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Article

## Representing Trust in Digital Journalism

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### Abstract

This article examines how journalists at two prominent news organizations have aimed to portray trustworthy digital reporting of marginalized communities. The case study draws on the concepts of engagement and trust as a resource to evaluate journalists' articles and the related audience comments on *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* digital sites. This study analyzed the digital news articles and audience comments in 2012 and the latter half of 2022 during the rapid expansion of mobile audiences and American readers' declining trust in newspapers. As this study discovered, journalists at the two legacy organizations have portrayed novel forms of reporting relating to fresh notions of enhancing readers' trust as well as elements of transparency and interactivity in the news. They have represented trustworthy journalism based on an inclusive approach and personalized depictions of marginalized communities' experiences to appeal to readers increasingly using mobile devices. Although the journalists' stories attracted some toxic tweets, their articles also encouraged digital subscribers' loyalty and enthusiasm to help solve the reported problems affecting marginalized communities. This study indicates the possibilities of fostering trustworthy interactions among journalists and engaged subscribers in digital news spaces.

### Keywords

digital journalism; journalist–audience interaction; news coverage; marginalized communities; media trust; The New York Times; The Washington Post

### 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).

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### 1. Introduction

Across many newsrooms, journalists have increasingly discussed how they can contribute to restoring public trust in the news coverage of the vulnerable. The newsroom discussions have been called a “reckoning” and a “reform-oriented” effort to help overturn a media culture that too often appeared to be catering to “the already comfortable while afflicting the afflicted” (Arguedas et al., 2023, pp. 3–4, 45–46).

Within America's highly advanced, complex, and varied journalism landscape, *The New York Times* (henceforth the *Times*) and *The Washington Post* (henceforth the *Post*) newsrooms have developed reputations as legacy agenda-setters that have shined a spotlight on the problems of marginalized communities. The *Times'* journalists have long portrayed their role as the “conscience of America” by exposing social issues, while the

*Post* reporters have become known for compassionate news coverage of the vulnerable (McCarthy et al., 1996; Schwarz, 2012, p. xvii).

More recently, journalism scholars have suggested that the rise of digital reporting could provide more opportunities for journalists to help overcome readers' declining trust in newspapers (Beckett & Deuze, 2016). The *Times* provided a promising pivotal moment in 2012 by showcasing a relatively new style of linear, narrative news or long-form journalism, allowing readers to scroll across the text on small, mobile screens (Dowling & Vogan, 2014; Morales, 2012). Journalism researchers have advocated the scrolling, digital structure for enhancing engaging news coverage of marginalized communities (Beckett & Deuze, 2016).

The *Times'* and the *Post's* teams announced a commitment to providing engaging, trustworthy news styles for growing numbers of mobile readers by 2022

(Guaglione, 2021; Tameez, 2023). Readers' trust in newspapers had declined in mid-2022. Only 16% of Americans indicated they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in newspapers (Brennan, 2022). Even so, the *Times* and the *Post* fared relatively well in Statista polling, with almost half of the survey respondents agreeing that the newspapers were very or somewhat credible (Watson, 2023a, 2023b). Digital scrolling structures have become a fast-growing research topic (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Dowling & Vogan, 2014). There has been less attention to the two news organizations' coverage of marginalized community news on digital and mobile platforms that can offer opportunities for trustworthy interactions with audiences.

This is a rare study of both the journalist-driven elements and the audience responses to the news organizations' digital journalism. It seeks to answer the question: How have journalists at the two organizations portrayed trust and trustworthy digital coverage of marginalized communities, and how have audiences responded to the related news articles in 2012 and the latter half of 2022? The study focuses on journalists' news articles and the related audience comments on the *Times* and the *Post* digital platforms. The selected timeframes correspond to the growth of digital scrolling structures in 2012 and the organizations' announcements of engaging mobile news styles by 2022 (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Burrell, 2017; Dowling & Vogan, 2014; Guaglione, 2021; Tameez, 2023).

This study is informed by concepts of engagement with audiences that relate to notions of trust. Ksiazek et al. (2016) have advanced the idea of a continuum of engagement. The continuum can begin with the time of exposure or the news release and can lead to interactivity or the active participation of audiences. As Ksiazek et al. (2016, p. 505) explain, "more (quantity) and better (quality) ways to interact with content and with other users indicate deeper engagement." Journalists need to understand engagement because the term relates to how audiences perceive the value of a news organization and whether readers will return and pay for the news, contributing to an organization's sustainability. According to Nelson and Kim (2021, p. 352), many newsrooms have been "convinced that engagement is the best way to increase trust in and loyalty to news." Moreover, Varma (2023, p. 3) has observed that traditional news reporting, emphasizing official sources and a neutral tone, relegates people who experience social injustice to "the margins of coverage." This article is based on Ford et al.'s (2020) notion of marginalizing when journalists misrepresent vulnerable communities based on race, class, gender, disability, generation, or geography. As Nelson (2021) has affirmed, journalists can potentially develop a more inclusive approach by opening digital spaces to marginalized voices. An inclusive journalism approach can encourage more audience engagement, as well as interactivity or participation, and loyalty that can lead to paid news subscriptions (Hess & Richards, 2021; Nelson & Kim, 2021).

The study also draws on the concept of trust as a journalism resource that is part of all the work associated with writing, producing, and distributing news, as well as audience responses. As Moran and Nechushtai (2023) explain, trust is embedded in all aspects of journalism and "shapes and is shaped by the multitude of actors and communities that attend to it" (p. 459). According to Carlson (2016), news reporters can develop metajournalistic discourses that are public expressions about journalism's meaning and legitimacy. Audiences, too, can establish metajournalistic discourses to evaluate news articles. Journalism can be viewed as trustworthy when audiences find that the news includes emotional authenticity or meaningful insights. This study contributes to this recent research by examining the portrayal of trust and trustworthiness in both the journalist-driven elements and audience responses relating to the news coverage of marginalized communities.

## 2. Reinterpreting Trust and Trustworthy News

Rebuilding audiences' trust has been considered crucial for journalists needing to develop engaging news to attract loyal subscribers and boost journalism organizations' sustainability (Nelson & Kim, 2021). Traditionally, journalists would use a news writing style of "detached expertise" to elicit readers' trust (Nelson, 2021, p. 35). Journalists emphasized elite sources, including political leaders. Their reporting focused on the hard news or "bad news" of crime to shape public values of equality, morality, and order (Mickler, 1998, p. 57). However, the impersonal stylistic norm tended to exclude marginalized community voices (Moran & Nechushtai, 2023; Varma, 2023). For example, Lane et al. (2020) discovered that the *Times* and the *Post* provided official views of a racial threat in crime-related articles about an unarmed Black teenager, Trayvon Martin, who was fatally shot in Florida in 2012. Aswad (2019) also noted that the *Times* accentuated official quotations in the news coverage of Syrian refugees that suggested their exclusion from US society.

More recently, researchers have advanced broader concepts of trust and trustworthy news. Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) has affirmed that journalists can potentially cultivate readers' trust by authentically reporting public expressions of emotion. Beckett and Deuze (2016) have asserted that trustworthy journalism needs to focus on people and value the audience. According to Papacharissi (2016, p. 311), networked audiences can be viewed as "affective publics" who ideally can be connected through expressions of sentiment. As Varma (2023) has noted, news that merely circulates marginalized voices in solely emotional terms is not sufficient; she has shown a need for new narrative structures that allow for "woven vignettes" to present the perspectives of marginalized people about the issues that affect them (p. 6). Vignettes should include marginalized communities' views of shared conditions beyond individual circumstances (Varma, 2023; Wake, 2021). This in-depth

reporting represents an advancement of the traditional inverted pyramid model in journalism that prioritized official views in the first paragraphs of news articles.

The rise of digital journalism contributed to the hope that online spaces could provide opportunities for varied, trustworthy news. For example, Wall and El Zahed (2015) found that the *Times* blog, The Lede, incorporated citizen journalist videos that provided glimpses into Syrian people's experiences during the country's civil war in 2012. They suggested that the raw, unpolished videos could boost audience trust in authentic news. As Wall and El Zahed wrote (2015, p. 176), "The emotionality of the videos...may well cause more intense audience involvement with and connection to what is being viewed." Smit et al. (2017) noted that other legacy broadcasters provided skeptical views about the citizen videos of violent attacks. Legacy news organizations mainly displayed videos rather than inviting audience interactivity or participation in the news.

In the 24/7 news cycle, many daily digital articles appeared as quick-hitting clickbait created in a "short, fast, news ticker-like way" (Planer & Godulla, 2021, p. 567; Usher, 2019). Newsroom managements have often required journalists to market saleable news on Twitter about trivial topics (Alieva, 2023; Tiffen & Smith, 2023). According to Tandoc and Vos (2016, p. 961), digital journalists' interactions with social media audiences suggested "a top-down, we-tell-you-what-is-important approach." This style of reporting represented a myth of interactivity (Young et al., 2018).

Nelson and Kim (2021) have observed that legacy journalism organizations, such as the *Times*, increasingly recognized a need to be more transparent and willing to engage with audiences. They state:

A growing number of journalism stakeholders have therefore begun investing millions of dollars and countless resources into efforts to make the news more "engaging" and "transparent," in hopes that doing so will result in more public trust and, consequently, more audience loyalty. (Nelson & Kim, 2021, p. 349)

News transparency has offered a way for audiences to "see inside" the truthfulness of journalists' reporting and practices (Ananny & Crawford, 2018, p. 974). Journalists could show more transparency by explicitly attempting to invite audiences to engage with the news production process (Nelson & Kim, 2021).

The rapid acceleration of digital news not only attracted a growing number of online subscribers but also led to the growth of hate speech on social media. Ksiazek (2015) established that many news organizations initially tried to filter out anonymous audiences' offensive messages. Reporters were increasingly targeted by abusive readers promoting misinformation or "junk news" on social media (Coatney, 2021, 2023, p. 171). The negative news messages also discouraged some

other readers, including digital users under the age of 35 (Arguedas et al., 2023); younger readers at times formed habits of avoiding the news about "depressing or overwhelming" topics (p. 43).

Increasingly, legacy establishments have abandoned or limited online comment sections (Ksiazek & Springer, 2020). Removing the comment sections could undermine news organizations' efforts to engage with online audiences. As Nelson et al. (2021, p. 581) have noted: "User comments offer citizens an opportunity to actively participate in public discussion of current events, knowledge creation, and the journalistic process. Abandoning or limiting these capabilities compromises that opportunity for user engagement." Craft et al. (2016, p. 678) have also remarked that some audience commenters can uphold positive values, becoming "potentially powerful shapers of journalism's standards of performance." This study contributes to the research into enhancing trust in digital news by examining both the journalist-driven elements and audience responses relating to the *Post's* and the *Times'* coverage of marginalized communities.

### 3. Method

This study used a three-stage strategy for identifying digital news coverage of marginalized communities. First, early news topics were identified by examining the annual overviews of the *Post's* and the *Times'* digital journalism in 2012 ("2012: The year in graphics," 2012; The Wonkblog Team, 2012). Two news topics related to marginalized community members: the fatal shooting of Black teenager Trayvon Martin and refugees fleeing Syria's war. The study included both topics based on Ford et al.'s (2020) notion of marginalized communities misrepresented in the news based on race, class, gender, disability, generation, or geography. An online search of the *Post's* and the *Times'* archives identified 40 news articles about the topics in the digital newspaper sections in 2012. The 40 items included news articles with embedded videos and blogs that had originally contained audience comments and featured tweets. The related audience comment sections had often been disabled or removed. Even so, this study's sample has included 34 audience comments and 12 tweets that specifically focused on the reporting of the topics rather than general discussions. The sample in 2012 included 40 digital news articles, 34 audience comments from the subscribers' sections, and 12 tweets.

The second stage involved identifying the two legacy organizations' digital-specific news coverage of marginalized communities between June and December 2022. Digital news articles were sourced from the hyperlinks shared on the news organizations' Twitter handles for PC users in 2022 (@nytgraphics and @PostGraphics). The articles were also sourced from the organizations' Twitter Lite sites for mobile device users, including youth audiences at the time (mobile.twitter.com/nytgraphics and mobile.twitter.com/wpdataatateam). All 788 general

news tweets were manually reviewed by a human coder. Of these, 13.83% ( $n = 109$ ) of tweets contained hyperlinks to related news articles about marginalized communities. This study's sample included 20 related long-form articles about a member or members of marginalized communities. The articles did not include news about sports competitions, commentaries about political party debates, or reports lacking direct sources. This sampling strategy allowed for a close analysis of the digital long-form articles (see Table 1).

The third stage related to the audience comments about the set of long-form articles that journalists shared on Twitter in 2022. This study's sample included readers' tweets ( $n = 393$ ) and subscribers' comments ( $n = 331$ ) that were specifically related to the reporting. Audience responses were analyzed according to whether they mainly supported an article, expressed emotional reactions, or posted a call for action (Ksiazek, 2018).

The digital news articles and subscribers' comments were also analyzed to assess the representations of trust. This analysis included a quantitative method to examine the different types of news messages. The study's qualitative analysis focused on metajournalistic discourse—public expressions by journalists and audiences about the meaning of the news and the journalism practices that produced them (Carlson, 2016). The news articles were analyzed in relation to the speakers or sources, the placement, the conditions underlying the publication, and the audiences. Altogether, the final refined sam-

ple included 60 digital-specific news articles, 405 audience tweets, and 365 subscribers' comments related to the reporting.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

Three main themes emerged from the analysis of the sample of news items. The themes emphasized news transparency, digital interactivity, and emotional appeals. Together, these themes show how the *Post's* and the *Times's* reporters have aimed to portray inclusive writing styles about trustworthy news of marginalized communities.

##### 4.1. News Transparency

Digital news can potentially be a "carrier of the ethic of transparency" that explicitly provides behind-the-scenes insights into the journalism production process to elicit audiences' trust (Revers, 2014, p. 823). The *Post's* and the *Times's* journalists used a candid style in digital blogs in 2012 that revealed glimpses into the news coverage of marginalized communities. More than a third of this study's article samples in 2012 explicitly referred to behind-the-scenes revelations.

For example, journalist Paul Farhi (2012) observed that the story of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, "began as a routine police-blotter item, a journalistic afterthought." As Farhi affirmed in the *Post's* style

**Table 1.** Sample of the long-form articles accessed via Twitter from June to December 2022.

<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>The Washington Post</i>
How the police killed Breonna Taylor	The God of São Félix
The chain of failures that left 17 dead in a Bronx apartment fire	Massive flooding in Kentucky engulfs homes, leaves at least 15 dead
The illegal airstrips bringing toxic mining to Brazil's Indigenous land	More dangerous heat waves are on the way
Expanded safety net drives sharp drop in child poverty	A failure of enforcement
"Very dire": Devastated by floods, Pakistan faces looming food crisis	See the scale of Pakistan's flooding in maps, photos, and videos
In Hasidic enclaves, failing private schools flush with public money	Hurricane Fiona hit Puerto Rico as a category 1 storm
Majority of Latino voters out of G.O.P.'s reach, new poll shows	The unseen toll of nonfatal police shootings
How diverse are the candidates in the midterm elections?	As fatal police shootings increase, more go unreported
Hey, New Yorkers: Meet your neighborhood's new Congressional district	The gold-mining city that is destroying a sacred Venezuelan mountain
Extreme heat will change us	Fatal force



section, “The national media didn’t descend on Sanford.” He wrote that eventually, “the story moved like a fast-burning fuse, leaping from traditional news sources to the blogosphere and social media.” *Times* journalist Charles M. Blow (2012) highlighted in an opinion blog that citizen communities, rather than journalists, initiated the questions about a neighborhood watch member’s shooting of Martin. Blow (2012) remarked, “This case has reignited a furor about vigilante justice, racial-profiling and equitable treatment under the law, and it has stirred the pot of racial strife.” The *Post*’s journalist Patrick B. Pexton (2012) discussed the pressures felt by young bloggers who had talked with him about their responsibility for reporting trending news, such as the story about the shooting. As Pexton opined in a blog, “They said that they felt as if they were out there alone in digital land, under high pressure to get Web hits, with no training, little guidance or mentoring and sparse editing.” The *Times*’ readers posted their positive reactions to Blow’s (2012) reporting of a tragedy in the digital subscribers’ comment section. The audience comments included, “Thanks for picking up on this story,” after wondering about “the minimal media coverage” and “why it was taking so long.” A dominant theme was sharing behind-the-scenes messages in the *Post* and the *Times* news blogs about Trayvon Martin.

Journalists can create a sense of trust by sharing their candid reasons for reporting the news (Moran & Nechushtai, 2023). Of this study’s sample in 2012, the *Times*’ journalists embedded citizen YouTube videos and tweets in digital news articles to show they were portraying Syrian refugees’ overlooked experiences. For example, a *Times* team used an inclusive tone to explain their news site, “watching Syria’s war” (“Watching Syria’s war,” n.d.). They shared a back story that, “We wanted to make sense of these videos” and “worked diligently to verify and add context to some of this footage” (“2012: The year in graphics,” 2012). The related descriptions portrayed Syrian people’s experiences, such as, “cradled in someone’s arms, the boy was wrapped in a checkered scarf with a bandage” (“Watching Syria’s war: Children,” n.d.). The news captions emphasized “what we don’t know,” disclosing missing details about the identities of children and camera operators pictured in the scenes. A *New York Times* team (“Watching Syria’s war: Children,” n.d.) selected tweets that included Syrian residents’ personal messages and hashtags related to online support sites. The citizen tweets included, “a mortar shell struck a school in #Aleppo killing four children and a teacher. This is the same school my cousins go to. #Syria.” Sharing behind-the-scenes revelations in the news blogs suggested Moran and Nechushtai’s (2023) view that journalists try to structure their reporting to elicit audience trust.

