

Article

## Distrust Profiles: Identifying the Factors That Shape Journalism’s Credibility Crisis

Thomas B. Ksiazek<sup>1</sup>, Su Jung Kim<sup>2</sup>, Jacob L. Nelson<sup>3</sup>, Ahran Park<sup>4</sup>, Sushobhan Patankar<sup>5</sup>, Olivia Sabalaskey<sup>1</sup>, and Harsh Taneja<sup>7,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Communication, Villanova University, USA

<sup>2</sup> Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California, USA

<sup>3</sup> Department of Communication, University of Utah, USA

<sup>4</sup> School of Media & Communication, Korea University, Republic of Korea

<sup>5</sup> Symbiosis International (Deemed University), India

<sup>7</sup> Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, USA

\* Corresponding author ([harsh.taneja@gmail.com](mailto:harsh.taneja@gmail.com))

Submitted: 27 April 2023 | Accepted: 20 August 2023 | Published: 7 December 2023

### Abstract

Trust in news is declining globally and has been for some time a phenomenon that has been amplified in the context of a global pandemic, the rise in anti-media populism, and social and political unrest. Overall, public trust in journalism remains low (44% globally), according to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*. Building on a growing body of research on predictors of (dis)trust among news audiences, this study examines survey data from the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* to explore distrust profiles—comparative profiles of users based on their relative distrust in news in general, news they consume, and news accessed through digital intermediaries like social and search—across distinct news environments: India, South Korea, and the US. We conclude that, across all three countries, there are large segments who either trust everything or distrust everything, suggesting a trust polarization phenomenon. Moreover, the results identify segments of swing trusters, users who trust some news and distrust other types but do not indicate a blanket tendency to trust or distrust everything. Normative expectations about the institution of journalism (i.e., folk theories) seem to be the most powerful factors in explaining the relative likelihood of membership in all profiles, where expectations regarding impartiality, concern about fake news, and fair coverage were important indicators of (dis)trust, with varying degrees depending on the media, political, and technological contexts in which they are situated. These findings suggest that to regain trust, journalists should consider how they can change people’s folk theories when it comes to news by comprehensively taking into account the unique trajectory of a given country’s media system.

### Keywords

digital intermediaries; distrust profiles; journalism folk theories; media systems; news audiences; news distrust; swing trusters; trust polarization

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Trust, Social Cohesion, and Information Quality in Digital Journalism” edited by Thomas B. Ksiazek (Villanova University), Jacob L. Nelson (University of Utah), and Anita Varma (University of Texas at Austin).

© 2023 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio Press (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

Across the globe, trust in news is declining (Ipsos, 2019). Journalism’s credibility crisis has been amplified in the context of a global pandemic, recent elections, and

social and political unrest. While trust levels vary by country, overall public trust in journalism remains low (44% globally), according to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* (Newman et al., 2021). Research suggests that concerns about information quality (e.g.,

misinformation, fake news, inaccuracy, and bias) underpin distrust in the news media (Knight Foundation & Gallup, 2018; Korea Press Foundation, 2019).

Beyond information quality, there is a growing body of literature on predictors of (dis)trust in the news (e.g., Masullo et al., 2019; Moran, 2021; Park et al., 2020). Our study builds on this work by examining survey data from the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* to explore *distrust profiles*—comparative profiles of users based on their relative distrust in news in general, news they consume, and news accessed through digital intermediaries like social and search—across distinct news environments: India, South Korea, and the US. In doing so, it fuses two theoretical frameworks used to understand audience perceptions of and trust in news: folk theories of journalism (Nielsen, 2019) and Hallin and Mancini's (2004) media systems approach to analyzing differences and similarities in the relationship between news media and the public across nations. We conclude that, by examining trust in news through a lens combining intrinsic and external factors, distrust profiles contribute to a fuller understanding of how people determine the extent to which they see journalism as credible.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. (Dis)Trust in Journalism

Journalism as a profession has grappled with diminishing public trust for decades. In the US, for example, trust began dropping in 1976 when 72% of Americans reported a great deal or a fair amount of confidence in mass media. Trust in the news within the US is now less than half of that peak—Instead, for the first time, more of the country's citizens report having no confidence at all than report having any trust in the news (Brenan, 2022). This credibility crisis is playing out across the globe; the *Digital News Report 2022* published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, which surveys more than half of the world's population, found that trust in news had fallen in almost half of the countries it surveyed (Newman, 2022). Indeed, the report observed that around 30% of people who actively avoid the news do so because they believe the news to be “untrustworthy or biased.”

These circumstances pose serious challenges to journalists invested in providing the public with accurate information. For starters, if people do not trust the news, they are unlikely to consume it (Goyanes et al., 2023), and even less likely to pay for it (Nelson & Kim, 2021). The lack of trust in professional journalism also makes the public more susceptible to falsehoods, as people's overwhelming distrust of news encourages them to “fact check” the news they consume, which tends to lead them to cherry-pick information that most aligns with their worldviews regardless of the legitimacy of the outlet (Nelson & Lewis, 2023). Additionally, rising distrust of journalists has contributed to public animosity

toward journalists, resulting in journalists facing increasingly intense levels of harassment both online and off (Mesmer, 2022). As Lewis (2019, p. 44) succinctly put it: “Most people in most countries have a distrust—even a loathing, it would seem—of the news media.”

Although there is widespread agreement among journalism practitioners and researchers that public distrust in journalism is a growing problem for the profession, there is no clear consensus when it comes to overcoming it, nor is there even much in the way of consensus when it comes to defining “distrust” in the first place. Our conceptualization of “distrust” comes from Markov and Min (2022, p. 1101), who observed: “Scholars commonly treat the concept of media trust as a continuum comprising distrust and trust at opposite ends without explicitly defining media distrust.” In addition to arguing that distrust typically appears on a continuum, Markov and Min (2022, p. 1103) distinguish between “media distrust” and “media cynicism”:

Both distrust and cynicism entail negative expectations of the public toward the media, but cynicism is characterized by a lower degree of reflexivity compared with distrust (e.g., Krouwel & Abts, 2007). Cynical citizens a priori reject the news media because they are certain that journalistic conduct is exclusively the product of journalists' selfish interests. Distrust, however, is not necessarily cynical. Distrusting citizens can have more nuanced beliefs about media motives and may consider additional criteria (e.g., competencies) when evaluating the media.

