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Trust and Specatorship

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Trust and Specatorship[1]

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Abstract. Research on trust and media in communication measures the trustworthiness of legacy news media (newspapers, radio, television) in nation state settings in longitudinal studies, in which controls for demographics are usually limited to age and political preference. These studies assume that trust in news sources is a useful indicator of the viability of liberal democracy. However, in an increasingly globalized and diversified digital information space in which alternative media challenge the established division of cognitive labor of democracy the underlying assumptions of this research design are increasingly tenuous. This working paper argues that, in order to understand trust in media we need to ask not just how much trust there is, but how trust in media works, how it relates to distrust, and how trust is related to and can emerge from conflict. Building on recent advances in political theory which shift the focus from democratic participation as a matter of having a voice to the empowerment of the people's gaze, the paper focuses on the question of spectatorship and proposes to read a documentary, Ra'anan Alexandrowicz' 2019 film "The Viewing Booth", as an experimental system and "theoretical object" which provides insights for a theory of trust and spectatorship.

Keywords. Trust, Media, Fourth Estate, Documentary, Spectatorship, Democracy, Digital Information Space, Cognitive Division of Labor

Democratic governance faces an information problem. In mass democracy with universal suffrage the ideal of the "omnicompetent citizen" (Lippman 2017) can appear hard and even impossible to attain. For broad political participation to be possible the knowledge gap between governing elites and the citizenry has to be closed (Dahl 2008). This requires a cognitive division of labor, in which reliable sources of information are accorded the authority to produce and disseminate the knowledge necessary for deliberative processes to work (Warren 1996, Bohman 1999). Scientific inquiry and expertise and independent journalism are the primary sources of this knowledge, but other practices like documentary filmmaking also qualify (Hediger 2021). In the cognitive division of labor of democracy, the authority of knowledge sources is a function of their trustworthiness. Research on trust in media usually focuses on news media (Newspapers, radio, television) and is conducted in longitudinal studies such as the long-running Gallup panel study on media trust or the longitudinal study on trust and media conducted by the University of Mainz in Germany. It can be said that trust in media research measures trust levels as an indicator of the stability and viability of liberal democracy. Historically, the study of trust in media is coeval with the emergence of broadcast media. The BBC was founded in 1926, and national radio networks, particularly CBS and NBC, which later became the television networks CBS, NBC and ABC, were incorporated at the end of the 1920s in the United States. Public broadcasting in its current form was instituted in France, Italy and Germany in the post-war period. Newspapers were typically owned by families which gave preference to civic duty over profit (Djankov et al. 2003). All news media publicly professed and adhered to standards of reporting which included double sourcing and balance in reporting, including efforts to reach out to anyone mentioned in a story for comment, a typical feature of US news stories. Research on trust in media focuses on the dominant gatekeeping institutions in these postwar systems. This, however, is no longer the world that we live in. Social media platforms and alternative media have upended the epistemic order of liberal democracy by facilitating disinformation (Freelon/Wells 2020) and undermining journalistic standards like double sourcing (Van Leuven et al. 2018). The loss of classified ads to online platforms and competition from alternative media has made newspapers and particularly local newspapers economically unviable (Athey/Calvano/Gans 2013), while local television in the US is increasingly dominated by right-leaning corporations like Sinclair (Blanekship/Vargo 2021). Established newspapers in the US like the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles* have become the property of tech

1 An earlier version of this working paper was presented in the ConTrust research seminar on July 2, 2022.

tycoons which no longer respect the editorial independence of their publications (MacMillan 2024), while in Germany important publications like *Berliner Zeitung*, formerly the leading paper in the East, and *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung*, a powerful regional newspaper, have come under ownership with ties to or sympathies for Russia and the Kremlin.[2] The underlying assumptions of the trust in media research design are, in other words, becoming tenuous. In the following I want to first discuss why and how exactly that is the case and then propose some preliminary outlines for an alternative approach to the question of trust in media, and to the question of how conflict factors into trust in media. This alternative approach brings together political theory and the theory of spectatorship from film and media studies to develop the outlines of a possible theoretical model of trust in media.

1. On some limitations of the dominant paradigm in trust and media research

The (relatively) recent *Oxford handbook on social and political trust research* (Ulsaner 2018) has no chapter on media, but the *Handbook on Political Trust* (Newton 2017) has a chapter on political trust and mass media, and the literature is rich and growing. Research on trust and media is conducted mostly in communication research. The backbone of this subfield are longitudinal studies in nation state settings, in which controls for demographics usually focus on age and political preference. It is important to note that trust and media research is not marginal to communication research. One of the founders of the field, Carl I. Hovland (1912-1961), is also a pioneer of research on trust and media. Gallup, the leading American market and opinion research institute – incidentally located in Princeton, where Hovland taught – has been conducting the most important panel study on media and trust for several decades now. Broadly speaking the methodology consists of polls of representative samples of the population of a given country or area, with a focus on questions concerning the trustworthiness of news sources (Quiring et al. 2024). Follow-up research concerns factors determining trust in media, including high levels of interpersonal trust as a predictor of trust in media, or the effects of parasocial interaction and quasi-interpersonal trust on generalized trust levels (Granow et al. 2020).

