

## Interview with Jason Parry for the TrustTalk podcast

*(The Interview can be listened to on the TrustTalk podcast: <https://pod.co/trusttalk> or on all major podcast platforms.)*

**Voice Over:** Welcome to TrustTalk. Our guest today is Jason Rhys Parry, senior content R&D at Sapienship, the global organization co-founded by Itzik Yahav and Yuval Noah Harari that supports organizations using technologies to address global problems, animal welfare and developing sustainable food production systems. He talks about the printing revolution, the role of footnotes in using sources of information in the digital age, and the effect of hiding academic research behind paywalls. In the interview, we cover the replication crisis in science affecting trust in science, the unexpected, positive climate effects of international climate treaties like the Antarctica Treaty and the Montreal Protocol. The role of trust in modern democratic states, and the risk of a technological arms race as a result of the war in Ukraine. Your host today, Severin de Wit.

**Podcast Host:** Jason, thank you for joining us at TrustTalk podcast. You are part of Sapienship, a social impact company. I assumed that the name comes from the term homo sapiens or Latin for wise man. Is that right?

**Jason Parry:** The company's name does refer to the name of our species, as you suggest, but it also refers to this idea that, as Buckminster Fuller once pointed out, Planet Earth is a kind of spaceship on which we're all trying to get on together. And so in order for this planet of sapiens, this Sapienship to function, we're all going to have to cooperate. And so the name kind of speaks to this mission that Sapienship has as a company, which is to foster the spirit of global cooperation.

**Podcast Host:** It's also the title of a book by one of your founders of Sapienship, Yuval Noah Harari. It's called Sapiens, right?

**Jason Parry:** Yes. Yes.

**Podcast Host:** As the theme of this podcast is trust, what role does trust play in the work of Sapienship?

**Jason Parry:** So trust plays a major role in what we do because it's really the crucial ingredient and the necessary basis for producing and cultivating the kind of global cooperation that I was just talking about. And so we're trying to do this in different ways. One way is making direct charitable donations actually to organizations that are furthering the work of global corporations. So recently, the founders, Itzik and Yuval, as well as the company, made donations to the World Health Organization and to UNICEF. But for the most part, we are a company, a group of content creators and academic researchers who are trying to produce content that clarifies the stakes for global cooperation in the 21st century. And so for the most part, we're focused on ecological collapse, technological disruption, and the threat particularly acute at the moment, of global war. And we're focused on those issues because they are transnational problems, which is another way of saying, I think that none of them can be solved unilaterally. And we think that this message is really important. So we're trying to get it to as many different audiences as possible through different channels, through graphic novels and children's books and social media campaigns and exhibitions and other outlets as well.

**Podcast Host:** Like podcasts.

**Jason Parry:** Like podcasts. Exactly.

**Podcast Host:** I would like to talk about the long view of trust. Yuval and Sapiens's ideas about the history of trust in human societies and how that history is being affected by modern technology.

**Jason Parry:** So, you know, if you take the long view of trust, I think you can see that every period of technological innovation produces a corollary set of mechanisms for building trust and establishing trust. We're living in the digital age, which is its own kind of revolution. But if we were to look at a previous revolution, we can look at the printing revolution and see kind of what happens there is maybe it's a guide to what's in store for us. And if you take the long view, you can see that there are these mechanisms that came out of print culture. I'm talking about things like footnotes, which were techniques for building trust. And if you look into the history of the footnote, which is actually surprisingly contentious and interesting, you see that it doesn't come out of scientific communication. It actually comes out of theology and theological

debates. If you read ancient writers, people like Thucydides, who tends not to cite his sources very rigorously evaluating sources, was something ancient writers did so that their readers didn't have to. But the printing press really changed that. And one of the reasons why the Reformation took off so quickly and succeeded where prior or previous challenges to church authority had failed, was because of the printing press. And these ideas could spread so quickly. And as a result, you had this religious war, that was partially waged through the media of books and pamphlets in a similar way to how today war is partially waged through social media. And the footnote kind of emerged as a technique that writers use to bolster their credibility so they could cite passages in Scripture or other spiritual authorities to substantiate the arguments they were making in the text. As a result, poor students are forced when writing their first research papers to learn how to format the footnotes and citations. And there's still no agreed-upon way of doing this by different journals and different disciplines all have their own styles. So this old mechanism for building trust, the footnote, is still being refined. Meanwhile, we've transitioned from a print world to a digital world, and this has created a new crisis of trust. And so it seems to me that we'll have to create new mechanisms for establishing the trustworthiness of sources in the digital age. I don't know exactly what form this will take. There was a few centuries between when the footnotes started and when we got something like an academic citation that we recognized today. So if history is any guide, it may take a while.