News leads can be a significant way that journalists can show transparency by writing opening paragraphs that bear witness to the hidden conditions of marginalized communities (Varma, 2023). Journalists reported

behind-the-scenes revelations in this study’s sample of long-form news articles in 2022. The journalists’ revelations appeared in prominent news leads, suggesting a fresh style for increasingly mobile users (Tameez, 2023). A *Times*’ team, for example, revealed in a lead summary that they had identified hundreds of illegal airstrips that allowed for criminal gold mining in Indigenous Yanomami people’s traditional land in the Amazon. Journalists reported in a bold, emphatic style, “the *Times* identified more than 1,200 other unregistered airstrips across the Brazilian Amazon—many of them part of criminal networks that are destroying **Indigenous lands** and threatening their people” (Andreoni et al., 2022). Crowdsourced satellite images focused on the damaged homes in the Indigenous communities. The lead summary included an enhanced byline portrayed as a fresh journalistic technique in 2022. Enhanced bylines began replacing traditional datelines that had included only brief mentions of the journalists’ locations. Instead, the enhanced bylines in lead summaries focused on how journalists produced the news. As the *Times*’ assistant editor, Edmund Lee, explained in an interview, “A big part of ensuring trust is letting people know we are where we say we are” (Tameez, 2023). This study’s news article sample in 2022 included long, linear narratives. The mobile-driven style frequently appeared in the articles for the *Post* and the *Times* readers (see Table 1).

Some news lead variations appeared across the *Post* platform. For instance, journalists Terrence McCoy and Cecília do Lago used a human-interest tone in an article about an environmental scandal that affected Parakanã families in the Apyterewa Indigenous Territory in the Amazon. A lead news summary focused on a local official responsible for the territory: “He’s been called a deforester and killer. Now he’s called mayor” (McCoy & do Lago, 2022). The opening summary included an animated background image of deforested land. The related byline contained an explanatory message: “Terrence McCoy, who covers Brazil for *The Washington Post*, visited a remote, illegally built town within Indigenous territory for this story.” McCoy used a more impersonal tone in a related article about the official system damaging Indigenous communities. The lead headline in McCoy’s related article emphasized, “The Amazon, Undone....Deforesters are plundering the Amazon” (2022). Journalists portrayed transparent news styles to disclose what Varma (2023, p. 6) has called “the shared conditions” of marginalized communities that expose the problems of official governance.

A notable number of audience subscribers reflected on the value of the news reporting by posting comments at the end of the articles that were part of this study’s sample in 2022. Audiences shared expressions of support on both the *Times* site ( $n = 106$ ) and the *Post* site ( $n = 62$ ). Readers specifically commented that a news investigation was “important,” “fascinating,” and “well-researched” regarding the *Times* ( $n = 54$ ) and the *Post* coverage ( $n = 36$ ). Examples include, “[t]his

article is a solid reason, I have been a subscriber to the NY Times for years—and will proudly continue,” and “THANK YOU WAPO for featuring this very important story” (Andreoni et al., 2022; McCoy, 2022). The *Post* subscribers also referred to their reading preferences. Their comments included, “a very informative article” and “Nicely colored graphics. (I’m often a bit of a scold on this issue.) Excellent, simple color contrast that quickly reinforces the text” (Muyskens et al., 2022). Subscribers’ comments often showed their loyalty, a quality that Nelson and Kim (2021) have found to be related to audiences’ trust in a news organization (see Figure 1).

Journalists generated wide-ranging reactions to their news tweets in 2022. The most popular news investigations promoted on Twitter included the Amazon exposés by the *Post* and the *Times* during the week when each article was published (Au & Connected Action, 2022a, 2022b). Even so, readers’ tweets were varied (see Figure 2). Most Twitter users tweeted cynical views that the articles were “junk science” or “fake news” ( $n = 212$ ). To a lesser degree, some subscribers posted messages about fake news ( $n = 44$ ) to discredit the reporting of environmental damage. Others tweeted political party endorsements ( $n = 115$ ). Despite the growing use of online blocking tech, some tweets included extreme racism and violent messages ( $n = 29$ ). Notwithstanding the toxic tweets, some Twitter users posted direct expressions of support ( $n = 55$ ). Digital newspaper subscribers also became commenters who tried to counteract Twitter users’ toxic messages. For instance, a subscriber commented on some users’ abusive comments about the *Post*’s coverage of Appalachian communities during a major flood. The subscriber remarked, “The comments to this article are asinine. Eastern Kentucky is an impoverished part of the country that has already suffered enough” (Childress et al., 2022). This sharing endorsed Craft et al.’s (2016) views that audience subscribers can help to uphold journalism standards. The journalists’ articles and subscribers’ comments indicated a collective initiative to enhance the news coverage of marginalized communities.

#### 4.2. Digital Interactivity

Journalists can help to enhance trust in the news during their digital interactions with audiences (Ksiazek et al., 2016; Nelson & Kim, 2021). The *Post* and the *Times* teams developed some interactive elements in the sample of news articles about Trayvon Martin in 2012. For example, the *Times*’ journalist Holly Epstein Ojalvo (2012) developed an inclusive article seeking students’ comments for the newspaper’s education site, The Learning Network. The article accentuated the need for a safe digital space that “explicitly invites the voices of young people” who were at least 13 years old. Some student commenters responded that they were “shocked” and “a little bit angry” that they had not heard of Martin’s story before. For the *Times*’ The Lede blog, journalists Jennifer Preston and Colin Moynihan (2012) shared the hashtags of social media networks in support of Martin’s family, such as #millionhoodies and #trayvonmartin. The Lede’s journalists shared their aim “to draw readers into the global conversation about the news taking place online.” Similarly, a *Post* local blog included “an open letter from black America” to the US President at the time, Barack Obama (Harriston, 2012). Blog writer Keith Harriston included a communication professor’s call to action to help overturn discrimination against Black communities. The professor was quoted as saying, “Make calls. Write letters. Send e-mails.” The news blogs and youth audience messages in 2012 included a conversational tone of immediacy that indicated Papacharissi’s (2016) view of “affective publics” who are mobilized and connected by sentiment.

Of this study’s sample in 2022, inclusive messages encouraged subscribers to use interactive data tools in four long-form articles. For example, a *Times* news article carried an inclusive message, “hey New Yorkers,” and a direct appeal for readers to use an interactive search tool to “meet your neighborhood’s new congressional district” (Lu & Fandos, 2022). An embedded link in the article allowed readers to filter or look up redistricting changes for each “racial or ethnic group” in their communities. Related community profiles referred

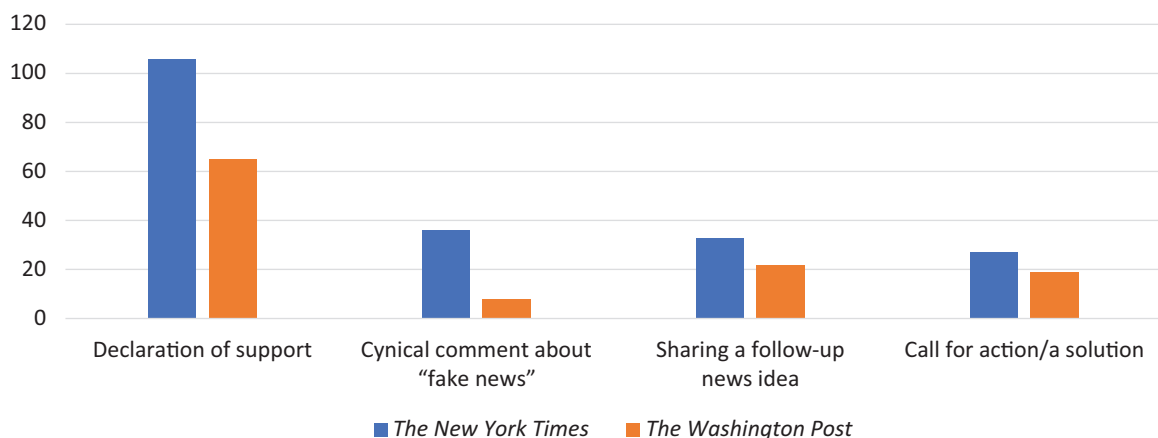
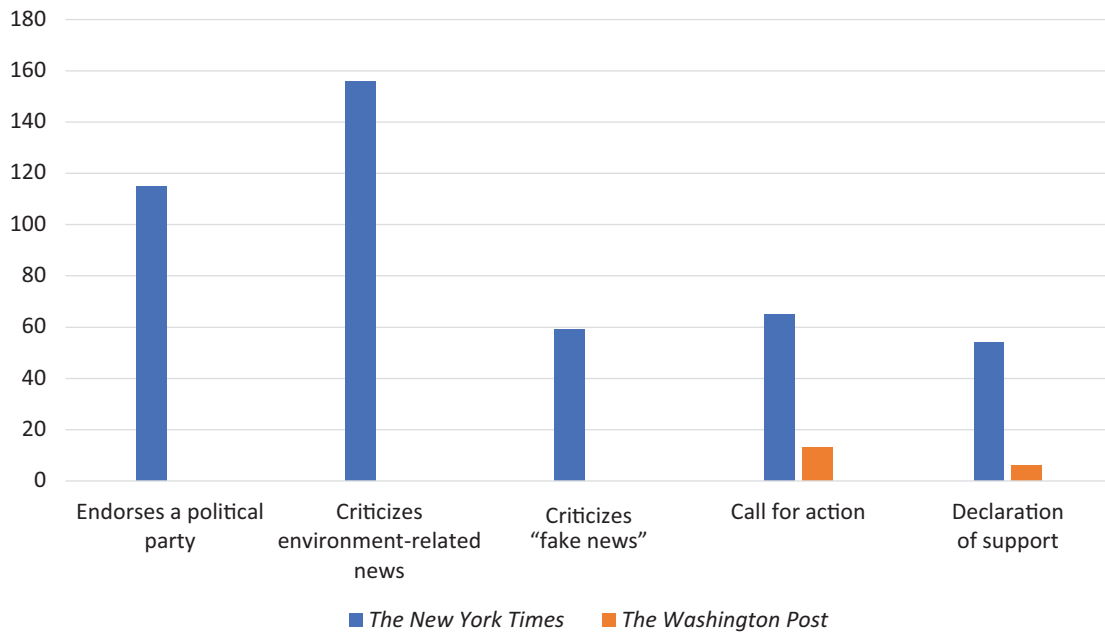


Figure 1. Main themes in audience comment sections.



**Figure 2.** Main themes in Twitter users' comments.

to map-makers' efforts to avoid excluding working-class Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Latino voters. Journalists Denise Lu and Nicholas Fandos referred to popular symbolism, such as portraying a community as "the heart of one of the city's most iconic Black districts since Shirley Chisolm," the first Black woman elected to the US Congress. The news profiles included supportive messages "to allow Asian-American voters a greater say in the political process" (Lu & Fandos, 2022). Journalists developed personalized, interactive messages that presented marginalized communities as a crucial part of everyday civic life.

The *Post's* news teams also wrote inclusive messages encouraging subscribers to use interactive data tools. For example, journalists invited users to search the *Post's* database online and track the missing records of the victims of fatal police shootings ("Fatal force," 2023). The related captions included personalized appeals such as "see all victims." Personalized data also appeared in a different version of the *Post's* article. This article featured an interactive database with the message, "See departments near you" (Tran et al., 2022). Readers could look up comparative tables that showed variations between the relatively low level of official data and the *Post's* records of victim statistics in local communities. Journalists presented inclusive messages to involve audiences in national news.

An inclusive style can promote a sense of audience involvement in news coverage and enhance a perception of trustworthy journalism (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Griffen-Foley, 2020). The articles in this study's sample generated readers' calls for action in tweets ( $n = 78$ ) and subscriber comments ( $n = 46$ ) in 2022. Subscribers asked how they could assist in solving a problem after feeling "helpless," "hopeless," and "depressed" about

the news of environmental damage in the Amazon's Indigenous communities. As a *Times* subscriber asked after reading about the gold-mining damage in communities, "So what can we do? This is incisive, first-rate reporting that leaves me depressed and hopeless. Whom do we contact, how do we figure out where the gold goes?" (Andreoni et al., 2022). A *Post* subscriber commented similarly about the news organization's Amazon investigation: "Good article, thanks! It's also depressing. What can we in the U.S. do to limit this damage?" (McCoy, 2022). Other readers shared personalized appeals about the news of climate change affecting vulnerable communities, such as, "Where are our priorities? When will we wake up and realize that this disaster is already on our doorsteps?" (Rubin et al., 2022). These audiences preferred to become involved in practical problem-solving rather than habits of news avoidance.

The interactive elements generated online calls to care for the marginalized communities portrayed in the news. For example, a *Post* team tweeted a call for action in mobile Twitter news about their interactive weather database: "Look up how many more 100+ degree temps your area is going to experience in 30 years." The *Post's* news article included an emphatic subheading, "Unequal risk," and the journalists' warning that "the poor, the elderly, very young children and people with certain chronic medical conditions are most at risk" (Muyskens et al., 2022). A reader responded to the journalists' article, commenting, "We need...a willingness to allow for compassion and empathy." The article became one of the most popular digital news investigations shared on Twitter during the week (Au & Connected Action, 2022c). The audience reactions indicated that compassionate news of marginalized communities could also become popular online.

### 4.3. Emotional Appeals

Journalists can share trustworthy news with an emotional authenticity that includes “the human factor at its center” (Beckett & Deuze, 2016, p. 4). Of this study’s sample in 2012, the *Post* shared a digital cartoon series to elicit readers’ emotional responses to the story of Trayvon Martin. Candorville cartoonist Darrin Bell created a week-long series, “The Train to the Afterlife,” which portrayed imagined scenarios about Martin’s possible opportunities had he not been fatally shot. Bell explained he was “reminding people this [Martin] was a living, breathing, vital human being with potential, not a useless stock character in the American story who deserved what happened to him.” Bell’s assertion was promoted in the *Post* as one of the best quotes of 2012 (Cavna, 2012a). The *Post* also provided a selection of readers’ reactions, including their comments that the cartoon series “moved me to tears” (Cavna, 2012b). Some readers described themselves as a blue-collar American as well as a “retired white guy.” A reader remarked, “I don’t think in all the discussion that has gone on, anyone made a more eloquent statement on this tragedy” (Cavna, 2012b). The inclusive news messages appeared to elicit trustworthy exchanges between journalists and what Papacharissi (2016) calls affective publics united by collective sentiment.

An often-overlooked way of reporting on marginalized groups has been to interview and quote them in the news (Varma, 2023). This study’s sample of news articles in 2022 frequently included marginalized community members’ views. Marginalized community members represented a majority of all news sources in the sample of articles in the *Times* (65%) and the *Post* (42%). For example, a *Times* team reported on their efforts to interview eyewitnesses and recreate scenes of a police raid that killed an innocent Black medical worker, Breonna Taylor, in Kentucky. Journalists emphasized their interviews with more than a dozen of Taylor’s neighbors because of a lack of camera recordings during the police raid on her home in 2020. A related video included camera footage of Taylor’s boyfriend after the raid as he cried out, “What’s going on?...My girlfriend is dead” (NYT Graphics, 2022a). The sample of news articles in 2022 shared a theme of evoking emotions to show a broader need for social change.

Eyewitness accounts of marginalized community members’ experiences appeared prominently in this study’s sample of news articles in 2022. Another *Times* team, for example, recreated scenes of a fire that killed 17 people in an affordable housing building in the Bronx. The team reported, “The main fire safety system failed disastrously” (Singhvi et al., 2022). Animated captions focused on trapped residents’ 911 emergency phone calls that included a ground-floor resident’s declaration, “I’m eight months pregnant,” and the plea of an upper-level neighbor, “Please don’t forget about me!” A *Times* team tweeted that the article was one of their “high-

est profile projects,” and the related videos attracted 6,514 views on Twitter at the time (NYT Graphics, 2022b). The *Post*’s journalists Arelis R. Hernández and Zoeann Murphy (2022) also focused on survivors’ stories in a news lead about Puerto Rico residents’ experiences after Hurricane Fiona. The news lead included a caption, “Survivors of Fiona wait for help: I’ll take anything.” This focus on eyewitness accounts indicated journalists’ intention to act in a role that Parks has called “caring, storytelling humanists” (2020, p. 1242).

Journalists’ expressions of empathy can become a “cornerstone” for restoring audience trust (Wahl-Jorgensen & Pantti, 2021, p. 1151). Readers shared their empathetic reactions in subscribers’ comments ( $n = 101$ ) and tweets ( $n = 32$ ) on the *Post* and the *Times* platforms. Their messages included, “I weep,” calling an article “shocking” and “terrifying,” and thanking journalists for “shedding light on a heartbreaking problem,” and being “able to speak to humanity.” Readers related the vulnerable groups’ experiences to their lives. A *Times* subscriber commented that an article about an extreme heat wave affecting overseas laborers was “certainly not an experience relegated to distant locales...this will likely be something we all face” (Rubin et al., 2022). Subscribers emphasized the relevance of a vulnerable group’s story for wider communities.

The articles also generated online subscribers’ suggestions ( $n = 64$ ) for follow-up news about the marginalized communities portrayed in the digital articles. The sample of comments in 2012 particularly related to students wanting to read more about Trayvon Martin’s story. For example, a student commented in 2012, “I have not heard anything about this [Trayvon Martin’s] case until today in journalism, but I will be following its results on the news” (Ojalvo, 2012). Other readers in 2022 shared their ideas for follow-up reporting about the *Times*’ coverage of local Hasidic schools. Readers suggested reporting on varied Hasidic communities’ experiences, and one subscriber remarked, “There seems to be a potentially much broader issue” (Shapiro & Rosenthal, 2022). The *Post* subscribers, at times, conversed with one another to show their concern for a person portrayed in an article. For example, readers suggested the *Post*’s journalists revisit the home of a Black victim of a nonfatal police shooting to check on his condition (Howey et al., 2022). The readers’ comments indicated the possibilities of embedding what Moran and Nechushtai (2023) call the resource of trust not only within the initial news production but also in any subsequent follow-up articles about marginalized community members who appeared in the initial reporting.

## 5. Conclusions

This study has found varied representations of trustworthy journalism by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Journalists portrayed novel practices in that they were being transparent about their work by including behind-the-scenes revelations in

enhanced news leads. These news revelations included journalists' reasons for trying to expose hidden problems affecting marginalized communities. The news about Trayvon Martin appeared in non-traditional formats, including social-oriented blogs as well as the news reporting of digital cartoons during the growth of digital scrolling structures in 2012. A decade later, journalists used an inclusive writing style, simple, interactive tools, and photographic evidence encouraging mobile users to engage with the articles. Their reporting suggested a popular appeal across the local, national, and international news sections in 2022. Journalists opened digital spaces for personalized depictions of marginalized community members' experiences. This reporting style suggested an effort to express trustworthy news representing marginalized communities' interests.

