectors of American society; the forces that contribute to feelings of trust and mistrust; the strangely ambivalent attitude displayed toward the media of communication; and the possibly different attitudes toward trust on the part of young persons living in an increasingly digitized environment. With support from Harvard's Center for Public Leadership, we had the opportunity to carry out two modest studies, which are reported here.

STUDY 1: PROBING TRUST ON THE INTERNET

Our initial study had been restricted to middle-aged adults, many of whom lived in the Philadelphia metropolitan area; the interview had focused sharply on the status of "trustees" in contemporary American society. To complement this focused investigation, we devised a broader-based online survey. The purpose of the survey was to secure quantitative data on several issues probed in the original study as well as several other issues of interest. We also sought to explore the impact on trust (if any) of age, socio-economic background, religious orientation, occupation, racial-ethnic background and political affiliation.

Methods

The online survey, entitled "Whom do you trust?," consisted of 10 questions and a short section on demographic information. (The full survey constitutes Appendix A in Pettingill, 2005). The 10 questions were grouped into 2 main categories. The first category required respondents to report trust in various sources using a scaled ranking, a rank-order hierarchy, or a trust / do not trust / irrelevant matrix. The second category of questions was open-ended and required a typed or "free" response.

The survey, posted from April until September 2005, was dispersed using a variety of web-based methods. As an initial step, project researchers forwarded a link to the survey to their network of friends and associates and asked them to do the same. Next, targeted demographic postings were made to cities on Craiglist.org (grassroots, non-commercial website) in the following American cities: Austin, Boise, Cincinnati, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Miami, Minneapolis / St. Paul, Phoenix, Raleigh-Durham, and San Francisco. Younger and more diverse respondents were solicited via targeted postings on thefacebook.com (online community for college students) to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, University of California at Los Angeles, and Howard University. Additionally, the survey was posted on bulletin boards at Beliefnet.org (web-based multi-religious community), Omidyar.net (web-based advocacy and idea network), ivilliage.com (website for readers of *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, *Good Housekeeping*), and C-log (conservative web log hosted by Townhall.com, a web-based conservative network).

To encourage full completion of the survey and further dissemination, we offered entry in a drawing for a cash pride for subject's participation. We also offered up to five additional entries in the prize drawing for each respondent who recommended the survey to a friend who also completed it in full.

Results

Our survey received a total of 726 completed responses from 891 respondents for a completion rate of 81%. Based on the aggregate data received, we decided that the most relevant and revealing analyses should focus on age and political affiliation. In the age category, 47.5% of respondents were under the age of 25, followed by 26.1% from 25-35, 11.2% from 36-45, 11.4% from 46-55, and 3.8% were over 56. For ease of comparison with Study 2, which ran parallel to this study, we chose to compare the under-25s (comprising 48% of respondents) with all ages over 26 (comprising 52% of respondents). The breakdown of political affiliation (self-identified) was 47% Democrat, 20% Republican and 33% "Other." Without the means to assign a political affiliation to the 'undecided' we decided to draw a partisan line and focus purely on those respondents who considered themselves either Republican or Democratic. From this reduced sample, Republicans comprised 30% and Democrats 70%.

In aggregate (regardless of age or political affiliation), the results of the survey reinforce and add clarity to those of the earlier pilot study. The media are not trusted as sources of reliable information regardless of the issue at hand, and there is only marginal trust in journalists and politicians as occupational groups. To our surprise, teachers and scholars topped the list in "trust in occupational groups," surpassing doctors who traditionally are found at the top of such lists.

Interestingly, respondents were loath to name a medium that they found trustworthy, and even when they did, the designated medium was not trusted nearly as well as family members or other close associates. In fact, regardless of the nature of the issue—personal, political, or professional—respondents indicated consistently high levels of trust for family members and friends. Additionally, respondents were much more willing to tell us whom they did not trust than whom they did. Interestingly, this result came not just through the survey itself, but through our attempts to advertise the survey to diverse groups. An experience with Beliefnet.org serves as a telling example.

