

Corporate Media Bust Your Trust

Ross [00:00:28] Welcome to Renegade Inc. The relationship between the media and its audience is driven by only one thing - trust. But that relationship today is strained because much of the mainstream or corporate media still think that they have a monopoly on the truth. The indomitable 24 hour news cycle was launched so broadcasters could continue to control the narrative. But social media has broken its grip and also raised fundamental questions about impartiality and reliability. So where next for those global media organizations whose figures are plummeting and whose audience now have greater options to find out what's really going on?

Ross [00:01:19] Joining me to discuss how the mainstream media has managed to betray the trust of the people that it should be serving, is the journalist Anna Brees, and Professor of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London, Des Freedman. Welcome to you both. Des, when we think about the media, it's easy to sit here for half an hour and slam the mainstream media. But when you really think about it, it takes two to tango because without an audience, without a willing audience, the media wouldn't have the kind of power that it's still has today. How do you begin to unpick that relationship between a media that has lost a lot of trust, a lot of credibility, and the fact that an audience still goes and still feeds at that trough, if you like?

Des Freedman [00:02:00] Well, I don't think they have the same levels of power. I don't think it's an equivalence between the power, particularly of individual consumers, viewers. YouTuber's is and so on, and what I still see is a very residual power of the media itself. So the best way of unpacking that is immediately, I think, to acknowledge that there remains a series of institutions, both very established ones and also some new ones that together collectively, they still exert an enormous influence over society. And it's not that surprising that given what is made available to people, audiences will still, you know, pick up on particular programs on content if they are not provided with the opportunity to have that same level of influence.

Ross [00:02:39] Is it the fact that mobile devices, smart devices, all the rest of it, are now so prolific that you can fact check this idea of first screen, second screen, that you can actually start to unpick some of these bigger narratives that are coming out of the established players?

Des Freedman [00:02:53] Well, you could do lots of things now. Technology has allowed us to be that much more active, combative, so we can all be media. But is that what happens? Do people have the resources, the time, the confidence? Are they listened to? Are they in themselves going to have the confidence to tackle what I see as really powerful voices? Fact checking is a possibility, but most people don't have the capacity to continually fact check. And to be honest, they still leave it to established institutions.

Ross [00:03:23] And knowledge, hungry time, poor people - by osmosis, if you like - just put that on. It runs in the background. It's wallpaper, but it does have an effect. Is that the point?

Des Freedman [00:03:33] Certainly, there is a level of osmosis, but even when they actively seek out alternatives - if they're turning to social media - it doesn't mean that they're

automatically able just to protect themselves from established voices in this country like the BBC and some of the dominant providers. It's still the case that through social media, it's the established legacy players who provide most of that content.

Ross [00:03:56] It's interesting that you use the word 'protect' because you said people could protect themselves against these legacy voices or the established players. Why protect?

Des Freedman [00:04:04] Well, I think given that there is this wider distrust of major institutions, there is this desire that people should be able to carve out spaces for themselves that will make sense of their own lives. And that's one of the biggest critiques we have of mainstream media, is that it doesn't actually reflect back on people's lives. It doesn't look like the audience. It doesn't sound like the audience. It doesn't have the same accent as the audience. And so there's this sort of instinct, which is we need something that's different. And therefore, I think there is a level of protection. Of course, audiences are also seen by regulators, by politicians as very vulnerable, as children in need of protection. But that's not how I see audiences. I see audiences, as people who really would love to be able to offer an alternative. The question is, do they have the resources to do that? And to speak back to power? I would just love the audience to be much more in control. It would be noisy, it would be messy, we would have to think about how we deal with some of the unacceptable voices around racism and so on. But that would still be a better position than just accepting that other people are deciding for us.

Ross [00:05:08] As a former BBC lifer - you could have been. You could have been there for a very long time. Anna, why did you leave? And do you recognize some of what Des is saying about the patronising aspect or the patronising nature of mainstream media?