These findings also indicate a growing need for journalists to recognize audiences' commenting contributions. Despite some users' toxic tweets, journalists have encouraged subscribers' comments that show active involvement in the news investigations. The subscribers' feedback indicates a sense of loyalty, empathy, and emotional commitment to the news organizations. The readers' reactions can be indicators of trustworthy journalism. Journalists can enhance their articles by acknowledging shared areas of interest during news exchanges with engaged subscribers. A renewed commitment to shared exchanges can strengthen a sense of trustworthy relations between journalists and civic-minded readers.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Article

## News Representation and Sense of Belonging Among Multicultural Audiences

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### Abstract

This study seeks to understand the role of representation in news media, trust in news, and participation in multicultural audiences' sense of belonging to society. A multimodal survey combining online, CATI, and CAPI methods was conducted in Australia at the end of 2021 and early 2022 ( $N = 1,084$ ). The top five non-English language communities in Australia (Arabic, Cantonese, Italian, Mandarin, and Vietnamese) were included in the survey, of which  $n = 851$  were born overseas. The findings reveal a significant link between the perception of sufficient representation in Australian news media, trust in news, confidence to participate in society, and sense of belonging. When multicultural audiences see themselves fairly and adequately represented in the news, they are more likely to trust the news and participate in the community by discussing the news and current affairs. This, in turn, leads to a stronger sense of belonging to society. We also found confidence in English and time spent in Australia were important factors contributing to perceptions of representation. While the length of stay has a positive impact on the perception of representation among those with high confidence in English, this perception is significantly lower among those who have lower confidence. This result confirms the significant role language proficiency plays in migrants' experiences in the host country.

### Keywords

Australia; migrants; multicultural communities; news representation; news trust; sense of belonging

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Media can play a critical role in audiences' sense of belonging to a community or society. This is because media, particularly news, can fulfil the information needs of citizens thus facilitating more opportunities to participate in society. Those who are connected through media are more likely to be informed about their community, which can make people more aware of collective problems as well as ways to solve them (Kim & Kim, 2021; McLeod et al., 1999). Communication is, therefore, the essential ingredient of participation in society, and, in highly interconnected societies, the flow of information is more fluid (Rojas et al., 2011).

Those who actively participate in the community are more likely to have a stronger sense of belonging, with belonging being an important element of social cohesion (Markus, 2021). Social cohesion is characteristic of "a cohesive society [that] works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility" (OECD, 2011, p. 17).

Despite the important link between media, participation, and social cohesion, the specific role of news in people's sense of belonging to society is an understudied area. This article seeks to understand the relationship between representation in news media, trust in

news, participation, and multicultural audiences' sense of belonging to society. In line with extant studies that connect news and community connection, we explored how audiences' perceptions of news representation can impact their confidence in participating in society as a citizen, as well as their sense of belonging. We focused on five multicultural communities—Arabic, Cantonese, Italian, Mandarin, and Vietnamese—which are the top five languages other than English spoken in Australia according to the 2016 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

The findings suggest that representation in the news and confidence to participate in the community and society are strongly related to audiences' sense of belonging. When multicultural audiences see themselves fairly and adequately represented in the news, they are more likely to feel they belong to society. This is because those who have a higher sense of belonging are more likely to trust the news media and have the confidence to participate in discussions of issues facing society. The length of time in Australia is an important factor contributing to these relationships.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. News Representation and Trust

It is well established that the diverse make up of Australian society is not adequately represented by the Australian news media (Bahfen & Wake, 2011; McGuinness et al., 2023). Scholars have argued that the overwhelming whiteness of Australian television is “wired in” (Rogers, 2020), with patterns of racist reporting in news being historically established (Jakubowicz et al., 1994; McCallum & Holland, 2010), linked to ingrained social attitudes (Dunn et al., 2004) and ongoing friction between political discourses of otherness, social cohesion, national unity, and integration (Gardiner, 2003; Nolan et al., 2016; Poynting & Noble, 2003). Ethnic and cultural minority groups are often excluded from the news production process (O’Shea, 2022). And when they become the focus of coverage it is often through the lens of “problem groups” that are depicted as failing to integrate and as the cause of crime and disruption (Windle, 2008).

News outlets routinely prioritise legal, political, and police sources, reinforcing a criminal discourse and limiting the presence of sources from affected communities themselves (Horyniak et al., 2016). Ethnic groups are discursively constructed in news as out-groups that are the object of news stories rather than active voices or participants in the reportage (Teo, 2000).

Studies have found poor representation of those from non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds in visible presenter or reporter roles in the news. A content analysis of approximately 19,000 news and current affairs items broadcast on Australian TV news revealed that fewer than 12% of presenters, commentators, and reporters

were of non-European or Indigenous backgrounds (Arvanitakis et al., 2020). Off screen, newsrooms are similarly dominated by Anglo-Saxon middle-class Christian males (Hanusch, 2016; McGuinness et al., 2023).

The under- or misrepresentation of non-White audiences through stereotyping and profiling (Downing & Husband, 2005; Oh & Min, 2023; Ross et al., 2020) can reinforce inequalities, continue to marginalise, and maintain the status quo. This can have impacts on social cohesion and experiences of belonging by falsely representing the true make up of society (Hall, 1977). Implicit stereotypes portrayed in the media can also have a detrimental impact on ethnic minority audiences' self-esteem and sense of empowerment (Appel & Kronberger, 2012; Ramasubramanian et al., 2017; Swim et al., 2003; Ward, 2004).

The exclusion of voices from diverse cultural communities has the effect of driving those audiences away from mainstream news and towards diasporic news media or news media aimed at ethnic minorities—often in their own languages (Ewart & Beard, 2017). Australians from diverse cultural backgrounds are less likely to use mainstream domestic news sources and may rely on online and social media sources (Rodrigues & Paradies, 2018). This may further fragment communities and disconnect audiences from critical information and resources needed to navigate work, education, and civic processes in Australia.

Perceptions of fair and adequate representation in the news are strongly related to the trust audiences place in the news (Newman et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021). Given that trust is an essential element of community attachment (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Manzo & Perkins, 2006), this lack of trust may lead to disengagement among those who believe they are not adequately represented in the media. Studies have shown those who use media for information tend to have higher social or interpersonal trust (de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Himelboim et al., 2012). Informational uses of media have an impact on trust, which is related to stronger community connection. However, if there is not enough information or news that multicultural audiences can relate to and feel represented by, they are less likely to engage with the news or the broader society.

### 2.2. Social and Political Participation

The relationship between news consumption, engagement with news, and engagement with society has been confirmed by many studies. Communication is the essential ingredient of civic engagement and participation, where engagement occurs at both the societal level through media consumption and at the individual level through interpersonal conversations, which are both amplified by social ties within a given community (Rojas et al., 2011). Localised use of media increases trust in the local community and encourages civic participation (Kwon et al., 2021).

Studies have found that those who pay attention to news and engage in political talk are more likely to participate in civic activities and even more so when they have a stronger tie with their networks. The increased activity is not because of the connections themselves but the potential increase in the flow of information through larger networks (Rojas et al., 2011). Through discussions, people become more aware of collective problems (McLeod et al., 1999). Discussions about civic and political issues with others can be a catalyst for civic engagement (Shah et al., 2017). Similarly, the integrated connectedness to community storytelling networks determines the community engagement of individuals (Kim & Kim, 2021). Those with highly integrated connectedness to community storytelling networks are more likely to be informed of what is happening in their local community and pay attention to common issues. Those who are connected are also more likely to have access to information and resources to address problems in their community.

News is known to contribute to the knowledge that enables citizens to feel more competent to participate in society, and therefore it is an important element of political efficacy (de Zúñiga et al., 2017). To participate in society, in addition to having access to information through community networks, citizens must also be confident that their voices will be heard. Political efficacy is defined as “beliefs about one’s own competence to understand and to participate effectively in politics” (Niemi et al., 1991, p. 1407). These social and political efficacies influence citizens’ willingness to participate in society (Balch, 1974).

Yamamoto et al. (2015) use the differential gains model to explain why certain citizens are more actively engaged in politics than others. Political discussions increase meaningful political learning and enable citizens to relate news to other aspects of their lives, learn different perspectives, and foster political engagement. Those who engage in online political expression are motivated to seek deeper political knowledge as they anticipate using it for future online expressive activities, therefore they are more engaged with the news.

### 2.3. *Sense of Belonging*

Concepts of belonging and community participation have a long history in communication research and have been found to be related to media use (Friedland, 2001; Shah, 1998). Community attachment is an identification with the community combined with an affective tie. Attachment means feeling a part of the community and having a sense of agency and belonging. This sense of belonging is associated with positive emotions (Leonard et al., 2016). Community involvement is a combination of cognitive and active interaction between self and community. Conversation is an essential catalyst for community integration and cohesion, as well as a focal mediator of media influence on participation (Shah et al., 2017).

Community attachment is a function of multiple factors. People feel they belong to their local area based on their interactions with neighbours, involvement in local organisations, and the belief that they have influence over what happens in their community. The feeling of social connectedness is a combination of understanding what others think and feel, the volume and quality of interaction, feelings of togetherness and reciprocity, and shared interests and ideas (van Bel et al., 2009). Accordingly, the media plays an important role in strengthening community ties.

According to Noble (2005), belonging includes ontological security—feeling settled—and confidence or trust in the world around us. This sense of security has several dimensions: material well-being and economic security; a capacity to both operate and be welcomed within various social networks and sites of interpersonal exchange; a confident knowledge of and familiarity with one’s surroundings, contributing to a sense of environmental comfort; and a familiarity with, and comfort in, the particular idioms, objects, and customs that are characteristic of particular social spaces (Nolan et al., 2016).

McMillan (1996) suggested four components to having a sense of community involvement: membership, mutual influence (opportunities for participating in community life, wherein one’s decisions are affected by the community), fulfilment of personal and collective needs, and the sharing of emotional connections between members. These components reflect active participation in a community as well as trust that the community will fulfil its members’ needs.

### 2.4. *Ethnicity and Language*

Ethnic and cultural identities are subjective concepts and are defined by an individual’s perception rather than through objective measures. Whether or not people can be counted as an ethnic or cultural group is for the members of that group to decide and not for outside observers. It is typically associated with shared culture, history, and traditions, and sometimes involves a distinct language or religion, although these are not universal features (Schneider & Heath, 2020). Nationality, religious tradition, and language are the core indicators of a group’s shared history, ethnic origin, and culture. Further indicators of similarity for cultural and ethnic groups relate to the social distance between groups, as exemplified in the sociological concept of panethnicity (Silke & Heath, 2020). Acknowledging the complexity of ethnic identity, in this study, we use the term “multicultural” audiences to reflect both cultural and language backgrounds of audiences.

Multicultural audiences’ language preferences for media are influenced by a wide array of factors including length of residence, educational level, and need for information (Lee & Tse, 1994). For migrants who are not fluent in the host country’s language, ethnic-language media is an important means of keeping them informed

and connecting them to their ethnic community (Zhou & Cai, 2002). Proficiency in the host country's language is an important factor that determines the ability to participate in society. However, it is not the sole factor.

Language is often tied to a person's identity. For example, spoken language was the most important dimension of ethnic identity, over cultural background or geographical region (Giles et al., 1977). This is why regardless of their language proficiency, migrants may prefer ethnic language media to preserve their ethnic heritage and may choose to consume both mainstream and ethnic media, regardless of language proficiency (Ramasubramanian et al., 2017). Sui (2023) applied Knobloch-Westerwick's (2015) selective exposure self and affect management model and Slater et al.'s (2014) temporarily expanding boundaries of the self model, and found ethnic audiences tend to prefer media outlets in a language that is indicative of their most salient cultural identity.

Studies have shown that language proficiency plays a pivotal role in the social integration and life satisfaction of migrant communities (Amit & Bar-Lev, 2015; Chiswick, 2002). Amit and Bar-Lev (2015) further recognised that there are multiple and contextual influences of language proficiency on sense of belonging, highlighting the need for a greater understanding of the role of language as perceived by immigrants integrating into a host country. Miglietta and Tartaglia (2009) suggested linguistic competence is essential for cultural knowledge acquisition which, in turn, is enhanced by host-culture media consumption. Consuming media in the local language can promote a sense of belonging to the surrounding ethnic community as well (Flores & Coppock, 2018; Miglietta & Tartaglia, 2009).

Another important factor that influences the adjustment of migrants is the length of stay in a host country. Empirical evidence has shown that length of stay in a country is related to migrants' adaptation (Ward et al., 1998) as well as a factor that strengthens emotional attachment to the host country (Miglietta & Tartaglia, 2009).

### 3. Hypotheses

This study poses an overarching research question of the impact of news consumption on sense of belonging among multicultural audiences. We examined these relationships within the context of the broader society (host country of migrants) and within multicultural communities. Based on previous research, we set up the following hypotheses.

Hypotheses 1 focus on news representation, trust, and participation:

H1a: Representation in news will have a positive relationship with trust in news.

H1b: Those who feel adequately represented in the news are more likely to have higher social and political efficacy.

Hypotheses 2 focus on representation, trust, participation, and belonging:

H2a: Those who feel adequately represented in the news will have a stronger sense of belonging to society.

H2b: Trust in news will have a positive relationship with sense of belonging to the society.

H2c: Social and political efficacy will have a positive relationship with sense of belonging to society.

Hypotheses 3 focus on language proficiency, length of stay, and belonging.

H3a: Confidence in English will have a positive effect on social and political efficacy.

H3b: Confidence in English will have a positive effect on sense of belonging to society.

H3c: Time spent in Australia will have a positive effect on social and political efficacy.

H3d: Time spent in Australia will have a positive effect on sense of belonging to society.

### 4. Methodology

A survey of  $N = 1,084$  multicultural audience members in Australia was conducted between 1 December 2021 and 14 January 2022. In this study, we defined multicultural audiences as those who speak a language other than English. While this overlaps with ethnicity, country of origin, and cultural background, it is a broader and more inclusive definition. We used a screening question ("Do you regularly speak a language other than English?") and offered the survey to those who replied "yes" to this question.

We adopted a multimodal method using online ( $n = 704$ , 65%), face-to-face (CAPI,  $n = 227$ , 21%), and phone (CATI,  $n = 153$ , 14%) surveys. This was to reflect the diversity within the target population and to be inclusive of those who are not online or not willing to complete an online survey. We targeted the top five non-English languages spoken in Australia (Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin, Italian, and Vietnamese) based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) census of 2016 data and set a quota of at least  $n = 200$  for each language group. The questionnaire was offered in six languages, including English, and the respondents were able to choose their preferred language to complete the survey. In the sample, 851 respondents were born overseas.

To ensure the quality of the translation, we worked with a research company that specialises in multilingual surveys. First, the English version of the survey was approved and programmed. Then, the English questionnaire was reviewed by professional translators and double-checked independently by a second professional translator. The questionnaire was reimported including translations and checked by the company's multilingual team member for accuracy and flow. The fieldwork was

conducted by McNair yellowSquares including their multilingual panel. We set quotas within each language for age, gender, and region. The mean age of respondents was 42. A summary of respondents is in Table 1.

#### 4.1. Variables

To measure belonging, we adapted McMillan and Chavis (1986)'s sense of community concept for multicultural audiences. The theory identifies four elements of a sense of community: membership, influence, meeting needs, and a shared emotional connection. We asked a set of questions on a scale from 1 to 5 ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*: (a) "My needs are met because I am part of Australian society"; (b) "I feel 'at home' in Australian society"; (c) "I have influence over what Australian society is like"; (d) "Members of Australian society care about each other." Cronbach's alpha of the measure was 0.84.

To gauge the participation level of respondents, we measured social and political efficacy by asking the level of agreement to two statements: "I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political and social issues facing Australia" and "I consider myself well-informed to participate in social and political debate about Australia" on a five-point Likert-type scale. Cronbach's alpha score was 0.859.

News representation is defined as how audiences feel about news coverage related to the respondents' cultural background. We examined three aspects of news representation: the volume and fairness of coverage, reporter/journalists representing people from respondents' language or cultural community, and respondents' perceptions of how well the news covers their language or cultural community, asked on a scale from 1 to 5 ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Cronbach's alpha score was 0.885.

We define news trust as the degree of trust people place in the source of the news. We measured trust in Australian news by asking them to rate on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is *do not trust at all* and 5 is *trust a lot*.

English confidence was measured by asking respondents how comfortable they feel with four dimensions of English skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This was measured on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is *not comfortable at all* and 5 is *very comfortable*. We used the mean score of the four categories as the variable. Cronbach's alpha score was 0.954.

For time in Australia, we used a dummy variable, 1 being those who lived in Australia for more than 10 years and 0 being 10 years or less.

#### 4.2. Data Analysis and Model Fitness

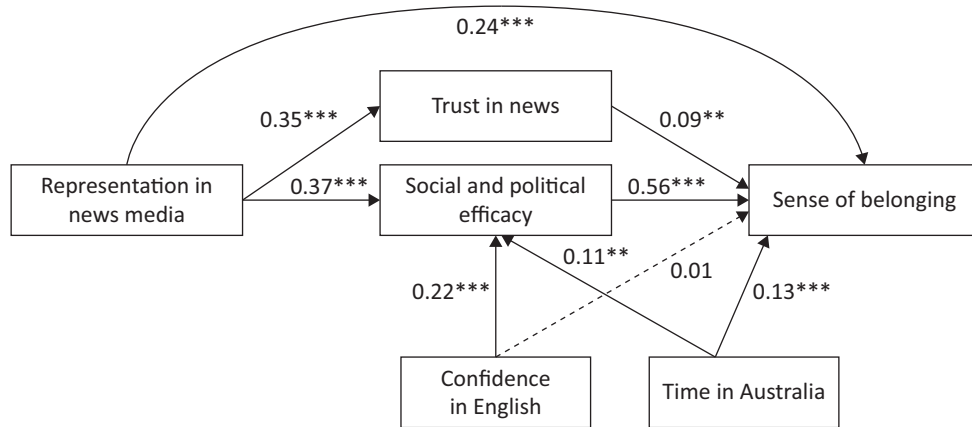
We conducted structural equation modelling using IBM SPSS AMOS 27. The global model fit was assessed using several indices, which showed a reasonably acceptable model fit:  $\chi^2 = 289.204$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CFI = 0.953, NFI = 0.944, TLI = 0.923, IFI = 0.953, RMSEA = 0.068. These are all above the threshold of the recommended values of CFI, NFI, TLI, and IFI (greater than 0.90). RMSEA is recommended to be under 0.05 but acceptable up to 0.08 (Byrne, 2016). These goodness-of-fit results indicate that the measurement models are adequate.

