Discurso Ethan Zuckerman
Invitado especial
41a. Premio Nacional de Periodismo Simón Bolívar

Señor José Alejandro Cortés,
Señor Miguel Cortés, Presidente del Grupo Bolívar
Señores Miembros del Jurado,
Señora Silvia Martínez, Directora del Premio,
Señores ganadores del Premio de Periodismo Simón Bolívar,
Señoras y señores, perdóname, pero mi español es muy mal y Ustedes vayan a entender mejor si hablo en Inglés con la traducción. Lo siento, disculpe.

I wanted to take this opportunity to talk about a deep change that I think is occurring in the world we share. Since I'm a professor at MIT, you are probably expecting me to tell you about a technological shift -the rise of synthetic biology or of quantum computing. But please don't worry - I don't understand that stuff either. Instead, I'm here as a journalist and a publisher, and I want to talk about a social and political shift I'm seeing in my lab and in my reporting work. It's a shift that helps explain what's happened in recent events both in Colombia and in the US. And it's a shift that's changing what it means to be a journalist and what our industry needs to do.

I was last in Bogota in August, just three months ago. Talking to friends and colleagues, I felt the great hope many people had that the 52 year civil war might be coming to an end, that the amazing transformation of cities like Bogota and Medellin would become what Colombia was known for globally, instead of years of violence. I also got the strong sense that peace was hard, that achieving a solution that Colombians thought was fair and just was going to require much more than an agreement and a referendum.

In the wake of the vote on October 2, Colombia looks like a nation divided, with 49.8% voting sí and 50.2% voting no. I want to suggest that Colombia is divided in a much more serious way, between 62% who didn't vote and 38% who did. The group that won in the referendum was not Uribe supporters, not those who wanted to see more FARC

leaders prosecuted. Those who won the vote were the 62% who had so little faith in the democratic process that they didn't vote.

It's very fashionable to beat up on the people who didn't vote - they were too lazy, they weren't educated enough about the issues, it was raining and they didn't care enough about their civic duty to go out and get wet. I want to suggest that it's dangerous to dismiss this group as lazy or uneducated.

Let me give you an example from the United States. In our elections, we see a great difference in turnout between old people and young people - retired people vote at almost twice the rate of people in their twenties. People read these statistics and declare that we have a crisis in civics! Young people are so selfish, so obsessed with their phones and music and media that they aren't paying any attention to the world around them.

But there's other data that contradicts this. Young people in America are volunteering at higher rates than they ever have. Huge percentages of people are active online in political discussions about racism and about sexual harassment, writing online and sharing stories of their experiences. Most of my students aren't going into politics or into government service, but they are starting businesses that have the twin goals of making money and of making social change, building products and services around alternative energy and organic farming. They may not be voting, but they are profoundly active in their communities and in civic life.

So what's going on here? This isn't a crisis in civics, it's a crisis in confidence, specifically a crisis in confidence in institutions.

The Gallup Research survey asks Americans the same question every year: do you have confidence that the government will do the right thing all or most of the time? In 1964, 71% of people said yes, they had confidence in the government. Last year, the answer was 13%. And who can blame them? The US congress passes fewer laws than ever, there's less compromise between our two parties, and it's so difficult to accomplish everything that the government periodically shuts down, and is indanger of defaulting on its debt, not because we are out of money, but because we can't agree to sign the check.

But Americans aren't just losing confidence in government - the same survey asks about confidence in other institutions: the church, banks, big business, universities, the health care system, the police. In the US, confidence is down in every large institution with the exception of the military.

So I have some bad news - mistrust is on the rise around the world, not just in the US. The research firm Eurobarometer looks at these same questions of trust in institutions around the world, and they find that trust is diminishing in most democracies. There's

two places trust is increasing - the most successful democracies in Scandinavia and Northern Europe and in autocratic states, like China and the United Arab Emirates.

What happens at times of high mistrust? People stop participating in the political process. If you don't trust that the government can or will carry out the will of the people, why bother to vote? Why run for office or support the campaigns of those who do? Elections continue, but the people who are elected know that they lack a strong mandate -they were elected by a plurality of voters, and they know the majority may not support anything they do. The people who continue to participate are those most passionate... and most extreme. We end up with paralysis, because the most passionate participants are not willing to compromise. And this paralysis leads to more disengagement from voters - they were worried that government couldn't accomplish anything, and this paralysis simply proves they were right.