Anna Brees [00:05:22] What I don't hear a lot is how much time journalists have to respond and how news is produced. If you're producing content, you know, as I was at ITV and BBC, you're doing the three breakfast bulletins - we were doing mid-morning bulletin, the lunchtime bulletin, six o'clock and then the late news, you haven't got a lot of time to research. So when these stories come in from the public - those fantastic stories that need exposing that everyone else is talking about...

Ross [00:05:45] An example, all of them. What would that be? What sort of thing?

Anna Brees [00:05:47] All the time you used to get people calling in, you know, this situation that I found myself in at work, for example. They would basically be some kind of victim of injustice or abuse in their workplace or where they live. We didn't have the time to say, right, let's take the details, let's do all the research that we need to do, because you have to be confident in a story if you are going to publish it because obviously, legally, you are going to get into trouble. So invariably, you didn't do it. So 80 or 90 percent of the stories that I would produce would be press release based. So there would be communications departments who would send press releases because it was easy and quick and it was low risk. It was low risk. And the other thing is, it's horrible to say, but those on the news desk would take calls. And if it was a professional or the story had been validated by a professional, then we would potentially look at a story and we'd like to get an exclusive. But if you look at the media, the mainstream media, which I call the old media, how many exclusives are we getting. The Sunday Times did one about Boris Johnson's affair, the

touching on the knee - alleged. It's very rare that we get any kind of exclusives coming out from the media because they are having to use content very quickly. So I did want to make that point. So that's very important. So you did not have the time. And I'm working on Twitter now and lots of people contacted me with exclusive stories, with evidence. And it's going to take me for one story, probably two to three weeks to get to a position where I can publish. So I'm not going to make any money from that. It's going to take me a lot of time. And I just don't think that's the way news rooms are set up, we are getting the stories that matter to the people because of that.

Ross [00:07:22] But there is also a patronizing element to this, isn't there because if you are copying and pasting a press release from whichever organization, and then just feeding it to the public as routinely as you're doing - six, seven or eight times a day - no wonder people are watching it and thinking, well, there's a huge disconnect between what these people are saying in this glitzy studio and what I'm experiencing on the ground?

Anna Brees [00:07:43] I guess journalists can be very patronizing. The power gets to you. You come into these people's lives. And I always thought to myself, you know, I'm in your home. You know, there was a chap who was dying of cancer and he couldn't get the cancer drugs, for example, because the NHS would only pay up to thirty two thousand pounds a year for these cancer drugs. And I come in and I'm with that family for an hour and then I leave and I put that story out there. I don't get all the voices and I don't hear the impact it's had on his family. You know, everyone involved in that story, there are so many different voices which we now have on social media. So I wasn't patronizing when I worked in television. I certainly hope I didn't come across like that. But I wasn't with these stories for very long. I wasn't there interviewing these people for a long time. And I'd talk to them for five minutes and I'd take out a 50 second soundbite. So that was my choice and my decision. And I produced a one minute 30 edited TV news package that was very much my interpretation of the story. And a lot of the time I copied people and I think they'll find a lot of mainstream media journalists feel safe when they see other mainstream media journalists doing the same thing thing. I think because a lot of it's being scared to be different. And I think there are a lot of journalists out there at the moment who do feel that they're not representing the public and that the news they're producing is basically fed from these people with money, you know, communications departments, press releases. They're the ones that have got the time to develop these relationships of trust with the mainstream media and provide this ever flowing resource of news because they have to produce content quickly.

Ross [00:09:06] Not only then have we got a time-poor audience who put this stuff on and just let it into their homes and they're not protected by it. But also, we've got the monied lot pushing stories in and also a bunch of journalists who are suffering from groupthink. How do you begin to unpick this?