After setting up an account, we searched for discussion groups that we thought would find our survey of interest and import. Because much of our pilot data indicated that "older" Americans lamented the decline of trust and trustees in America, we announced the trust survey to a group called AGING GRACEFULLY (AG), an over 50 group. Much to our surprise, the announcement for the survey elicited these responses:

> *(1) how do i know you are who you say you are? are you wanting personal information to sell to foreign governments? how can i be sure that you really say what you are doing with the information?*
>
> *(2) Here's a link to the study. I suppose you could contact the people listed to see if this is for real—the only thing that makes me question is the fact they are giving prize money—seems a little hokey, but it may be legit. I'm with you Frocks!*
>
> Our response,
>
> *This survey is completely legit, I promise—though I appreciate your due diligence! Because it is being sponsored by Harvard, there are institutional codes of conduct and confidentiality that we must maintain, which include not disclosing any information about those who take part in the study, and using responses for research purposes only. If you have any questions, feel free to direct them to inquiry@whodoyoutrust.org, or read more about the Professor heading the study at www.howardgardner.com. Thanks!*

met the following counter-responses:

(1) Hmmmm ~ How do we know that you (and others) aren't using Mr. Gardner's name, as well as his prestigious Harvard affiliation as a clever ploy in engaging people like us to take your survey? Apparently we don't! Therefore, I believe it's safe to say you've run across a group of AGers who are not quite as trusting as one might imagine.

*... *just call me a long time skeptic**

(2) Considering the type of medium we are using (the Internet) how can anyone be sure of anything we find here??

The responses above indicate high levels of distrust, as well as skepticism of our (research) intentions, offering of prize money, Harvard branding, anonymity, and lack of accountability on the Internet.

When comparing levels of trust within sources of media, we learned that a majority of respondents favored traditional print to web-based news sources. Relatedly, a large gap was revealed between the trustworthiness of printed newspapers and that of Internet sources. Within Internet sources, the sites of major newspapers were trusted more than "blogs" or alternative news sources.

Despite the consistency of most results across party and age lines, analyses according to our independent variables (age and political affiliation) revealed three surprising results. First, when asked to name their most trusted journalist, both Democrats and Republicans overwhelmingly cited entertainers (Jon Stewart and Rush Limbaugh, respectively), despite low levels of trust for entertainers (even lower than journalists!). However, younger respondents were more likely to name entertainers (Jon Stewart and Oprah Winfrey) as trustworthy, older respondents preferred established journalists (Peter Jennings [since deceased] and Tom Brokaw). Secondly, though the *New York Times* was cited across age and political lines as respondents' most trusted newspaper, differences emerged across partisan lines when looking at the "rest" of the list. Though major papers with a national readership followed the *New York Times* on the lists of both age groups and Democrats, Republicans tended to trust local papers. Finally, though trust in well-known political figures is low across age and political groups, it proves remarkably low for younger respondents.

Discussion

In addition to providing quantitative support for the earlier pilot study, the current study sheds light on whom and what respondents trust in matters beyond institutions and the political sphere. The independent variables of age and political affiliation had subtle effects on reported levels of trust in different fields, but a much larger and diverse sample is necessary to verify the accuracy of these results and expand our analysis to include more variables. Our sample was limited and not representative across age, gender, income, occupation, or party lines. A simple explanation for this result could be that our survey served as a proxy for "trust," and those who answered are indeed representative of those who are trusting of online internet surveys. Furthermore, the profile of respondents indicates that young and Democratic women (who made up a majority of our respondents) are more trusting than other groups, that they have more time to fill out surveys, make up a larger percentage of visitors to the sites where our survey was linked, or were simply referred to our site in larger numbers than others. With a larger and more diverse sample, we may be able to overcome these limitations and draw conclusions about the population at large.

The high level of trust for family and friends regarding a complex contemporary issue raises two important issues. First, why are family and friends trusted over established and professional media sources? Possible answers are that intimacy is conflated with trust, or that respondents trust family and friends "by default" due to the well-established lack of trust in the media. A second intriguing possibility is that many of our respondents may not feel adequately informed, but assume that their family and friends are and therefore trust those family and friends as "opinion leaders." If so, it would be useful to learn what kind of sources the opinion leaders are consulting. Do they consult media sources or are they too deriving their information from other people? Are these various sources disinterested or biased? Are they professional or knowledgeable, or do such considerations not matter?

