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THE PARADOX OF TRUST:

CAN MASS MEDIA RESOLVE THE ISSUE?

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Abstract:

The fast progress in communication technology and an even faster development of mass media resulted in a world that is under the uncontrollable effect of thousands of messages relayed through hundreds of communication channels. Today, developed or developing communities are literally under the captivity of three screens; television, computer and mobile device. These three pour out continuous and intense information daily, where a vast majority of this information flow cannot be controlled or checked for accuracy or validity. Even this alone raises a subject of newer, efficient and effective systems for inspection of information.

Per contra, there is a need to argue whether these daily messages can be described as any form or level of information, for these messages can be classified as crude data, plain information or personal views on various issues. To qualify as knowledge, messages must go through objective description, definition, measurement, determination and classification phases.

Google and search engines alike are regarded as the easiest access to information although they are merely electronic banks to store and accumulate data. The data content is severely doubted and questionable for accuracy and reliability because of openness to intervention and manipulation; where the source of information raises questions of credibility.

Another basic problem is the result of the intense message flow, especially the “news”. The intensive news flow created a sense and/or state of surfeit and alienation among individuals; eventually within the society. To overweigh this divergence, there is a problem of trust for the individual and the society, since information is reproduced and transformed daily.

This excess of messages may enhance a global awareness on any subject and intellectual satisfaction, but also result in an issue of mistrust.

The ever-growing problem of trust seems to have become an attitude and the main concern of the contemporary society.

The main reason for the current global economic crisis, armed conflicts, instability, stagnancy and escalating violence is basically the mistrust between individuals and societies.

Unless the issue of mistrust is eliminated to rebuild social and mutual confidence, there seems to be no possibility of social and inter-social peace. This approach is a prerequisite to accelerate political, social, economic and even cultural development in the world, as well as within societies.

Related research has disclosed that the level of trust in societies is positioned in adherence with rational values and the level of socio-economic development; and varies between communities.

Therefore, the essence for development for both parameters is the leverage of social knowledge and awareness; where mass media and means of communication stand out with the functions of; reaching - gathering information, collocation, informing the public via widespread emission, enhancing communal supervision, criticism and spontaneous formation; with individual education and entertainment. With these functions, means of communication are the foremost tools to create and cultivate social trust.

However, the basic problem arises because there is unilateral mistrust towards mass media. To utilize media to build up trust in a society, the means of communication must attain social trust and credibility.

Key Words: Communication

Key Words: Trust / Mistrust

Key Words: Mass Media

Key Words: Message Flow

Key Words: Functions of Media

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Mass Communication and Mass Media

For contemporary societies, it is impossible to stay away from communication tools and media, nor a day without communication. Also, one cannot even imagine of a life without communication tools or media. As of today, one of the most parameters of development is the level of access and use of mass media and communication tools alike. Newspapers, magazines, books, radio, television, movie theaters and, of course, the Internet have become the indispensable tools of personal life and being. In this context, it is definite that communication tools and media mean a lot for individuals and they have certain functions, missions and responsibilities for societies, depending on the level of cultural, social and political development.

Almost all members of any given society are receivers and consumers of information. The communication tools in focus, though all separate physically, relay specially tailored messages from one single source to hundred thousands, millions and even billions depending on the importance of the content. They inform masses simultaneously and various societies can have similar opinions on different issues. Therefore, the communication tools stated above can be mass media, while the communication they enhance becomes mass communication.

Mass media, in regard with them supplying information, reminders and especially breaking news, have become a very important part of everyday life and most of the time, a common denominator for social direction.

Before multichannel television, thematic broadcasters, Internet and mobile phones, there were not enough resources for people to be informed about social, political, cultural, economic and sports issues. Thus, newspapers, magazines, radio stations and national television had a greater impact on the individual. But the variety of television channels that became international rapidly, the rise of Internet at lightning speed and the mobile phone turning into an information bank, a

computer, and being an object of desire, more than a voice communicator; has definitely created serious alternatives and threat for traditional media.