Productive research designs require a certain degree of reduction in complexity. Trust in media research is no exception. However, in light of the current changes of the information ecology of democracy one could argue that some of the self-imposed limitations could turn into liabilities, particularly if we are to understand trust in media research as engaged in the business of measuring the stability of the liberal democratic order, and if we are to understand the complex dynamics of media, trust and conflict with a view of the viability liberal democracy. Three limitations in particular seem to be relevant in this respect.

First, the information ecology of democracy is changing

True to its historical origins in the 1940s trust in media research continues to focus primarily on news media (newspaper, radio, television) as sources of information in democratic societies. Only recently – relative to the longer history of the subfield, and considering that social media platforms have been around for twenty years now (facebook started operations in 2004, twitter in 2006) – has research on media and trust started to include considerations of social media as (alternative) sources of information (Tang/Liu 2015; Antoci et al. 2019; Hatamleh et al. 2023). Other types and configurations of media (including literature, film, etc.) are not included. And the approach remains entirely focused on the political space of the liberal democratic nation state.

However, to fully understand the relationship of trust and media we cannot limit ourselves to news media or mass media alone. The most recent round of the Mainz study emphasizes the continuing prominence of legacy media and suggests that despite the emergence of alternative media and a culture of "doing one's own research", particularly during COVID, trust levels for news media have returned to pre-COVID levels (Quiring et al. 2024). However, the audience for television and newspapers is aging and shrinking (incidentally, much like the audience for art house cinema, of which more than 50% are now over the age of fifty in Germany; Koptyug 2021). What is more, the audience for television is increasingly segmenting along partisan lines particularly in the US where Fox News caters to right-wing audiences while MSCNB has a predominantly left-wing public, a far cry from the golden years of network television when ABC, CBS and NBC had a combined market share of over 90% in primetime and provided Lowest-Common-Denominator programming and news programs were still subjected to the fairness doctrine (Muise et al. 2022). The situation is slightly different in Germany where the public broadcasters entered the streaming market early on and used their market power and superior resources to marginalize private television states and compete with commercial streaming services and platforms like youtube (Budzinski et al. 2021). In Germany it is primarily the audience for private television which is shrinking while efforts to target younger audiences with online formats seem to meet with considerable success. But while the classical paradigm of trust and media research, which uses "media trust" and "trust in news media" interchangeably, may continue to be viable in a comparatively system media system like Germany it seems increasingly questionable in other locations, particularly the US and India. Social media platforms like facebook, tiktok and twitter and creator media like podcasts have become primary outlets for political communication. Social media increasingly replace the vanishing local newspapers in countries like US and Canada, and they are increasingly dominating the media landscape in India, while the freedom of the press is diminishing (Mini 2023). At the same time, social media exceed national boundaries and increasingly implement strategies and political agendas formulated by the private owners of these platforms which often run counter to the interests of liberal democratic nation states and their polities (Couldry 2024). Elon Musk,

2 https://taz.de/Neue-Osnabruecker-Zeitung/!6074403/

owner of twitter/X and a naturalized South African, used his power and reach to endorse the neo-fascist AfD party in the run-up to the 2025 federal election, an unprecedented third-party interference in national electoral politics in a Western liberal democracy from a purported ally (but different from Russian interference in European elections or US interference in Central and Latin America only in terms of its open nature and brazenness). That same party used tiktok, a Chinese-owned platform, and specifically designed visuals to build up support among young males (Doerr 2021; Bösch 2023), a key voting segment in the party's successes in the 2024 European and 2025 German federal elections (Böhmer et al. 2024; Classen et al. 2024). At the same time social media platforms facilitate the dissemination of political narratives and further the agenda of covert state actors like the infamous Russian troll farms, a key factor of Russia's hybrid war against liberal democracies in Europe, and non-state actors or para-statal actors like ISIS (Comolli 2016). Add to that the partisan agendas of new owners of legacy media, and even with regards to the remnants of the old media system the question is no longer whether to trust, but who to trust and why. The media landscape is, in other words, no longer coterminous with the institutional frameworks of the nation state, nor are the institutional frameworks, which trust and media research in the postwar period as its frame of reference, still the same. With regards to state capacity, instant cross-border and cross-boundary communication has long since become the rule rather than the exception, and the liberal democratic nation state is limited in its ability to control the space for political communication, making the regulation of social networks at the nation state or EU level one of the key political battles of the coming decades (Battista/Uva 2023). Particularly with a view to questions of trust and conflict in an international relations perspective we have to recalibrate the spatial parameters of the dominant paradigms of research on trust and media. Adjusting the media trust research design to account for the digital information space will become inevitable in the near future.