Though the idea of opinion leaders is intriguing, most respondents answered "none" to the questions asking them to report which sources of media they trusted. This response seems to indicate that respondents are not turning to "opinion leaders," but rather "going it alone": they have formed their "own" opinions on complex issues. Try as one may, the claim that one develops opinions and gathers information solely by her own prowess and is free from the influence of the media does not survive scrutiny (even if one is a full-time investigative journalist). This raises the question of whether the blind are leading the blind, while also supporting a market-based hypothesis of the reported lack of trust in the media. The lack of trust may be a problem of demand (no demand for trustworthy media) as opposed to supply (no trustworthy media available). If the media are not trusted to begin with, they need not earn trust, but simply continue to sell "news" in some consumable form. So, though respondents may be consuming the media and thereby "consulting" sources, they are doing so with the understanding or belief that the information may not be trustworthy.

The criteria that are used to determine trust must be examined more closely. Though we have uncovered whom or which sources respondents trust, it is not clear on which bases this trust is determined. Study 2 sheds some light on this question with its discussion on possible "mental models"; but this study is also limited because it focuses solely on young people. A survey of "trusted" websites may reveal elements of trusts in the virtual sphere. For instance, the presence and popularity of "close-knit" online communities may indicate that intimacy is indeed a key component of online trust. However, the popularity of mega-sites like Google or NYtimes.com seems to indicate that a congeries of factors contributes to trust in a virtual source. It could be useful to disaggregate the different forms of trust manifest in the virtual sphere from those in "the real world." As shown through our experiences with beliefnet.org, virtual exchanges may reveal components that are crucial to establishing online trust in online communities: transparency, accountability, and familiarity (with the messenger). If these components are missing, borders are established in the seemingly borderless world of the Internet.

Although we need not give prescriptions for how trust should be determined, it may be useful to compare defining features of trust in earlier times (see Gardner, 2004)—such as disinterestedness, humility, and expertise—with its prevailing features today in both the "real" world of newspapers, friends, and family, and the "virtual" world of online communities, blogs, and news sources. Comparisons may reveal that trust is conceived of in a drastically different manner today. Though relative trust in the Internet as a source of media is currently low, its use is ubiquitous and steadily rising, making it a force to be reckoned with.

The abysmally low levels of trust for politicians revealed through our survey is nothing new, nor are the low levels of trust reported for journalists. Low levels of trust in politicians could manifest apathy for politics or simply ignorance. Regardless of the reasoning, there is no doubt that democracy suffers when politics is regarded as a farce and journalists as unreliable lackeys. On the positive side, the high level of trust reported for teachers suggests that they are possible sources of intervention. Once we have a more nuanced understanding of the criteria used for establishing and maintaining trust, interventions could be devised for use in classrooms along the lines of the Toolkit, an educational tool developed by the GoodWork® Project.

This survey has confirmed that institutions and occupations once heralded for their trustworthiness are not inviolate. Politicians and journalists have lost relevance as entertainers are increasingly regarded by younger generations as trustworthy, while newspapers and other media have ceded to the opinions of family members and friends. The Internet, though used ubiquitously, is not a universally trusted source of information. What remains to be understood entails another further layer of study. We need to uncover the strategies and criteria used to evaluate the trustworthiness of sources, which may vary based on its presence in the virtual or real world. We need sharper tools to understand the reasons for the primacy of family and friends. And we need to investigate further the apparent contradictions that arise when individuals retreat from the media, yet serve as sources of information for their friends and family.

"Politicians and journalists have lost relevance as entertainers are increasingly regarded by younger generations as trustworthy, while newspapers and other media have ceded to the opinions of family members and friends."