**Podcast Host:** Let's talk about trust in global cooperation. The challenges that Sapienship has identified, you just mentioned a few, but I would like to add ecological collapse, disruptive technology and global war will require countries around the world to make credible commitments, and this will require trust. Is this possible?

**Jason Parry:** So if you look around, you can find examples of successful global cooperation. And we'd like to highlight these examples because they show us that the kind of global coordination that will need a lot of in the 21st century has been done, that it is possible even in the contentious realm of geopolitics. I like to look at the example of the Antarctic Treaty system, which kind of set aside Antarctica for scientific research. We can imagine, I think, easily imagine a counterfactual world in which there was a bloody and brutal struggle for territory around the South Pole. But that's not what happened, right, we had the Antarctic Treaty and as a result, there's no resource exploitation in Antarctica, there's no militarization in Antarctica, at least in

theory, no one needs a visa to go to Antarctica. And I think it's tempting to say that there's something utopian about the Antarctic Treaty System, but really it's just a simple, well-designed mechanism that's held up pretty well. And when it comes to environmental issues, I think it's worth looking at the example of the Montreal Protocol, which was the agreement that led to the phase-out of substances causing ozone depletion. By all metrics, this was a success. UV radiation levels around the world are lower than they would be in the absence of the Montreal Protocol. And it's had some interesting side effects as well, actually, because of how UV radiation affects plant growth. There's been some recent research suggesting that the Montreal Protocol resulted in billions of tonnes of carbon being stored in plants that would otherwise be in the atmosphere. And we're talking about enough carbon to possibly raise global temperatures around one degree. So in a way, we already have a successful climate change agreement on the books it's just that wasn't its primary function. And that's kind of interesting. And maybe even on a strategic level, something to think about going forward, we can imagine an agreement about air pollution, which kills millions of people every year, that would have the very happy side effect of also mitigating climate change. As we review these examples, I think an important thing to keep in mind is that most people, I think, are aware of how poorly funded a lot of the institutions charged with carrying out these agreements are. The UN Biological Weapons Convention, for example, has an operating budget smaller than that of a typical McDonald's restaurant, which is just really shocking, especially considering how dangerous biological weapons could be. And so part of what we're trying to do is raise awareness about how crucial these kinds of organizations are and try and make support for these organizations a top priority.

**Podcast Host:** You just mentioned carbon emissions. Let's talk about trust and science. During the pandemic, we saw how trust in science, in this case, pharmaceutical and medical science, was questioned by a lot of people. How can we maintain or repair trust in science?

**Jason Parry:** Clearly, medicine is hard enough without the added threat of misinformation, and particularly in the realm of medicine, misinformation can be lethal. But I actually rarely see it mentioned in the larger discourse about misinformation that even if someone wanted to read peer-reviewed scientific papers on a topic, they often can't do so because they're behind paywalls. And this is despite the fact that so much of scientific research is funded by taxpayers. And there have been some steps recently to increase access, but the unfortunate truth is that a

lot of people are simply locked out of this wealth of information that's undergone at least a minimum of verification by other experts. And so to me, it seems slightly disingenuous to criticize people for going to conspiracy websites rather than reading scientific papers when the conspiracy websites are free and the scientific papers are often completely unaffordable. So I think one component of building trust, perhaps a good first step, would be simply making sure that the fruits of scientific research are available to people.

**Podcast Host:** That's a very good suggestion, actually, I talked about that with Roberto Gonda from the University of Pisa in Italy in episode 42 of the podcast, and also about the reliability of scientists because they work in an organization where they are peer-reviewed as opposed to experts that are a guest in a talk show and have to give their personal opinion about something that relates to science. Anyway, let's change the subject. Russell Hardy, in his contribution to Mark Warren's book *Democracy and Trust*, raised questions about the role of trust in the democracy on the ground of what he calls mistaken inference and the complexities of modern governance. He asked: "can a citizen ever be knowledgeable enough to trust government responsibly, or is trusting government merely an exercise in self-deception?"

**Jason Parry:** That's a really tough question because I can definitely see why it can seem difficult to trust a modern democratic state which is so complex and its mechanisms often so obscure. To your point, how can you realistically know enough about all these different departments and all these different agencies to trust what they're doing with any degree of confidence? I would suggest that, you know, this isn't a problem unique to modern centralized states, though, that even if in political societies with comparatively fewer moving parts, trust isn't something that emerges spontaneously. For example, you can look at plenty of forager societies and hunter-gatherer societies where vast amounts of resources are poured into rituals of gift-giving and sharing that are meant to kind of nurture trust and build trust both within groups and between groups. In later scenarios, you have medieval kingdoms which are simpler than modern democratic states. That doesn't seem to mean that they're any more trustworthy. And I think that part of what actually makes the modern democratic state seem so complex and so cumbersome is the fact that they tend to contain within themselves all these kind of mechanisms for checks and balances so that there are parts of the government whose job is just to watch over other parts of the government. And you also have these adjacent institutions, things like the media that are also exercising oversight. And this, I think, is

something really exceptional about modern democratic states. You tend not to see many investigative reporters in medieval kingdoms or in totalitarian states, for that matter. So maybe actually, that's that's a good rule of thumb, the more investigative reporters of government has monitoring it. The more you can trust that government.