Mass communication tools have become a contemporary and effective organization globally, they inform masses rapidly and instantly, while managing personal agendas, giving directions and entertaining with no limits of time or space. The mind-blowing rate of technological development made the mass communication tools more effective over individuals, institutions, societies and cultural elements; and the ever renewed information made societies more passive and dependent on themselves. Like many science people, Maltzke also referred to mass communications as a “one way process where “messages are relayed by a public/official, indirect technical tool to a scattered audience.” (Alemdar and Kaya; 1983: 46)

Another scientific study towards the aspects of mass media states that these tools are a very valuable asset and estate for those who pursue historic, political and economic power: *“The power over these tools provides certain amenities. First of all, mass media will attract attention towards certain problems, solutions or people in favor of those in power and will prevent attention towards rival individuals or groups. Second, mass media provides social status and strengthens legitimacy. Third, mass media will act as a tool of persuasion and motivation. Fourth, mass media will enhance the set up and sustainability of certain communities. Fifth, mass media can be a tool to provide psychic rewards and satisfaction; they will provide relaxation, entertainment and embrace individual mental and emotional needs. Generally, mass media pay back to the society that they take, while they are flexible, easy to plan and control”* (Alemdar and Erdoğan; 1990: 96)

Philippe Breton argues that the widespread voyeurism by means of mass media is no longer seen immoral and now considered essential; and states that the key –maybe the only true- message relayed by these tools is the importance of communication as a centralized common value of the public. (Breton; 1992: 180)

Regarding the general framework of issues, there is a fast development in communication technologies and, as a direct result, in mass media. Almost all societies are affected by thousands of messages generated by these communication tools daily.

The daily lives of individuals and societies are trapped between three screens; television, computers (because of Internet) and mobile phones, yielding a state of surrender. These three screens have become the indispensable tools of life and the amount of information flow from these screens have separated individuals from all other aspects of life, even work. Along with ease and a state of constantly being informed, this state also poses a threat; where the messages from these tools put the individuals into a position where the accuracy of information is in question.

Fundamental Functions of Mass Media Tools

Mass media tools bear a social responsibility that arises from being social bodies and their duties are defined by parameters other than straight commercial institutions. Aside from profit, since they operate for the public, they have certain professional and social functions. These can mainly be listed as; a) news, b) audit and criticism on behalf of the public, c) inform the public and form a public opinion free from manipulation and d) education and entertainment.

Media, as social communication institution, will help the individual to: be informed, read, learn, grow an opinion, make choices, while enhancing socialization and transform the social structure by adding up to contemporary cultural values.

The media is also responsible for the reformation of culture with contemporary values and norms, and lead the social, cultural, economic progress of the community while leveraging know how and new life styles. Media has a mission to introduce individuals to developing international values, policies and behaviors and to help them to integrate contemporary rules of life.

These functions, duties and responsibilities give media a distinctive role. The ease of access and the very low cost to reach mass media results in a greater and broader impact, therefore a higher responsibility. With intense speed to provide information for various needs, mass media is definitely helpful for the individual and society, only if it serves a just cause. As much as mass media creates ease for daily life, it is certain that it has control over masses and the lifestyle of individuals.

Media and Its Professionals That Drift Away From Ethic Codes

Over the last 25 years, the fundamental policy of the new world order has become globalization. This resulted in a transormaiton: Media, as an estate or power became the estate or media of the powerful. With the driving force of developing communication technologies, globalization has carried capital across borders and media became as harmful as it is helpful. The fast circulation of capital across countries has affected national economies and all institutions directly involved with economy.

Especially in developing countries, media is becoming more and more “dirty”, with the effects of a wilder liberalism, because the optimum conditions have not been provided neither socially, nor economically. Even the fundamental function, the news, is being presented after certain manipulations and in a “lighter”, “tabloid” format. Besides, this tabloid format is applied to almost all forms of broadcast and content.

The implementation of art and artist without universal quality, aiming and the lowest social and economical segment, and providing opportunity for the lowest quality persona to become opinion leaders of the society, are the disputable choices made by media, that produces nothing but dirt for itself and its audience. Also, the trend of creating bogus sensations, profanity and ignorance of legal or personal rights, subjective news, manipulative information and comments, illegitimate methods of news gathering has resulted not only the erosion of media values and ethics, but the ignorance of the public. This has created a media that uses human rights violation, attacks on personal integrity as a weapon.

Scientific research on media has revealed that the media itself has become the message and this message is way ahead of the content. But more critically, the identity of the media professional and the activities are the message itself. Along with the message produced and relayed, the media professional is becoming a message per se, and is in the spotlight rather than the responsibility and function the media has to bear. It is also clear that every written or audiovisual product of media bears the aspect of a social and political process. Thus, these products must be free of subjective comment and be objective because they require selection and responsible judgement.

