UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE
BIDEN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY & ADMINISTRATION
STAVROS NIARCHOS FOUNDATION ITHACA INITIATIVE

THE DOOR OPENS BOTH WAYS:

BUILDING TRUST BETWEEN NEWS MEDIA AND GENERATION Z

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Good journalism can make the world a better place and is an underpinning of a free and democratic society. Unfortunately, today, many people, particularly Millennials and Gen Zers, have grown up at a time when journalism has been continually attacked, discredited and almost forgotten—in terms of its traditional form.

As student leaders for the **Stavros Niarchos Foundation Ithaca Initiative** at the University of Delaware's Joseph R. Biden Jr. School of Public Policy, we were granted the opportunity to discuss trust in the media at this year's ***International Journalism Week 2022 by iMEdD: A Matter of Trust***, which was held in Athens, Greece. The conference gave us the opportunity to learn from and discuss with professionals from all over the globe. We were then afforded the opportunity to share with those same participants our *younger* perspective on how media relates to a democratic society and our vision for how the industry can regain the trust of the public.

Going into the conference, we understood that public trust in media was in a downward spiral and that with increased access to the internet, the ability to search

for information independent from major news outlets had become an aggravating factor. We know that it is now easier to reject the advice and knowledge of established experts because access to the internet allows us to conduct our own research and come to our own "independent" conclusions.

To help us hone in on what we as representatives of Generation Z regard as the problem with the media, **John Della Volpe**, Director of Polling at Harvard and SNF Ithaca Fellow, led us through a series of focus groups during which we, along with peers from Aristotle University in Greece, reflected on the current media environment. We agreed that social media news is rife with misinformation and disinformation throughout all platforms and if a consumer isn't careful, they could unknowingly absorb false information, tainting their perception and understanding of current events and history. And while it is true that social media has proven to be revolutionary, and it is our preferred medium for our generation to learn about current events and global affairs—not cable news or traditional newspapers, it has also proven to be a generator of anxiety and overwhelming stress.

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A recurring argument, throughout the conference, was that as a generation we are less involved and less well-read than older generations. However, we reject the notion that we are an apathetic generation, which lacks political involvement simply because we consume information through different mediums.

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This brief overview elucidates themes that emerged during the conference and our response to the opportunities and challenges within each theme. Social media, misinformation, confirmation bias and media transparency were discussed at length throughout the conference. These are at the center of our call to action for both journalists as well as our peer Gen Zers to work toward an ethical, diverse, informative and high-quality news cycle.

CHALLENGES IN TODAY'S JOURNALISM LANDSCAPE

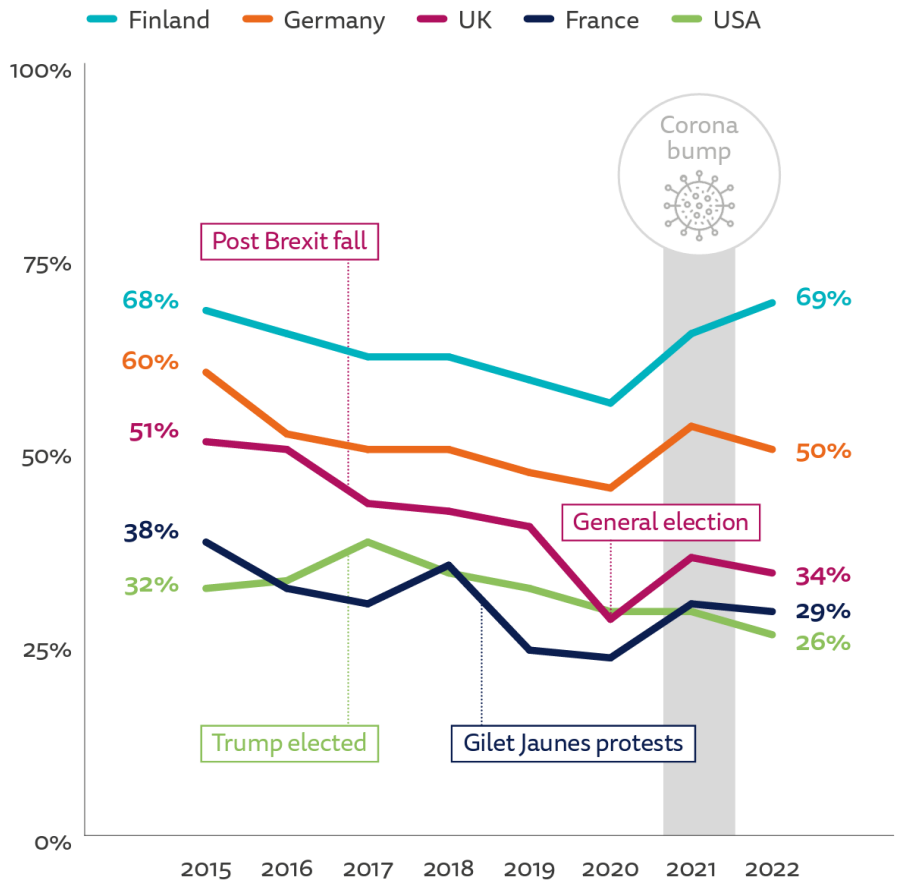
During the conference, *A Matter of Trust's* many in-depth panels and discussions revealed themes, some pointing towards potential solutions between media and media consumers, while others simply described the problems. We honed in on six critical themes that encapsulate the challenges facing today's journalism landscape and provide insight from *our* perspective on how to address these challenges:

