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**Reith Lectures 2002: A Question of Trust**

**Lecture 4: Trust and Transparency**

**1. Trust and Information**

Socrates did not want his words to go fatherless into the world, transcribed onto tablets or into books that could circulate without their author, to travel beyond the reach of discussion and questions, revision and authentication. So he talked and chatted and argued with others on the streets of Athens, but he wrote and published nothing. (Plato disregarded his teacher's worry and published Socrates' thoughts and conversations anyhow - to our benefit). The problems to which Socrates pointed are acute in an age of recirculated 'news', public relations, global gossip and Internet publication. How can we tell which claims and counterclaims, reports and supposed facts are trustworthy when so much information swirls around us. It is hard to distinguish rumour from report, fact from fiction, reliable source from disinformant, truth-teller from deceiver?

A crisis of trust cannot be overcome by a blind rush to place more trust. Our ambition is not to place trust blindly, as small children do, but with good judgement. In judging whether to place our trust in others' words or undertakings, or to refuse that trust, we need information and we need the means to judge that information. To place trust reasonably we need to discover not only which claims or undertakings we are invited to trust, but what we might reasonably think about them.

Reasonably placed trust requires not only information about the proposals or undertakings that others put forward, but also information about those who put them forward. Gullible people who put their trust eagerly in blind dates, or pyramid selling schemes, or snake oil merchants and other unlikely purveyors of sure-fire magic do so on the basis of patently inadequate evidence about those who make the proposals they accept; they get our pity or derision but hardly our sympathy. We reserve that sympathy for people who cannot judge those who deceived them. If we are to place trust with assurance we need to know what we are asked to believe or accept, and who is soliciting our trust. Here, it may seem, we are in plenty of luck.

There has never been more abundant information about the individuals and institutions whose claims we have to judge. Openness and transparency are now possible on a scale of which past ages could barely dream. We are flooded with information about government departments and government policies, about public opinion and public debate, about school, hospital and university league tables. We can read facts and figures that supposedly demonstrate financial and professional accountability, cascades of rebarbative semi-technical detail about products and services on the market, and lavish quantities of information about the companies that produce them. At the click of a mouse those with insatiable appetites for information can find out who runs major institutions, look at the home pages and research records of individual scientists, inspect the grants policies of research councils and major charities, download the annual reports and the least thrilling press releases of countless minor public, professional and charitable organisations, not to mention

peruse the agenda and the minutes of increasing numbers of public bodies. It seems no information about institutions and professions is too boring or too routine to remain unpublished. So if making more information about more public policies, institutions and professionals more widely and freely available is the key to building trust, we must be well on the high road towards an ever more trusting society.

This high road is built on new technologies that are ideal for achieving transparency and openness. It has become cheap and easy to spread information, indeed extraordinarily hard to prevent its spread. Secrecy was technically feasible in the days of words on paper. But it is undermined by easy, instantaneous, multiple replication and endless possibilities for subtle or less-than-subtle revision. We may still speak quaintly of 'leaks' of sensitive information, as if information could be sealed in watertight compartments and archives. But in fact we live amid electronic networks through which information travels with ease, at almost no cost in time, skill or money. Special regimes for data protection and for penalising breaches of commercial or other specific sorts of confidentiality are needed to retain even limited areas of secrecy. Openness or transparency is now all too easy: if they can produce or restore trust, trust should surely be within our grasp.

But during the decades in which new information technologies have come into widespread use, there has been huge optimism about the beneficial effects of wider and more inclusive transparency and openness. 'Open government' has become a watchword. Those holding public office in the UK are required to conform to the seven 'Nolan' principles. These principles, as many of you know, demand selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. Their common core (leadership, perhaps, apart) is a demand for trustworthiness in public life. Newspapers and activists invoke a supposed public 'right to know'. Freedom of information has become an admired ideal, and freedom of the press is still going strong. We are all admonished to make sure that transactions with members of the public are always based on informed consent. It seems that openness and transparency are set to replace traditions of secrecy and deference, at least in public life. Only 'personal data' supplied by individuals for specified purposes are to be protected from disclosure, and here again technology supposedly rides to the rescue, providing new standards of encryption and hence new possibilities for data protection. Ideals of transparency and openness are now so little questioned that those who 'leak' or disseminate confidential information (other than personal data) often expect applause rather than condemnation, and assume that they act in the public interest rather than betray it.