The fact that distrust is accompanied by more nuance and reflexivity relative to cynicism suggests that it is perhaps more malleable than cynicism or other negative, hardened perceptions of the news among the public. Yet, in order to reduce people's distrust in news, it is necessary to understand the origins of that distrust in the first place.

Some believe the biggest contributor to distrust of journalism is the widespread perception of liberal bias among journalists, leading them to advocate for journalism to maintain its ties to objectivity and the “view from nowhere” approach to reporting (Baron, 2023). On the other hand, those who believe the pursuit of objectivity has left marginalized communities feeling alienated from and disdainful of the press advocate for the rejection of objectivity in favor of a more self-reflexive and open form of news production (Callison & Young, 2019). Scholars have observed rising populist, anti-elitist sentiment among the public, combined with a lack of media literacy, has resulted in many citizens believing the news media to be under the influence of powerful, political actors (Obermaier et al., 2023). This has led some to argue that the path to more trust in news is more transparency in news production (Moran, 2021), while others believe it is more engagement with readers (Robinson, 2023; Wenzel, 2020), more diversity in

newsrooms (Wenzel, 2021), and more focus on solutions in news reporting (Thier et al., 2021). The range of approaches to improving trust in journalism is indicative of both the multifaceted nature of journalism's credibility crisis and uncertainty throughout the field when it comes to understanding the root causes of that distrust.

This uncertainty stems in part from the challenges posed when it comes to actually studying the public's lack of trust in journalism. Research into journalism's credibility crisis tends to focus on specific components of the dynamic between journalists and the public, rather than taking a more comprehensive approach. For example, this research tends to focus on how members of the public respond to interventions journalists are pursuing to rebuild trust (Robinson et al., 2021; Wenzel et al., 2020), or it focuses on the intrinsic factors that play into why those members of the public distrust journalism in the first place (e.g., their backgrounds, social networks, and perceptions of public institutions more broadly; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Williams, 2012). The result is a body of literature examining trust in news that sometimes feels less like one cohesive conversation than like two distinct discussions playing out alongside one another: (a) those focused on the relationship between what journalists do to earn public trust and what the public thinks about those efforts (Curry & Stroud, 2021; Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023; Konieczna & Robinson, 2014; Zahay et al., 2021), and (b) those focused on understanding the impact of the structural factors that shape people's lives and their thoughts about and trust in news (Ceron, 2015; Lee, 2010).

## 2.2. Fusing Folk Theories of News and Media Systems Approaches

This study attempts to bridge this discussion by fusing two conceptual approaches to understanding people's relationship with news media. The first is folk theories of journalism, which refers to "actually-existing popular beliefs about what journalism is, what it does, and what it ought to do" (Nielsen, 2019, p. 3). This way of considering people's relationship with journalism has been used in a number of studies to explore how people think about journalism and how those impressions shape their interactions with news (Palmer, 2019; Wilner et al., 2021). More recently, it has been used to understand the relationship between the stories people tell themselves about journalism, their skepticism toward journalism, and their avoidance of journalism (Nelson & Lewis, 2023; Palmer et al., 2020; Toff & Nielsen, 2022). The appeal of this approach, which tends to be applied to qualitative studies drawn from in-depth interviews with members of the public, is that it allows scholars to closely examine "understandings of journalism that in turn shape how one engages—or does not engage—with journalism" (Palmer et al., 2020, p. 1975). As mentioned in the previous section, the public's distrust in journalism comes from the quality deficit, more specifically the lack

of objectivity and impartiality and the presence of political or other types of biases. Thus, this research focuses on how the expectations or perceptions of these quality norms (or the violations of these) shape the creation of different distrust profiles.

Additionally, although journalism studies scholars increasingly turn to folk theories to make sense of people's expectations of and interactions with news, this conceptual approach does have some limitations. It is most useful for identifying ordinary people's overarching theories about the news media, but less so when it comes to determining the extent to which those theories are shaped by characteristics of the news media environment, specifically those that vary from one country to the next. In other words, while the folk theories approach offers a valuable means to understanding what people expect of journalism, it is less effective at identifying how those perceptions are impacted by the specific role that journalism plays in the countries in which those people reside. This limitation is especially important to acknowledge when it comes to the question of trust (or distrust) in news, because while journalism's credibility is indeed suffering in many places across the globe, people's trust in news varies from one country to another, as do their reasons for trusting (or distrusting) news (Newman et al., 2021).

To address this gap, our study draws on survey data from India, South Korea, and the US. Comparing these three nations allows us to assemble comprehensive distrust profiles across countries that have been frequently studied (the US) and understudied (India and South Korea) when it comes to the issue of news distrust. Our study also fuses the folk theory approach with a theoretical framework that has proven invaluable for cross-country studies of mass media: Hallin and Mancini's (2004) *media systems*. This conceptual framework has been used by scholars seeking to understand why the press differs depending on the country in which it exists. The media systems' theoretical framework consists of four dimensions: the media market, journalistic professionalism, political parallelism, and the state's role (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Humprecht et al., 2022).

Typically, this conceptual framework is employed in studies that set out to identify (a) the factors that shape distinct media systems throughout the world (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2011) and (b) the impact of these factors on news coverage or news consumption within these distinct media systems (Benson et al., 2012; Umbricht & Esser, 2016). To be clear, our study does not attempt to demonstrate a causal relationship between people's media systems and their folk theories of journalism. Instead, we set out to demonstrate the existence of distrust profiles across distinct news media environments. Our aim is to show that, despite the differences inherent within these media systems, large segments of people within all of them either trust everything or distrust everything. In short, the media systems are unique, but people's perceptions of journalism are not.