- Journalism and the work environment
- Lack of representation in the newsroom
- The rise of open-access social media
- Funding models for traditional media
- Misinformation fears and repairing relationships
- Transparency in the journalistic process

iMEdD **conducted a survey of journalists** between December 2021 and June 2022 and results showed that most journalists believed in the importance of their work, but found the work environment stifling or untrustworthy, driving many toward self-censorship. This echoes the results of a recent **Pew Research** survey, which found that while journalists generally perceive their work positively, 72 percent used negative words to describe their industry including "chaos" and "struggling," indicating an understanding that public perception of journalism is low. In the United States, studies show that levels of trust differ by age, type of news and political party affiliation.

A **Reuters 2022 Digital News Report** shows that the U.S. ranks among the lowest for trust in the news for developed nations at 26 percent. Meanwhile, Finland has the highest trust in media at 69 percent. What causes these divides and how can we work to bridge them?

PROPORTION THAT TRUSTS MOST NEWS MOST OF THE TIME (2015–22) – SELECTED MARKETS



Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C. T., Eddy, K., & Kleis Nielsen, R. (2022). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf, p. 15.

We think that inclusivity plays a role in strengthening trust in the media. According to the **Pew Research Center**, as of 2019 Generation Z has overtaken Millennials as the largest generational demographic on Earth with the majority of them coming

from developing countries in Africa, Asia and South America. This indicates there is an obvious need for the media to be representative of who we see in the media and how stories are portrayed. That can include:

Writing narratives that stem from the voices of the communities being depicted.

Building bridges for paid internships and experiential learning to reduce the class divides that exist within the industry.

Inclusivity breeds accessibility in its ability to add information perceivable to the viewer and understandable to a wide variety of audiences. Implementing inclusivity in media companies' processes and content is critical and should not be regarded as "optional" in an increasingly connected world.

How do we expand access and media coverage intentionally to other areas and broaden a U.S.-centric news cycle? We can recognize the importance of fact-checking and high-quality reporting, while at the same time hiring and promoting journalists with more diverse lived experiences that are reflected in the stories they tell.

Generation Z was born into the age of the internet, and we have spent the majority of our lives engaged in social media and the digital space. While this has brought positive growth to our functioning, we have also become news-avoidant because of the constant influx of negative and sensationalized news; this reality has contributed to a distrust of the news. We have found that media that is transparent, inclusive and engaging not only attracts Generation Z, but leads to a truer depiction of our world.

The way in which news is delivered has played a role in Generation Z's lack of involvement with news outlets. For context:

Generation Z has expressed a strong interest in news formats that are more visual and easier to consume	**Generation Z's attention span only lasts around eight seconds**	**News content must be engaging, typically involving mixed media formatting.**

While there may be concerns over the lack of context or background for these shorter forms, explainers, such as those pioneered by Vox Media, Inc. outlets, have made great progress in meeting these challenges. News delivery formats suited for the Generation Z epistemology already exist and some were explored at the iMEdD conference, such as **Outriders**, an innovative nonprofit newsroom that covers global issues.

We recognize that social media creates challenges to society and to journalists, particularly as it allows for the spread of threats and harassment through "dark participation" to reach individuals working to report on issues and uncover truths. The added danger that social media brings to the industry is an area that needs greater focus as journalists increasingly feel unprotected by their media organizations.

For all of social media's known pitfalls, there are instances where social media is heavily relied upon. The death of Mahsa Amini in Iran has sparked massive protests against the government which resulted in press censorship. Social media platforms such as TikTok have proven vital to the dissemination of information both in Iran and abroad. Therefore, how can we recognize the vitality of social media and at the

same time, **effectively yield these tools** in a manner that promotes journalism with integrity?

The changing landscape of **media funding** plays a large role in the way that media companies interact with consumers and the type of content people are exposed to. Are advertisements an effective form of funding, or do they lead to consumer distrust?