### 5. Results

We examined individual path coefficients that predict belonging to Australian society. Figure 1 shows that representation in Australian news had a positive correlation with trust in the news ( $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and political and social efficacy ( $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). H1b and H1c were supported.

**Table 1.** Summary of respondents.

Variable	Attribute	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	458	42
	Female	619	57
	Non-binary	1	0.1
Time in Australia	Less than five years	174	16
	Five to 10 years	202	19
	More than 10 years	465	43
	Born in Australia	243	22
Confidence in English	Low/moderate confidence	325	30
	High confidence	301	28
	Perfect confidence	458	42
Main language	Arabic	220	20
	Cantonese	210	20
	Italian	215	20
	Mandarin	222	20
	Vietnamese	217	20



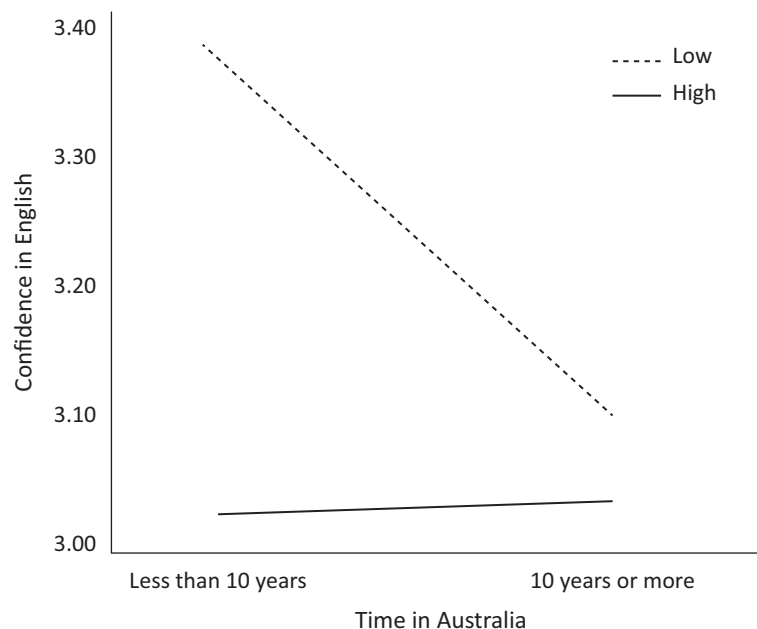
**Figure 1.** Sense of belonging to Australian society. Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

There was a positive association between trust in news media and sense of belonging ( $\beta = 0.09, p < 0.001$ ). Social and political efficacy had a greater impact on the sense of belonging ( $\beta = 0.54, p < 0.001$ ). Representation in Australian news media was positively associated with belonging ( $\beta = 0.24, p < 0.001$ ). H2a, H2b, and H2c were supported.

Confidence in English and time spent in Australia both had a positive relationship to social and political efficacy ( $\beta = 0.22, p < 0.001$  and  $\beta = 0.11, p < 0.05$  respectively). However, confidence in English was not related to sense of belonging, whereas time in Australia did have a positive and significant relationship to sense of belong-

ing ( $\beta = 0.13, p < 0.001$ ). H3a and H3c were supported but H3b and H3d were not.

While confidence in English and time in Australia both had positive and significant relationships with social and political efficacy, confidence in English did not have a direct relationship with belonging. To explore this somewhat puzzling result, we further conducted an ANOVA to see if there might be an interaction effect between language and length of stay. Figure 2 demonstrates that the relationship between time spent in Australia and perceptions of news representation differs depending on the level of confidence in English. For those with high confidence, there is no significant difference in their



**Figure 2.** Interaction between confidence in English and time spent in Australia on representation. Notes: The four categories of confidence in English were recategorized into “high” (high/perfect confidence) and “low” (low/moderate confidence) groups; for low confidence and time spent in Australia of 10 years or less,  $n = 154$  ( $M = 3.40$ ); for low confidence and time spent in Australia of more than 10 years,  $n = 154$  ( $M = 3.13$ ); for high confidence and time spent in Australia of 10 years or less,  $n = 222$  ( $M = 3.01$ ); for high confidence and time spent in Australia of more than 10 years,  $n = 311$  ( $M = 3.02$ ); respondents who were born in Australia were excluded from the analysis.

perception of representation based on their length of stay. However, among those with low confidence, the perception of representation is significantly lower for those who lived in Australia for 10 or more years, compared to those who are more recent migrants (less than 10 years). This implies that, to feel represented by the news in the longer term, both confidence in English and length of stay are important factors.

## 6. Conclusions

The findings reveal a significant link between perceptions of adequate representation in Australian news media and multicultural audiences' sense of belonging. Those who feel represented in the news are more likely to trust it and participate in the community by discussing the news and current affairs. This, in turn, leads to a stronger sense of belonging to society. Confidence in English and the time spent in Australia were important for migrants to be able to participate in mainstream society.

The mere fact of acquiring language proficiency does not seem to exert a direct influence on the perception of the sense of belonging. However, our study shows it helps increase a person's ability to participate, which has a considerable impact on the sense of belonging. This result is consistent with previous studies showing the significant role of language proficiency in migrants' integration and adaptation processes (Berry et al., 2006; Chiswick, 2002; Vedder & Virta, 2005). It is also worth noting additional analysis reveals that language proficiency was not related to confidence to participate within multicultural communities. English language proficiency is particularly important in a migrant's ability to participate in broader society, resulting in a stronger sense of belonging.

The length of time in Australia is an important factor contributing to an increased ability to participate in society and perception of belonging. Additional analysis indicates that the gap in the perception of sense of belonging to Australian society between those with high confidence in English and those with low confidence widens as the length of stay increases. Those who have stayed in Australia longer but still lack language proficiency, find it much harder to feel they belong. Amit and Bar-Lev (2015) asserted that the length of stay in the destination country and language proficiency are important parameters that affect migrants' sense of belonging. While it is not possible to know the longer-term effects within a cross-sectional survey, we can infer from these results that those who do not have confidence in English are less likely to access news in English, which has a compounding effect on their social and political participation.

The study is not without limits. We used "language other than English" to recruit respondents for this study. However, we acknowledge that language is only one of many dimensions that define a person's ethnic identity. Ethnicity is essentially self-defined and typically associated with shared culture, history, and traditions,

and sometimes involves a distinct language or religion, although these are not universal features (Schneider & Heath, 2020). While this study aspired to capture as much as possible a diverse representation of multicultural communities in Australia, by conducting the survey on the largest linguistic groups, further investigation on different ethnic contexts and social conditions is needed in the future to refine the findings and deepen our understanding of the diversity within multicultural communities. We also note that most of the respondents in the current study had relatively high levels of confidence in English. It would undoubtedly be of interest to examine the model of this study among multicultural communities with lower levels of language proficiency. Second, the role of diasporic media is complex. Media is related to identity formation and reinforcement. Studies have found that consumption of both ethnic and host country media influences the acculturation and adjustment of migrants (Jeffres, 2000; Park, 2009). Cultural identity is not a binary concept. Migrants can have bicultural attributes that are often not mutually exclusive (Park & Ahn, 2010). Third, we were unable to explain the differences and nuances across the five language groups in this study. These are very different communities in terms of their migration history, culture, and settlement in Australia. This study was a snapshot of a range of communities. Further research is needed to investigate the nuances between and within language communities. Finally, the measures used in the survey are all based on self-reports and cannot be exempt from subjectivity, particularly around measures about English proficiency. Further research is needed to deepen understanding of the relationship between news and migrants' sense of belonging.

Nevertheless, this study contributes to the body of knowledge on how news can play an important role in social cohesion. Those who are adequately provided with relevant news about society and feel they are well-represented are more likely to be informed about the current issues within society. Their sense of belonging is driven by their ability to participate in those issues. This has significant policy implications, for how news media can assist in the process of migrants' settlement more effectively.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

## Watching the Watchdogs: Using Transparency Cues to Help News Audiences Assess Information Quality

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### Abstract

The myriad of information sources available online can make it hard for the average reader to know whether a piece of content is credible or not. This research aims to understand if the public's assessment of the credibility of information could be more accurate with the help of transparency features that act as heuristic cues under the elaboration likelihood model and the heuristic-systematic model, and if the cues increase cognitive absorption. Two between-subjects studies were performed, one with a young demographic ( $N = 68$ ) and another with a representative sample of the adult population ( $N = 325$ ). The stimuli contained information boxes designed to indicate that the story was not written in a traditional journalistic style (message cues) and missing background information on the author (source cues). Results show significant effects of the cues on credibility assessment and cognitive absorption.

### Keywords

algorithmic cues; cognitive absorption; credibility; information quality; misinformation; transparency

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Even though the decline of public trust in news is not homogeneous around the world, the trend has affected several nations (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). In a study conducted by the Reuters Institute on 46 markets, only 42% of participants said “they trust most news most of the time” (Newman et al., 2022, p. 10). Americans show even lower numbers. According to data by Gallup, a mere 34% of respondents said they trust mass media to report the news “fully, accurately and fairly” (Brenan, 2022). The reasons for distrust include suspicion that the media is pushing the economic and political agendas of the powerful (Newman & Fletcher, 2017), as well as a lack of transparency on news production, source selection, and funding (Gottfried et al., 2020).

In an attempt to regain public trust, news outlets observed that there was a public demand for transparency in politics, business, and international relations, among other fields at the end of the 20th century, and began to advocate for transparency as a replacement to objectivity (Craft & Vos, 2021). Objectivity had been the “moral philosophy” guiding journalism since the 1920s when journalists affected by the First World War propaganda and the rise of public relations shifted their focus to a form of reporting that emphasized fact-based reporting (Schudson, 1978). This approach emphasized certain practices such as the verification of information by consulting multiple sources and balancing various sides mentioned in a story (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). In recent years, some in the field of journalism have suggested that fact-based, objective

reporting is not enough (Chadha & Koliska, 2015; Masullo et al., 2022).

The push for transparency in news takes objectivity a step further and is an attempt to give audiences insights into the quality of the reporting as well as the quality of the news organizations and individuals who did the reporting (Chadha & Koliska, 2015). The purpose of this research is to explore the ways that transparency cues can be used to help audiences better evaluate the quality of news. Even though transparency has been conceptualized in a number of different ways, most of the approaches have focused on how journalists and newsrooms can make changes to their routines in ways that are more transparent (Craft & Vos, 2021). We take a different approach to transparency that explores the use of a more algorithmic form of transparency, meaning that the transparency features were not put in place by the news outlet but instead by a third-party algorithm. In our approach, we exposed participants to news stories that have been analyzed by an algorithm that provides readers with information about both the message and source quality of the news story. We explore how such algorithms might influence attitudes toward the credibility of the news and whether the presence of transparency cues increases the level of cognitive absorption of the story.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature suggests that transparency in the news typically falls under a broad umbrella of at least two categories: transparency practices in the newsroom and tools implemented by journalists to demonstrate transparency in news content (Chadha & Koliska, 2015). For example, newsrooms can include practices like clarifying news outlet affiliations and newsroom blogs or providing explanations about the editorial process in a newsroom (Heikkilä et al., 2014). Journalists, on the other hand, often practice transparency by including specific features in their stories such as external links to the primary sources of information, the embedding of original documents, the author's email, corrections, a space for reader commentary, or detailed time stamps of when the story was published and updated (Karlsson, 2010).

The effectiveness of these targeted practices has been debated. Karlsson and Clerwall (2018) found that the public did not think of transparency as an aspect of good and credible journalism, while Bhuiyan et al. (2021) found a more mixed set of results. In a series of qualitative interviews, the researchers found that a few participants believed that journalists could improve their credibility by being open about their biases, yet other participants preferred transparency tools that indicated objectivity and evidence of the information. Karlsson (2020, p. 1808) suggests that this could happen because the transparency features are provided by the same source of information as the news story. In other words, all current attempts at providing transparency still rely on journalists or newsrooms providing additional details

about their practices. Our approach does not focus on asking the public to trust the journalist or the newsroom and instead, it uses algorithms to provide audiences with quality indicators about the story itself. Our study focuses on transparency at a news item level with two features: an indicator of the quality of the source of the story itself and a second indicator of the quality of the message or news content.

### 2.1. *The Importance of Source and Message Cues for Trust*

When it comes to the evaluation of the credibility of a piece of news, researchers have suggested that audiences evaluate the credibility of both the news source and the message (i.e., story features). Research on source credibility includes a study that found no effect on credibility perception of information indicating the author's gender (Henke et al., 2021) and another that found positive effects of explanations of the journalist's stance on the issue (Karlsson et al., 2014). Specifically related to message credibility, Peacock et al. (2022) compared the effect of labels that indicated whether the story was news, analysis, opinion, or an advertisement at the top or in the middle of the text, finding that neither had an impact, while Masullo et al. (2022) found no significant effect of an information box that explained how and why the story was created.

A study that combined source and message characteristics (author's bio with a picture, additional information about the story, footnotes, and the aforementioned label) found a significant effect, however, only 32 out of the 613 test group respondents interacted with the features (Curry & Stroud, 2021). It is important to note that all of the studies mentioned so far considered the audience as a monolithic group. Karlsson (2020) segmented participants by demographic characteristics as well as differences in relation to previous trust in media, the channel of information, and news consumption habits, finding that features increased credibility perception for those who already had a positive attitude toward news media. Prochazka et al. (2018) found that skepticism toward media was an important factor that led comments to have a positive or negative impact on the quality assessments of a news media brand.

### 2.2. *Theorizing How Transparency Features Work*

Under the theoretical framework of information dual-processing models, such as the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) and the heuristic-systematic processing model (HSM) proposed by Chaiken (1987), we theorize that transparency features in news outlet websites work as cues to stimulate more critical evaluations of both source and message content in a news story. Various dual-processing models (Liu & Shrum, 2009; Metzger, 2007) indicate that there are two ways in which people process information:

by analyzing the message critically in a systematic way or by using heuristics, meaning external characteristics, to make snap judgments about the information they are receiving. In the ELM, these are the central and peripheral routes to persuasion. In the HSM, they are called systematic processing and heuristic processing, since the cues appeal to heuristics, which are previously established rules in the person's mind.

In Chaiken's work in particular, the researcher found that the impact of various sources and message cues can have both differential and co-occurring effects on individuals' attitudes toward messages (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991). Specifically, the author found that when source cues (e.g., the perceived expertise of a person, their education, or appearance) and message cues (e.g., the perceived quality of the rhetoric, syntax, and quality of arguments in a given message) appeared high in credibility, individuals used both systematic and heuristic processes to evaluate the credibility of a source. In contrast, when source and message cues seemed to call into question the validity of the information, individuals evaluated content using a systematic process only. Simply put, when cues call into question the validity of a claim, people tend to more carefully analyze the claims using a more systematic approach. The same research has also found that in cases where people are more highly involved with the information and the information's credibility was called into question, people used a systematic processing route to evaluate the validity of a claim.

### *2.3. Source and Message Cues and Their Impact on Cognitive Absorption*

Research has indicated that a number of affordances of digital media can impact what audiences focus their attention on in a given product. Attributes like information boxes, blinking elements, drop-down menus, highlights, and others have had both positive and negative effects on what audiences learn about a piece of information and the degree to which they are involved in messages (Oh et al., 2018; Sundar, 2008). The state of "deep involvement with software" is known as cognitive absorption (Agarwal & Karahanna, 2000). While not every cue is going to aid in information processing, research has found evidence that suggests that cues can aid in helping people become more cognitively absorbed with the information they are processing online. As a result, the authors suggest that cues can "trigger more systematic user engagement with content" (Oh et al., 2018, p. 45). In the context of a news story, it is common for both legitimate and fake news sites to include a number of cues designed to trigger heuristic processes. These cues typically help audiences make snap judgments about the quality of the source and message. Common cues might include a website name (e.g., PatriotNews.com, NBCNewNow.com) that looks like a legitimate news source, or news banners designed to appear like mainstream news. Other news

sites might embed photos or use other cues that are designed to encourage audiences to think less critically about the content and see that news story as legitimate. Transparency cues are designed to instead encourage further scrutiny and analysis. In those instances where the cues suggest that a piece of information is less trustworthy, cues can highlight what the algorithm perceives to be flaws in a story and lead readers to engage in more critical or systematic thought processes.

### *2.4. Transparency Cues as a Form of Explainability*

Several studies have suggested that in order for audiences to accept algorithmic decisions, audiences must have some way of assessing how that algorithm made decisions. In other words, algorithms that are explainable are more likely to be perceived as legitimate. Algorithmic explainability has been conceptualized as the extent to which an algorithmically driven system can provide users with insights into how that algorithm arrived at decisions or how it provided recommendations to the user (Arrieta et al., 2020; Shin, 2021, 2022; Shin et al., 2022). Shin has found that explainability features are an important attribute in making an algorithmic choice more transparent and that they can influence whether an individual trusts the algorithmic recommendations (Shin, 2021). In practice, explainability has been conceptualized in a number of ways such as by providing audiences with pop-up information boxes that explain how an algorithm made a decision or through visualizations of that audience in understanding how that algorithm made a choice (Shin et al., 2022; Weitz et al., 2021). We note that much of the work that has been done in explainable algorithmic research has been focused on explaining how an algorithm provides recommendations (e.g., a recommended film or piece of news) to audiences rather than showing how an algorithm might have analyzed a piece of content which is our purpose here. To that end, we experiment with a series of source and message cues that are designed to indicate the quality of the content. In contrast to some algorithms that might simply provide the user with feedback about whether a piece of content is true or false, our algorithm seeks to show audiences how the algorithm arrived at those conclusions by providing them with both visual and textual cues that help audiences see for themselves how the algorithm conducted the analysis of the story.

