

The very fabric of society is breaking down around us. What the hell is there left to believe in?



- - Charlie Brooker
 - The Guardian, Monday 13 July 2009

It's all gone wrong. Our belief in everything has been shattered by a series of shock revelations that have shaken our core to its core. You can't move for toppling institutions. Television, the economy, the police, the House of Commons, and, most recently, the press ... all revealed to be jam-packed with liars and bastards and graspers and bullies and turds.

And we knew. We knew. But we were deep in denial, like a cuckolded partner who knows the sorry truth but tries their best to ignore it. Over the last 18 months the spotlight of truth has swung this way and that, and one institution after another was suddenly exposed as being precisely as rotten as we always thought it was. What's that? Phone-in TV quizzes might a bit of con? The economic boom is an unsustainable fantasy? Riot police can be a little "handy"? MPs are greedy? The News of the World might have used underhand tactics to get a story? What next? Oxygen is flavourless? Cows stink at water polo? Children are overrated? We knew all this stuff. We just didn't have the details.

After all their histrionic shrieking about standards in television, it was only a matter of time before the tabloids got it in the neck. Last Monday even the Press Complaints Commission, which is generally about as much use as a Disprin canoe, finally puffed up its chest and criticised the Scottish Sunday Express for its part in the Dunblane survivors' story scandal. You remember that, don't you? Back in March? When the Scottish Sunday Express ran a story about survivors of the Dunblane massacre who'd just turned 18? It fearlessly investigated their Facebook profiles and discovered that some of them enjoyed going to pubs and getting off with other teenagers, then ran these startling revelations on its front page, with the headline ANNIVERSARY SHAME OF DUNBLANE SURVIVORS.

"The Sunday Express can reveal how, on their social networking sites, some of them have boasted about alcoholic binges and fights," crowed the paper. "For instance, [one of them] - who was hit by a single bullet and watched in horror as his classmates died - makes rude gestures in pictures he posted on his Bebo site, and boasts of drunken nights out."

Nice, yeah?

As I'm sure you recall, there was an immediate outcry, which was covered at length in all the papers. You remember their outraged front pages, right? All their cries of SICK and FOUL and VILE in huge black text? Remember that? No? Of course you don't. Because the papers largely kept mum about the whole thing. Instead, the outrage blew up online. Bloggers kicked up a stink; 11,000 people signed a petition and delivered it to the PCC. The paper printed a mealy-mouthed apology that apologised for the general tenor of the article, while whining that they hadn't printed anything that wasn't publicly accessible online. All it had done was gather it up and disseminate it in the most humiliating and revolting way possible. Last Monday's PCC ruling got next to zero coverage. Maybe if it had happened after the News of the World phone-hacking story broke it would have gathered more. Or maybe not. Either way, the spotlight of truth is, for now, pointing at the press.

But this is just one small part of the ongoing, almighty detox of everything. There's been such an immense purge, such an exhaustive ethical audit, no one's come out clean. There's muck round every arse. But if the media's rotten and the government's rotten and the police are rotten and the city's rotten and the church is rotten - if life as we know it really is fundamentally rotten - what the hell is there left to believe in? Alton Towers? Greggs the bakers? The WI?

The [internet](#). Can we trust in that? Of course not. Give it six months and we'll probably discover Google's sewn together by orphans in sweatshops. Or that [Wi-Fi](#) does something horrible to your brain, like eating your fondest memories and replacing them with drawings of cross-eyed bats and a strong smell of puke. There's surely a great dystopian sci-fi novel yet to be written about a world in which it's suddenly discovered that wireless broadband signals deaden the human brain, slowly robbing us of all emotion, until after 10 years of exposure we're all either rutting in stairwells or listlessly reversing our cars over our own offspring with nary the merest glimmer of sympathy or pain on our faces. It'll be set in Basingstoke and called, "Cuh, Typical."

What about each other? Society? Can we trust us? Doubt it. We're probably not even real, as was revealed in the popular documentary The

Matrix. That bloke next door? Made of pixels. Your co-workers? Pixels. You? One pixel. One measly pixel. You haven't even got shoes, for Christ's sake.

As the very fabric of life breaks down around us, even language itself seems unreliable. These words don't make sense. The vowels and consonants you're hearing in your mind's ear right now are being generated by mere squiggles on a page or screen. Pointless hieroglyphics. Shapes. You're staring at shapes and hearing them in your head. When you see the word "trust", can you even trust that? Why? It's just shapes!

Right now all our faith has poured out of the old institutions, and there's nowhere left to put it. We need new institutions to believe in, and fast. Doesn't matter what they're made of. Knit them out of string, wool, anything. Quickly, quickly. Before we start worshipping insects.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jul/13/charlie-brooker-corrupt-institutions-faith>