Yet this high enthusiasm for ever more complete openness and transparency has done little to build or restore public trust. On the contrary, trust seemingly has receded as transparency has advanced. Perhaps on reflection we should not be wholly surprised. It is quite clear that the very technologies that spread information so easily and efficiently are every bit as good at spreading misinformation and disinformation. Some sorts of openness and transparency may be bad for trust.

In fact, our clearest images of trust do not link it to with openness or transparency at all. Family life is often based on high and reciprocal trust, but close relatives do not always burden one another with full disclosure of their financial or professional dealings, let alone with comprehensive information about their love lives or health

problems; and they certainly do not disclose family information promiscuously to all the world. Similarly, in trusting doctor-patient relationships (that's the sort we supposedly no longer enjoy) medically relevant information was disclosed under conditions of confidence. Mutual respect precludes rather than requires across-the-board openness between doctor and patient, and disclosure of confidential information beyond the relationship is wholly unacceptable. I may trust my friends, colleagues and neighbours whole-heartedly, without any wish, or need, to know everything about their private lives - or to have them know everything about mine.

Perhaps it is not then surprising that public distrust has grown in the very years in which openness and transparency have been so avidly pursued. Transparency certainly destroys secrecy: but it may not limit the deception and deliberate misinformation that undermine relations of trust. If we want to restore trust we need to reduce deception and lies rather than secrecy. Some sorts of secrecy indeed support deception, others do not. Transparency and openness may not be the unconditional goods that they are fashionably supposed to be. By the same token, secrecy and lack of transparency may not be the enemies of trust.

## **2. Deception and Misinformation**

I think that deception is the real enemy of trust. Deception is not just a matter of getting things wrong. It can be pretty irritating to be misled by somebody's honest mistake, but it is not nearly as bad as being their dupe. The passer-by who in all honesty provides a stranger with inaccurate directions for reaching a destination or the club secretary who in all honesty sends out notices for a meeting on the wrong date are not deceivers. Nor, irritating as they may be, are those who in all honesty undertake to perform tasks that are beyond their competence. Deceivers by contrast mislead intentionally, and it is because their falsehood is deliberate, and because it implies a deliberate intention to undermine, damage or distort others' plans and their capacities to act, that it damages trust and future relationships.

Deception is not a minor or a marginal moral failure. Deceivers do not treat others as moral equals; they exempt themselves from obligations that they rely on others to live up to. Deception lies at the heart of many serious crimes, including fraud and embezzlement, impersonation and obtaining goods by false pretences, forgery and counterfeiting, perjury and spying, smuggling and false accounting, slander and libel. Deception is also part of nearly all theft and most crimes of violence and coercion: burglars enter houses surreptitiously; spies and terrorists establish bogus credentials, live under assumed names, conduct spurious businesses and form deceptive friendships; murderers often lull their victims into false security and lure them to their deaths. Deceptions may amount to treachery or betrayal. Soviet historians lyingly misrepresented the massacre of Polish officers at Katyn as a German rather than a Soviet war crime; Judas Iscariot falsely played the part of the faithful disciple; Macbeth falsely acted the part of Duncan's faithful vassal. Wolves who wear sheep's (or grandmothers') clothing are not just making mistakes. Nor are card cheats and plagiarists, those who promote false history or scientific fraud, those who write false references for friends (or for colleagues whom they want to shed) or those who corruptly swing contracts, jobs or other favours in the direction of their cronies. Nor are those who hide their conflicts of interest, who promise commitments they have no intention of honouring, or who two-time their partners.

If we want to increase trust we need to avoid deception rather than secrecy. Although some ways of increasing transparency may indirectly reduce deception, many do not. Unless there has been prior deception, transparency does nothing to reduce deception; and even if there has been deception, openness is not a sure-fire remedy. Increasing transparency can produce a flood of unsorted information and misinformation that provides little but confusion unless it can be sorted and assessed. It may add to uncertainty rather than to trust. And unless the individuals and institutions who sort, process and assess information are themselves already trusted, there is little reason to think that transparency and openness are going to increase trust. Transparency can encourage people to be less honest, so increasing deception and reducing reasons for trust: those who know that everything they say or write is to be made public may massage the truth. Public reports may underplay sensitive information; head teachers and employers may write blandly uninformative reports and references; evasive and uninformative statements may substitute for truth-telling. Demands for universal transparency are likely to encourage the evasions, hypocrisies and half-truths that we usually refer to as 'political correctness', but which might more forthrightly be called either self-censorship or deception.

