Mainstream News Media Trust

Antecedents, Consequences, and Remedies

Edited by Nayla Fawzi,
Jesper Strömbäck, and Yariv Tsfati

ROUTLEDGE

MAINSTREAM NEWS MEDIA TRUST

Bringing together some of the foremost scholars in the field, this book offers a critical introduction to mainstream news media (dis)trust and its social and political conditions and consequences.

Drawing on qualitative and quantitative approaches, the chapters in *Mainstream News Media Trust* summarize what we know about news media trust today and set out a research agenda to advance our understanding of the topic in the future. The chapters address issues such as trends in news media trust, what factors shape and moderate news media trust, how much news media trust a society needs, how truthful news reporting and trust are related, how institutional trust and false stories shape public opinion, and contemporary challenges to news media trust. In addition, they consider what measures different news media have taken to increase audience trust and engagement.

This book adopts a comparative global outlook to provide a well-rounded state of the field art. *Mainstream News Media Trust* is essential reading for advanced students and researchers in Journalism, Digital Media, and related disciplines.

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PART I

Conceptual and normative perspectives

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1

INTRODUCTION

Re-thinking media trust in digital media environments and during democratic erosion

Nayla Fawzi, Jesper Strömbäck, and Yariv Tsfati

Introduction

To trust or not to trust mainstream news media has profound implications for individuals' everyday lives, how modern democracies function, and ultimately, how societies deal with complex challenges. This is because levels of news media trust shape and are shaped by a large variety of perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors – from learning about current public affairs, navigating the digital sphere, to making consumer decisions (see Fawzi et al., 2021). In the most literal sense, trust in news media is an epistemic issue, and this is the way most scholars have treated it for decades. Modern societies depend on mediated forms of political events and political knowledge. Most people do not make direct experiences but rely on (news) media to learn what is going on in their region, country, and in the world (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2014).

In contemporary hybrid media environments, individuals can choose from a large variety of sources to receive news and information about politics and society. As they mostly do not have the capacity (or motivation) to verify the information they are exposed to, they rely on specific sources to inform themselves and put trust in some and no or less trust in others (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). These choices that audiences make based on media content can be interpreted as a form of risk taking (Coleman, 1990). If the sources were to betray this trust, it is likely that parts of our knowledge, everyday decisions, and actions would be misguided. This illustrates that trust is inherently future-oriented; it is predicated on the belief that the news media will act reliably *in the future* based on past performance and perceived intentions. Moreover, trust comprises the willingness of an individual to be vulnerable to these actions of trustees, despite this uncertainty and irrespective of the ability to monitor or control them (Blöbaum, 2016; Mayer et al., 1995; Misztal, 2011).

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Taken together, this means that when audiences trust the news media, they believe that the information and interpretations provided are reliable and that the media will adhere to their professional standards and/or individuals' expectations (Fawzi et al., 2021; Fukuyama, 1995; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Mistrusting the media, however, does not necessarily mean believing that the information reported by the media, in a strict sense, is factually incorrect. It can also relate to the perception that media coverage is biased, incomplete, does not represent one's position, or that it breaches the public's interests (e.g., Tsfati et al., 2025).

Although the concept of news media trust has been central to political communication since its origins, and research on this topic is steadily increasing, some conceptual ambiguity and overlap with related concepts, such as media credibility and cynicism, still exist. As recent work has already made suggestions on how to disentangle the concepts (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati et al., 2025), in this chapter we want to focus on the concept of news media trust against the backdrop of the contemporary media and political environment: Is trust in mainstream news media still a valid concept in current information environments where the boundaries between journalism and non-journalistic sources have become increasingly porous (Carlson, 2017), new competitors have become important sources of information for parts of the audience (Newman et al., 2025), and economic pressure on journalism is mounting (McChesney, 2003)? When partisanship is a key factor in how individuals approach, use, and process media content, what do (changing) levels of news media trust imply (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2020)? And what are the implications for news media trust when politically motivated attempts to delegitimize the mainstream media are increasingly observed not only in authoritarian countries and illiberal democracies (Solis & Sagarzazu, 2020) but also in established democracies (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Ross & Rivers, 2018; Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2025)?

In this chapter, we want to re-think the role and meaning of news media trust first by discussing the transition of the two components "news" and "the media" in contemporary digital media environments, followed by the role of news media trust in current political environments in many democracies around the world. Based on this, we will introduce the idea of this book and its chapters.

Deconstructing "news" and "media" in digital high-choice environments

Traditionally, journalism research has defined news as information on current events produced by professional journalists who adhere to professional standards (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). This definition implies a relatively clear boundary between journalistic and non-journalistic content, with news organizations acting as primary gatekeepers controlling the flow of information into the public sphere. While historically this made sense, it does not align with

current digital media environments where journalistic curation is just one way individuals encounter news besides others such as algorithmic filters or strategic curation (Thorson & Wells, 2016). In contemporary media environments, an abundance of information is omnipresent on an increasing number of platforms, while non-institutionalized actors such as influencers or partisan media and technological sources like news aggregators, voice assistants, or generative AI have become more prominent sources of information (Newman et al., 2025). In turn, news is competing more than ever with other media (e.g., social media, alternative media) and media content such as entertainment and interpersonal conversations, often blending information, opinion, persuasive communication, and entertainment in ways that blur traditional genre distinctions.

This fundamental change in the news production and distribution process has altered the way individuals perceive, process, and respond to news. Users have become active parts of the journalistic process by sharing, commenting, and reshaping news content (Bruns, 2008). Paradoxically, news habits have at the same time become more passive in the sense that some people think that they do not have to follow the news to get informed but that the news will find them anyway. This phenomenon has been labeled the news-finds-me perception (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Goyanes et al., 2023). These developments have made it increasingly difficult for users to distinguish journalistic curated content from non-journalistic content or to identify reliable sources, which is further reinforced by the rise of AI content and tools. In consequence, contemporary complex information environments pose high demands on users' digital media skills to understand and navigate them in a self-determined manner.

This transition implies that the classical news definition no longer aligns with the audience's current understanding of news. While some users include non-journalistic sources when they perceive them as independent, neutral, or with high expertise (Schneiders, 2024), others expect partial news that confirms their worldview (Mont'Alverne et al., 2025). In particular, young audiences and heavy (distrustful) social media users may comprise information as news that stems from sources which they find authentic and as being close to their everyday lives, such as influencers (Schmuck & Harff, 2024; Wunderlich et al., 2022). Above all, news in a traditional sense account for only a very small part of many users' media diet (Mangold et al., 2024).

Due to the blurring lines between news and information sources but also between communicators and the audience, the term "media" itself has become more and more challenging. From a user perspective, "media" may include not only journalistic institutions but also algorithmically curated ecosystems in which professional journalism, social media platforms, AI tools, influencers, and partisan, strategic and individual actors converge and compete. This, in turn, challenges research on media use and trust as it is not always clear what people are thinking about when responding to questions about "the media" (Daniller et al., 2017; Knudsen et al., 2022; Tsfati et al., 2023).

Furthermore, this has shifted the functional role of epistemic authority (Bartsch et al., 2025), which comes both with opportunities and challenges for journalism and the digital public sphere. On the one hand, the development allows previously neglected voices to get heard and more easily connect with each other leading to a greater variety of different issues and actors in public debates (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). On the other hand, mis- and disinformation, strategic and (extreme) partisan interests have flooded the digital realm, thereby challenging journalistic authority but at the same time emphasizing its relevance (Benkler et al., 2018; Carlson et al., 2021b; Schudson, 2018).

The relevance of journalistic authority refers to the various functions that news media are expected to fulfill for society and democracy (Baker, 2001; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Strömbäck, 2005). They should curate the relevant information for their audience in an accurate and unbiased way so that individuals can form their own opinions based on truthful information and make well-founded decisions. They should thereby create a public forum where social diversity is represented, and different ideas and positions are exchanged. Moreover, it is expected that news media critically observe powerful political and business elites (Christians et al., 2009; Graber, 2003; Schudson, 2008). This briefly summarizes aspects of the well-known role of journalism for democracies that depend on such a free and independent press (Strömbäck, 2005).

In terms of news media trust, this highlights the importance of journalism's *actual* performance in democratic countries. Journalism that fails to fulfill its demands should not receive high levels of trust while journalism that fulfills its democratic functions is key to people's ability to trust the media (Fawzi & Mothes, 2020; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2022; but see chapter 2 in this book). From a normative perspective, this implies that trust should not be regarded in a linear way, in the sense of "the more the better." Blind or uncritical trust can be seen as problematic as insufficient scrutiny and reflection might be exploited by trustees and would lead to a passive audience. Noteworthy in this context is that research indicates that media trust is higher in authoritarian countries (Müller, 2013). Total absence of trust is also not desirable as it implies a rejection of journalistic authority and a passive audience leading to disengagement. Rather, what is preferred from a normative perspective is a healthy skepticism with an audience that critically observes and scrutinizes news media and their coverage (Norris, 2022; Quiring et al., 2021; Tsfati & Barnoy, 2025). This has important implications on how to assess declining levels of media trust.

The role of news media trust in democratic erosion

Contemporary democracies face a profound paradox: while news media are expected to *strengthen* democratic resilience through informed citizenship and elite accountability, empirical evidence increasingly suggests they may simultaneously *undermine* democratic stability. This tension arises from two

interrelated dynamics. First, as outlined above, the fragmentation of the digital public sphere fuels perceptions that mainstream media fail core democratic functions: relevant segments of the public feel misrepresented by mainstream media, perceive coverage as biased or incomplete, and reject traditional journalistic norms like impartiality (Fawzi & Mothes, 2020; Mont'Alverne et al., 2025; Strömbäck et al., 2025). In some sense, it is also true that news coverage is biased – if not in terms of a partisan bias (D'Alessio, 2015; Hassell et al., 2020; Hopmann et al., 2016). For example, communication studies have for decades found that journalism disproportionally focuses on negativity, conflict, and the framing of politics as a strategic game, thereby increasing political cynicism and alienation (*media malaise*) or providing a platform for extreme positions (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese, 2004; Knüpfer et al., 2025; Maurer et al., 2023; Schuck, 2017). This suggests that, for many media organizations, profit is considered more important than fulfilling democratic functions (Hamilton, 2004; McChesney, 2016). However, news media that fail to reflect societal diversity or contextualize power imbalances inadvertently validate claims of systemic bias, accelerating the erosion of public trust (at least in some segments of society, Kalogeropoulos et al., 2022).

Second, distrust against news media might fuel a self-reinforcing downward spiral with fundamental consequences for journalism's democratic role. As audiences fragment toward non-journalistic sources, legacy media face shrinking revenues and declining financial sustainability (McChesney, 2003). This limits the availability of resources for in-depth and investigative reporting, which in turn may reinforce the perception of journalistic shortcomings. The rise of "free" algorithmically curated content, where generative AI synthesizes news – for example, in generative AI results or search engines' AI-generated overviews – diverts traffic from journalistic sites and further threatens their business models. Crucially, this spiral is amplified by political actors: authoritarian and extreme movements and alternative media deliberately exploit media fragmentation to delegitimize professional journalism as "fake news" or "propaganda" (Egelhofer et al., 2021). In Hungary and Poland, for example, ruling parties have enacted media laws that formally subordinate outlets to state control while rhetorically branding independent journalism as "anti-national" (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). In the US, political elites weaponize distrust to mobilize supporters against "the media" and portray them as "the enemy of the people" (Carlson et al., 2021a). These tactics target not just specific reports but journalism's epistemic legitimacy – framing factual reporting as partisan deception to erode public trust in shared reality itself (Meeks, 2020). Research also shows that use of right-wing political alternative media (Tsfati et al., 2025) and exposure to disinformation accusations against news media (Egelhofer et al., 2022) can reduce trust in mainstream news media.

However, there is also another perspective. Robust evidence confirms functional effects of legacy media for democracy. For instance, longitudinal and

cross-country studies demonstrate that consumption of quality and information-oriented journalism increases political knowledge, efficacy, trust, and civic engagement (in the sense of a virtuous circle; e.g., de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006; Norris, 2000; Strömbäck et al., 2016; Van Aelst et al., 2026), and trust in news media themselves (Hopmann et al., 2015). Public service broadcasters, in particular, foster learning, cross-cutting exposure, social cohesion, and satisfaction with democracy (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Túñez-López et al., 2021). This emphasizes the dual role of news media: while they can weaken democracy through endogenous and exogenous structural failures, they remain indispensable for democratic resilience when fulfilling their normative roles (e.g., Humprecht et al., 2020). This might be explained by the fact that the strengths of liberal societies may simultaneously be responsible for both the news media's functional but also dysfunctional effects on democracy. For instance, on the one hand, free speech and press freedom enable an independent press; on the other hand, they enable the spread of dis- and misinformation on social media that in turn threatens journalism's authority. But this is only possible in countries that guarantee freedom of speech in the first place (Knill et al., 2025).

This duality underscores why distinguishing proper and constructive media criticism from delegitimizing media criticism is analytically important, in particular for our analysis of news media trust. Constructive criticism – rooted in journalism's own ideals (e.g., calls for greater diversity, transparency, or accountability) – aims to improve journalism, which serves democracy (Carlson, 2017). It accepts journalism's epistemic role in making sense of what is going on in the world while simultaneously demanding higher standards and greater responsiveness to societal needs. In this sense, critique can function as a corrective mechanism, reinforcing trust when journalism signals its interest and capacity for self-reflection and reform. Delegitimization, conversely, seeks not to improve journalism but to erode trust in professional journalism as such (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2025). It often operates through generalized and uncivil claims that portray all news media as deceptive, corrupt, or politically orchestrated (e.g., "all media lie"). Moreover, delegitimizing rhetoric often dissolves meaningful distinctions between verified reporting and unverified content or partisan sources (Panievsky, 2025). This erosion of epistemic boundaries aims to undermine journalism's authority as a credible knowledge institution. When audiences are urged to view all news media sources as equally unreliable, trust becomes detached from institutional standards but instead a political stance as individuals may align themselves with their favored party's perceived critique of the media (Schudson, 2022). Trust then becomes a cleavage line: when social groups put trust in contradictory sources, this impedes societal debates as well as reaching consensus on shared reality and basic facts. Authoritarian actors typically deploy this tactic strategically. By erasing boundaries between journalism and disinformation, they position themselves as the sole arbiters of

truth (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Fawzi, 2020). Anti-democratic and far-right actors, in particular, reject journalism that strengthens democracy (Fawzi et al., 2026), and discrediting the news media is thus an essential part of their political battle against all democratic institutions.

As democratic backsliding accelerates globally (Nord et al., 2024) and these fundamental attacks on news media increase in parallel, it becomes increasingly urgent to analyze news media trust and the role of the news media as a safeguard or a disruptor of democracy in contemporary media environments. We therefore argue that not only despite but also because of these fundamental changes in media and the political environments, it is relevant and important to focus on the concept of trust in news media and distinguish it conceptually from trust in a wide range of non-journalistic sources. How different types of media operate differs fundamentally, and the same holds for expectations of different trustees. Therefore, an integrative analysis is almost impossible. Moreover, conflating them analytically hinders a diagnosis of whose news media trust is eroding or increasing, why, and under which conditions. This brings us to the outline of this volume, where we do take into account the *effects* of these structural political and media changes on journalism and on trust in journalism, respectively. Henceforth, we will use the term *news media trust* to encompass trust in news media, news journalism, and journalism.

The outline of this book

The aim of this book is to analyze and take stock of what we currently know and what we don't know about the concept of news media trust, its antecedents, and consequences to provide a comprehensive overview of different facets of the topic and to inspire future research on news media trust. Based on the theoretical reflections above, we take a look at the role of news media trust on different levels: from the concept itself to the audience perspective, the role of the current media and political environment, and finally, media trust on the societal level, i.e., in cross-country comparisons (Figure 1.1, inspired by Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

The book starts with a theoretical-normative perspective and takes a closer look at the concept of media trust itself (Chapter 2) and its measurement (Chapter 3). In Chapter 2, Michael Schudson adopts a normative approach to the concept of media trust discussing a possible paradox: As media quality improved, trust in media declined. His main argument is that declining public trust in media in the US since 1970 is frequently misinterpreted as a recent crisis, when it actually reflects journalism's progress toward more critical, evidence-based, and accountability-focused reporting since the 1960s – a shift that inherently generates distrust by challenging political power and elite narratives. This transformation, marked by a rise in contextual and investigative

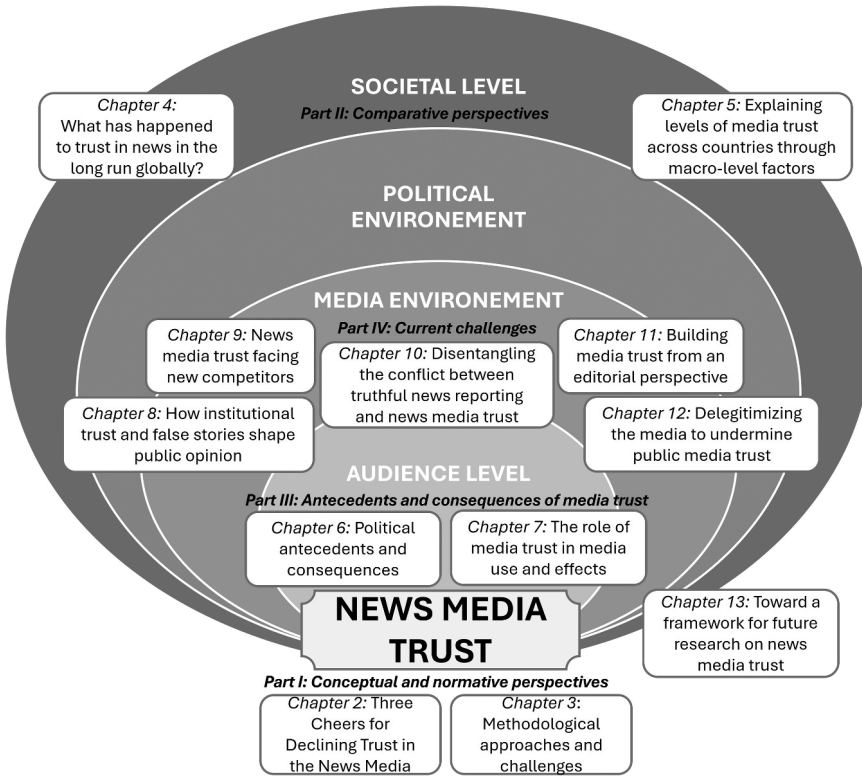

FIGURE 1.1 Overview of the volume's chapters.

journalism, coincided with broader societal changes like institutionalized skepticism, where continuous public scrutiny of power became a democratic norm. Consequently, reduced trust often stems not from media failure but from journalism successfully fulfilling its role in exposing governmental shortcomings and diversifying perspectives. Schudson further discusses how these developments are influenced by partisan perceptions.

As noted above, media trust is related and has often been used interchangeably with media credibility. Recent literature reviews and research have argued that credibility, which refers to evaluations of media content or sources, is one relevant cue that results in media trust (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020). In Chapter 3, Yariv Tsfati and Caroline Fisher present existing measures of media trust in quantitative surveys. They show that due to its conceptual fuzziness it comes as no surprise that previous research has employed very diverse strategies to measure media trust: from single-item measures to 16-item scales often based on Gaziano and McGrath Credibility Scale. In consequence, there is often a disconnect between the concept of media trust and

how it is operationalized. They discuss the different measurements' advantages and disadvantages and then show how the digital media environments challenge them. Tsfati and Fisher emphasize the importance of specifying the object and level of trust, including distinctions between general trust, trust in specific outlets, and topical trust, which has been shown to predict knowledge more effectively than generalized measures. Beyond surveys, the chapter underscores the value of qualitative and mixed-method approaches, including interviews, focus groups, and media diaries.

In the second part, the book will shift its focus to the societal level, taking a comparative perspective. Chapter 4 by Richard Fletcher and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen investigates how public trust in news has changed globally over the long term, drawing on survey data from 115 countries between 1981 and 2025. Combining the World Values Survey/European Values Study and the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, the authors provide the most extensive comparative and longitudinal analysis of trust in news to date. The analysis shows a clear overall decline in trust in news across the past half-century. On average, trust has fallen by about 1–2 percentage points every five years, dropping from roughly half of the population in the 1980s to around 40% today. This decline began well before the rise of the Internet but appears to have accelerated from around 2000 as social media platforms became more successful. Despite this general pattern, the authors stress that trust in news has never been high in many countries and that trends vary considerably across national contexts. The findings also demonstrate that trust in news is closely linked to media freedom. Countries consistently classified as having free media have experienced modest declines, while countries with improving, fluctuating, or deteriorating levels of press freedom show more pronounced downward trends. In contrast, countries consistently rated as "not free" have seen increases in reported trust in news over time. Overall, the chapter challenges the idea of a universal collapse in trust while confirming a long-term, uneven decline shaped by media systems, political context, and structural changes in the information environment.

Based on this analysis, Thomas Hanitzsch, Magdalena Obermaier, Carsten Reinemann, and Nina Steindl take a broader look at macro-level factors that can explain changing levels of media trust across countries (Chapter 5). They argue that although these cross-national variations in media trust have been documented, communication research has only recently begun to systematically examine the social, political, and economic contexts shaping these differences. Existing findings are often inconsistent or counterintuitive. To bring greater conceptual clarity to this fragmented literature, the chapter proposes a typology of macro-level factors across four domains: political systems, media systems, socio-economic development, and culture. Within each domain, the authors distinguish between structural features (such as regime type or media ownership) and performance-related factors (such as political trust, press

freedom, or perceived journalistic quality). Reviewing empirical evidence, they find mixed relationships between media trust and factors such as media autonomy, journalistic professionalism, democracy, and human and economic development. Audience expectations and regime-specific norms seem to play a crucial role in shaping trust. The authors conclude by identifying major theoretical and methodological gaps.

In part III, we will approach media trust on the audience level analyzing the individual antecedents and consequences of news media trust. In Chapter 6, Nina Steindl and Magdalena Obermaier provide an overview of political correlates of news media trust. They thereby draw on two major theoretical paradigms from political trust research: cultural and institutional theories. Cultural approaches emphasize early socialization, interpersonal trust, value orientations, and ideology, arguing that trust is shaped outside the political system and projected onto institutions. Institutional theories, by contrast, view trust as performance-based and endogenous, reflecting evaluations of political and media performance over time. Reviewing the state of the art, the chapter identifies several key political correlates of media trust. Political ideology and extremism strongly shape trust; in particular, populist attitudes are linked to lower trust. Higher political interest and knowledge generally correspond to higher media trust. Political trust is one of the most robust correlates: individuals who trust political institutions are also more likely to trust the news media. News media trust is further related to political behavior, including participation and patterns of political discussion.

In Chapter 7, Rens Vliegenthart takes a closer look at the complex role of news media trust in the media use and effect process against the backdrop of the contemporary high-choice media environments. The chapter first discusses how media trust influences individuals' approaches to news media and their motivations for media use. It then shows that trust predicts mainstream media use, while alternative and partisan media – especially right-wing outlets – systematically erode trust in established journalism. It then turns to exploring the relationship between news engagement and media trust, paying particular attention to news avoidance. The chapter further shows that trust plays an ambivalent role in misinformation dynamics. Trust in professional journalism can protect against false beliefs, yet trust in social media news increases susceptibility to sharing disinformation. Finally, the chapter reviews evidence that news media trust moderates media effects, including agenda-setting, framing effects, and reality perceptions. While higher trust often enhances media effects, findings are mixed and context-dependent, reflecting differences in operationalization and message characteristics.

In part IV, we take a closer look at challenges to news media trust due to current developments in the media and political environments. In Chapter 8, Katherine Ognyanova focuses on trust and misinformation in more detail by exploring the bidirectional dynamics between misinformation and institutional

trust across the stages of exposure, belief formation, and correction. Ognyanova argues that trust acts as a gatekeeping mechanism; those who distrust mainstream media often substitute it with alternative sources where false narratives circulate more freely. During the belief stage, institutional trust serves as a credibility filter that determines whether expert consensus is accepted or rejected, though this protective effect requires "calibrated trust" that is specific to the expert's domain. The chapter concludes that misinformation exposure can further erode trust in institutions attempting to correct it, creating a self-reinforcing feedback loop that undermines the shared factual basis necessary for democracy.

In Chapter 9, Yifei Wang and Miriam Metzger systematically address how the previously often mentioned changes in the media environment affect public news media trust. First, the authors identify how digital-age competitors, such as social media influencers, AI-generated content, and algorithmic news aggregators, have transformed the supply and demand for news. On the supply side, these new entrants blur the boundaries between professional and alternative sources, often amplifying sensationalism and misinformation while challenging traditional gatekeeping norms. On the demand side, audiences face choice overload and cognitive fatigue, leading to behaviors like news snacking and the news-finds-me perception, where individuals rely on passive, heuristic-based evaluations of credibility rather than active news seeking. Second, the authors explore how these shifting patterns of news engagement mean that trust is no longer solely decided by content quality, but by how that content is encountered within mixed information environments that blend news with entertainment.

Chapters 10 and 11 draw attention to the perspectives of journalists and newsrooms. Chapter 10 by Jesper Strömbäck examines why truthful news reporting does not always lead to higher trust in journalism. From a democratic perspective, news media derive legitimacy from providing verified, factual information, yet trust varies sharply across and within countries, often along political lines. The chapter argues that this is also rooted in the transformation from low-choice to high-choice media environments. Digitalization has weakened journalists' gatekeeping role, increased exposure to alternative and partisan media, and enabled political actors to challenge journalistic accounts of reality. At the same time, audiences increasingly rely on different epistemologies of truth, such as affective, ideological, or authoritarian truths, rather than empirical verification. Psychological biases like motivated reasoning and confirmation bias further shape how people assess information, often favoring congruent narratives over factual accuracy. As a result, truthful reporting may be perceived as biased or hostile. The chapter concludes that declining trust may sometimes reflect deep politicization of facts rather than journalistic failure.

In Chapter 11, Jake Nelson reviews editorial strategies for rebuilding media trust. It focuses primarily on two dominant strategies: increasing transparency in news production and adopting more engaged, participatory forms of journalism.

Transparency initiatives aim to make journalistic processes more visible to audiences in order to signal accountability and credibility, while engagement efforts seek to involve the public more directly in news production through listening sessions, collaboration, and community participation. Reviewing existing empirical research, the chapter finds that transparency has, at best, modest effects on audience trust and often fails to reach or persuade skeptical audiences. Evidence on the trust-building impact of engaged journalism remains limited, as most research has examined its implementation rather than its outcomes. The chapter argues that these mixed results highlight a misalignment between journalists' assumptions about trust and how audiences evaluate news credibility.

Finally, in Chapter 12, Jana Egelhofer and Sophie Lecheler explore the rise of delegitimizing media criticism as a troubling political strategy used to undermine the media's role as a democratic "fourth estate." Unlike democratic criticism, which is grounded in reasoning and a civil tone, delegitimizing attacks are often generalized, unfounded, and intentionally uncivil, employing labels like "fake news" or "lying press" to erode public trust. These attacks serve as strategic cues for voters, particularly among populist and far-right actors who frame the media as part of a detached, corrupt elite. Egelhofer and Lecheler warn that exposure to such criticism not only reduces trust in targeted outlets but can also induce self-censorship among journalists and serve as a pretext for the restriction of press freedom.

This book ends with a conclusion by the editors Yariv Tsfati, Nayla Fawzi, and Jesper Strömbäck in which they summarize the main open questions and research gaps identified in the various chapters and propose a framework for future research on news media trust.

Taken together, the arguments advanced in this introductory chapter highlight why news media trust can no longer be treated as a simple indicator of democratic health nor as a problem to be solved by restoring "more trust" per se. In fragmented, hybrid media environments, trust emerges as a fundamentally ambivalent phenomenon – at once indispensable for democratic functioning and potentially dysfunctional when uncritical or systematically eroded. Decades of research across contexts has substantially deepened our understanding of how trust in news media is formed, challenged, and contested, yet they have also left us with unresolved conceptual ambiguities, mixed empirical findings, and pressing normative questions. Against this backdrop, this book deliberately pauses to take stock: to critically review what we know about news media trust, to disentangle it from trust in non-journalistic sources, and to situate it within contemporary political and media transformations. By bringing together diverse theoretical perspectives, methods, and empirical contexts, the volume aims not only to synthesize existing scholarship but also to offer a clearer analytical pathway forward – one that helps clarify when, why, and for whom news media trust strengthens democracy, and when it signals deeper democratic strain.

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2

THREE CHEERS FOR DECLINING TRUST IN THE NEWS MEDIA

From collusional journalism to critical journalism

Michael Schudson

Introduction

People have felt grave doubts about the press long before the Internet or social media, at times when politics was polarized and at times when it was not. In the United States, the steady decline in media trust from 1970 and onwards has, in my opinion, been badly misread. It has produced or justified anxiety about what we have come to call "the media" among journalists and pundits alike.

In the same era (1970–present) when measured trust in most American institutions has declined, leading news institutions have undergone a dramatic transformation whose reverberations have yet to be fully acknowledged – even by journalists themselves. Dissatisfaction with journalism inside journalism and outside grew in the 1960s. What came to be widely acknowledged as either "he said, she said" journalism or "false balance" journalism or "both-sidesism" has been the object of sharp, even derisive, and ultimately potent critique. As multiple scholars have documented, news since the 1960s has become deeper, more investigative, and more likely to take "holding government accountable" or "speaking truth to power" to be essential goals. In these past six decades, mainstream media not only continued to be fact-centered and verification-oriented but also guided by a more explicit avowal of the public service function of holding government accountable, just as important a value as the ideal of "objectivity" itself.

There is a large literature on the question of trust in the media, some of it very rich and carefully done, including work by the editors of (and other contributors to) this volume (e.g., Fawzi et al., 2021; Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati et al., 2025). At the same time, there is a kind of romantic – or just plain mythical – nostalgia for a media past that never

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was and that in a democracy never should have been. In this chapter, I will illustrate two bits of mythology – one about the founding era of the United States and one about the highly trusted media of the 1950s and 1960s. Both are clearly errors that should be flushed out if we are to arrive at a clear-minded assessment of the media skepticism that so many bemoan today.

The first myth

The first myth is wonderfully illustrated by something that historians of the founding era have long known but that I only learned quite recently. Journalists at ceremonial occasions celebrate the First Amendment of the Constitution as "first for a reason." One example is Jill Abramson when she was executive director of the *New York Times* (Abramson, 2019). And that reason? The reason, they say, is that the founders recognized free speech and notably a free press as fundamental to the republic they were building. And why? Obviously (to us) because the press is crucial to holding power to account. What's wrong with this story?

What seems to have been largely forgotten is that the first ten amendments to the US Constitution, widely known as "the Bill of Rights," originally were 12 amendments that the young Congress sent to the states for ratification. In that group of 12, what we know as the First Amendment was third. However, the first two amendments were rejected, not ratified. One concerned the population size of congressional districts and the other pronounced that Congress could not award itself pay raises until after a subsequent election. So "freedom of religion, of speech, and of press" were not "first for a reason." They were first by accident (Amar, 1998)! Also important is that the newspapers the founders were acquainted with did little or no original reporting. They were still republishing news items shipped from Europe for much of their content, and they ran many voluntary contributions from readers. They were often outspoken, including criticism of President Washington and subsequent presidents, but they were issued by a printer from his print shop, managed by himself and a few apprentices. There was no newsroom. There were few or ordinarily no people hired to "report" the news. I have great respect for the authors of the US Constitution, but they did not recognize newspapers as fundamental units of the republican government (the founders had contempt for "democracy" as such, because they believed an elected government was too likely to descend into mob rule).

The second myth

The second and even more important mythological point is that a better moment in the history of US journalism was the period of greater trust – presumably the 1950s and 1960s – from which era trust in the media has sadly descended.

But should we accept that the decline in trust in the media is sad? Let me begin here with a question, rarely considered in the "declinist" presumption around us: how much trust *should* there be in a healthy constitutional democracy? To telegraph my position: I think there was far too much trust or general public complacency about the practices of journalism in the pre-Vietnam, pre-civil rights movement, pre-Watergate, pre-women's liberation, pre-Stonewall era.

Consider, for example, the results that journalist and media critic Carl Sessions Stepp (1999) found when he compared ten metropolitan daily newspapers from 1963 to the same papers in 1999. He judged the 1963 papers "naively trusting of government, shamelessly boosterish, unembarrassedly hokey and obliging," and he found himself particularly surprised to find stories "often not attributed at all, simply passing along an unquestioned, quasi-official sense of things." In the "bothsidesism" style of news, still dominating newspapers in 1963, quoting one party to a dispute or an election contest and then quoting the other was the whole of the reporter's obligation. Going behind or beyond the statements of the quoted persons, invariably elite figures, and appointed or elected political officials was not required. It was particularly in the work of investigative reporters in the late 1960s and 1970s that reporters became detectives seeking documentable evidence to confirm a view of the reality of recent events they were pulling together. Later, as digital tools for reporters emerged, the capacity to document and to investigate expanded, and a reporter did not require the extravagant resources of a *New York Times* newsroom to be able to write authoritative stories.

The anxiety among journalists that the public no longer trusts them reflects a reality that public opinion polls support – trust in the mainstream media has been in decline since about 1970. But something else has changed in the same period from the late 1960s forward: journalism. Journalism became less a reproduction or representation of the opinions of political office-holders – and more an independent-minded journalism free and indeed eager to criticize people in power. The public learns more than it used to about failings of governments and governmental officers and infers more regularly and readily and with more apparent justification that government (and other powerful institutions) should not be trusted. While trust in the media may be unhealthily low today, it was surely unhealthily high in the 1950s and early 1960s. To put it too simply, US journalism shifted from what I will call a collusional (if there is such a word) press in which reporters protected politicians – both Republicans and Democrats – in exchange for politicians' accepting them into their elite circles (McGarr, 2022; Mellinger, 2015). What the media became in the 1970s and after was more independent-minded, critical (of both Democrats and Republicans), more investigative, and more enterprising than the journalism of the 1950s (Fink & Schudson, 2014; Stepp, 1999).

This chapter focuses on developments in the United States but they are paralleled elsewhere in the world. See, for instance, the study by Esser and

Umbricht (2014) that examines the media systems of six different Western nations. At the same time, investigative reporting not only expanded greatly in various countries around the world but also internationalized with cooperative ventures like the International Consortium of Investigative Reporting (ICIJ). This and other international efforts (including the spread of dedicated "fact-checking" organizations) have advanced the complexity, ambition, and relative independence of journalism globally (Graves, 2016).

Journalism Past was far less balanced through a societal narrowness of who gets covered than Journalism Present. The journalism of the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s was less "fair and balanced" journalism in its faith in political insiders, omitting from consideration altogether the concerns and voices of a variety of social groups that lay outside narrow assumptions about who counts as "the public" that journalism is supposed to serve. The so-called mainstream media could reasonably have been called the "white media" or even the "white heterosexual male media" – or, worse still, the white heterosexual male media with a dangerously oversimplified understanding of what counts as a democratic society. That, at any rate, is the path I propose in this chapter.

When trust was too high: Collusional journalism

People often recall – or think they recall – that long-time CBS News television anchor Walter Cronkite was in his day "the most trusted man in America." If you Google that phrase (as I did on October 11, 2021, and again on October 11, 2025) you immediately come up with Walter Cronkite. Why? Because a public opinion poll in 1972 asked respondents which of the leading political figures of the day they trusted most. Cronkite's name was thrown in as a kind of standard of comparison – how do any and all of the politicians compare to some well-known and well-regarded non-political figure? Seventy-three percent of those polled placed Cronkite as the person on the list they trusted most, ahead of a general construct – "average senator" (67%), and well ahead of the most trusted of the politicians, Senator Edmund Muskie (61%). Chances are that any other leading newsperson, or probably a movie star or athlete, would have come out as well or better than Cronkite. In other words, the main reason Cronkite was "most trusted" is simply that he was the only non-politician among the persons listed in the poll (Menand, 2012).

So the notion that Cronkite was unusually "trusted" is a phantom best forgotten. Somehow, people have wanted to believe that somewhere, just before all the ruckus began over civil rights and Vietnam and uppity women and the heroes of "Stonewall" who brought on a new, public self-respect for lesbians and gays and other people of non-standard sexual identities, at some time just the day before yesterday, the media had been a pillar of central, neutral, moderate, unquestioning Americanism. It ain't so.

When Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson ran in 1952, he railed against what he called the "one-party press" – a Republican press, that is, and certainly he was right if you looked at the corporate ownership of the country's newspapers, their antagonism toward Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, and their overwhelming editorial-page support for Republican candidates. If you go back very much further than the 1940s, you reach a moment when "trust in the media" would have been an incomprehensible phrase. News outlets were understood to be and understood themselves to be advocates for one party or the other, not neutral truth-tellers. Readers trusted their own favored paper and distrusted the others.

In common parlance, there was no "news media" or "mainstream media." There was "the press" and that, Richard Nixon decided in his presidential years, was too cozy and familiar a term. Journalists were, in his estimation, united against him – and he was not entirely wrong. Journalists went gaga about Jack Kennedy, bowled over in the 1960 campaign and the early days of the Kennedy administration by the charm of Kennedy, his wife Jackie, and his good-looking family. Nixon was a respected figure in Washington, but far from beloved, and certainly not charming, and he never got over the resentment he felt about journalists' swooning over Kennedy.

Things would only get worse after Nixon became president. He felt aggrieved by journalists and the idea that they were biased against him led him to plan strategically to muddy their reputation. To refer to journalists as "the press" ceded them an emotional upper hand, an aura of rectitude armed with First Amendment privilege. Nixon judged that aura an unacceptable advantage and urged his staff to use the term, "the media." William Safire, the public relations professional who became a speechwriter for Nixon, recalls in his memoir, "The press became 'the media' because the word had a manipulative, Madison Avenue, all-encompassing connotation, and the press hated it." Nixon judged journalists to be his dedicated opponents, Safire recalls, and reports that he personally heard Nixon declare to his staff that "the press is the enemy" at least a dozen times (Safire, 1975).

There was a moment, beginning in the late 1950s, when watching the television networks became part of everyday life for most Americans, however soporific those shows could be. This may have been the beginning of something called "the media." Until then, Americans would have been hard put to identify a Thing that today people recognize as "the mainstream media."

The full entrance of "the media" into the American vocabulary arrived at about the same moment as distrust in the media intensified – but in a one-sided fashion. Barry Goldwater and his supporters, in his 1964 campaign for the presidency, were convinced that the media, notably the three major television news networks, were deeply biased against the Republican candidate (Shumate, 2021). Nixon's later effort to make "the media" rather than "the press" the more common term for journalism may or may not have made a difference, but

it was indicative that "the media" was something of a novelty for Americans and one that, early on, Republicans found more threatening than did Democrats.

Too often these days, low trust in the media is linked to some feature of the digital age – it's an Internet problem or a Facebook problem or a Twitter problem or a generalized social media problem. Social media, after all, offer a microphone to individuals who want to promote any old picture of reality, no matter how lunatic, that suits either their politics or their crackpot sense of humor. This may well contribute to distrust of any and all assertions coming from unknown entities beyond our immediate social circles. But sharply declining trust in the media, as the academic literature clearly demonstrates – going back notably to Ladd's detailed and thoughtful *Why Americans Hate the Media* (2012). It predates George W. Bush and his unnamed adviser, who in 2004 spoke sneeringly to the *New York Times Magazine* of journalists as "the reality-based community" (Siskind, 2004). It precedes the rise of Donald Trump, and it precedes social media. A full-bodied sense of "the media" as a powerful – and dangerous – social and political force found its voice before the digital era.

What has not become part of the common understanding is how dramatically journalism changed in the decades just prior to the Internet. The most significant change in American journalism between the 1950s and the early 2000s has been the rise of a more aggressive, more independent, more evidence-based, and more interpretive journalism. Various historians, social scientists, and journalists have documented these changes (e.g., Patterson, 1993). With Katherine Fink, I have added to this literature, too (Fink & Schudson, 2014). In what Fink and I have called "contextual reporting," the journalist's work is less to record the views of key actors in political events and more to analyze and explain them. More than other concurrent changes, this one altered the front page, and in a way that put a premium on the story or stories behind the story. The move from writing down what political leaders said to contextualizing what they said and did, and why, offered a new model of journalism. This is also reflected in the changing role conceptions of US journalists for whom the importance of acting as a watchdog has steadily increased, particularly since the 1980s (Willnat et al., 2022). In consequence, studies have shown that an increasing negative depiction of politicians did go hand in hand with a decline in public confidence ratings of the press, described as "killing the messenger-effect" (Kiousis, 2002).

The new model seeped into the work of journalism with little fanfare. Journalists continued to defend their work as "objective" or "balanced" while, in practice, transforming what they meant by such terms. Fink and I found that in 1955, in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Milwaukee Journal*, 85% of front-page stories were conventional who-what-where-when stories and 9% contextual. Focus on that first figure and track it through succeeding years: in 1955, 85% of all front-page stories were conventional who-what-where-when stories; in 1967, 79%; in 1979, 60%; in 1991, 51%; and by

2003, 47%. In 2003, then, 52% of front-page stories were contextual reporting, a percentage about six times greater than what it had been in 1955. This shows that contextual journalism emerged as a powerful and prevalent companion to conventional reporting. The news media became an institution to reckon with as never before, and not because news organizations had political agendas of their own – although sometimes they did – but because they had attained a preeminent role in civil society as a monitor of government action, the cardinals of accountability for American democracy.

This does not mean that all was well with American journalism by the 1990s, but it does mean that concern that the news media have fallen from the great days of Ida Tarbell or the great days of Woodward and Bernstein has been overdone. The Ida Tarbell days of muckraking lasted just a few years and never extended very far beyond a handful of middle-class national magazines; "muckraking" as Teddy Roosevelt derisively labeled it at the time, really didn't influence the daily press. And when Woodward and Bernstein, more than half a century later, broke open the Watergate story, it would be months before any other news organization assigned reporters to the story. Investigative reporting a la Woodward and Bernstein did come to have some influence beyond the *Washington Post*, but it has never been a quantitatively significant part of any news organization's budget or time on the air or space on the page, at least, not until the establishment of *ProPublica* (founded in 2007) and other substantial online news organizations that devote themselves primarily to investigative reporting.

What did change, and it changed in a major way, was a move from who-what-when-where reporting to analytical "how" and "why" reporting, often focusing on a broader time frame than the past 24 hours, offering a context for the story at hand.

People of an ardent conservative persuasion judge the media to be very liberal; people of powerfully liberal convictions find the media to be pawns in the hands of conservatives. This is a familiar enough phenomenon to have acquired a name in social psychology – the "hostile media effect" (Vallone & Ross, 1985). The familiar response of journalists has been that "we must be doing our job right if we have offended people of extreme views both left and right."

The evidence is clear that in the 1940s, 1950s, and into the late 1960s, there was a chumminess among leading politicians and public officials and the reporters who covered them. What is not as well known is that this boys' club atmosphere (there were women journalists and black journalists, but they were not welcomed in this world) was well institutionalized and fully embraced by the American Society of Newspaper Editors in their annual convention, normally held in Washington, D.C. The ASNE was the most prestigious association of leading editors and reporters from its founding in the early 1920s on. At the annual meeting, top public officials met these journalists in private plenary sessions, not open to journalists generally nor the public at all. Journalist historian Gwyneth Mellinger has documented this fully (Mellinger, 2015).

From both sidesism to assertive watchdog journalism

Our age, like so many others, is an age of both credulity and skepticism, but what may be distinctive about our time is that the skepticism is approved, encouraged, and taught. Complaints about snarkiness in reporters and columnists did not begin with social media. The capacity of journalism to demean and destroy is not a new discovery. But there is something different now, as there has been since roughly 1970, and that is the institutionalization of skepticism as a value. To be accepted as a grown-up, there has come to be a cultural pressure to be knowing, critical, and skeptical, if not cynical.

What is "trust"? And what is "the media" or "the news" or "journalism" that people are trusting or distrusting? What do respondents in surveys think the question is that they are answering? Does the person who distrusts the news reports on politics also distrust the news reports on the weather or on sports? Does news of the private lives of celebrities evoke more or less trust than news about coronavirus vaccinations?