Before turning to these findings, however, we first explore the distinctions within each of these media systems in greater detail.

### 2.3. Study Context

Hallin and Mancini (2004) classified media systems into three models (polarized pluralist, democratic corporatist, and liberal model) based on a historic review of media systems across Western nations. The US constitutes a typical case of the liberal model with a high level of journalistic professionalism and a low level of state interventions. India and South Korea exhibit varying degrees of indicators of the liberal model, but are not clear-cut cases (e.g., for an attempt to classify India, see Mushtaq & Baig, 2016; for South Korea, see Rhee et al., 2011,). Compared to the US, India and South Korea are characterized by a multi-channel media environment with a strong presence of public broadcasters: Prasar Bharati in India and the KBS (as the main public broadcasters along with MBC and EBS) in South Korea. Although both public broadcasters have functional autonomy by law, the appointments of the advisory board can be influenced by politicians, hindering that autonomy (see Rhee et al., 2011; Sappal, 2018). In India, the strong political affiliations of news media, opaque cross-media ownership, and malpractices such as “paid news” where political actors pay news media for favorable coverage ahead of the election have damaged the credibility of journalism (Saeed, 2015). In South Korea, news media have played a critical role in the nation’s democratization process, but increasing competition in media markets and subsequent pressure for ad revenue have posed a threat to newsrooms (Rhee et al., 2011). The emergence of the *giraegi* (a combination of journalist and trash in Korean) discourse—the anti-press sentiment that centers around disgust, hate, and shame toward the press—has also exacerbated distrust and skepticism toward journalists (Shin et al., 2021).

Second, the overall freedom status of the three countries ranges from partly free (India) to free (South Korea and the US) according to Freedom House’s (2022) annual report on “freedoms in the world.” One of their assessment criteria includes “freedom of expression and belief” which evaluates a combination of media freedom, individual freedom, and academic freedom of expression and religious beliefs. In particular, media freedom covers various issues related to media independence and freedom such as media censorship by the government, self-censorship by journalists, financial independence of media organizations, threats/harassment/imprisonment/crimes involved in journalistic activities, to name a few. As of 2021, India, South Korea, and the US score 2, 3, and 4 for media freedom, respectively, with 4 indicating the greatest level of freedom (Freedom House, 2022). This variation across three nations gives us an opportunity to see how different levels of media freedom might have implications for the formation of distrust profiles in these countries.

Third, the technological contexts in which news users find, consume, and engage in news in these countries show interesting differences. According to the *Digital News Report 2021* which included India for the first time, the internet penetration of the US and South Korea are equally at 96%, whereas India’s internet penetration is much lower (54%). Instead, many people in India access news through their smartphones (73%), compared to South Korea (63%) and the US (60%). In India and South Korea, online intermediaries such as mobile aggregators and social media play a significant role in news discovery and consumption. For example, South Korean news users heavily use mobile aggregators from Naver (66%) and Daum (30%), whereas Indian news users get their news from personalized mobile aggregators such as Daily Hunt (23%), News Republic (19%), and NewsPoint (15%). In contrast, the majority of news users in the US list online sources (72%), TV (52%), and social media (42%) as news sources. Given the impact of online intermediaries on curating news to end users and the resulting trust in the news or the lack thereof (e.g., Park et al., 2020), comparing these countries can shed insights into the potential role of online intermediaries in yielding distrust.

### 2.4. Research Questions

At a moment when trust (and distrust) in journalism has become a prominent concern among journalism scholars, practitioners, and stakeholders across the globe, it has become increasingly necessary for research to explore questions of (dis)trust in news from a similarly global perspective. Therefore, to make this study as comprehensive as possible, our analysis also attempts to overcome the geographic constraints that often appear in research regarding trust in news and in journalism studies research more broadly.

The current study aims to explore comparative profiles of users based on their relative distrust of news in general, the news they consume, and news accessed through intermediaries like social media and search engines. It will build on a growing body of literature that explores predictors of (dis)trust among news audiences (e.g., Masullo et al., 2019; Moran, 2021; Park et al., 2020), which typically draws on demographic or psychographic traits or a combination of both. In doing so, it will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the trust relationship among users, journalists, and a growing sector of news intermediaries, which play an increasingly central role in the news ecosystem (González-Tosat & Sádaba-Chalezquer, 2021; Nielsen & Ganter, 2017).

The following research questions guide our study:

RQ1: How do distrust profiles across news outlets and intermediaries vary among news audiences in India, South Korea, and the US?

RQ2: What are the demographic and psychographic characteristics of individuals that predict membership in each distrust profile?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Sample and Data Collection Procedures

The data for this study come from online surveys conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism for their *Digital News Report 2021* (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2021). Data were collected by YouGov, a UK-based polling organization, in January–February 2021 through an online questionnaire of nationally representative samples across 46 countries. Representative samples were drawn from YouGov’s panel of 15 million participants worldwide based on age, gender, geographic region, and education, and were also weighted based on census targets. For the countries of interest in the present study, sample sizes were 2,049 for India, 2,006 for South Korea, and 2,001 for the US.

#### 3.2. Measures

To answer RQ1, we created distrust profiles based on Likert scale responses ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*, to the following statements (variable name in parentheses): “I think you can trust most news most of the time” (News), “I think I can trust most of the news I consume most of the time” (My News), “I think I can trust news in social media most of the time” (News in Social), “I think I can trust news in search engines most of the time” (News in Search).

To create the distrust profiles, we first converted the data to binary values for all four measures above, where 1 indicates distrust (strongly/tend to disagree that they trust) and 0 indicates trust (neutral/tend/strongly agree that they trust). This allowed for 16 distinct combinations of distrust in News, My News, News in Social, and News in Search. In our subsequent analysis, we include any profile that met a threshold of  $n \geq 200$  for any country (i.e., a minimum of 200 respondents with a given profile, which is roughly 10% of the sample sizes for the three countries), resulting in a final list of four distrust profiles: (a) Trusts Everything; (b) Distrusts Everything; (c) Distrusts News in Social, Trusts Everything Else; (d) Trusts My News, Distrusts Everything Else.