Second, there is not trust in media without distrust

Focusing on trust alone has, in a way, never been a sufficient approach to understanding the stability and viability of the epistemic order of democracy. In the dominant paradigm of trust and media research distrust and mistrust are implicitly cast in a negative light. High trust levels are good, which by implication means that trust is good, and distrust and mistrust are not. However, one "cannot simply trust trust as it is practiced in a given society; otherwise, one runs the risk of accepting the unacceptable or of hypostasizing and even idealizing existing social orders" (Deitelhoff/Forst/Hediger/Wille 2022, 10). Supporters of Donald Trump trust their leader, with disastrous consequences for anyone who disagrees with them and increasingly for his supporters as well, as we have seen in many instances since January 20, 2025. At the same time distrust is a necessary element of democratic politics and governance. With a view to the United States Mark Warren has argued that democracy requires a certain amount of distrust and that democracy prospers if and when distrust is channeled through a relatively narrow area of liberal democracy's institutional set-up, i.e. through parliament and the legislative process (Warren 2009). In that view the notoriously low approval ratings of the American congress are not a sign of crisis, but an indication of best practice in democratic governance. Conflict usually undermines trust, and voters distrust congress because that is where political conflict takes place in its most tangible form. This distrusts, however, is balanced – or was, until recently – by high levels of trust particularly in the judiciary.

However, channeling distrust to limited parts of the government can also have its problematic tradeoffs. Under the impression of the progressive politicization of all areas of society after 1968, Claude Lefort has developed a counterposition to that of Warren. In most democracies participation is episodic and limited to elections. But by limiting political conflict to the institutional arrangements of elections and the legislative process, Lefort argued, liberal democracy creates a citizenry which feels largely disenfranchised outside of the electoral process, which actually prepares the ground for totalitarian and populist movements. Pierre Rosanvallon has proposed to capture the importance of political conflict outside of the electoral and legislative process with his concept of "counter-democracy", which emphasizes the role of distrust in democratic politics (Rosanvallon 2009).

A similar set of arguments have to be made for news media and mass media. News media have long been viewed, with a term that can be traced back to Edmund Burke, as the "Fourth estate" or the "vierte Gewalt im Staat", in addition to the legislative, executive and the judicial branches of government (Hampton 2009). The task and function of the "fourth estate" is to hold the other three publicly to account. The function of media can thus be seen as a developing and maintaining systematic, institutionalized distrust, of government, but also of other institutions and social actors, in particular corporations. In fact, an important part of the mission of independent journalism, or "muckraking journalism", in the United States in the first half of the 20th century was to defend citizens against corporate interest, to the point where one observer could write in the 1950s that "one of the most important developments in American politics and social theory has been the reconciliation of the middle classes with the business community" (Chalmers 1959). This means that trust in media has, in fact, a paradoxical structure: Trust in media depends on the public's perception and appreciation of the media's systematic distrust of government and other social actors. The more effective the media are in uncovering general corruption and specific misdeeds, we can assume, the more the public trusts the media. Or, to put it in terms of trust and conflict, the more media tackle pressing issues and hold social actors to account, the more their work is perceived to be trustworthy.

However, there are tradeoffs. The institutionalized mistrust of government can itself become a trigger for conflict, when authoritarian rulers crack down on press freedom to avoid public accountability (Hutchison/Schiano/Whitten-Woodring 2016). Recent examples include moves

by the second Trump administration to sue television networks for coverage that they don't like, the exclusion of accredited independent media like Associated Press from the White House Press Pool, and of course Trump's repeated declaration that the media are the "enemy of the people". Furthermore, to the fourth estate social media platforms and the creator economy have now added what is increasingly described as the democratized fourth estate (Verstraete/ Bambauer 2017) or "the fifth estate" (Dutton 2013). The "fifth estate" has a longer history. In pre-Internet times this included media practices that reach, so to speak, below and beyond the gate-keeping news media of liberal democracy, including pirate radio, the post-68 video and film collectives. Pirate radio, which is closely intertwined with the rise of neo-liberalism particularly in the UK, had a significant impact on the information ecology as it paved the way to the shift away from public broadcasting monopolies in Europe to what in Germany is called the "dual broadcasting system", in which public broadcasters work alongside private television networks (Johns 2009). Prior to the advent of social networks the "fifth estate" included formats such as blogs, but it was really the advent of social media platforms like facebook and twitter which reshaped the traditional public sphere into the contemporary digital information space. Social media platforms serve as aggregators and multipliers and can enhance the reach of legacy media; an important part of content on twitter and now X and bluesky consists of clips from television shows or commented links to newspaper articles. However, increasingly entrepreneurs in the "creator economy", e.g. podcasters like Joe Rogan, which speak to a mostly male and young audience, exceed legacy media in reach and impact. Similarly, activist video filmmakers like James O'Keefe of "Project Veritas" don the mantle of muckraking journalism to attack down government officials and civil society actors even as they advance an authoritarian right-wing agenda (O'Keefe 2022). Increasingly in the digital information space, the public performance of distrust spreads from gatekeeper institutions and legacy media to the entire information ecology, creating levels of distrust which can render governance ineffective, as seen in the spread of vaccine skepticism during the COVID pandemic (Ternullo 2022). Contemporary societies are, in other words, diverse not only in terms of their ethnic and cultural composition. They are, and have been for a long time, highly diversified in terms of their media landscape and their dynamics of trust and conflict. For most of the 20th century legacy media provided a reliable and trustworthy stage for the articulation and potential resolution of societal conflicts. Now these stages have multiplied, and there is even a conflict amongst media which can undermine trust. This underscores that the study relationship of trust and conflict cannot be limited to news media and similar gate-keeping media institutions but has to include the entire range of counter-democratic or "fifth estate" media practices along with news media. With a view to the viability of liberal democracy measuring trust in news media alone can potentially deflect from the larger, if much more complex task of measuring optimal levels of distrust in a democratic polity.