As has been noted, the question of declining trust in the news media is vexed not only by the complications for survey respondents of understanding what "trust" means but also because "the media" is not a readily comprehensible entity (for empirical research on this, see for example, Daniller et al., 2017; Tsfati et al., 2023). What further complicates the analysis of declining trust is the underlying premise that the high levels of trust we have descended from were a good thing. But clearly, trust in institutions is salutary for democracy only to a point. The decline in trust in most institutions that public polling has documented since the late 1960s was a decline from what arguably was much too high a level of trust. This is clearly true with the federal government, the media, banking, corporate America, organized labor, and organized religion. Trust must be distinguished from complacency, the kind of complacency that (along with gerrymandering) makes most seats in Congress permanent sinecures, the kind of complacency that accepted President Eisenhower's lies about the U-2 spy plane, President Kennedy's lies about the "missile gap," President Johnson's lies about the war in Vietnam, and President Nixon's lies about Watergate. It required the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s to bring down that overgenerous level of deference to American political institutions and to yield a level of "civic skepticism" (a term I borrow from Kreiss, 2016) more fitting for a democratic society.

What people don't like about the media is its implicit or explicit criticism of their heroes. In a two-party system like the United States, the president is invariably either Republican or Democrat, and confidence in the president or the presidency is typically significantly higher among Republicans when there's a Republican president and higher among Democrats when there's a Democratic president. To the extent that the news flatters an opponent or criticizes a fellow partisan, trust will decline in ways that have little (or even

nothing) to do with trust in the institution, only with portraits of the incumbent leader of the institution (see also Chapter 10). Moreover, people answering a poll may not be trying to accurately report their level of trust but rather acting politically to align themselves with their favored party's perceived critique of the media (Schudson, 2022).

Journalism in a knowledge society

To get some perspective on the "trust in media" question, we might think of the media as but one of a set of knowledge-producing institutions in a "knowledge society." When sociologist Daniel Bell (1973) popularized the term "post-industrial society" in the early 1970s and took universities to be the central institution of contemporary society, he wrote that modern societies place science and cognitive values at their center, bring scientists and social scientists (at least economists) more centrally into governmental policy-making, and bureaucratize intellectual work. He wrote that it would have been reasonable to name "post-industrial" society the "knowledge society" or the "information society" or the "professional society," and he offered only contingent reasons for landing on "post-industrial" (Bell, 1973). In any event, the university becomes, in Bell's view, the central institution of the post-industrial world after World War II, accelerating in the 1950s because it is the location for the formation of professionals in science and engineering and for the advancement of research in these areas, research generating greater technical control over the natural and, to some extent, the social world. Academics, if they think about these matters at all, have largely given up the effort to locate a central guiding value or principle for higher education, but they nonetheless have implicitly adopted a principle of approved skepticism. One might equally call it a dogma of humility, the conviction that what we know and what we profess, whether in physics or in sociology or in literary studies, will over time be challenged and will be reconstituted in a different shape, and that this is how human knowledge advances, toward a new temporary consolidation (and another and another thereafter), not toward a finished unity. At the San Francisco Women's March early in 2017, a child held up a sign that read: "What do we want? Evidence-based science. When do we want it? After peer review." This says a lot.

Since 1945, more and more journalists have come to their work with a college education. Of journalists 55 years or older in 1971, 55% did not have college degrees; of those 55 and older in 2002, only 22% were not college graduates. Of 25–34-year-old journalists in 2002, only 7% were not college graduates. Over time, their readers were more likely to have college degrees, too. Between 1940 and 1970, the percentage of the adult population with college degrees grew from about 3% to 20%. In 2018, that percentage was 35% (Weaver et al., 2007).

Equally important, college students received a more critical education. Academic culture itself, like journalism, adopted more "adversarial" habits in the 1960s – not politically adversarial but intellectually adversarial. Faculty came to expect students to learn to "read against the text" in courses in the humanities, not simply to learn to revere accepted canons of high culture. And in the sciences and social sciences, students were increasingly encouraged not to memorize textbooks but to imagine themselves as fledgling scientists, moving on to the next level of insight by criticizing the assumptions, methods, or reasoning of the exemplars whose work they were assigned to read. Students heard the message that the morally right way to go through life was with an "open mind," one eager for new evidence, not permanently stuck in yesterday's convictions.

In a key early statement of this position, a faculty committee at Harvard in 1945 published *General Education in a Free Society*, the so-called Red Book, which insisted that the focus of college education should be "mental skills" and not common knowledge. The committee had begun with the opposite position but discovered that "they could not agree on a set of canonical works that would form the core of their own curriculum." They also objected to treating modern science as "peripheral to general education" as it was in the view of earlier advocates of general education like Robert Hutchins at the University of Chicago.

This may seem far afield from journalism, but as journalism became a more sophisticated, more interpretive, less rote, and ritualistic practice, it became a newly recognized member of the knowledge professions or, one might say, a knowledge ecology.

The change in the media's role was the joint product of several closely connected developments: government – especially the federal government – grew larger and more engaged in people's everyday lives; the culture of journalism changed, and journalists asserted themselves more aggressively; and many governmental institutions became less secretive and more attuned to the news media, eager for media attention and approval. As the federal government expanded its reach (in civil rights, economic regulation, environmental responsibility, and social welfare programs like food stamps, medical insurance for the poor, and for the elderly), the women's movement proclaimed that "the personal is political," and as stylistic innovation in journalism proved a force of its own, the very concept of "covering politics" changed (Fink & Schudson, 2014; Pressman, 2018). American journalism changed profoundly from "inside Washington" politics toward a widening focus on economic, social, and cultural life and toward a deepening of investigation and analysis to bring these additional corners of life to the public stage. Probably no example has been of such global significance as the #MeToo movement, powerfully propelled by investigative journalists at the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* magazine and influencing comparable revelations around the world.

New norm of transparency makes public information public

News coverage became more probing, more analytical, and more transgressive of conventional lines between public and private, but this recognizes only part of what influenced a changing journalism. Not only did the news media provide a more comprehensive and more critical coverage of powerful institutions, but also powerful institutions adapted to a world in which journalists had a more formidable presence than ever before. "Until the mid-1960s," historian Julian Zelizer simply observes, "the press was generally respectful of the political establishment" (Zelizer, 2007). The decline of this respect helped bring more attention to political scandal. So did legislation to make governing more public, for example, through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in 1966 that established a formal procedure for citizens to request the release of information that an agency of the government held, and to take the agency to court if it failed to release the information in ways the law required.

But FOIA was just the beginning of a new faith in "transparency" in government. The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 brought more "sunshine" to Congress. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 required federal agencies to provide and publicly release "environmental impact statements" making possible lawsuits to prevent or modify anticipated government actions affecting the environment; the campaign finance laws of 1971 and 1973 required public disclosure of campaign contributions; the Inspector General Act of 1978 and other legislations were transparency-oriented milestones. Politicians and government officers were now more often held accountable. The character of democracy shifted from one in which voters normally could express and act on disapproval of government incumbents only on election day to one in which the government was under a more continuous public surveillance (Schudson, 2015).

This tied journalism to a new, more interpretive ideal. It made reporters themselves experts as never before. It requires time and often teamwork and a lot of resolve, persistence, and patience. It should also require acknowledgment that journalism has changed – and changed for the better. But popular recognition of this powerful and sweeping change has been swamped by the apparently irresistible story of the digital transformation of journalism, as if no other changes in news-gathering matter.

Post-1945, there has been a politicization of everyday life, a sprawl of rights-consciousness, and a new availability of low-cost civic engagement from 10K runs for breast cancer research, benefit concerts, blogging, and hashtag-spawned social movements. In this era, representative institutions constituted through elections remain central, but they are powerfully supplemented in ways notable enough to qualify as a new species of democracy. Various terms for this new model of democracy have been offered – from "audience democracy" (Manin, 1997) to "between-election democracy" (Esaisson & Narud, 2013) to "counter-democracy" (Rosanvallon, 2008) to "monitory democracy," perhaps

the most fitting (Keane, 2009). Monitory democracy empowers civil society to hold the government accountable, not only at the voting booth on election day but in 24/7 surveillance of governmental activity or what Keane calls "the continuous public chastening of those who exercise power" (Keane, 2009).

In monitory democracy, we expect from the media "accountability journalism," the watchdogging of government and other powerful institutions; we expect the media to offer a model of reasoned discourse about public affairs; and we expect the media to provide a representation of and a tolerance for various legitimate viewpoints (what counts as "legitimate" is, of course, contentious).

But the media are just one important institution that makes a monitory democracy work. Journalism has adapted to monitory democracy by adopting for itself more self-consciously and assertively than ever the role of holding government accountable to its constitutional duties and to a broad obligation to serve the public. "Accountability," as a general term for holding the government accountable to the public, or to national laws and traditions, comes into frequent use at about the same time, growing rapidly from the 1990s on (Dubnick, 2014). "Accountability journalism" or "accountability reporting" are, likewise, terms of relatively recent invention. Leonard Downie, Jr., among the editors who oversaw the work of Woodward and Bernstein and later succeeded Ben Bradlee as the *Washington Post's* executive editor, is not sure who invented the term but believes that he was one of the first or perhaps the very first to make regular use of the term to describe the kind of journalism he believed the most important. Downie writes, "I believe I was the first to use the term accountability journalism widely and often" (Downie, 2017).

In the United States, monitorial mechanisms have grown more extensive and more powerful from FOIA forward. Consider the Inspector General Act of 1978. Within a few years, it established in every Cabinet-level agency and most other major federal agencies an office of inspector general empowered to audit the department on an ongoing basis. Through semiannual reports and many other occasional reports on the agency each "IG" is empowered to monitor, the inspectors general make public an assessment of the agencies' waste, fraud, and abuse of the public trust. In fiscal 2014, the then-existing 72 IGs supervised 14,000 employees with a total budget of $2.6 billion. The IGs initiated over 5,500 indictments, closed 5,900 successful prosecutions, and 5,200 suspensions or debarments, and issued 6,900 audits, inspections, and evaluation reports (Hilliard, 2017; Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, 2014).

If you have been blissfully unaware of the position of inspector general across federal departments and agencies, you may nonetheless have heard of Michael Atkinson, IG for the Intelligence Community, a position he held from May 17, 2018. He was appointed to that position by Donald Trump, who had nominated him for the post. In September 2019, the whistle blower whose statement led to the House impeachment inquiry concerning President Trump, submitted his or her allegations to IG Atkinson, as is the requirement for whistle blowers in the intelligence agencies in accord with the Inspector

General Act (1978) and the Intelligence Community Whistle Blower Protection Act (1998). Atkinson made the determination that the whistle blower's complaint was "credible" and "urgent." He forwarded it to the President's Office of Legal Counsel. Finding no serious response there, he circled back to reporting it, again as required by statute, to the Congress. And that propelled the impeachment inquiry against Donald Trump. President Trump dismissed him from his office on May 3, 2020.

I have read dozens of *New York Times* news stories that are based directly on inspector general reports, always properly credited, but rarely taking a sentence or two to explain what the IG's office is, let alone its relatively recent origin. Journalists do not inform their readers about what IGs do, nor do scholars of the media and democracy. The failure of journalism to do a bit of civic education when its reporting derives from IG reports does not differ much from the work of political scientists, political historians, or journalism scholars who have done scarcely anything to shine a light on the work of the IGs. There is only one academic book I know of that takes up the topic in the past couple of decades (Hilliard, 2017).

Conclusion

If Keane is right, democracy has morphed from legislative to monitory since 1945 and more intensively so since the early 1970s. If Bell and others are right, society has become less social-elite-centered and more university-centered and science-centered since 1945. And if I am right, journalism has also changed dramatically in the period 1965 to 1980 or 1990 – never quite abandoning the ideal of "objectivity" but in practice demanding of the best journalism a more interpretive and less strait-jacketed stance in the world. There is now less need to trust journalists, in a sense, because they identify their sources more often than they did in the 1950s and 1960s. But there is more reason to question them because their ambition to explain events and not to just record them inevitably requires sophisticated thinking on their part and just as inevitably calls on their own expertise and judgment.

In other words, people trusted "the media" more than the media deserved in the period up until the 1970s when measured trust levels began to fall, and it is perhaps not so strange that trust in news media has fallen in the United States (and many other countries) during a period when critical thinking has become a stronger norm and when journalism has become not only better and more professionalized but also less strait-jacketed and more independent, more critical, more assertive, and more empowered by the new norm and practices of transparency (Schudson, 2015). Perhaps it might seem paradoxical that media trust should fall as media quality improves, but in light of all the other developments that have taken place since the 1960s, it would probably be more surprising if media trust had not fallen.

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3

INVESTIGATING NEWS MEDIA TRUST

Methodological approaches and challenges

Yariv Tsfati and Caroline Fisher

Introduction

For over half a century, researchers have tried to measure audience trust in news media, largely through surveys and more recently using qualitative methods to investigate and understand levels, antecedents, and consequences of media trust. This research endeavor was simpler during the era of mass media but has been hugely complicated by the growth of digital information sources, AI, the spread of online misinformation, and significant generational shifts in attitudes toward normative values of news and what is considered trustworthy.

For all the research activity, there is still a lack of clarity about what is being measured. Some studies have examined credibility (Kiousis, 2001) while others have focused on trustworthiness (Collins, 2009), mistrust (Engelke et al., 2019), and cynicism and distrust (Markov & Min, 2023). A range of descriptions are used interchangeably, such as "news," "news media," "journalism," "media," all of which are significantly different and are likely to be perceived as such by research participants (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Audience respondents are also asked to reflect on their level of trust in different aspects of news, such as news in general, mainstream news in particular, individual brands, the platform that delivers it, the content, the journalist who produced it, and the topic. Each of these areas of inquiry is valuable, but makes it difficult to compare findings across studies and research designs.

What this breadth of research reveals is the complexity of trust in news, and the impact of individual, social, institutional, national, and global influences that shape it. This chapter begins with a discussion of the changed information environment that is shifting audience perceptions of and trust in news. It then

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examines the confused objects of trust research and identifies the various methods that have been used in media trust research, and finally the challenges and future directions for research.

What is trust in news media?

Trust, as conceptualized by Mayer et al. (1995), refers to the trustor's willingness to accept vulnerability to the actions of another party – the trustee – regardless of the ability to monitor or control that party's behavior. Most definitions of media trust translate this notion into the audience's belief that the information and interpretations offered by news outlets are dependable and credible. Some scholars emphasize that trust inherently involves risk, asserting that "trust is only relevant when one must enter into risks" (Ratnasingham, 1998, p. 314). This dimension is particularly pertinent to media trust, as audiences often lack the means to independently verify the accuracy of news reports through non-media sources (Kohring, 2019). Consequently, decisions and judgments made based on media content can be seen as acts of risk-taking (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati, 2004). If the media fails to uphold this trust, the repercussions may extend to misinformed choices and misguided actions in everyday life.

An additional set of definitions of media trust relies on a definition offered by Fukuyama (1996, p. 26), who framed trust as the expectation that shared norms – such as professional standards and ethical codes – will be maintained. Applied to journalism, this implies that trust in media involves the belief that mainstream news organizations, and their personnel, adhere to the principles of responsible reporting and journalistic integrity (Schudson & Anderson, 2009, p. 89). Thus, such a definition of media trust encompasses not only the accuracy of information but also the fairness, transparency, and ethical conduct of those who produce it.

Measuring trust in media in surveys

Survey research has traditionally dominated the field of media trust research. Three main types of survey measures have been used to tap media trust: Items used to compare the believability in different communication platforms; single-item measures invoking concepts like confidence or trust, asking respondents to rate trust in media in general terms; and scales measuring audience evaluation of different components of journalistic professionalism.

Measures comparing trust in different communication platforms

In the United States, concerns surrounding *media trust* gained prominence in the 1930s, when newspapers feared a declining readership due to the rise of radio, and again in the 1950s with the emergence of television. Attempts to

measure the shift in audience attitudes were assessed using surveys, which have since dominated research into trust in news. Early examples include audience opinion surveys conducted by the Roper Organisation for the US Television Information Office (see Robinson & Kohut, 1988). These studies asked Americans which medium – newspapers, radio, or television – they would be most inclined to believe "[i]f the newspapers, radio and television gave different accounts of the same news story." Initially, responses revealed greater public trust in newspapers over electronic media, but by the early 1960s, this began to shift as television became more popular (Robinson & Kohut, 1988). Along similar lines, Westley and Severin (1964) sought to understand the shift in trust toward electronic media. In their study, they investigated demographic influences on media credibility through a face-to-face survey with 927 residents in Wisconsin who were asked: "As between television, radio and the newspapers, which one do you feel gives the most accurate and truthful news?".

The growing trust in TV was reaffirmed by Abel and Wirth (1977), who asked 681 adults in Detroit via cross-sectional telephone surveys: "Which would you believe in a conflicting local news report: your local newspaper or TV station?". Interestingly, the comparative task given to respondents answering this type of question does not actually measure trust in media, as we do not know if the trusted answer enjoys much or little trust. It is also noteworthy that such measures invoke the concept of belief, not trust.

Single-item measures tapping generalized trust or confidence in media

Starting in the 1970s, major consortia projects such as the World Values Survey (WVS), the US General Social Surveys (GSS), and the American National Election Study (NES) started to include single-item measures of trust or confidence in different media types. For example, the WVS asks respondents "How much confidence do you have in the press and television?" (used, for example, by Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; The European Values Survey project used a similarly worded question; see Ariely, 2015). Similarly, respondents in the US GSS are asked to rate their "confidence" in an array of social institutions including "the press," and responses to this question have been used in media trust research (e.g., Gronke & Cook, 2002). Similar projects in different countries likewise use one or two items to tap trust or confidence in the media (e.g., Yamamoto et al., 2016). Given that media trust is assessed in the context of batteries tapping trust in other institutions, respondents' trust in media, when measured by this approach, can be affected by responses about other institutions in the battery, in the form of, for example, consistency or contrast effects.

Several other projects use single-item measures directly and concisely asking respondents about their trust in media. For instance, the *Reuters Institute*

Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2025) asks respondents how much they agree with the statements "I think I can trust most news most of the time," and "I think I can trust most of the news that I use most of the time," using a 5-point agreement scale. The global Edelman Trust Barometer asks participants to rate different news platforms on a 9-point scale from "Do not trust at all" to "Trust a great deal," Similarly, Tsfati et al. (2022) used a single and direct item measure worded "Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust information from the news media in Sweden?" with answer categories varying between "1" for "do not trust at all" to "7" for "trust completely." On the one hand, none of these questions clearly articulates a definition of trust, leaving it up to each participant to provide their own. On the other hand, evidence suggests that these single-item scales are highly correlated with some of the multiple-item scales, load on the same factor as these scales, and yield similar patterns of results when examining their associations with other variables (e.g., Tsfati et al., 2023; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Given this, some suggest that general single-item measures might be recommended given that they function similarly and require lower costs (e.g., Tsfati et al., 2023, p. 5).

Scales tapping the perceived professionalism of media

While single-item questions ask respondents to rank their trust or confidence in media without defining trust, Gaziano and McGrath (1986) asked their participants to rate 16 characteristics of news media using a 5-point Likert scale. Using factor analysis, they found 12 primary dimensions of media credibility – or trustworthiness – including attributes such as fairness, lack of bias, completeness, accuracy, respect for privacy, alignment with public interest, separation of fact from opinion, and quality of reporting (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986, p. 454). Meyer (1988) went on to adapt their credibility scale based on a factor analysis of their 12-item credibility scale. Among other things, they found that the items fell under two main categories of believability and community affiliation, highlighting that trust in media evaluations are not purely cognitive but are also affective and value-based. Based on Meyers' (1988) recommendations, many measure audience trust in media using five items from the Gaziano and McGrath's scale (fair, unbiased, tell the whole story, accurate, and separate fact and opinion; see Koo et al., 2025; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). This was also recommended in a review article by Strömbäck et al. (2020). Similar scales (Yale et al., 2015) added items such as honest, believable, up-to-date, and current. It is noteworthy that these measures do not invoke the notion of trust directly, nor do they tap the accepted definition of trust as the willingness to rely on media information when making decisions. They do, however, tap the definition following Fukuyama (1996) that sees trust in media as the belief that mainstream news media adhere to the principles of professional reporting and journalistic integrity.

The most comprehensive measure of media trust using a similar approach was offered by Kohring and Matthes (2007). Their measure consisted of 16 items tapping the perceived selectivity of topics (e.g., "The topic receive the necessary attention"), facts (e.g., "The essential points are included"), the accuracy of representation (e.g., "The information would be verifiable if examined"), and trust in journalistic analysis and presentation (e.g., "Criticism is presented in an adequate manner). Similarly, Blöbaum (2014) emphasized a procedural view of media trust by proposing that it comprises trust in the overall journalism system, trust in individual journalists, and trust in journalistic methods.

Drawing on two respected scales by Kohring and Matthes (2007) and Yale et al. (2015), Prochazka and Schweiger (2019) tested the validity of the adapted frameworks in an online survey with German respondents. While they found both scales provided a good fit, the scale developed by Kohring and Matthes was found to be better in relation to certain factors, partly because of the "more precise item wordings" that help participants give a more precise answer (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019, p. 38). Indeed, whether the survey question is open or closed can have an impact on the response as well (Brosius et al., 2022). Trust in journalistic methods might also include the writing, research, and publication, or "message trust," which is inseparable from the topic (Tsfati et al., 2022). Perceptions of *message trust*, like the other categories, are hard to isolate from views of the news source and platform. In its most basic form, it is about audience perception of the quality of news and what makes it meaningful and relevant to them. Multiple survey and interview studies have identified that perceptions of partisanship, bias, sensationalism, a lack of transparency, and inaccuracy all contribute to audience perceptions of trust in news content (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil De Zúñiga, 2017; Newman & Fletcher, 2017).

More recently, Strömbäck et al. (2020) offer a theoretically driven framework for future research on news trust and its relationship with news use based on a review of the literature. They provide a tantalizingly simple conceptual model comprised of five main levels of trust – the news media in general, media types, individual brands, journalists, and media content – with each level of analysis accompanied by a proposed survey question. While this framework does include the key objects of trust, it doesn't, and can't, include the human, intangible, and often irrational elements that motivate individuals to access news, or not, and make value judgments about the trustworthiness of specific aspects of news, which they might not normally distinguish from news as a whole.

Challenges in survey measures

Measuring trust in news media was a much simpler pursuit during the mass media era. However, the arrival of digital media has created an environment in which the audience is now spoiled for choice as news, information, and entertainment sources compete for their attention in a high-choice hybrid media

environment (Chadwick, 2013), rendering the boundary between "news" and "not news" particularly porous (Carlson et al., 2018). Further, the audience is now both consumer and producer (Bruns, 2010), whether that be as a citizen journalist, content creator, or newsfluencer (Hurcombe, 2024; see Fisher et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2025).

For example, Park et al. (2024) found that younger generations are increasingly turning to non-mainstream outlets and obtaining news from everyday individuals and social media influencers, reflecting a shift toward more personalized and participatory news consumption. Complementing these findings, Anderson (2024) reports that non-traditional sources comprise more than half of the news consumption among younger news-seekers. For some, "news" may reflect conventional reportage, while for others it simply denotes something novel or personally relevant – what Nielsen (2017, p. 83) refers to as "news to me." This broader interpretation can include social media updates from friends, podcasts, influencers, opinion pieces and blogs, promotional content, or even public service alerts issued by police or other authorities.

Given that the boundary between journalism and "not journalism" has become increasingly porous (Carlson et al., 2018), and given that many of the survey measures reviewed above simply refer to concepts such as "the media," "the news media", "mainstream news," this raises the question of what outlets people have in mind when they answer survey questions about audience trust in "the media." Using an experimental approach, Daniller et al. (2017) found that people trust "the media" more positively when thinking about specific news outlets than when considering the media in general. They suggest this is due to a negative accessibility bias – that people more easily recall distrusted sources when asked about "the media" broadly. As they note, general references tend to trigger more negative judgments because negative information is more readily accessible. Daniller et al. (2017) also argue that with the growing diversity of media sources, the number of distrusted options has increased, possibly contributing to the long-term decline in overall media trust observed in studies like the GSS. In contrast, using a correlational design comparing coefficients for the effects of trust in 20 specific outlets on general media trust evaluations, Tsfati et al. (2023) find that measures of general media trust were more strongly associated with trust in specific mainstream (and in particular popular) outlets and negatively associated with trust in specific non-mainstream outlets. Rather than placing more weight on the least trusted media, as suggested by Daniller et al. (2017), their respondents seem to have averaged across all mainstream sources when forming their general evaluations of the news media's trustworthiness. One key reason for the divergent findings might be differences between the US and the Swedish media system, and the higher level of polarization and politicization of media trust in the US.

Levels of trust object

Another challenge with extant research is that asking generally about "the media" does not specify a particular trust object in a variety of institutions that employ hundreds of workers at the local, national, and international levels. The GSS confidence measure is targeted toward "people running" the institutions, conflating the level of trust object, as so many studies do. In a study of trust in media and fake news in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) asked respondents about their trust in national, local, and international news organizations, and social networking sites. Similarly, Wu and Shen (2022) asked their respondents to rate their level of trust in the information from central government media, local media, Weibo, and WeChat. Generally, Strömbäck et al. (2020) argue it is essential that studies on media trust are clear about what level of analysis the measures and the studies target. In that context, it is also important to note that media trust might vary depending on the topic of the news coverage. For example, Tsfati et al. (2022) found that people's trust in coverage of specific topics by mainstream media is distinct from general media trust. Using a Swedish national survey, the authors show that levels and predictors of trust differ by topic (e.g., immigration, climate, economy) and that topical trust better predicts accurate issue perceptions than general media trust. The study concludes that focusing solely on general media trust masks important variation in how audiences evaluate and learn from coverage of specific issues.

Trust or trustworthiness?

Secondly, in the research into news trust, there is a lack of clarity about the distinction between *trust* and *trustworthiness*. Many studies claim to be investigating trust in news, when in fact they are looking into the trustworthiness of news (see Engelke et al., 2019). While these two concepts are closely linked, they are not the same and require different research approaches (Garusi & Splendore, 2023). Williams (2002) explains that *trust* is an attitude that one places in another and is an important condition for truth-telling. To trust someone is to rely on them, often in situations of vulnerability and without guarantees. In other words, it involves risk. On the other hand, *trustworthiness* is a quality of the person or thing being trusted, such as their sincerity, accuracy, reliability, and credibility. However, both are essential because "[w]ithout trust, and without the disposition to be trustworthy, the practices of communication and cooperation would collapse" (Williams, 2002, p. 97). Therefore, in the context of exploring trust in news, the literal aim would be to examine the audience' s perception of risk toward the news.

As noted above, while most single-item scales simply ask respondents to rank their general trust in media, most multiple-item scales typically ask

respondents to assess the perceived professionality of people working in the media. This does not tap the most common definition of media trust as audience willingness to be vulnerable to news media information in everyday decision-making. To the best of our knowledge, a recent exploration by Valeriani and Gagusi (2025) is the first to ask respondents about the extent to which they rely on information from media for various types of decisions.

Source, medium, or message

Another important issue is related to which element of news is being measured. Generally speaking, the large body of early studies can be roughly divided into research focused on either the source, media, or message (Kiousis, 2001) or, as Sapir (2022) categorized it, on the micro, mezzo, and macro trust factors. These broad categories emerged during the mass media era under the banner of "credibility" research and proved to be a useful way to distinguish between different elements of news and objects of credibility. Put simply, *source credibility* refers to perceptions of credibility in the provider of news, including the brand and the journalist; *media*, or *medium credibility*, refers to perceptions of credibility in different platforms or channels for news, such as television, newspapers, radio, and social media; while *message credibility* relates to the information content in the news item and the topic. While Metzger et al. (2003) claimed that these categories remain adaptable and relevant in the digital age, Sundar (2015) argued they were inadequate to manage the multilayered complexity of online media. The growth of social and digital platforms – not to mention Generative AI – has resulted in the boundaries between these categories becoming increasingly blurred. In response, Fawzi et al. (2021, p. 157) suggested that a simpler distinction between the myriad elements of trust in news is to categorize them under broader headings of "specific" and "generalized" trust.

Types of (mis)trust: Cynicism or skepticism

On the opposite end of trust, there are also questions about how to conceptualize lack of trust. Here, while a few scholars see these concepts as predictors of (mis)trust in media, many scholars have followed Cappella and Jamieson's (1997) call to distinguish between media cynicism (the categorical rejection of media information) and media skepticism (a suspicious and critical approach dictating careful verification and processing). Quiring et al. (2021) suggested a 4-item measure for each (sample cynicism item: "The established news media and politics conspire to manipulate peoples' opinions"; sample skepticism item: "The established news media sometimes are biased, but overall, they reflect the different opinions of the society well"). Similarly, Markov and Min (2023) separated between media cynicism and distrust, with distrust representing a more nuanced, reflective, and skeptical approach toward media. They measured the

former with items such as "Journalists are prepared to lie to us whenever it suits their purposes" and the latter with items such as "The news media are fair when covering the news." In a factor analysis, their items loaded on two factors – two for cynical perceptions (one for perceived self-serving motives and the other for pessimism about journalism) and the third for media distrust, with items that are similar to the Gaziano and McGrath News Credibility Scale (NCS).

Tsfati and Barnoy (2025) offered a completely different approach. Their conceptualization separated media cynicism, skepticism, and a third category of automatic media trust, which is as deterministic and automatic as cynicism but represents automatic belief in the benevolence of journalists (in contrast to the malevolent perceptions of cynics). While in Quiring et al.'s (2021) study media skepticism was positively correlated with general media trust with which cynicism was negatively correlated, implying that people could score higher on both cynicism and skepticism. Tsfati and Barnoy (2025) measured their constructs on a continuum ranging from cynicism to automatic trust, with skepticism in the middle.

Their measurement included eight items in which respondents with high media trust had to rank themselves between automatic trusting ("You can believe everything reported in the news") and skeptical ("You can believe parts of the facts reported in the news") statements and low-trusting respondents had to rank themselves on a continuum varying between skeptical ("You can believe parts of the facts reported in the news") and cynical ("You cannot believe anything in the news") statements. After combining the scores of the high-trust and low-trust respondents and averaging them, Tsfati and Barnoy split their sample into cynics (lower part of the scale), skeptics (middle part), and automatic trustors (upper part). To validate the categorization, respondents read six mainstream news stories, ranked the credibility of each, and were requested (in an open-ended question) to explain why they ranked the credibility of each story the way they did. Findings showed that skeptics were slower to read and evaluate the stories (reflecting a more careful and reflective approach). There was less dispersion in cynics' evaluation (reflective, more automatic, and categorical rejection). Cynics, skeptics, and automatic trustors also differed in the way they explained their evaluations, with cynics providing more cynical explanations like "I don't trust this story because I don't trust any story I read in the media". Tsfati and Barnoy note that their study implies that

> rather than a continuous phenomenon that varies from complete mistrust and incrementally and gradually relates to other constructs, trust in media may be better modeled by non-linear models with its two extremities (labeled automatic trustors and cynics in the current study) relatively similar to each other in many respects and are qualitatively different in many respects from the center of the distribution (the skeptics of the current study).
>
> *(p. 24)*

Qualitative and mixed-methods approaches

As already noted, the bulk of research into news trust and associated labels (credibility, etc.) has traditionally been quantitative and based on surveys (Engelke et al., 2019). However, there is a growing body of qualitative and mixed-methods work attempting to understand more richly why people do and don't trust the news. As Brosius et al. (2022) argued, there is much to benefit from combining quantitative and qualitative methods to increase insights. At a time when audience conceptions of news are changing, Garusi and Splendore (2023) state that qualitative approaches help researchers better understand how perceptions of news and people's trust in it are evolving, which is just as important as trying to measure it. While survey responses are easier to validate, open-text comments, interviews, and focus groups can reveal sometimes contradictory perceptions and behavior, and offer a more "complex construct that involves both cognitive and emotional dimensions" that makes it "challenging to capture" (Garusi & Splendore, 2023, p. 5; see also Pasitselska, 2022). For example, Stětka and Mihelj (2024, pp. 94–112) used a mixed-methods approach including survey data in conjunction with in-depth interviews and relied on qualitative media diaries to understand audience news exposure. The open-ended components of their research demonstrated that respondents had some very reasonable explanations for what quantitative scholars might think is paradoxical. For example, exposure to untrustworthy media sources was explained by contextual factors (e.g., exposure by family members or in the workplace).

Despite the complexity, a consistent range of sentiments do recur in audience qualitative studies, such as perceptions of bias, sensationalism, and a lack of transparency. Wilner et al. (2021) conducted focus groups comprising news-consuming adults who were asked to read three news stories and, afterwards, a set of questions for discussion. While focus groups present challenges for the researcher in that they may not have much control and some participants are more vocal than others, they are an efficient way to collect data and provide rich insights based on shared meaning-making in the group (Wilner et al., 2021, p. 1935). Three key themes emerge from their study. These include a perception of "constant bias," a desire for journalists to be a "silent watchdog" and do more investigative reporting, and a desire for more "witnessing as truth" through an increase in first-hand reporting. An analysis of more than 7000 open-text comments by Newman and Fletcher (2017) further revealed perceptions of "bias, bullshit and lies" to be key drivers of low levels of trust in news, particularly among young people with lower incomes (see also Knudsen et al., 2022). For this younger cohort, technical affordances of digital media have also been found to be important to credibility assessments, such as ease of interactivity, navigability, and design (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007; Sundar, 2015). Additionally, social connections play a key role

in determining trust in news for younger people. Ognyanova's (2019) longitudinal network analysis of 13 residential student groups highlighted the importance of social relationships on trust perceptions, especially in-person discussions with colleagues who share similar political views.

The use of qualitative methods has also increased our understanding of different types of audience trust. For example, Park, et al. (2025) found the degree of skepticism and cynicism depended on a range of factors, including their level of news consumption and political orientation. Analysis of 40 semi-structured interviews with heavy and non-news consumers revealed a range of responses, such as "pragmatic skepticism," "selective trust" and "generalized cynicism," which can lead to verification and fact-checking behaviors among heavy news consumers. Markov and Min (2023) similarly used in-depth interviews to probe into different types of perceptions of the media. In their interviews, cynicism emerged as the deterministic and process-oriented perception that journalism serves no purpose other than financial profit and audience manipulation. In contrast, distrust was a more nuanced, probing, and outcome-oriented perception that may be open to correction in the presence of counter-evidence. These and other qualitative projects (e.g., Schwarzenegger, 2020) provide insight into how individuals articulate and rationalize their animosity toward journalists in their own words and moral frameworks and using their daily experiences.

In addition to qualitative methods, Ritter and Holcomb (2023, Ch. 8) call for experimental approaches to be adopted. While surveys offer a high degree of control to researchers, they are limited in their external validity because of their reliance on self-reporting. Digital trace data, on the other hand, provides a better picture of what people actually do instead of what they say they do, but they are limited in relation to people's perceptions of conceptual issues. Instead, the authors call for investment in experimental platforms such as NewsLens in the US, where users are invited to read, rate, and share articles in relation to trust and quality. Interestingly, they found a difference in perceptions of trust and quality, meaning a user might think an article is high quality, but not trustworthy. When analyzed based on participant demographics, the political orientation of the audience was found to be the most significant factor related to quality and trust perceptions. This comes as no surprise, with research repeatedly showing that the political orientation of audiences is strongly correlated with perceptions of trust and mistrust, especially in highly polarized countries like the United States (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2025; Steindl et al., 2024; Tsfati et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Summing up, this chapter has attempted to give an overview of key approaches to measuring trust in news. While the body of research into trust in mainstream news continues to grow, the field has been plagued by a lack of

consensus among researchers about how to conceptualize and operationalize it. The result is a canon of scholarship complicated by key challenges such as the interchangeability of terms, inconsistency in definitions and objects of study, and a rapidly changing media context and audience behaviors. Despite this lack of consensus and the diversity of research in the area, this review offers several conclusions.

First, the use of different measures often led to similar findings. One of the most consistent findings in the area, the modest association between trust in mainstream media and mainstream news exposure, has been replicated using different measures on different samples and in different contexts. Similarly, the association between media trust and key demographic factors such as education, age, and political orientation has been found using different trust measures.

Second, as Strömbäck et al. (2020) suggest, the literature points out that greater specificity regarding the type and object of trust in survey question wordings is recommended. For example, Tsfati et al.'s (2022) measures of trust in media coverage of specific topics were more strongly associated with knowledge of the specific topics (and not of other topics) compared to the effects of general trust. Likewise, separating between different types of trust (cynicism and skepticism) has brought more precision to models predicting different types of news exposure diets.

Third, beyond the recommendation for precision, it is difficult to point to a superior measurement approach. Very few studies compare the performance of several scales (for an exception, see Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019), and the validity of the different scales has only rarely been examined. Most scholars simply implicitly or explicitly assume the face validity of questions about trust in media (see Yamamoto et al., 2016, p. 139). Given that only small differences between the detailed NCS and a simple single-item media trust measure, for example, it seems like single-item trust measures can effectively capture public trust while allowing easier use in longitudinal studies. A caveat, though, is that the level of analysis and the type of media asked about should be clearly specified. From a discipline-wide perspective, the inclusion of a refined single-item trust in media measure in consortia projects (such as the GSS, WVS, NES, etc.) can thus be recommended.

Lastly, qualitative and mixed-methods approaches offer crucial advantages for studying audience trust in mainstream media because they capture the complexity, nuance, and emotional dimensions that quantitative surveys often overlook. Techniques such as interviews, focus groups, open-text analysis, and media diaries enable researchers to understand why people trust or distrust the news, revealing context-specific explanations for seemingly paradoxical behaviors – such as continued exposure to untrusted sources. Combining these methods with quantitative tools can, as shown by Stětka and Mihelj (2024), enrich interpretation and bridge gaps between attitudes and behavior. Qualitative studies can also uncover recurring themes – like perceived bias, sensationalism,

and lack of transparency – while highlighting generational and social factors that shape trust, such as digital interactivity and peer influence. Overall, mixed and qualitative designs provide a more holistic and human-centered understanding of media trust, integrating cognitive, emotional, and contextual elements that single-method surveys alone cannot fully explain.

While these are relatively modest and general conclusions to offer based on a review of over half a century of research, the review does suggest directions for the future. Given that the past is typically a good predictor of future outcomes and that the number of academic publications in the area has grown tremendously in recent years, we should probably not expect the arrival of a neat and consensual framework anytime soon. While many studies have used journalists' and scholars' expectations of good journalism when phrasing survey items assessing audience trust in the media, research has shown that audiences differ from journalists in their expectations of news media and in their definition of good journalism (Tsfati et al., 2006). Importantly, while journalists value norms like objectivity and independence, audiences may also prioritize more emotional and human elements, valuing qualities such as approachability, empathy, and affective communication skills (Mellado & Gajardo, 2024). Thus, considering calls for a stronger audience turn (Swart et al., 2022) and an emotional turn (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020) in journalism studies, future studies of audience trust should perhaps turn the spotlight on the emotional elements in audience trust in media.

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PART II

Comparative perspectives

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4

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO TRUST IN NEWS IN THE LONG RUN GLOBALLY?

Richard Fletcher and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

Introduction

Trust in news is an important issue both for media professionals and for scholars seeking to understand the role of news media in our societies.

Journalists and others in the news media have many reasons to care about trust, both as an intrinsically important part of their relationship with the public, and as a means to an end (e.g. selling subscriptions, justifying public funding). "Trust is the new currency for success", as the World Association of News Media has put it.[1]

Scholars interested in trust in news include media researchers specifically (Fawzi et al., 2021; Ladd, 2012), as well as social scientists considering the news media as part of broader comparative analysis (Norris, 2011). Researchers have documented that it matters to many in the industry, who both care about trust, and are concerned about losing it (Robinson, 2023; Toff et al., 2021a). They have also found that it is an important mediating factor influencing the individual-level consequences of engaging with the news (Ejaz et al., 2024; Skipworth, 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2022).

Both media professionals and scholars are keenly aware that trust in news has declined in recent years in many places (Fawzi et al., 2021; Fletcher et al., 2025; Newman et al., 2025). In some countries, individual politicians and political parties are now openly attacking the news media, painting them as untrustworthy on social media and elsewhere, and parts of the public express not merely a lack of trust, but active distrust. In a recent survey, more than half of respondents reported that they "very" or "quite often" come across media criticism, often from politicians, and often on social media (Newman et al., 2023).

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While accentuated in recent years, it is also clear that there has been longer-term declines in trust in news going back decades in some intensely studied and well-documented individual countries – the most well-known example of this is probably the United States, where, according to Gallup, the percentage who say they trust the media has declined from around 70 % in the 1970s to a little over 30% in the 2020s.[2]

But neither the recent nor the longer-term declines are uniform across the world. In other countries, during the same period, trust in news has remained stable, or even increased. As a group of scholars argued in a landmark comparative and longitudinal study analysing data from 53 countries going up to 2014, "decline in media trust is not a universal trend" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

In this chapter, we build on this previous work and examine long-term global trends in trust in news by combining data from the World Values Survey/European Values Study (WVS/EVS) and the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (DNR) to expand the scope of analysis both in terms of countries covered and the time period under consideration. We examine datasets containing trust data from 115 countries,[3] together accounting for about three-quarters of the world's population (in large part due to the inclusion of China and India) and cover developments over nearly half a century, going beyond existing work in both space and time. Overall, we show that there is a clear, consistent, and general (though not universal) decline in trust in news across most of the countries covered, that trust has generally declined throughout the whole period covered, and that the decline has increased in the 2000s as digital media gradually displaced television as the most widely used source of news.

We rely on survey data because it is uniquely suited to document developments in overall trust in news at the societal level. Many other methods, including qualitative methods and experiments, are important in understanding what trust in news means, what engenders it, and what relation it has with other issues (whether behavioural, institutional, or societal). But with representative samples, surveys can document public sentiment at the population level, and questions fielded repeatedly across multiple waves and across countries enable analysis of developments over time and cross-country comparisons (see also Chapter 3 in this volume).

That makes surveys useful for understanding trust in news as fundamentally subjective and relational, and thus a phenomenon that, to be properly understood, has to be analysed on the basis of data on what different people think of the news. Content analysis, interviews with journalists, fieldwork in news organisations, and other methods can all contribute to our understanding of what journalists and media do and do not do to earn and retain trust. But given that trust is necessarily in the eye of the beholder, to document and understand trust, we have to consider how the public perceives the news – something surveys can help us do.

It is important to stress that this kind of general public trust in news is not a measure of trustworthiness, or an objective indicator of any other intrinsic property. As Onora O'Neill pointed out in her classic work, sometimes people trust individuals and institutions that are not, in fact, trustworthy. And sometimes they do not trust – or even distrust – those that they might, on closer inspection, see as trustworthy (or that journalists, scholars, or others think they ought to see as trustworthy) (O'Neill, 2002; see also Chapter 2 in this volume).

It is also important to stress that both what trust means and how people respond to survey questions about it are context-dependent. For present purposes, given the high number of very different countries included in the analysis, it is particularly important to note that comparative work in political science suggests that while people in more democratic countries may tend to answer questions about trust in a "positive" sense, as pertaining to whether they have confidence in the ethical and normative commitments of, in this case, the news media, people in authoritarian countries may tend to answer the question in a "negative" sense, as pertaining to whether the news media act predictably (Rivetti & Cavatorta, 2017). Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that respondents engage in both self-censorship and preference fabrication in surveys concerning trust in institutions perceived as aligned with authoritarian regimes (Tannenberg, 2022), including news media directly controlled by the government (see also Chapter 5 in this volume).

But subjective as it is, whether well-founded or not, trust in news is, from the perspective of journalists and news media who face an often sceptical public, what sociologists call a "social fact", famously defined as "manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control" (Durkheim et al., 1964). Whatever media professionals and media scholars think of how the news media are seen by members of the public, these public perceptions of trust are thus important in themselves, as part of the place the news media occupy as a social institution (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Nielsen, 2016; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). In people's relations with news, as in their relations with politics and much else, perception is a consequential part of reality.

Research questions

To advance our understanding of global, long-term trends in trust in news, we focus on two main research questions.

First, we extend previous work to include the decade from 2015 to 2025, a period which has seen an accelerated move towards a more digital, mobile, and platform-dominated high-choice media environment different in many ways from the low-choice media environment dominated by broadcast and print mass media, as well as active political attacks on the media in some countries, and a global pandemic that tested the capabilities of virtually all institutions in society. Informed by research suggesting that structural changes in the media

environment – in the period we cover, most notably perhaps the relative decline of television news and the growing importance of digital media – in themselves can influence trust in news (Fletcher et al., 2025), and that there has been an overall long-term decline in trust in many, but not all, institutions globally (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2022; Valgarðsson et al., 2025), we ask –

RQ1. What has happened to trust in news globally in the last 50 years?