But, though difficult it is, a mass communication for the good of the community must be operating with other motives than just commercial worries.

Freedom of media is not twisted truth, deprivation of events from reality, manipulation and the freedom to create sensation. There is no freedom without limits and crossing borders means self destruction. "Freedom, as a fundamental of the human practice, is not a personal freedom to act restlessly. A moral definition of freedom is a state of abiding rules created by one to preserve freedom, in touch with personal needs and motives. Morality and ethics can sprout only when one abides these rules of freedom (Piper; 1999: 35)."

Freedom of press for old school, or freedom of media today, is really the freedom of informing the society. A journalist or a radio / TV producer obtains the space of freedom from the society and uses it in the name of the community. While practicing the daily requirements, a media professional must refer to business ethics, principles and values while facing every new situation and before making a choice. This is called the ethic code.

The incorporation of ethics means enlightening the society, while coming over certain personality disorders like regarding the common good, rather than personal needs. Ethics "reminds us that a resource will provide values that cannot be evaluated by even qualities, rather than a point of view fixed on quantity and solely commercial profit. The moral objective is encouraged by common judgment and this is what makes the resource valuable (Piper; 1999:11)." At times when social and institutional obstructions are increased, values are judged by quantity and a state of distrust at all levels, moral capabilities are more important as Piper reminds and qualities become a critical need.

Kuçuradi argues that ethic values are the values of the individual, his/her lifestyle and possible actions, and that only if these possibilities are realized, a person can be regarded as ethical: "the very aspect of being human depends on the realization of possibilities and the objectives of personal actions. This all depends on people that act ethically (Kuçuradi, 1996: 172)." demektedir. In brief, a person is qualified and capable if only s/he can fulfill the facilities and possibilities.

Media must respect freedom, be ready to account for actions on ethical values and social responsibility. Therefore, the main need for media is to employ professionals that have ethical values and control themselves to create a sound business organization.

With the effort to question ethics of the people that want to work in media, another important aspect is to establish a business organization that is respected, effective and functional. As much as these prerequisites are critical, it is observed that the reason of obstruction is the lack of a strong organization and an ethical insight.

Mass Media Faces the Paradox of Trust

The problem is not just the unethical media professional and the loss of quality in the media. Another rapidly growing social problem is the issue of “trust”. Latest research on media, politics, economy and social values reveals that the public is in a state of trust crisis. Whether daily, monthly or annual, national or international, almost every research points out the rise of “distrust”.

The effect of the global economic crisis is a very important cause for this situation. But it is also an indisputable fact that developing countries and nations under a heavy burden from the international economy also bear a significant level of “distrust”.

This state of distrust is not limited to economy, institutions, peers or societies; media is in the picture as well, actually more than any other parameter. But, media is supposed to be establishing trust as a social communication institution, informing the society to elevate the perception of trust. People are informed by media and grow an opinion, observe the processes of politics, government, economy, social life and art, while building trust and contributing. Along with these, trust is the fundamental need for a healthy social structure and development.

Prof. Dr. Yilmaz Esmer, the representative of World Value Survey in Turkey, states the most trusted institutions in Turkey as follows, as of year en 2007:

1. Military Forces
2. Social Security Institution
3. Health Institutions
4. The Constitutional Court
5. Courts of Law
6. Univerisities
7. Police
8. Religious officials
9. Department of Religious

Affairs 10. Charities 11. Government / Cabinet 12. Womens' Organizations 13. The National Assembly 14. Bureaucrats 15. Environmentalist Organizations 16. Islamic Conference Organization 17. Youth