Third, it is time to open the black box

As it is, the concept of trust in current research on media and trust remains largely un- or at least under-theorized. In the literature media trust is usually described as a relation between two sides, "a trustor, the side that places trust, and a trustee, the side being trusted" (Strömbäck et al. 2020). Furthermore, in keeping with Luhmann's notion of trust as the acceptance of a certain degree of dependency on others, are understood to "contain a degree of uncertainty, making the credibility of the trustee imperative for understanding the degree to which people trust the trustee." However, distinctions between first-order and second-order trust (to use a distinction proposed by Warren), which allow us to differentiate between face-to-face relationship and trust in institutional arrangements and processes, do not appear in the literature, nor does the question of justified vs. unjustified trust. Instead, the citizen-media consumer is treated as a black box. Into this black box the researchers feeds questions such as "how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media – such as newspapers, TV and radio – when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly – a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all." (Strömbäck et al. 2020). The black box, which is tacitly assumed to be inhabited by an entity/a subject which is both cooperative and honest, then produces output in the form of data, which are assumed to be reliable based on the characteristics attributed to the purported denizen of the black box. It is also important to note that, by default, the inhabitant of the black box has no other presumed qualities than those of cooperativeness and honesty. This of course also means that, except for demographic controls like age and partisan affiliation, the trust s/he has in media is the trust of a member of an unmarked group. However, both empirically and theoretically speaking there is no such thing as an unmarked position in relationships of trust. This means that by default the research design implicitly (and uncritically) assumes a communitarian conception of trust in which members of a community trust each other by virtue of belonging to the same community (Putnam 2000).

Particularly in light of the rapid transformation of the epistemic order of democracy we need to question these assumptions and develop a more nuanced understanding of media and trust. That means that we need to pry open the black box and question the guiding assumptions which the current paradigm makes about the citizen/media consumer, i.e. the assumptions of cooperativeness, honesty, and neutrality/homogeneity, which implies a communitarian conception of trust as its corollary. From points one and two above follows that we need to think in relation to media of trust not simply as a two-point relationship in a limited national framework of political communication and decision making. Rather, in order to fully account for the diversity and complexity of configurations of media and trust in the space of politics extending between the institutional arrangements of liberal democracy and "counter democracy" and in the digital information space in particular, we need to specify not just the relationship between truster (A) and trustee (B), but we need to define in each case the context (C) and the content

(D) of the trust relationship. Even trust in news media is not a binary relationship. A truster (A) who watches the evening news trusts the news media (B) to enable the viewer to act as a competent citizen (C) through accurate information (D), while a reader (A) of the *Wall Street Journal* trusts the paper (B) to facilitate investment decisions (c) through accurate political information and market data (D). Furthermore, in an increasingly contested space of communication, in which information is not just resource of state governance reliably provided in the clearly circumscribed, monodirectional setting of mass media but can be anything from a resource of counter-democracy or the formation of cultural identities in migrant communities obtained through informal distribution networks to an element of hybrid warfare, a concept of trust which, however implicitly, assumes a coherent community of trusters and trustees obviously loses much of its heuristic and explanatory power. Rather, when confronted with an activist video or a twitter post from an unknown and unaccredited source initial the viewer's or reader's default attitude may well be one of distrust. Here trust is not just a matter of giving "yes, no, maybe" answers to a questionnaire. Trust, if and when it is established, emerges from a critical argument in which reasons to trust or distrust source and content are weighed against each other. In diverse societies and multi-layered transnational spaces of communication trust in media, in other words, is always already a form of justified trust (Forst 2022), whether in the form of internal justification, i.e. based on specific reasons related to the way in which the trustee acts (e.g. the bio and track record of previous posts of a twitter source) or in the form of normative justification, i.e. public commitments of the trusted to act morally or fairly. Crucially, the reasons for justified trust concern not just the content or the institutional frameworks of communication, but the form as well. In communication, aesthetics can be a source of trust. In documentary films, for instance, unedited long takes signal credibility by avoiding the artifice of montage. What is required, then, is a different model of the media user and their engagement with media formats and information than the one offered by the black box model of the established paradigm of trust and media research, one that accounts for various modes of justification in the transition from mistrust to distrust to trust.