Second, building on scholarship highlighting the importance of context (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) – especially domestic politics (Hanitzsch et al., 2018) – in influencing trust in news, as well as the concern expressed by many social scientists that we are living through a "democratic recession" (Bermeo, 2016) with many societies undergoing democratic backsliding or even active autocratisation (often accompanied by attacks on the news media by politicians and sometimes parts of the public, see also Chapter 12 in this volume), we ask –

RQ2a. Are the trends different in countries with different levels of media freedom?
RQ2b. Are the trends different in countries with changing levels of media freedom?

Our approach here is deliberately empirical and descriptive. We do not intend to offer any causal account, review existing work, or develop yet another theory. Instead, our focus is on offering a descriptive argument to expand our understanding of an aspect of the world that both media professionals and media scholars have reason to care about. Such descriptive analysis is, as even the most programmatic proponents of causal analysis recognise, an essential part of science and necessary to advance our understanding of the empirical world (Gerring, 2012). As King, Keohane, and Verba point out in their influential *methodenstreitschrifft* known for its pronounced privileging of causal analysis, "it is hard to develop [causal] explanations before we know something about the world and what needs to be explained on the basis of what characteristics" (King et al., 1994). We believe this is especially important when it comes to areas like the media, where the objects of analysis evolve over time, and where opinions and narratives about what is going on often rush ahead of evidence. Precisely because trust in news is important, both for media professionals and for scholars working on media, it is important we have a contextually nuanced, up-to-date, and empirically grounded understanding of the phenomenon. Despite this, as one recent literature review on trust in news noted, although "communication researchers have comprehensively studied the correlates of trust in news media at the individual level, relatively little attention has been paid to the societal level" (Fawzi et al., 2021, p. 163). The aim of this chapter is to help rectify that.

Data

Our analysis is based on survey data from two sources: first, the World Values Survey (Haerpfer et al., 2024) combined with European Values Study (EVS, 2022) – together sometimes referred to as the Integrated Values Survey (IVS) – and, second, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2025).

The WVS/EVS has collected data on confidence in the press across eight waves from 1981 to 2022, and the DNR has collected data on trust in news every year from 2015 to 2025 across 11 waves. The WVS/EVS data covers 118 countries, while the DNR covers 48. Due to overlap, and after sub-regions within countries and countries with no trust data were removed, the combined dataset covers 115 countries over nearly half a century, from 1981 to 2025 (see Table A1 for a list of countries). The WVS/EVS dataset contains 632,711 valid responses and the DNR dataset 858,688. The combined number of responses included in the analysis is thus nearly 1.5 million. Our analysis of data on 115 countries over nearly 50 years compare to analysis of data on 53 countries over 40 years in the most ambitious previous study we are aware of (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; see also Müller, 2013).

The two datasets we rely on have usually fielded one main question to measure people's overall trust in news. Because of the theoretical and conceptual complexity of the issue at hand, some researchers field a range of different questions to get at different aspects of trust in news. Gaziano and McGrath's (1986) "news credibility scale", for example, suggests using no less than 12 items. It has been deployed in recent work utilising a subset of these, for example, an important study using five of the items to ask respondents whether the news media in Sweden are "fair", "unbiased", "tell the whole story", "accurate", and "separate fact and opinion" in their news coverage (Tsfati et al., 2023). Others have tried to develop new, multidimensional ways of getting at trust in news and its component parts (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Toff et al., 2021b). Researchers have also investigated variation in trust in news across different topics, documenting, for example, significantly lower trust in news about crime and immigration than about medicine and the economy (Tsfati et al., 2022). Similarly, many researchers have noted that which kinds of news media respondents are asked about – most commonly "the press" versus "television news" in the past, and more recently in the DNR "most news" versus for example "news found on social media" – often document different public perceptions of different parts of the news media environment (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Research shows, for example, that television news is usually more widely trusted than newspapers, perhaps in part due to reliance on the "realism heuristic" that audiovisual content is used to benefit from (Sundar, 2008). A few surveys also include questions about trust in individual news media brands, documenting great variation (Newman et al., 2025; Schulz et al.,

2020; Toff et al., 2021b). Furthermore, methodological analysis suggests that, in authoritarian countries, asking separate questions about media that are directly controlled by the government and those that are not (though often still faced with government sticks and carrots), tends to return significantly higher results for those explicitly aligned with the government (Tannenberg, 2022). These different approaches all rely on including a range of different questions in the same survey on the basis of interest in variations in trust at the individual and aggregate level, on the one hand, and various levels of analysis on the other hand (news in general, news on specific topics, via specific media, from specific brands, in specific contexts, etc.).

There are clearly potential advantages to fielding a wider range of questions, both around different aspects of trust and related concepts like confidence, credibility, etc., as well as around different kinds of news media or even individual brands. But it is much more resource-intensive due to the costs involved in fielding surveys, and the need to be disciplined about questionnaire length limits how many other issues can be covered in the same survey. For example, the Swedish study mentioned above finds that "there were only minor differences in the results between the *News Credibility Scale* and a general single-item media trust measure" (Tsfati et al., 2023). Studies have also suggested that this is because while scholars may have theoretically and conceptually sound reasons for understanding trust in news as a multidimensional construct, the public tends to think about it in a unidimensional way (Daniller et al., 2017). We therefore consider the single-item measures used here reliable for our purposes, and the number of countries included ensures we can analyse variation across different contexts - but it is important to be very clear that this necessarily limits the granularity of the findings when it comes to, for example, trust in different topics or types of media, areas where we would welcome future large-scale longitudinal and comparative work.

The measures of trust in news deployed by the WVS/EVS and the DNR are different but related. The WVS/EVS survey asks respondents how much confidence they have in various institutions, including "the press". Although the WVS/EVS question does not refer specifically to either "trust" or "the news", it is frequently used as a measure of trust in news (Hanitzsch et al., 2018), and we do the same here. There are four response options: "A great deal", "Quite a lot", "Not very much", and "None at all", and respondents can also choose not to answer. The DNR survey asks respondents whether they "trust most news most of the time", with responses recorded on five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree", with no "Don't know" option. Below, we work with data from these two measures to be able to expand the scale and scope of the empirical analysis.

Analysis

The data has been analysed using a similar approach to one developed for the longitudinal analysis of political trust across multiple datasets, survey projects, and survey questions (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). This approach is based around harmonising the different measures of trust in news contained in the datasets before analysing them. We have done this by dichotomising the responses to different trust questions into (1) "Trust" and (0) "Lack of trust". "A great deal" and "Quite a lot" responses from the WVS/EVS data were recoded as (1) "Trust", and "Not very much" and "None at all" responses were recoded as (0) "Lack of trust". Those who chose not to answer were excluded. "Strongly agree" and "Tend to agree" responses from the DNR were recoded as (1) "Trust" with "Neither agree nor disagree", "Tend to disagree" and "Strongly disagree" recoded as (0) "Lack of trust".

The datasets can then be analysed using linear multi-level modelling, where time (measured here using the year the survey was conducted) is used to predict trust, and a random intercept for country is added to account for the fact that individual respondents are nested within countries. It is also possible to pool the datasets and model the relationship between year and trust, where individual responses are nested in datasets, which are in turn nested in countries.

Changes in global trust levels

While it is a common assumption that there is a general trend of declining trust in news, systematic comparative analyses of whether that is actually the case remain scarce (with exceptions like Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Beginning with the WVS/EVS dataset, we find a decline over time, as year – which has been centred around zero to produce meaningful intercepts – has a small but statistically significant negative association with trust in news ($b = -.002$, $p < .001$) (see Table 4.1, Model 1). In other words, on average the proportion that trust the news has decreased by about 1 percentage point (pp) every 5 years from 1981 to 2022 – declining from around 49% in the 1980s to 39% in the 2020s in the countries covered. The United States, as an individual country example, sees a sharp decline from 50% in 1981 and ends at 23% in 2011 (the last WVS wave it was included in). In the period covered by the WVS/EVS dataset, the United States thus comes across as a more extreme example of a general trend.

The DNR data (Table 4.1, Model 2) shows a similar but slightly steeper downward trend ($b = .004$, $p < .001$). In this dataset, trust in news decreased by 2pp every 5 years from 2015 to 2025 – declining from 44% in 2015 to around 40% today in the countries covered. According to this data, in this period, trust in news in the United States is in fact basically stable – starting at 32% in 2015 and ending at 30% in 2025. In the period covered by the DNR

TABLE 4.1 Multi-level models showing the effect of year in different datasets where the dependent variable is trust in news

Predictors	*Model 1 WVS/EVS*			*Model 2 DNR*			*Model 3 Pooled*		
	b	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*
(Intercept)	.435	.014	**<.001**	.484	.015	**<.001**	.444	.012	**<.001**
Year	−.002	.000	**<.001**	−.004	.000	**<.001**	−.002	.000	**<.001**
Random Effects									
σ^2	.22			.23			.23		
τ_{00}	$.02_{\text{Country}}$			$.01_{\text{Country}}$			$.01_{\text{Country:Dataset}}$ $.01_{\text{Country}}$		
ICC	.09			.04			.08		
N	115_{Country}			48_{Country}			115_{Country} 2_{Dataset}		
Observations	632,711			858,668			1,491,379		
Marginal R^2/ Conditional R^2	.002/.095			.001/.041			.003/.080		

Note: Bold indicates a statistically significant effect at $\alpha = .05$.

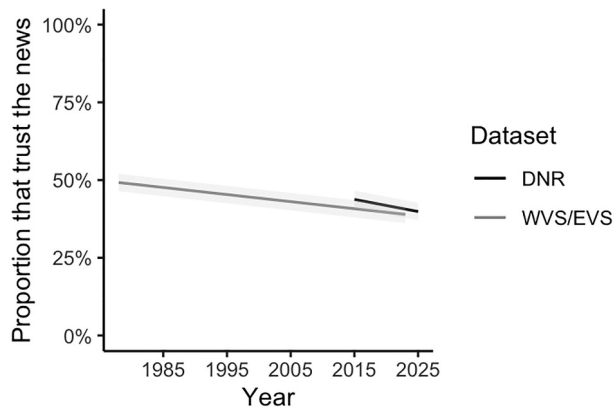

FIGURE 4.1 Predicted effect of time on trust in news in the DNR and WVS/EVS datasets.

dataset, the United States is thus more of an exception, with relatively stable (low) trust in news in a period characterised by (accelerating) general declines in many other countries.

Given the overall trends, it is no surprise that if we pool the datasets (while accounting for the fact that individual responses are nested in datasets which are in turn nested in countries) we also find a negative trend ($b = -.002$, $p < .001$) (Table 4.1, Model 3). To explore the extent to which this trend is

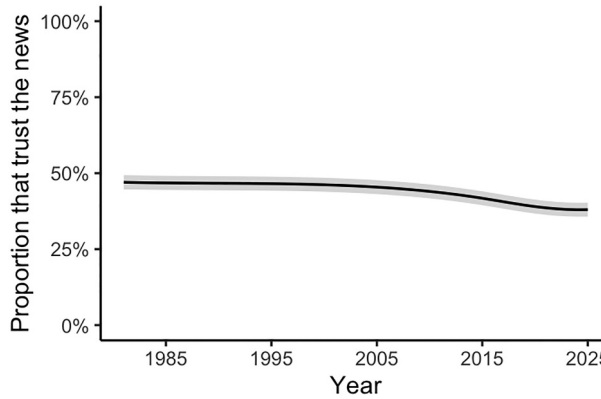

FIGURE 4.2 Trust in news over time in the pooled dataset.

non-linear we estimate a similar model with time as a B-spline with five degrees of freedom. When visualised, this model suggests a slight decline from 1981 onwards that seems to accelerate from around 2000, broadly around the time digital media began to be widely used for news (see Figure 4.2).

While it is not universal across countries, or evenly distributed over time, the data thus reveals that recent declines in trust seen in many places and documented in the DNR are part of a longer-term downward trend extending back to at least the 1980s. Importantly, and running contrary to the tendency to sometimes assume a past where most people trusted the news, even half a century ago, across the countries covered here, less than half the public said that they trusted the news, and the decline we document had begun before the internet became a mass medium. But it does seem to have accelerated as digital media become mainstream and various platforms (e.g. search engines, social media, video sites, and messaging applications) come to occupy dominant positions in the media environment. This structural media change may have influenced overall trust in news (Fletcher et al., 2025; see also Chapter 9 in this volume), and social media in particular has certainly enabled more public criticism of the media both from political actors and members of the public (Newman et al., 2023), even as political context and key events like the pandemic no doubt continue to be important too.

The results in Table 4.1 also highlight that while there has been a statistically significant decline in trust, differences between countries and datasets explain much more of the variance. Given how previous research has documented the importance of context and complicated the idea that there are universal trends in trust in news, it is not surprising that different countries show different trends that often depart from the average.

Figure 4.3 attempts to summarise this, by displaying the effect of time on trust in news in each country and dataset based on 140 separate OLS models

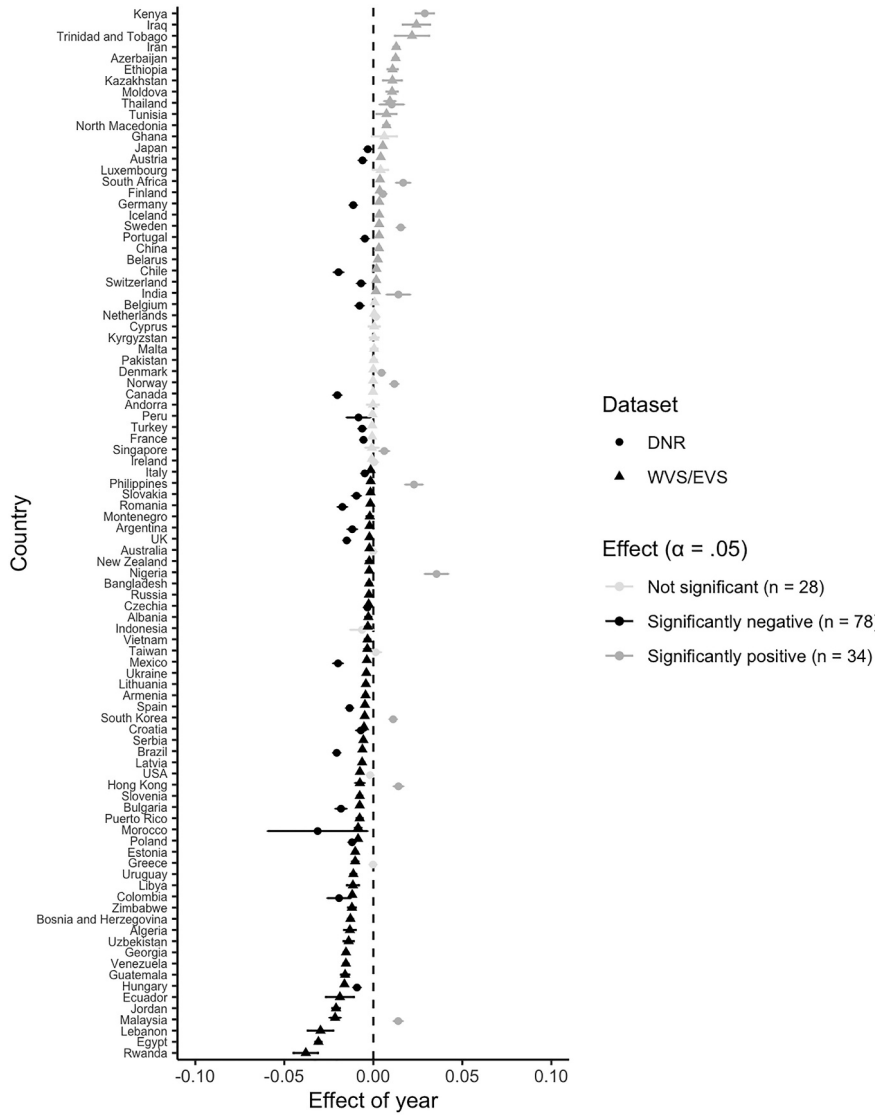

FIGURE 4.3 Predicted effect of time on trust in news in every country-dataset combination.

across 94 countries (some of the 115 countries in the two datasets only contain data from a single year, meaning it is not possible to study the effect of time). Limited space prevents us from going into detail, but it is clear that most countries have experienced a statistically significant decline in trust according to at least one of the datasets. A total of 78 of the country-datasets covered show a significant negative effect over time, whereas 34 have seen a positive effect over time. In the remaining 28 cases, the results are not statistically significant.

Although there are some consistent country patterns in the DNR and WVS/EVS datasets, there are also some differences. This is likely to be because they cover different time periods, and, given how most scholars stress the contextual character of trust in news and its relationship to domestic politics (with its vagaries), it is not clear why one should necessarily expect declines from the 1980s and 1990s to continue into the 2020s. The underlying surveys are also based on different methodologies. The WVS/EVS data is largely based on face-to-face interviews with nationally representative samples, whereas the DNR data comes from online surveys with nationally representative quotas.

There could also be inconsistencies due to the questions asked. The WVS/EVS question asks about confidence in "the press", which although it can be used to refer to the news media and journalism as a whole, the term will be understood as newspaper and magazine journalism specifically by some (perhaps most) respondents. There is some evidence of this in the data. For example, if we look at Japan and the UK, we see quite different baseline levels of trust in each dataset. In Japan – which has one of the highest newspaper circulation rates in the world – the WVS/EVS data on confidence in the press is much higher than the DNR data on trust in news. In the UK, however, where partisan newspapers have very low levels of trust and the most trusted brands are broadcasters like the BBC (Newman et al., 2025), confidence in the press is considerably lower than trust in news (Figure 4.4). Differences here are not due to the time period and are unlikely to be caused by survey methodology, as it is possible to collect high-quality, nationally representative online survey data in both countries.

We now turn to RQ2a and RQ2b, which ask whether the trends in trust in news are different for countries with different or changing levels of press freedom. To place countries into different groups we use Freedom House's (2017) data on freedom of the press, which was compiled annually from 1980 to 2016,

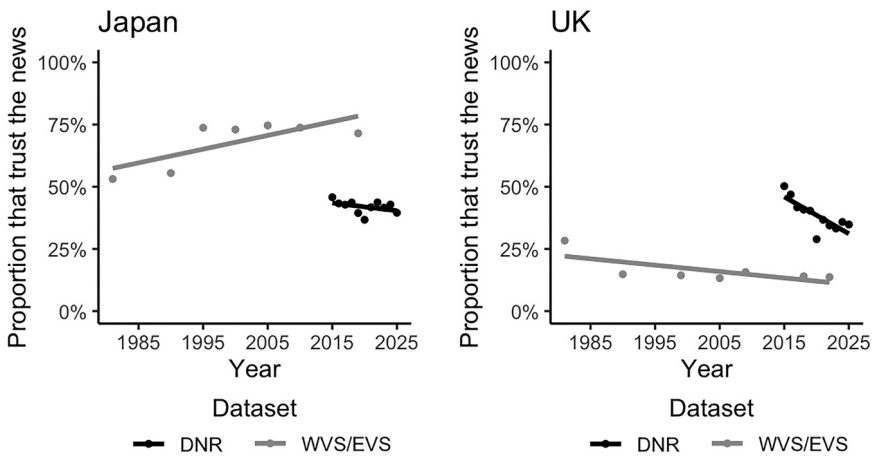

FIGURE 4.4 Confidence in the press and trust in news over time in Japan and the UK.

and thus allows us to cover much of the period studied. Freedom House scored countries based on their own assessment of the press freedom situation, and categorised them as "Free", "Partly Free" or "Not Free". For the purposes of RQ2a, we categorised a country as "Free" if Freedom House consistently classified it as "Free" in every year (n=27 countries), with the same approach for countries classed as "Not Free" (n=10). This leaves a substantial number of countries where the classification varied over time. For the purposes of RQ2b, countries were categorised as "Improving" (n=22) if there was evidence of an upward slope over time (after "Free" [3], "Partly Free" [2] and "Not Free" [1] were converted to numerical values) and there was a net increase of at least 1 from the first year in the data to the last. Countries were categorised as "Deteriorating" (n=26) if there was a downward slope and a net decrease of at least –1 in the Freedom House score. Countries were categorised as "Fluctuating" (n=28) if there was no substantial net change from the first to last year.[4]

When we add a term for press freedom group to the Model 3 and interact it with time (Model 4 in Table 4.2), we can estimate the trend for trust in news in each group based on the pooled DNR and WVS/EVS data.

TABLE 4.2 Multi-level model showing the effect of year in countries with different types of press freedom where the dependent variable is trust in news

Predictors	*Model 4 Pooled*		
	b	*SE*	*p*
(Intercept)	.455	.022	**<.001**
Year	–.003	.000	**<.001**
Press freedom (ref=Deteriorating)			
- Fluctuating	.002	.032	.950
- Free	–0.049	0.032	0.115
- Improving	–0.004	0.034	0.900
- Not Free	0.087	0.047	0.065
Year: Fluctuating	–0.002	0.000	**<0.001**
Year: Free	0.002	0.000	**<0.001**
Year: Improving	–0.003	0.000	**<0.001**
Year: Not Free	0.009	0.000	**<0.001**
Random Effects			
σ^2	0.23		
$\tau_{00\ \text{Country:Dataset}}$	0.01		
$\tau_{00\ \text{Country}}$	0.01		
ICC	0.07		
N_{Country}	113		
N_{Dataset}	2		
Observations	1,487,380		
Marginal R^2/Conditional R^2	0.009/0.077		

Note: Bold indicates a statistically significant effect at $\alpha = .05$.

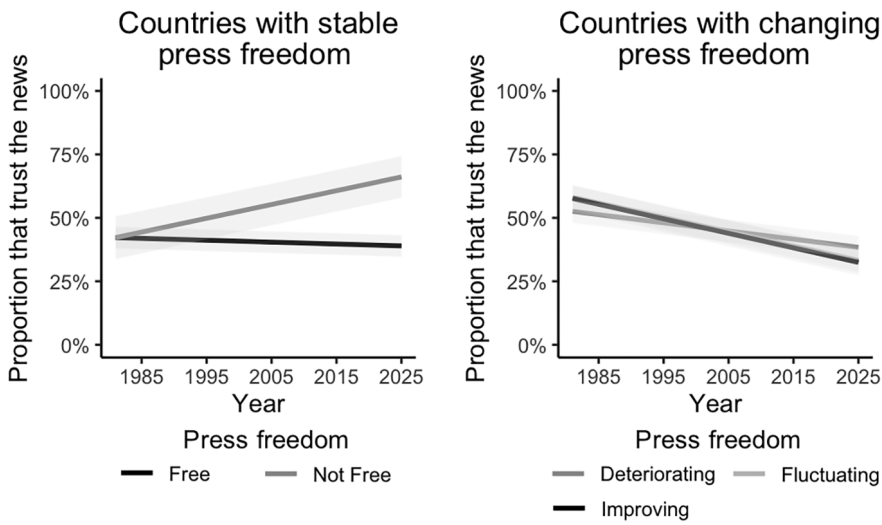

FIGURE 4.5 Predicted effect of time on trust in news by press freedom (pooled DNR and WVS/EVS data).

When we visualise this in the first panel in Figure 4.5 (RQ2a), where we compare consistently "Free" countries to those consistently "Not Free", we see that trust in news in countries with no press freedom has actually risen since the 1980s (this is based entirely on WVS/EVS data, as there are no countries in the "Not Free" group in the DNR data). However, consistently "Free" countries have seen small declines in trust in news. In the second panel in Figure 4.5 (RQ2b), we see that in countries with "Deteriorating", "Fluctuating", or "Improving" press freedom, trust in the news has fallen. In other words, since the 1980s, only countries which consistently lack press freedom have seen increases in trust. (Our finding here is in line with earlier work by Müller, 2013.)

Discussion

In this chapter, we have analysed global long-term trends in trust in news based on survey data from 115 countries from 1981 to 2025. Extending previous work both in terms of the number of countries covered and the time period, we document that there clearly has been an overall decline in trust in news over time, starting in the 1980s, and accelerating from around 2000 as the internet and various digital platforms became mass media. A more detailed examination including other levels of analysis, including trust in news on different topics, via different media, or from different brands, may nuance the findings in important ways. But the overall results are clear.

This trend towards lower trust in news is aligned both with the experience of media professionals in many countries and with findings from social scientists documenting a similar overall decline in trust in some (but not all) political institutions over recent decades (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). The decline in trust predates the rise of the internet and the digital platforms that have come to dominate it, and unquestionably has many contributing causes, but it does seem to have accelerated as digital media became more mainstream. One possible reason for this could be that news does not appear as authoritative in a digital environment that affords active and often contentious debates, alternative voices, and where all sorts of content are presented equally by platforms (Fletcher et al., 2025). And if people living under authoritarian regimes in media environments that are not free are less likely to publicly voice their criticisms or embrace alternatives, the possible effects of the structural shift may play out differently in these contexts.

These clear, general trends notwithstanding, it is still true, as Thomas Hanitzsch and co-authors found in their important study (Hanitzsch et al., 2018), that there is no single universal trend. A significant minority of countries have not seen a decline in trust in news, and some even saw an increase. The United States, sometimes treated as if it were representative of wider developments, is an outlier here both in terms of how unusually high trust in news was in the last part of the 20th century, and in terms of how sharply it has declined since. Many other countries have, in a less dramatic but still significant fashion, moved from limited trust in news in the 20th century to somewhat lower levels in the 21st. Looking back over the last half-century, it is clear that situations where the majority of the public in a country trusted the news are the exceptions, not the rule.

Context seems to be a contributing factor to this variation. Building on existing work stressing the importance of domestic politics for trust in news, we have examined long-term global developments across countries consistently regarded by Freedom House as having free media, countries consistently rated "not Free", as well as countries that have seen, respectively, a deteriorating, fluctuating, or improving media freedom situation over the period covered. Overall, we find a clear decline across all the countries with changing media freedom situation, a slight decline in the countries consistently rated free, and a significant increase in trust in news in countries rated "not Free".

These findings raise a number of important questions for both media professionals and scholars to consider. The fact that trust in news has declined in free countries and countries with fluctuating levels of media freedom lends itself to at least two different interpretations.

The optimistic interpretation is that this reflects the development of a more *sceptical citizenry* (sometimes called "critical"), with more people less deferential to institutional authority, including that of the news media and the political institutions that tend to set the news agenda. As Pippa Norris (2022) has

argued in her comparative work on trust in public institutions, scepticism is normatively preferable to a credulous citizenry that overestimates the trustworthiness of fallible institutions. From this perspective, while certainly frustrating for journalists and others in the media, and sometimes likely to produce second-order effects that undermine how much people benefit from following the news, the decline is in itself primarily problematic in contexts where one believes that the news media, collectively, deserves more trust than the public has in it.

This, of course, points to the pessimistic interpretation, that the trends we document here reflect the development of a more *cynical citizenry*, with more people questioning institutional authority in ways that risk leaving them more isolated when acting in and making sense of the world, or more reliant on the alternative actors who seek to supplement or supplant legacy institutions. In this perspective too, much hinges on what one believes is the normatively and societally "appropriate" level of trust in news in general in a given society, and what one makes of those actors (whether individual news media brands, and/or online voices, politicians, or social movements) that those losing trust in "the news media" broadly in turn rely on.

While survey data can provide an empirical starting point, and can enable analysis of more differentiated patterns of "selective trust" (Toff et al., 2021b) as well as, for example, how aligned public trust and expert assessment of accuracy are at the brand level (Schulz et al., 2020), even such data, and the kind of analysis we present here, cannot fully answer these questions. They are partially about normative conceptions of citizenship and democracy that always need to balance both "positive" and "negative" components (Rosanvallon, 2008), and in part about the kinds of deeply contextual judgements Onora O'Neill has long stressed (O'Neill, 2002) as to whether one believes the news media in a specific context serves both society as a whole and specific communities in it in a way that makes the news media trustworthy.

These judgements all have a normative dimension where judgement will vary depending on perspective, just as they are relative and contingent on positionality – historically privileged groups long well represented in the news media and well catered for may see the issues very differently from the many groups who have few reasons to be sentimental about the past (Callison & Young, 2019; Richardson, 2020; Usher, 2021). Implicit and explicit claims about a supposed "Golden Age" always raise questions of "when" as well as "for what" and "for whom". In this respect, at least, the trends we have documented here connect with other research in a potentially worrying way – while trust in representative political institutions has declined over time, as we have shown trust in news has, despite what is often claimed, there is no general downward trend with regard to political and social trust (Norris, 2022), and there has been no parallel long-term general decline in trust in other institutions such as the civil service or the police (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). Perhaps

what we are seeing is – at least for those actors most directly affected – a crisis of public trust in two of the institutions many scholars see as necessary parts of a well-functioning democracy, electoral politics and independent news media, two institutions where our societal disagreements and conflicts are often vigorously expressed, performed, and refracted, rather than an across-the-board crisis of trust in political institutions in general. That scenario is different from a general crisis, and problematic in its own, more specific, way.

These questions are as important for countries that may share a similar tendency towards declining trust in news, but have seen very different developments in terms of media freedom – improving in some, fluctuating elsewhere, and deteriorating elsewhere. Similarly, the clear and significant increase in trust in news in countries where the media are not free, according to Freedom House, lend themselves to different interpretations.

One interpretation is that parts of the public in these contexts essentially accept or acquiesce to the kinds of normative ideals for news media that Friedrich Siebert and co-authors during the Cold War characterised as "authoritarian" and/or "communist" (Siebert et al., 1984) or in their less full-throated versions, various views seeing the news media as part of the "developmental state". Therefore, the public either acquiesces to or accepts the subordination of the news media to other institutions, including authoritarian rulers, especially if they think the regime is delivering economic growth and social services (Rose & Mishler, 2010).

Another interpretation is that people in stable autocracies tend to have a different conception of what they can realistically expect from news media that are not free, and that this is basically "priced in" to how they answer survey questions about trust, and that their answers reflect that they trust the news media to do what they expect them to do (but not more), potentially reducing the distance between expectations and reality that may loom larger in other contexts. A version of this advanced by political scientists researching trust in authoritarian contexts suggests that trust in such situations tends to take the form of "negative trust", where people trust the news media to be predictable, and answer accordingly, even as the trust in question takes the form of trusting the news media to toe the government line rather than a more "positive trust" that news media actively represent certain ethical norms and values, such as independence from those in power (Rivetti & Cavatorta, 2017).

A third interpretation is, as mentioned above, that data documenting relatively high and stable levels of trust in news in authoritarian countries represent an "autocratic bias" in responses. Here, people are concerned about answering potentially sensitive questions – especially if they fear their responses might be divulged to the authorities – and engage in self-censorship by withholding judgement, or "preference falsification", deliberately responding as they believe the authorities want them to, not as they privately would (Tannenberg, 2022). All of these possible interpretations of how to make

sense of trust in news in authoritarian contexts can start from survey data and analysis like ours, but they clearly require more in-depth and qualitative analysis (inspirational examples include Roudakova, 2017).

In addition to raising normative questions that each of us have to wrestle with as citizens, our findings here thus also raise many empirical questions for scholars. We can ask consistently worded questions about trust over time and across countries, but how stable is the meaning of all this to respondents? Findings that hold for "the news" may vary by medium of distribution, and will likely vary by individual news brand. Even the effect of trust as a mediating variable may be contextual and contingent. There is plenty of work for both qualitative and quantitative research, for both historical and present-oriented work. We hope this chapter, in which we have examined long-term global trends in trust in news across 115 countries and almost half a century, can help provide a basis for this.

Appendix

Table A1 Countries included, press freedom, and number of waves

Country	*Press freedom*	*WVS/EVS waves*	*DNR waves*	*Pooled waves*
Albania	Improving	4	–	4
Algeria	Fluctuating	2	–	2
Andorra	Free	2	–	2
Argentina	Deteriorating	7	9	16
Armenia	Deteriorating	5	–	5
Australia	Free	5	11	16
Austria	Free	4	11	15
Azerbaijan	Not Free	3	–	3
Bangladesh	Fluctuating	3	–	3
Belarus	Deteriorating	6	–	6
Belgium	Free	4	10	14
Bolivia	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Improving	4	–	4
Brazil	Deteriorating	5	11	16
Bulgaria	Improving	6	8	14
Burkina Faso	Improving	1	–	1
Canada	Free	5	10	15
Chile	Fluctuating	6	9	15
China	Not Free	6	–	6
Colombia	Deteriorating	5	5	10
Croatia	Improving	4	9	13
Cyprus	Free	4	–	4
Czechia	Free	6	11	17

(*Continued*)

Country	*Press freedom*	*WVS/EVS waves*	*DNR waves*	*Pooled waves*
Denmark	Free	5	11	16
Dominican Republic	Deteriorating	1	–	1
Ecuador	Deteriorating	2	–	2
Egypt	Deteriorating	4	–	4
El Salvador	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Estonia	Fluctuating	6	–	6
Ethiopia	Fluctuating	2	–	2
Finland	Free	7	11	18
France	Free	6	11	17
Georgia	Fluctuating	5	–	5
Germany	Free	9	11	20
Ghana	Improving	2	–	2
Greece	Deteriorating	3	10	13
Guatemala	Fluctuating	2	–	2
Haiti	Improving	1	–	1
Hong Kong	Deteriorating	3	9	12
Hungary	Fluctuating	7	10	17
Iceland	Free	5	–	5
India	Deteriorating	6	5	11
Indonesia	Improving	3	5	8
Iran	Not Free	3	–	3
Iraq	Not Free	4	–	4
Ireland	Free	4	11	15
Italy	Deteriorating	6	11	17
Japan	Free	7	11	18
Jordan	Fluctuating	4	–	4
Kazakhstan	Deteriorating	2	–	2
Kenya	Improving	1	6	7
Kosovo	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Kuwait	Improving	1	–	1
Kyrgyzstan	Deteriorating	3	–	3
Latvia	Fluctuating	5	–	5
Lebanon	Improving	2	–	2
Libya	Fluctuating	2	–	2
Lithuania	Fluctuating	5	–	5
Luxembourg	Free	2	–	2
Macau SAR	–	1	–	1
Malaysia	Deteriorating	3	9	12
Maldives	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Mali	Improving	1	–	1
Malta	Free	4	–	4
Mexico	Deteriorating	7	9	16
Moldova	Fluctuating	4	–	4
Mongolia	Improving	1	–	1
Montenegro	Fluctuating	4	–	4
Morocco	Fluctuating	4	2	6
Myanmar	Not Free	1	–	1

(*Continued*)

Country	*Press freedom*	*WVS/EVS waves*	*DNR waves*	*Pooled waves*
Netherlands	Free	8	11	19
New Zealand	Free	4	–	4
Nicaragua	Improving	1	–	1
Nigeria	Fluctuating	5	5	10
North Macedonia	Deteriorating	4	–	4
Norway	Free	6	10	16
Pakistan	Deteriorating	4	–	4
Palestine	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Peru	Deteriorating	5	5	10
Philippines	Deteriorating	4	6	10
Poland	Improving	8	11	19
Portugal	Free	4	11	15
Puerto Rico	–	3	–	3
Qatar	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Romania	Improving	7	9	16
Russia	Deteriorating	7	–	7
Rwanda	Not Free	2	–	2
Saudi Arabia	Not Free	1	–	1
Serbia	Fluctuating	6	1	7
Singapore	Deteriorating	3	9	12
Slovakia	Improving	7	9	16
Slovenia	Improving	7	–	7
South Africa	Fluctuating	6	7	13
South Korea	Deteriorating	7	10	17
Spain	Free	9	11	20
Sweden	Free	8	10	18
Switzerland	Free	5	10	15
Taiwan	Improving	4	9	13
Tajikistan	Not Free	1	–	1
Tanzania	Improving	1	–	1
Thailand	Deteriorating	3	5	8
Trinidad and Tobago	Free	2	–	2
Tunisia	Improving	2	–	2
Turkey	Deteriorating	7	11	18
UK	Free	8	11	19
USA	Free	7	11	18
Uganda	Improving	1	–	1
Ukraine	Fluctuating	6	–	6
Uruguay	Free	4	–	4
Uzbekistan	Not Free	2	–	2
Venezuela	Deteriorating	3	–	3
Vietnam	Not Free	3	–	3
Yemen	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Zambia	Fluctuating	1	–	1
Zimbabwe	Fluctuating	3	–	3
Total		453	428	881

Notes

1 Nick Tjaardstra, *World Press Trends 2017: Trust is the New Currency for Success* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: WAN-IFRA, 2017), https://wan-ifra.org/2017/10/world-press-trends-2017-trust-is-the-new-currency-for-success/
2 https://news.gallup.com/poll/651977/americans-trust-media-remains-trend-low.aspx
3 We refer to "countries" throughout this chapter, but it should be acknowledged that a small number of these may more accurately be described as "regions" given that they are not universally recognised as countries (see Table A1).
4 Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia were consistently classified as "Partly Free". However, because this is too few countries for a separate category in the analysis, they were classified as "Fluctuating". Macau SER and Puerto Rico are included in the WVS/EVS dataset but were not classified by Freedom House, and are therefore excluded from this part of the analysis.

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5

EXPLAINING LEVELS OF MEDIA TRUST ACROSS COUNTRIES THROUGH MACRO-LEVEL FACTORS

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Introduction

Studies point to a considerable erosion of news media trust among citizens in some parts of the globe (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Müller, 2013). Such a decline is widely observed for many, albeit not all countries in the Western world (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Jones, 2005). According to the 2024 edition of the Digital News Report, just about 40 percent of the respondents surveyed across 47 countries said they trust most news (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2024; see also Chapter 4 in this volume). These findings have become a matter of concern as individuals rely on accurate and reliable information provided by the media to make well-informed decisions (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005), while news organizations depend on citizens to trust their information if they want to keep them as their audience (Strömbäck et al., 2020). In other words, media trust is not only crucial for a society's well-being but is also a key asset for the news media to secure their survival.

For a long time, communication scholarship has suffered from a notable scarcity of research into the role of social and cultural contexts in explaining the formation and erosion of media trust. As we will show in this chapter, this situation is gradually changing with an increased availability of cross-national data. Comparative research in this area seeks to understand not only the extent and the causes of national differences in media trust but also how macro-level factors interact with influences on the individual level. These studies often find considerable differences between societies and point to a range of factors potentially responsible for these differences (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Müller, 2013; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

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At the same time, our overview also highlights significant shortcomings in the existing research and points to implications for future studies on the topic. Notably, scholars are only beginning to understand how contexts shape news media trust globally, and a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates macro-level factors with meso- and individual-level dynamics – and their effects on trust at both individual and aggregate levels – remains absent.

Engaging in studies of macro-level correlates of news media trust, scholars are confronted with several inconsistent, unexpected, and often puzzling results. For instance, researchers consistently find many developed democracies among the countries with the *lowest* media trust, while surveys from several authoritarian countries report high trust levels (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Müller, 2013). Ariely (2015b) shows that there is no direct relationship between news media trust on the one hand and media autonomy and journalistic professionalism on the other. Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2019) report a negative association between media trust and human development. Chang and Tang (2023), focusing on countries in East and Southeast Asia, find differential effects for media performance on news media trust. Pointing to the role of audience expectations, they argue that in a democratic setting, audiences may punish the news media for not meeting their high expectations. By contrast, citizens in authoritarian societies may have calibrated their expectations to the known reality of news media often serving as a megaphone for government propaganda.

Based on these observations, we will argue that communication scholarship needs to reconsider several assumptions undergirding hypotheses about the nature of contextual influences on news media trust. For example, researchers have treated contextual variables as independent variables in some studies, dependent measures in other cases, and empirical correlates of news media trust. Oftentimes, the nature of these relationships is not explicitly argued. We will further argue that to facilitate a better understanding of the societal contexts of news media trust, researchers need to be sensitive to political regime type and consider culture-specific normative expectations. Notably, the absence of the public's normative expectations on news performance is glaring in internationally comparative studies. Different political systems may breed different normative expectations as to how journalism and the news media should fulfill their role in society. However, until recently, macro-level influences on news media trust have been studied mostly in the Western world, and researchers have paid relatively little attention to countries in the Global South and Global East (see Chang & Tang, 2023, for an exception).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a critical overview of the state of the art of research on news media trust and its social contexts with a focus on macro-level factors. After briefly discussing our definition of media trust and macro-level factors, we present an attempt to classify media trust's contextual macro-level factors. This classification will serve as an organizing device in the subsequent synthesis of empirical evidence. We will conclude with a critical

examination of implications for both research and practice. This includes scrutinizing common assumptions underlying our understanding of contextual influences and reflecting on conceptual and methodological consequences for future research.

Defining media trust and macro-level factors

Studies of trust are rooted in theories of public engagement (Easton, 1965) and social capital (Putnam, 1993), which assume a mutual relationship between trust and cooperation within a community. Aharoni et al. (2022, p. 338), hence, characterize trust as a "fundamental social emotion inherent in human interactions." In the context of news media trust, the literature focuses – often quite implicitly – on a range of different objects on different levels of analysis and aggregation. They range from individual journalists, specific media outlets, brands, and programs (e.g., BBC Newsnight), specific news organizations (Fox News), types of media channels (television vs. newspapers or commercial vs. public service media), media coverage (general and on specific topics), and the news media as a public institution to the news media system as a whole (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Most studies examining the social contexts of news media trust focus on public trust in the media, which is seen as a form of institutional trust (Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

Yet, scholars have not agreed on a consensual definition of news media trust. Most definitions arguably converge around four key assumptions (Fawzi et al., 2021; Hanitzsch et al., 2018). First, theorists emphasize that media trust is grounded in past experiences and processes of (political and media) socialization that result in expectations about future news performance. Second, trust is oriented toward an unknown future. It therefore involves risk and uncertainty because the potential outcomes of the actions of media actors or their intentions are not fully known to the audience. Third, news media trust, like any other form of trust, reduces social complexity by generalizing expectations of future behavior of the trust object, in this case, the news media. Fourth, for all the above reasons, news media trust involves vulnerability because the trusting audience relies on the information provided by the news, which makes media trust particularly relevant where audience members have limited power to judge the relevance or verify the veracity of the information provided.

This chapter follows Hanitzsch et al. (2018) and Fawzi et al. (2021) in defining news media trust as the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the assumption that future news performance will align with individual expectations and/or norms and values prevalent in society. We will not go into further detail regarding the differences and similarities between media trust and related concepts, such as media credibility, skepticism, and cynicism, which are sometimes used synonymously (see for a thorough discussion of the more fundamental conceptual questions Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

The focus of this chapter is the macro-level factors that influence individual and aggregate levels of trust in certain media trust objects. The term "macro level" refers to the highest level of aggregation in social analysis and it is often distinguished from the meso level of, for example, organizations, institutions, or groups, and the micro level of individuals (e.g., Fawzi et al., 2021; for a different classification, see Ognyanova, 2019). In internationally comparative research, the macro level mostly refers to the level of nation-states, but it can also be used for culturally or politically defined world regions as well as sub-national regions within a certain nation-state. The term "macro level" is sometimes used interchangeably with the term "context," or it is regarded as one specific type of context (Ognyanova, 2019). However, "context" may also refer to lower levels of analysis, for example, influences of media organizations on their employees or the social ties and interpersonal networks of individual media users (e.g., Ognyanova, 2019). In this chapter, we will use the term "context" only in reference to the macro level.

Researching the impact of macro-level factors

Studies investigating the impact of macro-level factors typically use cross-national surveys to measure citizen's individual media trust as their main dependent variable. Most of the time, studies rely on rather general measures of institutional trust in "the media," "the news media" (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2025), or specific types of media (e.g., "the press" or "television") as proxies of general media trust (e.g., Ariely, 2015b; Chang & Tang, 2023; Curini et al., 2024). Trust in specific outlets, in the coverage of certain topics, or indices based upon more comprehensive, or complex measures of trust are missing from the comparative literature. This means that most of the studies rely on measures that produce generalized judgments about sets of media outlets about which researchers typically know very little. In countries with larger and more diverse media systems, this measurement strategy might yield lower trust levels compared to measuring media trust based on citizens' specific news media diets (see also Tsfati et al., 2022, 2023).

As far as the measurement of macro-level variables is concerned, studies employ a variety of strategies. The first one is geared toward constructing macro-level indicators from individual-level survey responses. For example, in accordance with Lindquist and Östling (2010), Hanitzsch et al. (2018) used the standard deviation of political preference as indicator for ideological polarization across countries. Along these lines, Brosius et al. (2022) utilize aggregated media bias and accuracy perceptions across countries – in other words, indicators of media performance – to predict media trust. The second strategy is to rely on external data for the national level (e.g., the Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy, or Freedom House's Freedom of the Press index) and incorporate these into a dataset. For instance (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) used,

among others, the Gross Domestic Product reported by the World Bank as an indicator of economic performance in their comparative analysis. The third strategy is to perform analyses for different groups of countries categorized according to a specific criterion, such as type of media system or political regime type (e.g., Müller, 2013).