## **3. Research Questions**

Our study investigates whether algorithmic transparency features could act as cues to stimulate the use of systematic processing in credibility assessment. In order to explore this, we provide individuals with a piece of news that has been analyzed by an algorithm. The news was intentionally written to be of poor quality to mimic some types of information individuals might encounter on social media. The algorithm was designed to provide

participants with information cues about the story's source and the message. We theorize that the use of such cues will help participants think more critically about the content. We report the results of two separate studies below. The first tested our algorithmic cues on a college-aged population. The second study used a sample that was representative of US voters. Our stated research questions are:

RQ1: Does the incorporation of algorithmic transparency cues (source vs. message) change the perceived credibility of a story?

RQ2: Does the incorporation of transparency cues (source vs. message) in a story increase the level of cognitive absorption?

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants for Study 1 and Study 2

A total of 90 undergraduate students from a major university in the Southeastern US were recruited to participate in an online experiment for extra credit. Out of these 90 participants, 68 provided complete responses and passed the corresponding attention checks. Respondents were 63.2% female ( $n = 43$ ). In terms of political leanings, 55.9% of the participants described themselves as liberals ( $n = 38$ ), 25% as moderates ( $n = 17$ ), and 19.1% as conservatives ( $n = 13$ ).

Following our analysis of the initial student population, we sought to confirm our results in a more general pool of adults. A total of 402 participants from a representative adult population pool in the US were recruited through Prolific, a company that provides sample populations to researchers. To incentivize participation, participants were paid \$3 for having completed the survey, which took an estimated time of 15 minutes. Of these 402 participants, 325 provided complete responses and passed the corresponding attention checks. Male and female respondents represented 49.2% each ( $n = 160$ ) and 1.5% of respondents identified as non-binary ( $n = 5$ ). In terms of political leanings, 54.5% of the participants described themselves as liberals ( $n = 177$ ), 19.1% as moderates ( $n = 62$ ), 26.2% as conservatives ( $n = 85$ ), and 0.3% preferred not to answer ( $n = 1$ ).

#### 4.1.1. Sample Size and Power Analysis

Regarding the sample size of Study 1 (S1), we note that the size of the student sample was determined by the availability of participants (i.e., convenience sampling) since the main purpose of this study was to serve as a pilot for Study 2 (S2), which we planned to do with a more representative sample of the US population. Following S1 and the preliminary results obtained from the student sample, we performed an a priori power analysis to determine the minimum sample size needed for

our second study. For these purposes, we computed the sample size for a one-way ANCOVA assuming a medium effect size (Cohen's  $f = 0.25$ ), a power of 0.8, and a significance of 0.05. With these parameters, the minimum sample size required for S2 is 179.

### 4.2. Procedures

An experiment with a 2 (source cues: no/yes)  $\times$  2 (message cues: no/yes) between-subjects factorial design was conducted, with three parts and a duration of approximately 12 minutes. In the first part, participants completed a survey about news consumption habits and preexisting attitudes towards news using five-point Likert scales.

For the second part, the participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions: control (S1:  $n = 24$ , S2:  $n = 78$ ), message cues (S1:  $n = 14$ , S2:  $n = 85$ ), source cues (S1:  $n = 13$ , S2:  $n = 81$ ), or both types (S1:  $n = 17$ , S2:  $n = 81$ ). They watched a video tutorial on how to use the provided website that lasted approximately one minute and were asked to read the article and pay attention to the transparency features on the screen.

The third part consisted of two series of five-point Likert scale questions: an adaptation of Gaziano and McGrath's (1986) credibility scale and an investigation of cognitive absorption following the technology acceptance model (Davis, 1989). The technology acceptance model evaluation included an assessment of perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. However, due to space constraints, we do not report these results and focus exclusively on credibility and cognitive absorption.

All participants read the same news story, which was taken from an original news source and modified by professional journalists, about a concert venue requiring individuals to provide proof of Covid-19 vaccination to be allowed inside at an upcoming concert. Stimuli varied according to the groups, possibly including source or message cues (see Figure 1).

Participants in the control condition only needed to read the story and answer our follow-up questions.

Journalists are taught to include basic facts in their news leads, called the 5W and 1H, meaning who, what, when, where, why, and how. The message cues condition consisted of a drop-down list of the algorithm's assessment of whether those items were present in the story. We intentionally left several message characteristics blank to highlight the low quality of the story's reporting process. This condition also included corresponding highlights in the text, with missing event descriptors highlighted in red on the side panel. Furthermore, the website provided detailed tooltips when hovering over the corresponding message cues (e.g., providing more details or indicating that the element was missing), which have been summarized in a table in Appendix 3 of the Supplementary File.

The source cues condition consisted of a drop-down list of background information about the author of the

# Ticketmaster Proposes Plan to Require Event Attendees to Provide Test Results or Proof of Vaccination

Publication Date  
03/12/2021

By Riley Smith  
Mar. 12, 2021.

Ticketmaster is making plans for a post-pandemic world that once again involves concerts, sporting events, and large gatherings of people – but these congregations may have a different look to them. That’s because the world’s largest ticketing marketer has announced that it plans to require event attendees to verify that they have tested negative for coronavirus within a 72-hour time frame prior to the event and/or received a coronavirus vaccine (which would provide approximately one year of COVID-19 protection), according to an exclusive interview published in Billboard.

Hoping to recover from the decimating effect the pandemic had on the entertainment industry, Ticketmaster has proposed a three-part plan to require those who have purchased a ticket to ask third-party health care providers to deliver test results to the ticketing marketer. Upon successful verification, Ticketmaster will then send the needed credentials to attend the event. The ticketing company says it will not have access to customers’ medical records; only a verification on whether the fan is cleared to attend.

**Disclaimer:** There are a number of missing or inconsistent elements in the background information of the author. Also, this story is missing a number of key facts in the first sentence that indicate it was not written in a traditional journalistic style. Check the event summary and author details for more information. Elements labeled in red are missing or inconsistent.

Author Details	Event Summary
The author details provide biographical information about the journalist’s expertise and background. Hover over each element to get more information.	The event summary provides an overview of the answer to the basic journalistic questions. Hover over each element to get more information.
<b>Name:</b> Riley Smith	<b>Who:</b> Ticketmaster
<b>Expertise:</b> Politics	<b>What:</b> making plans
<b>Number of years in journalism:</b> Unknown	<b>When:</b> ?
<b>Retractions:</b> No known retractions	<b>Where:</b> ?
<b>Other places where author is published:</b> 100% Fed Up; American Conservative Media	<b>Why:</b> ?
	<b>How:</b> ?

**Figure 1.** News story with source and message cues. Notes: The Author Details section covers information about the source while the Event Summary section shows which of the 5W and 1H questions are answered in the text; information in red means that the information is missing or inconsistent with the topic of the story.

news article: name, main field of expertise, number of years in journalism, known retractions, and other places where the author had been published. We intentionally highlighted the fact that the author had an inconsistent expertise area (politics, in a non-politics article), an unknown number of years in journalism, and publications in biased news sources. Furthermore, the website provided detailed tooltips when hovering over the corresponding source cues (e.g., explaining what each particular element meant). Appendix 3 of the Supplementary File presents a table with the tooltips shown to the users.

The fourth condition combined both the message and source cue treatment conditions. This design allowed us to explore the individual effects of both the individual cues and the effects when combined together. Finally, the website included the tooltips for both cues when hovering over the corresponding credibility cues.

Each group also had an interactive attention check for the tasks. Participants in the control group needed to click on the button to read the text, which was blurred. Participants in the other condition groups needed to click on a button to see the corresponding transparency cues. Each click and hover over the tooltips was tracked. We discarded participants who did not click because this meant that they responded to the follow-up questions without reading the article or the associated transparency cues. In the first study, 22 responses were discarded and another 77 were rejected in the second study.

### 4.3. Measures

#### 4.3.1. Preexisting Attitudes Toward News Media

Participants’ preexisting attitudes toward news media were measured before exposure to the stimulus with six items using 5-point Likert scale questions taken from Williams (2012) and Tsfati (2002). Attitude toward news media was determined by averaging the responses of the six items. Both studies showed a high level of internal consistency for preexisting attitudes (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ , S1: 0.84, S2: 0.95).

#### 4.3.2. Perceived Credibility (RQ1)

The perceived credibility of the article was measured with four Likert-type items (see Figure 2), modified from Gaziano and McGrath (1986). Participants were asked whether the article was fair, complete, accurate, and trustworthy. The final perceived credibility value was determined by averaging the responses of the four items (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ , S1: 0.85, S2: 0.89). Additional items in Gaziano’s original scale, such as biased, subjective, and sensationalistic, had lower factor loadings (<0.6) in preliminary factor analyses, representing an additional factor that was not reliable (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ , S1: 0.53, S2: 0.73) or relevant to our experiment.

On a scale of 1 (least accurate) to 5 (most accurate), please indicate the extent to which of the following adjectives describe the content you just read.

	1	2	3	4	5
Fair	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Biased	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Complete	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accurate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Subjective	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Trustworthy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sensationalistic	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Figure 2.** Likert-scale questions based on Gaziano and McGrath’s (1986) credibility scale items.

4.3.3. Cognitive Absorption (RQ2)

Cognitive absorption is a measure that depends on five dimensions: temporal dissociation, focused immersion, heightened enjoyment, control, and curiosity (Agarwal & Karahanna, 2000). We analyzed cognitive absorption as one factor with parsimony in mind, averaging the responses of nine items (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ , S1: 0.90, S2: 0.92). We note that the nine items we selected were a subset of the original cognitive absorption scale, as not all elements were relevant to our evaluation. We show the evaluation items for cognitive absorption in Figure 3.

4.3.4. Duration

The time taken by each participant to complete the task could influence the results of cognitive absorption. Therefore, we measured the duration in seconds and performed a logarithmic transform on the duration of the task (Dragicevic, 2016), which mitigates outliers and corrects for the positive skewness in time measurements (Keene, 1995; Sauro & Lewis, 2010).

5. Results

RQ1 examined whether the use of source cues and message cues had an effect in terms of perceived credibility. The results of a one-way ANCOVA with preexisting attitude toward news media and politics as control variables revealed a statistically significant difference between the four groups in both studies (S1:  $p < 0.001$ , S2:  $p < 0.001$ ) with a large effect size (S1:  $\eta_2 = 0.247$ , S2:  $\eta_2 = 0.140$ ).

Tukey’s honest significant difference (HSD) test revealed that all three conditions with transparency cues (message, source, and both) are statistically different from the control condition in terms of perceived credibility (S1:  $p < 0.05$ , S2:  $p < 0.001$ ), as shown in Table 1. The usage of source cues on their own was associated with the lowest perceived credibility (S1:  $M = 2.853$ ,  $SD = 0.713$ ; S2:  $M = 2.543$ ,  $SD = 0.881$ ), followed by the combination of both cues (S1:  $M = 2.882$ ,  $SD = 0.801$ ; S2:  $M = 2.750$ ,  $SD = 0.885$ ) and the message cues on their own (S1:  $M = 2.929$ ,  $SD = 0.654$ ; S2:  $M = 2.753$ ,  $SD = 0.764$ ). In contrast, the control group had the highest perceived credibility (S1:  $M = 3.701$ ,  $SD = 0.822$ ; S2:  $M = 3.413$ ,  $SD = 0.774$ ). However, we note that the differences between all the groups with transparency

\* In considering the experience you just had, answer each question.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Using this interface excites my curiosity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Interacting with the interface makes me curious	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Using the interface arouses my imagination	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
While using the interface I am able to block out most other distractions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
While using the interface, I am absorbed in what I am doing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
While using the interface I am immersed in the task I am performing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I had fun interacting with this interface	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoyed using this interface	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Using this interface was boring to me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Figure 3.** Subset of cognitive absorption items based on Agarwal and Karahanna’s (2000) original cognitive absorption scale.



**Table 1.** Effects of the cues on credibility assessment in S1 and S2.

	Source cues	Message cues	Both cues	Control group
S1: <i>M</i>	2.853 <sub>a</sub>	2.929 <sub>a</sub>	2.882 <sub>a</sub>	3.701 <sub>b</sub>
S1: <i>SD</i>	0.713	0.654	0.801	0.822
S2: <i>M</i>	2.543 <sub>a</sub>	2.753 <sub>a</sub>	2.750 <sub>a</sub>	3.413 <sub>b</sub>
S2: <i>SD</i>	0.881	0.764	0.885	0.774

Notes: For S1,  $F(3, 68) = 6.662, p < 0.001, \eta_2 = 0.247$ ; for S2,  $F(3, 325) = 17.089, p < 0.05, \eta_2 = 0.140$ ; means with no subscript in common differ at the  $p < 0.05$  using Bonferroni post hoc comparisons.

cues are not statistically significant according to Tukey’s HSD test.

We note that the preexisting attitude had a significant effect (S1:  $p < 0.05$ , S2:  $p < 0.05$ ) on the perceived credibility, with a more negative attitude being associated with lower perceived credibility ratings. The effect size of attitude for the student population was large, but it was small for the representative adult population (S1:  $\eta_2 = 0.160$ , S2:  $\eta_2 = 0.015$ ). Finally, we highlight that political leaning also has a significant effect when dealing with the adult population ( $p < 0.05$ ), while it does not have a significant influence on the student population, which could be caused by the higher political diversity in the representative US population sample compared to the student sample. In both samples, the effect size of politics was small (S1:  $\eta_2 = 0.001$ , S2:  $\eta_2 = 0.037$ ).

RQ2 examined whether the use of source cues and message cues had any effect in terms of cognitive absorption. The results of a one-way ANCOVA with preexisting attitude and log-duration as control variables revealed a statistically significant difference between the four groups in both studies (S1:  $p < 0.05$ , S2:  $p < 0.001$ ) with a large effect size in the student sample and a medium effect size in the representative adult sample (S1:  $\eta_2 = 0.145$ , S2:  $\eta_2 = 0.084$ ). Details of the results are in Table 2.

For the student sample, Tukey’s HSD test revealed a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) in cognitive absorption when comparing both cues ( $M = 3.902$ ,  $SD = 0.686$ ) and source cues ( $M = 3.470$ ,  $SD = 0.570$ ) groups with the message cues ( $M = 3.254$ ,  $SD = 0.403$ ) and the control ( $M = 3.286$ ,  $SD = 0.777$ ) groups. For the adult population sample, Tukey’s HSD test revealed that all three conditions with transparency cues (message, source, and both) are statistically different from the control condition in terms of cognitive absorption ( $p < 0.001$ ). Participants with both cues had the

highest cognitive absorption ( $M = 3.679$ ,  $SD = 0.823$ ), followed closely by the message cues on their own ( $M = 3.600$ ,  $SD = 0.821$ ), then the source cues on their own ( $M = 3.561$ ,  $SD = 0.695$ ), and finally the control group at the bottom ( $M = 3.091$ ,  $SD = 0.739$ ). Furthermore, both log-duration ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $\eta_2 = 0.015$ ) and attitude ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_2 = 0.038$ ) had significant effects, although small, on cognitive absorption, unlike the student sample.

We measured and analyzed the time taken by users to complete the survey to further verify that our transparency cues improved the engagement of participants with systematic processing. In particular, we make the assumption that taking a long time to complete the task is associated with a higher level of engagement. Thus, we examined whether the use of source cues and message cues had any effect in terms of the time taken to complete the task. We performed a one-way ANOVA with log-duration as the response, with the results shown in Table 3. This analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between the groups in our second study with the adult population with a medium effect size ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_2 = 0.092$ ), but no significant difference for our study with the student population. Tukey’s HSD test revealed that there is a statistically significant difference in task duration between the control group and the rest of the conditions ( $p < 0.01$  for each pairwise comparison).

## 6. Discussion

We note that despite obtaining significant results and relevant effect sizes, our research is not without limitations. First, we note that our evaluation did not take into account whether the participants had any previous knowledge of the topic of the news article, which could influence their usage of the cues or their perception of credibility. Second, regarding the generalizability of our studies, we note that the first study with the student

**Table 2.** Effects of the cues on cognitive absorption in S1 and S2.

	Source cues	Message cues	Both cues	Control group
S1: <i>M</i>	3.470 <sub>ab</sub>	3.254 <sub>a</sub>	3.902 <sub>b</sub>	3.286 <sub>a</sub>
S1: <i>SD</i>	0.570	0.403	0.686	0.777
S2: <i>M</i>	3.561 <sub>a</sub>	3.600 <sub>a</sub>	3.679 <sub>a</sub>	3.091 <sub>b</sub>
S2: <i>SD</i>	0.695	0.821	0.823	0.739

Notes: For S1,  $F(3, 68) = 3.501, p < 0.05, \eta_2 = 0.145$ ; for S2,  $F(3, 325) = 9.807, p < 0.001, \eta_2 = 0.084$ ; means with no subscript in common differ at the  $p < 0.05$  using Bonferroni post hoc comparisons.

**Table 3.** Effects of the cues on task duration (after log transform) in S1 and S2.

	Source cues	Message cues	Both cues	Control group
S1: <i>M</i>	6.213 <sub>a</sub>	6.499 <sub>a</sub>	6.512 <sub>a</sub>	6.134 <sub>a</sub>
S1: <i>SD</i>	0.477	0.642	0.475	0.651
S2: <i>M</i>	6.257 <sub>a</sub>	6.244 <sub>a</sub>	6.419 <sub>a</sub>	5.991 <sub>b</sub>
S2: <i>SD</i>	0.375	0.507	0.567	0.430

Notes: For S1,  $F(3, 68) = 2.047, p > 0.1, \eta_2 = 0.088$ ; for S2,  $F(3, 325) = 10.89, p < 0.05, \eta_2 = 0.092$ ; means with no subscript in common differ at the  $p < 0.05$  using Bonferroni post hoc comparisons.

population was limited by its relatively small sample size and lack of representativeness of the general population of the US. However, we found statistically significant results and large effect sizes in this sample. Moreover, we addressed these issues in the second study, by using a representative sample of the US population and defining an appropriate sample size that ensured high power. However, we note that these findings might not apply directly to non-US contexts.