In particular, we need to understand that trust in media is a matter of norms, or rather of a negotiation between viewer/user/citizens' preferences and perceived social norms. The rise of partisan alternative media which no longer adhere to the norms of balance and factuality may well be a case of demand and supply rather than an actual shift in preferences. Recent gains of extreme right-wing parties in Europe, for instance, can be explained through a shift in norms induced by political entrepreneurs like Trump exploiting exogenous shocks like the 2008 financial crisis and migration in the wake of the Syrian Civil War. Sensing an opening these entrepreneurs adopt rhetoric display behavior which breaks existing norms and lowers the social cost of acting on right-wing/authoritarian preferences for voters (Valentim 2024). Right wing parties, in other words, supply a demand which was hidden by preference falsification. The rise of right-wing parties always goes hand in hand with attacks on public broadcasting and polemical concepts such as "Lügenpresse" (lying press), a term lifted from the vocabulary of National Socialism and reactivated in the course of the COVID epidemic in Germany. Rather than an erosion of trust it can be useful to think of this rise of distrust in legacy media as a matter of shifting norms and lowered social costs of acting on preferences. To fully understand trust and distrust of media, then, we should ask whether there is an alignment or a conflict of preferences and social norms in the public's response to authoritative sources of knowledge and information.

To sum up: Spectatorship and Ocular Democracy could be the way

Making things more complicated to account for the complexity of an object of study creates potential pitfalls. With regards to media and trust the choice seems unavoidable, however. What we can do to reduce, or at least limit complexity is to focus on specific settings or configurations to develop a better understanding of the dynamics of trust and conflict in media and communication. If the question is how and under which conditions conflict can lead to trust, we need to define a setting of communication in which an engagement with media formats can be observed in such a way as to allow us to develop more general assumptions about trust, conflict and media, and put a specific focus on the question of potential tensions between preferences and norms in the viewer/user's relationship to media.

In what follows I want to turn to the concept of spectatorship as a key to develop the outlines of such an understanding trust in media. In democratic theory, spectatorship has emerged as a concept to rethink democratic politics beyond the sporadic engagement of elections. In that view democracy is not just about giving a voice (and vote) to the people, but about empowering the people's gaze (Greene 2009). For a long time, spectatorship has been cast in terms of a passive, receptive attitude, but it can also be rethought as a critical activity of probing and making judgments (Rancière 2011).

I propose to focus on documentary spectatorship to study the dynamics of trust and conflict in media. Documentary film and media are an easily recognizable form of audiovisual representation which combines a factual with a more or less explicitly normative perspective on social realities and addresses the viewer as a citizen with political agency (Hediger 2021). Documentaries usually commit to democratic access to social reality and open a space for democratic deliberation about the justification for possible courses of action with regard to the challenge addressed in the film. By virtue of its deliberative function and as an exercise in public reason, i.e. in the exchange of reasons in a framework of discursive rationality (Forst 2001), documentary plays an important role in the cognitive division of labor of democracy.

I want to focus on a specific example, Ra'anan Alexandrowicz's 2019 film "The Viewing Booth", a film in which test subjects respond to and comment on the trustworthiness

of activist videos about the conflict in Israel/Palestine. This film can be described as a "theoretical object" in the sense of Hubert Damisch, a cultural configuration particularly apt to produce theory (Damisch 1998). Alexandrowicz' film functions both as an artwork and experimental system (Rheinberger 1994), a set-up which offers an analysis and provokes new questions for further research. It is, as Alexandrowicz himself puts it, part of a "small but stubborn lineage of work that turns the camera towards the viewer" (Alexandrowicz 2019). Specifically, with a view to the deliberative function of documentary one can argue that "The Viewing Booth" is a meta-documentary, or rather a documentary which engages not simply in an exchange of reasons, but in an exchange of reasons about reasons to trust.

Film scholars tend to treat films as objects of study, and film analysis aims to describe and analyze formal and structural aspects of the film to explain its aesthetic impact. What follows differs from this approach as I will engage in an analysis and a commentary of a text which in itself is concerned with reaching a better understanding of trust in and through media.

2. Documentary spectatorship between communitarian and justified trust: A Test case (not just) for trust and media research

Ra'anan Alexandrowicz is an Israeli filmmaker who now lives and works in the United States.[3] Among his works are a trilogy of films on the Middle East conflict around Israel/Palestine. "The Inner Tour" (2001) accompanies a group of Palestinians form the occupied territories on a tour through Israel on the eve of the Second Intifada. In "The Law in these Parts" (2011) Alexandrowicz creates a setting in which, as an Israeli citizen, he holds the judges and lawyers responsible for the legal framework of the post-1967 to account and reconstructs the legal and political history of the occupation in the process. In "The Viewing Booth" Alexandrowicz invites American students with an interest in Israel and the Middle East to watch activist videos from human rights organizations, the Israeli Defense Force and settler organization and respond to the videos on camera.[4] The film focuses on one student, Maia Levi, who comes from a Jewish middle class family with strong ties to Israel and emerges as the protagonist because of her remarkable ability to reflect on and articulate the dynamics of distrust and trust in dealing with partisan activist videos.