As far as their general approach is concerned, most analyses follow a cross-sectional logic, that is, they investigate the impact of macro-level factors at one point in time and do not examine dynamic processes. One exception is the study by Fletcher et al. (2025), which uses data from the Reuters Institute's Digital News Reports (2015–2023) to estimate the effect of changes in various media-related predictors (e.g., individual news use and type of media system) on changes in trust in news media over time, both within and across countries. With respect to their statistical methods, most analyses apply relatively simple (hierarchical) regression models. An increasing number of studies employ more advanced multilevel modeling techniques to disentangle effects of macro- and micro-level factors on media trust (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2025; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

A typology of macro-level factors

Researchers have invested significant effort into examining correlates and antecedents of news media trust on the individual level. The picture looks different when shifting the spotlight to the contextual level. Here, the number of studies is rather limited. Such dearth of research looms particularly curious given that many studies in the area point to substantial variance in news media trust across different countries and regions (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Müller, 2013; Nielsen & Fletcher, 2024; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Furthermore, these studies have identified a considerable number of contextual factors and their potential power to influence news media trust on the societal level. Researchers sometimes also refer to these factors as "opportunity structures" (Fawzi et al., 2021, p. 164) and "cultures of news consumption" (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020, p. 366).

The way these contextual variables are used in the literature varies widely, as do the underlying theoretical propositions. The contextual factors may impact news media trust directly, indirectly, or in combination. They are often intertwined, making it difficult, if not impossible, to single out particular effects, their size and direction, and interaction with other contextual and individual factors.

In the following, we suggest a classification of these macro-level factors and, wherever possible, the broader conceptual ideas behind them in an attempt to bring greater clarity to research on the societal influences of media trust. As a starting point, we used the typology proposed by Fawzi et al. (2021), who distinguish between characteristics of the political, media, and social systems. In the following, we advance and refine this approach by suggesting four contextual domains from which macro factors may emanate: (a) the political

system, (b) the media system, (c) the socio-economic development, and (d) culture. Within these domains, we further distinguish between structures and performance similar to Mishler and Rose (2001). *Structure* refers to the existing institutional arrangements within those domains (e.g., the presence of public service media), while *performance* captures the quality of domain outputs (e.g., economic development). In the following section, this broad classification will serve as an organizing tool for the presentation of key empirical studies that examine macro-level influences on media trust. On this basis, we will then identify several factors that remain underexplored in the context of media trust, thereby highlighting crucial research desiderata.

The impact of macro-level factors

Political system factors

In the past 15 years, researchers have focused much of their attention on political system types and characteristics shaping media trust. Among the structural aspects, a key macro-level factor is *regime type*. Notably, researchers have produced substantive evidence on the political contexts of trust in democratic societies, where citizens usually enjoy a broad range of news outlets from which to build their news diets. In authoritarian societies, however, options for news consumption are relatively restricted (low-choice environment). Müller (2013) reasons that authoritarian contexts can generate higher media trust because of individuals' high familiarity with the content delivered by the media. In many analyses, regime type – mostly the distinction between democratic and non-democratic societies – unfolds its significance as a moderating or control variable. Tsfati and Ariely (2014), for instance, found an interaction effect in which regime type molds the relationship between media trust and state ownership of press and television.

The performance of a political system has received considerably greater attention. A relevant feature is *democratic performance*, or democratic quality. Examples are the studies by Müller (2013) and Hanitzsch et al. (2018), who reasoned that audience perceptions of political performance may go hand in hand with public assessments of media performance, meaning that positive evaluations of politics transpire into favorable attitudes toward the media, which in turn breeds higher trust. However, empirical evidence presents a mixed picture. For instance, Müller (2013) identified a negative relationship between media trust and democratic quality, based on the Freedom House Index. Tsfati and Ariely (2014) came to a similar conclusion but noted that this association became non-significant after controlling other factors. Hanitzsch et al. (2018), however, included democratic performance as a control variable (using the Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy) and did not observe any effect on press trust. One reason for the inconsistencies

in findings from different studies may be connected to the choice of variables included. Overall, however, the findings suggest that actual democratic performance may be less influential than the changes in values and economic prosperity that come along with it.

Turning to aggregate *political trust* as another performance-based indicator, research consistently reveals positive correlations with media trust (for individual-level correlates, see also Steindl & Obermaier's Chapter 7 in this volume). Brosius et al. (2022), for example, demonstrates across ten European countries that political trust is positively associated with trust in news media. Chang and Tang (2023) identify the same relationship across East and Southeast Asian regimes with varying levels of press freedom – high, partial, and none. Similarly, Hanitzsch et al. (2018) document this positive correlation across 45 countries worldwide using World Values Survey data. Building on these findings, Verboord et al. (2025) show that across European countries, aggregate negative evaluations of societal changes and national conditions (e.g., concerning immigration, inequality, digitalization, globalization, democracy, and solidarity) negatively predict trust in institutions, including trust in news media.

A final aspect of political performance, which has already been addressed, is *ideological polarization*, also known as attitude polarization. Hanitzsch et al. (2018) suspected that citizens have less trust in the media when they live in societies with higher levels of ideological polarization. They also reasoned that media trust erodes as societies become more polarized over time. The underlying mechanism, they argue, is the hostile media phenomenon (Vallone et al., 1985), which is more likely to occur in politically polarized contexts. In addition, along the lines of Ariely (2015b), they suggest that ideological polarization moderates the relationship between political and media trust. As a result, the association between trust in politics and trust in the media would be stronger in ideologically polarized societies. Guo and Lei (2025) made a similar point more recently.

Media system factors

Scholars of news media trust have attended to three broad structural aspects within media systems. The first one is related to the *type of the media system*. For instance, Müller (2013) concluded that media trust was particularly low in countries classified under Hallin and Mancini's (2004) North Atlantic or Liberal media system models. The relevance of *media ownership* is grounded in the view that the media market alone is not capable of providing high-quality news because of its reliance on generating commercial revenue (Müller, 2013; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). This argument presupposes that audiences are able to recognize "high-quality news" – and that they actually prefer such content. That assumption may not hold to scrutiny, given that consumers

regard like-minded media typically as more trustworthy than those presenting dissenting views. Indeed, Tsfati and Ariely (2014) found a positive and significant effect of state ownership in press and television on media trust, but this association became non-significant after controlling for democracy and economic development. However, their analysis also revealed an important interaction: state ownership of television was positively associated with media trust in democratic societies, whereas this relationship was negative in non-democratic contexts. A strong presence of public service media, which is relatively free from economic pressure and independent from the state, may be better positioned to provide diverse, high-quality, and reliable news to the audience (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Schranz et al., 2018). However, commercial media may be in a better position to tailor their content to specific audiences, generating trust for themselves, but perhaps at the expense of reducing general trust levels.

As to the *structure of the media environment* (Fletcher et al., 2025), several studies point to a correlation between news consumption and media trust. Here, Fletcher et al. (2025) argue that publics in countries where the media environment is structured around television news use may have higher trust in news than audiences in countries dominated by social media news consumption. Other studies used, for instance, internet penetration as a control variable (Guo & Lei, 2025).

In addition to these structural issues, researchers also identified several factors related to the performance of the media system. As a most basic factor, *press freedom* (or sometimes: *media autonomy*) is often considered a potential moderator of relationships between news media trust and other variables. Ariely (2015b), for instance, argues that political trust and media trust may be more independent of each other in contexts where the news media enjoy the autonomy needed to pursue a monitoring role. Guo and Lei (2025) speak of a transfer effect of political trust on media trust, which is more pronounced in societies with lower press freedom. Consistently, Ariely (2015a) observed that the association between press trust and political trust weakens in countries with higher levels of media freedom. Chang and Tang (2023) hypothesized a similar relationship rooted in differential audience expectations of the news media in countries that provide media autonomy and those that do not. Similarly, using aggregate data from the 2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019) identify a negative relationship between perceived influences on journalistic work (such as economic pressures) as an indicator of media performance perceptions and media trust across countries.

Political parallelism, or party-press parallelism in Hallin and Mancini's (2004) terms, is another relevant aspect of media performance. Curini et al. (2024), for instance, argue that the impact of ideological proximity (the degree of convergence between one's own political position and those expressed overall by journalists) on news media trust is more pronounced in political

contexts with stronger links between political actors and the news media. Likewise, Ariely (2015a) suggests that the relationship between political and media trust may be more robust in countries characterized by stronger political parallelism.

For the influence of *market commercialization* on media trust, the theoretical argument draws on Robinson's (1976) observation of a "media malaise," in which the increased relevance of a commercial logic in news production is seen to breed political cynicism (Ariely, 2015a). Along the same lines, Müller (2013) argues that low media trust is likely caused by a "market failure," as the media fail to deliver news coverage that aligns with citizens' expectations. However, the relationship between media market commercialization and general trust levels may be more complex. As mentioned above, commercial outlets may be inclined to tailor their news to politically defined audience segments, thereby meeting their expectations and increasing trust for their individual outlets, while at the same time eroding trust in other media or "the media" in general. At the same time, the political cynicism often embraced by ideologically positioned news media may well backfire on them, driving both political and media trust into a vicious spiral to the bottom (Ariely, 2015a; Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Müller (2013) concludes that a fully commercialized media system may actually be detrimental to the formation of high media trust.

Another performance feature of media systems is *journalistic professionalism*. The rationale here is very much in line with theories arguing that news media trust is endogenous and that the erosion of media trust is a consequence of a degrading news media performance (Müller, 2013). Journalistic performance may be more aligned with normative expectations in media systems characterized by a strong public-service orientation (Ariely, 2015b). Along these lines, several studies employed perceived *journalistic quality* – in other words, aggregate-level perceived media performance – as a correlate of country-level media trust (see also Chapters 7 and 10 in this volume). For instance, Brosius et al. (2022) demonstrate that perceptions of bias and inaccuracy were negatively related to media trust across ten European countries.

Socio-economic development and culture

While political and media system-related factors received considerable attention from media trust researchers, this is certainly not true for the remaining two domains of potential influence. Studies investigating the impact of *socio-economic development* on news media trust have primarily focused on aspects of performance, specifically *economic performance*. Tsfati and Ariely (2014) assumed a negative relationship, with media trust being lower in countries more advanced in their economic development. However, this association became insignificant when they controlled for other macro-level influences. Such an association was also suspected by Schranz et al. (2018),

who considered a range of economic data such as business trends, unemployment rates, and inflation. However, they have not advanced any theoretical explanation as to how economic performance relates to media trust. Given the strong correlations between measures of economic development and other country-level variables, such as democratic performance, disentangling the true effect of economic development from other factors may prove difficult. This is also true for *human development*, which Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2019) found to be inversely associated with media trust. Again, the mechanism behind this relationship, if indeed existing, is still underarticulated.

Culture, by contrast, has attracted modest scholarly interest. Among the performative aspects, Tsfati and Ariely (2014) have explored the impact of *post-materialism*, the increased significance of post-materialist values, on media trust. This strand of research connects to observations of a growing relevance of post-material values in modern societies, which entails progressive emancipation of the individual from religious and secular-rational authority. In this process of emancipative value change (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), citizens grow more skeptical of social institutions and develop higher expectations of their performance. Hence, Müller (2013) argues that emancipative value change substantially drives the erosion of media trust in post-industrial societies. Tsfati and Ariely (2014) made a similar point, predicting lower news media trust in societies that scored higher on post-materialism. Examining *sociocultural value change* as an aspect of perceived structural aspects, Verboord et al. (2025) find that aggregate-level progressive-liberal values across European countries are positively associated with institutional trust, including trust in news media.

Another aspect in this context is *social trust*, or *aggregated individual-level generalized trust*. Social trust is the extent to which citizens generally trust other individuals. Cultural theories of trust argue that institutional trust is an extension of social trust, learned early in life and, much later, projected onto public institutions (Mishler & Rose, 2001). In media trust research, several studies have indeed found evidence for this assumption. People have greater trust in the news media when they generally trust others (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Müller, 2013; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). However, this relationship has so far been studied only on the individual level. Arguably, its influence on institutional trust – or news media trust for that matter – does emanate not only from individual social trust but also from a general sense of trusting others shared in a community or society. Hence, social trust may be related to media trust on both the individual and contextual levels.

Implications for future research

Our understanding of macro-level influences on news media trust has significantly benefited from an increasing number of studies over the past 15 years. At the same time, admittedly, most of the work still lies ahead of us. In the

TABLE 5.1 Macro-level factors of media trust

Domain	*Structure*	*Performance*
Political system	Regime type	Democratic performance
	Type of democracy	Political trust
	Clientelism	Ideological polarization
	Political fragmentation	*Corruption*
Media system	Type of media system	Press freedom
	Media ownership	Political parallelism
	Structure of the media environment	Market commercialization
		Journalistic professionalism
	Internet penetration	*Journalistic quality*
	Media self-regulation	*Journalism culture*
		Pluralism of views
		Media market competition
Socio-economic development	*Urbanity*	Economic performance
		Human development
		Socio-economic inequality
Culture	*Cultural diversity*	Sociocultural values
		Social trust

Note: Adapted from Fawzi et al. (2021). Factors in italics have not yet been investigated.

following, we highlight several shortcomings of the existing literature that scholars must address to further advance research in this area. For the purpose of this reflection, we distinguish between theoretical and methodological challenges but recognize that both are often intertwined. Table 5.1 provides a summary of the macro-level factors discussed in the previous sections, complemented by factors yet to be investigated.

Theoretical implications

We identified four major areas that carry theoretical implications for future research. They pertain to the range of macro-level factors of media trust, the needed disentanglement of actual and perceived structure and performance factors, the theorization of relationships and interactions among macro-level factors, and the mechanisms by which contextual influences mold levels of public trust in the media on the individual level. Let us discuss them one by one.

First, we need to extend the range of macro-level factors of media trust. Here, research into the antecedents of political trust could serve as a source of inspiration. With respect to political system factors, for instance, future research should examine structural aspects such as the *type of democracy* (e.g., presidential vs. parliamentary systems, majoritarian vs. consensus

democracies), the *role of clientelism* in political culture, and levels of *political fragmentation*. For example, the news media may employ different styles of political reporting in a political culture built on consensus-seeking compared to news coverage in majoritarian democracies. Strong clientelism and levels of political fragmentation may have the potential to breed political cynicism and, by extension, distrust in the news. As political spheres become more polarized, the volume and quality of elite attacks on the news media have risen to higher levels, which in turn further erodes public trust in the media (Beavers, 2025; see also Chapter 12 in this volume).

Regarding performance, besides overall democratic quality, specific aspects such as *corruption* levels and their potential impact on media trust warrant systematic investigation. Political trust research has shown that corruption (e.g., measured through Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index) is a crucial factor in comparative studies (e.g., Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016). For example, Mishler and Rose (2001) show that actual and perceived political corruption negatively predict trust in political institutions across countries. Following the argument that citizens who are satisfied with political performance may extend some of this satisfaction to media trust – particularly when they recognize that a well-functioning democracy depends partly on well-functioning media (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) – it is plausible that high levels of political corruption may likewise diminish media trust, as citizens may conclude that news media have failed their role of holding politics accountable.

Concerning media system factors, structural elements such as the presence and type of *media self-regulation mechanisms* remain unexplored. Well-regulated media systems may have features in place that punish excesses in news coverage (e.g., transgressions of professional ethics), which may in turn lead to more positive evaluations of media performance by the public. This performance could be accounted for through considering features of *journalism culture* (e.g., journalistic roles). Continuous misalignment between professional news culture and public expectations of journalism's social role may well result in an erosion of trust. Likewise, the *pluralism of views* represented in media content and the degree of *market competition* within media landscapes merit theoretical development and empirical testing as potential determinants of media trust. Citizens arguably have less trust in the news if they do not feel that their views are adequately represented in media coverage. At the same time, tight market competition may incentivize news organizations to drive their content in directions that ideologically align with their target audience. A serious omission of existing studies on macro-level influences on media trust is that they did not consider empirical evidence on actual media performance (e.g., content analyses of news quality).

In the domain of socio-economic development, we can see a similar gap. On the structural level, for instance, the role of *urbanization* has received minimal attention. News media likely perform differently, and may be differently evaluated by citizens, in urban cities compared to rural areas within the same country. Furthermore, performance-related factors, particularly *economic inequality* as measured by indicators such as the Gini coefficient (e.g., by the World Bank), also remain largely underexplored despite their prominence in political trust research. Here, studies rely on various indicators such as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), unemployment and inflation rates, budgetary deficits and surpluses, or on data on personal finances, to measure the macroeconomic performance (e.g., Miller & Listhaug, 1999; van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016). For instance, based on their analysis of data from 15 EU countries, van Erkel and van der Meer (2016) show that longitudinal changes in macroeconomic performance (1999–2011), especially fluctuations of unemployment, affect political trust. Also, budget deficits impacted political trust negatively. In general, the impact of the economy is more pronounced for people with lower levels of education, as they might blame the government for it. Whether similar effects may be apparent for media trust remains to be investigated.

Finally, regarding cultural value systems, structural aspects such as *cultural diversity* have been given little attention by researchers. For example, societies characterized by considerable ethnic or religious heterogeneity may be much more vulnerable to political conflict arising from this diversity and to greater fragmentation of the public, for instance, into ethnically or religiously segregated communities that all entertain their own news ecologies. Such an environment may pose its own challenges to media trust.

Second, another area of future development in research on macro-level factors of media trust relates to the need for better conceptual delineation of actual and perceived structure and performance factors. Current studies suggest that disentangling the effects of actual and perceived institutional performance is key to explaining individual levels of media trust. In theory, both structural and performance aspects across all four domains – the political system, the media system, socio-economic development, and culture – can be investigated in their actual or perceived forms. One way in which such refinement could be empirically accomplished is by employing external data at the national level and through individual-level survey responses aggregated to the macro level (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Several factors have been tested in both ways, for example, actual and perceived democratic performance or media autonomy (e.g., Ariely, 2015a; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Müller, 2013; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Verboord et al., 2025). However, systematic theorization and investigation of both forms, actual and perceived performance, remain necessary to disentangle their potentially distinct effects.

Third, a fundamental limitation of current research is the lack of systematic consideration of the relationships and interactions between various macro-level factors. Scholars currently employ a wide array of macro-level determinants, and their selection often appears driven primarily by data availability rather than theoretical reasoning. Moreover, these factors are frequently treated as conceptually independent from one another, even when many of them are empirically interconnected or hierarchically dependent. For example, media system types, media autonomy, and press freedom are fundamentally shaped by political system type and likely also by national democratic performance. Hence, regime type should be conceptualized as an etiologic factor that influences press freedom, which in turn affects other media system characteristics.

Similarly, socio-economic development may shape both the structure of media markets and the prevalence of certain cultural values, creating cascading effects on media trust that current research fails to adequately account for. Furthermore, we need more systematic investigation of the interplay between actual and perceived structure and performance. For example, democratic contexts may foster the establishment of independent public service media that adhere to professional standards and strive for high-quality reporting (actual media performance). Conversely, cultural factors such as the prevalence of post-materialistic values may drive public expectations toward the news media and, thus, shape perceived media performance.

Finally, future research must do better in explicitly theorizing the mechanisms through which macro-level factors affect individual-level media trust, potentially drawing on insights from political trust research while accounting for the distinct nature of media as institutions. For instance, some macro-level factors influence media system structures, which in turn shape the performance of media systems as a whole or segments thereof (e.g., public service media and commercial media), thereby informing individual perceptions of media performance. Such hierarchical and mediating relationships need to be spelled out theoretically and tested empirically, ideally through statistically more advanced techniques, such as path models or structural equation modeling, which allow to disentangle direct and indirect effects.

In the context of political trust, for example, van Erkel and van der Meer (2016) have shown that people take different points of reference into account when evaluating macroeconomic performance. As a consequence, performance assessments may affect political trust in differing ways. Similarly, it might be that different people base their assessments of general media performance on differing criteria. If that is the case, straightforward effects of

performance judgments on media trust may be harder to identify. More specifically, performance evaluations may vary with respect to the relevance of actual content, the role of individual news repertoires, and the ability of audiences to actually judge news performance.

Hence, the assumption that media system characteristics affect trust levels may depend on whether (a) these characteristics affect or indicate media performance, (b) audiences are able to perceive and assess relevant performance characteristics, and (c) these performance characteristics are relevant for their trust. One could ask if it all comes down to the question of which circumstances provide an optimal match between expectations and performance. In this thinking, one way of achieving high levels of public trust would be to have a situation in which (a) expectations are homogenous among a population, (b) performance is consonant across the media system, and (c) performance matches audience expectations.

Methodological implications

Finally, we would like to point out several methodological limitations and open empirical questions that carry important implications for future research. They relate to the need to account for temporal dynamics, path-dependency, contextual moderation, and nonlinear relationships.

1 Future research must develop greater sensitivity to temporal dynamics. Researchers need to invest greater effort into the longitudinal dynamics of media trust and its contextual antecedents. Arguably, public trust in the media may be affected by the current configuration of contextual factors as much as by the changes in these configurations over time. For example, results of the study by Hanitzsch et al. (2018) indicate that the relationship between press trust and political trust is becoming stronger over time. At the same time, public trust in the media might respond very sensitively to abrupt changes in the political environment and may be less susceptible to gradual shifts that often go unnoticed by most citizens. For example, sudden drops in political trust caused by major political scandals may substantially deteriorate citizens' trust in the news media. This effect might be particularly pronounced when occurring in a context where people held considerably high trust in politics and the media for a long time.
2 Researchers have long noted substantive path-dependency between countries and their relative political trajectories (Alexander, 2001). For instance, media systems in continental Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Anglo-Saxon world have historically developed in similar ways (Hansen, 2002; Mahoney, 2001), which may explain some of the cross-national variation in media trust. For instance, comparative evidence points to higher trust levels in countries that have historically instituted a

strong social welfare system. At the same time, studies report some of the lowest levels or largest drops in media trust for several English-speaking countries that still embrace or have only recently abandoned political duopoly (i.e., two-party system; Newman, 2024).

3 Future studies need to also pay greater attention to contextual moderation, that is, the contextual contingency in modeling macro-level influences on media trust. Several of the hypotheses marshaled toward the explanation of cross-national differences in media trust may play out differently in the various contextual configurations of political, economic, and sociocultural factors. Furthermore, several of the hypotheses that have been empirically proven for democratic and/or Western countries may have little explanatory power in other parts of the world. For example, Tsfati and Ariely (2014) discovered a positive effect for state ownership on media trust in democratic societies, while that association turned negative in non-democratic countries. Hanitzsch et al. (2018) found the link between political trust and media trust to be considerably stronger in politically polarized societies compared to contexts with lower polarization levels.
4 Finally, most of the analyses reviewed in this chapter assume linearity in the relationships between media trust and its macro-level antecedents. As the above point about contextual contingency already alludes to, this assumption may actually not hold true for several variables and many contexts. The relationship between media trust, on the one hand, and regime type and quality of democracy, on the other, is a case in point. Comparative evidence impressively demonstrates that this association is less straightforward than it may seem. Publics in some authoritarian contexts (e.g., China, Singapore, and Thailand) report substantially higher media trust levels than do citizens in developed democracies (e.g., UK, Canada, South Korea, and Taiwan; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Newman, 2024). Future research must critically interrogate linearity assumptions and adjust its analytical strategies for the assessment of macro-level influences on media trust accordingly. As a consequence, we may need to explore alternative frameworks and techniques to account for nonlinear (including curvilinear) relationships.

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PART III

Antecedents and consequences of media trust

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6

POLITICAL ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF MEDIA TRUST

Nina Steindl and Magdalena Obermaier

Introduction

Journalism is essential for democracy. However, the media's legitimacy and ability to fulfill their societal functions, such as providing information and guidance for the public, depend on a certain degree of trust to be placed in them (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; van Dalen, 2020). After all, most people learn about current political events and developments from the media: One can only form an opinion about politics upon receiving information about it, and most news is published by or originates from established news media (Newman et al., 2022). Thus, it is imperative that the news media provide people with credible, reliable, and trustworthy political information (van Dalen, 2020: 356, also see Tsfati & Cohen, 2005).

Trust varies significantly across countries, media types, and outlets (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Kleis Nielsen & Fletcher, 2024; see also Chapter 4 in this volume). According to the Digital News Report, "across the world, much of the public does not trust most news most of the time," while about 40% say they do (Kleis Nielsen & Fletcher, 2024). Although a minimum level of trust – no matter if media or political trust – should exist for the system to work, this does not mean that blind trust is desirable; rather, a well-considered medium level of trust is preferable (Schudson, 2008) that is shaped by people's use of updated information reviewing the performance of institutions (Norris, 2022). The extent to which people trust in the news media, however, is in part related to political factors such as political trust and ideology. In that sense, people tend to have more news media trust when they also place higher trust in political institutions (e.g., Ariely, 2015) and when news sources fit their personal political views (e.g., Stroud & Lee, 2013). Research points out that some

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consequences of media trust such as exposure to news can impact audiences' political thinking (e.g., Jiang et al., 2022).

Cross-nationally, trust in news media has been quite stable over time in some countries (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2018). One of them is, for instance, Germany. Still, there is a small group of German citizens who only partially trust or do not trust news media at all. The same holds true for those with higher levels of media cynicism viewing traditional news media as illegitimate (Fawzi et al., 2025). At the same time, undermining public trust by delegitimizing the media as a cornerstone of democracy is a deliberate tactic used by authoritarian and extremist forces across many Western nations (e.g., Ross & Rivers, 2018). These actors not only attack liberal democracy itself – they specifically target established media outlets, accusing them of manipulation and intentional falsehoods, aiming to weaken the very foundations of an informed society (Fawzi et al., 2025). That raises the question as to how political factors such as political ideology or political trust are associated with trust in news media from theoretical and evidence-based perspective.

As discussed below, there are a variety of political antecedents and consequences of media trust. We first present theoretical approaches explaining the relationship between political factors and media trust, especially cultural and institutional theories. Second, we provide an overview of the state of research. More specifically, we discuss political attitudes, such as ideology and trust (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2018), as well as political competencies (e.g., Fawzi, 2019), media use (e.g., Hutchens et al., 2025), and behavior (e.g., Tuzov & Masood, 2024) as political correlates of media trust.

Throughout, we understand media trust as "the individual's willingness to be vulnerable to media objects, based on the expectation that they will perform a) satisfactorily for the individual and/or b) according to the dominant norms and values in society (i.e. democratic media functions)" (Fawzi et al., 2021: 3). This trust, however, can refer to different media objects (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020). These include the news media system (e.g., Jackob, 2012), the media as an institution (e.g., Pingree et al., 2013), media organizations (e.g., Williams, 2012), media types such as the press (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2018), specific outlets (e.g., Daniller et al., 2017), as well as the coverage of different topics (e.g., Newman et al., 2022; Tsfati et al., 2022) and individual journalists (e.g., Blöbaum, 2018). This chapter specifically addresses the individual level, as most research is focused on that, and we primarily investigate trust in traditional, established news media.

Explaining the relationship between political factors and news media trust

Since trust research provides evidence for the relationship between various political factors and news media trust, one must also reflect on how we can explain the relationship between them. From an interdisciplinary perspective,

there are a variety of theoretical explanations on the origins and determinants of institutional (specifically political) trust. In communication research, however, theoretical frameworks on (media) trust face many challenges, in particular because of the mixed use of similar and related but not identical concepts such as credibility (see Fawzi et al., 2021: 156, for an overview). Thus, communication's trust research lately leans toward theoretical assumptions from political trust research (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Here, one can identify two contradictory and, at the same time, overlapping paradigms addressing explanations for trust: cultural and institutional theories.

The following subsections will provide a summary of both paradigms (e.g., Mishler & Rose, 2001), discuss integrative models (e.g., Rohrschneider, 1999; Rose et al., 1998), and show how these perspectives combine with theoretical assumptions from communication research (also see Fawzi et al., 2021; Obermaier, 2020; Steindl, 2021, for overviews).

Cultural theories

The cultural paradigm combines various theoretical approaches, specifically from psychology's considerations on the development of trust in the course of socialization (e.g., Rotter, 1967), social capital theory (Putnam, 2000), and cultural value change (Inglehart, 1997, 1999; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). This can be traced back to the study of civic culture (Almond & Verba, 1965), which refers "to the political system as internalized in the cognitions, feelings, and evaluations of its population. People are inducted into it just as they are socialized into nonpolitical roles and social systems" (Almond & Verba, 1965: 14).

Cultural theories are based on this fundamental understanding. A key assumption is that institutional trust is exogenous, originates outside the political sphere, and is rooted in interpersonal trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001): People learn through socialization, i.e., early life experiences and cultural norms, whether they can trust others. This interpersonal trust is projected later in life onto institutions, as political values are learned through direct and indirect (political) socialization experiences (Almond & Verba, 1965; Mishler & Rose, 2001; Misztal, 2001). Interpersonal trust promotes cooperative behavior within society, and is, therefore, important for the efficiency of democracies (Putnam, 2000). Consequently, trust in institutions will be high when interpersonal trust is high, whereas people showing low trust in others also show low levels of institutional trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001).

In general, cultural theories reflect cultural values in society, and, therefore, also the acceptance of the political system (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Because of that, on a societal level, little variation in institutional trust is assumed within one society, as the population is sharing similar experiences (e.g., regarding their political system) (Mishler & Rose, 2001). However, over the past decades, post-materialist values (e.g., self-expression and autonomy) have become increasingly important. Such a cultural value change in advanced industrial

societies reflects a greater distance from institutions (such as the media) and higher expectations of them (see Inglehart, 1997, 1999; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). This seems to hold specifically true for the young and more highly educated (e.g., Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Therefore, on an individual level, differences in institutional trust are assumed and related to personal experiences and social background (Mishler & Rose, 2001).

Arguments in line with the cultural theories' rationale have been applied by scholars to explain how socialization and previous political experiences with the media account for trust in the news media as a public institution. Regarding the link between interpersonal trust and media trust that empirically emerges quite robustly (Hanitzsch et al., 2018), it has been argued that individuals with high values of interpersonal trust generally believe that others can be trusted, and this tends to have positive consequences. Therefore, trust is their willingness to make themselves dependent on institutions such as the news media, because the audience never knows exactly to what extent the object of media trust can or will live up to their expectations. Therefore, the greater the trust, the more likely it is that the person has had more experience with trusting other people (Jackob, 2012; Müller, 2013; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; also see Putnam, 2000).

Regarding political factors, such as political ideology or values, empirical evidence has shown an association (e.g., Gronke & Cook, 2007; Lee, 2010; Steindl et al., 2024). In the literature, there are various explanations for that, and some can be interpreted as being in line with culturalist logic. In cognitive psychology, it is argued that individuals tend to use value orientations or political ideology as heuristic cues to evaluate political objects with minimal effort (e.g., Fiske, 2013; Scheufele & Lewenstein, 2005). Accordingly, people tend to trust news media per se more when they share their political ideology (Stroud & Lee, 2013). Similarly, studies investigating hostile media perception show that individuals with particular political opinions are more likely to perceive media coverage as biased against their own political position; this perception is even more pronounced with those holding extreme stances (Vallone et al., 1985). This can be transferred to media outlets whose political lines are contrary to one's own political ideology (Arceneaux et al., 2012). When people believe the media is hostile toward their point of view, they are less likely to trust the media in general and to view its reporting as balanced (Pingree et al., 2013; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). In addition, proponents of political culture theories suggest that pro-democratic value orientations promote support for democratic institutions (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Pluralistic values as the cornerstone of liberal democracy and the corresponding idea of the public sphere are linked to news media's information function, including the use of a variety of perspectives (Rohrschneider, 1996; Schudson, 2008). Similarly, audiences' perception of matching pluralistic value orientations between them and the news media can predict higher levels of support

for and trust in media institutions in democracies. To the contrary, a mismatch, with people sharing other value orientations, such as those incorporated in a right-wing populist ideology, is argued and shown to be linked to lower media trust levels (Fawzi, 2019).

Institutionalist theories

Institutional theories can be traced back to political economy and theories of political support, putting a rational-choice perspective on institutional trust (e.g., Coleman, 1990; Easton, 1965, 1975). One key assumption is that trust is endogenous and relates to performance (Mishler & Rose, 2001). From this perspective, trust reflects the satisfactory performance of a respective institution, meaning that institutional trust is understood as a consequence of institutions' performance. In that sense, negative performance leads to lower levels of trust in institutions, while positive institutional performance evokes higher levels of institutional trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001).

Such understanding of institutional trust refers either to the subjective assessment or evaluation of the institution's performance at the individual level (e.g., the perceived quality of democracy), or, on the societal level, to the actual performance of the respective institution (e.g., performance according to democracy index) (Mishler & Rose, 2001). This performance-based understanding can be found in research showing that satisfaction with public institutions leads to higher levels of political trust (e.g., van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017; You, 2017).

Following an institutional theory rationale, in political communication research, there has long been an interest in how the use of news related to political performance (e.g., in terms of scandalization) influences political trust or cynicism (e.g., Avery, 2009). Ultimately, this can spill over into trust in news media as a public institution: While one line of research shows that news media use is related to more political knowledge, participation, and trust on part of the audience, leading to a "virtuous circle" (Norris, 2000), a spillover or backfire effect has also been theorized and found by various researchers referring to a media malaise or a "spiral of cynicism" (see, e.g., Cappella, 2002; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Robinson, 1976). Studies show that, for instance, game-framed news, scandalous coverage, or constant negative portrayals of politicians lower political participation and political trust – and relate to an antipathy toward the news media or lower levels of media trust (e.g., Avery, 2009; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hopmann et al., 2015; Ladd, 2010).

Common explanations following an institutional theory-logic for a positive relation between political and media trust argue that audiences are increasingly aware of a mediatization of politics and devalue politics and media as part of the same social elite (Fawzi, 2019; Hanitzsch et al., 2018). The latter also reflects the so-called trust nexus, which suggests that news

media trust is interdependent with political factors. "The erosion of trust in the media is broadly connected to a public disenchantment with and widespread sense of disdain for social institutions more generally but for political institutions most particularly" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018: 7). It is assumed that those institutions are seen as belonging to the same societal elite, and, therefore, trust in both is similar (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2018). For a relation with recipient's political performance evaluation and media trust, citizens might assume that appropriate media performance contributes to a functioning democracy, which is why they credit news media with political performance (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Lifetime learning model and ideological performance model

Although cultural and institutional approaches are often regarded as contradictory, both provide plausible explanations for institutional trust, and they share a common understanding of the importance of experiences: Cultural theories consider early-life experiences, and institutional theories consider experiences later in life as decisive for institutional trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001: 37–38, 1997: 434). Integrative models connect both theoretical paradigms.

One of them is the Lifetime Learning Model (Mishler & Rose, 1997, 2001, 2007; Rose et al., 1998). It regards early socialization and assumes that these pre-political experiences are projected onto the institutions. At the same time, attitudes toward institutions can be reinforced, changed, or replaced by later life experiences and the evaluation of the institutional performance. Thus, institutional trust is a result of both interpersonal trust and the assessment of the institutional performance. Through lifetime learning experiences, the formation of trust could be understood as a dynamic process (Mishler & Rose, 1997, 2001; also see Uslaner's, 2008, differentiation between moralistic and strategic trust).

The Ideological Performance Model (Rohrschneider, 1999) also takes advantage of both paradigms but views explanations for institutional trust as interrelated. A key assumption is that citizens learn certain ideological values (e.g., democratic principles) through socialization in the respective political system (e.g., democracy), and that these value orientations of the citizens, together with their assessment of the institutional performance, explain the support for those institutions (Rohrschneider, 1999).

In terms of news media trust, using these integrated approaches to explain media trust with reference to social, political, and performance-related factors has become more common (Fawzi et al., 2021; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Obermaier, 2020). Studies also provide evidence that factors stemming from both cultural and institutional perspectives have a non-negligible share in explaining media trust (e.g., Ariely, 2015; Steindl et al., 2024).

Individual-level political causes and consequences of trust in news media

The literature identifies a range of political characteristics linked to trust in news media, though some are examined more frequently than others. In this section, which follows common factors derived from culturalist and institutionalist theories, we highlight key findings on how political ideology and competencies, use of partisan media, political performance evaluation and trust, and political behaviors relate to media trust (also see Fawzi et al., 2021). Following Fawzi et al. (2021), we characterize these factors as correlates of media trust. Whether these political attributes function as antecedents or consequences of media trust – or whether more intricate, reciprocal relationships exist (such as "reinforcing spirals"; see Slater et al., 2020; Tsfati et al., 2025) – remains largely a matter of theoretical positioning rather than empirical demonstration, given the predominance of cross-sectional research in this domain. Recent scholarship has begun addressing this methodological gap, with emerging panel studies examining causal dynamics between news media use and media trust (Aharoni et al., 2025; Andersen et al., 2023; Strömbäck et al., 2025), and a few between political characteristics and media trust (Schumann & Arlt, 2025). Although we highlight such panel studies when relevant, cross-sectional designs remain dominant in the literature discussed here, warranting our decision to frame these relationships as correlational rather than causal.

Political ideology and competencies as correlates of trust in news media

Political ideology plays a powerful role in shaping media trust. People tend to trust news sources that align with their own ideological beliefs (Stroud & Lee, 2013). While much of the early research emerged from the United States – where conservatives consistently express lower trust in news media (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Lee, 2010; Wilner et al., 2022) than liberals (Livio & Cohen, 2018) – this pattern extends well beyond the US context. For instance, studies across Europe demonstrate that those holding more liberal values exhibit higher trust in news media (Verboord et al., 2023), and that ideological proximity to journalists predicts greater media trust in both European countries and the United States (Curini et al., 2023). Attitudes toward specific political issues also affect trust: Americans who are concerned about climate change, for instance, tend to trust the media more (Hansen & Kim, 2011). During the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals who trusted the media were more likely to follow public health guidelines and accept vaccinations (Wu & Shen, 2022; Zhao et al., 2020).

Partisan identification plays a similar role. Supporters of more extreme (populist) parties – whether on the left or right – often express lower trust in mainstream news (Clemm von Hohenberg & Bauer, 2021; Jones, 2004; Moy et al., 1999). Political extremism, right-wing populism, and anti-elitist sentiments

are all associated with reduced media trust (Fawzi, 2019; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Hutchens et al., 2025). In some cases, these attitudes are linked to greater trust in alternative media sources (Ehrke et al., 2023).

Another key factor undermining media trust is perceived bias. Studies have established a clear link between a hostile media perception and declining media trust: The less people trust the media, the more likely they are to believe that news coverage is hostile to their own views (Newman & Fletcher, 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2025; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Moreover, audiences are more likely to see news as slanted simply because it comes from a source they view as politically biased – especially if that bias clashes with their own beliefs (Baum & Gussin, 2007; Yun et al., 2018). This perception of bias not only affects how stories are received, but it can also actively erode media trust (Arceneaux et al., 2012).

Finally, political competency is important. People with higher levels of political interest or knowledge tend to trust the media more (Fawzi, 2019; Gunther & Lasorsa, 1986; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Those who consider themselves politically informed also report higher levels of trust in news coverage (Moy et al., 1999).

Use of partisan media as a correlate of trust in news media

Research revealed that the use of politically leaning news media or political media content, which we here refer to as partisan media use, plays a crucial role in shaping news media trust, warranting closer examination (see also Chapter 6 in this volume). A number of studies have examined how consuming partisan or non-mainstream content shapes media trust: In the US, consuming conservative talk radio consistently correlates with lower trust in mainstream news (Barker & Knight, 2000; Ladd, 2012), while hyper-conservative media use correlates with diminished trust and liberal-leaning outlets with higher trust (Hutchens et al., 2025). Even foreign news sources – in some studies viewed as alternative media for offering non-mainstream perspectives – attract audiences with low domestic media trust (Elvestad et al., 2017). Importantly, these relationships appear bidirectional: In cross-sectional data, distrust in traditional news media can drive partisan media consumption, which further erodes mainstream media trust (Ladd, 2012). Several studies using Swedish panel data demonstrate, however, that right-wing alternative media use decreases traditional news trust over time, argued to be likely due to these outlets' delegitimizing media criticism (Andersen et al., 2023; Tsfati et al., 2025), and increases in perceived leftist bias in public service media (Strömbäck et al., 2025). Beyond that, the presentation of political content matters. Exposure to negative US presidential coverage reduces overall media trust, as audiences view journalists negatively as messengers of negativity (Kiousis, 2002). Other research has highlighted the role of political framing. When

news presents politics as a strategic game rather than a contest of ideas, audiences tend to lose faith in the media's integrity (Hopmann et al., 2015).

The relationship between misinformation and media trust has also received attention, though findings remain mixed. Boulianne and Humprecht (2023) found no consistent link between perceived exposure to misinformation and media trust across the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Canada. However, experimental research by Egelhofer et al. (2022) showed that when politicians accuse news sources of spreading "fake news," it lowers perceived accuracy and trust in the targeted media outlet – an effect that, though small, may accumulate over time. Moreover, individuals with strong populist attitudes tend to generalize these accusations, leading to a broader erosion of trust in the media in general (Egelhofer et al., 2022). In line with that, Chilean panel data reveal that lower news media trust predicted increased misinformation exposure over time, but not vice versa (Valenzuela et al., 2022; also see Stubenvoll et al., 2021; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019).

Media trust also shapes how news exposure influences political thinking and emotional responses. People who trust the media are more likely to adopt the opinions and emotional cues presented in coverage (Ladd, 2012). They also tend to align their perceptions of public opinion with the dominant narratives featured in the news (Tsfati, 2003). Using panel data, Shehata and Strömbäck (2022) demonstrate that varying levels of trust in traditional and right-wing alternative media moderated only certain relationships between news media use and perceptions of healthcare and education in Sweden. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, Jiang et al. (2022) found that news attention was more strongly associated with beliefs about the effectiveness of social distancing among those with lower media trust.

Political performance evaluation and political trust as correlates of trust in news media

A substantial body of research has explored the link between trust in political institutions and trust in the news media. The findings consistently and globally show a strong correlation: Individuals who place greater trust in democratic institutions – such as the government or legislative bodies – are also more likely to trust the media, and vice versa (Ariely, 2015; Chang & Tang, 2023; Guo & Lei, 2025; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Obermaier, 2020). In contrast, those who are politically cynical tend to show less trust in the media and greater skepticism toward it (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Carr et al., 2014; Pinkleton et al., 2012).

There is some evidence that dissatisfaction with perceived political performance is linked to media trust, in line with institutional theories as explained before. Perceived political performance is typically operationalized through various indicators, including satisfaction with the economic situation and how well democracy functions (e.g., Fawzi, 2019; Obermaier et al., 2021), as well as

government fairness and responsiveness (e.g., Mishler & Rose, 2001). Obermaier (2020) showed that satisfaction with perceived political performance is positively associated with generalized media trust. Likewise, Schumann and Arlt (2025) demonstrated in a four-wave panel survey in Germany that individuals with a higher level of media trust show lower levels of political dissatisfaction with trait-like stability. In addition, the authors show that among some individuals, association can shift over time. For example, this occurred when the decreased political dissatisfaction with the government's coronavirus policy predicted media trust in late 2021, leading to lower media trust levels. Thus, while news media reporting may shape people's evaluations of political performance, these evaluations can in turn influence trust in the news media itself.

Political behavior as a correlate of trust in news media

While research has been somewhat slow in establishing a direct link between media trust and political participation, emerging findings suggest important connections. Some studies indicate that individuals with low trust in the media are more likely to vote strictly along party lines (Ladd, 2010, 2012) and engage in certain political activities, such as signing petitions or posting comments online (Fletcher & Park, 2017). Interestingly, Tuzov and Masood (2024) found that in post-Soviet countries, individuals who reported high levels of trust in the media were less likely to participate in non-institutional political actions, such as protests or boycotts.

Low trust in the media also tends to amplify hostile media perceptions, which can paradoxically motivate political dialogue – especially across ideological divides. These interactions are often seen as "corrective actions," where individuals seek to challenge opposing viewpoints (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014). In line with this, Kunst et al. (2020) found that people with low media trust who are exposed to narratives of "suppressed voices," claiming that their perspectives were excluded from the mainstream discourse, were more inclined to express their opinions both online and offline. At the same time, frequent discussions within ideologically homogenous groups can reinforce the perception that the media is biased, further lowering trust (Gronke & Cook, 2007).