To answer RQ2, we tested the following demographic characteristics of respondents as predictors of membership in each distrust profile: age, gender, income, and education. We also tested the following psychographic characteristics:

- Political interest: Five-point scale from *not at all interested* (1) to *extremely interested* (5);
- Political ideology: Left, center, right;
- Community attachment: Four-point scale from *not at all attached* (1) to *very attached* (5);

- Fair coverage perceptions (fair or unfair) of people: (a) your age, (b) your gender, (c) where you live, (d) your social and economic class, (e) your ethnicity, and (f) with your political views;
- Concern about fake news: Five-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5) to the statement “Thinking about online news, I am concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet”;
- Expectations of impartiality in the news (impartiality):
  - Viewpoint diversity: News outlets should present a diversity of viewpoints (viewpoint diversity) *or* a single viewpoint (single viewpoint);
  - Neutrality: News outlets should be neutral on all issues (neutral) *or* neutral on some, but not others (non-neutral);
  - Time: News outlets should give equal time to all sides (equal time for all sides) *or* less time for sides with weaker arguments (less time for some sides).

#### 3.2.1. Analysis

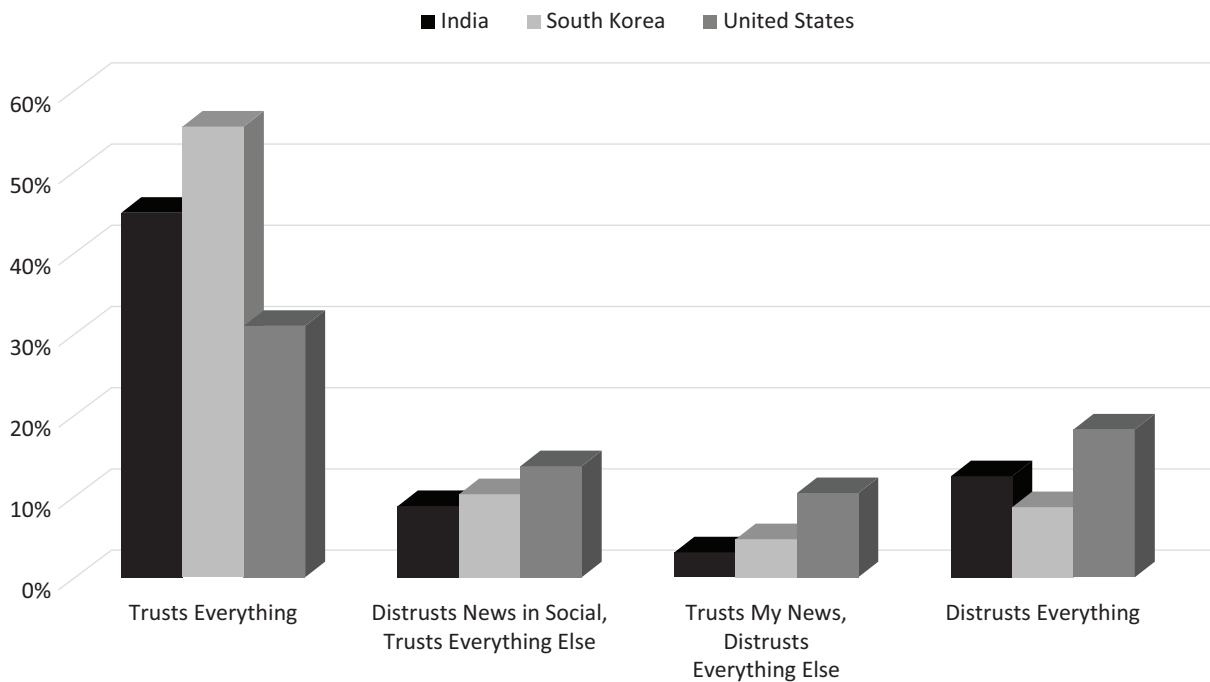
To answer RQ1, we descriptively analyzed the frequency percentages for each of the four distrust profiles that met our threshold. In the results presented below, we identify variations both within and across the three countries. To answer RQ2, we used logistic regression, which allows for a nominal dependent variable (i.e., membership, or not, in each distrust profile), to test for which demographic and psychographic characteristics predict the likelihood of an individual having a particular distrust profile. In total, we conducted 12 separate logistic regressions, four profiles for each of the three countries.

### 4. Results

By descriptively visualizing the percentage frequency comparisons across the four distrust profiles, we begin to identify variations both within and across countries to answer RQ1. Looking at Figure 1, the most noticeable patterns that emerge are large percentages who either trust everything or distrust everything across all three countries. These patterns are consistent across all three countries, where these are the two largest profiles. We can also see that South Koreans are more likely to trust everything than the other two countries while Americans are most likely to distrust everything when compared to the others, followed by Indian audiences. Overall, US news audiences exhibit wide-ranging distrust. In particular, Americans are most likely to trust the news they consume and distrust everything else. They are also the least trusting of news on social platforms, with a large percentage distrusting social and trusting everything else.

To test RQ2, logistic regressions were performed to determine which demographic and psychographic





**Figure 1.** Percentage frequency comparisons among distrust profiles.

characteristics predict membership in each of the four distrust profiles (see Appendices A–D of the Supplementary File for model significance, variance explained, case classification, and relevant statistics for each significant independent variable). In what follows, we offer a summary of the significant predictors for each distrust profile across the three countries. For non-binary categorical predictors—income, education, ideology—the findings should be compared to reference categories that capture the highest income and education levels in the item response options, along with left-leaning ideology.

#### 4.1. Trusts Everything

For the Trusts Everything profile (Appendix A of the Supplementary File), Indian males were 0.77 times less likely than females to trust everything. Additionally, Indian users with no education or only early childhood were 0.14 times less likely to trust everything. Regarding impartiality expectations, users that favor viewpoint diversity and give equal time to all sides were 0.71 and 0.65 times less likely to trust everything, respectively. Those who perceive fair coverage of where they live were 1.88 times more likely to trust everything. Political interest was negatively associated with trusting everything, while concern about fake news was positively associated with trusting everything.