**Podcast Host:** Let's dive a little bit more in the relationship between trust and technology. After decades of unbridled enthusiasm about all things digital, the public may be losing trust in technology. Online information isn't reliable, whether it appears in the form of news, search results or user reviews. Social media, in particular, is vulnerable to manipulation by hackers, foreign powers or manipulators. Personal data aren't necessarily private, and people are increasingly worried about automation and artificial intelligence taking humans' jobs. What's your view on this?

**Jason Parry:** Well, I think you've raised a whole constellation of problems that are kind of entwined. And if I may answering the kind of personal register when I was an educator, I had the privilege of teaching some truly brilliant students and I was always slightly disappointed to see some of them go off and get jobs, doing things like refining the algorithms that a social media platform uses for its targeted ads. It seemed like such a tragic misuse of human talent, a tragic misallocation of human talent. And I think that this isn't lost on the general public either. There are these very clever people using very sophisticated technologies to try and influence their behaviour one way or another. And as a result, I don't think it's necessarily surprising that we're seeing such an uptick in paranoia in the political sphere. And so part of what we're trying to do at Sapienship is, is really support those companies that are using technologies to really address some of these global problems that we've been talking about. Also things like animal welfare or developing sustainable food production systems. And we're in the early stages of other initiatives as well, which will hopefully create avenues for people all over the world to dedicate more brainpower to worthy causes. And these are just small provisional steps, but hopefully they can be part of a reform part of a broader conversation. I think a much-needed conversation about how to address this mismatch between the fact that we have these incredible, astonishing technological capacities and the fact that we put them to such mundane or even sinister uses. The fact that we have these capacities and we so often use them just to spy on people and sell them stuff.

**Podcast Host:** We talked about the various aspects of trust and research and science, but how about the intersection of those elements in intersection of research, trust and advocacy? How do you find the signal amidst the noise, so to speak?

**Jason Parry:** My background is in literature and philosophy, and as you can probably surmise that the various initiatives that statesmanship undertakes requires research in fields far outside of that. And I'm quite lucky in this respect to be part of a research team that has people from lots of different backgrounds. But even then there are plenty of projects that require each of us to go far outside our individual domains of expertise. So maybe it's worth just sharing a few techniques I've kind of picked up that have helped me evaluate information in fields that I'm not particularly well versed in. I think one important thing to keep in mind is that unfortunately there's a massive replication crisis happening in science. There are plenty of studies that are flawed. There are plenty of studies where subsequent experiments fail to replicate the results. And I think this means that whenever you're reading a new study, even if it's published in a top journal, even if lots of media sources are talking about it, you should always read it with a dose of skepticism, especially if the results are really astonishing. And on the one hand, this could make you skeptical of science in general, but on the other hand, I think, counterintuitively, it's a sign that science is a process capable of self-criticism and self-evaluation. The fact that we are aware that this replication crisis exists and that various institutions are taking steps to kind of mitigate that problem, it shows that science isn't infallible, but that it contains within itself mechanisms for course correction. Another thing is just reading as widely as possible because you're never sure where you'll see your intuition confirmed. It may be in the most unlikely of places. I like to use the example of Jared Diamond's book, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, in which he actually uses an idea from Leo Tolstoy's novel, *Anna Karenina*, to explain why certain animals were domesticated rather than others. And you wouldn't think that a novel about 19th-century Russian aristocrats would be very helpful in kind of articulating a concept from biology. But it turns out it is. And actually, I think this is another good rule of thumb that if you see your intuition reflected in or echoed in a literary classic, that's actually a very good sign that it's signal and not noise.

**Podcast Host:** That's a very nice example, Jason. And it reminds me of I have now 44 episodes on trust and by now I have spoken to so many different experts on trust. And I'm surprised by the fact that there still doesn't seem to be a uniform, commonly accepted definition of trust.

It's very much dependent. It's all of us also depends on who you ask, which is a little bit troublesome, because if we want to trust Trust, we better stick our heads together and come to a common understanding. I think I mentioned in one of the interviews the example of a big conference on trust where the first question was asked, can we define trust? And the whole conference was just about defining trust. The good thing is it gives rise to further exploration like I'm now doing with you. We can't have a conversation without also referring to the sad situation that's currently occurring in Ukraine and therefore also in the world. I would say. Trust is the first victim of war, trust between diplomats, trust in actors being candid about their plans and so on. What's your view on the role of trust in times of war?