Discussion and future research directions

Independent journalism is essential for individuals to build their own opinions, for which a certain degree of trust is a prerequisite (e.g., Levi & Stoker, 2000; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005; van Dalen, 2020). However, media trust varies greatly from country to country and within countries (Kleis Nielsen & Fletcher, 2024). Current societal, political, and technological developments, for instance, fake news, AI-generated fake images and videos, or (political) actors trying to delegitimize the media to name just

a few examples, further challenge trust in the media (see also Chapter 12 in this volume). This raises the question as to how political factors, such as political ideology or political trust, are associated with trust in news media from theoretical and evidence-based perspective.

However, neither blind trust nor total mistrust is useful for society and journalism. It is acknowledged in the literature that, for instance, with a majority of blind trustors, news media may have less chance to adapt their services to citizens' demands, whereas the former could lead to media cynicism as overall evaluation of media performance regardless of their actual performance (Fawzi, 2019; Tsfati & Barnoy, 2025). From a normative point of view, both lower and higher levels of trust in institutions by different interest groups are required for democracies to function properly (Gamson, 1968). Hence, for news media to fulfill their public duty, a medium level of trust is desirable (Schudson, 2008, 2022). The level of media trust, however, is correlated with a variety of political factors. As we have shown in this chapter, on the individual level, not only attitudes such as political ideology (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2018) and political trust (e.g., Ariely, 2015) but also political competencies (e.g., Fawzi, 2019), media use (e.g., Hutchens et al., 2025), and political behavior (e.g., Tuzov & Masood, 2024) are characteristics that relate to media trust in some way. For instance, people with higher levels of news media trust place higher trust in political institutions (e.g., Ariely, 2015), while individuals with higher levels of media cynicism view traditional news media as illegitimate (Fawzi et al., 2025). However, since most of the research relies on cross-sectional data, these political factors are treated as correlates, and whether they are understood as causes or effects is shaped by theoretical assumptions. Such assumptions often face challenges due to the inconsistent use of related concepts (e.g., credibility; see Fawzi et al., 2021), which is why lately approaches have been borrowed from political trust research, especially cultural and institutional theories. Both provide somewhat contradictory theoretical assumptions reflecting the origins and determinants of trust (e.g., Mishler & Rose, 2001). Empirical evidence shows that integrating these approaches through regarding cultural perspectives (social and political factors) and institutional perspectives (performance-related factors) is an effective way to explain media trust (Ariely, 2015; Fawzi et al., 2021; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Obermaier, 2020; Steindl et al., 2024).

The literature review on political correlates of media trust provides a plethora of avenues for future research. To date, there are still very few multi-wave panel data and studies using mixed methods (e.g., content analyses and surveys), which would be needed to disentangle the causal mechanisms between political ideologies, satisfaction, and trust in news media (e.g., Aharoni et al., 2025; Andersen et al., 2023; Schumann & Arlt, 2025; Strömbäck et al., 2025). In addition, applying qualitative approaches, especially in regard to the consequences of media trust, would be beneficial as it allows for an in-depth understanding of development, impacting factors, and significance of media trust.

The study of media trust and political factors should further investigate specific groups such as journalists. Such knowledge would be useful, for instance, when it comes to learning more about the interplay of media trust and political factors in light of the news production process (e.g., regarding the adherence to journalistic norms and values, and how it is translated into media content). Research on the antecedents and consequences of media trust has made significant advances over the last decade, but much work remains.

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7

THE ROLE OF MEDIA TRUST IN MEDIA USE AND EFFECTS

Rens Vliegenthart

Introduction

In the current era of high-choice, hybrid, and increasingly fragmented media environments, media trust is a central determinant of how individuals consume, engage with, interpret, and respond to information. The transformation of the news landscape, driven by digitalization, social media, and algorithmic curation, has profoundly altered the relationship between citizens and the news media (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Whereas traditional media once held a monopoly on public information, audiences today face an abundance of competing sources, ranging from established outlets and partisan commentary sites to user-generated content on social media. The abundance of information has made questions of trust, credibility, and trustworthiness more pressing than ever. Many citizens still rely on traditional media, in some form, to stay informed about political, social, and cultural issues (Vermeer et al., 2024). Yet using those media has become less self-evident. With information overly present, the perceived trustworthiness of and trust in a source can be an important heuristic to determine whether people use that source, consider the provided information convincing, and are consequently affected by it. Individuals increasingly rely on *epistemic authorities*, people, institutions such as media, or technologies perceived to "know better", to navigate the overwhelming amount of available information and to obtain the required knowledge. In the digital age, traditional epistemic authorities such as journalism and science are challenged by new, hybrid, and sometimes false sources of knowledge, including influencers, algorithms, and AI systems (see also Chapter 9 in this volume). Trust is a central component of epistemic authority. For a source to function as an epistemic authority, it must not only

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be *objectively competent* but also *subjectively trusted*. When this trust erodes, people may reject legitimate sources such as journalists and traditional media (Bartsch et al., 2025).

Trust in media encompasses different aspects: it can refer to generalized trust in "the media" as an institution, to trust in specific outlets, and to trust in individual journalists or even specific pieces of content (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati et al., 2022). Conceptually, media trust has been linked to broader notions of institutional trust (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Kohring & Matthes, 2007) and to the perception that media are competent, benevolent, and honest in their role as public informants. Furthermore, it relates to other, more precise evaluations such as credibility and accuracy.

At a societal level, declining levels of media trust in many, albeit not all, countries have been related to the decline of traditional media and the decreased reliance on (online) newspapers and television as sources for political information (Van Aelst et al., 2026). Reports like the Reuters Digital News Report mention both declining levels in trust and traditional media use, though considerable cross-national variation exists (Newman et al., 2025).

This chapter explores the complex, dynamic relationship between media trust, media use, and media effects. It does so by examining three interrelated aspects. It analyzes how media trust influences media use, including news exposure, source choice, and news avoidance. Furthermore, it examines how trust shapes susceptibility to mis- and disinformation and influences engagement with credible vs. untrustworthy sources. Third, it discusses the role of trust as a moderator in classic media effects theories, such as agenda-setting, priming, and framing. The chapter concludes with an outlook for future research, emphasizing the implications of digitalization, algorithmic communication, and the erosion of epistemic authority for understanding the enduring importance of trust in the communication process.

Media trust and media use

The relationship between media trust and media use is not as straightforward as might be anticipated. Intuitively, one might expect that media trust is a strong predictor for media use. However, in their 2020 overview article, Strömbäck et al. (2020) make several observations about the relationship between the two that provide a more complex and multifaceted image of the interconnectedness of the two. First, the relationship between media trust and media use is typically quite modest. Across the studies they review, trust–use correlations are typically small to moderate, and evidence points to a reciprocal (two-way) relationship rather than a strong, one-directional causal link. In other words, trusting people use mainstream news somewhat more, and using mainstream news can, to some extent, reinforce trust, but effects are not large and vary across outlets and user groups.

Second, most albeit not all studies were done before the more recent transformation into media environments characterized by, among other things, greater abundance of alternative and partisan media, social media, and more frequent attacks on news media. This limits generalizability: findings from earlier, less fragmented systems may underestimate selection and avoidance dynamics now more common when there is a greater presence of alternative information sources.

Third, almost all previous studies in this area rely on cross-sectional data. Strömbäck et al. (2020) stress that studies relying on cross-sectional data cannot address questions related to the causal ordering (does trust drive use, or does use shape trust?) and inflates concerns about confounding factors (e.g., by ideology, or specific media (hostility) perceptions). They hence call for panel, experimental, and trace-data approaches to identify directionality and heterogeneity across media types.

Finally, how (news) media trust at different levels of analysis is related to each other remains unclear. A key conceptual point is that "news media trust" can target different objects, for example, information from news media, specific outlets or journalists, media as institutions, or the coverage of different topics (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati et al., 2022). Prior work often conflates these levels and uses inconsistent measures, making it unclear how they relate to each other and to use. Strömbäck et al. (2020) propose focusing measurement on trust in the information provided and explicitly testing how trust at different levels interrelates and differentially predicts news consumption (and vice versa). They also note that topic-specific trust (e.g., immigration vs. economy coverage) may feed into higher-level trust and behavior (see also Tsfati et al., 2022; see also Chapter 3 in this volume).

These observations have been taken up by several researchers that studied trust–use interactions in the past years, providing more nuanced insights into the relationship between media trust and media use. For example, in a large cross-national and cross-sectional study into the correlation between news media use and trust, Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019) find that general news trust is correlated with both mainstream and alternative media use. More specifically, they find that people who rely mainly on social media for their news consumption report lower levels of trust. Studies even make the assumption that these are highly overlapping and use trust in media to predict knowledge or misconceptions, under the assumption that trust overlaps with use (e.g., Vliegenthart et al., 2024).

The idea that media trust has a direct impact on media use makes intuitive sense. If the citizen acts as a rational actor, it is logical they turn to sources they trust. Tsfati and Cappella (2003) argue that this relationship assumes audience members to be rational actors aiming for utility maximalization and that their key motivation is to find information. When wanting to get informed about current affairs and not having the opportunity to attend to all news, trust is a solid determinant when deciding what news to consume, and thus a good

predictor of actual exposure. However, if people have other motivations for news media use than getting informed, then trust might matter less. Empirical studies do not always confirm the (causal) relationship between trust and use (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017), but often also face shortcomings in terms of data and analyses.

Also a reversed causal relationship can be considered, with repeated use of specific media increasing trust in them (e.g., Mourão et al., 2018) or where specific coverage about the source itself reduces trust (Archer & Peterson, 2025). The causal relationship between media use and media trust has been the central object of investigation in several recent studies (Aharoni et al., 2025; Andersen et al., 2023; Tsfati et al., 2025), typically relying on longitudinal data. Tsfati and colleagues argue that research has consistently shown that people who trust mainstream news media tend to consume them more, while those who distrust mainstream outlets often turn to alternative or partisan media. Yet, the causal direction of this association has remained unclear: does trust drive media use, does use build or erode trust, or are the two part of a self-reinforcing loop? Theoretically, three different mechanisms might be at play. First, based on selective exposure theory, people might choose outlets they already trust, and the relationship is thus expected to run from trust to use. Second, based on ideas of persuasion and social influence, repeated exposure to mainstream journalism might build trust, while partisan outlets, especially right-wing ones, may erode it (Tsfati et al., 2025). Third, attitudes and media use influence each other over time, potentially leading to maintenance (homeostasis) or escalating feedback loops, yielding a reinforcing spiral. Tsfati et al. (2025) explore the presence of these different mechanisms in an empirical study using a four-wave panel survey in Sweden (2020–2023). First, their findings reveal that trust consistently impacts use – supporting the selective exposure mechanism. Second, mainstream media use sometimes, but not consistently, increases trust, while right-wing alternative media use reduces trust in mainstream media. These results are largely in line with the social influence mechanism. Third, trust shows a slight upward trend over time, but mainstream media use remains stable. Thus, the relationship is better seen as maintenance mainly driven by trust rather than a strong mutually escalating spiral. Overall, the authors describe an "asymmetrical reinforcing spiral." Trust-based selective exposure is the dominant force: people who trust mainstream media continue to use them, and modest exposure effects can further cultivate trust, but mainstream use itself does not markedly grow over time. In contrast, right-wing alternative media exert a clear and accumulating negative influence on mainstream trust. Others find results that are in line with these findings: Andersen et al. (2023) also show alternative media use to decrease general media trust and vice versa in a reinforcing manner. Aharoni et al. (2025) find for alternative media a *selection* effect to be present (trust influencing use), while for mainstream media a *media* effect is found (use influencing trust).

Some of the literature was explicitly bothered by the modest association between media trust and news exposure implying that many people watch news they do not trust. Recently, Štětka and Mihelj (2024) used a mixed-methods approach to study the association between media trust and news exposure. When asked qualitatively, their respondents provided rather rational explanations for watching untrusted news, for example, restrictions linked to family, household, and working contexts (p. 97). Knudsen et al. (2022) demonstrate that when asked as an open question what media trust entails, four topics can be distinguished: *truthfulness*, *thoroughness and professionalism*, *bias* as well as *independence* and *objectivity*, all with different antecedents. Other studies search for possible moderators. For example, Tsfati and Cappella (2005) found a significant interaction between news need for cognition and trust in media in their joint effect on mainstream news exposure. Finally, given that reports on mainstream news exposure have been found to be inflated (Prior, 2009), it is possible that measurement error is part of the explanation for the modest correlation (that is, it is possible that some mistrusting audiences overreport their mainstream news exposure).

News avoidance and engagement

Recent years have seen a steep increase in interest in news avoidance as a prevalent phenomenon that challenges current journalism and potentially democratic societies at large. It has also changed the focus of the study into the relationship between news trust and use, by looking specifically at the lower (problematic) side of both and, in particular, the contribution of low trust to news avoidance. Low levels of trust in traditional media are often argued to be an important factor in the deliberate choice of citizens to avoid news and disengage (Newman et al., 2025). This relationship is found both at the individual and the societal level, with countries with higher overall trust (e.g., Finland) tending to show lower avoidance, while low-trust systems (e.g., Greece, Hungary) report higher avoidance (Newman et al., 2025). Interestingly enough, Castro et al. (2022) find in their cross-national study that news minimalists have a slightly higher level of media trust than those people who consume news mainly online or via social media.

De Bruin et al. (2024) provide a nuanced overview of different types of news avoiders, who differ in their degrees and antecedents of avoidance. Among the motives for avoidance considered, low trust and distrust in media are explicitly included. Some respondents indicate that they avoid news because they believe it is biased, untrustworthy, or manipulative. Distrust is associated with specific types of avoidance, having a critical or skeptical foundation. Those with stronger distrust tend to be among the more consistent avoiders. In their profiles, distrust is often going hand in hand with more frequent, stable avoidance. In contrast, citizens who occasionally avoid the news

may still maintain some baseline level of trust or may be more situational in their avoidance, depending on context or emotional state, rather than being driven by structural distrust.

Several recent studies have delved deeper into the use-related antecedents of low media trust. Palmer et al. (2023) point to the importance of focusing on the underlying antecedents of low levels of trust, emphasizing that a lack of knowledge about how the media environment works for many may underlie the lack of trust they have in traditional journalism, consequently resulting in actual avoidance behavior. Park et al. (2025) provide additional nuance to the relationship between trust and news engagement. Their research suggests a useful distinction between low levels or lack of trust on the one hand and mistrust on the other hand. While mistrust leads to (occasional) news avoidance, low trust results in people turning away from the news altogether.

Also Altay, Fletcher, and Nielsen (2025) take a more encompassing perspective on news engagement and discuss the development of "news participation" worldwide in the past years, relying on the Digital News Report surveys of 2015–2022. This news participation is considered covering a range of active interactions with news, including commenting, sharing, and discussing both offline and online. Overall, the study finds that participation increases when trust in news decreases, but also that participation has declined more sharply among those with lower trust in the news, to the extent that by 2022, the previously observed participation gap between high- and low-trust individuals had vanished.

Mis- and disinformation

A challenge in the vastly changing information environment is the presence of misinformation and disinformation (Strömbäck et al., 2022; see also Chapter 8 in this volume). Here, news trust is argued to play a role in the spread, but especially the susceptibility toward this type of information (Humprecht, 2025). Declining trust in mainstream media fuels the appeal of widely available *alternative* media and conspiracy networks. Users of these outlets often see journalism and science as *biased, elitist, or conspiratorial*, leading them to rely on alternative epistemic authorities such as influencers or peer networks for information (Bartsch et al., 2025, see also Fawzi & Krämer, 2021, Müller & Schulz, 2021, Strömbäck et al., 2023). As people now consume news from a much wider range of sources, including many of lower quality, the likelihood of encountering false information has risen sharply. Trust is essential for how people find their way through this complex media environment. On the one hand, exposure to and perceptions of misinformation and disinformation decrease general media trust (Altay, Lyons, & Modirrousta-Galian, 2025; Hameleers et al., 2022; Stubenvoll et al., 2021). On the other hand, trust in news media plays only a limited role when explaining the degree to which

citizens spread misinformation (Humprecht, 2025). Humprecht, drawing on cross-national survey data in a range of Western countries, finds that traditional forms of media trust, such as general trust in news media or journalists, play only a limited role in explaining the dissemination of disinformation. In general, higher levels of trust in legacy news media were not linked to lower willingness to share disinformation. This finding suggests that trust in established news institutions may provide only partial protection against the spread of falsehoods and that citizens' online behavior is driven by more immediate, platform-specific forms of trust.

By contrast, trust in news encountered on social media consistently and strongly predicted the willingness to spread disinformation in all six countries. Individuals who expressed confidence in news they saw on social platforms were substantially more likely to engage with false or misleading posts, by liking, sharing, or commenting on them, than those who distrusted such content. This relationship highlights how trust can function as a double-edged sword: when directed toward unvetted or algorithmically curated online content, it can facilitate rather than inhibit the diffusion of falsehoods.

Not only the spread of false information is a concern, but also the degree to which citizens are susceptible to this information and inclined to believe it is as well (Glüer & Wikforss, 2022). Here, the question is whether trust can make people more resistant to false information. Most importantly, interventions aimed at increasing trust in traditional quality media are indeed considered to be more effective in combating disbeliefs than, for example, factchecks (Acerbi et al., 2022). This implies that trust might be a key factor to consider when developing strategies to counter the spread and impact of mis- and disinformation. More specifically, strengthening trust in reliable news sources may foster a more resilient information environment, as individuals who trust professional journalism are more likely to rely on credible outlets, verify information, and reject dubious claims. Conversely, low levels of media trust are likely to create fertile ground for the acceptance and circulation of false information (see also Damstra et al., 2023), since distrustful citizens are more inclined to turn to alternative or non-mainstream sources that may reinforce existing biases or conspiratorial worldviews. This shows that tackling disinformation effectively requires a dual approach: reducing the supply and visibility of falsehoods, while simultaneously increasing the demand for and confidence in trustworthy information. In short, media trust functions as both a protective barrier and a motivational driver: it shapes whether citizens engage with credible information, believe it, and pass it on.

Media effects

Media effects research in recent years has been strongly guided by an emphasis on *moderators* of individual-level media effects. Rather than assuming that media messages affect all audiences in similar ways, scholars increasingly

acknowledge that effects are conditional: they depend on who is exposed, under what circumstances, and in which communicative environment. While some of the classical studies mention source credibility – conceptually close to trust – as an important determinant of communication effectiveness (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), trust has received relatively limited attention until recently. Trust might determine not only whether individuals choose to engage with certain media but also how they process and evaluate the information they encounter. As such, it plays a crucial role in the entire chain of media influence, from exposure and attention to comprehension, evaluation, and behavioral response.

Empirical research has provided important evidence for this moderating role. For instance, early studies demonstrated that trust can condition both agenda-setting effects (Tsfati, 2003b) and priming effects (Miller & Krosnick, 2000). Media trust has also been found to moderate effects on audience learning from news about the social (Tsfati, 2003a) and economic conditions which can indirectly shape political decision-making (Ladd, 2012). It is additionally found that trust to some degree moderates effects of media use on societal perceptions (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022). Also framing effects can be moderated by media trust. In a well-known study, Druckman (2001) demonstrates the source credibility, that specifically has trustworthiness as a central element, has a strong impact on the effects that frames have on opinions mediated by belief importance.

Overall, when people trust the media, they are more likely to accept media-provided issue priorities as reflections of real-world importance and to rely on media frames in evaluating political actors and events. Conversely, those with low levels of trust are less likely to use the media as cognitive shortcuts in forming judgments, instead relying on alternative cues or interpersonal sources. More generally, trust shapes message processing: high trust enhances attention, comprehension, and learning, while low trust promotes skepticism, counter-arguing, and selective interpretation (Strömbäck et al., 2020). These mechanisms align with dual-process theories of information processing, such as the *Elaboration Likelihood Model* (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the *Heuristic-Systematic Model* (HSM) (Chaiken, 1980), which posit that trust functions as a heuristic cue affecting whether people engage in systematic vs. superficial processing of messages. The idea is that information from highly trusted sources is more likely to be processed in a systematic way and likely to have stronger (persuasive) effects (Li & See-To, 2024).

Nonetheless, recent empirical studies reveal a more nuanced and sometimes inconsistent picture. De Coninck et al. (2023), in a large-scale cross-national study, found that trust did not moderate the relationship between news consumption and perceived immigrant threat for quality newspapers or commercial television. However, a clear moderating effect did emerge for tabloid newspapers: among individuals who trusted these outlets, the otherwise positive link between tabloid use and perceptions of immigrant threat was notably weaker.

This finding suggests that trust can, under certain conditions, *buffer* audiences against negative or sensationalist content. Altay et al. (2024) report similarly mixed evidence. They find only weak moderation effects of general media trust in the relationship between platform use and political knowledge gains – and no moderation at all in the context of false belief acquisition. Nagler et al. (2023), studying the carryover effects of exposure to conflicting health information, likewise find that trust in the news does not moderate individuals' susceptibility to subsequent uncontested information. By contrast, Wise and McLaughlin (2016), in an experiment on campaign message persuasiveness, show that media trust enhances the impact of subtle message cues (e.g., tone or framing), but loses importance when messages contain strong, explicit persuasive content. Xiao et al. (2021) do find a clear moderation effect of trust – they demonstrate, specifically for social media news use, that the positive impact on conspiracy beliefs becomes stronger if people trust social media news more. This finding underlines the fact that trust is not inherently positive and that in some contexts, a healthy amount of skepticism is useful (see also Norris, 2022).

These seemingly mixed findings underscore that while a particular relationship between trust and media effects might be theoretically plausible, the actual relationship might be empirically contingent. For example, the theoretical rationale for expecting moderation effects is strong: trust should determine the perceived *credibility* of both source and content, influence the motivation to engage with the message, cognitive elaboration, and ultimate attitudinal or behavioral outcomes. Yet, empirical findings remain scattered across studies, due to substantial variation in operationalizations, research designs, and contextual conditions. Also important is that many studies examine the moderating role of trust in relation to general *media use* (e.g., frequency of exposure to certain platforms or outlets), rather than in relation to *specific message features* sent by specific sources within realistic communicative contexts. Others rely on tightly controlled experimental designs focusing on isolated cues, which may not capture the complex interplay between media trust, message content, and audience predispositions that characterizes real-world information processing.

Still, across communication domains, trust in specific information sources has been found to shape audience responses, be it in the context of health communication, environmental issues, or political campaigns (Hocevar et al., 2017). When audiences perceive sources as credible and benevolent, messages are more likely to be accepted, processed deeply, and retained. Conversely, low levels of trust may not simply reduce persuasion but can produce *backlash effects*, where audiences respond in ways opposite to the communicator's intention (Vaala et al., 2025). Such dynamics underscore that trust does not merely amplify or dampen media effects; it can fundamentally alter their *direction*. Understanding how and when this occurs remains one of the most promising yet underexplored frontiers in media effects research.

In the contemporary high-choice media environment, trust thus functions as a key heuristic people use when deciding which sources to attend to and which ones to ignore. Such reliance on heuristics rather than systematic processing (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994) underscores the need for analytical nuance: media trust is not merely a stable, individual-level disposition but can fluctuate across (news) topics and contexts. This dynamic aspect of trust is central to understanding how people process information. Tsfati et al. (2022), for instance, show that topical media trust can be distinguished from general media trust and is a stronger predictor of issue-specific outcomes such as knowledge. Along those lines, Tsfati and Barnoy (2025) distinguish strong differences in media cynicism and skepticism as differential elements of media trust, and show that skeptics use a wider variety of media sources and take more time to process information. A conceptualization of trust as contingent and context-dependent aligns with broader concerns in journalism studies regarding the challenges traditional media face in maintaining the confidence of their audiences (Van Dalen, 2019), with news avoidance and disengagement emerging as troubling consequences. Some even argue that declining trust represents the most serious challenge confronting journalism today (Fink, 2019).

Recognizing trust as dynamic also means acknowledging that its moderating role in media effects is contextually shaped. The relationship between trust and how people respond to media varies across not only individuals but also media systems and information environments. In high-choice, hybrid media systems, where citizens navigate a mix of traditional, digital, and user-generated sources, the boundaries between trustworthy and untrustworthy information have become increasingly blurred (Strömbäck et al., 2022). In such environments, trust operates as an interpretive lens that guides selective exposure and influences whether incoming information is integrated or rejected. In polarized contexts, trust often becomes intertwined with social or political identities (Suiter & Fletcher, 2020; see also Chapter 6 in this volume), amplifying tendencies to accept congenial information while dismissing discordant messages as biased or false. The rise of algorithmic curation further intensifies these processes: users' trust in platforms and in the perceived neutrality of algorithms shapes their willingness to engage with content and affects how they navigate personalized news environments (Yang et al., 2025). Consequently, media effects cannot be fully understood without situating trust within the broader communicative, technological, and political contexts in which it operates.

Conclusion and future outlook

Summing up, this chapter has outlined the multifaceted role of media trust in interaction with media use and as a moderator of media effects. Across decades of research, it is apparent that trust plays a key role in determining what media

people consume and the degrees and ways people are affected by that use. Yet, a lot of nuance exists. Rather than acting as a simple driver or moderator, trust operates as a dynamic, context-dependent construct that shapes the entire chain of media and news engagement, from selection and exposure to interpretation and persuasion. Additionally, the way trust is conceptualized, and how specific its measurement is, makes a considerable difference for its connection to media use and for the way it moderates media effects.

First, research on the link between media trust and media use shows that their relationship is modest but persistent. Trust influences what people consume and avoid, but it also develops through repeated exposure, a process that unfolds differently across mainstream and alternative media. Studies such as Tsfati et al. (2025) demonstrate that selective exposure and social influence mechanisms co-exist, with trust-based media choice as the dominant driver. In contrast, low trust in mainstream outlets can trigger disengagement or push audiences toward partisan alternatives. However, the relationship remains reciprocal and dynamic, with reinforcing effects of mainstream media use on trust.

Second, in an era of information abundance and algorithmic personalization, trust functions as a crucial heuristic guiding attention and evaluation. Its absence can contribute to news avoidance and disengagement, while misplaced trust, especially in social media content, can facilitate the spread of mis- and disinformation. The studies reviewed here underscore that trust is a double-edged sword: when oriented toward professional journalism, it sustains democratic information flows; when directed at unverified online sources, it accelerates misinformation diffusion. This ambivalence highlights the need to conceptualize trust not as a binary (trust vs. distrust) but as a multidimensional construct that includes low trust, mistrust, and misplaced trust, each with distinct behavioral outcomes. Additionally, it again underlines the importance to be specific about the measurement of media trust and in many instances to make it as specific (in a specific medium, and even on specific topics) as possible.

Third, media trust moderates the impact of media content on attitudes, knowledge, and perceptions. Trust determines to what extent citizens accept or reject issue frames, whether they learn from or resist persuasive messages, and whether exposure leads to attitude reinforcement or has unintended backlash consequences. Yet, empirical evidence for moderation effects remains fragmented. Some studies find robust interactions between trust and media use; others report negligible or even unanticipated effects. These inconsistencies stem partly from heterogeneous operationalizations of trust (general vs. outlet-specific, issue-specific vs. institutional), varying message types, and differences in political and technological contexts. Consequently, again future work must move toward greater conceptual precision and cross-level integration, linking individual trust dynamics to structural characteristics of media systems.

Despite extant research, several gaps remain. Empirically, much of what we know about media trust still relies on cross-sectional correlations. Longitudinal panel designs, trace-data analyses, and experimental manipulations are hence needed to disentangle causal directions and feedback loops. Conceptually, there is a lack of integration between research on media trust and adjacent literatures on concepts such as source credibility, epistemic trust, and institutional legitimacy. Moreover, studies seldom examine how trust functions across platforms (legacy vs. digital), topics (e.g., science, immigration, health), or levels of analysis (individual, organizational, societal). Media trust and use are furthermore *context-dependent* and relational. As Bartsch and colleagues (2025) argue, audiences may rely on different epistemic authorities depending on context (e.g., turning to a YouTube influencer for science explanations but to traditional media for political news). Finally, contextual factors, such as polarization, populist communication, and algorithmic curation, are often treated as background conditions rather than as being explicitly conceptualized and operationalized in longitudinal and comparative research designs.

Looking ahead, future research should pursue at least four avenues.

1 Dynamic models of trust formation and decay, employing longitudinal and experimental approaches to capture short-term fluctuations and long-term trajectories of trust in response to media exposure and societal crises.
2 Cross-contextual and comparative analyses, examining how institutional quality, journalistic norms, and political polarization shape both the level and function of media trust across countries and media systems.
3 Integration of content and behavioral data, combining survey, experimental, and trace data with content analyses to understand how algorithmic personalization, platform affordances, and audience heuristics jointly condition trust and selective exposure.
4 Interventions to increase trust, developing evidence-based interventions to rebuild trust in credible media while fostering critical, informed skepticism toward unreliable sources. This includes educational efforts aimed at enhancing media literacy and civic epistemology in digital democracies.

In sum, this chapter argues that media trust remains a determining factor in today's high-choice media environments. It connects individual cognition with institutional legitimacy and mediates between journalistic performance and audience involvement. As the boundaries between news producers, intermediaries, and consumers continue to blur, understanding when, how, and why and with what consequences citizens place their trust or withdraw it will be central to explaining the resilience or erosion of democratic public spheres.

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PART IV
Current challenges

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8

THE AGE OF MISINFORMATION

How institutional trust and false stories shape public opinion

Katherine Ognyanova

Introduction

Misinformation has been the focus of extensive research across communication, psychology, public health, and political science (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). Much of this work examines information flow and processing, focusing on platform algorithms, media literacy, or the cognitive biases that make people vulnerable to false narratives.

This chapter conceptualizes misinformation as intrinsically linked to an ongoing crisis of institutional trust. Confidence in political, scientific, and media institutions affects not only whether people encounter misinformation, but also whether they believe it and how long those beliefs persist. At the same time, exposure to misinformation can erode institutional trust, weakening the self-correcting mechanisms that democracy depends on. The problem thus appears to be self-reinforcing: exposure to misinformation undermines trust in the very institutions trying to correct it, while declining trust makes us more vulnerable to further false claims (Valenzuela et al., 2021).

Trust operates through distinct mechanisms at different stages of information processing. Media trust influences our news consumption and likelihood of encountering false narratives (see also Chapter 7 in this volume). Our confidence in knowledge-producing institutions determines whether we accept claims that contradict the expert consensus. Trust in media can also alter our receptivity to misinformation corrections, affecting whether we will accept or dismiss them. Overall, trust emerges as an important factor in the context of understanding and addressing knowledge resistance (Strömbäck et al., 2022).

Accordingly, this chapter examines the relation between *misinformation* and *trust* across three stages: exposure to false narratives, belief formation, and

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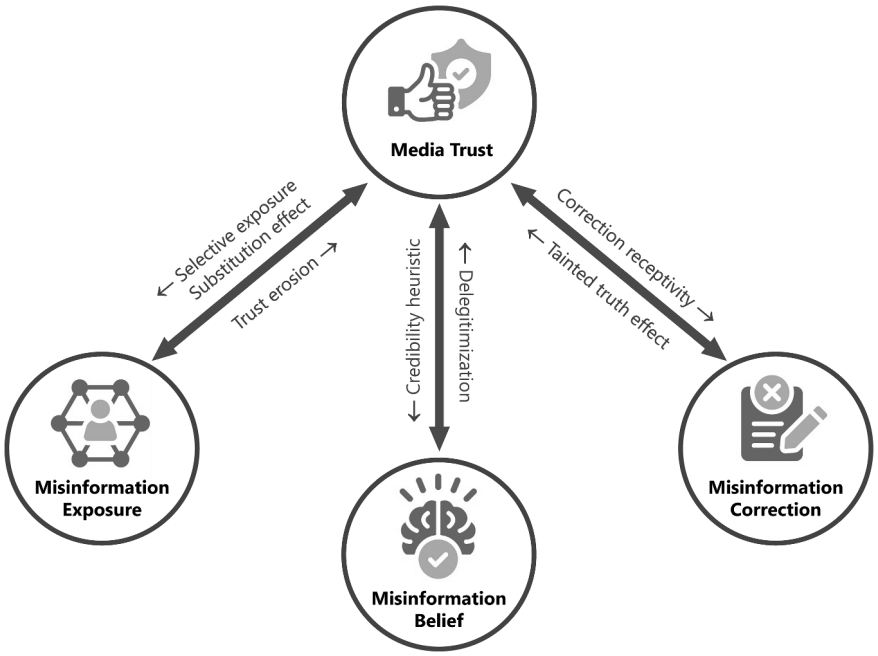

FIGURE 8.1 Relationship between media trust and misinformation exposure, belief, and correction.

the correction of misperceptions (Figure 8.1). It highlights their bidirectional dynamics, showing how each reinforces or undermines the other. Misinformation is viewed not only as a failure of individual reasoning but also as an emergent property of social trust networks: the patterns of interpersonal and institutional credibility that structure information exposure and shape collective belief formation.

The implications extend beyond the academic domain. If our misinformation challenges are linked to a trust crisis, then solutions focused solely on media literacy, fact-checking, or content moderation will be insufficient. Effective interventions must also address the institutional trust deficits that make populations vulnerable to false narratives in the first place.

Defining media trust

Trust is a core theoretical concept, crucial to the functioning of social systems. It describes a relationship in which we accept vulnerability to the actions of the trusted party (Mayer et al., 1995). The concept of *media trust* captures our expectations that news organizations will perform satisfactorily and provide information that is accurate, balanced, and current (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Trust in media thus implies that the audience is willing to rely on

journalism for information and guidance, accepting the risk that news coverage may be selective, incomplete, or biased. This is essential as news consumers often lack the resources to independently verify all the claims they encounter. Trust provides a cognitive shortcut, allowing us to navigate the information environment by relying on intermediaries to verify those claims for us.

Trust and credibility are related yet conceptually distinct constructs. *Credibility* involves audience judgments about the believability of information or its source, grounded in perceived expertise and trustworthiness (Metzger et al., 2003). Trust instead reflects a forward-looking willingness to accept vulnerability toward an institution based on expectations of its reliability and integrity (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Repeated credibility assessments inform and reinforce institutional trust, which in turn shapes how new information is evaluated.

Media trust operates at multiple levels (Fawzi et al., 2021), from general attitudes toward journalism as an institution, to trust in specific outlets or in the coverage of particular topics (Tsfati et al., 2022). People may trust mainstream media overall but distrust partisan outlets, or trust certain sources while being skeptical of their coverage on specific issues. Trust also differs by channel: print and broadcast news tend to rank higher than social media platforms, though this varies considerably across demographic and political groups (Li et al., 2023; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

The relationship between media trust and misinformation can further be clarified in light of two related but distinct forms of distrust (Norris, 2022). Following Tsfati and Cappella (2003), *media skepticism* refers to rational doubt about journalistic performance that can range from critical evaluation to broader mistrust. Skeptics may question the accuracy or bias of specific outlets while still remaining engaged with the media system. *Media cynicism*, in contrast, implies a wholesale rejection of news institutions as corrupt or dishonest, often leading to disengagement or substitution with partisan alternatives. This distinction is crucial because, as Fawzi et al. (2021) note, skepticism can foster critical civic engagement, whereas cynicism erodes the epistemic trust needed for democratic deliberation. Misinformation and the weaponization of "fake news" accusations may encourage a shift from healthy skepticism toward detached cynicism, undermining the shared factual basis needed for democratic discourse (Van Duyn & Collier, 2019).

Current trends in public trust present an important backdrop to the processes described in this chapter. In many democracies, confidence in the news media has declined continually over the past few decades. According to Gallup, media confidence in the US has reached a historic low. As of September 2025, only 28% of Americans said they had a "great deal" or "fair amount" of confidence in mass media to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly (Gallup Inc., 2025). This is a remarkable drop compared to over 70% who answered the same way in the 1970s.

The Reuters Institute reports similar downward trends across much of the world, though the US ranks toward the bottom (Newman et al., 2025; see also Chapter 4 in this volume). The erosion of trust across nations, parties, and generations points to a broader legitimacy crisis for journalistic institutions. This declining confidence creates fertile ground for misinformation, as audiences lacking trusted intermediaries increasingly turn to peers, social media, and alternative sources for information and orientation (Hameleers et al., 2022).

The challenge of misinformation

Scholars have developed a wide variety of competing and overlapping concepts to describe the spread of false or misleading information in the contemporary media environment. While popular discourse often collapses these under the label *fake news*, academic works also talk about related ideas such as *misinformation*, *disinformation*, *propaganda*, *information disorder*, and *pseudo-information* (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024).

The term *fake news* gained a new prominence during the 2016 US presidential election (Tandoc et al., 2018) when scholars applied it to intentionally deceptive digital misinformation and propaganda. Lazer et al. (2018) described *fake news* as fabricated information that mimics the format of news but does not have the editorial standards and practices of legitimate journalism. While useful, the term *fake news* has become problematic, as it was increasingly weaponized by political actors and used to describe any content they found objectionable (Tandoc et al., 2018; see also Chapter 12 in this volume).

An influential framework proposed by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) opted to use the term *information disorder* to describe problematic content. Their typology organized information along two dimensions: the type of content and the intent behind sharing it. False and misleading content was called *misinformation* if it was not purposefully intended to deceive, and *disinformation* when it was a deliberate attempt to distort reality or cause harm. Additionally, *malinformation* was a term used for genuine content that was meant to harm someone, such as a leak of private documents.

Differentiating problematic information based on its intent is theoretically useful and important but challenging to apply in practice. In many cases, neither online audiences nor researchers can be sure whether false and harmful content is distributed with malicious goals in mind. Partly in response to that problem, Kim and Gil de Zúñiga (2021) proposed the umbrella term *pseudo-information*, which emphasized effects rather than intentions. *Pseudo-information* refers to content with harmful consequences or social externalities, no matter whether its creators were well-meaning, malicious, or just careless.

In this chapter, however, the primary focus is not so much on the intent or consequences of spreading information, but rather on its *truth value*. Here, the term *misinformation* is used as suggested by Wittenberg and Berinsky

(2020) to describe content that contradicts the best expert and institutional evidence available to the public at a given point in time. This definition emphasizes the relationship between claims and their evaluation by epistemic authorities, making it especially relevant to issues of trust in the media, science, and other knowledge-producing institutions. This approach also acknowledges the social construction of truth through trusted institutions, highlighting that misinformation problems are inseparable from trust problems.

Beyond definitional issues, a notable challenge in misinformation research involves identifying the factors that drive the various stages of user engagement with problematic content. *Exposure*, *engagement*, *belief*, *sharing*, *acting upon*, and *correcting* misinformation should not be conflated as they involve different psychological mechanisms with distinct implications for intervention strategies (Tsfati et al., 2020). Nevertheless, research frequently measures one stage while directly or indirectly drawing conclusions about another. For instance, web tracking studies often record online exposure to misinformation and implicitly assume its link to beliefs or behavior (Ognyanova et al., 2020). Research exploring how problematic content spreads may also imply that sharing a post suggests believing its accuracy. In contrast, experimental work by Pennycook et al. (2021) shows that sharing misinformation often occurs due to inattention, not belief. Similarly, engagement metrics like clicking, commenting, or liking something do not necessarily indicate acceptance. People may engage with content to criticize it, fact-check it, or share it as an example of misinformation (Bode & Vraga, 2021).

With that in mind, this chapter examines three stages of the misinformation process in which media trust plays a particularly significant role: *exposure*, *belief*, and *correction*. At the exposure stage, media trust affects which sources people seek out or avoid. At the belief stage, trust operates as a credibility filter, influencing whether people accept or reject claims they encounter. At the correction stage, trust determines whether individuals update their beliefs when presented with accurate information or dismiss the corrections as biased. The sections that follow address these relationships in detail.

Trust and misinformation exposure

Our chances of encountering misinformation are shaped by both structural and psychological mechanisms. Network and algorithmic frameworks emphasize the role of platforms: social media personalization, echo chambers, and homophilous networks can amplify like-minded content while limiting cross-cutting exposure (Bakshy et al., 2015; Nyhan et al., 2023). Theories of selective exposure and perceived media bias (Strömbäck et al., 2025; Stroud, 2017) suggest that people prefer information confirming their existing attitudes, while also avoiding sources they view as hostile (though evidence for selective avoidance is mixed). Political partisanship further predicts exposure patterns.

For instance, in the US, Republicans seem to have substantially higher misinformation encounters than Democrats (Guess et al., 2020). Demographic characteristics and conspiratorial thinking also play a role (Thorson, 2024). Together, these factors help explain why misinformation circulates unevenly across populations. Yet they cannot fully explain why some people actively seek out unreliable sources. In the context of information selection, media trust can serve as a filter determining which sources people rely on or reject.

The gatekeeping role of media trust

In the beginning stages of information processing, media trust may be part of a gatekeeping mechanism that directs what content audiences will seek out or pay attention to (Fawzi et al., 2021; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022). People who trust mainstream sources tend to rely more on established outlets adhering to professional journalistic norms, which can reduce exposure to false content. Those who distrust mainstream media, in contrast, often prefer alternative channels that align more closely with their views (Andersen et al., 2023). This dynamic, known as a *substitution effect* (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003), suggests that media skepticism (and especially media cynicism) is associated with the use of hyperpartisan and potentially problematic news sources.

Similar substitution patterns have been documented across national contexts. Comparative research shows that low trust in the press predicts greater reliance on alternative, populist, or conspiratorial websites (for an overview, see Fawzi et al., 2021; Hameleers, 2025; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). These outlets often present themselves as challengers to the "dishonest" or "biased" mainstream media and tend to contain substantially higher rates of misinformation (Benkler et al., 2018). It thus appears that trust not only correlates with exposure but also helps structure the information environment that individuals construct. In polarized settings, distrust can prompt audiences to turn away from established gatekeepers and toward ideologically aligned sources or peer networks where false information circulates more freely.

Hameleers (2025) further suggests that distrust and the use of problematic sources can be mutually reinforcing. Exposure to anti-establishment or conspiratorial content heightens perceptions that misinformation is pervasive, which in turn deepens mistrust of mainstream media and encourages further reliance on alternative outlets. This feedback loop can not only amplify selective exposure and perceived misinformation salience but also erode the shared informational foundations needed for democratic deliberation. Network dynamics and algorithmic personalization can strengthen these patterns by connecting low-trust individuals with like-minded others, further reinforcing skepticism toward mainstream journalism.

Perceived versus actual exposure

It is worth noting that a growing body of research distinguishes between actual exposure to misinformation, observed through behavioral data, and perceived exposure, reflecting people's subjective beliefs about the amount of misinformation they encounter. These perceptions are also strongly shaped by trust. People who distrust mainstream media or hold anti-establishment attitudes consistently overestimate the prevalence of misinformation (Hameleers, 2025; Stubenvoll et al., 2021). Low-trust individuals interpret this perceived prevalence as evidence of systemic failure, concluding that the media system as a whole is corrupt. This perception gap is present even when behavioral data show that most people rarely encounter fabricated news (Guess et al., 2020).[1] The result is a subjective sense of crisis among low-trust individuals who see the world as saturated with falsehoods, while high-trust people might view misinformation as a manageable problem. Perceived misinformation exposure has its own downstream effects: it is associated with lower confidence in institutions, greater cynicism toward all media, and increased avoidance of mainstream journalism. Self-reported exposure predicts lower media trust, especially among people with lower political knowledge (Lee et al., 2023).

Bidirectional dynamics

Over time, exposure to different news sources can influence media trust (Tsfati et al., 2025). The literature also offers tentative evidence that encountering misinformation can erode confidence in journalism. Research tracking people's online behavior demonstrates that visiting low-quality websites predicts subsequent declines in media trust (Ognyanova et al., 2020). Important to note, however, those effects are likely not due to exposure alone, but to unmeasured mechanisms that involve belief in the consumed content. Low-quality, hyperpartisan, and anti-establishment websites often accuse mainstream media of bias and dishonesty, delegitimizing traditional journalism (Benkler et al., 2018). Belief in such claims can reduce trust, a pattern that we further discuss in the next section of this chapter.

Cross-national studies also demonstrate that the relationship between trust and misinformation exposure is shaped by the broader media system. Societies with strong public service broadcasters, high baseline trust, and low polarization (e.g., Germany or the Nordic countries) exhibit lower levels of misinformation circulation (Humprecht et al., 2020). In polarized nations with weak public media and declining trust (e.g., Brazil and the US) misinformation exposure tends to be concentrated among people who distrust mainstream news (Mont'Alverne et al., 2024). The availability of trusted, nonpartisan outlets thus appears to be crucial for the trust-exposure dynamics.