STUDY 2: MODELS OF TRUST HELD BY YOUNG AMERICANS

While surveys are useful for discerning broad trends, they are no substitute for in-depth investigations of targeted groups. The views of trust held by young persons are of particular interest. On the one hand, the degree of trust in well known individuals and institutions has gone down steadily in recent decades; young persons today inhabit a trust environment that would have been difficult to envisage fifty years ago. On the other hand, young persons today have available a whole raft of media, including digital ones, from which they can draw their own conclusions about whom and what to trust, and why. Accordingly, we determined to investigate the conceptions of trust held by young persons aged 15-25. Our chosen vehicle was a series of trust-related vignettes.

Methods

Materials

The vignettes were grouped into three categories–Media-Person (MP), Person-Person (PP), and Media-Media (MM)–depending on the main focus of interaction within each one. For example, the MP category pitted the authority of an individual against a medium (e.g., a friend's version of a story vs. a newspaper's version of the same story). Likewise, the PP category compared the authority of two persons (e.g., a friend vs. a stranger) and the MM category pitted two media against each other (e.g., a local newspaper vs. a national newspaper). The vignettes appear as Appendix A of Benjamin, 2005.

Subjects

The sample of participants consisted of 63 people (18 male, 45 female) in the age range of 15-25 years, from the Philadelphia region. Data were also collected from each participant on affiliations regarding politics (23 liberal, 25 moderate, 15 conservative) and religion (21 religious, 16 semi-religious, 26 nonreligious).

Procedures

Each participant was interviewed using a series of six alternating vignettes from a set of sixteen. The vignettes were read orally to the participants in the form of short scenarios, or dilemmas. Each vignette related to an issue of trust, and was followed up by several questions. The interviewees' responses were written down and sometimes tape-recorded.

Results and Discussion

This study revealed numerous findings across categories, within categories, and between individuals. The most salient of these include: a general distrust of media and celebrities; the prevalence of culling from multiple sources as an information-gathering technique; the importance of independent thinking in self and others; and an ambivalent attitude towards crime and unethical behavior.

General Distrust of Media and Celebrities

Participants voiced their general distrust of media and celebrities across categories and through several scenarios. For instance, asked whether a participant would be more likely to buy a product if it was advertised by a celebrity, many participants volunteered that they would not buy the product because they believed the celebrities were "only in it for the money" and that they could therefore not be trusted. Asked whether participants would support a celebrity-spearheaded campaign against poverty, many also took this opportunity to express their skepticism and distrust of "Hollywood," questioning celebrities' charitable motives, calling them "selfish" and only in it "to benefit their careers." Others claimed that "celebrities endorse things more for show" and that "stars are [unjustly] glorified today."

Participants also used the MM category to vent their distrust in the media, including: print ("newspapers are more entertainment than anything"), online ("anything digital can be altered"), and television ("it's all biased"). One participant stated that "Americans are drawn to dirt" and blamed the media for sensationalizing headlines in order to lure customers. Another said that she just doesn't take anything as "straight fact."

Culling as an Information-Gathering Technique

Another popular cross-category finding revealed that many people get their information by culling from a variety of sources, media and otherwise. As previously noted, several participants described their technique of using many different sources to get the most well-informed perspective on a particular topic. One participant, for instance, said that she believes "all newspapers are biased" because they all have "some backing"; accordingly, she never reads just one newspaper or watches just one television news program. Instead, she "pulls from many sources to get information" and will be more accepting "where they are overlapping." Likewise, she will watch CNN and Fox News to hear opinions from both sides of the political spectrum. Others went a step further than combining different news sources. They either shunned domestic news sources altogether, preferring instead to get their information from foreign newspapers and television programs, which they claimed to be "less biased," or they simply relied on news aggregators, such as RSS, Atom, and Google for quick, relatively objective information. These aggregators gather news stories and headlines in a single web-based location according to the user's preferences.