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Currently, smaller news media publications are struggling with a lack of funding. This can lead to lower quantity and quality of journalism with a high degree of integrity. Journalists at iMEdD feel that people are less likely to pay for news subscriptions than they were in the past and that it is no longer a primary revenue source for the future.

We have seen that over the past two decades, local newsrooms in the U.S. have been dying out to the extent that **65 million Americans** live in an area with either one or no local newsrooms. Being unaware of the local happenings negatively impacts communities and democratic life. We wonder: could publicly funded news, on both a local and national scale, be viable? We look toward the statutory corporation model of the BBC as an example.

It was clear at the conference that organizations are working to protect and repair the relationship between journalism and the public. However, misinformation presents a key challenge. According to Pew Research, journalists report high pride in their work and their journalistic integrity but over one quarter have reported on a story that later was found to contain misinformation. Journalists *themselves* don't feel that the newsroom adequately handles misinformation. Despite that, more journalists think it is better to print the *story* with erroneous information because they place greater value

on informing the public of the story than on the nuance of the misinformation the story may contain.

We caution that such a practice may itself contribute to the spread of misinformation by creating additional false equivalencies, leading to the need for organization such as **PolitiFact**, a fact-checking resource based in the United States that investigates claims made by public figures and social media, and provide a truth ranking for such statements. *A Matter of Trust* affirmed the importance of journalism, and the danger journalists often face by providing accurate information.

Addressing the challenges surrounding journalism, media and the public while working toward a news and media model that positively impacts consumers is paramount, especially as we are witnessing democracies in retreat throughout the globe. The word "transparency" is often used in news media; however, without an intentional objective to gain trust, transparency becomes moot. We learned from industry professionals Joy Mayer and Lynn Walsh during the iMEdD session **"How Any Journalist Can Earn Trust,"** that journalists need to maintain transparency on their initiatives for trust and they can accomplish this by including a biography as part of any article they publish.

> ***Increasing transparency in the media can foster a more authentic experience for consumers and begin to eliminate some of the barriers that exist between journalists and their audiences.***

While a seemingly small and simple solution, it is a positive signal to the reader through which we can evaluate the motives and biases of the journalist delivering the information we consume. Increasing transparency in the media can foster a more authentic experience for consumers and begin to eliminate some of the barriers that exist between journalists and their audiences.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The door opens both ways. Journalists are responsible for adapting to younger audiences, but younger audiences also are responsible for adapting to journalism. A scientific analogy may make this clearer: suppose you're a researcher who wants to measure lead levels in drinking water. You collect a sample and take it to the lab for testing. You choose mass spectrometry, one of the most sensitive detection methods available for lead determination. But after running the experiment, you have no idea how to interpret the data. Even though the instrument is top-of-the-line, you cannot make sense of its output, so you cannot know the truth about your drinking water. A similar relationship exists between journalists and the public. Journalists have the access, skillset and inclination to tell stories the public may never otherwise know. But once they tell the story, the public must still rightly interpret it, or the truth gets lost in translation. We want to consider the ideals of journalism, the reality of journalism and specific ways the public can respond to both, all for the purpose of strengthening our democracy.

The journalistic ideal is one of the core values that was repeated throughout the iMEdD conference; journalism is a pillar of democracy. Many journalists at the conference shared harrowing stories of working under authoritarian or illiberal governments and in countries that stifle press freedom. Journalism can be a foil to injustice and corruption. Access to information has changed dramatically since the dawn of the Digital Age. There is no longer a need to wait for the morning paper to hear about the latest in sports, entertainment and politics—social media can feed it directly from the source to the consumer, without journalists mediating between the two. This shifting trend in media preference will only increase as the younger generations grow into adulthood. So, what role can journalists play in the changing media landscape today? How should that shape the public's view of journalism?

The immense amounts of information we receive has increased the need for a mediator. Someone to summarize, synthesize and story-tell for the public: in other

words, a journalist. And as traditional print media and mid-length articles fall out of fashion, journalists need to remediate their work into more appealing and relevant formats. But in the same way a scientist must train their skills in data analysis to understand the instrument output, the public must train their skills of reasoning and critical thinking to understand the flood of data they receive through their devices.

We need to improve our metacognitive skills to better sort *information from misinformation*. There is a larger educational scope to this problem, but we can call on our generation to begin to form effective media consumption habits and learn to view journalism from a critical and reasoned lens. We can broaden our friend groups to include people from diverse viewpoints and backgrounds and discuss journalism together. We can compare notes on current events issues and put our interpretations under rigorous scrutiny and peer review.

Let us rely on journalists for the public good they provide but maintain an understanding of their limits. All the while, we must develop critical reasoning skills to draw our own conclusions.