Trust and misinformation belief

Belief in misinformation marks the transition from exposure to acceptance: the stage when individuals not only encounter false content but also treat it as credible. False belief formation arises from the interplay of cognitive, motivational, and contextual factors. Cognitively, people differ in how they process information: some engage in careful analytical reasoning, while others rely more on intuitive judgments or familiarity. Repeated or emotional messages, as well as reliance on cognitive shortcuts instead of analytical thinking, can make falsehoods seem more plausible (Ecker et al., 2022; Pennycook et al., 2021). Studies examining motivation find that people tend to protect their worldviews and partisan identities, interpreting information in ways that affirm what they already believe (Flynn et al., 2017). False information consistent with your beliefs can thus seem more credible than accurate information challenging your worldview.

Our acceptance of false claims is shaped not only by cognitive mechanisms but also by individual and structural factors such as education, ideology, and the media environment. Polarized media systems, ideologically homogeneous networks, and low trust in institutions are associated with greater susceptibility to misinformation (Valenzuela et al., 2021). The social component is also important in other ways: media trust itself is shaped through network mechanics, as people's confidence in the news is influenced by their social contacts (Ognyanova, 2019).

Trust as a credibility filter

Across domains, institutional trust acts as a credibility filter, determining which sources are granted legitimacy, which claims are deemed plausible, and whether expert consensus is accepted (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020). This applies not only to media trust but also more generally to epistemic trust in knowledge-producing institutions, including science, medicine, and the government. High trust in these institutions implies reliance on experts and lower acceptance of misinformation (Ejaz et al., 2025). Those with low confidence in institutions, experts, and elites are more likely to accept anti-establishment claims. Zimmermann and Kohring (2020) find that low trust in journalism and politics predicts higher belief in misinformation even after controlling for ideology and exposure. Anspach and Carlson (2022) similarly show that distrusting mainstream media amplifies the effects of misinformation exposure: people who do not trust news outlets are more likely to believe false claims once they encounter them.

The protective effects of institutional trust depend critically on domain-specificity: trust in the *appropriate* experts for a given topic protects against misinformation, while trust in non-experts making claims outside their competence

increases vulnerability. A large-scale study across eight countries found that trust in scientists and expert organizations was the strongest predictor of resisting climate misinformation, while trust in politicians and celebrities predicted greater acceptance of false claims (Ejaz et al., 2025).

Generally, institutional trust predicts lower acceptance of misinformation only when the institutions produce accurate evidence-based messages. This condition is not always met. In the domain of health, for instance, recent US government communication has often contained multiple false or misleading claims. Under those circumstances, research found that misperceptions were linked to higher trust in the government and lower confidence in medical experts (J. W. Kim et al., 2023). Similarly, in the realm of electoral information, media trust may reduce false beliefs within democratic countries but has the opposite effect in authoritarian regimes, where news outlets spread state propaganda (Vliegenthart et al., 2024). These findings highlight the need for *calibrated trust*: confidence in evidence-based expert institutions combined with skepticism toward politicized or low-credibility actors. Trust should further be extended to sources that provide accurate information in particular domains and contexts, rather than being granted based on institutional labels alone (Norris, 2022).

Critically, trust in news sources predicts misinformation belief more powerfully than mere exposure to those sources. Focusing on the 2016 US election cycle, Hutchens et al. (2021) found that trust in partisan media was a stronger predictor of misperceptions than media use alone. Moreover, trust moderated the effect of media use on believing false claims: consuming partisan news only predicted misperceptions among those who trusted those outlets. Similar patterns were found in other countries: exposure to legacy media reduced electoral misperceptions only when combined with trust in the news (Mont'Alverne et al., 2024). Using high-quality sources without trusting them provided little protection. Conversely, trusting low-quality sources even with limited use increased susceptibility. These findings offer an important insight into combating misinformation. Interventions focused exclusively on reducing exposure may have limited efficacy if underlying trust patterns remain unchanged. For instance, trusted sources removed from one platform can migrate elsewhere and retain their large audiences.

Trust as a cognitive heuristic

Cognitive frameworks interpret the role of trust in misinformation through *dual-process* models which distinguish between heuristic and systematic information processing. Heuristic processing involves intuitive judgments using mental shortcuts based on factors such as familiarity, emotional tone, or source cues. Systematic processing requires a more deliberate, comprehensive, and evidence-based evaluation (Pennycook & Rand, 2018; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In fast-paced online environments, most judgments happen heuristically,

which makes repetition, emotion, and perceived credibility especially influential. Credibility itself depends on underlying trust judgments. When individuals trust the source behind a message, perceived credibility is high, allowing claims to be accepted without deeper scrutiny. Conversely, when trust is low, even accurate information may be rejected as unreliable.

While existing studies do not directly measure information processing modes, their findings are consistent with a dual-process interpretation. Research shows that people inclined toward analytical thinking are less susceptible to misinformation, likely because they engage in a more systematic, accuracy-oriented evaluation (Pennycook & Rand, 2018). Institutional trust might be used in heuristic processing, serving as a source cue that determines whether information from mainstream or alternative sources is accepted. This mechanism offers a plausible cognitive basis for the link between misinformation belief and trust in epistemic institutions (Hutchens et al., 2021; Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020).

It is also possible that confidence in institutions can condition the effects of ideology and partisan reasoning. People with high media trust are more likely to accept information that challenges their partisan preference, even when they have strong political identities (Ladd, 2012). In this case, trust may serve to legitimize sources of evidence that might otherwise be rejected on partisan grounds. Conversely, low-trust partisans might rely on directional reasoning, reinforcing ideological misperceptions (Flynn et al., 2017).

Beliefs are also shaped and reinforced socially. Within ideologically aligned networks, trust is often extended to peers and in-group sources, who can persuade us to believe true or false claims (Ognyanova, 2019, 2021). Emotionally charged and identity-congruent misinformation thus persists not only due to individual cognitive biases but also through collective trust networks.

Feedback loops of trust and belief

As with misinformation exposure, evidence suggests that the relationship between belief and media trust is bidirectional. Accepting false narratives can erode confidence in institutions that contradict those narratives, creating a feedback loop between misperception and distrust. A longitudinal study by Valenzuela et al. (2021) demonstrates this pattern: in it, initial misperceptions predicted subsequent declines in media trust, which in turn predicted higher misperception levels.

This feedback loop likely arises through two mechanisms. One is delegitimization: many misinformation narratives explicitly accuse mainstream media, scientists, or governments of deception or incompetence, encouraging audiences to distrust them. The second pathway involves epistemic uncertainty: exposure to conflicting claims fosters confusion and cynicism. When people encounter accurate information contradicting their false beliefs, they may reject the truth and reduce trust in the sources that offer it, rather than revising their misconceptions.

Importantly, the process described in this study was based on belief rather than mere exposure: the study measured the perceived credibility of false claims, not the frequency of encountering them. The observed effects were modest and weakened over time, suggesting that the mutual reinforcement between trust and belief may eventually stabilize. Notably, the authors found no corresponding positive dynamic: high-trust individuals did not become progressively more resistant to misinformation over time, indicating that the self-reinforcing dynamic primarily operates on the side of distrust.

The bidirectional relationship between belief and trust highlights why correcting misinformation is particularly difficult: the erosion of trust reduces receptivity to accurate information, weakening the very institutions providing the corrections.

Trust and misinformation correction

While misinformation belief and correction are closely connected, they involve distinct psychological mechanisms. The two processes share several predictors, including analytical thinking, accuracy motivation, and institutional trust – but they operate through different pathways. Belief formation is often driven by heuristic and affective processes: repetition, emotional resonance, and source cues make false claims seem plausible (Ecker et al., 2022; Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Correction requires cognitive effort to override prior knowledge and update existing mental models (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Walter et al., 2020). These differences justify treating correction as a distinct stage in the misinformation cycle, governed by related but not identical psychological mechanisms. Discussing correction as a separate process helps clarify how trust not only shapes what people believe but also when they are willing to stop believing.

Individuals differ in their openness to factual correction. Analytical thinkers, who engage in reflective, evidence-based reasoning, are more receptive to corrections and less likely to retain misinformation after retraction (Ecker et al., 2022; Pennycook & Rand, 2021). In contrast, intuitive thinkers are more vulnerable to the *continued influence effect*: relying on misinformation in reasoning even after recognizing it as false. This persistence is especially enduring when misinformation provides a convenient explanation that the correction does not fully replace (Martel & Rand, 2024). Our social context can also reinforce false beliefs if rejecting them risks disapproval from peer groups who share our ideological views (Ognyanova, 2021).

Source trust and correction effectiveness

Across studies, source trust consistently emerges as one of the most important factors predicting whether corrections are accepted or rejected (Berinsky, 2017, 2023). The same factual correction offered by different outlets can produce very

different outcomes depending on how much we trust each venue (Walter et al., 2020). Perceived source credibility matters at both the belief and correction stages but serves distinct functions in each case. During belief formation, credibility acts as a heuristic cue that encourages acceptance without detailed scrutiny. During correction, credibility serves as a threshold for belief revision: people are generally more likely to accept a retraction when the correcting source is judged more credible than the original one (Ecker et al., 2022; Lewandowsky et al., 2012). This explains why misinformation from trusted sources spreads more easily, while accurate corrections from distrusted ones often fail to take hold.

The reliance on trusted sources further highlights why network dynamics are also crucial here. Corrections that come from one' s own social contacts can be particularly effective. Social ties carry inherent trust that fact-checkers must work to establish, which is especially important in an environment of low institutional trust (Walter & Tukachinsky, 2020). The social embeddedness of corrections thus provides a complementary pathway to institutional fact-checking (Ognyanova, 2021).

Trust can outweigh perceived expertise in determining the effectiveness of corrections. While both factors contribute to perceived credibility, studies show that people are more receptive to corrections from trusted or identity-aligned sources, even when those sources lack formal expertise (Wittenberg & Berinsky, 2020). We are much less likely to accept corrections from experts we view as biased or untrustworthy. In political contexts, fact-checks from elites we ideologically oppose will often fail (Nyhan et al., 2013; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Conversely, corrections from in-group figures or sources that appear to act against their own interests can be especially effective (Berinsky, 2017; Chan et al., 2017).

The same dynamics apply to media trust. Audiences tend to discount corrections from outlets they distrust, even when they recognize the information as accurate (Nyhan et al., 2020). Yet low trust does not fully negate fact-checking effects. Martel and Rand (2024) find that warning labels are most effective for those who trust the fact-checker, but the corrections still reduce belief in false news even among the distrustful. This could be because warning labels trigger general uncertainty, or because distrust in fact-checkers does not translate into automatic rejection of every correction. In practice, however, corrections often "preach to the choir," reaching the audiences already predisposed to accept them. In polarized media systems, this dynamic produces asymmetric outcomes: people who already trust mainstream media are most likely to accept fact-checks, while those who distrust them have weaker or more inconsistent reactions (Primig, 2024).

Unintended consequences: The tainted truth effect

Importantly, corrections can also shape our attitudes toward the media. While fact-checks improve belief accuracy, repeated exposure to such warnings may

gradually erode trust in the news. This unintended consequence, known as the *tainted truth effect*, functions as an over-correction. When audiences are repeatedly reminded that misinformation is pervasive, they become overly cautious and may discount even accurate information (Echterhoff et al., 2007; Freeze et al., 2021). General warnings or frequent fact-checks can thus reduce the perceived credibility of both false and true headlines (Clayton et al., 2020). Similar dynamics also emerge in political communication: exposure to elite rhetoric calling the media "fake news" fosters cynicism and primes citizens to distrust all journalism, regardless of its accuracy (Freeze et al., 2021).

Experimental works have further unpacked the effects on media trust. Researchers found evidence that fact-checks can decrease trust in news content and media institutions (Bachmann & Valenzuela, 2023). Notably, the decline in trust and increase in perceived media bias were observed after a single exposure to misinformation correction. This was especially pronounced among people whose prior views were aligned with the false content and challenged by the fact-check.

Overall, trust seems to moderate how corrections are interpreted: individuals with high baseline trust are more likely to view fact-checking as evidence of journalistic integrity, while low-trust individuals interpret it as confirmation of systemic bias. Over time, this asymmetry can create a feedback loop where efforts to correct falsehoods can further erode confidence in the press, making subsequent corrections less likely to be believed.

Strategies for effective correction

Mainstream media face multiple challenges when attempting to rectify audience misperceptions. Because correcting misinformation requires restating it, news outlets can inadvertently increase the accessibility and reach of falsehoods (Tsfati et al., 2020), potentially reinforcing public impressions that the information environment is unreliable.

Several strategies can reduce false beliefs while minimizing trust costs. Corrections can be framed better by providing context, showing the misinformation is limited in scope rather than pervasive (Clayton et al., 2020; Hameleers & van der Meer, 2023), avoiding overly negative language, and offering alternative explanations to fill in the gap left by debunked claims (Bachmann & Valenzuela, 2023). Research has also suggested employing credible messengers, especially ones whose side does not benefit from the correction (Berinsky, 2023).

Proactive strategies like accuracy prompts (Pennycook et al., 2021) and source credibility labels (Celadin et al., 2023) have also been shown to be effective. Prebunking or psychological inoculation, warning people about manipulation techniques in advance of exposure, is another promising approach (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2024). Issue-specific prebunks that focus on accuracy work best, as they increase belief in true information rather than just skepticism toward falsehoods (Pennycook et al., 2024).

In sum, effective interventions work not by amplifying suspicion, but by calibrating trust and cultivating reasonable skepticism. This can encourage scrutiny of misinformation while reinforcing confidence in reliable, evidence-based journalism.

Conclusion

This chapter examines the role of media trust in misinformation dynamics at different stages of information processing. Trust determines which sources people consult, which claims they believe, and whether they accept corrections. At the same time, exposure to false narratives that delegitimize journalism, science, and democratic institutions can erode the very trust needed to combat misinformation. These bidirectional dynamics can create self-reinforcing cycles that are difficult to interrupt through traditional interventions.

Breaking these spirals requires more than reducing exposure or flagging individual posts. Long-term solutions should include rebuilding confidence in knowledge-producing institutions (see also Chapter 11 in this volume). At the system level, that means strengthening credible public-interest journalism, improving transparency in editorial standards and corrections, and supporting durable, nonpartisan public media. Platforms should prioritize provenance, elevate reliable sources, and deploy interventions that encourage accuracy without normalizing cynicism.

At the user level, interventions should cultivate calibrated trust: confidence in evidence-based institutions paired with skepticism toward politicized or low-credibility actors, including hyperpartisan media. Effective tools might include accuracy prompts, targeted fact-checks that provide coherent alternative explanations, credible messengers, and issue-specific prebunks combined with accuracy framing. Because trust moderates intervention effects, strategies must be audience-aware: those already distrustful will need different pathways to engagement than those predisposed to rely on mainstream sources.

Finally, measuring success should include outcomes beyond short-term belief change: durable corrections, reduced reliance on low-quality outlets, and well-calibrated institutional trust. Democracies depend on shared knowledge infrastructure. Rebuilding trust in newsrooms, scientific agencies, and public institutions offers the most promising route to resilience against misinformation.

Note

1 Though it is worth noting that online behavioral data typically measure visits to low-quality domains, and can miss false or misleading content embedded in mainstream sources or spread through social communication channels.

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9

NEWS MEDIA TRUST FACING NEW COMPETITORS

Yifei Wang and Miriam J. Metzger

Introduction

The contemporary news media environment is marked by an unprecedented abundance of content and sources, ranging from traditional mass media outlets to digital-native platforms. These developments have blurred the boundaries between professional journalism and alternative non-journalistic information sources, disrupted long-standing norms of news production and consumption, and fundamentally impacted the news supply-demand relationship, as well as the power dynamics between news producers and consumers. Classic models of news production and consumption considered the public as mostly passive and susceptible to manipulation by media messages, and positioned media elites as the sole gatekeepers of news information – thus shaping social realities on behalf of the public (Peterson, 1956). In essence, in the mass media age when news information was scarce and flowed one-way from media elites to the public, traditional perspectives of news based on elite gatekeeping and social responsibility theories conceived of the market for news as a *seller's market*.

However, with the drastic increase in information supply during the digital media age, a *buyer's market* has now emerged featuring fierce competition among news producers to capture the limited attention of news consumers (Newman, 2010). Greater choice in suppliers offers audiences more options for news, and thus puts more control in the hands of news consumers, rather than the producers, to choose which media sources and narratives construct their social realities. This transition encourages the balkanization of knowledge and interpretations of news information (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). It also creates a paradox of choice wherein news abundance makes it more difficult for audiences to feel confident about their media selections (Schwartz, 2015).

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Indeed, research suggests that a buyer's market can critically influence how people cognitively process, evaluate, and ultimately trust the information they consume due to *choice overload* when facing a vast array of competing sources and perspectives. The abundance of options can overwhelm individuals' decision-making capacity, making it difficult to assess information credibility and form clear judgments (Chernev et al., 2015). Applied to news, choice overload may undermine people's confidence in individual news articles or outlets, and also in the entire news ecosystem. This is exacerbated by the fact that today's news ecosystem is characterized by varying degrees of transparency and credibility. Moreover, when individuals encounter sources with unclear reliability or intentions, they may exhibit *ambiguity aversion* – a psychological tendency to avoid options that are uncertain or hard to assess (Machina & Siniscalchi, 2014), so rather than critically evaluating such information, people might instead distrust or disengage from news altogether.

As the media ecosystem increasingly shifts news production from journalistic organizations to a range of online or non-journalistic platforms, it has facilitated the rise of sensationalist content, misinformation, personalized news feeds, and partisan news (Buturoiu et al., 2023; Van Aelst et al., 2017). The high-choice news environment has also altered news consumption patterns by increasing selectivity in news exposure, news avoidance, incidental exposure, and news "snacking." These changes introduce distinct challenges that affect news media trust. In this chapter, we discuss how transformations in both the supply and demand sides of the news market shape news trust. By examining the features of decentralized news production alongside the psychological mechanisms underpinning news consumption, we aim to shed light on the forces driving contemporary challenges to news media trust and offer an organizing framework to understand how the evolving media landscape influences public attitudes toward news.

Supply side – News production and distribution

Emerging competitors of traditional news media

While traditional media outlets – such as newspapers, broadcast television, and radio – once dominated the dissemination of news, the media landscape has now dramatically shifted. Audiences are increasingly turning to non-traditional and non-journalistic sources for information. Today's news ecosystem includes *social media platforms*, *influencers*, news *aggregators*, and *AI-generated content*. In fact, more Americans now access news via social media and video platforms than through television or news websites and apps, marking the first time that non-journalistic platforms have overtaken traditional media as the dominant source of news, at least in the US (Newman et al., 2025).

In terms of trust, research finds that people trust news articles from social media less than news originating from traditional sources (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023), and trust in social media as a source for news is lower than traditional media (Fotopoulos, 2023). While it is good that people are more skeptical of news they consume via social media given its propensity for spreading misinformation, if this skepticism becomes normalized, using social media for news may contribute to a long-term decrease in news media trust (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023). Indeed, Park et al. (2020) analyzed longitudinal data from 26 countries and found declines in overall news trust among those who rely on social media for news. Social media moreover provide a forum for attacks on mainstream news, which may also serve to diminish trust in news (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Other research has hypothesized that social media could increase perceived credibility of specific news content when articles are shared by trusted friends. However, the evidence is mixed with some studies confirming (Turcotte et al., 2015) and others disconfirming this hypothesis (Slavík et al., 2025).

One critical agent on social media platforms is social media influencers (SMI), who serve as a key source of news for many users, often more so than journalists (Newman et al., 2025). Although little research has examined the relationship between SMI and news trust, advertising scholarship indicates that followers of SMIs tend to report stronger parasocial relationships and higher perceived source credibility, which in turn mediate their positive evaluations of sponsored content (Breves et al., 2021). In the context of news trust, such parasocial relationships may increase trust in the influencer's perspective, making audiences more receptive to their interpretations. Consistent with this idea, Zimmermann et al. (2023) found no difference in perceived credibility of news from media outlets versus from SMI, and young people who subscribe to newsletters written by SMI trust them as credible sources of news (Dwyer et al., 2024). Although some SMI may deliberately disseminate controversial content and attack news organizations (Ahmed et al., 2020), many post content that aligns with mainstream media narratives and upholds journalistic standards (Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023). Weighing these contradicting tendencies, recent research shows that overall, followers of SMI report higher levels of news media trust than non-followers (Wasike, 2025).

Other key players in the contemporary news market are news aggregators and recommender systems (NRS). News aggregators compile thousands of stories from various sources into customized news feeds. By 2019, *Google News* alone contributed to over 10 billion clicks per month on publishers' websites (Callaway et al., 2024). Similar to news aggregators, NRS employ algorithms that make automated and data-driven personalized news story recommendations. NRS now drive between 75 and 95% of news consumption on platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter (Blassnig et al., 2024), making them powerful influencers of consumers' news exposure and engagement.

While news aggregators and NRS provide infrastructures for digital news distribution, such algorithmic customization is often a black box to the audience. Monzer et al. (2020) argue that because the original news source is not always apparent, it can be difficult for users to evaluate the credibility of news received through aggregators. Moreover, rather than selecting news based on editors' assessments of credibility, news aggregation platforms and NRS display information primarily based on relevance to users' geographical location, demographics, and past keyword searches or clicks, although they often do take source authority into account (Chyi et al., 2016). Such systems may unintentionally include inaccurate or biased news content. Perhaps for these reasons, people tend to be wary of algorithms selecting news for them (Weidmüller & Engesser, 2024), especially when users perceive threats to privacy or potential manipulation (Blassnig et al., 2024). However, Diel and Roberts (2021) found that news stories appearing on news aggregation sites were perceived as equally credible as the same stories from their original sources. Park et al. (2020) also found no evidence that use of news aggregator apps was correlated with levels of general news trust or mistrust.

Finally, AI-generated information is reshaping how news is produced and distributed. Advanced generative AI technologies, including large language learning models (LLMs), are now capable of producing full news articles and even newscasts. The Italian newspaper *Il Foglio* published the first entirely AI-generated edition in May 2025 (Giuffrida, 2025). *NewsGPT.ai* and *Channel 1* offer text and video platforms for news that are entirely AI-generated. Though only 5% of US adults report knowingly consuming AI-generated news, AI plays a broad role in journalistic production: around 70% of journalists now use generative AI for tasks like writing headlines or summaries (Diakopoulos et al., 2024). In addition, platforms increasingly deploy AI-powered summaries and recommendations to facilitate news access, and 7% of global respondents (with 15% of those under 25) say they use AI chatbots as news sources (Newman et al., 2025).

A few early studies show that AI-authored news is perceived as more credible than news authored by professional journalists, perhaps because it is seen as less susceptible to political bias (Haim & Graefe, 2017; Jung et al., 2017). However, more recent studies show that AI- generated news is either perceived as equally credible (especially when people are not told whether it is machine- or human-authored), or as less credible, which has been attributed to algorithm aversion (Graefe & Bohlken, 2020; Wang & Huang, 2024). In any case, algorithmic news curation, automated writing, and news bots certainly pose problems for transparency in news production (Buturoiu et al., 2023) that may affect trust in news overall. Moreover, AI news summaries used by aggregators skew the content to only certain sources and decrease the likelihood of users opening news websites. As a result, users may form news trust judgments without actual news engagement or full contextual understanding (Chapekis & Lieb, 2025).

Patterns of news production

The rise of non-journalistic sources and the increasing role of technological mediators in the news ecosystem has not only reshaped how news is distributed but also contributed to a broader transformation of news content becoming increasingly *personalized*, *politicized*, *sensationalized*, and often of *lower quality*. Such developments challenge traditional journalistic norms, such as accuracy and objectivity, which can affect public trust in news.

First, in contrast to the more uniform news content of newspapers and broadcast programs, digital platforms curate *personalized* news content based on individual-level data, such as behavioral patterns and past preferences, resulting in a highly fragmented information ecosystem (Feijóo et al., 2009). While news personalization may improve user engagement, it may lead to lower or higher trust in news as news users weigh the benefits (e.g., information needs and interest) versus their concerns (e.g., privacy and agency) of news personalization (Monzer et al., 2020). On the one hand, news users may appreciate customized news as being more relevant and interesting to them, which could lead to higher trust of personalized news articles or platforms (Lee & Lee, 2023). Thurman et al. (2019) found that news users generally consider algorithmic curation of news based on past consumption more trustworthy than editorial curation. On the other hand, personalized news can evoke privacy concerns (Blassnig et al., 2024) and may thus lead to lower trust in news channels that distribute personalized news. Also, Monzer et al. (2020) found that many news users feel they lack agency in determining the personalization process and find it blurs the line between news personalization and commercial targeting, thus eroding their trust in news.

In an oversaturated and highly competitive media environment, both digital and traditional news outlets increasingly cater to ideological niches, reinforcing partisan preferences to cultivate audience loyalty (Peck, 2019). The proliferation of *partisan* (and hyper-partisan) news content carries significant implications for public trust in news. As audiences increasingly consume information that reinforces their preexisting opinions, they are more inclined to perceive such content as credible and trustworthy, while viewing dissenting or ideologically incongruent information as biased or untrustworthy (Gentzkow et al., 2025). This is closely linked to the hostile media effect, which is that individuals with strong prior attitudes are prone to interpreting even neutral or balanced news coverage as biased against their own positions (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). This dynamic contributes to epistemic closure, where individuals become less receptive to alternative viewpoints. Research additionally indicates that sustained exposure to ideologically slanted news online diminishes trust in specific news outlets and can cultivate a broader skepticism toward traditional news (Guess et al., 2021).

Intensified competition among news outlets has also altered news content by prioritizing *sensationalism* over substance. While the public's appetite for

dramatic and emotionally charged news is not new – as seen historically with tabloids and yellow journalism – dynamics of the contemporary media environment have amplified these tendencies. In a cluttered news marketplace, fierce competition for audience attention is coupled with the reality of shortened audience attention spans, which drives content producers to create sensational content (Webster, 2014). In such a context, news producers may resort to emotionally provocative content at the expense of accuracy and journalistic integrity to gain audience attention (Arbaoui et al., 2020). Research also suggests that clickbait content tends to attract more attention and invoke more emotional arousal than neutral reporting (Pengnate, 2019). While such strategies may succeed in driving attention to news stories (Sui et al., 2023), people are less likely to find sensationalized news credible (Staender et al., 2021), and theoretically it may fuel general skepticism toward news (Khawar & Boukes, 2024). So far, however, research findings are mixed as to whether reading sensationalized news affects overall trust in news media (Hopmann et al., 2015; Munger et al., 2020).

High-choice news markets also tend to foster *low quality* content (Park et al., 2020; Van Aelst et al., 2017). Unlike traditional journalistic institutions, many digital news platforms lack formal gatekeeping processes, allowing virtually anyone to publish content without editorial oversight. Competition between news sources also adds pressure to publish news quickly, which can introduce misinformation and lower the quality of news in both legacy and digital media environments (Buturoiu et al., 2023). Misinformation in the news ecosystem can make it difficult for audiences to differentiate between credible journalism and manipulated narratives (Benkler et al., 2018), sowing confusion about what is and is not true (Rapp & Salovich, 2018). Exposure to misinformation may even erode public trust in the news ecosystem as a whole (Ognyanova et al., 2020; Valenzuela et al., 2022; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019; see also Chapter 8 in this volume). Fake news (and fake news accusations) can be seen as a type of pollution that makes people question not only specific news articles or outlets but also the entire institution of journalism (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; see also Chapter 12 in this volume). The meta-perception that misinformation is widespread can create generalized news skepticism, even toward legitimate and reliable news sources (Hameleers et al., 2022; Matthes et al., 2023). When people assume falsehoods are common across the news landscape, they may doubt accurate reporting by association. Thus, both actual exposure to misinformation and the belief it is pervasive contribute to news distrust.

Demand side – News consumption

As technological innovation accelerates and media competition intensifies, changes on the supply side not only reconfigure the channels through which audiences encounter news but also reshape the cognitive and behavioral

patterns of audience engagement with news. Specifically, high-choice media environments promote *greater selectivity*, *avoidance*, *news "snacking,"* and *incidental exposure* to news information (Buturoiu et al., 2023). These shifting patterns of news consumption carry critical implications for public judgments of news media and news media trust (see also Chapter 7 in this volume).

Selectivity in news consumption

Selective exposure refers to the human tendency to choose information that aligns with one's preexisting beliefs or social identities, and digital platforms can magnify this tendency by providing audiences a much wider range of news information to choose from (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015). Research shows that news consumers more frequently select and spend more time on attitude-consistent content (Westerwick et al., 2017), and that consuming news from ideologically slanted sources – such as FOX News – can trigger and reinforce biased patterns of thinking (Bell et al., 2022). Digital platforms also learn from users' behavior and algorithmically tailor content to match their preferences, resulting in involuntary selective exposure that can deepen informational echo chambers. On the other side of selective exposure is *selective avoidance*, the deliberate evasion of counter-attitudinal information (Garrett et al., 2013), and some evidence suggests that selective avoidance may exert a stronger influence on partisan news consumption than selective exposure (Mukerjee & Yang, 2021).

These selective tendencies have important implications for news media trust. Research shows that selective exposure to attitude-consistent information is driven by perceived credibility of that information (Metzger et al., 2020), and repeated exposure to preferred news sources tends to reinforce trust in those same sources over time (Tsfati et al., 2025). However, such selective preference for certain sources may lead to greater skepticism of the entire media landscape. For example, using alternative partisan media for news can weaken trust in mainstream media (Strömbäck et al., 2025; Tsfati et al., 2025). Moreover, selective news consumption can limit individuals' engagement with ideologically oppositional or unfamiliar viewpoints, reinforcing perceptions of out-group media as biased or deceptive (Peterson & Kagalwala, 2021).

In any case, the impact of selective news consumption on overall media trust appears to be dependent upon the nature of the information environment in which news exposure occurs. In a homogeneous media ecosystem, selective exposure likely heightens news media trust due to consistent message reinforcement, whereas people may perceive lower news media trust in a heterogeneous media environment that contains conflicting information. Additionally, state-initiated interventions, such as public service media, can potentially moderate this relationship as they provide a shared informational baseline that fosters generalized news trust across partisan divides (Humprecht et al., 2020; Müller, 2013).

Patterns of news consumption

News consumers in high-choice media environments may also experience cognitive overload from seeing constant news updates (Holton & Chyi, 2012). When the news supply surpasses individuals' cognitive capacity to process it, audiences may struggle to discern what is relevant (Jacoby, 1977) and to make accurate decisions about information quality (Park, 2019). News overload can lead to cognitive fatigue, rendering people too overwhelmed to discern information veracity (i.e., "analysis paralysis," Song et al., 2017) or to do so in heuristic and less rigorous ways, leaving them more susceptible to misinformation (Horne & Adali, 2017). News overload can also lead the audience to adopt *news avoidance* as a coping mechanism to protect mental bandwidth (Xu et al., 2024).

When people perceive news institutions as biased or manipulative, news distrust can feed news avoidance (Goyanes et al., 2023) and news avoidance may further entrench distrust in the news media, creating a feedback loop. Or when individuals feel overwhelmed by the constant influx of headlines, disengagement from news as a coping mechanism limits their exposure to diverse perspectives, making them more susceptible to their preexisting biases (Pauker et al., 2018). By avoiding news, individuals also miss opportunities to witness journalistic accountability and corrections to misinformation. Moreover, to fill the information gap brought by news avoidance, news consumers may instead rely on non-journalistic sources, such as social media or word-of-mouth, thus increasing their susceptibility to misinformation. Over time, this cycle of overload, avoidance, and narrowed exposure may foster cynicism and make audiences more likely to view professional news media as biased and unreliable, further eroding trust.

As people increasingly shift their news consumption to mobile devices (e.g., smartphones), researchers have noticed a consumption pattern they term "news snacking," which refers to brief and intermittent information intake, such as glances at mere news headlines or short videos (Molyneux, 2018). The interface design of mobile apps encourages ephemeral engagement and reduces friction in switching between content (Barnes et al., 2025). With users rapidly shifting focus without fully processing or retaining information, news snacking promotes attention fragmentation and reliance on limited and cursory cues (e.g., headline, media outlet, or intermediary) to evaluate information credibility (Slavík et al., 2025). As users gravitate toward *snack* content that is quick and easy to process, they may not expect or appreciate the rigor or depth of high-quality journalism. Additionally, habitual news consumption fosters trust in specific sources by building familiarity through media routines (Arguedas et al., 2024). News snacking, however, disrupts this ritual by scattering attention to news across different times and outlets, potentially weakening trust in news media.

Digital platforms also facilitate *incidental exposure* to news, which is the unintentional consumption of news without actively seeking it out (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). Social networks and algorithmic curation jointly amplify incidental news exposure by highlighting news content through interpersonal networks and algorithm-driven visibility in personal feeds (Weeks & Lane, 2020) that is presented alongside non-news content, like entertainment posts and personal updates. Such a mixed information environment might prompt audiences to stay vigilant about the credibility of the information they encounter because they recognize that it blends informational, sensational, opinionated, and entertainment content. But this could also foster skepticism about information that erodes trust in news media, which is found to be especially pronounced among frequent social media users (Park & Lee, 2023).

Moreover, the "news-finds-me" (NFM) perception is a belief that one does not need to actively seek news because important information will reach them automatically (Gil de Zúñiga & Cheng, 2024). The NFM mindset signifies a transformation in how people conceptualize their engagement with news, shifting from proactive information seekers to passive recipients, and rather than actively seeking out news, users with high NFM perception tend to receive information via social media platforms (Campbell & Hawkins, 2025). This passive mode of news consumption reflects a form of epistemic outsourcing, in which users trust algorithms or social networks to filter information (Diehl & Lee, 2022). Thus, trust in news media becomes detached from editorial authority and instead is rooted in social endorsement or algorithmic visibility. Some have speculated that this could diminish critical scrutiny of news, and research shows that greater NFM perception increases belief in misinformation (Gil de Zúñiga & Cheng, 2024; Zhang & Jiang, 2024).

Collectively, these patterns show that news media trust is not solely decided by the quality of content but by how that content is encountered, experienced, and interpreted. In the pre-Internet era, news consumption was typically intentional and ritualized in the sense that individuals accessed information through a limited number of channels and often at scheduled times. These ritualized reception formats reinforced habits of focused news engagement and placed significant control in the hands of editors who curated the flow of information. Today, however, the information environment prompts news engagement that is far more fleeting, passive, and heuristic. This evolution not only changes consumption patterns but also reshapes the psychological frameworks, such as attention and cognition, that underlie news media trust.

Conclusion

The developments on both the news supply and demand sides discussed in this chapter reflect a fundamental transformation of the news ecosystem brought on by advances in technology. Today's news market includes an

unprecedented number of both journalistic and non-journalistic competitors that vie for audience attention. In this chapter, we offer an organizing framework for scholars to begin to understand the implications of the changes for public trust in news. The framework specifies that newer entrants to the news markets not only alter the news distribution process but also influence how news is produced and consumed in ways that likely affect public trust in news (see Figure 9.1).

Our framework moreover proposes that the changes in news distribution, production, and consumption shape news media trust through three pathways: by affecting how people judge the credibility of the news media as a whole ("news medium credibility"), particular news stories ("news content credibility"), and people's orientations toward and intentions to use news. Prior to the digital age, the news media (e.g., print and broadcast) were closely tied to professional journalism, which reinforced audience trust in news media as a whole. The rise of non-journalistic sources of news disrupted this association, and by extension can foster a generalized distrust in news media. The current fragmented media environment also provides a milieu for sensationalism and misinformation to thrive, challenging professional journalistic standards of news production (e.g., objectivity and fact-checking) that can impact audiences' credibility evaluation of news content. The erosion of these journalistic norms may moreover fuel a generalized suspicion toward all news outlets, as well as news skepticism or cynicism, which can prompt disengagement from news media and leave citizens more susceptible to misinformation.

On digital devices, journalistic sources now compete not only with alternative news providers but also with entertainment content, such as social networking and online games. In response, news content is frequently embedded alongside or within entertainment content. Unsurprisingly, then, news use today is increasingly oriented toward distraction, leisure, and identity expression (Van Aelst et al., 2017). This mode of news consumption further encourages passive and brief news consumption, such as incidental exposure and "news snacking." Taken together, the changes described in this chapter not only prompt news consumers to take a more entertainment orientation toward news that likely impacts their trust evaluations (e.g., trust of news to inform citizens) but also affect the perceived credibility of news at both macro (news organizations, news industry) and micro (article content) levels.

As the news environment continues to undergo profound changes, news media trust faces challenges from both supply and demand sides that future research will need to tackle. In addition to offering an organizing framework to help structure such research, this chapter also identified some gaps in scholarly understanding of how the changes affect trust perceptions. As noted earlier, in some cases the empirical evidence is mixed (e.g., whether

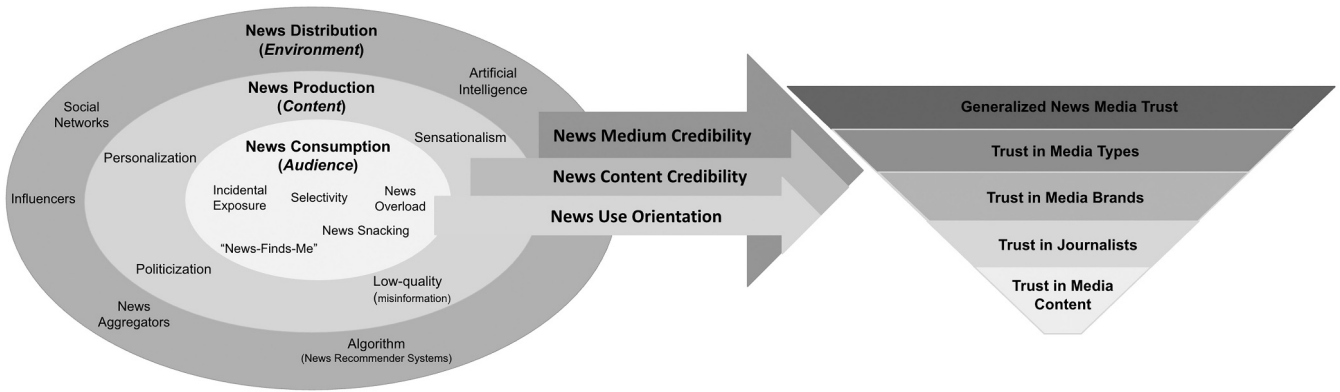

FIGURE 9.1 Organizing framework for news media trust in the face of new competitors.

news personalization increases or decreases trust at the article-level or news trust more generally), and in other cases theoretical assumptions as to why or how trust is affected are merely speculative and as-yet untested (e.g., effect of AI-generated news on general news media trust). More research is needed to resolve contradictory empirical findings in the literature and to test proposed theoretical explanations – or offer new mechanisms where they are missing.

Future research should also look at each of the news supply and demand changes identified in our framework to understand their boundary conditions and mutual interactions, and it should do so across different types of aspects or types of trust in news, which could include trust in the news media system as a whole, trust in news media as a public institution, trust in specific media corporations or news organizations, trust in media channels for news (e.g., newspapers, social media, AI), trust in particular news brands or programs, trust in specific news coverage at the story or topic level, and trust in journalists (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Additionally, the list of news sources discussed in this chapter is not exhaustive. Outside of news outlets and news stories, people may encounter news and political information in comments, online forums, politicians and political party newsletters, and fitness or lifestyle websites, to name just a few examples. Indeed, most exposure to political information online takes place on non-news sites (Wojcieszak et al., 2024). While studies have found that reading the comment section accompanying news stories negatively affects news article-level trust (Naab et al., 2020), news outlet-level trust (Hutchens et al., 2023), and general news media trust (Dobber & Hameleers, 2025), research on the impacts of receiving information via most non-news venues on trust is scant. Future studies are thus needed to understand how receiving political information across a broader array of non-news sources and news intermediaries than discussed in this chapter affects trust.

Doing so is especially important because new and non-journalistic sources of news – such as social media platforms and influencers, AI systems and chatbots, and aggregators – are not merely supplementing legacy news media; they are, in many cases, outcompeting them in reach, relevance, and cultural influence. As engagement with traditional news outlets declines, these emerging and non-journalistic sources are becoming increasingly central to how people engage with news and, as a result, interpret and evaluate news trust in the digital age.

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10

INCONVENIENT TRUTHS?

Disentangling the conflict between truthful news reporting and news media trust

Jesper Strömbäck

Introduction[1]

From a liberal democratic perspective, the most important function of the news media is to provide people with the kind of information they need to be free and self-governing (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Although it can be discussed what characterizes such information, a prerequisite is that the information provided by the news is factual, verified, and truthful (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021; Patterson, 2013; Strömbäck, 2005). It is also on that basis that news media are seeking to earn legitimacy and the public's trust. For example, the New York Times stresses in its ethical handbook that its mission is to "seek the truth and help people understand the world," and that "to succeed, the trust of our readers, viewers and listeners is essential."[2] Similarly, the BBC emphasizes in its Code of Conduct that "Trust is the foundation of the BBC. We´re independent, impartial, and truthful,"[3] while the ethical guidelines for journalists in Sweden state that "The role of the mass media in society and the public's trust require correct and comprehensive news reporting."[4]

These examples illustrate that truth and truthful news reporting are key to the news media's claim to be trusted and their legitimacy as epistemic authorities (Bartsch et al., 2025; Ekström & Westlund, 2019; Parks, 2022). They also help explain why high or increasing media trust is typically perceived as a strength, while low or declining news media trust is perceived as a problem (but see Chapter 2 in this volume).

At the same time, research shows that levels of news media trust differ both across and within countries in patterns that can hardly be reconciled with any serious notion that truth and truthful news reporting are decisive for how much people trust the news media (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). The most glaring example is probably the US, where news

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media trust is much lower among Republicans than among Democrats (Brenan, 2024) and where "Republicans and Democrats place their trust in two nearly inverse news media environments" (Jurkowitz et al., 2020).

Such patterns call for a reassessment of the link between truthful news reporting on the one hand and news media trust on the other. Although truthfulness is a key indicator of how people understand media trust (Knudsen et al., 2022) and matters for the extent to which people trust the news media (Fawzi & Mothes, 2020), assuming a strong and causal link between truthful news reporting and media trust represents a too simplistic view of how news media trust is developed and maintained, and the role of truthful news reporting in that context. It might even neglect that there might be a conflict between truthful news reporting and news media trust, and that truthful news reporting may even result in declining news media trust.

Based on this, the aim of this chapter is to provide an analysis of why there might be a conflict between truthful news reporting and news media trust. To preview the argument that will be developed: the potential conflict between truthful news reporting and news media trust has been exacerbated by the transition to high-choice media environments where news media face a fiercer competition from an increasing array of alternative and often hostile media and other communicators, where their dominant epistemology and accounts of reality are increasingly challenged, and where psychological biases such as directional motivated reasoning have greater impact on people's media use and news media trust than in former, low-choice media environments.

Some conceptual clarifications

As conceptual clarity is a virtue, let me begin by clarifying how some key concepts will be used. The most important, of course, is news media trust. Like other forms of trust, it refers to a "three-place relationship between the truster, the trustee, and the object of trust: a person trusts another with something, which can be an action, a state of affairs, or a proposition" (Irzik & Kurtulmus, 2019, pp. 1146–1147). Depending on the level of analysis, the trustee might be news media in general, different types of media (TV, radio, newspapers), different media brands, journalists, the news coverage in general, or the news coverage of different topics (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati et al., 2025a). Importantly, levels of media trust typically differ across these levels (Daniller et al., 2017; Tsfati et al., 2022). Despite this, many measures of media trust are ambiguous with respect to the object of trust, and the most widespread measures typically build on very abstract conceptualizations of the (news) media (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati et al., 2025a). The World Values Survey, for example, asks people "how much confidence" they have in "television" and "the press," while the General Social Survey in the US asks how much confidence people have in "the people running" different institutions, among them "the press."

Given that the most important function of the news media is to provide the kind of information people need to be free and self-governing, what should matter the most is, however, not the extent to which people trust news media as institutions or the people running them. What should matter the most is the extent to which people trust *the information* provided by the news media (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Even though trust at different levels of analysis is interrelated (Aharoni et al., 2025; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Tsfati et al., 2022), if people do not trust the information provided by the news media, it matters less whether they trust other aspects of the news media. From this perspective, it is by providing information that is verified and truthful that news media deserve to be trusted.