Independent Thinking

Another finding across categories was the desire among participants to be independent thinkers about key issues in their lives; furthermore, participants also valued those who were independent thinkers themselves. The latter finding was most evident in participants' responses to a particular scenario dealing with a coworker's arrest. At first the participants were only told that their coworker, whom they did not know very well, was arrested for an unknown cause. Most participants answered that they might be a little more wary of their coworker, but that they would like to give them "the benefit of the doubt." The participants were then told that the reason for arrest was because their coworker was protesting political causes. Upon learning this new information, nearly all participants became less wary of their coworker

and quite a few went so far as to say that they trusted and respected their coworker more because of this arrest. Why did participants hold this person in a higher regard? Many cited "freedom of speech" and "honesty" as key reasons, while others said it was because the coworker "had conviction," "stood up for their [sic] own beliefs," and "didn't just blindly accept opinions."

Along with respecting independence in others, many participants also stated the importance of independence of thought in their own decision making. This finding emerged through several scenarios. One scenario asked participants how they would decide to vote on a key issue—from information they researched themselves or from the opinions of a friend's parents, who happened to be experts on that particular issue. All participants responded that they would vote for the side that their own research supported, trusting their own findings over simply following someone else's. Asked whether or not a participant would buy something based on a celebrity endorsement, many said that they had no regard for the celebrity and would prefer to make up their own minds about the product. What's more, when told that a newspaper had criticized the celebrity's product for its high cost and low quality, participants still said that they would not listen to the papers, preferring instead to come to their own conclusions. Lastly, participants expressed their desire for independence of thought when asked whether or not a common link of friendship between a roommate and the roommate's friend (who is unfamiliar to the participant) would influence their judgment. In this case, most participants would disregard the common friend and make up their own mind about the roommate's friend.

Ambivalence Towards Crime and Unethical Behavior

In this rather disturbing finding, participants often had trouble defining "severe" transgression: they were willing to pardon embezzlement and deceit on the grounds that these actions didn't physically harm anyone and were therefore not considered to be severe offenses. In one scenario, the fact that a neighbor had apparently embezzled money was not enough to deter half of the people who answered the question (10 out of 21) from asking the neighbor to feed their dog while they are away for the weekend. Participants reasoned that the crime was "not severe enough," and was "not the same as animal cruelty."

Differences Within Categories

Within the MP category we found that most participants preferred and trusted their friends, rather than the media, as a source of information. For example, out of the 36 people who were asked to whom they would turn when choosing a movie to rent, 27 people said they would go with their friends' recommendation, while only 9 people said they would listen to the critics (who represent the media). Many stated that they would simply trust their friends' judgment over the critics, while others figured "if [they're] friends, [they] must share similar interests."

Within the PP category we found, surprisingly, that participants were split on their trust of a relatively unknown person. This finding is demonstrated by responses to a dilemma that asked participants to decide if they would let a relative stranger who lived in their apartment complex take care of their dog for a weekend while they were away; the alternative was putting the dog in a kennel. Out of the 31 people asked this question, 15 said they would ask the neighbor and 16 said they would rather put their dog in the kennel. Furthermore, opinions were divided on the appearance of the neighbor—ome people felt that this was a decisive factor (generally, older or middle-aged people, females, well-kempt, and those with pets / families of their own were considered more trustworthy), whereas others felt that one can't judge a book by its cover.

Another interesting finding came from within the MM category. When buying a piece of technology such as a cell phone, participants were split between using a single reliable medium or a majority of media sources. In this case, out of the 33 participants asked the question, 14 chose the reliable source, 13 chose the majority source, and 6 chose either a combination of sources or neither (preferring instead to talk with friends or evaluate the phone in person).

In the MM category we were also surprised to find that many participants used the internet, but few read or knew of informative blogs. Age was a variable, as those participants over twenty were more aware of blogs than those participants under 20. Even in the over-20 age category, only a small percentage of people took the blogs seriously.

Another surprising finding within the MM category was the greater trust expressed by participants in local papers versus national papers. Out of the 21 people posed the scenario, 10 trusted the local paper, 6 trusted the national paper, and 5 trusted either a combination of the papers or neither of them, preferring to go to other sources—whether media, family, or friends—for their information. Why trust the local paper more? Participants gave reasons such as it "deals with the community," "there are not as many constraints," "it's more specific," "it directly affects people," and it is "unbiased."