Most of the videos critical of the occupation were produced by B'Tselem, an Israeli non-government organization founded by human rights lawyers, activists and Knesset members in 1989 with the goal of documenting human rights violations in the occupied territories. One of the key tools used by B'Tselem in their activism are short observational documentary videos of interactions – and mostly confrontations – between IDF forces and Israeli security personnel and Palestinians in public spaces in the occupied territories. These videos have been made available through B'Tselem's website. Their intent is to address the broadest possible audience of Israeli citizens, with the aim of creating a critical mass of political momentum based on the evidence of human rights violations to force the Israeli government to change course.

Activist video and/as social documentary

B'Tselem videos thus function like classical social documentaries. What we now call documentary first emerges in the 1920s. "Documentaire" was a common genre term for travel films in the 1900s and 1910s, when French film companies dominated the world market. "Documentary" in the sense that we now know is a term first coined by John Grierson, a Scottish philosopher, producer, filmmaker and theorists (Grierson 1966). As a philosopher, Grierson was of the Kantian persuasion, and one of his main concerns was the fate and survival of liberal democracy under the onslaught of fascism and other forms of totalitarianism in the 1920s and 1930s. Documentary in the sense that Grierson defined it – an understanding which became widely accepted beyond the anglophone world after the Second World War – can be understood as a symptom of and a reaction to a perceived crisis of liberal democracy in the 1920s. Three factors contributed to that perceived crisis: The ascendancy of competing, authoritarian and totalitarian models of society, the growing complexity of modern societies,and the rapid extension of the voting franchise after the First World War, in particular the extension of the franchise to women. The growing complexity and voting extension factors to what American political scientist Walter Lippman diagnosed as a crisis of the ideal of the "omni-competent citizen" (Lippman 201). Citizen and voting franchise holders could no longer be trusted to know enough about the issues at hand to make truly informed decisions. "Documentary" in the sense of Grierson was intended as a form of civic education which would contribute towards the restoration of the ideal of the "omni-competent citizen". Documentaries come in many varieties, and early documentaries in particularly tend to address audiences in an authoritative, top-down fashion. As a general rule, however, they invite audiences to engage with reality in a deliberative manner and sustained by discursive rationality. In that sense the documentary can be described as a format for democratic deliberation.

Among the varieties of documentary, the social documentary relies perhaps most strongly on the force of the better argument. It is a form of documentary which offers not just civic education, but an encouragement to political action. Social documentaries portray social realities which run counter to principles of justice, fairness and good governance. They address their audience as responsible citizens and political agents and invite them to do something about the problem they depict. Most social documentaries

3 https://www.onceinabluemoonfilms.com/

4 The informal trilogy of „The Inner Tour", "The Law in These Parts" and "The Viewing Booth" was screened with introductions and public debates under the title "The Record and the Narrative. The Documentary Cinema of Ra'anan Alexandrowicz" at Kino im Deutschen Filmmuseum as part of Ra'anan Alexandrowicz' ConTrust Research Fellowship on February 11 and 12, 2025.

contain no direct call to action, however. Rather, they create an experience of what Judith N. Skhlar has proposed to call "passive injustice" (Skhlar 1992): When we become witness to an injustice for which we are not directly responsible and remain passive, i.e. neglect to redress the injustice, then we experience a tension between our normative ideas and our factual inactivity, i.e. an experience of passive injustice. B'Tselem are a textbook case of social documentaries which create a sense of passive injustice to elicit a response in the form of political action from their audience.

YouTube and the missing passive injustice effect

When youtube went online in 2006, Ra'anan Alexandrowciz was convinced that this new platform would be a game changer for political activism. As Alexandrowicz writes about his extensive archival research for "The Law in These Parts":

> I had always accepted the paradigm that the more that people were made aware of injustice and oppression, the less that oppression and injustice can endure. But now, thinking back to these media objects—thousands of news stories, documentary films, witness videos, and even fact-based comedies—prompts a question: how can we reconcile this extensive critical documentation of an ongoing human rights travesty with the apparent failure to end it? (Alexandrowicz 2019)

The expectation, in other words, was that once the injustices their documentary videos depicted became visible to a broad audience in Israel and, equally importantly, to a global audience, then change would become inevitable. Instead, something different happened. Settler organizations and the Israel Defense Force started to produce their own documentary videos, using the same documentary techniques and sometimes depicting the same events, but from their perspective. It turned out that there was also a significant audience for these videos, which ran counter to human rights activist perspective. Rather than let the principles of justice enshrined in human rights triumph, the video activism clash reproduced the political stalemate on the ground.