Des Freedman [00:09:25] There's a combination of individual and structural factors, if I can put it like that? So certainly I don't put the blame on individual journalists. I don't particularly think that's helpful - maybe sometimes. But most of the time they're dealing with pretty difficult circumstances. But you have to acknowledge the fact that journalists, increasingly, are not that representative of the wider society. So we had recent research that showed there was a vast overrepresentation of journalists and editors who were educated at Oxbridge and went to private school - you know, massively overrepresented. That actually is a real

structural constraint on what they think is important. We know about politics at such an explosive, volatile time in the world. Politics is still seen as this thing that happens in one square mile around parliament and maybe sometimes around the city when it broadens out to economics. And that's it. And I think the understanding or the misunderstanding of what was going on that led up to Brexit, you know, the inability - that's something that was happened in the UK as well as with the election of Trump - to really think of what is happening to the ordinary lives outside these bubbles. That is difficult for journalists when those aren't their lives to do that. So I'm going back to what Anna was saying, what the journalist Nick Davies called 'churnalism' - the idea that you're constantly repurposing public relations output - you're also facing horrendous deadlines across different platforms at the same time as you have a wider media system that frankly is much more interested in reproducing established narratives and stories instead of challenging them. All of that is quite an explosive mixture that just does not serve audiences well.

Anna Brees [00:11:00] What I would also say is that journalists aren't doing research in their own spare time and their free time. So I've seen a lot of journalists talk about the Westminster paedophile ring now being nothing to see here kind of thing because of what happened with Carl Beech. None of them were there reporting on the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in March, where there were about four senior police officers saying that they were told to keep quiet should they encounter anything to do with a VIP paedophile. So this story just did not get out. I'm aware of one journalist that was there every day. He wasn't getting paid as he had been publishing on Twitter. But generally there was very little presence at that independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in March from any of mainstream media organizations. And the testimony's on oath from these senior police officers talking about how if they saw a photograph of anyone of importance or a politician with a young boy, they were told to keep quiet. So the journalists that I have challenged and said, well, you know, you've said that the Westminster paedophile ring, you know, basically implying that Leon Brittan and everyone else is in the clear and that there's nothing to see here. So, I say, we'll have you looked at these testimonies from IICSA they get angry. This is a problem I do have with journalists when I present them with information. Well, look, there is another story out there that you haven't been presented on your press release or from your editor. Will you look into it and on the whole, what I find is they get angry and they don't like being challenged and criticized, even though that's what they do every single day.

Ross [00:12:31] Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we talk more about the loss of faith in the corporate media with Anna Brees and Professor Des Freedman, let's have a look at what you've been tweeting about in this week's relegating index. First up, we've got a tweet from Majid in reference to the BBC reversing the decision to censure Naga Munchetty. 'Make no mistake, this is a result of public outcry alone. Common sense may have finally won, but the BBC and its executive complaints unit need to seriously get their act together. Racism is a matter of fact, and it's wrong, plain and simple'. What's your take on it?

Anna Brees [00:13:07] I have no take on it because I don't have a license and I don't watch it. I don't have an opinion on it at all.

Des Freedman [00:13:14] I don't have the same qualifications, but I'm just not sure how you can be impartial about your own experience of racism. I'm just not quite sure how that works.

Ross [00:13:20] Next from Justin Schlossberg. 'If broadcasters are too afraid to meaningfully challenge the self-regulating billionaire press, then our media system is not fit for purpose'. Next from Mark Curtis. 'Levels of mainstream media bias-propaganda against the opposition now resemble those emanating from straight authoritarian regimes'.

Des Freedman [00:13:45] It's an interesting comment because we always think of state broadcasting propaganda as emanating from elsewhere. It's always, and only, about North Korea or Russia or Iran.

Ross [00:13:55] Or RT? You're on RT.

Des Freedman [00:13:55] Absolutely. And whilst there may be genuine - there are - genuine criticisms to be made, I like the way that it can't apply to the liberal West. Well, how do you insulate an organisation of the BBC from the state institutions from which it emerged and to which it answers?

