Credibility of new news: Session 3: Society

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/02/29/credibility-of-new-news-live-seminar-blog-session-3-society/

Polis is hosting an Opendemocracy.net/MacArthur Foundation all-day seminar on the credibility of new forms of news. There is an introductory podcast here. In short, we have gathered a bunch of clever people – journos, geeks and philosophers to discuss what the advent of the Internet means. Read about the first session here and the second session here. This is session three on how society understands the idea of the credibility of new media.

In effect this session is about what standards can you set for media freedom or editorial values such as objectivity. So it was interesting to hear Flemming Rose, the Culture Editor of the newspaper that published the Danish cartoons, insisting on the universality of the liberal idea of freedom of expression. He thinks that something positive came out of the whole controversy – at least in Denmark and Europe. Sales of the Koran soared, for example. And "It has created far more diversity among the Muslim community" he says. He says that there is now a more complex and accurate representation of European Muslims now that 'moderates' as well as 'activist' Immans have spoken out. And internationally Flemming says, it has revealed the real nature of Islamic extremists who continue to insist on censoring what they find offensive. It has confirmed his sense that there is such a thing as a universal ideal of freedom.

He was challenged on this by Tamara Witschge from Goldsmith's University who said that other people had used the issue for political purposes beyond freedom of expression and so the credibility of the newspaper was contested.

Philosopher Anthony Grayling said that one thing that was being overlooked was the loss of the gatekeeper. We could all see the cartoons on the Internet. Now everyone can claim authority or at least a point of view. Grayling said that this puts more of a burden on editors like Flemming Rose to explain their positions. And as someone who believes in the liberal idea of a universal sense of freedom expression, he wanted it defended against claims of exceptionalism made by certain groups.such as Muslims or the Chinese authorities. So when the media stands up against that pressure 'courage becomes credibility".

I suggested that because Internet sites such as Wikileaks (that acts as a platform for leaked data) are not gatekeepers, it could be accused of being irresponsible but ultimately it is a defence of freedom of expression. Is that credibility?

David Berry from Swansea University said that we are really talking about 'credibilities' in the plural rather than a universal standard. There are a series of processes that information goes through before it is 'believed' in different ways. (I like that idea – I think that the more plural sources you have, the more contestation of ideas you get, the more credibility media has. The Internet can do that).

Roger Scruton made an interesting comparison between Samizdat writers in Communist Czechoslovakia and bloggers today. He said that the dissident writers that he worked with and helped to smuggle their work out to the West did not have a normal audience. This meant that they didn't have critics, so much of their work was rubbish. Courageous but not always worth reading…

[The other wise tip from Roger, speaking as one of our better wine critics, that he gave me the previous evening at dinner was that you should never spend more than £12 on a bottle of wine – except for white Burgundy.]