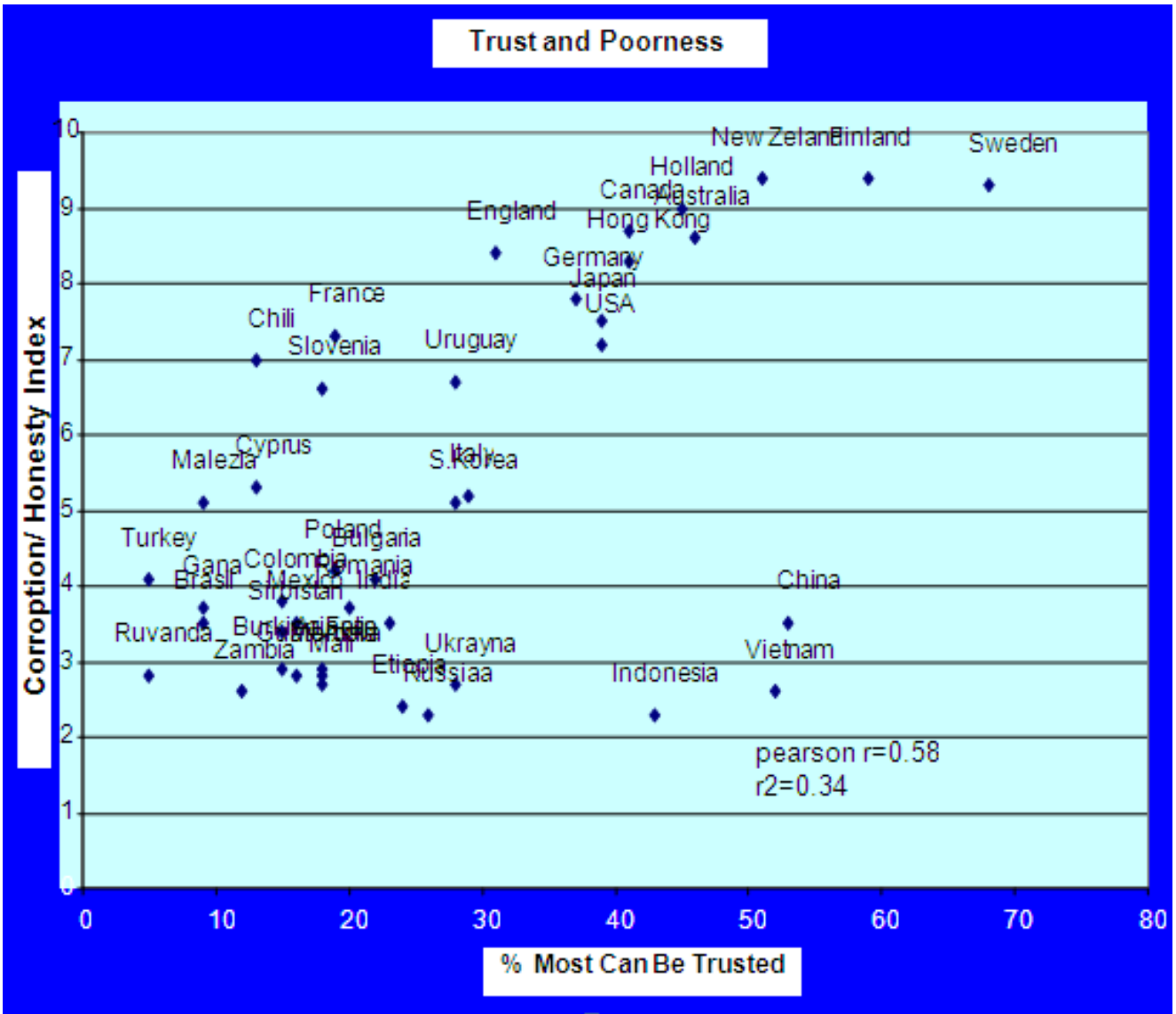
This list starts with a 74 percent trust in Military Forces and ends with a 4 percent trust in youth. As for the “distrusted”, the list is formed as follows:

1. Big corporations (% -2) 2. Labor Unions (% -15) 3. Political Parties (% -30) 4. TV stations (% -33) 5. The UN (% -37) 6. The EU (% -38) 7. Media (% -38) 8. IMF (% -70)

It is critical to view this list with percentage values. As seen on the list, media, along with political parties and international organizations, has the lowest rate of trust. With a bookmark here, focusing on the media, let's take a look at Prof Dr Esmer's study, where there's another graphic table that points out integrity and corruption index and trust on people index in an international scale.

As presented in the table, in societies with higher integrity and corruption index, interpersonal trust index is lower. The perception of trust in societies is directly related to poor economic, social, political and democratic development.

But with the trust crisis arising in developed countries and media being one of the definitive social institutions in developing countries, the effect of media to this state of distrust must be argued.



As stated above, there are critical reasons for the loss of trust in media, where these result in serious social costs. It is imperative to restate that; The implementation of art and artist without universal quality, aiming and the lowest social and economical segment, and providing opportunity for the lowest quality persona to become opinion leaders of the society, are the disputable choices made by media, that produces nothing but dirt for itself and its audience. Also, the trend of creating bogus sensations, profanity and ignorance of legal or personal rights, subjective news, manipulative information and comments, illegitimate methods of news

gathering has resulted not only the erosion of media values and ethics, but the ignorance of the public. This has created a media that uses human rights violation, attacks on personal integrity as a weapon.