There are deeper and more systematic reasons for thinking that transparency damages trust. We can only judge whether there is deception, hence reason not to place trust, when we can tell whether we have been fed deliberate falsehoods. But how can we do this when we cannot even tell who has asserted, compiled or endorsed the supposed information? In a world in which information and misinformation are 'generated', in which good drafting is a vanishing art, in which so-called information 'products' can be transmitted, reformatted and adjusted, embroidered and elaborated, shaped and spun, repeated and respun, it can be quite hard to assess truth or falsehood.

Paradoxically then, in the new information order, those who choose to make up information or to pass it on without checking its accuracy, have rather an easy time. Positions are often maintained in the face of widely available and well-authenticated contrary evidence. Supposed sources proliferate, leaving many of us unsure where and whether there is adequate evidence for or against contested claims. In spite of ample sources we may be left uncertain about the supposed evidence that certain drugs are risky, or that fluoride in the water harms, or that standards for environmental pollutants in water or air have been set too high (or too low or at the right level), that professional training of doctors or teachers are adequate or inadequate, that waste disposal by incineration or by landfill is safer. Proponents of views on these and countless other points may not heed available evidence and can mount loud and assertive campaigns for or against one or another position whether the available evidence goes for or against their views. As the quantity of (mis)information available rises, as the number of bodies with self-conferred credentials and missions and active publicity machines increases, as the difficulty of knowing whether a well-publicised claim is a credible claim increases, it is simply harder to place trust reasonably. Milton asked rhetorically "Who ever knew truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?". Today the very prospect of a 'free and open encounter' is drowning in the supposedly transparent world of the new information order.

### **3. Information and Informed Consent**

Global transparency and complete openness are not the best ways to build or restore trust. We place and refuse trust not because we have torrents of information (more is not always better), but because we can trace specific bits of information and specific undertakings to particular sources on whose veracity and reliability we can run some checks. Well-placed trust grows out of active inquiry rather than blind acceptance. In traditional relations of trust, active inquiry was usually extended over time by talking and asking questions, by listening and seeing how well claims to know and undertakings to act held up. That was the world in which Socrates placed his trust-and his reservations about publishing. Where we can check the information we receive, and when we can go back to those who put it into circulation, we may gain confidence about placing or refusing trust.

But where we can do nothing to check or investigate sources of information and their credentials we often, and reasonably, withhold trust and suspend both belief and disbelief in favour of cynicism and half-belief. We may end up claiming not to trust, and yet for practical purposes place trust in the very sources we claim not to trust. Where possibilities for checking and questioning supposed information are fragmented, trust too may fragment. Even if we do not end up with a crisis of trust we end up with a culture of suspicion.

So if we want a society in which placing trust is feasible we need to look for ways in which we can actively check one another's claims. Active checking has to be more than a matter of checking that many sources of information concur: reading extra copies of a newspaper or extra newspapers lends no extra credibility. Nor can active checking reduce to citing sources such as well-frequented or favourite websites and channels: arguments from authority, to use the old term, however deliciously congruent with favourite beliefs, establish nothing. In an information order in which 'sources' borrow promiscuously from one another, in which statistics are cited and regurgitated because they look striking or convenient for those pursuing some agenda, in which rumour can readily be reprocessed as news, active checking of information is pretty hard for many of us. Unqualified trust is then understandably rather scarce.

Ought we then to conclude that unqualified trust belongs only in face-to-face relationships, where information is provided directly by people we know, whom we can question and monitor? Certainly direct relationships between individuals-intimate or not-can be good for establishing trust, but they are not enough. We need to place or refuse trust far more widely.

We can place trust beyond face-to-face relationships when we can check the information and undertakings others offer. This is after all the function of informed consent requirements, where consent is given or refused in the light of information that should be checkable. Informed consent procedures have a place all the way from choosing socks to choosing university courses, from getting an inoculation to getting married, from choosing a video to choosing a career. Of course, even if all informed consent were given in the light of good and trustworthy information, those who consent can get things wrong. They may choose flimsy socks and boring videos, they may marry philanderers and embark on university courses with which they cannot cope. There are no guarantees. But informed consent can provide a basis for trust provided that those who are to consent are not offered a flood of uncheckable

information, but rather information whose accuracy they can check and assess for themselves. This is demanding.

Capacities for testing others' credibility and reliability often fail and falter. Sometimes they falter because the information provided is too arcane and obscure. But sometimes they fail because those asked to consent cannot check and test the information they are offered, so can't work out whether they are being deceived, or whether they can reasonably place their trust. So Socrates' misgivings are not obsolete today. It is very easy to imagine that in a world in which information travels like quicksilver, trust can do the same. It cannot. Placing trust is, I suggest, as demanding today as ever it was in Athens.