When we lose confidence in institutions, we tend to transfer our trust to individuals. In the US, that's leading to one of the strangest elections in history, where a man with no experience governing, a history of business failures and a track record of offending nearly everyone in our country stands a chance of becoming our president. But mistrust in institutions doesn't have to lead to demagoguery. It can lead to all new ways for citizens to participate in civic life.

Around the world, I am seeing citizens look for ways to make change outside the political system. My students don't want to go into government, but they do want to go into business. Last week, I met with two students from India who've invented a pollution control device that filters particles out of exhaust. You can attach it to a car, a generator, a motorbike, and not only does it reduce your emissions, but their technology can turn those particles into ink. So you can drive your car or run your generator, and fill the toner cartridge for your laser printer at the same time. They're convinced that they can help people make money and reduce emissions at the same time, and they might be right.

Making change through technology and markets is a great way for individuals to try to make change when they lose faith in their ability to pass laws. But perhaps the most powerful way people can make change is by trying to shape social norms, the unwritten rules of how we interact with each other in society. In the US, you may know, we're having very serious problems with African Americans being killed by police. This isn't a problem of law: ¡t's illegal for the police to kill someone unless their lives are at risk. It's a problem of social norms: due to America's tragic racial history, many white people perceive young black men to be dangerous. Ending the violence means changing this deep-seated perception.

Activists involved with the Black Lives Matter movement have used social media to call attention to this crisis of police violence - they've demanded the news media do a better

job of covering cases where black people are killed by police by making victims famous. Our lab did a study of these efforts and found there were ten times as many stories about black victims of police violence after the movement started than before it began.

This form of social change is uncomfortable for us as journalists. For one thing, the press is an institution that's subject to almost as much mistrust as government. And now activists are telling us that we're not doing our jobs right, that we need to cover this story and not that one. They are telling us that we're not always living up to our own ethical standards, that our reporting sometimes makes complicated situations more confusing.

I want to invite you to look at the situation a different way. Activists have realized that making media is a way of making change. What they've realized is what we do as journalists is powerful, and that they can do this work, too. We have a natural tendency to defend our territory, to complain about these interlopers invading our profession as we struggle to keep doing the important work we do. But I believe that they way forward is to cooperate with people who are making media to make change. I believe activists and citizens can make news that is fair and trustworthy, and that we can learn new lessons from them as well.

My friend Michael Schudson has an essay called "Six or Seven Things News Can Do For Democracy". Some of what he asks the press to do is familiar to us - to inform, investigate and analyze the events that take place in the world around us. These are tasks everyone who proudly calls themselves a journalist knows how to do well, and we can help citizens learn to do this work as well.

But Schudson asks the news to do things we're less comfortable with. He argues that it's news's job to make us empathize with stories of people who are unfamiliar to us. That the news needs to provide a public space for discussion of the issues of the day. That sometimes the job of news is to empower people to mobilize and take political action. Some of these are places where we can learn lessons from activists, from citizen journalists, from people who are using the media to make change and to feel powerful even when they feel deeply disempowered by
the institutions around them.

Schudson ends his essay by suggesting that news can help people understand and appreciate our democratic system and how it works. Here I want to suggest that our job isn't to explain how we think democracy is supposed to work, or how democracy used to work. Our job is to help people understand how democracy works - and doesn't work - now.

Often, people are right to be mistrustful of institutions - our job is to discover and reveal institutions that are broken or corrupt. But we cannot stop there, or we leave our

readers informed but disempowered. We have to help citizens - our readers - understand how they, personally, can make change in the world, at the ballot box, as consumers, as entrepreneurs, through social media, through technology. We have to document where the levers of power are in society today and help people learn how to move them.

Maybe it's not fair to put this challenge on the media, an institution that's going through its own struggles to be financially sustainable. But l believe the answer to our future as an industry begins with ensuring we are relevant as a civic actor. And the brilliance and bravery of the journalists in Colombia we are honoring today and who have done groundbreaking work through years past gives me great confidence that you are all up to the task. Thanks for listening to me and thank you for the work you do.