Individual Differences

The split-answer scenarios revealed several age-related differences between individuals, with "older" participants referring to those aged 20 years and older. For instance, older participants were less likely than younger participants to trust an unknown neighbor to take care of their dog while they were away for the weekend. Older participants were also less likely to trust the neighbor after learning of the neighbor's potential involvement in an embezzlement scandal. Older participants, however, were more likely to trust a local paper over a national paper.

It is worth noting here an "immature" or "novice"" mindset associated with some of the participants' answers. This mindset can be characterized as uninformed, influenced by friends' opinions, celebrity-oriented, and majority-rules. The participants exhibiting these characteristics tended to be younger (19 and under), but the mindset is by no means limited to younger persons.

There were also several non-age-related differences between individuals. When it came to judging people based on nonviolent crimes, for instance, nonreligious persons were less judgmental than religious persons. In another example, when deciding on which source(s) of information to consult before buying a technological product, liberals were more likely to choose reliability of a source over a majority of sources. Nonreligious persons were also more likely to choose reliability over majority.

Mental Models

Although we were dealing with a small sample, we were able to identify a number of distinct conceptualizations of the trust process.

1. Knowledge-based

a. Professionalism

Participants of this mindset trust organizations, publications, and individuals based solely on the fact that they are either well-recognized in the public sphere or are seen as authorities on certain issues. This type of trust can be seen as a blind faith in professionalism. Quotes indicative of this mindset include: "I trust the critics because they are trained;" "I trust the critics' opinions because it is their job;" "I trust national

newspapers because they have to be prominent for a reason...and they attract the best writers;" and "I trust professional writers because they must be working for a prominent newspaper for a reason."

b. Elective ignorance
Elective language involves an explicit statement that one avoids the media deliberately. Participants who exhibited this mentality tended to say either, "I don't read the news," or "I don't care about the news."

c. Information-seeker
Unlike those who exhibit elective ignorance, information-seekers base their trust on the information they have gathered from a variety of sources; this information allows them to make an educated decision. As one participant noted, "You don't have to like it, but you're not helping yourself by not being aware of what's happening."

2. Person-centered
a. Self-promotion
One who has a self-promoting concept of trust will put faith in something only if it works towards advancing one's own interests. For instance, when asked to imagine themselves as high school athletes being recruited for a college sports teams by a corrupt coach, some participants stated that they would be willing to disregard the coach's transgressions if it meant furthering their own athletic careers.

b. Neutral
Neutrality of person-center trust is opposed to the goal-ordered nature of self-promotion. The former stance implies that although individuals may relate hypothetical events to their own lives, they are doing so in order to understand the situation better rather than to advance their own interests. People of this mindset tended to answer questions with personal anecdotes related to the scenario being posed at the time.

3. Other
a. Primacy
Participants exhibiting primacy treated the first information they encountered as being true. As one participant explained, "I internalize what I hear first as the truth;" and another, "I judge based on first impressions."

b. Contextualization
One who contextualizes bases her opinions on contingencies and never really takes a firm stance on the issues presented in the trust scenarios. Oftentimes answers will begin with, "It depends...."

While each mental model is legitimate on its own, many people were found to be amalgams of several styles. This reinforces the finding that participants tended to pick, choose, and combine information from a variety of sources.

Limitations of the Study

The most obvious limitations of this study were related to its sample – small, confined to the East Coast, and containing little socioeconomic diversity. A broader sample would yield more accurate and representative results. In future studies, one would also want to vary the methods of inquiry (i.e., methods other than interviews using scenarios) and to standardize the scenarios so that they could be used appropriately with different groups of participants.

Implications for the Understanding of Leadership

We began our study with the assumption that societies require trust but with the expectation that traditional leaders—persons and institutions—no longer are regarded as worthy of trust by many Americans, and most especially, by the young. All three of our pilot studies have confirmed that leadership, as traditionally conceptualized, holds a tenuous position in American society today.