In addition, around 20% of participants did not engage with the transparency cues (S1: 22, S2: 77). To better understand the behavior of these participants in regard to the credibility assessment and cognitive absorption, we performed a follow-up statistical analysis on the perceived credibility of this group and compared it with the control group of the representative sample of S2. There was no significant difference from the control group in statistical terms ( $M = 3.361, SD = 0.884$ ). Thus, it would be possible to consider these participants as parts of the control group as well, since they did not interact with the cues. However, we have interpreted the failure to engage with the transparency cues as a lack of attention issue from the participants (i.e., failing an additional attention check), despite not failing the regular attention checks included in the survey. Thus, we ended up removing these participants from the final statistical analysis presented in this article.

Despite the limitations, the results reflect the potential of source and message cues to do more than just appeal to heuristics processes, instead encouraging the use of the central route or systematic processing of information (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991). Regarding RQ1, results indicate that the use of transparency cues was associated with lower perceived credibility in comparison to the absence of cues consistently throughout both studies. Source cues had the most impact, followed by both cues and message cues, however, the difference between the effects of the cues is not statistically significant according to Tukey's HSD test. The results demonstrate a similar effect to those found by Maheswaran and Chaiken (1991), that when transparency cues suggest incongruence with other information available they may invite more systematic processing. In our specific instance, we theorize that certain news cues invite heuristic processes. These might include items that are available that suggest all the typical trappings of a quality news story—headers, news flags, titles

that seem like an official news source, the presence of an author's/journalist's name, etc. Such cues make it easy to engage heuristic processes that lead to quick snap judgments about the quality of a piece of news. However, when readers are presented with additional transparency cues, those cues may call for more careful scrutiny of the piece. It is also important to note that, in both studies, we found a large effect size for the influence of transparency cues on perceived credibility, higher than those reported in similar work with significant results (Curry & Stroud, 2021; Karlsson et al., 2014).

Regarding the effect of the transparency cues given the nature of the news article that we showed participants, we note that the contents of the article were actually true, just incomplete or attributed to an inconsistent source. However, the algorithmic transparency cues were designed to reduce the perceived credibility, focusing mostly on the article's inconsistencies and disregarding the true nature of the article. In this context, this result raises the question of what effect it would have on an actually false news article. Thus, future work could include studying the effect of the cues in articles with different actual levels of truth in them (e.g., a completely fake article, an inconsistent or slightly biased and misleading article, and a factual article with minimal bias). Exploring how the transparency cues influence different types of articles would also be of interest. Following this line of thought, if the transparency cues can alter the perception of an article's credibility in a significant way, it raises the ethical consideration of potential misuse by providing misleading cues and promoting misinformation.

Regarding RQ2, the cognitive absorption levels were positively impacted by source and message cues, with an even slightly higher impact for both cues combined, meaning that the users who engaged with the cues had a significantly deeper involvement with the story. We considered this using two data points. First, our reader's self-report data suggests that those who had experienced the cues in our student sample generally reported higher levels of cognitive absorption with the exception of those who received the message cues only condition. However, in our larger representative population, we found that all conditions with cues yielded higher levels of cognitive absorption and thus a deeper involvement with the story.

Our second indicator was suggested through our analysis of the task duration which revealed that the

participants in the representative adult sample that used the transparency cues had higher task duration. Moreover, if we only consider participants that engaged with transparency cues in the representative adult sample, we find that those participants that take longer to do the task (above the mean of 9.13 minutes) report slightly lower perceived credibility ( $M = 2.628$ ,  $SD = 0.869$ ,  $n = 113$ ) than those who took less time to complete the task ( $M = 2.729$ ,  $SD = 0.827$ ,  $n = 134$ ). Although the difference is not statistically significant in this case, these results suggest that engaging with the cues and dedicating more time to the task causes participants to be more critical of the article, as they detect the inconsistencies and thus have lower perceived credibility.

All results align with the purpose of the cues, which is to encourage readers to pause and reflect on the story. Following the HSM, the contradiction between the cues and the message suggested that they created an “attenuating effect” (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012) that increased involvement with the content, leading to a use of systematic processing (according to the HSM) or the central route (of the ELM). On the other hand, the control group and the participants that did not interact with the cues would be using heuristic processing (HSM) or the peripheral route (ELM). Besides leading participants to conduct a more critical assessment of credibility, engaging in systematic processing would cause them to take more time and result in higher cognitive absorption.

We argue that the use of an algorithm is another important aspect of the success of the cues, for two specific reasons. First, our algorithm offers visual and textual cues that allow the user to assess the quality of the reporting on their own, instead of operating as a block that states whether the news item is credible or not. This way, it follows the principles of explainability that encourage the audience to grant it legitimacy (Shin, 2021). Second, because we did not attribute the origin of the cues to the same source as the story, we are not asking the reader to trust the institution that is providing the news (Karlsson, 2020, p. 1808).

## 7. Conclusions

We have proposed the use of algorithmic transparency cues that highlight missing information and inconsistencies in the authorship of a story to assist news readers in judging the quality of a news item through the quality of the information. The research has two statistically significant results: first, a large effect size of the cues on the assessment of source and message credibility; second, a positive impact on cognitive absorption, which is a measure of involvement with software (Agarwal & Karahanna, 2000). In addition, users who engaged with the cues also took longer to complete the task. The sum of these results supports our hypothesis that the transparency cues encouraged readers to engage in the systematic processing of information (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012), consequently thinking more criti-

cally about the message they have received. In this context, future research could explore whether cognitive absorption has a mediating effect on perceived credibility when using cues. This would provide insight into the mechanisms with which the cues influence the perception of credibility.

We have also extended the concept of explainability in algorithmic journalism beyond the context of news recommendation. Research has shown that explainability is a component of credibility in algorithmic journalism recommendations (Shin, 2021, p. 1060). We believe that it can have the same function in journalistic analysis, in this case by analyzing the news item itself and showing results directly to the audience so they can make their own decisions on whether the story is credible or not, thus providing them actionable insight.

Finally, we highlight the potential ethical implications of transparency cues influencing the perceived credibility of a news article. As previously mentioned, a malicious actor could use misleading cues to promote misinformation, instead of using the cues as intended.

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## 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 authors (unedited).

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Article

## “They Always Get Our Story Wrong”: Addressing Social Justice Activists’ News Distrust Through Solidarity Reporting

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### Abstract

This study positions social justice activists’ objections to dominant reporting norms as a catalyst for critically reassessing these norms and their connection to diminishing trust in US journalism. Based on a conceptual application of discourse ethics to journalism and qualitative analysis of 28 in-depth interviews with social justice activists, we examine how participants experience and evaluate mainstream coverage of social justice, and why they think journalism could improve its trustworthiness through practices consistent with solidarity reporting norms.

### Keywords

activism; journalism; trust in news; social justice; solidarity

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Eroding trust in news in the US has prompted a wide breadth of research, public engagement initiatives, and industry responses (see Robinson et al., 2021). One common solution is to encourage media literacy (cf. Plaut, 2023). By teaching audiences to regard journalism as a rigorous, reliable, and superior form of information within digital ecosystems, researchers, news practitioners, and philanthropists have suggested that journalism could restore its mantle of public authority. Despite a range of such interventions, however, trust in US news remains low, based on audience surveys (Knight Foundation & Gallup, 2023).

A popular narrative is that dominant US journalism was once a trusted, authoritative institution that unified society (Obama, 2022; cf. Schudson, 2022). Yet dominant journalism has never been an unanimously trusted institution: Due to dominant journalism’s longstanding tendency to dehumanize, distort, and undermine marginal-

ized groups who struggle for survival (Santa Ana, 2002; Squires, 2009; Walters, 2001), marginalized communities are among the original skeptics and critics of mainstream journalism (González & Torres, 2011).

Decades of scholarship have demonstrated how US journalism often portrays marginalized communities’ collective activism using negative, criminalizing frames aligned with “the protest paradigm.” This coverage tends to ignore (or minimize) the structural causes and demands of collective activism (Boyle et al., 2012; Entman & Rojecki, 1993; Gil-Lopez, 2021; Gitlin, 1980; Harlow et al., 2020; McLeod, 2007). Adherence to the protest paradigm varies depending on factors like issue, location of protest, whether protestors aim to challenge versus protect the status quo, and the ideological orientation of news outlets (Harlow et al., 2020). News coverage is most likely to align with the protest paradigm when activists use radical tactics (Boyle et al., 2012; Lee, 2014) or seek to advance racial justice (Brown & Harlow, 2019). For example, Brown and Harlow (2019)

have found that the protest paradigm is uncommon in coverage of climate action, except when climate action focuses on Indigenous communities.

Against the backdrop of the protest paradigm, our study leverages insights from social justice activists and organizers to interrogate US journalism norms for covering social justice issues and to analyze their implications for trust in US news. We use Varma's (2020, p. 1706) definition of social justice as "dignity for everyone in a society," and define social justice activists as people who participate in collective efforts to challenge and address systemic marginalization (Young, 1990).

Based on 28 in-depth interviews, we argue that low trust in US news may indicate a lack of consensus about the merit of dominant journalism norms, instead of indicating that audiences lack awareness or understanding of these norms. Interviewees identify promising reconstructions in ethical news-making processes that could help journalists develop relationships with social justice movements, in the service of producing more nuanced, accurate, and trustworthy coverage of ongoing struggles for basic dignity.

We begin by synthesizing dominant reporting norms in mainstream journalism and contrasting them with solidarity reporting norms (Varma, 2020, 2022, 2023). Then, we provide an overview of discourse ethics as a framework for justifying this study's focus on social justice activists. Discourse ethics, based on Glasser and Ettema's (2008) application to journalism, calls for deliberation when anyone affected by a norm objects to it, thereby guaranteeing that journalism criticism is no longer restricted to people with journalistic credentials or institutionally-validated expertise. Social justice activists in our study belong to and represent constituencies negatively impacted by dominant journalism norms, which means their perspectives should be incorporated into discussions of trust in journalism that target these norms. We find that participants critique dominant reporting norms and articulate solidarity reporting norms as more trustworthy alternatives. Finally, we conclude by considering the prospects for building trust in journalism through transformed reporting norms, and the implications of solidarity reporting for journalism that attempts to serve heterogeneous news audiences.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

### 2.1. *Contrasting Dominant and Solidarity Reporting Norms*

Dominant reporting norms emphasize accuracy and transparency in pursuit of objectivity (Aitamurto, 2019). With a dominant monitorial role (Christians et al., 2009), journalism aims to shine a spotlight on society's influential institutions, leading to a focus on politicians, experts, and institutional spokespeople (Bennett et al., 2006). Professionalized into prioritizing journalistic autonomy (Carlson, 2017), journalists often take an adversarial

stance toward sources in interviews (Clayman, 2002), strive for balance in reporting, and prioritize detachment, impartiality, and neutrality as signals of credibility, authority, and trustworthiness (cf. Bratich, 2020). Journalists are usually trained to be generalists with procedural expertise in how to report a story without background expertise or prior knowledge of the topics they cover (Perry, 2016). Dominant framing becomes episodic (Iyengar, 1990), individualizing (Bennett, 2016), and emotional when profiling marginalized individuals (Schneider, 2012).

In contrast, solidarity reporting norms (compared in Table 1) move journalism from a monitorial function to an interpretive process (Carey, 1992) of accounting for unjust shared conditions that deny people's inherent dignity. Solidarity reporting brings an ethical imperative for journalism that aspires to be accurate and fair to also represent "the grassroots epistemologies emanating from the streets" (Canella, 2022, p. 5). To do so, solidarity reporting prioritizes people with grounded insights into systems of oppression (for a conceptual explication of oppression, see Young, 1990). Framing in solidarity is societal, systemic, and political (Varma, 2020). News values become radical hope, mutual aid, and collective empowerment (Varma, 2022). Rather than an adversarial stance toward sources during interviews, solidarity reporting develops collaborative and constructive dynamics. Finally, journalists who enact solidarity as an ethical priority reflexively attend to their own positionality and represent the various standpoint epistemologies they encounter in the production of news (Cabas-Mijares, 2022).

Past research has not considered the implications of a solidarity approach to journalism for audience trust. We focus on social justice activists' insights, grounded in their participation in collective efforts to navigate and disrupt oppressive systems, and justify this focus using Glasser and Ettema's (2008, p. 525) application of Habermas' discourse ethics to journalism. Discourse ethics requires consensus among "all affected" by a norm for it to be defensible, and deliberation is set in motion when anyone affected objects to the status quo. Rather than deferring to individuals' consciences, experts, or majoritarian rule, conditions of access and argumentation are required for developing ethically defensible norms (Glasser & Ettema, 2008, p. 524).

Habermas' work has been critiqued for neglecting to account for actually-existing power dynamics in public discourse that create substantial barriers to access and argumentation (Fraser, 1990). Näsström (2011) offers an important addition to the discourse ethics framework through the "all-subjected principle," which adds a power analysis for deciding who, among "all affected," should be prioritized. People subjected to norms experience them as disempowering impositions that they cannot refuse or avoid, whereas people affected may or may not be adversely impacted. Aligned with the all-subjected principle, our study begins with social justice



**Table 1.** Dominant reporting norms and solidarity reporting norms.

	Dominant reporting	Solidarity reporting
Journalist's dynamic with sources	Adversarial, hostile, extractive	Collaborative, constructive, reflexive
Framing	Individual, episodic, emotional	Societal, systemic, political
News values	Skepticism, conflict, sensationalism	Radical hope, collective empowerment, shared conditions
Narrative structure	Balance between opposing views	Truth based on what is happening on the ground
Sourcing emphasis	Officials, institutional experts	People affected by social injustice or engaged in collective efforts to address social injustice
Journalist's professional skillset	Procedural knowledge of reporting practices	Procedural knowledge as well as subject matter knowledge of social justice issues and histories
Basis for trustworthiness of journalism	Detachment, impartiality, neutrality, transparency	Commitment to people's basic dignity, human rights
Primary purpose of journalism	Shine a spotlight on society's influential institutions	Represent underlying causes of ongoing social justice issues

activists for whom refusing or avoiding dominant news coverage altogether is implausible, given the history of the protest paradigm, as well as their own need to reach a broad, general public beyond their own networks. Mainstream journalists have used activists' work, struggles, and lives in news coverage shaped by norms that activists find objectionable and harmful (Bragg, 2022; Holzer, 2022; Torres, 2015). Thus, affected by and subjected to journalism norms, social justice activists offer specific and relevant insights for enriching journalism as a public service.

Discourse ethics usefully distinguishes between two interconnected levels of justification and application (Rehg, 1994), such that objections at the level of application mean general principles are no longer satisfactory at the level of justification (Glasser & Ettema, 2008). Addressing a crisis of trust begins, we argue, by examining why people do not trust journalism and journalists (see Duchovnay & Masullo, 2021; Robinson & Culver, 2019; Wenzel, 2020), which often arises at the level of application and destabilizes the justification for dominant norms that are taken-for-granted within the journalism profession as hallmarks of credibility. Social justice activists' substantive objections to dominant reporting norms at the level of application mean, based on the logic of discourse ethics, that they should be included in discussions of how to address these issues.

Journalists committed to traditional norms around objectivity and neutrality are, however, typically wary of accepting insights originating from social justice activists and their associated social movements or community groups (Jha, 2008). News organizations may fear that activists' efforts constitute "special interest pleading," but as Ryan et al. (1998, p. 179) note, "only in collective endeavors can marginalized groups accrue the resources

sufficient to enter the news arena." Even when social justice movements' limited resources are redirected to conform to dominant news routines and tailored to court disinterested reporters, journalists may persistently discard this input and ignore structural inequities in their coverage (Ryan et al., 1998). News coverage that sensationalizes or misrepresents collective action further erodes trust in dominant news media among social justice activists (Wasserman et al., 2018). Pragmatically, dominant reporting norms have not preserved or built trust in journalism, which signals a lack of consensus for dominant reporting norms and the need to develop alternatives.

## 2.2. Journalism and Community (Dis)Trust

Trusting journalism as an institution means believing news media will provide credible information, even when audiences cannot independently verify all claims (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023). This creates a risk, which loyal news audiences accept due to their expectation that news media's professional norms will ensure high information quality with respect to what audiences perceive as accuracy and fidelity to the issues at hand (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Kohring & Matthes, 2007).

US survey research suggests that the prospects for improving trust in local news are relatively high, with only 18% of US adults having low trust in local news, as opposed to 41% with low trust in national news (Knight Foundation & Gallup, 2023). As Usher (2021) has argued, discourse about declining trust in US news often fails to consider how previous and emerging economic models for journalism—including at the local level—privilege rich, white, and liberal audiences who pay for news, and the fact that there have always been "historical

news deserts” where journalists parachute into areas to produce extractive, stereotypical coverage. By building deeper relationships with communities, journalists may “legitimate their specialized knowledge by knowing places,” and develop “place trust” (Usher, 2019, pp. 131–132).

To address news distrust at a community-level, some news initiatives place themselves within local storytelling networks, a process where journalists engage community members in collectively defining and responding to their problems (Wenzel, 2019, 2020). “Listening literacies” initiatives aim to encourage community members to critically assess information and engage news organizations and journalists as they co-create and share information (Robinson et al., 2021). As Almeida and Robinson (2023, p. 511) ask, “What would it look like for community news outlets to partner with community activists in solidarity and seek reparations for their city’s or town’s historical wrongs?” Local news is well-positioned to develop such a dynamic since relationships between journalists and activists can develop over time, leading local journalists to treat social justice efforts as newsworthy (Kutz-Flamenbaum et al., 2012; related discussion in Varma, 2023).

In the absence of such constructive dynamics within dominant news media, however, activists have often sought recourse in alternative media to articulate grievances, demands, and visions for change on their own terms. While alternative media have historically functioned as intragroup communication within movements (Downing, 2014), digital media have placed more control over external communications in the hands of activists (Richardson, 2020). “The media” is no longer an outside institution to which activists must make appeals, and instead is a constitutive part of the social practices of activism (Canella, 2022). Nevertheless, activists continue to view mainstream journalism as a way to advance social justice (Lester & Hutchins, 2009), despite a commercial media system that is often misaligned with their aims.

We pose the following research questions to guide our examination of social justice activists’ dynamics with dominant news media and the impact of these dynamics on activists’ evaluations of news information quality and trustworthiness:

RQ1: How do social justice activists experience and evaluate dominant journalism norms in mainstream coverage of social justice?

RQ2: What reporting norms do social justice activists articulate for improving trust in journalism?