Aside from these negative effects of media, another important issue is the rise of manipulative information via the Internet. Without the natural process of books, encyclopedias, reports, researches and documents, information that is not accurate and can easily be manipulated is reigning over humanity and leading the common man to a state of total passivism. Information that is rumored, formed by some personal opinion, subjective, but still called knowledge based information is the determining force social life. The Internet, though with a lot of ease, is going under a fierce questioning of so called “information raid” in terms of accuracy and is becoming an object of distrust. As a result, the latest mass media is facing a trust crisis and is affecting all aspects of life.

Turkoglu, an expert on the issue, states his opinions on a national newspaper and his personal website: *“Following the death of Oscar winning French composer Maurice Jarre, a quote related to him turned out to be false, and the global media got mad. The quote, not from Jarre, but from a university student in Dublin, published in Wikipedia is really nice: ‘There will still be a waltz playing in my head when I die.’ Apparently, the global media got carried away by the poetic tone of the words and were trapped by including the quote in their wire service. When the truth came out, the ladies and gentlemen blamed it all on Wikipedia and the Internet. This has been a news item and an issue for columns in our country, the common comment is to be careful on information gathered from the web and the necessity to confirm from other sources. The common man of today, who thinks at the minimum is advised with a single, simple message: ‘Do not trust the Internet!’ But with a little deeper effort we can easily see that the problem is not about the Internet. For decades, the media and the media professionals are becoming more and more incompetent and incapable, without quality. How do we know that the information presented by popular sites and the Internet is less qualified than those presented by the media for years?”* (Turkoglu; <http://ooofoffline.blogspot.com/2009/06/internet-mi-yalanci-medya-mi.html>)

The real threat here is not to exaggerate distrust towards Internet and leave others in the shade. The real threat is to distance societies from being communities, leaving the last two centuries of effort obsolete, and producing masses without initiative, reaction that are almost drugged to sleep. These individuals, dependent on mass media tools with everything they have, use these tools to put on their own shows or to watch and contribute to an ongoing one. Knowledge, research, reading, arguing, taking initiative, reacting is now replaced with passive viewership. While there is no demand for knowledge, people do not care about scientific or intellectual production, but instant information.

In another evaluation, Turkoglu observes: *“comScore, a measurement company that works on Internet use globally published a report on Turkey. According to the report, in terms of Internet reach per capita, Turkey is seventh in Europe and second in Eastern Europe after Russia. The Internet reach is 17,7 million people as of April and represents home or office access, excluding mobile phone reach or public Internet access points. On the other hand, in terms of total time of surfing and page visits, Turkey captures the first spot among 17 countries. The monthly average is 32 hours and total page visits are over three thousand. The hourly average is 90 percent Google or a Google related page. Simply, the first step is to look for a place (page or site) to go for that day. Though there is no separate data for MSN Messenger, the vast majority visits Microsoft sites, at a rate of 87 percent and these are for instant messaging and chat. Third place is taken by facebook at a 72 percent. The top three and the most visited fifteen sites show that the majority of users are online for entertainment only. Internet is used for digital gossip, downloading movies and files. This actually is not typical for Turkey. Similar to other information reaching tools, people use the Internet to reach entertaining part of information. In other words, societies that become more and more ignorant view information as something to be consumed, not produced. The next step of an industrial society, the information society needs its individuals to don the ability to differentiate right from wrong, and to produce new information with the one already at hand. What is wrong with consuming information? Addiction to those who produce information. Spending resources to keep up with consumption and not knowing what to do if the producers stop providing that information. From this point of view, Internet, newspaper or TV consumption is like drug addiction. As long as you have money in your pocket, and the dealer has the goods, there is no problem. But we know how the story ends; either we*

run out of money, or out of breath without puttin up something significant (Türkoğlu; <http://oooffline.blogspot.com/2009/06/interneti-tuketirken.html>)”