Ross [00:14:13] And finally, from someone called Anna Brees: 'Some 38 percent of online viewers can imagine not watching traditional TV at all in five years time. YouTube and Netflix now as popular as the top four TV channels'.

Anna Brees [00:14:31] I think that the public is really rising up and understanding the message of new media and how we can take control of our message. You have to remain fresh in this business. So I don't look at the generation such as my mum and dad who watch and love the BBC, I look at my children who don't even know who the BBC are.

Ross [00:14:48] This actually was also a Guardian piece which says young people in the UK abandon TV news almost entirely. And it's indicative of the wider problem that we're depicting here, because those over 65 watch 33 minutes a day. But those who are aged between 16 and 24 watched on average just two minutes a day. And that comes direct from Ofcom.

Des Freedman [00:15:10] That's missing the point. They may only be watching two minutes a day on linear television, but through their parents, through whatever comes up on their feeds, they are not insulated from mainstream news because a vast majority of what comes up on social media - again, thanks to Ofcom - it tells us that it is the BBC, Sky, ITV, the Mail Group and News UK, these are still the dominant news providers.

Ross [00:15:37] Our book of the Week this week is 'Making The News' by your good self. Anna, pitch it to us in a very pithy way and tell us why we should read it.

Anna Brees [00:15:44] 'Making The News' is something I wrote back in 2018 where I had the opportunity to go back to the BBC or ITV, where I had worked, but I realised that there was a new kind of truth out there. Now we all have mobile devices, so we have the ability to produce and publish. And all those voices that I missed while working in the newsroom, I can now empower them and educate them. And it's also about how, you know, you can grow a channel and be your own editor and get your message out there. So we have so many more voices. And it's really also about some of the stories that I've come across which haven't been given mainstream media coverage that have really, truly shocked me.

Joe Brack (video clip) [00:16:21] I'm a member of the committee to support Julian Assange and to try and get him out of the British prison that he's currently in. We're here today at Westminster Magistrates and there's a hearing here on his case management.

Emmanuel (video clip) [00:16:50] I can see that there is no democracy without the information for the citizen and information, honest and full of quality and extensive information. Julian Assange is one of the people to break the wall of silence of information.

Amna Shaddad (video clip) [00:17:08] What it means for freedom of the press is essentially if he is extradited, if he is convicted, then it means that journalists can't do their job. Because what he has done is not anything different to what journalists have done before, he's just used a different platform, a different method for doing it. He's created a platform - WikiLeaks - for whistleblowers to publish materials. And if we let Trump put this guy in jail, if we extradite him, then essentially from then on, other journalists will also be penalized for similarly putting out information that they don't want the public to know.

Cheryl Sanchez [00:17:37] What the UK is doing, effectively, is helping the USA criminalize journalism. Journalism is supposed to be the fourth estate, the one that keeps government responsible and act in the interest of people. Corporate media is now a fifth column, which means they're an asset. They help the government torture journalism and torture journalists and make a case that journalism is a criminal act now.

Joe Brack (video clip) [00:18:07] I think the real negative effect is with the mass media who used to have a reputation for good journalism. I think that's my worry, more, as an independent journalist, the affect of them persecuting Julian Assange has been to create even more independent journalists. And you get people doing blogs, you get people filming things of themselves and posting it. So in a bizarre way, it's been very good for independent journalism because people are turning to the independent journalists and the non-mass media market to get their news.

Ross [00:18:52] So when we look at this problem with the media, ultimately it comes down to one of trust. We talked about this before we started making this programme - this idea of falling off a cliff. It's the Wile Coyote thing, you know, Roadrunner, where there's that couple of seconds before having gone over the edge of the cliff, it looks around and starts to drop. Are we at that point where people start to switch off in droves or start to stop believing that actually what they're seeing on the media is representative of what's going on in their lives?

Anna Brees [00:19:28] I think trust for some people goes very quickly and for other others, it takes quite a long time. And for others, they'll always trust the BBC. Now, for example, my mum said to me today when I was on the train, she said, 'but I love the BBC'.