One way of putting what happened here is to argue that the documentary form itself had become contested. When former US vice president Al Gore wanted to alert the world to the risks involved in climate change he produced "An Incovenient Truth", a documentary, which came out in 2006 and became a worldwide success in cinemas and on other platforms (Aufdereheide 2006; North 2007; Murray/Hampton 2007). But when the German AfD wants to undermine climate science, they also use the documentary form and produce videos which they then distribute via youtube and in snippets via tiktok (Allgaier 2019). The documentary form, it seems (but it would be important to operationalize this hypothesis), benefits from a basic and resilient form of generalized trust. Its mode of address and formal features alone appear to be sufficient to elicit a default attitude of trust in audiences, even as documentaries engage in a discourse that also invites distrust and opens itself up to both internal and normative justification. Documentary, one could argue, is something of an "invisible institution" in the sense of Kenneth Arrow, or rather, somewhat paradoxically, a visible form sustained by an invisible institution (Arrow 1974). It is in this sense that documentary is not just an interesting, but ultimately random case study, but a liminal test case for conceptions of trust and media.

"The Viewing Booth" is the film which Ra'anan Alexandrowicz made in response to his disillusionment with youtube and impact, or lack thereof, of the visual record of human rights abuses under occupation. Alexandrowicz wanted to find out why the "passive injustice" framework and the assumption of discursive rationality built into the social documentary mode of address did not work as intended and expected. To answer that question, he designed an experimental set-up. The "Viewing Booth" of the title is a cabin in which test persons have access to an interface with a selection of 40 activist documentary videos on the middle east conflict and Israeli policies in the occupied territories from both sides of the aisle. In 2017 invited students of Temple University in Philaldelphia to participate in the experiment. The test persons were then invited to enter the booth and select any video that might interest them. They were then filmed by a camera which registers their reactions to the videos. Alexandrowicz filmed about nine hours of material with more than a dozen test persons.

"Swinging back and forth between empathy and suspicion": How to not trust your eyes

The 70-minute film Alexandrowicz ultimately released focused almost exclusively on only one person in the sample, Maia Levi, a Temple university student from an upper-middle class suburban Jewish family from outside of Philadelphia (Alexandrowicz 2019). Alexandrowicz narrowed his focus down on Levi for two reasons: because her political stance differed from Alexandrowicz's and aligned more with the Israeli government than B'Tselem or the opposition and, perhaps more importantly, she was highly articulate and transparent in her reactions to the videos, particularly, as Alexandrowicz puts it, her ability to swing "back and forth between empathy and suspicion" and reflect on it. Levi had, in fact, been warned against B'Tselem's videos by her mother, and she goes into the viewing booth with a strong pro-Israel, pro-government attitude. As a matter of fact, her first question when watching a video is always whether makes Israel look good or bad. Even when she finds the content shocking, she struggles to negotiate what she sees with her basic assumption that the IDF are "the good guys", both in terms of adhering to human rights protocols and their basic intentions. What she brings to the experiment, then, is a reserve of communitarian trust: a basic trust in the honesty and good intentions of a certain set of actors, a trust which is based on the assumption of ethno-religious and cultural kinship and thus requires no justification. But what she also brings to the experiment is a keen sense of the pitfalls of passive injustice. What troubles her about a video which depicts a violent altercation or a midnight razzia is that she could find herself in a spectatorial position where what she sees objectively constitutes an injustice by her own standards of fairness and justice. The drama of Maya Levi in "The Viewing Booth", we

could argue, is that of someone having her communitarian trust assumptions challenged by documentary representations and finding herself forces to move towards justified trust. We can watch and hear Levi argue with herself, and sometimes with Ra'anan Alexandrowicz, about the extent to which her basic trust in the good intentions and decency of the IDF comes into conflict with a sense of passive injustice triggered by what she sees in the films.

Two scenes are particularly important. In one video we see an IDF platoon wearing masks wake up a Palestinian family in the middle of the night and search the apartment. The main characters in the video, so to speak, are two young boys who are woken up and are confused about what is going on, but remain calm and composed. Levi is shocked by what she sees at first, but then instantly starts to actively distrusts the veracity of the documentary representation, searching for signs that the scene was, in fact, staged to make the Israeli soldiers look bad. Her main cue is the fact that the two boys remain calm rather than start to cry. As Alexandrowicz later points out to her, she does not comment on the fact that the Israeli soldiers are masked. This could either be read as another cue for a staged performance, but also as a feature that makes the IDF soldiers look particularly problematic; masking is, in fact, not standard procedure in policing missions. As a matter of fact Levi filters out the masks and focuses on elements of the video which are more conducive to a deconstructive reading which legitimizes her distrust.

The second scene concerns a video in which a group of young men can be seen throwing stones across a border fence at a group of people which, judging by the soundtrack, includes women and who are standing behind the camera. As the young men attempt to hit the people behind the camera a group of Israeli soldiers can be seen lingering by the fence and refusing to intervene. This scene is particularly instructive because it can teach us something about discursive rationality and affect. Levi is clearly shocked by the scene but has trouble identifying the stone throwers. They could be Israeli or Palestinian, and it is difficult to determine their identity because they are too far from the camera and ambiguously dressed. For several minutes Levi withholds her moral judgment, and with it her ultimate affective assessment of what she sees. Ultimately, she determines that the stone throwers are Israeli settlers, which causes a moral problem for her, because she clearly disapproves of their action per se – a conflict between attitudes and preferences and an internalized social norm. In order to harmonize her sense of passive injustice with her communitarian trust in the basic goodness of the Israeli settlers, she shifts the focus to the video's lack of context. Because we are not given any context to the scene, she argues, we cannot fully assess whether the action of the stone throwers is transgressive and morally reprehensive or, in fact, justified. Faced with a choice of trusting her own eyes, so to speak, and trusting the veracity and honesty of the documentary footage or distrusting the film in order to be able to maintain her favorable predisposition towards the settlers and her communitarian trust in the justified nature of their actions, she choses to distrust the film. The scene shows how internal justification and normative justification of trust in social documentaries work, but it shows something else, too: It shows that affect in relations of trust is fundamentally a judgment, not an irrational or diffuse element of noise, but part and parcel of the process of justification.