Another data relevant to the issue comes from a student of mine who recently finished his graduation thesis. The websites of Turkey’s top 5 daily newspapers have been monitored for three months and showed that the reader is not interested in the agenda. Ali Arici, a student from Anadolu University School of Communication Sciences stated in his final report that: *“The first week being the pre-evaluation period, a total of four weeks was monitored during October, November and December. Every day, from 5 newspapers, 25 most read news items and every week, 175 most read news, and finally 700 articles were monitored. The analysis was made under these parameters: Agenda, tabloid news, sexuality, violence and soccer (football). The Internet sites of Aksam, Sabah, Hurriyet, Yeni Safak and Zaman papers were observed and only one fourth of the most read articles were related to the agenda. The rest three fourth has content on tabloid, sexuality, soccer (football) and violence. In other words, the “not serious” news wer the most read ones. Of the 700 articles monitored, 200 were related to daily events and agenda. The final quarter of 2008, when the research was conducted, the remaining 500 most read articles are under other categories that are considered popular.”*

This shows that, though media has significant problems and effect on trust crisis, societies have become more like masses rather than communities. At this point, it is helpful to remind Baudrillard’s views: *“To give better news, to become a community, to leverage the cultural level of the masses, etc... It is all a lie. Because masses resist this clever communication force mind-numbingly. They want a show instead of meaning. No effort managed to persuade them how serious the content or the code is. They are trying to relay messages to people who want show. Actually they adore every content if there’s a show embedded. What they deny is the dialectic of meaning... There are numerous examples in the silent passivism folklore that scorns meaning. On the night Klaus Croissant the lawyer was deported from France, a television station broadcasting the French National Team’s World Cup Qualifier is the best example. A few hundred demonstrators in front of the Sante Prison. A lawyer in a midnight hassle and 20 million viewers in front of a screen. Cheers and screams when France won, the shame and agony of intellectuals at this numbness. Le Monde daily: ’21:00 hours. German lawyer is taken from the*

Sante Prison. In a few minutes Rachetaeau will score the first goal.' A melodrama of shame. But no one wonders the reason for this numbness. As always, there is one reason: Masses have been put to sleep by the rulers by football. There should not be such a numbness and it is pointless to argue. This numbness, that should already not be present, has nothing to tell us. It can only be told about by the rulers. How can this magic alienation keep masses from revolution? After all these revolutions and efforts, how can 20 million be passive compared to the few hundred? And not only be passive, but prefer a football game to a political and humane drama? It is interesting that the resolutions are not affected by this observation, the thing to be done is to ask the question. All resolution point out that there is a numb mass of people in a coma (Baudrillard; 1991: 13)"

As Baudrillard very well and clearly put, the problem is the very essence of the argument. The state of becoming a mass, distrust towards media and other institutions, replacement of sound knowledge by inaccurate information add up the paradox.

With a look at the starting point, thousands of messages flowing daily are not actual knowledge. They are more like data, information or public figures commenting subjective views on public agenda. In order to define these as knowledge, they should be handled objectively, defined, classified and put in order. Google and search engines alike, are considered as the easiest way to reach knowledge, whereas they are mere electronic data banks. The accuracy of the data and the extent to trust them is under question, since they are open to external manipulation.

Another fundamental problem is the issue of individual alienation caused by the intensity of messages. What is more critical is that, information that is reproduced every day and transformed on the way to the receiver creates certain distrust on the individual and the society. In other words, the message raid may give a sense of intellectual satisfaction, but it also adds up to an ever growing problem of distrust. The problem of distrust becomes an attitude every passing day and will become one of the major social issues. The main reason for the current global economic crisis, armed conflicts, instability, stagnancy and escalating violence is basically the mistrust between individuals and societies.

Unless the issue of mistrust is eliminated to rebuild social and mutual confidence, there seems to be no possibility of social and inter-social peace. This approach is a prerequisite to accelerate political, social, economic and even cultural development in the world, as well as within societies. Related research has disclosed that the level of trust in societies is positioned in adherence with rational values and the level of socio-economic development; and varies between communities. Therefore, the essence for development for both parameters is the leverage of social knowledge and awareness; where mass media and means of communication stand out with the functions of; reaching - gathering information, collocation, informing the public via widespread emission, enhancing communal supervision, criticism and spontaneous formation; with individual education and entertainment. With these functions, means of communication are the foremost tools to create and cultivate social trust. However, the basic problem arises because there is unilateral mistrust towards mass media. To utilize media to build up trust in a society, the means of communication must attain social trust and credibility. This can only be possible if professional business ethics are regarded as key to operations, professionals that abide with these codes are employed and independent business organizations carry the mission to regulate the media environment.

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