For South Korean users perceived community attachment was negatively associated with trusting everything. Also, South Korean users that favor viewpoint diversity were 1.62 times more likely to trust everything. Concern about fake news was negatively associated with trust-

ing everything. Those who perceive fair coverage of their political views were 1.73 times more likely to trust everything. Similarly, those who perceive fair coverage of their social/economic class were 1.42 times more likely to trust everything.

Age was negatively associated with trusting everything for American users. Additionally, Americans whose gross income falls between \$40 k and \$44.9 k were 0.27 times less likely to trust everything. Regarding education, those who obtained a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree were 2.49 and 4.04 times more likely to trust everything, respectively. Concern about fake news was negatively associated with trusting everything. Regarding impartiality expectations, users that favor viewpoint diversity were 0.49 times less likely to trust everything. However, American users who perceive fair coverage of their political views and social/economic class were 2.66 and 2.19 times more likely to trust everything, respectively.

#### 4.2. Distrusts Everything

For the Distrust Everything profile (Appendix B of the Supplementary File), Indian users who held center ideologies were 0.77 times less likely to distrust everything. Concern about fake news was negatively associated with distrusting everything. Those who perceive fair coverage of where they live were 0.54 less likely to distrust everything.

For South Korean users, perceived community attachment was positively associated with distrusting everything. Concern about fake news was positively associated with distrusting everything. Also, those who perceive fair

coverage of their age and where they live were 0.45 and 0.50 times less likely to distrust everything, respectively.

American users with gross incomes under \$5k, between \$15k and \$19k, and between \$60k and \$69k were 3.57, 5.36, and 4.09 times more likely to distrust everything, respectively. However, American users who obtained upper secondary education, post-secondary/non-tertiary, a bachelor's degree, and a master's degree were 0.34, 0.287, 0.36, and 0.29 times less likely to distrust everything, respectively. Regarding impartiality expectations, users that favor giving equal time to all sides were 2.07 times more likely to distrust everything. Americans who perceived fair coverage of their political views and gender were 0.35 and 0.50 times less likely to distrust everything, respectively.

#### 4.3. Distrusts News in Social, Trusts Everything Else

For the Distrusts News in Social, Trusts Everything Else profile (Appendix C of the Supplementary File), Indian users that favor giving equal time to all sides were 2.07 times more likely to distrust news in social but trust everything else.

South Korean users who favor giving equal time to all sides were 0.55 times less likely to distrust news in social but trust everything else. Those who perceived fair coverage of where they live were 1.89 times more likely to distrust news in social but trust everything else.

Regarding American user ideologies, those who held center and right ideologies were both 0.10 times more likely to distrust news in social but trust everything else. Those who favor diverse viewpoints were 3.41 times more likely to distrust news in social but trust everything else.

#### 4.4. Trusts My News, Distrusts Everything Else

Indian users' perceived community attachment was positively associated with Trusts My News, Distrusts Everything Else (Appendix D of the Supplementary File). Those who favor giving equal time to all sides were 2.77 times more likely to trust my news but distrust everything else. Concern about fake news was negatively associated with trust my news but distrust everything else.

Regarding gender, South Korean males were 2.38 times more likely than females to trust my news but distrust everything else. Those who held center ideologies were 0.83 times less likely to trust my news but distrust everything else. Those who believe news outlets should be neutral on some issues, but non-neutral on others were 0.22 times less likely to trust my news but distrust everything else. South Korean users who perceived fair coverage of their age were 0.36 times less likely to trust my news but distrust everything else.

American users who perceived fair coverage of their political views were 0.44 times less likely to trust my news but distrust everything else.

## 5. Discussion

This study sought to explore distrust profiles both descriptively and in terms of demographic and psychographic predictors. At a moment when many journalism researchers and practitioners are concerned about increasing distrust in news, we set out to identify the characteristics of that distrust. We also wanted to understand how those characteristics might vary from one media system to another, and, equally important, how some of those characteristics might endure. To that end, we set out to examine people's trust and distrust in news across three different media systems: India, South Korea, and the US.

The findings indicate large percentages of users who either Trust Everything or Distrust Everything across the three countries: India, South Korea, and the US. Together, these patterns suggest a clear *trust polarization* phenomenon. For users who trust everything, some clear patterns emerge regarding significant predictors. Folk theories of journalism help explain the relative likelihood of trusting everything, whereas normative expectations regarding impartiality, concern about fake news, and fair coverage were important indicators of trust. Perhaps counterintuitively, those expectations and perceptions were less likely to explain the relative pattern of distrusting everything, whereas one might expect violation of those norms to prompt feelings of distrust. Additionally, the results suggest cross-national differences regarding whether these normative expectations positively or negatively predict trusting or distrusting everything. Especially for users who Trust Everything, Indian users differ in that the signs of significant factors are flipped compared to the results from South Korea or the US, or factors that are insignificant in the creation of the Trust Everything profile for South Korean or American users are significant or vice versa for Indian users (e.g., impartiality perception on equal time, expectations of fair coverage on geography, social/economic class, and political views). However, for the Distrust Everything profile, the US exhibits distinctive patterns compared to India and South Korea. This trust polarization and cross-national differences challenge the notion that news organizations and journalists can change users' minds about their (dis)trust perceptions or there is one single approach to solving the issue of widespread distrust across the globe.