Hence, building on contemporary conceptualizations of news media trust but focusing on news media content (e.g., Engelke et al., 2019; Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati et al., 2025a), here news media trust will refer to *the extent to which people (the trustors), however tacit or habitual, in situations of uncertainty trust news media at different levels of analysis (the trustees) to provide information that is verified and truthful (the object of trust)*.

By news media, I refer to traditional, mainstream, or legacy news media, that is, radio, TV, and newspapers that operate by journalistic norms, values, and editorial processes. For reasons that will be discussed, I do not include alternative or partisan media, although the boundaries might be porous (Bauer et al., 2022; Rauch, 2016).

From low-choice to high-choice information environments

To understand why there might be a conflict between truthful news reporting and the extent to which people trust the news media and the information provided by them, a crucial starting point is digitalization and the transformation from low- to high-choice information environments, and how that process has altered the relationship between media, politics, and people (Heinecke, 2019; Van Aelst et al., 2017; Strömbäck, Boomgarden et al., 2022; see also Chapter 9 in this volume).

In the low-choice information environments of yesterday, most people got most of the information about politics and society through traditional news media (Mutz, 1998; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2014). Since most news media within the confines of national media systems largely follow the same journalistic norms, values, editorial processes, and production routines, they tend to function as a single institution (e.g., Cook, 2005; Hjarvard, 2008; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). As a consequence, it did not matter that much what news media people used: at the national level, the issues on the media agendas and how reality was depicted did not differ that much between different news media (of the same type) within countries. Although there has always been a variety of newspapers from the left to the right, more so in some countries than in others, the opportunity structures for selective exposure were much more

limited than today. Hence, people's political leanings or other motivations did not matter that much for what news media they used, although levels of news media use have always differed (Prior, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2013). People from the left to the right were consequently exposed to largely the same mass-mediated depictions of reality. This held in particular for broadcast media.

In this context, a main challenge for politicians who needed to reach out to the public was how to influence the news media, their issue agendas and how the news media framed whatever the news was about (Cook, 2005). Toward that end, they had to adapt to the news media and their logics and seek ways to subsidize the news to make them appealing for the news media to report on (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013). There was little room for politicians to push for alternative accounts of reality, and they were typically afraid of being caught lying or being wrong. The news media had the power to define what was considered politically scandalous and could cause feeding frenzies by intense coverage of gaffes and allegations of lies, plagiarism, or exaggerations (Sabato, 1993; Thompson, 2000).

The consonance of the media's coverage meant that people broadly speaking got a shared sense of reality and a common ground for discussions (Marietta & Barker, 2019; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021; Peter, 2004). Factual disputes were less common, and when they inevitably did occur, referring to what the news media said on the matter was a means toward settling the facts (and the same held for many other institutions, such as science). Although trust in the news media differed across individuals, it was typically higher and less politicized (Andersson & Oscarsson, 2020; Brenan, 2024).

Fast forward to contemporary information environments, there is an abundance of all things related to media. In particular, digitalization and the transformation into high-choice information environments have weakened the role of news media as gatekeepers to the public sphere and as the all-dominant source of information for people, made political actors less dependent on traditional news media, and enabled virtually anyone to post, publish, and share information that potentially can reach larger groups of people. On a positive note, this has made high-quality information more accessible than ever. The downside is that it has also increased the prevalence of false and misleading information circulating in an increasingly fragmented public sphere (Benkler et al., 2018; Hameleers, 2021; Strömbäck, Boomgaarden, et al., 2022; Vosoughi et al., 2018; see also Chapter 8 in this volume). For several reasons, this is important in the context of the relationship between truthful news reporting and news media trust.

Increasing prevalence of alternative and hostile communication

One reason that the transformation into high-choice information environments has altered the relationship between truthful news reporting and media trust is that it has paved the way for a range of alternative communication channels,

including social media platforms and more or less alternative and partisan media (Benkler et al., 2018; Strömbäck, Boomgaarden, et al., 2022; Van Aelst et al., 2017). This has resulted in a situation where people are increasingly exposed to different depictions of factual matters and truth claims depending on what media or communication channels they use. This, in itself, undermines the news media and their power to define what's news and what's true.

The same development has made political actors less dependent on traditional news media. Although news media still matter and are influential, now political actors can bypass the news media, form their own communication channels, and communicate directly with people through social media or friendly alternative media. In turn, this allows them to challenge the news media and their accounts of reality. It has also made them less afraid of and more inclined toward criticizing and attacking the news media (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Meeks, 2020; Ross & Rivers, 2018; Solis & Sagarzazu, 2020; see also Chapter 12 in this volume).

This may hold in particular for authoritarian, populist political actors that perceive the news media as enemies. Predictably, this resonates with their supporters and followers and may trigger hostile media perceptions (Perloff, 2015), leading to an upsurge in hostile attacks on the news media for being biased, fake news, and spreading propaganda (Egelhofer et al., 2022; Fawzi, 2019; Fawzi & Krämer, 2021; Liminga & Strömbäck, 2023; Schulz et al., 2020; Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2025). Such elite cues that the news media cannot be trusted are important as they influence people's perceptions of and trust in the news media (Egelhofer et al., 2022; Watts et al., 1999).

Also important is the establishment of a range of (hyper)partisan and political alternative media. Although the boundaries between traditional news media and alternative media may be porous and the degree of "alternativeness" varies, their raison d'être is that they are in opposition to what they consider to be the mainstream (Cushion, 2024; Holt et al., 2019). This is important in several respects. To begin with, in many cases their purpose is not to inform but to cater to people's pre-existing beliefs and political identities. Toward that end, they are more likely to disseminate slanted, false, cherry-picked and misleading information than news media (Benkler et al., 2018; Staender et al., 2024; Strömbäck, 2023). Furthermore, in contrast to news media they do not seek to earn trust by providing verified and truthful information but rather by providing partisan-consistent and identity-confirming information (Benkler et al., 2018). Hence, their agendas and how they frame actors, issues, and events typically deviate from mainstream news media in ways that reflect their and their audiences' political leanings. This is particularly appealing for people with strong confirmation bias and directional motivated reasoning and may also trigger hostile media perceptions (see discussion about confirmation bias and motivated reasoning below). This holds true not least since criticism of and attacks on news media are quite frequent on (in

particular right wing) alternative media (Benkler et al., 2018; Cushion, 2024; Figenschou & Ihlebaek, 2021; Waisbord, 2022). Consequently, research suggests that there is a relationship between the use of right-wing alternative media, perceptions of leftist bias in mainstream news media, and lower trust in and use of mainstream news media (Aharoni et al., 2025; Andersen et al., 2023; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2025; Tsfati et al., 2025b).

Thus, the news media and trust in them are challenged by the fact that there are more, and more diverse, communication channels with more diverse depictions of reality than ever, by the rise of (hyper)partisan and political alternative media, and by an increasing visibility of criticism of and attacks on the news media. In such a situation and when people are uncertain about what is truth, the question of whom to trust becomes ever more acute. But importantly, the answer to that question may not be those who provide the most factual information.

Increasing impact of different epistemologies

One reason why there might be a conflict between truthful news reporting and the extent to which people trust the news media and the information provided by them is that journalists and parts of their (potential) audiences adhere to different epistemologies (Godler et al., 2020; Núñez-Mussa et al., 2025; Parks, 2022). Needless to say, truth is a complex and multifaceted concept, and even if one believes that there are objective truths, truth can be understood in different senses (Godler et al., 2020; Parks, 2022). Truth claims are also always socially and discursively constructed (Ekström & Westlund, 2019; Parks, 2022). Most people – including journalists – do, however, not reflect much upon how they understand truth and why and on what grounds they perceive some but not other things as true. Instead, most people hold tacit and subconscious conceptualizations of truth.

In terms of journalism, important to note is that it does not pursue truth in a philosophical sense. While it strives to provide truthful information, it operates under conditions of high uncertainty and time pressure and under constraints set by economic, technological, cultural, and political factors and audience expectations (Örnebring & Karlsson, 2022; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Tuchman, 1980). These constraints influence all aspects of journalism. At the end of the day, news is not and can never function as any unaltered mirrors of reality. Instead, news should be understood as social re-constructions of reality shaped by numerous factors aside from their truth value and the normative expectation that they should provide people with the information they need as citizens.

Rather than pursuing truth in a philosophical sense, journalism seeks a more practical form of truth, which boils down to editorial processes of verification (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Typically, these are oriented toward verifying

whether *discrete empirical facts* are accurate rather than assessing whether something is true in a larger sense (although fact-checking journalism and interpretative forms of journalism go beyond that, e.g., Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012; Suomalainen et al., 2025). As noted by Parks (2022, p. 181), "Truth, then, is generally measured in increments of fact, as a binary test applied to each assertion: this statement is (verifiably) true, this statement is (verifiably) false."

Truth in journalism hence boils down to a process of sorting through factual developments and statements to check whether they are *accurate* and *correspond* to some external evidence. In that sense, journalistic epistemology is influenced by realism and the *correspondence theory of truth* (Dawson & Gregory, 2009), and conceive of truth in the sense of observable and verifiable facts – what Parks (2022) labels *empirical truth.* This holds true, even though journalism too often settles for verifying whether it is true that X has said Y without verifying whether Y is truthful.

Empirical truth is, however, but one sense of truth. Other senses identified by Parks (2022) are *logical truth*, *affective truth*, *ideological truth*, *authoritarian truth*, and *narrative truth.* Leaving logical truth aside (since it is rare in news reporting), the essence of affective truths is that they are based on one's instincts, emotions, gut feelings, and perceptions instead of observable and verifiable facts or systematic evidence (Parks, 2022, p. 184). In other words, what *feels* true is what is conceived of as true and what matters (Brashier & Marsh, 2020). To take an example, if someone believes crime is increasing, that person holds that to be true, regardless of what crime statistics might show.

Ideological truth is also quite insensitive to empirical facts, but less emotional. In short, its essence is that truth is assessed by whether or to what extent it aligns with deeply held beliefs and value judgments. One example might be that all humans are created equal, while another is that capitalism is the only realistic economic system. *Authoritarian truths* can be considered as a form of ideological truth and be defined as "empirical falsehoods whose affirmation is a signal of loyalty" (Parks, 2022, p. 187). One example is when supporters believe in Trump's "big lie" that the 2020 election was stolen (Arceneaux & Truex, 2023). According to Parks (2022), the difference between ideological and authoritarian truths is that the former are typically held in earnest, while believing authoritarian truths is a matter of affirming loyalty and a particular political and social identity: "I belong to this team, therefore I will take this to hold true."

Narrative truths, at last, differ from the other senses of truth in that they are not concerned with discrete facts, statements, or states. They are rather shaped by a selection and synthesis of truth claims and taken-for-granted truths that are recurringly repeated and invoked, whether those narrative truths are formed deliberately through strategic narrative persuasion (Cho et al., 2014; Hamby et al., 2018) or subconsciously adopted and then repeated as self-evident truths (Parks, 2022).

Whether all these "senses of truth" deserve to be called "truths" can certainly be questioned,[5] but in this context that is beside the point. The important point is that different people, and different groups of people, have different epistemological understandings and hence define truth – however tacitly and subconsciously – differently. This, in turn, implies that journalism that builds on one particular epistemology will not – however truthful the news reporting is according to the standards set by that epistemology – convince those subscribing to other epistemologies and understandings of truth. As noted by Parks (2022, p. 182):

> When journalists interpret and portray truth claims solely through the lens of verifiable, Enlightenment-rooted truth without recognizing and pointing out other senses of the concept, they talk and listen right past their intended publics – misunderstanding both the nature of their sources' assertions and the implications of their representations.

The implication is that there might be a conflict between truthful news reporting and news media trust whenever people subscribe to other epistemologies than journalism which typically subscribe to empirical truths. For example, reporting on climate change based on the overwhelming evidence that there is a process of global warming caused by human activities, however truthful that reporting is, will not be seen as truthful for those who believe otherwise, whether it depends on them subscribing to affective, ideological, authoritarian, or narrative truths. It will rather be perceived as biased.

A key point in this context is that in former low-choice media environments, when news media were the most important source of information for virtually everybody, the notion of empirical truth likely had much greater impact across the board since information that would fuel other senses of truth was much scarcer. In other words, while there have always been different senses of truth, and conflicts between them, theory suggests that the impact of other senses than empirical truth has become greater in contemporary high-choice information environments.

Increasing importance of psychological biases

A related reason why there might be a conflict between truthful news reporting and news media trust is that people's truth assessments are influenced by psychological biases such as directional motivated reasoning and confirmation bias. As shown by an extensive body of research, human beings are never neutral when they expose themselves to, pay attention to, process, and retrieve information. Instead, we are – subconsciously – influenced by different psychological biases (Brashier & Marsh, 2020; Kunda, 1990; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Nickerson, 1998; Rekker, 2021).

As highlighted by the theories of confirmation bias and motivated reasoning, how people process information and assess the truth depends on their underlying – subconscious – motivations (Kunda, 1990; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Nickerson, 1998). In short, the theory on motivated reasoning posits that in any given situation, people might be largely driven by the motivation to be accurate (*accuracy reasoning*) or to arrive at a particular conclusion (*directional reasoning*). When people are motivated to be accurate, they spend more cognitive effort processing information and are more careful when deciding what information to pay attention to and believe in. In terms of senses of truth, they rely on *empirical truth.* In contrast, when people are motivated by directional goals, the outcome or conclusion is what matters most. Toward that end, people "attempt to be rational and to construct a justification for their desired conclusion" (Kunda, 1990, p. 482). This influences what information they retrieve from memory, how they evaluate the relevance and truth value of different truth claims, and how they justify their beliefs. In this process, the accuracy of information matters less than whether the information supports their already-held beliefs, although people typically do not realize it. Instead, they maintain an "illusion of objectivity" (Kunda, 1990).

Directional motivated reasoning hence encompasses *confirmation bias*, the tendency to seek and interpret information in ways that are biased toward confirming people's pre-existing beliefs (Nickerson, 1998). The more central a certain belief is for an individual's identity and group belonging, the more important it becomes to defend that belief, and the more likely it is that an individual's acquisition and evaluation of information is shaped by directional motivated reasoning and confirmation bias (Brashier & Marsh, 2020; Kahan, 2016; Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998; Young, 2023).

Motivated reasoning and confirmation bias is hence directly related to news media trust. As noted by Freiling et al. (2021, p. 84),

> When searching for accuracy, trust in the source may be directed towards whether the source will provide accurate information. But if the goal is directional […] trust might not be directed toward the source providing the accurate information, but instead toward the source providing information in line with that goal.

Important to note, though, is that neither motivated reasoning nor confirmation bias is anything new. What has changed is not people and their psychological biases. What has changed is the information environment and the *opportunity structures* for acting on these (and other) psychological biases (Prior, 2007; Skovsgaard et al., 2016; Van Aelst et al., 2017; Young, 2023). In low-choice media environments, there are limited opportunities to engage in selective exposure and selective avoidance, regardless of how strong confirmation bias and the tendency to motivated reasoning are. In high-choice information environments, people cannot avoid being more selective, which means

greater impact of their psychological biases, motivations, and abilities in matters related to how they expose themselves to, pay attention to, process, and ultimately trust, different types of information sources and information.

Motivated reasoning and confirmation bias may hence lead people to question and not trust information that goes against their preferred conclusions and already-held beliefs, irrespective of how truthful that information is according to the standard of empirical truth. The implication is that even if the news media provide information that has been verified and is truthful, it does not necessarily translate into people trusting that information. It may even lead them to perceive the news media as biased and hostile.

Another and related psychological bias is the tendency for people to base their truth assessments on whether information is *coherent* with what they already (think they) know (Brashier & Marsh, 2020; Dawson & Gregory, 2009; Reid, 1992). Importantly, this holds regardless of the veracity of the information. What matters is not the strength of evidence but the *fluence of processing* and whether new information *feels* true (Dechêne et al., 2010; Fazio et al., 2015). Brashier and Marsh (2020, p. 507) thus conclude that people "interpret subjective experiences like fluent processing and affect—feelings that correlate with truth but can also prove illusory—as evidence."

The fluency of processing information naturally depends on what information people have been exposed to. When most people attend to mainstream news media, whatever information they carry becomes familiarized, and the processing of such information becomes more fluent. When people are increasingly getting information from digital and social media, other pieces of information may feel truer. This holds in particular when people use alternative media or have social media feeds dominated by certain – false or misleading – politicized narratives (Arguedas et al., 2022; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Pariser, 2011). Important in that context is that repetition in itself makes people more likely to believe something is true, which in turn affects trust (Dechêne et al., 2010; Fazio et al., 2015; Koch & Zerback, 2013). This mattered less in low-choice information environments when false and misleading circulating in the public sphere was less prevalent, but it matters in contemporary information environments. Now, politically motivated actors have greater abilities than ever to disseminate and repeat false and misleading information and capitalize on people's psychological biases and vulnerabilities.

Conclusions

Taken together, the developments discussed above have contributed to a situation where not only political polarization and affective polarization but also factual belief polarization, dueling fact perceptions, and knowledge resistance are widespread (Iyengar et al., 2019; Marietta & Barker, 2019; Rekker, 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2022; Young, 2023). The political debate has become increasingly focused on attempts to (re-)define reality, sometimes with utter disregard

for empirical evidence (Kessler et al., 2020; Marietta & Barker, 2019; Young, 2023). Inconvenient truths – facts that run counter to what political actors or others want to believe or want others to believe – are denied or attacked, oftentimes by using false and misleading information. This can be done by domestic as well as foreign political actors to undermine political opponents as well as trust in the news media and other epistemic authorities, and to (re-)shape public perceptions (Benkler et al., 2018; Howard, 2020; Törnberg & Chueri, 2025).

This makes news media and journalism increasingly exposed. Their core function is to provide verified and truthful information about politics and society, but in contemporary political information environments, such information is more likely to be perceived as biased by political actors and groups that (subconsciously) subscribe to other senses of truth than empirical truth, that are guided by directional reasoning and confirmation bias rather than accuracy reasoning, and that earnestly or for strategic reasons are pushing other accounts of reality. In short, when reality and factual matters become too politicized, it is hard for news media that strive to provide verified and truthful information to be perceived as neutral. Regardless of how the news media cover issues, one side or the other – or both – might perceive them as biased. This holds in particular whenever one political side is engaging more in believing or pushing alternative accounts of reality, not grounded in empirical truths. The end result might be declining news media trust, despite ever so truthful news reporting.

In such situations, the news media might be tempted to opt for balance by letting different sides speak on more or less equal terms. That might make sense when the disputes are about opinions, but when disputes concern factual matters, such an approach would only lead to false balance "whereby a viewpoint conflict is improperly represented as though the opposing sides enjoyed comparable epistemic standing" (Terzian, 2025, p. 2). That in turn would lead to less truthful and hence less informative news. To take a classic example: letting a climate denialist speak on the same terms as climate scholars would only obfuscate the truth, and the same holds in many other situations when factual matters are disputed. In a similar vein, leaving it to political opponents to dispute politicians that spread false and misleading would also mean that journalism abdicate from their responsibility to provide truthful news, aside from the fact that it would only further the politicization of factual matters. Hence, that is also not a solution. Needless to say, opting for what boils down to more or less false balance might also lead to less news media trust.

To the extent that this analysis holds true, one conclusion is that declining news media trust among some groups must not necessarily be perceived as a problem. In the end, it should depend on why news media trust is falling. A second conclusion is that the question of how the news media should handle the conflict between truthful news reporting and news media trust deserves much more attention than hitherto. Only then can potential solutions hopefully be found.

Notes

1 Many thanks to Nayla Fawzi, Yariv Tsfati, and Michael Karlsson for comments on a previous draft.
2 https://www.nytimes.com/editorial-standards/ethical-journalism.html
3 https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/reports/policies/codeofconduct#trust
4 https://www.sjf.se/yrkesfragor/yrkesetik/spelregler-press-radio-och-tv/publicitetsregler
5 For my part, the answer is no. In my view, for something to be labelled truth it needs to correspond to evidence, which can come in different forms but always builds on empirical facts.

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11

BUILDING MEDIA TRUST FROM AN EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVE

Jacob L. Nelson

Trust in news is necessary for journalists, news organizations, and the institution of journalism as a whole. Journalists require public trust to successfully carry out their goal of informing the public (Schudson, 2022). News organizations typically (though not always) require public trust to successfully compete for audience attention and consequently earn enough revenue to sustain themselves (Nelson & Kim, 2021). And journalism as an institution requires public trust if it hopes to have any chance of overcoming the intensifying attacks it faces from antimedia populist political figures (Panievsky, 2021). We are currently in a moment when journalists and news organizations in many countries are increasingly confronted more by the *absence* of public trust, leaving news media outlets more vulnerable to politically motivated attacks, less competitive in the race for audience attention and revenues from audiences, and less attractive for advertisers.

The challenge is hence clear: Journalists and news organizations need to find ways to improve their standing among the people they seek to serve. Unfortunately, as journalists, journalism stakeholders, and journalism studies scholars are becoming ever more aware, the path to meeting this challenge is much less apparent than the challenge itself. While attempts to build trust are nothing new for the news industry (e.g., the public journalism efforts in the 1990s as described in Glasser, 1999), they have become a larger, more explicit focus for the news media as both a collective and as different outlets throughout the past decade (Fawzi et al., 2021). Yet even as journalists and news organizations make more concerted efforts to improve public trust in their work, the impact of these efforts appears mixed at best. Trust in news continues to be fragile, despite the myriad ways in which journalists have been experimenting to maintain or improve their audience's trust and engagement.

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In light of these circumstances, this chapter seeks to answer the question: How are journalists and news organizations trying to win the battle for public trust? To do so, this chapter begins by offering an overview of the credibility crisis facing journalism. It then explores the steps different news media have taken at all stages of the journalistic production process to increase audience trust and engagement, and how these manifest in published news content. This chapter focuses specifically on news organizations' efforts to increase their transparency (Curry & Stroud, 2021) and to pursue more "engaged" forms of journalism that include listening sessions in addition to other explicit efforts to incorporate audience participation in news production (Robinson, 2023). The chapter then summarizes what empirical research shows with respect to how these different trust-building strategies influence audience trust, engagement, and perceptions of news quality. It concludes with an overview of what strategies work and do not work, and areas where more research is needed.

Journalism's trust problem

Journalism's trust problem began decades ago and, in many, albeit not all, countries across the globe, continues to grow worse (see also Chapter 4 in this volume). Though rates vary from one country to the next, the overarching trend leans toward diminishing trust in journalism. For example, public trust in journalism within the US was at its highest in the mid-1970s, when 72% of Americans reported a great deal or a fair amount of confidence in mass media. In 2025, trust in journalism dipped to just 28% – the lowest on record (Brenan, 2025). The Digital News Report, a report published annually by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism that examines news habits and attitudes across the globe, observed that only 40% of people described trusting "most news most of the time" (Newman et al., 2025). To be sure, not all countries are currently experiencing drops in news trust – Finland, for example, boasts trust levels at nearly 70%. Yet, as the Digital News Report notes, other European countries like the UK and the Netherlands have experienced decreases in news trust in recent years (Newman et al., 2025).

This lack of trust in news compounds the other dire circumstances facing news organizations as they struggle to survive in a crowded and increasingly inhospitable media environment. As journalism studies scholars have shown, people's decision to support news with their attention and money is motivated in part by their sense that the news is accurate and credible (Chen & Thorson, 2024; Goyanes et al., 2023). Low or declining trust in news therefore not only negatively impacts journalists' abilities to inform the public but also makes it harder for their news organizations to maintain themselves financially (Nelson & Kim, 2021). These circumstances may create a vicious cycle whereby news organizations that face both diminished trust in their content as well as diminished resources to produce that content end up being perceived as even less credible due to the worsening quality of their news.

A lack of public trust in journalism not only negatively impacts news organizations' abilities to produce the news – it also impedes their reach and hence the public's ability to understand current events with any meaningful degree of accuracy (Strömbäck et al., 2020). A growing body of journalism studies research has examined the consequences of diminishing public trust in journalism, finding that people's growing skepticism toward journalism compels them to engage in de facto "fact-checking" of the news they consume (Garusi & Juarez Miro, 2025; Nelson & Lewis, 2023). Because people feel such little trust in individual news sources, their news consumption comprises a two-part process that begins with interactions with the news itself and then is followed by efforts to seek out "other sources that would either confirm or refute what they had seen, heard, or read from the original news report" (Nelson & Lewis, 2023, p. 1533). Yet rather than help people find their way to the truth or bolster their faith in news sources that offer credible news, this "fact-checking" tends to instead leave people even *more* susceptible to misinformation, because these fact-checking processes are highly improvised and because the digital environment can easily be gamed by bad faith actors who may, for example, flood the internet with misleading information in such a way that this misinformation becomes the top results in search engines (Aslett et al., 2024).

Finally, in addition to harming journalism's ability to inform the public and the public's ability to stay informed, the fragile state of trust in journalism also exacerbates existing tensions within the relationship between journalists and the people they seek to serve. Journalists face increasing hostility from both political figures and their supporters, and the lack of trust in news held by many among the public means few are coming to journalists' defense (González-Macías & Reyna-García, 2019). Instead, members of the public are increasingly joining the fray and emulating these political figures' hostility toward journalists and news organizations (Deavours et al., 2022; Mesmer, 2022; Miller, 2024). The harassment that is an increasingly common part of working in journalism has left journalists less satisfied with their work, their managers, and their organizations, and has unsurprisingly led many to consider leaving the profession entirely (Bossio et al., 2024; Holton et al., 2021; Miller & Lewis, 2022; Nelson, 2023).

In sum, a lack of trust in news has made it harder for journalists to do their jobs, for news organizations to stay in business, for members of the public to stay informed, for journalists to defend themselves against politically motivated attacks, and for journalists and members of the public to maintain any semblance of a functional relationship. In other words, decreasing trust has made journalism harder, less rewarding, and less impactful. In light of these circumstances, it is no exaggeration to state, as the journalism studies scholar Katherine Fink has, that "the single biggest challenge facing journalism today is the public's lack of trust in it" (2019, p. 40). The question facing journalists, journalism studies scholars, and journalism stakeholders is: How should journalists improve their standing among the public?

The causes of not trusting journalism

Understanding why people do not trust journalism is a prerequisite for helping journalists improve the public's trust in their work. As journalism studies scholars turn their attention to trust in news, they have uncovered a number of recurring themes that often present themselves as public critiques of the news. The first is that people feel that journalists are biased, and that they either deliberately or accidentally allow those biases to affect the quality of their reporting (Ojala, 2021). One recent study, for example, observed that "both liberals and conservatives freely associate traditionally left-wing (e.g. CNN) and right-wing (e.g. Fox News) media sources with the term fake news" (van der Linden et al., 2020). People across the globe express a clear preference for impartial news (Mont'Alverne et al., 2023), yet perceive journalists as falling far short when it comes to providing unbiased news (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017; see also Chapter 10 in this volume).

One obvious reason for this is politically motivated attacks accusing the news media of being biased. As Strömbäck and Åkerlund point out, although accusations of ideological bias might be "rooted in sincere convictions" that journalists are failing to cover the news objectively and neutrally, "they may also be rooted in strategic considerations" (2025, p. 973). As they observe, by targeting the news media and their reporting, politicians and activists can deflect criticism, undermine trust in mainstream news media and their accounts of reality, create incentives for people to turn to and trust political alternative media instead of mainstream news media, and increase the likelihood that people believe in politically expedient misinformation (2025, p. 973).

Politicians' accusations that the news media is biased against them may contribute to those politicians' supporters' sense that the news media is similarly biased against them as well, a phenomenon referred to as "hostile media perception" which is triggered by attacks on the media (Lee & Kim, 2025). In short, politicians' public grievances against journalists may lead members of the public to not only trust those politicians more than they trust journalists but also feel like they, too, are being similarly mistreated and misrepresented by the news media.

There is another cause of diminishing trust in news that journalism studies scholars are beginning to examine: concerns among the public that journalists are biased not by their political interests but by their economic interests (Obermaier et al., 2021; Steindl et al., 2023). In a digital media environment, journalists, politicians, and influencers (not to mention friends and family members) are battling for our attention. People are aware of these desperate circumstances facing media producers generally and news media producers specifically, and their awareness appears to be playing a decisive role in their skepticism toward journalism. One recent study observed that people feel news organizations report the news inaccurately because they want to generate

larger audiences – and therefore larger profits (Nelson et al., 2024). Another study concluded that members of the public perceive journalists' use of audience data as "commercially driven" (Ovaska, 2025, p. 1).

In either case, the underlying assumption at play is that members of the public perceive journalists as being overly influenced by factors that are in tension with their goal of providing the public with accurate, credible information. This assumption has proven powerful when it comes to motivating the interventions journalists pursue to improve public trust. Journalists' efforts to make the public see them as more trustworthy tend to hinge on the notion that if journalists can persuade members of the public that they are acting in good faith to offer the public accurate news, regardless of their individual political affiliations or of their organizations' financial demands, they are more likely to earn public trust. These efforts at persuasion tend to take two forms – transparency and engagement – which I turn to next.

An emphasis on transparency to improve public trust

The discourse surrounding journalism's lagging public trust has frequently been accompanied by a chorus of advocacy on behalf of one possible solution: more transparency when it comes to how journalists do their jobs (Karlsson, 2021). As the journalism studies scholar Michael Koliska writes, "Many journalism scholars and practitioners believe that transparency, i.e., providing more information to the public about the inner workings of journalism, will make journalism more accountable, credible and trustworthy" (2022, p. 1488). Koliska notes that many newsrooms have increased their transparency efforts in recent years as a reaction against accusations of "fake news" that have shaken people's faith in journalism as an institution. While other professional norms remain at the forefront of how journalists do their jobs – particularly the emphasis on reporting accurate information in an ideologically neutral way – transparency has quickly become a common method by which news organizations attempt to "legitimize journalistic practice" (Koliska, 2022, p. 1489).

Transparency in news production typically involves news organizations sharing with the public the processes through which they (1) produce the news (e.g., by describing how they choose which stories to cover), (2) navigate challenging reporting situations (e.g., by describing their approaches to anonymous sources), (3) engage with their audiences (e.g., by making public their social media policies), and (4) address errors in their reporting (e.g., by offering a guide to audiences with a step-by-step description of how errors are handled internally) (Deuze, 2005; Koliska, 2022; Ward, 2014). Each of these approaches to transparency stems from the same underlying assumption: that allowing the public to see into the news production process will make news organizations more accountable *to* the public – and therefore more trusted *by* the public.

As news organizations grow more concerned about public skepticism toward their work, it is no surprise to see these organizations increasing their attempts to be more transparent about how that work is produced. Indeed, news organizations like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* now routinely publish articles that attempt to explain specific pieces of reporting (e.g., a *Washington Post* explanation for a piece of AI-generated climate change reporting (Blakemore et al., 2024)) as well as more general newsroom policies and guidelines (e.g., a resource on the *Times* website that walks audiences through everything from their use of anonymous sources to the circumstances under which they publish obscenities (Timmons, 2022)). More recently, these same news organizations have experimented not only with transparency surrounding their techniques but also with transparency surrounding the journalists employing them. A recently published analysis of the *New York Times*' "enhanced bios" examined "how a leading global newsroom signals expertise as it navigates questions of transparency in one of the most politically polarized places in the world" (Toff et al., 2025, p. 1). If the *New York Times*, one of the world's leading news organizations, feels compelled to engage in this exercise in order to, as the *Times* put it in their press release about the initiative, deepen their "audience's trust in our mission and in the credibility of our journalism" (Deepening Our Commitment to Standards, 2021), it seems safe to say that transparency as a mechanism for improving trust has become a mainstream means by which journalists aspire to improve their standing among the public.

A more engaged approach to the public

In addition to embracing more transparency, many within journalism have also looked for ways to more meaningfully "engage" with the public. Originally, journalists pursued "audience engagement," loosely defined as efforts by journalists to better understand and interact with the people they hope to reach (Broersma, 2019; Gajardo & Costera Meijer, 2023; Steensen et al., 2020), to increase revenue to their news organizations by increasing audience attention to their reporting. The underlying assumption behind the pursuit of audience engagement, which tended to take the form of journalists posting content to and interacting with audiences on social media platforms, was that the more journalists worked to make the public aware of their reporting, the more likely their work would cut through the clutter of an increasingly saturated media environment (Batsell, 2015; Jarvis, 2015). This approach to audience engagement was *reception-oriented*, meaning its focus was primarily on journalists' efforts to help them better understand audience's reception of news (Nelson, 2021). Journalists – and their managers – would then use these data to understand how best to get audiences to consume and, ideally, financially support their work.

Now, however, journalists are increasingly as concerned with improving public trust in their reporting as they are with getting the public to pay for that reporting (Uth, 2022). After all, it is hard to imagine people feeling compelled to pay for news they do not feel can be trusted (Nechushtai, 2020). These circumstances have led many journalists to pursue a different form of audience engagement – one that focuses less on increasing journalism's reach and more on improving its perceived trustworthiness. This approach to audience engagement, referred to as *production-oriented* (Nelson, 2021), looks very different from reception-oriented approaches. Instead of focusing on monetizing audience attention by increasing the reach of news, its focus is on creating opportunities for journalists to work alongside the public in the very production of news (Uth et al., 2023).

To be clear, this more collaborative approach to the news audience is not a new phenomenon as much as it is a resurgence of an older one – namely, the public journalism movement of the 1990s (Glasser, 1999). Similar to the contemporary engaged journalism movement, public journalism stemmed from the belief ordinary citizens wanted to play a more active role in news production, and had real value to contribute to that process. Writing about the goals of public journalism, Glasser (1999) sounded eerily similar to today's engaged journalism advocates, suggesting that journalism "must heed what ordinary citizens are saying, invite them back into the political dialogue we cover and reflect that in our newspapers and broadcasts" (p. xiv). And like the public journalism advocates of the 1990s, today's engaged journalism advocates assume people are wary of the news in large part because they believe journalists to be elites whose experiences are out of step with the daily lives of the general public (Nelson, 2021).

When journalists pursue production-oriented approaches to audience engagement, they attempt to cultivate avenues by which people can take a more collaborative and active role in news production. Some newsrooms that embrace production-oriented audience engagement, for example, host "listening sessions" to bring together journalists and community members to discuss topics that are of value to the community or, alternatively, to give those community members the opportunity to voice their concerns surrounding the way that journalists are covering them (Robinson, 2023; Wenzel, 2020). Others pursue even less conventional approaches. For example, a number of studies have examined efforts by journalists in the US as well as in European countries to perform the news in front of live audiences as a means of involving people in journalism (Hänninen & Rautiainen-Keskustalo, 2025; Tenenboim & Stroud, 2020).

Though production-oriented audience engagement might at first blush seem like an alternative to transparency, it can best be understood as simply a more extreme form of it. On the one hand, while transparency efforts tend to privilege openness, engagement efforts privilege interactivity. Yet, on the other

hand, both transparency and engagement efforts can be interpreted as distinct means to the same end – giving members of the public a better understanding of (and, hopefully, appreciation for) how journalists do their work. In other words, transparency and engagement are less symptomatic of distinct interpretations of the root causes of a lack of journalistic trust than they are of distinct approaches to a shared assumption surrounding people's skepticism toward the news. Advocates of production-oriented audience engagement and journalistic transparency believe that people are losing trust in news because they think journalists are too deceitful or incompetent to present the news accurately, and that the solution is simply to show the public that journalists take their obligation to the public seriously.

Making sense of the (limited) impact of these efforts

The increase in transparency and engagement efforts by newsrooms might suggest a consensus that more transparency and engagement about news production indeed leads to more trust in news. After all, considering how under-resourced many news organizations find themselves at this current moment, why would newsroom managers invest in interventions they weren't absolutely certain would yield results? Unfortunately, the relationship between what journalists do and how audiences respond is much more complicated than journalists would like it to be. Determining the impact of engagement and transparency efforts is an onerous task, one that most news organizations lack the resources to undertake. As a result, the evidence surrounding the efficacy of engagement and transparency when it comes to journalistic trust is far from conclusive in either regard.

Studies have been remarkably consistent in their findings that increased transparency does little to improve trust in journalism. In his review of the transparency in journalism literature, Koliska (2022) observes that many studies have found that newsrooms' transparency efforts have no effect on perceptions of journalistic credibility (Henke et al., 2023; Karlsson & Clerwall, 2018; Peacock et al., 2022; Roberts, 2007; Tandoc & Thomas, 2017). Others have found modest effects (Curry & Stroud, 2021; Karlsson, 2021; Masullo et al., 2022). These disheartening results have led to some resignation that transparency might not be the solution to journalism's credibility crisis that many had hoped. There are several possible explanations for why more journalistic transparency is not yielding more trust in journalism.

One that is often offered is that audiences are simply not coming across news organizations' efforts to be more transparent with their work. Considering people increasingly get news via social media platforms rather than by navigating directly to a news organization's website or mobile app (Andı, 2021), it is possible – perhaps even likely – that people simply do not spend enough time with news organizations' content to ever stumble upon their explanations for

how that content was assembled. Another explanation is that news audiences already unsure about whether or not to trust news organizations might not be inclined to believe those organizations' efforts at transparency – something Prochazka and Obermaier (2022) observed recently in their study of how people's media cynicism impacted their reactions to journalists' admitting mistakes. If people believe that someone is inherently dishonest, they are perhaps more likely to assume anything that person says is not to be trusted – including arguments for why they are, indeed, trustworthy. As Koliska concludes, "Transparency features in journalism (at least in their current form) may not be as impactful as the professional and ethical journalistic literature suggested" (Koliska, 2022, pp. 1502–1503).

Still another explanation for transparency in journalism's lackluster record when it comes to improving journalism's credibility among the public is that the efforts at transparency themselves might be insincerely carried out in the first place. As Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau argue in their analysis of *The New York Times'* use of transparency in its since-discredited podcast "Caliphate," "transparency can be deceiving, since journalists decide what elements of their process they reveal or conceal" (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2022, p. 2314). In other words, journalists who are choosing to exercise transparency are likely to do so strategically, in a way that will bolster trust in their work by showing the public how *good* that work is and, consequently, how *trustworthy*. Within this lens, transparency about news production can be perceived less as an authentic attempt to show audiences what goes into the production of quality journalism than as simply another form of marketing or advertising.

There is, however, one additional reason why transparency in its current form has failed to move the needle when it comes to trust in journalism: These efforts at transparency are simply focused on the wrong aspect of news production. Most efforts at transparency focus on the mechanisms by which news gets produced, such as journalists' sourcing and design decisions. Yet this approach does little to address what is emerging as a primary source of decreasing trust in news: People are skeptical of news not necessarily because they do not know how news production works, but because they believe journalists prioritize profits above truth or public service (Nelson et al., 2024).

The empirical evidence surrounding the efficacy of audience engagement is similarly thin. However, unlike transparency efforts in journalism, this lack of evidence is less a reflection of empirical research that has revealed engaged journalism to be unsuccessful when it comes to trust building than it reflects the *lack* of exactly that sort of research. To be sure, there is a sizeable amount of research focused on understanding engaged journalism; however, this research overwhelmingly focuses on the *pursuit* of engaged journalism rather than its impact (Lawrence et al., 2018; Schmidt et al., 2022; Schmidt & Lawrence, 2020). Some, for example, have examined how engaged journalism

differs from more traditional approaches to news production (Brannock Cox & Poepsel, 2020; Crispim da Fontoura, 2021; Gerson et al., 2017). When researchers have sought to examine the impact of engaged journalism on news audiences, this work has tended to focus on the impact of that engagement on news organizations' bottom lines rather than on their audiences' trust in their reporting (Ferrucci, 2024; Stroud & Van Duyn, 2023).

In short, we know from existing research that journalists invested in engaged journalism see this approach to news production as inextricably linked to solving journalism's trust problem (Zahay et al., 2021). What remains unknown is the extent to which this approach to news production actually does help make journalism more trustworthy. There is an intuitive appeal to engaged journalism as a means to improving trust in news – after all, if people feel more included in news production, presumably they will perceive journalists less as "out of touch" people disconnected from their communities and more as peers who care deeply about the people they are attempting to serve with their reporting. Yet, there is an alternative hypothesis – the only people interested in taking advantage of engaged journalism opportunities might be those who are already primed to see journalism as trustworthy (or at least potentially trustworthy). While engaged journalism efforts seem motivated to reach those who have already decided journalism as an institution is no longer credible, it may ironically be the case that this precise group of people is too deeply invested in their cynicism to give these engagement efforts a chance.

Conclusion

Journalists have grown deeply concerned about the fragility of public trust in in news media. However, as this chapter has shown, even as journalists and journalism studies scholars become more focused on improving public trust in the news, they remain uncertain when it comes to the most effective path forward. Though many interventions exist for mitigating public skepticism toward journalism, we are far from any sort of industry or scholarly consensus surrounding which – if any – will ultimately succeed. Those who believe people are decreasing their trust in the news because they feel journalists are too biased in their reporting have advocated for a doubling down on objectivity when it comes to news reporting (Baron, 2023). Alternatively, those who believe that journalists' embrace of objectivity has alienated the public by making their work seem elitist and out of touch in a social media environment that privileges more "authentic" approaches to media presentation and audience engagement argue that objectivity as a journalistic value should be set aside (Callison & Young, 2019; Wang & Ni, 2025).

Others within journalism and journalism studies have argued that journalists must counter the attacks the profession faces from antimedia populist figures – namely that journalists care more about serving their own interests than

serving the public's – either by embracing more transparency (Moran, 2021; Steindl et al., 2023) or audience engagement (Robinson, 2023; Wenzel, 2020) in news production. From their perspectives, transparency and engagement are necessary for journalists to show the public that (1) they attempt to do their work with integrity and (2) they value the public's input throughout the news production process (Robinson, 2023; Robinson & Johnson, 2024). In short, there is a tremendous range of approaches that journalism studies scholars and journalists themselves are exploring as they attempt to mitigate the credibility crisis the profession faces. As this chapter has attempted to highlight, these distinct approaches – and the dearth of empirical data corroborating the efficacy of any of them – are indicative of the complexity of the problem itself.

In doing so, this chapter has sought to synthesize research focused on journalists and news audiences to understand the extent to which journalists' assumptions about the root causes of people's decreasing trust in news align with how the public thinks about and engages with news. To be sure, there are similar mechanisms that journalists are also pursuing to improve trust in news media, such as constructive journalism (Mast et al., 2018), solutions journalism (Lough & McIntyre, 2021), and efforts to improve media literacy among the public (Tully et al., 2018). Like engaged and public journalism, constructive and solutions journalism are "public-oriented" (Mast et al., 2018, p. 497) approaches to news production that "act as an antidote to the negativity bias in traditional news" by encouraging "contextual, thematic reporting with an aim to increase trust and empower audiences" (Lough & McIntyre, 2021, p. 1070). And like those behind journalistic transparency efforts, media literacy advocates believe that teaching people to consume news critically produces skeptical consumers who can judge journalistic quality without sliding into a blanket cynicism toward all news sources (Tully et al., 2018).

Going forward, in addition to continuing to study the efficacy of these and other ongoing efforts to restore trust in news, journalism studies scholars should also consider looking beyond journalism to understand how the credibility crisis facing this profession compares with similar crises unfolding across other institutions. Healthcare, for example, faces a similar public trust challenge with similar ramifications for its professionals (Moon et al., 2023). Journalists cannot serve their function as purveyors of information to the public if members of the public do not cooperate as both sources and consumers of that information. Similarly, doctors cannot serve their function as advocates for public health if members of the public are unwilling to share their concerns with them or follow their guidance.

Consequently, research that focuses solely on journalism, rather than examining decreasing trust unfolding across institutions, runs the risk of overlooking the ways in which journalism's crisis mirrors a larger phenomenon unfolding when it comes to people's relationship with institutions writ large. In doing so, it also risks perpetuating a false sense of agency among those working within

journalism surrounding their abilities to improve their standing among the public. We know from existing research that trust in news is not just about how journalists present the news but also about how political figures discuss the news, as well as how people *feel* about political institutions more generally. For example, Hanitzsch et al. observed that "trust in the news media is strongly linked to the way publics look at political institutions" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 3; see also Chapter 6 in this volume). Broadening the lens through which we study people's trust in news is necessary to better understand the challenges journalists face when it comes to building trust.

Doing so will help us not only more clearly understand the difficult path ahead for journalism but also more accurately determine how journalists can successfully navigate this path, and what resources they will need to do so.