### 3. Methods

This study uses qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of 28 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. We began recruiting social justice activists and organizers

in June 2022. First, we contacted organizing groups and asked journalists who regularly cover social justice issues for suggestions. We also circulated a call on a list-serve which includes journalists, activists, organizers, and educators working on social justice issues. Finally, we asked interviewees for suggestions about others to contact for the study. All identifying information has been removed to protect study participants, including the names of individual journalists and local news organizations with whom participants interacted.

We conducted interviews from July to September 2022 via Zoom and in-person across three US cities. Interviews lasted for 30–60 minutes. In each interview, we began by asking activists to describe their involvement in social justice work, and then asked for their thoughts on news coverage of social justice issues and their activism efforts. Next, we asked if they had interacted with journalists directly, and if so, what those interactions were like. Then, we asked interviewees how journalism could improve, if at all, and what advice they would give to a journalist who wanted to cover social justice activism. Qualitative thematic analysis of audio transcripts followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006, p. 87) steps of “generating initial codes” before developing themes based on “coded extracts” situated within the full set of qualitative data. We focus our findings on themes that arose in multiple interviews to encapsulate recurring experiences, critiques, and recommendations. Codes including “news routines,” “newsworthiness,” “perspectives in news coverage,” and “information quality” were prominent across transcripts, as interviewees regularly identified these areas as roots of their distrust of dominant journalism. Through close textual analysis, we found that interviewees primarily critiqued reporting norms, rather than individual reporters or news outlets.

Activists in this study self-described as participating in a range of social justice efforts across multiple, intersecting, and interconnected areas due to their structural understanding of social justice. These areas include reproductive justice, housing justice, labor unions, immigration, climate change, public safety, racial justice, and gender equity. Critiques of dominant journalism norms were consistent across issue areas, as were articulations of solidarity reporting norms as trustworthy alternatives.

Due to ongoing and intensifying attacks on social justice activists in the US, we assured interviewees that they would not be identified, named, or individually profiled in this study. We received Institutional Review Board approval before beginning this study, which requires that we protect interviewees’ anonymity. Also, most participants rejected the idea of categorizing or labeling themselves in terms of a single issue (or an assortment of issues), since they viewed social justice activism as a holistic commitment to societal transformation. For these reasons, we refer to interviewees under the umbrella of “social justice activists,” rather than using issue-specific categories or profiles.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Dominant Journalism Norms as Obstacles to Information Quality and Trust

Social justice activists primarily described their experiences with news media in negative terms, characterizing their interactions with journalists as “frustrating,” “difficult,” “intimidating,” and “scary.” Most participants attributed this tenor to mainstream journalism norms of professional practice rather than to reporters’ personal politics or unprofessionalism.

In this section, we present activists’ experiences with and assessments of dominant journalism norms in mainstream coverage of social justice. Participants articulated objections to dominant norms, including journalists’ adversarial stance toward sources and journalists’ tendency to use individualizing and episodic framing when covering social justice issues.

#### 4.1.1. Adversarial Interviewing Tactics

Participants regularly critiqued journalists’ approach to interviewing. Journalists conducting interviews, they said, displayed hostility toward communities impacted by social injustice, asked loaded questions laden with skepticism, and attempted to extract quotes to fit a pre-conceived narrative. The adversarial stance that activists described is consistent with how watchdog reporters confront officials in power (Clayman, 2002). In the context of covering social justice efforts, however, journalists’ adversarial stance alienated sources and contributed to activists’ low evaluations of mainstream journalism’s credibility. One activist who refused “to be the victim” shared a frustrating experience with a local reporter who pressed for a response to a question that the activist told the reporter, repeatedly, was based on a distortion:

I was telling the reporter, “I’m not going to answer that”....And she would rephrase it and I’m like, “I’m not going to answer that.” On mic, on camera...“You are trying to get a reaction out of me. You’re trying to sensationalize something and I’m not going to play into it.”

Journalists taking adversarial stances during interviews was expected behavior, according to participants who had a sharp awareness of the protest paradigm (McLeod, 2007). Rather than a sign of rigor and watchdog reporting, activists experienced adversarial interviews as an attempt by journalists to manufacture conflict for the sake of turning social justice issues and activism into a spectacle. In this context, journalists abiding by a norm of maintaining an adversarial stance toward sources contributed to activists’ suspicion and skepticism of journalists’ and news organizations’ motives.

#### 4.1.2. Individualizing, Emotional, and Episodic Framing

Activists in our study tracked news coverage of their efforts and were often disappointed due to individualizing, emotional, and episodic framing (Bennett, 2016; Iyengar, 1990; Schneider, 2012) that omitted collective organizing work. As one activist shared, news stories tended to erase community initiatives and demands, which implied that “we’re just complaining residents who are upset about the world not being the way that we want it.” Another activist articulated the same omission problem at the level of framing:

It’s easy for the movements to become obscured when you’re just talking about a personal story from a worker....Having those emotional individual stories is important, but I think it’s a disservice when it’s not tied to organizations and unions that have been pushing for [change] for many years.

Activists indicated that individual stories focused on emotion were inadequate for representing the scope and dimensions of social justice organizing. As a different participant noted, “The power dynamic is not acknowledged” in stories that use episodic framing, and mainstream journalism often portrays social injustice as “unavoidable.”

Event-framed reporting, activists said, neglects the institutional decisions and structural conditions behind social injustice. One activist provided the specific example of factory layoffs that dominant news media “presented as an unavoidable business cost....The status quo of workers generally not having power is reflected in the media coverage by just not giving them the space.” Officials, business owners, and experts receive disproportionate airtime and amplification through news, activists pointed out, which leads to distorted narratives about social justice issues and further diminishes activists’ trust in journalism.

Participants implicated flagship news organizations in their critiques of mainstream journalism, as well as smaller news organizations. They characterized journalism’s shortcomings as systemic, industry-wide, and entrenched. At the same time, activists rarely endorsed the idea of abandoning mainstream media altogether in favor of focusing their attention exclusively on alternative news outlets. Instead, pointing to the benefits of mainstream journalism’s wide audience reach, capacity for in-depth reporting, and continued influence on public opinion and policy-making, activists articulated specific ways for mainstream journalism to improve, which we analyze next.

### 4.2. Solidarity Reporting to Address Distrust Among Social Justice Activists

In this section, we examine specific practices that activists indicated would improve social justice coverage

and their trust in journalism. Adopting norms of solidarity reporting including prioritizing grassroots sourcing, replacing dominant news values with solidarity news values, and improving journalists' grasp of social justice concepts and histories were key changes that activists recommended as desirable and effective correctives to journalism's shortcomings (see Table 1).

Rather than attempting to forge opportunities for movement propaganda or public relations through journalism, participants in our study described paths for improving trust that were aligned with their shared interest in truthful, evidence-based reporting. None of the interviewees were in favor of opinion pieces replacing factual reporting, nor did they seek endorsements from news organizations. Furthermore, activists recognized the unmet need for shared public definitions of pressing issues, and expressed concerns about media fragmentation for society (aligned with rhetoric found in journalism trust initiatives, see Robinson et al., 2021):

I see very much the real harms of a fraying media landscape where everybody has their own press. If you don't share facts, you really can't share a government....I fear where this goes. It's hard to see a country persist where everybody's got their own version of the truth.

Truthful reporting on social justice issues and activism, participants argued, requires quoting people with direct experience, and representing structural conditions.

#### 4.2.1. "Quote People": Redefining Expertise by Prioritizing People With Direct Experience

Activists were aware that journalists routinely cultivate relationships with officials and institutions of power to ensure access to ongoing coverage, and said that they would like to see the same dynamic with organizing groups. "First, journalists have to be willing to build relationships with people on issues they're covering," said one participant. Another activist provided similar practical advice: "Quote people. Don't take people out of context. Quote them at length. Don't do sound bites....You don't have to be equal. Just be fair." Quoting people, participants said, would help ensure that coverage was less distorted and dependent on officials. Although quoting people sounds like an obvious practice, activists said that it was rare for journalists to talk to people directly experiencing oppression and groups working to address it. As one activist explained:

I don't see a lot of media or journalists who are willing to make sure they're talking directly to the people they're writing about, which often results in a rehashed version of law enforcement perspective or narrative on the topic at hand with maybe a nod to someone with a different perspective at the end to signal objectivity.

A disproportionate emphasis on academics, corporate management, police officers, and politicians solidified distrust among activists, who said that expanding representation to include people "who are actually on the ground experiencing this in real-time" would improve their trust. However, interviewees also sensed that journalists assumed that non-credentialed people would not have insight worth quoting:

What I've noticed is that [journalists] focus a lot on the politicians...they go and spend 20 minutes with the elected official....And then they go and grab another politician, which is cool, but it's like, "You already interviewed 20 of them."

Aligned with a solidarity reporting norm of prioritizing "all subjected" to social injustice (Varma, 2020, 2023), activists suggested that journalists de-emphasize officials and other elite sources in coverage of social justice. Expanding the sourcing pool and acknowledging the expertise of people experiencing and resisting oppressive systems is consistent with practices showcased by journalists in other contexts who improve the accuracy of their reporting by considering standpoint epistemologies different from their own (Cabas-Mijares, 2022). Centering the perspectives of marginalized people accomplishes more than merely improving representation; it introduces more nuance to reporting norms and produces fuller stories, which participants said could improve the credibility of journalism.

#### 4.2.2. Representing Underlying Causes, Structural Context, and Shared Conditions

At the level of news values and framing, activists said they would trust news with less sensationalism, negativity, and individual profiling, and more explanatory reporting of structural factors and shared conditions. Activists advised journalists to focus on "underlying influences," which would help remedy the problem of portraying social justice issues as isolated "one-offs." Dominant episodic framing (see Iyengar, 1990) treats social justice issues as if they were new, spontaneous, or unexpected, which interviewees said neglects the ongoing and long-term nature of their social justice work and movement strategies.

One activist, whose family's eviction had attracted news attention, noticed that the coverage did not account for how widespread the issue of eviction was in the city:

I think that the part that would've been good to add...was, "Okay, this particular story is happening. How many more like that are happening right now?" To me, one of the things that was interesting in this...day in this courtroom...just sitting through and listening to one story after another, after another, until they got to ours. Wow. Housing court is

full....I was like, “There’s a little industry here. They’re just going.” So, the fact that there’s so much of that going on, it didn’t come through [in news coverage].

To accurately report the extent of social injustices, activists regularly identified a need for journalists and editors to have a better understanding of the basic roots of social justice issues such as housing, eviction, abortion, prison systems, immigration, gender-based discrimination, racism, and labor unions. “Know your topic,” said one activist. Knowing what a union is, what abortion access means, and why major cities in the US are experiencing a housing crisis were three (of many) specific examples that activists provided as illustrations of basic facts that journalists seldom knew, even when setting out to report on unions, abortion, and housing issues.

When journalists lack basic knowledge of what they are covering, activists found themselves needing to not only provide interview quotes but also to educate the reporter in order for there to be any hope that the story would be accurate. Activists lamented that journalists’ lack of background knowledge made interviews frustrating and time-consuming. As one activist noted, “It can be very painful to have to do that education” when a journalist is clearly uninformed or misinformed about what a social justice effort is about in the first place. Another activist said:

What I think I see are a lot of people who come from a fairly homogenous background writing about a topic that they’re not very familiar with and thinking that their collective biases are neutral or that they’re being objective when they’re not.

Some participants conceded that public misunderstandings of movements may come from ignorance rather than ill intent, as many people are unfamiliar with social justice issues and the purpose of collective action. However, in the words of one participant, “Journalists are supposed to find out.” While inexperience, lack of resources, or the pace of news publishing could undermine journalists’ capacity to learn nuances of an issue, participants observed that poor coverage of social justice efforts also frequently comes from well-resourced and well-established outlets like *The New York Times*, *NPR*, and flagship local newspapers in their cities.

Participants urged journalists to seek out patterns of experience within and across communities to better account for the reality of persistent social injustices. “It’s better to interview a community than one person,” said one activist. Here, changes in news values and framing are aligned with replacing dominant news values and individual framing with solidarity news values (Varma, 2022) and solidarity framing (Varma, 2020). Advancing awareness of the historical trajectories of social justice issues and movements is aligned with and extends the logic of solidarity reporting, as it enriches journalism’s ability to represent the roots of ongoing issues.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions: Improving Trust Across Axes of Difference With Solidarity Reporting

This study has investigated why social justice activists distrust news and how journalism organizations could address their objections. Social justice activists found dominant journalism norms distressing, demeaning, and distorting. As a result, they tended to evaluate dominant news as having low information quality and, therefore, limited trustworthiness. At the same time, activists rejected the idea that focusing their energy exclusively on grassroots media was a sufficient remedy, due to dominant journalism’s wider reach and influence on public opinion.

Solidarity reporting (Varma, 2020, 2022, 2023) encapsulates much of the approach and specific practices that activists and organizers articulated when asked what would improve their trust in journalism. Through newsworthiness judgments, sourcing prioritization, and framing, wider adoption of solidarity reporting would address many of the critiques that interviewees raised. Related work on engaged journalism projects for community relationship-building (Wenzel & Crittenden, 2021) may also be relevant to addressing these issues. However, none of the interviewees endorsed a more time-intensive dynamic with journalists. Instead, they sought more fruitful interactions that would begin with reporters doing better background research on social justice concepts and histories prior to interviews. Doing so, activists maintained, would enhance the accuracy, fairness, and trustworthiness of news coverage. Activists consistently said that journalists and editors need to educate themselves about social justice before attempting to educate the public.

Solidarity journalism offers a practical alternative to dominant reporting norms, by prioritizing grounded facts and dismantling journalism’s deference to institutional authorities (Varma, 2023). A compatible addition to the solidarity journalism framework, based on activists’ calls for improved social justice background knowledge among journalists, is to incorporate historical and contemporary context into how journalists prepare to report a story, which would mean creating conditions for journalists to learn and become conversant in topics like labor unions, reproductive justice, eviction, and immigration. Aligned with Perry (2016), this study affirms the need for journalists to have a basic grasp of history before they can reasonably expect to be regarded as trustworthy.

Certainly, journalists would benefit from educating themselves about the history of any issue they cover. Some issues, however, are likely closer to journalists’ realm of experience, education, and familiarity than others. Multiple studies have found the US journalism profession to be disproportionately white, cis-male, and middle-to-upper class (Bauder, 2021; Grieco, 2020; Usher, 2019). This homogeneity in newsrooms, along with professional conformity pressures, may contribute

to why journalists have conserved racist, heterosexist, classist, and other biases in reporting (Alamo-Pastrana & Hoynes, 2020; Brown, 2021; Lowery, 2020). Disrupting hegemonic biases requires taking seriously the insights of people outside of newsrooms who are affected by them, as our study has begun to do.

The present study has focused on social justice activists' evaluations of journalism from mainstream news outlets. A major limitation of this study is its exclusive use of social justice activists' self-reported interactions with journalists and evaluations of coverage. We did not ask interviewees to provide examples of coverage that they criticized, nor could we observe their interactions with journalists firsthand. It is possible that journalists already utilize some of the solidarity practices identified in this study. However, our research questions focus on social justice activists' evaluations and articulations, which makes addressing the potential chasm between perceptions and practices an area for future research.

Another area for future research is to assess the role of movements using their own social media accounts to reach the public, instead of relying on journalism. Some activists in the present study mentioned that social media did not offer a viable alternative to news coverage due to having like-minded followers, and due to misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms making truth difficult to parse.

A related future study could examine social justice coverage from the perspective of journalists who develop this reporting to understand why journalists uphold dominant reporting norms over solidarity reporting norms. Such a study could also identify practical barriers that may prevent journalists from doing solidarity reporting. Finally, the present study is of a single country with declining trust in news, and future work could develop a comparative study across countries with rising trust in news to assess whether solidarity reporting norms are more prominent in these countries, or if the mechanisms for trust are distinct depending on country-level context.

Scholarly and practitioner dismay over eroding trust in US journalism signals a disconnect between journalism's self-perceptions and public perceptions. This study's findings indicate that there are clear reasons why people fighting for social justice do not trust journalism. Due to reporting routines that dehumanize, decontextualize, and deny the lived realities of people struggling against the status quo, social justice activists experience trustworthy journalists as the exception rather than the rule. As a result, they express exasperation with trying to improve journalism narratives both as sources and as suppliers of background knowledge for journalists.

Protest paradigm scholarship has diagnosed an important problem that helps explain the tension between social justice activists and journalism, but has seldom provided actionable, plausible alternatives for dominant journalism. Rather than viewing journalism as obsolete or unnecessary, activists interviewed in this study argued that journalism is crucial for the

work of social justice, since—even in a social media era—journalism contributes to constructing a baseline of shared facts across society. By incorporating activists' articulations for how journalism can improve, the present study has contributed a grounded approach for journalism to address dwindling trust through solidarity practices, based on the logic of discourse ethics.

Discourse ethics also includes a consideration of appropriateness, which means that generalizable norms must account for context-specificity (Glasser & Ettema, 2008). Dominant reporting norms may be appropriate for contexts where journalists are, for example, aiming to expose official corruption, but inadequate and ill-suited for covering social justice activism and organizing efforts. Pragmatically, if dominant reporting norms led to accurate, rigorous, and widely-trusted coverage, then there would be little basis or justification for calling for change aside from a group's idiosyncratic preferences. Yet US journalism facing a crisis of eroding trust needs to heed and incorporate specific calls for change—or accept a likely outcome of continued diminishing trust that places journalism on a trajectory toward obsolescence in the eyes of a growing range of people who are unconvinced that journalism seeks to serve the public. To develop trust in journalism, journalism organizations would benefit from moving from asserting their credibility to assessing it based on insights from people who experience journalism not as practitioners but as subjects of it—including social justice activists.

Habermas' discourse ethics calls for consensus among "all affected" (Glasser & Ettema, 2008, p. 525). The present study has focused on one group affected by dominant reporting norms. Analyzing their recommendations provides a step in the direction of developing more defensible journalism on social justice issues. It is possible, however, that trust in journalism is a zero-sum game: What makes journalism trustworthy for those who seek to restore an era in which fewer people had rights, for example, may be fundamentally incompatible with what makes journalism trustworthy for people who aim to advance a more inclusive society. Determining whether recommendations from different groups who object to dominant reporting norms are compatible is an area for future research. The encouraging insight from this study is that many of the recommendations are consistent and compatible with ideas about how journalism should improve from conservatives (Duchovnay & Masullo, 2021), racial minorities (Robinson & Culver, 2019), trans people (Fink & Palmer, 2020), and people who avoid the news (Palmer & Toff, 2020), which suggests that wider adoption of solidarity reporting norms in dominant mainstream news venues could improve trust across axes of difference.