We conceptualize the other two profiles as segments of *swing trusters*, or users who trust some news and distrust other types, but do not indicate a blanket tendency to trust or distrust everything. Akin to how politicians strategically target swing voters, journalists and news organizations might identify ways to build trust among these swing trusters. This potential to win back trust is supported by recent research from the Knight Foundation and Gallup (2018) in which 69% of respondents who reported losing trust in the news media believed that their trust could be restored. Similar to

the pattern of indicators that predict Trusts Everything and Distrusts Everything, folk theories of journalism also seem to drive the relative likelihood of membership among the swing trusters profiles: Distrusts News in Social, Trusts Everything Else and Trusts My News, Distrusts Everything Else. Yet, we see a lesser number of significant factors among normative expectations regarding impartiality, concerns about fake news, and fair coverage among swing trusters compared to users who either Trust Everything or Distrust Everything, posing a need for further research on what drives the development of swing truster segments.

Across all four profiles, psychographic indicators, especially normative expectations of journalism, were much more consistent indicators of profile membership in comparison to demographic measures. Variables like age, education, and income—traditionally known to be consistent predictors of news exposure—seem less powerful when it comes to patterns of (dis)trust in the news. This suggests news organizations should consider shifting their focus from the demographic makeup of their target audience to what they expect from the institution of journalism. We also observe that some of these quality norms are more important in the US (e.g., expectation of viewpoint impartiality and fair coverage of political views), compared to India and South Korea (e.g., concern about fake news, expectation of fair coverage on geography). These differences may result from the differences in media systems, for example, the importance of the marketplace of ideas in the American press, and the emphasis on balanced coverage of diverse geographic areas in India and South Korea with a strong presence of public broadcasters. Other differences may stem from varied technological contexts; for instance, the heavy reliance on online intermediaries in India and South Korea makes concerns about fake news one of the crucial factors that influence the formation of (dis)trust. Together, these findings offer a comprehensive exploration of the factors that shape trust (and distrust) in news. In doing so, they allow us to better understand the interplay between people's folk theories about journalism and their demographic traits. The result is a clearer understanding of the consistencies with which distrust in news takes shape, across media systems in which distrust is borne out.

### 5.1. Limitations

Some important limitations of this study are worth acknowledging. As noted by Newman et al. (2021, p. 6), "online samples will tend to under-represent the news consumption habits of people who are older and less affluent, meaning online use is typically over-represented and traditional offline use under-represented." For countries with very high levels of internet penetration like South Korea or the US, the differences between the online and overall populations are likely to be minimal. However, for India with inter-

net penetration at 54%, there is likely to be a significant difference between the online and total population. Moreover, the vast majority of respondents in India chose to complete the questionnaire in English rather than Hindi or other Indian languages, meaning the findings for India should be considered reflective of the younger, elite, English-speaking, online population, and certainly not the total population. Additionally, the *Digital News Report 2021* noted a sharp rise in news trust in South Korea possibly due to Korean users' increased reliance on TV news during the pandemic, requiring caution when interpreting South Korean findings. Given the use of secondary data, albeit with a time-tested instrument that has been deployed across regions with high validity and reliability, we were also limited in our methods to operationalize distrust profiles by the single-item questions used to capture trust in different types of news media outlets. Perhaps future research could build on this approach by designing primary data collection instruments that would allow for more organic, advanced segmentation methods.

Also, we know that since surveys rely on recall and are subject to social desirability effects, respondents often over-report their news exposure, relative to what we see through more passive measurement techniques (e.g., Prior, 2009). At the same time, surveys offer the opportunity to measure cross-platform news exposure and capture a wealth of additional descriptive information about respondents (e.g., demographics, political ideology, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, etc.), key benefits for the purposes of this study. Device-based behavioral data approaches for passively measuring media use often rely on IP addresses to identify users, which are typically more reflective of a given household rather than an individual (Kim, 2018).

We decided to compare India, South Korea, and the US given their similarities and differences in the trajectory of the development of media markets, the level of freedom in political rights and civil liberties, and the role of intermediaries such as online commentators or news aggregators in news curation and consumption, all of which are relevant to the formation of distrust profiles. Whether and how these national differences have caused the establishment of different distrust profiles is beyond the scope of this article, but this cross-national comparison enables us to better understand the complexities of how more macro-level factors such as media, political, and technological systems may influence different levels of trust/distrust among news users in these three countries.

### 5.2. Future Research

While this study offers an initial cross-national analysis of distrust profiles, it would be useful to expand the research context across a wider range of countries and media systems. It would also be useful to draw on different methods for exploring distrust in news; for example,



folk theory research frequently draws on in-depth interviews with members of the public, yet these studies are often confined to distinct media systems (e.g., the US, as in Nelson & Lewis, 2023). Going forward, this body of research would benefit from larger-scale studies that draw on qualitative, interview-based data to further examine distrust in news across media systems.

Future research can also benefit from comparing a larger number of countries where systematic comparisons of media systems or other macro-level factors of clusters of countries can be made. For example, a restriction on countries with similar structural factors would allow us to see how media structures, when holding other factors constant, shape the formation of different distrust profiles. Researchers could also use levels of media freedom across countries to explore variations between users who are living in countries where freedom of the press is restricted, and not protected. Furthermore, researchers could also group countries where people rely heavily on online intermediaries vs. traditional news organizations to see how differentiated patterns of news reliance result in more or less trust in journalism.

Additionally, the findings in the current study suggest that news organizations and digital intermediaries should recalibrate how they approach reaching audiences and building or winning back their trust. Specifically, swing trusters present a key opportunity, and both practitioners and academics would benefit from a deeper understanding of how journalists and intermediaries approach the trust relationship with these users. In-depth interviews that probe beliefs about what influences perceptions of trust and information quality would offer an important complement to this study. This approach has already been used by a small but growing number of journalism studies scholars (such as Groot Kormelink & Klein Gunnewiek, 2022; Palmer et al., 2020; Wilner et al., 2021), resulting in a greater understanding of how people approach journalism broadly and trust in news specifically. More studies utilizing this methodological approach would add to this growing body of literature.