Ross [00:19:41] How old's your mum?

Anna Brees [00:19:42] She's 73. She doesn't encourage what I'm doing on my campaign, which is really quite anti-legacy media. I love all the words that we use and I'm consistently listening to the different definitions. So we talk about legacy media and corporate media and old media and mainstream media. At the end of the day, it's about I'll believe something if it's

comes from a source that I trust and I will pass on that information. So as a journalist, you're just passing on information, aren't you that you believe to be the truth? And it is so, so, difficult now. And I do worry about the future and a fluid reality where we don't trust anything. And I have people commenting to me on Twitter sending me messages saying, 'how do we know this is true'? They showed me a video of dead children somewhere. And that's a very good question. And I said, I don't know. That's a really, really serious question. So I really would like to see these institutions like the BBC and other news organizations just listen a little bit more to the public and spend a bit more time on these stories. You know, I've sent quite a few to colleagues of mine who are now at ITN and Sky News, and I just don't think they've got the time for them and they're not putting the money into investigating them. I know the Sunday Times has quite a big investigative team. The Sunday Times costs a lot of money - I think it's £2.80. I'd rather pay more and know that they're taking their time and then spending a little bit more time on these stories and not just a moment, which I think they're doing, is still they're stuck in an era where they are just churning out press releases and not listening to the public. And the public are getting very angry. And I think there's a revolt. I think people are rising up and are saying, you're not representing us. This is not a reflection of society. We're not getting the stories out there that we are hearing on social media and they need to listen more.

Ross [00:21:23] Is it the case like bankruptcy, trust in the media happens very gradually over a long period and then all at once? Is there a sort of falling off a cliff moment, do you think?

Des Freedman [00:21:32] I do think the big political events will shake up people's attitudes towards institutions in general. And, of course, the media are, you know, an example of that. So it's not as if it's just this really incremental, very slow change that takes place. Things can happen very dramatically. And of course, that's related to people's direct experiences. And I think that will have happened in relation to climate. It certainly happened in relation, for example, to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, where you had just such a stark gap between the fact that the world's media in the West were supportive of the invasion, but obviously, majority population were not supportive. That forced people to ask a question that forced them all to be really good, critical media students. It doesn't always remain the case. I think that also happened in 2008 with the crash and the recession. People start to ask very big questions about the economy and they also start to ask questions about the media. The media itself hits the headlines because why didn't you guys warn us? You were the ones who are selling us the idea of great bull markets and how consumerism is serving us, when actually, my home is just been repossessed.

Anna Brees [00:22:34] Well, I think BBC's Nick Robinson said that because Boris Johnson has been broadcasting directly to the public, he's accused Boris Johnson of propaganda. And I know Boris Johnson was the first prime minister to launch new government policy on Facebook live. And he's getting millions of views. He's refused to take part in some debates on Sky News. What do you think about politicians broadcasting direct to the public? Well, I've been thinking that they're avoiding scrutiny?

Des Freedman [00:22:56] Yes, I do think they are. I mean, he's doing a Trump. It obviously makes sense. I'm sure he has been well advised that maybe you don't need these people. Also, it's just because actually, what does he gain from giving over his time? Maybe from his own perspective, he's better off just having that unmediated relationship, which, of course,

will be commented on and picked up by the press. This is what Trump did. I think it's a mistake to think that Trump got where he is now through the use of Twitter. Actually, the people who got Trump elected in terms of the media were the commercial broadcasters.

Anna Brees [00:23:28] But you compared Boris Johnson to Trump because he's broadcasting directly to the public. On a good night, Channel 4 News - if you look at the barb figures, get four, five hundred thousand views. Boris Johnson got two million just on Facebook live. That doesn't even count Twitter. Can't the comments underneath be the scrutiny for people?

Ross [00:23:44] Perhaps they are, but I don't think that fits again with most people's experiences of scrolling down through thousands of comments. Maybe that's just me. But I still think, you know, we want journalists to be able to have the opportunity and the freedom to scrutinize power.