Documentary, deliberation and limits of discursive rationality

The disquieting aspect of both scenes is, of course, that even though Levi engages in a careful and sophisticated argument to justify her trust she ends back up with her original trust pattern, only now with a veneer of justification. A few weeks after the original recording Alexandrowicz asked Levi back for another round of filming. This time, he showed her no more videos, but confronted her with his recordings of her reactions, and he films her reactions to her own reactions. The ultimate outcome of this second round of filming is that Levi tells Alexandrowicz that for all the doubt and distrust that she had subjected herself to in the setting of the viewing booth, she now felt more securely confirmed in her original attitudes and convictions than before the experiment. The Hebrew title of the film is "The Mirror", and the film ends with Alexandrowicz stating that Levi's reaction felt to him like looking in a mirror and discovering a harsh, dispiriting picture of himself.

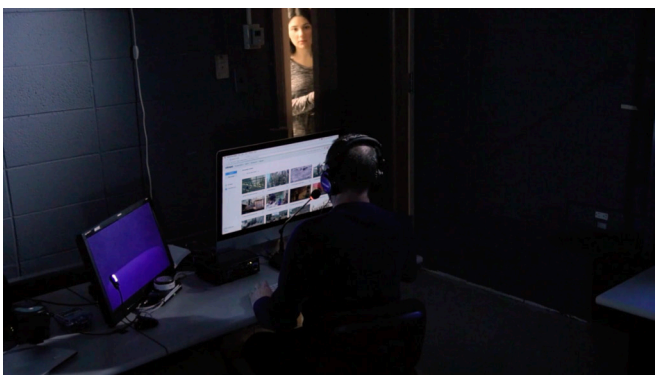
Levi's affirmation of her original attitudes is very much in line with the results of the study which marks the beginning of empirical research into media effects, Hovland and Lumsdaine's 1947 book "Experiments in Mass communication", which presents the results of a study conducted in 1943 on the impact of the US army's war propaganda short film series "Why we fight" (Hovland/Lumsdaine 2017). Directed by famous Hollywood directors such as Frank Capra, the "Why we fight" films served to explain the war aims of the European campaign to US soldiers enlisted to fight in the North African and European theaters. The main result of the study was that the films increased the soldier's awareness of the war aims, but had no measurable effect on their attitudes towards the war or their assessment of the enemy. Information yes, persuasion no. A similar result appears in Michael Kosfeld et al.'s recent study on political grouping and polarization in the United States, where the exposure to information ultimately leads to a reinforcement and hardening of the original political attitudes (Bauer/Chen/Hett/Kosfeld 2023).

What "The Viewing Both" and a study of documentary spectatorship offers us is a model for the formation of trust in and through media which not only pries open but explodes the blackbox of binary trust models focused exclusively on news media and offers a view of spectatorship as a negotiation between preferences and social norms. The film's experimental set-up could be replicated for other topics, for instance videos on climate change (which Alexandrowicz has considered doing). One could also argue that approaches such as the counterforensics work on Hamas' attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing war in Gaza, resonate with the underlying assumptions and experimental

dynamics of the "The Viewing Booth's" research design, particularly the oscillation between empathy and doubt, but at scale (Romeo 2025).

At the same time, the ultimate failure of the discursive rationality expectation tied to documentary form and the persistence of pre-existing preferences raises important questions. As a meta-documentary about the exchanges of reasons about reasons to trust, "The Viewing Booth" confirms documentary's role as a space for deliberation, for the exchange of reasons in a framework of discursive rationality. At the same time the film works as a discovery mechanism, so to speak, for the limits of discursive rationality. In the figure of Maia Levi the film reveals the persistence of communitarian trust patterns in conflict and thus the difficulty, if not impossibility of achieving the goal of reciprocal acceptance of the better argument which is the aspirational core of discursive rationality. But then, if the film shows that discursive rationality remains an unattainable normative ideal, it also shows its use value as an empirical heuristics. Or, to put it differently, "The Viewing Booth" demonstrates both the limits of discursive rationality and documentary's indispensable role as an aesthetic form for democratic deliberation in increasingly ocular democracy.

"The Viewing Booth": Set-up and Key Scenes[5]



5 (c) Ra'anan Alexandrowicz 2019. With permission by the author.

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