## 6. Conclusions

Distrust profiles contribute to the body of scholarship on (dis)trust in journalism. By segmenting users based on their relative distrust of various sources of news, this study contributes to our understanding of the factors that shape journalism's credibility crisis. While a trust polarization phenomenon emerged, the findings also identified segments of swing trusters, who may present a more realistic opportunity for journalists to improve their credibility with the public. They also indicate that normative expectations matter a great deal when it comes to people's trust or distrust in journalism, suggesting that journalists would do well to consider how they might challenge or change people's existing

folk theories when it comes to news. Many newsrooms are pursuing a variety of means of communicating their trustworthiness to the public. Our findings suggest that improving the credibility of individual newsrooms may begin with improving the public's perception of journalism *as a whole*.

## Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the provision of data by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

## References

- Baron, M. (2023, March 24). We want objective judges and doctors. Why not journalists too? *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/24/journalism-objectivity-trump-misinformation-marty-baron>
- Benson, R., Blach-Ørsten, M., Powers, M., Willig, I., & Zambrano, S. V. (2012). Media systems online and off: Comparing the form of news in the United States, Denmark, and France. *Journal of Communication*, 62(1), 21–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01625.x>
- Brenan, M. (2022, October 18). Americans' trust in media remains near record low. *Gallup News*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/403166/americans-trust-media-remains-near-record-low.aspx>
- Callison, C., & Young, M. L. (2019). *Reckoning: Journalism's limits and possibilities*. Oxford University Press.
- Ceron, A. (2015). Internet, news, and political trust: The difference between social media and online media outlets. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 20(5), 487–503. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12129>
- Curry, A. L., & Stroud, N. J. (2021). The effects of journalistic transparency on credibility assessments and engagement intentions. *Journalism*, 22(4), 901–918. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919850387>
- Freedom House. (2022). *Freedom in the world research methodology*. <https://freedomhouse.org/reports/freedom-world/freedom-world-research-methodology>
- González-Tosat, C., & Sádaba-Chalezquer, C. (2021). Digital intermediaries: More than new actors on a crowded media stage. *Journalism and Media*, 2, 77–99. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia2010006>

- Goyanes, M., Ardèvol-Abreu, A., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2023). Antecedents of news avoidance: Competing effects of political interest, news overload, trust in news media, and “news finds me” perception. *Digital Journalism*, 11(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1990097>
- Groot Kormelink, T., & Klein Gunnewiek, A. (2022). From “far away” to “shock” to “fatigue” to “back to normal:” How young people experienced news during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journalism Studies*, 23(5/6), 669–686. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1932560>
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (Eds.). (2011). *Comparing media systems beyond the Western world*. Cambridge University Press.
- Humphrecht, E., Castro Herrero, L., Blassnig, S., Brüggemann, M., & Engesser, S. (2022). Media systems in the digital age: An empirical comparison of 30 Countries. *Journal of Communication*, 72(2), 145–164. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqab054>
- Ipsos. (2019). *Trust in the media*. <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-06/global-advisor-trust-in-media-2019.pdf>
- Kalogeropoulos, A., Suiter, J., Udriș, L., & Eisenegger, M. (2019). News media trust and news consumption: Factors related to trust in news in 35 Countries. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 3672–3693. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10141>
- Karlsen, R., & Aalberg, T. (2023). Social media and trust in news: An experimental study of the effect of Facebook on news story credibility. *Digital Journalism*, 11(1), 144–160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1945938>
- Kim, S. J. (2018). Audience measurement and analysis. In A. B. Albarran, B. Mierzejewska, & J. Jung (Eds.), *The handbook of media management and economics* (2nd ed., pp. 379–393). Routledge.
- Knight Foundation, & Gallup. (2018). *Indicators of news media trust*. <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/indicators-of-news-media-trust>
- Konieczna, M., & Robinson, S. (2014). Emerging news non-profits: A case study for rebuilding community trust? *Journalism*, 15(8), 968–986. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884913505997>
- Korea Press Foundation. (2019). *Media users in Korea 2019*. [https://www.kpf.or.kr/synap/skin/doc.html?fn=BASE\\_202001301015244791.pdf&rs=/synap/result/upload/mediapds](https://www.kpf.or.kr/synap/skin/doc.html?fn=BASE_202001301015244791.pdf&rs=/synap/result/upload/mediapds)
- Lee, T.-T. (2010). Why they don’t trust the media: An examination of factors predicting trust. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 54(1), 8–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764210376308>
- Lewis, S. C. (2019). Lack of trust in the news media, institutional weakness, and relational journalism as a potential way forward. *Journalism*, 20(1), 44–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918808134>
- Markov, Č., & Min, Y. (2022). Understanding the public’s animosity toward news media: Cynicism and distrust as related but distinct negative media perceptions. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 99(4), 1099–1125. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.utah.edu/10.1177/10776990211061764>
- Masullo, G., Curry, A., & Whipple, K. (2019). *Building trust: What works for news organizations*. Center for Media Engagement. <https://mediaengagement.org/research/building-trust>
- Mesmer, K. R. (2022). An “assumption of bad faith”: Using fake news rhetoric to create journalistic teaching moments. *Journalism Practice*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2022.2086158>
- Moran, R. E. (2021). Subscribing to transparency: Trust-building within virtual newsrooms on Slack. *Journalism Practice*, 15(10), 1580–1596. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1778507>
- Mushtaq, S., & Baig, F. (2016). Indian media system: An application of comparative media approach. *South Asian Studies*, 31(2), 45–63.
- Nelson, J. L., & Kim, S. J. (2021). Improve trust, increase loyalty? Analyzing the relationship between news credibility and consumption. *Journalism Practice*, 15(3), 348–365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1719874>
- Nelson, J. L., & Lewis, S. C. (2023). Only “sheep” trust journalists? How citizens’ self-perceptions shape their approach to news. *New Media & Society*, 25(7), 1522–1541. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211018160>
- Newman, N. (2022). *Overview and key findings of the 2022 Digital News Report*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/dnr-executive-summary>
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Schulz, A., Andi, S., Robertson, C. T., & Nielsen, R. K. (2021). *Reuters Institute digital news report 2021*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021>
- Nielsen, R. K. (2019). Folk theories of journalism: The many faces of a local newspaper. In S. Allan, C. Carter, S. Cushion, L. Dencik, I. Garcia-Blanco, J. Harris, R. Sambrook, K. Wahl-Jorgensen, & A. Williams (Eds.), *The future of journalism: Risks, threats and opportunities* (pp. 318–326). Routledge.
- Nielsen, R. K., & Ganter, S. A. (2017). Dealing with digital intermediaries: A case study of the relations between publishers and platforms. *New Media & Society*, 20(4), 1600–1617. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F1461444817701318>
- Obermaier, M., Steindl, N., & Fawzi, N. (2023). Independent or a political pawn? How recipients perceive influences on journalistic work compared to journalists and what explains their perceptions. *Jour-*