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12

DELEGITIMIZING THE MEDIA TO UNDERMINE PUBLIC MEDIA TRUST

Jana Laura Egelhofer and Sophie Lecheler

The ability of journalism to hold political power accountable is widely recognized as a core element of pluralist democracy (e.g., Strömbäck, 2005). At the same time, media criticism plays a crucial role in democratic discourse by ensuring that journalism fulfills this responsibility and by holding the media accountable when professional standards are violated (e.g., Carey, 1974; Wyatt, 2007). Historically, this has included not only normative debates about journalism's public role but also structural critiques of media power (e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 1988). However, the way media criticism is expressed by many political actors – including politicians, parties, alternative media, influencers, and citizens – is often generalized, unfounded, and disproportionately uncivil. While harsh media attacks are not new, they have arguably become more prevalent due to two key developments. First, the rise of (right-wing) populist political actors who frequently rely on anti-media rhetoric as part of their political strategy (e.g., Fawzi, 2020). Second, the growth of social media platforms, which allow political actors to bypass traditional media channels and directly target news organizations, reaching large audiences with anti-press messages often amplified by alternative (partisan) media (e.g., Carlson, 2016; Carlson et al., 2021). Of course, political actors – like all citizens – have every right to criticize the news media. However, growing evidence suggests that many now use media criticism as a strategic tool to undermine the *legitimacy* of journalism as the "fourth estate" in democracies (e.g., Egelhofer et al., 2021; Ekman & Widholm, 2023; Liminga & Strömbäck, 2023). Such media criticism is considered a key authoritarian strategy to weaken democracy, which is particularly concerning given ongoing democratic backsliding in many countries (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

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This chapter focuses on this form of *delegitimizing media criticism*. It first explores the concept of media criticism and its democratic function, before defining delegitimizing media criticism. The chapter also discusses the central themes and goals associated with delegitimizing media criticism, particularly in its use as an illegitimate political strategy. It then reviews empirical research on the prevalence of such criticism among different political actors and examines its impact on citizens' trust in the media. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and considerations for how journalists can respond when media criticism is used to delegitimize journalism.

Democratic media criticism

Media criticism can be understood as a continuous discussion concerning the role and performance of journalism (Wyatt, 2007, 2018). It is part of meta-journalistic discourse, comprising public statements regarding journalism's definition, boundaries, and legitimacy (Carlson, 2016; Carlson et al., 2021; Cheruiyot, 2018). Media criticism may address concrete elements, such as news content or journalistic practices, or broader issues, including the media's influence and societal role (Wyatt, 2018).

It can be distinguished by its source as internal or external. Internal criticism originates within the media itself (e.g., journalists), whereas external criticism is voiced by actors outside the journalistic field (e.g., political actors, citizens) (Carlson, 2009; Wyatt, 2018). The relevance of external criticism has increased notably with social media, which has expanded opportunities for public engagement in critical discourse about journalism (Carlson, 2016; Wyatt, 2018).

Media criticism plays an essential role in democracy by holding journalism accountable and assessing how effectively it fulfills its democratic responsibilities (Carey, 1974; Cheruiyot, 2018, 2019; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). It has thus also been labeled the "conscience of journalism" and "the Fifth Estate" (Wyatt, 2018, p. 1). By highlighting breaches of journalistic standards and framing these as deviations from normative ideals, media criticism ultimately strengthens journalism's legitimacy (Carlson, 2009).

There are numerous valid reasons to criticize the media. Journalists and media professionals are human: they make mistakes, are subject to cognitive biases, and may sometimes pursue their own agendas and lie (e.g., McNair, 2017). Furthermore, news is a manufactured product, shaped by individual decisions of journalists, media, and market logics as well as broader media and political systems – and is therefore inherently imperfect. Trends such as tabloidization, emotionalization, and commercialization can justifiably be criticized (e.g., Fawzi, 2020). On an individual level, journalists will inevitably make errors in their reporting (see Maier, 2005) and identifying such factual inaccuracies through criticism is crucial for journalism to remain a reliable source of information.

Furthermore, criticism may reasonably address the under- or overrepresentation of specific actors, groups, issues, or ideas in news coverage (e.g., Fawzi, 2020).

Consequently, criticism is "a necessary dialogue concerning how journalism can improve" (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019, p. 901). Media criticism that is considered "good" or democratic seeks to assess journalistic performance and improve journalism by offering constructive input. For such criticism to be effective, journalists must be receptive to engaging with it (Cheruiyot, 2019; Wyatt, 2007, 2018).

In defining democratic or legitimizing media criticism, scholars draw on deliberative democracy, arguing that ideal criticism should be a) grounded in clear reasoning and b) conveyed in a civil tone (Cheruiyot, 2019; Egelhofer, 2025; Egelhofer et al., 2021). Critics should explain why a particular journalistic practice or piece is being challenged (Cheruiyot, 2018; Egelhofer et al., 2021; Fawzi, 2020). Only then can journalists adequately understand and respond to criticism (Cheruiyot, 2018). Civility refers to the mutual acknowledgment and respect among participants, ensuring that differing opinions are heard rather than suppressed (e.g., Prochazka et al., 2018). Understandings of legitimate media criticism and public discourse more broadly are, however, in flux. Earlier conceptualizations of incivility include emotionality (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), and initial theories on media criticism demand unemotional critique (Carey, 1974). However, emotionality is now increasingly considered a normal – even necessary – part of democratic discourse (Bickford, 2011). Similarly, while some definitions of incivility encompass impoliteness, such "rude" speech is increasingly recognized as a legitimate form of political communication (Rossini, 2022). Satirical formats, for example, may use ridicule or strong language while still offering well-reasoned, evidence-based criticism, aimed at holding power to account. What is considered problematic, therefore, is not emotionality or impoliteness per se, but communication that violates the norms of pluralistic democracy, for example, using discriminatory speech against individuals or social groups or undermining their participation in political discourse – referred to as intolerance (Rossini, 2022) or public-level incivility (Muddiman, 2017). When defining democratic media criticism, adherence to democratic norms is decisive. Expressions of criticism should therefore ensure that differing opinions are tolerated. Ultimately, democratic media criticism does not seek to silence or discredit, but to hold journalism accountable in ways that foster open dialogue, pluralism, and trust in the media as a democratic institution.

Delegitimizing media criticism

In contrast to the ideal type of media criticism discussed above, delegitimizing criticism often lacks reasoning and/or is characterized by norm-violating incivility (Cheruiyot, 2018; Egelhofer et al., 2021; Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

Journalists are, accordingly, less inclined to respond when criticism is expressed in an uncivil tone (Cheruiyot, 2018). When criticism fails to explain why a media product or journalistic practice is problematic, meaningful debate becomes impossible, and unsubstantiated, overly generalized allegations are better understood as attacks than as criticism (e.g., Carey, 1974; Fawzi, 2020).

Recurring themes in delegitimizing media criticism concern alleged violations of core journalistic standards, particularly truthfulness, objectivity, and quality. Actors often accuse journalists of untruthfulness, political bias, or poor-quality reporting, frequently implying *intentional* wrongdoing. Naturally, not all criticism referencing these standards is delegitimizing but these themes also often appear in media criticism classified as delegitimizing (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Ekman & Widholm, 2023; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Liminga & Strömbäck, 2023).

Allegations of untruthfulness can be divided into misinformation and disinformation accusations. While both suggest factual inaccuracy, disinformation accusations imply that journalists intentionally deceive the public (e.g., Egelhofer et al., 2022). They thus constitute a form of delegitimizing media criticism, involving accusations of deliberate lying – an inherently uncivil act to undermine respect for the targeted party (Kenski et al., 2018). The most prominent example of such an accusation is the use of the term "fake news" to discredit news media – a label popularized by Donald Trump and later adopted by politicians worldwide (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Egelhofer et al., 2020; Farhall et al., 2019; Neo, 2022). These allegations have gained traction as false information has become more widespread, heightening concern among citizens (Newman et al., 2025) and prompting scholars to diagnose a "disinformation order" (Bennett & Livingstone, 2018; see also Chapter 8 in this volume). However, claims of deliberate deception are not new. In Germany, *Lügenpresse* ("lying press") accusations have been used for over a century, initially to discredit foreign media coverage during the First World War, and have since become "a systemic and periodically recurring accusation (…), questioning the legitimacy of journalism as an institution and undermining its very existence" (Koliska & Assmann, 2021, p. 2730).

Similarly, *allegations of political bias* are a well-established rhetorical tool (Smith, 2010; Watts et al., 1999). Such accusations imply that coverage is systematically slanted against political actors or ideology and may suggest intentional misconduct (Gravesteijn et al., 2024) or incompetence (e.g., ignorance or laziness, Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019, p. 1228). These claims become delegitimizing when they imply purposeful wrongdoing, particularly when portraying journalists as conspiring with political actors or as part of a corrupt elite with malicious intent (Bos et al., 2023; Egelhofer, 2025; Fawzi, 2020; Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2025). One of the most extreme expressions is the claim that the media not only pursue a hidden agenda but also are, in fact, "the enemy of the people," as asserted by Donald Trump (Carlson et al., 2021).

Allegations of poor-quality reporting form a third recurring theme in delegitimizing media criticism. Here, critiques often portray coverage as sensationalistic or trivial (Buttgereit et al., 2024; Egelhofer et al., 2021; Liminga & Strömbäck, 2023). Unlike democratic criticism of quality, delegitimizing critique may generalize such claims without specifying concrete failures, insinuate intentional low-quality reporting without evidence, and may rely on norm-violating language. Importantly, these themes frequently co-occur in contemporary delegitimizing media criticism. For example, allegations of political bias are often coupled with disinformation accusations, presenting the media as deliberately spreading lies to serve a political agenda (Gravesteijn et al., 2024; Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2025).

As discussed in the next section, research has paid particular attention to politicians' use of such allegations.

Delegitimizing media criticism as a political strategy

Delegitimizing media criticism by political actors is increasingly discussed as a political strategy aimed not at evaluating media performance, but at influencing voters or undermining journalism as a democratic institution (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Egelhofer, 2025; Fawzi, 2020). While strategic communication by politicians is a standard and not inherently problematic practice, using media criticism to delegitimize journalism can be considered an *illegitimate strategy*. Indeed, verbally attacking the media is considered a key authoritarian strategy to weaken democracy (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). It allows leaders to undermine journalistic legitimacy without overtly violating press freedom and at relatively low cost compared to more repressive measures (Solis & Sagarzazu, 2020).

Delegitimizing media criticism can act as a voter-centered or actor-centered strategy. As a *voter-centered strategy*, it is primarily aimed at undermining trust in news media – either in specific outlets or in journalism in general (Egelhofer et al., 2022; Ekman & Widholm, 2023; Liminga & Strömbäck, 2023; Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2025). Politicians may use it when dissatisfied with how they are covered to reduce the impact of negative media portrayals – an "established political tactic" (Farhall et al., 2019, p. 4355), that can be electorally effective, as shown in the 2015 Israeli elections (Tsfati, 2017). Political actors may use delegitimizing media criticism *reactively*, by framing unfavorable coverage as misinformation (Buttgereit et al., 2024), or *proactively*, aiming to erode trust to "insulat[e] themselves from future unfavorable media coverage" (Smith, 2010, p. 333). Politicians may also intend to draw audiences to alternative news sources more aligned with their political agenda (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Liminga & Strömbäck, 2023).

As a *media-actor-centered strategy*, delegitimizing media criticism seeks to directly influence journalists and editors to shape issue agendas and tone of coverage (Carlson, 2009; Fawzi, 2020). For example, right-wing populist actors often accuse the news media of reporting too positively about

immigration and combine this with explicit demands to change coverage (Fawzi, 2020). Additionally, politicians may seek more favorable coverage. For instance, Israeli journalists have strategically skewed their coverage to the right, after being accused of left-wing bias (Panievsky, 2022). Another goal may be to intimidate media professionals and induce self-censorship (Egelhofer, 2025). In addition, leaders have used the notion that the media spreads "fake news" as grounds for restricting press freedom in countries such as Cambodia, Hungary, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam (International Press Institute, 2020; Neo, 2022; Reporters without Borders, 2017). At the very extreme end of possible media-actor-centered goals stands the infliction of physical violence. For example, Mazzaro (2021) shows that Venezuelan politicians' anti-media attacks are positively correlated with violence against journalists.

Considering these goals underscores the democratic threat posed by delegitimizing media criticism. When used to erode voters' trust in news coverage and influence their choice of media outlets, it undermines the media's ability to provide citizens with factual rather than politically convenient narratives. When employed to intimidate media actors or justify censorship and violence, it directly obstructs the media's role as the fourth estate in democratic society.

Prevalence of delegitimizing media criticism

To understand the prevalence of delegitimizing media criticism, it is essential to identify the actors who predominantly engage in it: *politicians, parties*, *alternative media*, *political influencers*, and *citizens*.

Most research criticism focuses on *politicians and parties*. In the Global North, delegitimizing media criticism predominantly originates from right-wing conservative and right-wing populist political actors (Egelhofer et al., 2021; Ekman & Widholm, 2023; Liminga & Strömbäck, 2023; Wright, 2021), whereas studies from Latin America highlight its prominence in the rhetoric of left-wing populists (Mazzaro, 2021; Solis & Sagarzazu, 2020; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). This trend is unsurprising, as harsh criticism of the media has been a staple of both conservative and populist political rhetoric.

Media criticism by conservatives – particularly in the US – has increased over the past decades. As political and affective polarization has intensified, Republicans have increasingly perceived the news media as biased toward liberal perspectives, viewing coverage of conservative politics as unfair (Ladd & Podkul, 2018; Watts et al., 1999). The Nixon administration, in particular, established public attacks on the media as a strategic response to alleged bias (Ladd & Podkul, 2018; Meeks, 2020). While there is evidence that – especially right-leaning – politicians genuinely believe that the media are biased against them (Soontjens et al., 2021), a perception consistent with the hostile media phenomenon (Vallone et al., 1985), empirical research does not support claims of a systematic liberal media bias (D'Alessio, 2012; Domke et al., 1999; Hassell et al., 2020; Riedl et al., 2026).

Populism is theoretically well-aligned with efforts to delegitimize the media (Egelhofer et al., 2021, 2022; Fawzi, 2019, 2020). It is commonly understood as a thin ideology or communication style that frames society as a conflict between a homogenous "good" people and one or more "evil" out-groups, with the elite typically representing the central adversary (Aalberg et al., 2016;Jagers & Walgrave, 2007 ; Mudde, 2004). Right-wing populism additionally incorporates nativist ideas, portraying both elites and non-natives as threats, while left-wing populism primarily targets economic elites (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004). Within this worldview, news media are seen as part of the elite, detached from and unrepresentative of the people and often accused of conspiring with political or economic elites to undermine popular sovereignty (Fawzi, 2019, 2020; Krämer, 2018; Mazzaro, 2021; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). Moreover, the populist notion of a unified and homogenous people stands in opposition to journalistic pluralism, leading populists to reject diverse perspectives in media coverage (Fawzi, 2020) and to regard opposing views as lies (Waisbord, 2018).

Populists frequently target public service media, the media more broadly, or specific quality news outlets in their criticism (Buttgereit et al., 2024; Egelhofer et al., 2021; Ekman & Widholm, 2023; Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2025; Wright, 2021). Public service media are viewed as the "ideal-typical media enemy," allegedly too close to the state (Fawzi, 2020, p. 45), a perception reflected in derogatory labels such as "state broadcasting" or "system press," used by German right-wing populists (Wolleschensky & Sehl, 2025, p. 4). Criticism typically focuses on funding through public fees – portrayed as unjust – and alleged political bias (Buttgereit et al., 2024; Gravesteijn et al., 2024).

While politicians' media criticism evidently is not new, the prevalence and intensity of delegitimizing criticism – particularly its openly uncivil nature – appears to have increased, especially in the Global North. Media attacks have long been documented in Latin America since the late 1990s, most notably among populist leaders in Argentina, Ecuador, and Venezuela (Mazzaro, 2021; Solis & Sagarzazu, 2020; Waisbord & Amado, 2017), but such attacks seemed to have gained momentum in the US, Australia, and Western Europe following the political success of Donald Trump and other right-wing populists. For example, Ekman and Widholm (2023) report that delegitimizing media criticism accounted for less than 5% of Swedish politicians' media-related tweets in 2018, whereas Liminga and Strömbäck (2023) find that by 2020–2021, 28.6% of such tweets contained delegitimizing criticism. Moreover, politicians were more likely to use a delegitimizing form than a constructive or neutral one. Wright (2021) similarly shows a marked increase in harsh media attacks in Australian politicians' tweets after Trump's 2016 election and argues that Trump's repeated media attacks may have normalized a more hostile tone toward journalism.

This growing prevalence of delegitimizing media criticism is partly explained by the rise of social media (Carlson, 2016; Egelhofer, 2025; Fawzi, 2020). These

platforms allow politicians to bypass journalistic gatekeeping and communicate directly with voters (Engesser et al., 2017), making it easier to disseminate uncivil and unfounded attacks that may not enter conventional news coverage (Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2025).[1] Consequently, most research on contemporary politicians' media criticism focuses on these platforms, particularly on Twitter and Facebook (e.g., Egelhofer et al., 2021; Liminga & Strömbäck, 2023).

Another significant contributor to the prevalence of delegitimizing media criticism is the so-called *(political) alternative media*. Often referred to as (hyper-)partisan media, these outlets define themselves by their "anti-systemness" (Strömbäck, 2023, p. 882), presenting themselves as a "corrective" to the mainstream media and politics (Heft et al., 2020). They are often aligned with (far) right-wing politics (Benkler et al., 2018) and primarily seek to reinforce political narratives rather than adhere to journalistic standards such as accuracy or impartiality (Strömbäck, 2023). Consistently, delegitimizing criticism of mainstream media is a recurring feature in alternative media coverage both in the Global North and South (e.g., Bhat & Chadha, 2020; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019, 2025).

Delegitimizing media criticism is also propagated by far-right *political influencers*, who are deeply interwoven with populist and anti-democratic movements and seek to mobilize support by discrediting both mainstream politics and news media (e.g., Rothut et al., 2024).

Finally, *citizens* – particularly followers of right-wing populist politicians and parties – also contribute to the spread and visibility of delegitimizing media criticism. Wolleschensky and Sehl (2025) show that public service media experience delegitimizing attacks primarily from audiences, especially from supporters of right-wing parties, rather than from the parties themselves. Social media plays a central role in enabling citizens' criticism. Research shows that these platforms are frequently used by followers of right-wing actors to attack journalists and news outlets, as documented in the Netherlands (Gravesteijn et al., 2024), Sweden (Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2025), South Korea (Shin et al., 2021), the Philippines (Macaraig & Hameleers, 2022), Turkey (Bulut & Yörük, 2017), and the US (Literat et al., 2023). Most of this research focuses on Twitter, but TikTok is also emerging as a space for citizens' media criticism (Literat et al., 2023). Waisbord (2020, p. 1031) describes attacks by citizens as "anti-press trolling" or "mob censorship," "aimed at disciplining and silencing journalism," often with encouragement from political leaders.

Effects on public media trust

As argued above, one core motivation behind delegitimizing media criticism is to undermine media trust. Before reviewing the available empirical evidence, we briefly outline why delegitimizing media criticism can impact media trust levels.

Media trust refers to citizens' broader support for journalism as democratic institution, as well as trust in specific outlets or journalists. It is crucial because journalism necessarily involves a certain degree of uncertainty. Audiences must rely on the integrity and professionalism of journalists and the truthfulness of their outputs (Fawzi & Krämer, 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati, 2010). Trust functions effectively when these expectations are met, based on a democratic ideal of journalism providing verified, relevant, and accurate information (Fawzi & Mothes, 2020). It follows that if these expectations are called into question, media trust may be affected. This can occur in several ways. As discussed above, the very content of delegitimizing media criticism targets the uncertainty inherent in the trust relationship that journalism requires from its audience. In other words, criticism often challenges the normative democratic functions of journalism, both at the level of content and of individual actors (Egelhofer et al., 2022). For example, bias accusations question expectations of fair reporting (Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2025), while allegations of untruthfulness undermine expectations of accuracy and relevance (Egelhofer et al., 2022). Finally, expectations of journalists as professionals with integrity are challenged when errors are framed as intentional rather than accidental (Egelhofer et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the form of many delegitimizing media attacks – often uncivil or aggressive – may account for effects on public trust. Research on incivility and norm violations suggests a relationship between incivility in user comments and concepts related to media trust, such as detrimental effects on audiences' perceptions of the credibility and quality of a news article and its source (Naab et al., 2020; Prochazka et al., 2018; Weber et al., 2019). However, these effects are not uniform. For instance, user comments declaring a broad and unspecified lack of trust in "the media" are not necessarily more impactful than targeted criticisms of a specific article, probably even less so when media brands are previously known to the audience and trust relationships are established (Hutchens et al., 2023).

Sustaining a trusting relationship with the media is a complex process that audiences are unlikely to repeat each time they consume news. Instead, they rely on *heuristics* – mental shortcuts and rules of thumb – to reduce their cognitive load, when evaluating the trustworthiness of news. These heuristics are often triggered by cues, certain markers within a story or news outlet that can be used to easily indicate its trustworthiness or quality (Bos et al., 2023; Sterrett et al., 2019). The most prominent trust-related cues concern the sources of news (i.e., the news outlet, e.g., Winter & Krämer, 2014). However, cues may also stem from other content characteristics, such as the presence of visualizations (e.g., de Haan et al., 2018). As certain forms of delegitimizing media criticism become more prevalent and familiar, they too can act as cues. For instance, disinformation accusations (e.g., through the label "fake news") automatically provide two powerful cues to the audience: first, they serve as a shortcut to the idea that the information presented is low in facticity; second, they suggest that the journalist who produced it did so with the intent to

deceive (Egelhofer et al., 2022). Terms such as "fake news" thus operate as quasi-frames that gain influence in situations where audiences have limited factual understanding or procedural insights, as often the case in the trust–dependent relationship between journalism and its audiences. Therefore, the underlying trust is likely influenced by particularly prevalent and easy-to-grasp cues such as "fake news." Fundamentally, this aligns with the "truth effect," where repeated exposure to information renders it more familiar, easier to process, and increases perceptions that these cues are accurate (e.g., Dechêne et al., 2009). The effectiveness of often-repeated cues has been demonstrated in a small number of studies, such as Bos et al. (2023), which show that "fake news" and anti-elitism cues can influence credibility judgments, when they resonate with recipients' prior issue positions.

Citizens may encounter media criticism cues in different spaces. Many delegitimizing media attacks occur in less-regulated digital environments, especially user comment sections. User comments, either on a news website or on a social media platform, prominently accompany the digital dissemination of news, often highlighted by specific social media affordances such as likes and ranking algorithms. Therefore, citizens are confronted with them and will likely use them to evaluate the credibility of a specific piece of information, sometimes even before they read or watch the news item in question (e.g., Naab et al., 2020). Moreover, digital architectures that allow sharing a news item with the added commentary put these cues in prominent positions (Anspach & Carlson, 2020; Carlson, 2016). In this way, social media users (including politicians) can use easily produced cue procedures to attack the trustworthiness of media. Furthermore, incivility markers, such as all capital letters, emojis, or exaggerated punctuation, provide additional cues alluding to negativity and a lack of quality and control on the side of journalists (Prochazka et al., 2018). As a result, consuming news messages today often means simultaneously consuming criticism of these messages (Carlson, 2016), and this criticism may attract more attention than the initial news item (Anspach & Carlson, 2020; Bos et al., 2023).

Criticism cues accompanying journalistic products may come from both citizens and from elites as social media users. However, delegitimizing media criticism from political elites is likely particularly influential as a cue for citizens' judgments of media credibility and ultimately trust (Smith, 2010; Watts et al., 1999). This reflects a well-established finding in political communication research: elite information sources are more impactful than citizen sources (Zaller, 1992). In this sense, (delegitimizing) media criticism by elites often aligns with characteristics associated with strong media effects. First, their motivation is to frequently repeat a specific critical message, which strengthens its effect (Chong & Druckman, 2010; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2018). Second, they possess the digital and analog reach necessary to expose large audiences to these messages (Lecheler & Egelhofer, 2021). Finally, media outlets themselves are more likely to pick up elite communication, meaning that journalists

more frequently report on delegitimizing media attacks from elites, further increasing their visibility (Barnoy & Reich, 2021; Egelhofer et al., 2020).

Based on this, emerging experimental studies focus directly on the effects of elite delegitimizing media criticism on public trust, and related intermediate concepts such as credibility judgments. This literature most often tests allegations of untruthfulness (e.g., the use of labels such as "fake news") and bias accusations, and clearly shows that media attacks against outlets reduce trust in these outlets, although this effect often depends on partisan ideology, with the strongest effects found among supporters of the attacker (Archer & Peterson, 2025; Egelhofer et al., 2022; Guess et al., 2017, but see Van Erkel & Soontjens, 2022). Effects on general media trust appear to be limited (Van Erkel & Soontjens, 2022) but tend to be stronger among citizens with pronounced populist attitudes (Egelhofer et al., 2022). In addition, (delegitimizing) media criticism also influences dependent variables related to media trust, such as news credibility and media bias perceptions (Bos et al., 2023; Smith, 2010).

Furthermore, evidence from survey research and content analyses provides additional reason to assume that exposure to (delegitimizing) media criticism is linked to lower levels of media trust. Studies repeatedly show that hostile media criticism is predominantly employed by (right-wing) populist politicians in different contexts such as Europe and the US (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2016). At the same time, survey research suggests that citizens with populist attitudes, or voters of populist parties, are particularly distrustful of legacy media (e.g., Fawzi & Krämer, 2021). Similarly, as discussed above, delegitimizing media criticism is a frequent feature of (partisan) alternative media coverage (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019), and there is evidence of a link between the use of these media and distrust of legacy media (Tsfati et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Media criticism fulfills an essential democratic function by holding journalists accountable and, ideally, improving journalism. However, it has also been adopted as a political strategy – primarily by right-wing (populist) actors – to delegitimize journalism and undermine public trust in news media. This chapter has shown that delegitimizing media criticism is a troubling and growing trend with serious consequences. Existing research suggests that politicians' media attacks negatively affect citizens' trust in targeted news outlets, reduce the perceived accuracy and objectivity of coverage, and may lower general media trust for some. Furthermore, delegitimizing media criticism can have detrimental consequences beyond audience perceptions, potentially inducing self-censorship among journalists, serving as a pretext for restrictions on press freedom, or even motivating physical violence against media actors.

Given these democratic risks, delegitimizing media criticism remains an important area of future research. First, regarding prevalence, while there are signs of an upward trend, longitudinal analyses are lacking (but see Solis & Sagarzazu, 2020; Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2025; Wright, 2021). Current research also disproportionally focuses on Twitter (and to a lesser extent Facebook). As video-led platforms such as TikTok gain importance (Newman et al., 2025), we need to understand how prevalent political media attacks are there, as well as which multimodal forms exist. Research should also consider other actors than politicians, as citizens and political influencers become more influential on these platforms.

Second, more research is needed on the effects of delegitimizing media criticism. Experimental evidence remains limited, especially on repeated exposure. Future studies should also investigate mitigation strategies, such as whether citizens can be "inoculated" against strategic media attacks. Additionally, more attention should be paid to the consequences for media professionals themselves, including psychological impacts and self-censorship.

Third, there is an urgent need to expand the geographic scope beyond established democracies in the Global North. While concern has intensified in Western democracies following the rise of right-wing populist actors, uncivil anti-media discourse has a longer history in the Global South (Mazzaro, 2021; Solis & Sagarzazu, 2020) and potentially more severe consequences in less stable democratic contexts, directly endangering press freedom and journalists' safety (Mazzaro, 2021; Neo, 2022; Reporters without Borders, 2017).

Delegitimizing media criticism also poses a continuing challenge for journalists and media professionals. They must respond to unjustified media attacks with a clear defensive stance, particularly by exposing the strategic motives behind them, while at the same time acknowledging that some criticism may highlight real weaknesses in journalism. In this sense, journalists should consider whether such criticism indeed points to problematic practices or gaps in news coverage (Fawzi, 2020). Research also suggests that media attacks can, in some cases, prompt self-reflection and professional awareness among journalists (Wolleschensky & Sehl, 2025). In other words, journalists need to walk the line between remaining receptive to criticism and self-reflection when warranted, while actively defending their profession's legitimacy and resisting threats to a free and critical press.

Note

1 However, earlier forms of media criticism have also been directly disseminated through news media – for example, in former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez's s state-run talk show "Aló Presidente" (Mazzaro, 2021).

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13

CONCLUSION

Toward a framework for future research on news media trust

Yariv Tsfati, Nayla Fawzi, and Jesper Strömbäck

From a democratic perspective, a central function of news media is to "aid citizens in becoming informed" (Holbert, 2005, p. 511). To fulfill this role, three conditions must be met. First, news media must provide the information citizens need to act freely and self-govern (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Yet being informative is insufficient if the media are neither used nor trusted. Thus, the second and third prerequisites are widespread use of and widespread trust in the news media (Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Mainstream media trust is particularly important, since research shows that mainstream news media – despite numerous shortcomings and despite differences between individual media outlets and media types – typically help people learn about politics and society (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2026). Studies also show a positive relationship between using and trusting mainstream outlets (Andersen et al., 2023; Fletcher & Park, 2017; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Mourão et al., 2018; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati, 2010; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). At the same time, comparative research indicates that media trust is declining or fragile in many countries (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2023; Suiter & Fletcher, 2020; see chapter 4). Unsurprisingly, trust in mainstream media has become a major concern for scholars and news organizations alike. This trend is reinforced by digitalization, falling use of traditional news media, the rise of digital and social platforms, and the growing prominence of partisan and political alternative media. News outlets have also become frequent targets of politically motivated attacks from such media as well as political actors (Carlson, 2017; Egelhofer et al., 2021; Farhall et al., 2019; Fawzi, 2019; Strömbäck & Åkerlund, 2025; Solis & Sagarzazu, 2020).

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Donald Trump's labeling of the press as "enemies of the people" is emblematic, though far from unique (Meeks, 2019; Ross & Rivers, 2018).

Despite growing scholarly attention, recent reviews highlight several deficits in research on media trust (Engelke et al., 2019; Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020). The concept itself is often weakly theorized, with scholars frequently focusing instead on related notions such as credibility or skepticism, sometimes treating them interchangeably (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Moreover, there is often a gap between conceptual definitions and empirical operationalizations (Engelke et al., 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Most studies examine general media trust or trust in broad categories like "TV" or "newspapers," even though trust varies across outlets and topics (Tsfati et al., 2022). The increasingly complex media environment also makes "media" a more ambiguous category, raising questions about what respondents mean when evaluating media trust (Daniller et al., 2017; Tsfati et al., 2022). Finally, much existing research relies on the United States – an atypical case in terms of media systems, political structures, and trust levels (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

While the concept of trust is relevant to audience relations with journalists, decades of research on news media trust have resulted with a few conundrums, contradictions, and puzzling findings. First, people's perceptions of bias in the media are themselves biased. Research about the hostile media perception (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Tsfati, 2007; Tsfati & Huino, 2014) demonstrates that people see even balanced media content as biased against their political camp. Related findings (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Watts et al., 1999) raise the concern that some audiences mistrust the media not because the media are untrustworthy but at least partly because of their political ideologies or because their politician tells them not to trust the media. Second, while audience trust in media has been found to be positively related to the perceived performance of the media (Fawzi & Mothes, 2020), it has also been found relatively unrelated to the actual performance of the media (Major & Atwood, 1997). More specifically, research suggests that media trust decreases only slightly in response to media wrongdoings (Livio & Cohen, 2016), and after time even this decrease in trust is recovered (Tsfati, 2002; see also Chapter 2). This is in contrast to findings showing that institutional trust should be negatively affected in case of past violations (Uslaner, 1998). Third, while rational audiences are expected to consume correct information from trustworthy sources, the correlation between trust in media and mainstream news exposure is only modest (after correcting for attenuation, Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Strömbäck et al., 2020). This means that many people follow quite a bit of news without trusting the media, and that many trusting audiences follow relatively little news. When it comes to news media, seeing is not believing, and believing and trusting do not equate seeing. Fourth and finally, research has demonstrated that many mistrusting audiences are still affected by news coverage despite

their mistrust (see Miller & Krosnick, 2000). For example, in the case of agenda setting effects (effects of media on people's perceptions about the importance of different social problems) the correlation between media agenda and public agenda was estimated at .70 for trusting audiences and .58 for audiences low on media trust (Tsfati, 2003). That is, even for mistrusting audiences, there was a high correlation between media agenda and public agenda. In other words, people not only watch news they do not trust but are also affected by it.

Still, most research on news media trust and its antecedents and effects was done before digitalization brought about the transformation into high-choice media environments, which has profoundly reshaped the role of mainstream news media vis-a-vis audiences, politics, and an ever-increasing plethora of competitors for attention and trust (Chadwick, 2013; Strömbäck et al., 2022; Van Aelst et al., 2011) Against this background, the purpose of this volume was to bring together state-of-the-art chapters to summarize what we know and what we do not know related to mainstream news media trust, and to push the research front with respect to mainstream news media trust as a concept and its trends, antecedents, and consequences. This concluding chapter provides a few integrative themes and ends by suggesting a few directions for future research.

The high-choice information environment and the paradox of attention

A central theme across the chapters is the transition from a "seller's market" of scarce mass media to a "buyer's market" characterized by an abundance of sources. This shift has created "choice overload," overwhelming individuals' cognitive capacity to discern quality and making them more susceptible to heuristic-based judgments. Instead of ritualized, focused news consumption, people now engage in "news snacking" or rely on the "news-finds-me" perception, where trust is detached from editorial authority and rooted instead in social endorsement or algorithmic visibility. This fragmentation encourages the "balkanization of knowledge" (Jamieson & Cappella, 2009) as individuals can easily find alternative sources that cater to their preexisting identities while avoiding information that challenges their worldviews. This has ramifications for what trust and credibility mean for news outlets. In the low-choice era, trust was pivotal for the economic survival of news outlets as credibility was essential for news organizations' reputation on which audience exposure depended (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) and indeed, credible newspapers charged more for advertising (Meyer & Hester, 2003). This changed dramatically as technological platforms such as Google Ads created affordances for advertising revenues even in the absence of reputation (as in the case of the dissemination of major fake news stories by teenagers in Macedonia; see Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

The epistemic crisis: Truthful reporting versus subjective beliefs

The high-choice information environment is related to the issue of misinformation. Historian Yuval Noah Harari (2016) argued that "Censorship no longer works by hiding information from you; censorship works by flooding you with immense amounts of misinformation… until you're just unable to focus." A provocative theme raised in Chapter 10 by Jesper Strömbäck deals with the disconnect between empirical truth and public trust. In polarized environments, truthful news reporting can actually decrease trust among groups who subscribe to "affective" or "ideological" truths rather than verifiable evidence. Because journalism increasingly adopts an analytical, interpretive stance focused on accountability (Chapter 2), it is more likely to be perceived as biased by those whose political heroes are the targets of such coverage. This creates a situation where misinformation becomes an emergent property of social trust networks; individuals may reject accurate corrections from institutions they view as hostile, instead trusting false claims that feel congruent with their partisan identity. This process is discussed by Ognyanova in Chapter 8 and amplified by delegitimizing attacks on media, documented by Egelhofer and Lecheler in Chapter 12. These processes are perhaps what make the effects of the editorial attempts to restore trust (e.g., using transparency interventions) relatively futile as described by Nelson in Chapter 11.

All of this suggests that a possible shift in our assessment of the normative meaning audience trust is warranted (see Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023). For decades, scholars, journalists, and pundits have lamented the drop in audience trust in various countries, arguing that trust in media is a central cornerstone of democracy: For example, Craig Crawford (in Ladd, 2012, p. 209), a commentator and columnist once stated that "public distrust of the news media is one of the most hazardous political challenges now facing Americans." Given that media institutions are supposed to be central conduits of reliable information, public distrust of media means they cannot fulfill their crucial role of informing the public.

In contrast to this view, in Chapter 10, Strömbäck explicitly supports the idea that declining trust among some groups is not an issue if it results from those groups rejecting empirical truth in favor of "affective" or "ideological" truths. In such cases, trying to regain trust through "false balance" would actually degrade journalistic quality. This aligns with Schudson's argument (Chapter 2) that the quality of news coverage is not necessarily related to public trust. This normative perspective is consistent with the findings in Chapters 4 and 5, which suggest that reported high levels of trust in autocratic regimes often stem from low expectations of the media. In some cases, they may even represent a form of "negative trust," in which people trust the news media only to behave predictably – namely, to follow the government line – and report high trust in surveys accordingly.

In line with these views of audience trust as not necessarily normatively desirable, several of the chapters suggest that media skepticism as a form of audience mistrust may be healthy from a normative perspective. Schudson argues that "It required the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s to bring down that overgenerous level of deference to American political institutions and to yield a level of 'civic skepticism' more fitting for a democratic society." Similarly, Nielsen and Fletcher suggest that declining media trust "reflects the development of a more skeptical citizenry (sometimes called 'critical'), with more people less deferential to institutional authority, including that of the news media and the political institutions that tend to set the news agenda." Steindl and Obermaier advocate that rather than blind trust, a well-reflected, medium level of trust, which is shaped by people's assessment of the performance of institutions, is preferable. Ognyanova reinforces this, noting that addressing modern informational challenges "depends on fostering calibrated, domain-specific trust that enables societies to distinguish healthy skepticism from corrosive cynicism, and fact from falsehood." Similarly, Nelson suggests that media literacy efforts aim to "foster skeptical news consumers, who understand the goals behind news production, without creating undue cynicism that may hinder trust in any or all news sources."

In Chapter 3, Tsfati and Fisher reviewed current measures of audience skeptical perceptions of media. Their review highlighted empirical studies demonstrating the validity of several media skepticism measures (Markov & Min, 2022; Quiring et al., 2021; Tsfati & Barnoy, 2025). They note that, along the lines suggested in the chapters reviewed above, findings suggest that news media skeptics process news more slowly (in a way that reflects a more thorough and critical processing approach), demonstrate more variability in the evaluation of different stories, and consume more news from a more diverse set of sources. Their review points to the existing empirical evidence that support the idea that media skepticism is indeed healthy, at least for some normatively desirable outcomes.

The trust nexus: Interdependency of political and media institutions

A few of the chapters point to a strong correlation between trust in political institutions and trust in the news media. This "trust nexus" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018) suggests that when citizens become disenchanted with the broader societal elite, they simultaneously withdraw trust from both politicians and the mainstream press. This interdependency is weaponized through delegitimizing media criticism, where political actors – particularly right-wing, authoritarian and populist ones – strategically attack the media to insulate themselves from negative coverage and draw supporters toward alternative partisan outlets. Consequently, the chapters in this volume consistently highlight that

news media trust is not merely a reflection of actual journalistic performance (as opposed to perceived performance) but is deeply embedded in the broader political health and degree of polarization within a society.

While editorial efforts like transparency and engaged journalism (discussed by Nelson in Chapter 11) are vital for professional legitimacy, they are not a panacea for the trust crisis we can observe in several countries. The erosion of trust is driven by large-scale structural and political forces – including the rise of the high-choice news market discussed above, the weaponization of media attacks by populist leaders, and the decline of general institutional trust – that are largely beyond the control of individual newsrooms. Addressing news media trust today is hence less like repairing a broken tool and more like restoring a polluted ecosystem; cleaning up the "misinformation pollution" and strategic delegitimation requires not just fixing individual news outlets (the organisms) but also addressing the structural, political, and technological environment (the habitat) that determines whether healthy skeptical trust can actually take root and survive.

What we do not know?

While the chapters provide a rich map of the current landscape of news media trust, they collectively identify several significant gaps in our knowledge that limit the ability of scholars and practitioners to fully address the trust "crisis". A primary area of uncertainty involves the causal directionality between media trust and its various correlates. Because much of the extant research relies on cross-sectional surveys, it remains unclear whether distrust drives certain behaviors – such as news avoidance, the use of alternative media, or susceptibility to misinformation – or whether those behaviors are the primary drivers of eroding trust. While some recent longitudinal studies have begun to identify "reinforcing spirals" or "asymmetrical spirals," (Tsfati et al., 2025) we still lack a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates these individual-level behaviors with macro-level factors like political regime type and media system structures.

Furthermore, there is a persistent lack of conceptual and methodological consensus regarding what is actually being measured when we study "trust." Researchers frequently use terms like credibility, confidence, and trust interchangeably, and it is still not understood how trust at different levels of analysis – such as trust in a specific news brand, trust in a specific news topic (e.g., climate change), and general institutional trust – interact with or influence one another (Strömbäck et al., 2020). This "confused object of trust" means we do not fully know if a citizen who expresses distrust in "the media" is reacting to a specific political commentator, a general feeling of elitism, or the perceived quality of a single news article. Additionally, the role of emotional and irrational elements in trust formation remains a "black box," as traditional survey

items typically prioritize cognitive evaluations of journalistic professionalism (Ross Arguedas et al., 2024) over the affective, human-centered qualities like empathy and approachability that audiences may actually value (Mellado & Gajardo, 2024, p. 1; see Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020).

On a global scale, we face a profound empirical puzzle regarding trust in non-democratic contexts. While data consistently show higher trust levels in authoritarian regimes, the chapters by Nielsen and Fletcher and Hanitzsch et al. show that we do not yet know if this represents genuine belief in news quality, a "negative trust" rooted in the media's predictability as a state megaphone, or "preference falsification" where respondents hide their true skepticism for fear of government reprisal. Similarly, while Wang and Metzger documented the rise of new digital competitors like social media influencers and AI-generated news, the long-term impact of these sources on general media trust is still largely speculative and untested. We also lack longitudinal data on the prevalence and effects of delegitimizing media criticism on newer, visual-led platforms like TikTok.

Key takeaways for future research

Several of the chapters advocate future scholars to move beyond "the confused object of trust" and clearly specify whether they are measuring trust in the news media as a whole, specific brands, individual journalists, or topical coverage. Methodologically, the field needs to move beyond cross-sectional surveys to longitudinal panel data and digital-trace data in an attempt to disentangle the unclear causality between media trust and many of its correlates. Such longitudinal designs are abysmally needed in multinational micro-macro designs in order to better understand media trust dynamics in autocratic contexts and in the global south when combined with insights about historical institutional development, such longitudinal designs promise to illuminate our understanding of the factors that underlie the paradox of why people trust media in autocratic contexts.

As noted above, several of the chapters highlight that media trust acts like a body's immune system; having a system that is "too trusting" (a weak immune system) allows problematic information and interpretations to spread unchecked, but a system that is "too cynical" (an overactive immune system) results in an autoimmune response that attacks the very institutions (the healthy cells) necessary for social stability. This is perhaps why Tsfati and Fisher (Chapter 3) recommended incorporating non-linear models in future studies of media trust. That is, trust in the media may not function as a simple continuum that runs from total mistrust to full trust and gradually connects to other phenomena. Instead, it may follow a non-linear pattern in which the two ends of the spectrum share important similarities with one another and differ in meaningful, qualitative ways from those in the middle of the distribution.

An additional insight that emerges from the previous chapters is that integrating qualitative and mixed-methods design could provide a path forward in our attempt to capture the irrational, emotional, and context-specific factors explaining why some people express mistrust and cynicism toward media while others express naïve confidence. While recent explorations utilizing qualitative methods have started uncovering the meaning of audience mis/trust in media for news audiences and its consequences for audience exposure to and engagement with news content (e.g., Gur-Ze'ev et al., 2024; Nelson & Lewis, 2023; Ross Arguedas et al., 2024; Štětka & Mihelj, 2024), these studies have still not impacted formal models we see in quantitative studies of media trust. Beckett (2008) commented that:

> People do not use the media in a scientific way. They do not expect it to be empirically correct. They 'trust' a media outlet because generally it reflects or complements their experience of life. They find that it is relevant and useful to their lives. It is part of their imagined and real community. Trust is a relationship not a fact.

However, media trust is not just a relationship. The qualitative studies cited above documented that it is a *complex* relationship. People may hate the news media but love them at the same time. They may distrust the news media but continue to consume their coverage. News consumption emerges from these studies as ritualistic, emotional, and stemming from people's identity (Ross Arguedas et al., 2024) but at the same time as unintentional or critical (Nelson & Lewis, 2023). The chapters above call for a more multidimensional understanding of audience trust in the media. Scholars should indeed continue to theorize, conceptualize, and operationalize audience trust in media along these lines in an ever more complex technological and political environment. This book has deepened our view of how much progress has been made in recent decades in understanding audience trust in the media, while also making clear how much remains to be explored in future research.

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