Anna Brees [00:23:59] But like you said earlier on, 80 percent of journalists in the newsroom aren't like, you know, most people. I went to a normal comment. They went to private school. They're not gonna ask the questions we ask.

Des Freedman [00:24:08] Absolutely.

Ross [00:24:08] And also, if you follow this logic, then at the Queen's Speech on Christmas Day you should have a journo there - preferably someone from the other side of the tracks that hasn't been to Oxbridge and all the rest of it - saying, 'hang on, mom, got that a bit wrong haven't you. Different?

Des Freedman [00:24:22] There is a difference between journalism of ventriloquism. You know, the queen's speech, for one, this is ventriloquism. Of course, you know, this is what we teach is the theory of fourth estate journalism where journalists should hold power to account. What we also teach is that journalists are not equipped with the circumstances, the resources and the power relations to be able to do this. So they constantly fail. And what they do is where there are challenges from precisely the kinds of unmediated conversations that you're involved with these are then seen as fringe. These are then seen as amateurs. These are seen as the conspiracy people when actually what they're doing is just challenging the status quo.

Ross [00:24:58] And asking very legitimate questions?

Des Freedman [00:25:00] Completely asking legitimate questions. The phrase, 'conspiracy theory', which I do still hear a lot, that has been weaponized against people asking fundamental questions of the way the world is.

Ross [00:25:10] Professor, as we are all media students now - because we are subject to so much media on an hourly basis - give us three questions that we should be asking when we're thinking differently or thinking critically about the media we can see.

Des Freedman [00:25:22] Right, put me on the spot why don't you? Number one: Why does the media look the way it does?

Ross [00:25:28] OK explain that.

Des Freedman [00:25:29] Well, there's nothing natural. We're led to believe that this is the only option. The way the media is organized, whether it's commercial, public service, whatever media system you have, is the result of political decision making. There is nothing natural, not even a technological determinism, i.e. the idea that things will look the way they are because technology develops like that - no, not at all. Even with algorithms, we're talking about humans in particular, relations of power. Question two is absolutely crucial, I think, is what can we do to change it? And the third question is in whose interests does the media operate at the moment?

Ross [00:26:02] As we conclude, is this actually not a time for hope and optimism? Because maybe we need this level of creative destruction within the media to birth the green shoots, the new voices, the new broadcasters. Are you optimistic, broadly, that we're in this position now or do you think actually we're going to have to see a lot more loss of trust for these new broadcasters and journalists to come through?

Anna Brees [00:26:26] I think we've got to remain hopeful. And I think when we look at how the media is changing and look at the direct impact of how society is changing because the media is changing. And is it changing for the better? That's what we ask ourselves. Is society changing for the better? And I think media is so closely related to war, poverty, deprivation, famine, and the success and thriving of society is directly related to the media. I do have a vision of hope, yeah, I do.

Ross [00:26:51] That means we should be asking those three questions, really?

Des Freedman [00:26:54] Absolutely. I mean, it depends who is going to be destroyed in your vision of destruction. If it is the Dacre's, the Rothermere's, the Murdochs and so on, and the Zuckerbergs, then I don't have such a problem with that. If it's just the jobs of ordinary journalists and ordinary broadcasters and technical staff, then I do have a problem with it. I don't want to destroy. I want those jobs to turn into something which is much more serious and actually does the job that that all those people sought to do in the very beginning. Am I hopeful? Yes, because look around you. People are saying 'enough is enough'.

Ross [00:27:24] And some people are doing it.

Des Freedman [00:27:25] And some people are doing it.

Ross [00:27:27] Anna, Des, thank you both very much for your time. That's it from Renegade Inc this week. You can drop the team, a mail, studio@renegadeinc.com, or you can tweet us at Renegade Inc. Join us next week for more insight from those people who are thinking differently. But until then, stay curious.