**Jason Parry:** First of all, obviously our hearts go out to the people of Ukraine whose lives have been uprooted and destroyed by this conflict. And I think one of the reasons why this conflict is particularly concerning is that there is this trust that neighbouring countries won't invade one another, this norm against wars of conquest, which has been very successful in the post-war period. And this has freed, I think, a lot of people from what was historically a major source of anxiety, namely, are we going to get invaded if not this year, when, next year, and so, again, one reason for concern about this conflict is that this breach of that trust in one part of the world endangers that trust all over the world. But of course, it's also in the middle of war that trust is important. For example, it's important that all the actors involved can be trusted to uphold things like international humanitarian law. And this is very difficult because it's in everybody's interest to uphold these laws, but it requires enemies to trust each other. It requires enemies to trust that they'll abide by the same standards of conduct. And obviously, in a war zone, this trust is particularly fragile. And I think things like social media exacerbate this problem. Finding trustworthy information in a war zone has always been hard. The fog of war is not a new concept. I would argue, though, maybe in previous eras the fog of war referred to an absence of information, whereas now that the fog of war is made of information, and even more worrisome, this breach of that trust that risks global war also threatens the trust necessary to address things like climate change, to address things like the regulation of dangerous technologies. And so it's easy to see a future scenario where this conflict results in a kind of technological arms race. And once these things get started, they're very difficult to stop. Even in the 12th century, the Pope tried to outlaw the use of the crossbow because he saw, quite rightly it turned out, that it would just lead to mass destruction and death. But all it took was one army not to listen to him, and soon everyone was using crossbows. And so my hope is

that in the subsequent, what, 900 years, we've learned something. And maybe what we've learned is that this trust can't be taken for granted and that it's an absolutely crucial part of any viable future for humanity. And so we should do what we can to uphold and protect it.

**Podcast Host:** especially now the crossbow has become so lethal.

**Jason Parry:** Yes.

**Podcast Host:** My last question, Jason, refers to your work as a R&D guy in Sapienship. What in your view, is for Sapienship the largest challenge for the years to come?

**Jason Parry:** Well, I would say that I think, again, a major challenge is figuring out how to communicate results to the public. I think scientific communication may actually be a major challenge because building support for scientifically informed policy is kind of the necessary basis for addressing any of the problems that we've been talking about. And so we're experimenting with a few different ways of doing that. For example, we recently launched the 2% More Social Media Campaign, and this campaign came out of an attempt to review all the available forecasts and estimates and projections of the cost of averting climate breakdown. We wanted to find out what is the price tag of addressing climate change. And what we found really surprised us, actually, the consensus among organizations like the IPCC or the International Energy Organization, as well as prominent climate economists, is that it would only take additional investment equivalent to about 2% of global GDP each year to decarbonize most sections, if not all sections of the global economy by 2050. And this seemed like amazing news. 2% of global GDP is a lofty goal, but it doesn't seem like an unattainable one, right, this is less than countries around the world spend on defence. And so we've all wrote an essay on this topic for Time magazine, but we had all this extra research kind of leftover. We weren't able to fit everything into the essay. And so the challenge was how do we communicate this information that establishes our credibility, that will help build trust for the kinds of policies that we're advocating for? And I talked earlier about footnotes. And, you know, I come from an academic background. When I think about trust and credibility, I tend to think in terms of bibliographies. But it didn't seem adequate to just point people towards our sources, many of which are very long and many of which were very technical. And I have plenty of friends and relatives who are more convinced by a slick YouTube video than by a scientific paper. So we

decided to create a page on our website and we decided to try really hard to balance transparency and accessibility. We wanted to make it really easy for people to double-check and triple-check all our calculations. And we worked really hard to make it visually appealing as well and show people a kind of roadmap for where these funds could come from and how we could fund this clean energy transition. And balancing transparency and accessibility is difficult because transparency implies a kind of comprehensiveness, right, to give people all the data. Whereas accessibility, I think, implies a process of curation. But I think this balance is really essential for public communication and for building the kind of trust that will be necessary to generate adequate support for scientifically informed policies to drive the kinds of global cooperation that we're trying to establish.

**Podcast Host:** Jason, thank you very much for this interview, very insightful, thank you for that. I wish you and your organization, Sapienship, a wonderful future for this great work that you are doing.

**Jason Parry:** Thank you. Severin. It's been my pleasure.

**Voice Over:** We hope you enjoyed this episode of TrustTalk. We would be very grateful if you would leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or on Stitcher. Don't miss out on future travels around trust and subscribe to this channel or visit us on our website [TrustTalk.co](https://TrustTalk.co) or on Twitter at [TrustTalkCo](https://TrustTalkCo). We look forward to seeing you again.

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