- nalism, 24(4), 857–876. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849211034359>
- Palmer, R. (2019). A “deep story” about American journalism: Using “episodes” to explore folk theories of journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 20(3), 327–344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1375390>
- Palmer, R., Toff, B., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020). “The media covers up a lot of things”: Watchdog ideals meet folk theories of journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 21(14), 1973–1989. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1808516>
- Park, S., Fisher, C., Flew, T., & Dulleck, U. (2020). Global mistrust in news: The impact of social media on trust. *International Journal on Media Management*, 22(2), 83–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14241277.2020.1799794>
- Prior, M. (2009). The immensely inflated news audience: Assessing bias in self-reported news exposure. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 73(1), 130–143. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfp002>
- Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. (2021). *2021 digital news report: Methodology*. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/methodology>
- Rhee, J. W., Cho, H. J., Song, H. J., & Jung, H. H. (2011). South Korean media system: Toward a democratization model. *Korean Social Sciences Review*, 1(1), 303–337.
- Robinson, S. (2023). *How journalists engage: A theory of trust building, identities, and care*. Oxford University Press.
- Robinson, S., Jensen, K., & Dávalos, C. (2021). “Listening literacies” as keys to rebuilding trust in journalism: A typology for a changing news audience. *Journalism Studies*, 22(9), 1219–1237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1937677>
- Saeed, S. (2015). Phantom journalism: Governing India’s proxy media owners. *Journalism Studies*, 16(5), 663–679. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2015.1054174>
- Sappal, G. S. (2018, March 9). There is no autonomy for Doordarshan and All India Radio (and the opposition must take the blame). *Scroll.in*. <https://scroll.in/article/871280/there-is-no-autonomy-for-doordarshan-and-all-india-radio-blame-the-opposition>
- Shin, W., Kim, C., & Joo, J. (2021). Hating journalism: Anti-press discourse and negative emotions toward journalism in Korea. *Journalism*, 22(5), 1239–1255. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920985729>
- Thier, K., Abdenour, J., Walth, B., & Dahmen, N. S. (2021). A narrative solution: The relationship between solutions journalism, narrative transportation, and news trust. *Journalism*, 22(10), 2511–2530. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919876369>
- Toff, B., & Nielsen, R. K. (2022). How news feels: Anticipated anxiety as a factor in news avoidance and a barrier to political engagement. *Political Communication*, 39(6), 697–714. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2022.2123073>
- Umbricht, A., & Esser, F. (2016). The push to popularize politics. *Journalism Studies*, 17(1), 100–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.963369>
- Wenzel, A. (2020). *Community-centered journalism: Engaging people, exploring solutions, and building trust*. University of Illinois Press.
- Wenzel, A. (2021). Sourcing diversity, shifting culture: Building “cultural competence” in public media. *Digital Journalism*, 9(4), 461–480. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2020.1810585>
- Wenzel, A., Ford, S., & Nechushtai, E. (2020). Report for America, report about communities: Local news capacity and community trust. *Journalism Studies*, 21(3), 287–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1641428>
- Williams, A. E. (2012). Trust or bust?: Questioning the relationship between media trust and news attention. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(1), 116–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2011.651186>
- Wilner, T., Montiel Valle, D. A., & Masullo, G. M. (2021). “To me, there’s always a bias”: Understanding the public’s folk theories about journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 22(14), 1930–1946. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1979422>
- Zahay, M. L., Jensen, K., Xia, Y., & Robinson, S. (2021). The labor of building trust: Traditional and engagement discourses for practicing journalism in a digital age. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 98(4), 1041–1058. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699020954854>

## About the Authors



**Thomas B. Ksiazek** (PhD, Northwestern University) is a professor in the Department of Communication at Villanova University. His research interests include patterns of cross-platform media use, new forms of user engagement with the news, implications of audience behavior for society and the field of journalism, and the application of network analysis to the consumption and production of media.



**Su Jung Kim** (PhD, Northwestern University) is an associate professor at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and an affiliate member of the Annenberg Research Network on International Communication at the University of Southern California. Her research examines how audience behavior takes shape in the digital media environment, especially the formation, patterns, and impacts of audience engagement behaviors.



**Jacob L. Nelson** (PhD, Northwestern University) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah and a fellow with the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University. He is also the author of *Imagined Audiences: How Journalists Perceive and Pursue the Public* (Oxford University Press, 2021). He researches the relationship between journalism and the public.



**Ahran Park** (PhD, University of Oregon) is an assistant professor in the School of Media and Communication at Korea University. Her research focuses on the dynamic evolution of media law and policy in the context of comparative law, as well as the impact of the digital environment on journalism practices.



**Sushobhan Patankar** (PhD, Savitribai Phule Pune University) is an associate professor at Symbiosis Institute of Media and Communication at Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune. He teaches television journalism, documentary filmmaking, and the business of media. Sushobhan researches journalism and digital media.



**Olivia Sabalaskey** is a recent graduate of Villanova University. She is interested in areas of research such as mass-mediated content (film, television, new media), audience engagement and behavior, as well as cross-platform media use. This is her first research publication.



**Harsh Taneja** (PhD, Northwestern University) is an associate professor of new and emerging media at the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He is interested in how people consume media in an environment where they purportedly have plenty of choices. Within this broader question, his work focuses on global internet audiences, as well as how people consume news on digital media.