While we lack empirical data on this issue, one can develop three quite different lines of analysis. Traditionalists hanker for the time when select leaders and institutions indeed merited trust; they would like to return to the America of the 1950s, (or, indeed, of the 1650s!) Modernists or post-modernists might contend that the notion of certain select leaders and institutions is in itself anachronistic. Putative leaders are simply masking their power and prejudices; society is well off to abandon belief in the inherent trustworthiness of any entity. Instead we should encourage all participants to state their positions as strongly—perhaps even as extremely—as possible, and let the best policy emerge from debate or from sheer market forces.

"New forms of leadership, suited to contemporary society, educated in and comfortable with the new media, yet adhering to timeless values of integrity and openness, are required for our time."

According to a third line analysis, to which we are sympathetic, traditional views of leadership are not likely to return, but this does not justify the cynicism of the latter "post-modern" group. Nor does it suffice for individuals to delude themselves into thinking that friends or relatives will necessarily be more trustworthy than the media institutions and personalities that they have rejected. New forms of leadership, suited to contemporary society, educated in and comfortable with the new media, yet adhering to timeless values of integrity and openness, are required for our time. These new forms of leadership are likely to emerge from "bottom up" sources, and to require new forms of validation; more than ever, trust will have to be earned and re-earned continually, rather than simply ascribed. Yet the properties that have characterized the most effective and respected leaders of the past will continue to mark our leaders of the future (Barendsen & Gardner, 2006).

NEXT STEPS: A FOCUS ON YOUTH

As a result of our studies thus far, we have confirmed general trends about the decline of trust; identified the media as key battle grounds for trust; and begun to tease out some of the conceptions of the trust process that are held by young persons. At the same time, our studies are small-scale; they do not yet involve a representative sample of the population; and they call for much deeper and more sustained inquiry into the models of trust and how they actually play out in varying circumstances. Accordingly, we have identified four priorities for study in the future.

l. Enlarge our sample. So far our in-depth studies have been restricted to a convenience sample—individuals in the Northeast of the United States. While our survey was available universally, our sample was skewed toward individuals who are younger, more liberal, and more urban. We need to form alliances with organizations that have greater access to under-studied populations.

2. Probe the models held by young persons. We need to determine how entrenched these models are; whether youths simultaneously hold conflicting models; and whether certain models correlate with independent variables like age, degree of education, region of the country, degree of religious identification and the like. Only a larger sample, approached with more refined measures, can yield answers. And only if we have answers can we begin to design tools appropriate for various populations.

3. Proceed beyond assertions to actual behavior. It is valuable to know how young persons conceptualize issues of trust. But if we are to intervene meaningfully, we need knowledge of how trust operates in the actual practices of these persons—for example, how does it affect their decisions about controversial issues, community service, the purchasing of goods, or voting? Ethnographic studies are one way to secure this information. Given our finding that teachers enjoy a high level of trust, one promising tack involves collaborative work with teachers who assign research topics—for example, preparation for a debate. If the topics are judiciously determined, and the range of human and digital sources are specified, it should be possible to secure authentic information on the ways in which, and the extent to which, difference sources of information are culled, evaluated, trusted, or discarded.

4. Proceed beyond research findings to practical interventions. While the research agenda is important and fascinating, the ultimate goal of this line of work is practical: to find ways in which authentic forms of trust can be established and maintained in the society. Ultimately, such efforts will require programs whose precise form cannot at this time be anticipated. Nonetheless, a goal of the current phase of research is to begin to think of the most promising approaches and programs. In this regard, we will be able to draw on our experiences with the GoodWork® Toolkit: an instrument that we are currently using in secondary schools to help students think productively about ethical dilemmas that arise in school and at the workplace (Fischman & Barendsen, 2005). Though quite new, the Toolkit has already elicited considerable interest among students, parents, and educators. It would be straightforward to expand or revise the Toolkit so that it incorporates issues of trust. We are confident that judicious use of the Toolkit will help young people to realize the importance and complexity of judgments about trust, induce them to become more thoughtful about their decisions, and encourage them to work with individuals and institutions that truly merit their trust.

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