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Article

## Trust and Distrust in Public Service Media: A Case Study From the Czech Republic

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### Abstract

Although public service media is a trusted island in the media landscape of many countries, trust in public service media is not absolute and universal. This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore what trust and distrust entail for the public, a perspective rarely applied in trust research. Also, it explores the extent to which the sources of trust and distrust are the same and whether the concepts of trust and distrust are identical (only inverse), or linked but separate. It focuses on the Czech Republic, where the level of trust in the news is among the lowest in the world, yet public service media is the most trusted news source (Newman et al., 2022). Based on four focus group discussions with the general public ( $N = 24$ ), this study analyzes the reasons for the audience's trust and distrust in Czech public service media. There are three main categories: trust in the message (i.e., people trust public service media if, in their view, it provides objective, truthful, reliable, relevant, and fast information without sensationalism and anti-system views); trust in the source (i.e., people trust public service media if they perceive the public service media journalists as professional); and trust in the public service media organizations (i.e., people trust public service media if they perceive the regulatory framework as effective in ensuring independence from politics and oversight boards as a guarantee for quality). As the reasons leading to trust were not identical (only inverse) to the reasons leading to distrust, our findings suggest that trust and distrust in public service media are not two sides of the same coin.

### Keywords

Czech Radio; Czech Television; distrust; media quality; public service media; skepticism; trust

### 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).

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### 1. Introduction

Trust in journalism is a key ingredient without which journalists cannot fulfil their societal role as watchdogs, moderators of the public forum, and facilitators of shared experiences (Usher, 2018). At the same time, trust is also a fundamental prerequisite for the functioning and survival of public service media (PSM), which can serve as one of the cornerstones of democracy (UNESCO, 2008). Although PSM is a trusted island in the media landscape of many countries (European Broadcasting Union, 2022), trust in PSM is not absolute and universal. Previous research shows that younger audiences, ethnic

minorities, those with right-wing orientations, and lower education have less trust in PSM news (Jõesaar et al., 2022; Picone & Donders, 2020). What are the reasons for trust and distrust in PSM and its news service? How can PSM become more trustworthy in the eyes of the public, increase its legitimacy, and strengthen its relevance?

This contribution focuses on the case of the Czech Republic. It is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the level of public trust in the news is among the lowest in the world. According to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022* (Newman et al., 2022), the Czech Republic ranks 37th out of 46 countries surveyed. Second, while trust in PSM and commercial media as sources of news

is more or less balanced around the globe (Ipsos, 2019), in the Czech Republic, PSM is the most trusted national news source (Newman et al., 2022). Based on four focus group discussions with participants ( $N = 24$ ) whose socio-demographic characteristics follow the structure of the Czech population, this study explores the reasons for the audience's trust and distrust in PSM (i.e., Czech Television, Czech Radio).

This study contributes to existing scholarship in three ways. First, it uses a qualitative approach to explore what trust and distrust entail for the public, which is a surprisingly rarely applied perspective for trust research because most studies use a quantitative approach (Engelke et al., 2019). However, the qualitative approach enables a deeper understanding of the sources of trust and distrust on the part of the audience. Second, in PSM research, the audience perspective is often neglected (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2022; Lestón-Huerta et al., 2021) and the question of how the public evaluates and perceives PSM has received limited attention to date (Just et al., 2017; Sehl, 2020). Third, the article makes a theoretical contribution: Its broader aim is to explore the extent to which the sources of trust and distrust are the same, and whether the concepts of trust and distrust are identical (only inverse), or linked but separate, as Engelke et al. (2019) suggest.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *Trust and Distrust: Two Sides of the Same Coin?*

In today's complex and interdependent societies, trust is the social glue that binds people, organizations, and institutions (Sztompka, 2000). This includes the media and journalists: Without the trust of their audiences, they could not fulfil their roles (Usher, 2018), which would have serious consequences for society. Yet, trust in the media has been declining in many countries in recent years (Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Conceptually, different terms are used in media-trust research. While the term "credibility" is often employed in communication and journalism studies, the scholarship that draws on sociological traditions tends to refer to "trust" (Engelke et al., 2019; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Ultimately, these terms are commonly used interchangeably (Kohring & Matthes, 2007) and frequently describe the same constructs (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). In this study, we use "trust" as the key term in order to draw on broader sociological theories related to this concept (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Also, it is broader than the concept of credibility, which is currently understood as its subcategory which is related to the evaluation of media content (Fawzi et al., 2021).

Trust describes the relationship between a trustor and a trustee; it is:

The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation

that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the other part. (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 712)

Trust in the media can be defined as "the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5).

In their model of trust, Mayer et al. (1995) differentiate between factors that cause trust, the trust itself, and the outcomes. The factors that lead to trust are related to the trustor's propensity to trust and the three main characteristics of the trustee (Mayer et al., 1995): ability (i.e., skills, competencies), benevolence (i.e., the degree to which a trustee is believed to want to benefit the trustor), and integrity (i.e., adherence to the principles that the trustor finds acceptable). Applied to trust in the media, this means that audiences should trust the media if they are convinced of their professionalism, their good intentions to serve the public, and their adherence to the usual standards of journalistic quality and ethics.

Trust in media is a complex phenomenon that involves at least three levels: (a) trust in the news information, which relates to the media content; (b) trust in the journalists and those who deliver the news, which is a form of interpersonal trust; and (c) trust in the media organizations, which is a form of institutional trust and where we differentiate among trust in individual media brands, media types, and news media in general (Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Williams, 2012).

The lack of trust can have the character of distrust (i.e., the belief that the media and journalists are doing something wrong), mistrust (i.e., a doubt based upon suspicion), media skepticism (i.e., reluctance to trust without conclusive evidence), or media cynicism (i.e., distrust in the sincerity and nobility of journalists and the media; Cook & Gronke, 2005).

Another conceptual ambiguity concerns the relationship between trust and distrust. The two can be perceived as two ends of the same scale, which would mean that they are both determined by the same (but reversed) antecedents or as separate concepts based on different antecedents (Engelke et al., 2019). Engelke et al. (2019, p. 74) argue that trust and distrust are "linked but separate concepts" and that, although some antecedents are common for both concepts (just opposite), others are different for each of them. Their study showed that, first, some antecedents can be associated with both trust and distrust (e.g., while some recipients associated the high speed of reporting with trust, for others, speed was a reason for distrust) and, second, some antecedents were relevant only for one of the two concepts (e.g., familiarity with the journalist can be a reason for trust, although not knowing the journalists was never mentioned as a reason for distrust; Engelke et al., 2019). This difference in conceptualization has implications for the quantitative measurement of trust

and distrust because, if the two are distinct concepts, the usual single-scale measurement is inadequate (Engelke et al., 2019).

## 2.2. Sources and Correlates of Trust and Distrust

Previous empirical research, which is overwhelmingly quantitative, has identified several factors that influence or are associated with trust and distrust in journalists, news, and the media (for a detailed overview, see Fawzi et al., 2021). They can be distinguished into three categories: (a) wider social factors, (b) the characteristics of the audiences, and (c) the perceived characteristics of the media and media content.

First, previous studies suggest that trust in the media is lower in volatile political environments, politically polarized countries, and countries with low levels of political trust (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). There is empirical support for the “honeymoon effect”: In countries that have recently transitioned to democracy, initial excitement leads to increased levels of trust but is soon followed by disillusionment and a rapid decline in institutional trust, including in the media (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2019; Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

Second, when it comes to the audience factors, both institutional trust (specifically the trust in the government and political trust) and interpersonal trust are positively related to media trust (Jones, 2004; Lee, 2010; Pjesivac, 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2016). The same applies to news consumption (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Wilner et al., 2022). On the contrary, political cynicism (Lee, 2010), exposure to disinformation (Ognyanova et al., 2020; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019), and the use of social media as the main source of news (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Park et al., 2020) correlate with lower levels of trust. Political ideology also plays a role: conservative and right-wing citizens and those who are on the political margins are more distrustful of the media (Jones, 2004; Lee, 2010; Schranz et al., 2018; Wilner et al., 2022). Research on socio-demographic correlates, such as gender, age, and level of education, has been inconclusive (for an overview, see Fawzi et al., 2021; Livio & Cohen, 2018).

The third group of factors relates to the perceived characteristics of the media and media content. Trust is negatively associated with perceived news media corruption (Pjesivac, 2017), perceived undue political and commercial influences (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019), and perceived journalistic errors (e.g., sensationalized or understated stories and stories that lack essential information; Wilner et al., 2022). On the contrary, trust is enhanced by the perceived correspondence between actual events as experienced in person and the media coverage of these same events (Livio & Cohen, 2018), and, according to some studies, by greater journalistic transparency (Curry & Stroud, 2021), although other studies find that transparency does not play a role (Karlsson et al., 2014; Tandoc & Thomas, 2017). Moreover, in one of the few qualitative studies on trust,

Knudsen et al. (2022) revealed that ordinary citizens refer to four main themes when explaining their understanding of trust in the media: truthfulness, thoroughness and professionalism, independence, and objectivity.

Another useful source of insight into the sources of audience trust in the media is various scales that measure the levels of trust and credibility (for an overview, see Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). These scales are typically, as Prochazka and Schweiger (2019) note, multi-item measures of trust in the news media and similar constructs, which are based on quality perceptions (e.g., balance, objectivity, honesty, accuracy, timeliness). They presume that trust in the media is linked to the assessment of its quality. This is also the premise of this study.

## 2.3. Audience Assessment and Trust in Public Service Media

In many countries, PSM enjoys a high level of public trust. For instance, PSM news is the most trusted source of news in 25 of the 27 EU member states, with the only two exceptions being Hungary and Poland (European Broadcasting Union, 2022). Even in times of increasing online offerings, citizens in various European countries consider PSM to be highly important (Just et al., 2017; Sehl, 2020).

This does not mean that the popularity of and trust in PSM is universal. Although many citizens rate the informational quality of PSM’s news service better than that of most other media outlets, some are skeptical of its independence and the quality of its journalism, they are critical of political and economic influences, and they are dissatisfied with how PSM fulfils its role (Just et al., 2017; Reiter et al., 2018; Sehl, 2020). Schulz et al. (2019) show that the audience for PSM news in eight European countries is primarily older and educated. When it comes to trust, PSM news is often less trusted by younger audiences, those with lower education, ethnic minorities, people with right-wing political orientation, and people with populist attitudes (Jöesaar et al., 2022; Picone & Donders, 2020; Schulz et al., 2019).

In addition, people who sympathize with populist parties not only trust PSM less but also have different expectations. Their trust is more closely linked to their perception of how well PSM represent their in-group values and attitudes, while the trust of people who are not sympathetic to populist parties is more closely linked to their perception of how well PSM adheres to the normative standards of journalism, like impartiality and objectivity (Smejkal et al., 2022). Still, across Europe, there is a strong positive relationship between the perceived freedom of PSM from political pressures and the level of trust in it (European Broadcasting Union, 2022). Using Spain as a case study, Campos-Rueda and Goyanes (2022) argue that citizens still expect the PSM to fulfil traditional values: independent and qualified journalism that delivers accurate and unbiased information.

## 2.4. Trust in the Media and Public Service Media in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, the level of public trust in the news is among the lowest in the world. Only 34% of the people claim to have trust in the news overall. This ranks it 37th out of 46 surveyed countries (Newman et al., 2022). There are several possible reasons: the perceived lack of media independence due to oligarchization, political ownership of media outlets, and commercialization; the rise of disinformation media that accuses the mainstream media of withholding important information; and attacks on journalists by populist politicians (Urbániková, 2022). In addition, the historical legacy of low interpersonal trust compared to Western countries and citizens' dissatisfaction with the state of the Czech society, along with the recent upheavals caused by the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic, may also bolster distrust in media (Urbániková, 2022).

However, the Czech PSM seems to be an island of trust in the sea of distrust. Czech Radio and Czech Television are the two most trusted news sources for Czech citizens: 58% and 56%, respectively, stated that they trust their news (Newman et al., 2022). As elsewhere in the world (Sehl et al., 2022), PSM is a thorn on the side of Czech populist and extremist parties and parties with authoritarian tendencies (Gosling, 2020). However, unlike in Hungary or Poland, the Czech PSM has so far resisted the pressure and maintained its independence from political power, despite various attempts to bring them under political control in recent years ("Concerns over increasing meddling in independence of Czech public broadcaster," 2021).

### 3. Data and Method

To learn more about the reasons for the audience's trust and distrust in PSM, and to explore the relationship between the concepts of trust and distrust, this contribution uses the Czech Republic as a case study and aims to answer two research questions:

RQ1: How do people explain and justify the extent to which they trust and distrust the Czech PSM?

RQ2: To what extent are the reasons for trust the same (just inverse) as the reasons for distrust, and to what extent do they differ?

To gain an in-depth understanding of what trust and distrust entail for the public, we adopted a qualitative approach and used the focus group method, which is a form of group interview about a predetermined set of discussion topics that is guided by a moderator (Bryman, 2012). We conducted four discussions, three online (via a video conferencing platform) and one in person (in the capital city of Prague due to its relatively easy accessibility from other regions). The ratio between the number of online and in-person focus groups was determined

by data from the Czech Statistical Office (2022), according to which four-fifths of Czech households have a computer or tablet and a similar proportion have access to the internet. The in-person focus group was attended exclusively by those who indicated during recruitment that they use the internet less than once a month.

Each focus group had six participants. The participants roughly replicated the structure of the Czech population in terms of gender, age, education, region, and the size of residence. The purpose of this approach was to achieve a sufficiently diverse sample of participants, without any claim to generalize the findings to the whole population. The participants were recruited by a professional market research agency. They were informed in advance of the research topic, their informed consent was obtained prior to the discussion, and they were financially rewarded for their participation. The discussions were held in November 2022 and the length of each was approximately 100 minutes.

The discussion guide (see the Supplementary File) included the topics of payment for media content and for PSM, the perceived importance of PSM, expectations for PSM, recommendations for PSM management, and trust and distrust in PSM. The participants were first asked to rate their level of trust in Czech Television and Czech Radio on a scale of 1 = *full trust* to 5 = *no trust* (for each medium separately) and to think about the reasons that led them to their indicated level of trust. This was followed by a detailed discussion of their reasoning and justification.

An audio recording and field notes were taken of each discussion. The recording was then transcribed verbatim and coded in Atlas.ti software. Thematic analysis, "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), was used to analyze the data. The coding and data analysis was performed in two steps to increase the validity and reliability of the findings. The authors first inductively coded the discussions independently of each other, compared and discussed the codes, and then developed the final code structure and consolidated the codes into several content domains.

### 4. Findings: Trust and Distrust in Public Service Media

The participants ( $N = 24$ ) expressed more trust than distrust for Czech Television and Czech Radio, with a higher level of trust in the latter than in the former. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being *full trust*, Czech Television achieved an average score of 2.8 (i.e., 39% declared trust, 30% were neutral, 30% declared distrust) and Czech Radio had an average score of 2.1 (i.e., 74% declared trust, 10% were neutral, 16% declared distrust). The study focused on the analysis of the underlying reasons for trust and distrust. Based on the explanation that the participants provided for their level of trust in the Czech PSM, we inductively identified a number of factors that lead to trust and distrust (Figure 1). We categorized them according to the

three levels recognized in the literature (Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Williams, 2012): trust/distrust in the message (i.e., the PSM content), trust/distrust in the source (i.e., the PSM journalists), and trust/distrust in the PSM organizations (i.e., its structural position and its regulatory framework).

As depicted in Figure 1, some sources lead to both trust and distrust, which means that they are relevant to both concepts, even though the participants disagreed on the actual assessment of PSM in these aspects (e.g., perceived objectivity of the PSM content led to trust, while perceived lack of it led to distrust). We also identified several reasons that were related solely to trust, but no reason that led solely to distrust.

#### 4.1. Trust in Message: Not Just What Public Service Media Is “Allowed” to Say

To start with the level of the PSM content, the participants primarily discussed the news and current affairs programs and referred to traditional journalistic standards, such as objectivity, truthfulness, relevance, and timeliness, to justify their trust or distrust. Perceived objectivity proved to be the key. The participants agreed that, for PSM to be trusted, its content must be objective, which for them means that it should be impartial, balanced, and include the full spectrum of views without favoring one particular view.

However, they disagreed in two aspects. First, the participants had diametrically opposed assessments of the actual objectivity of the PSM content. While part of them praised it (e.g., “When I want to form an opinion, I turn on Czech Television; it doesn’t seem to me that it’s so influenced by politics and it seems to me to be

impartial”), others criticized its lack (e.g., “It seems to me that it’s always taken out of context...it’s always targeted against someone or for someone; I miss the objectivity there”). In this respect, the participants were particularly critical of Czech Television, not so much of Czech Radio.

Second, a deeper inquiry revealed that the different assessment was largely driven by differing perceptions of what views PSM should give space to. While some participants praised PSM for not presenting anti-system views and conspiracy or disinformation stories and explicitly cited that as a reason for trust, another part resented PSM for not giving space to all views and stories and for deliberately suppressing and withholding certain opinions. This can be illustrated by two topics in particular: the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, some participants argued that PSM does not give space to pro-Russian views and even assumed that the journalists are “forbidden” to do so (e.g., “The reason why the Russians went to war...[is that] Ukraine wanted to join NATO...The Russians didn’t like it. But...the journalists are forbidden to report this. That’s objectivity.”).

Some participants were similarly suspicious of PSM’s coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. They suspected the PSM of withholding information about the lower-than-expected efficacy of the Covid-19 vaccine, pressuring people to get vaccinated, uncritical promotion of the government’s view of the dangers of the virus, and scaring the people. As one participant put it: “For me, trust in [Czech] Television ended during the Covid-19 pandemic.”

Another significant source of trust (or, conversely, distrust) was the perceived truthfulness of the information provided by PSM. The participants agreed that truthful and reliable information, which is ideally verified from multiple sources, is important for their trust. Again, they

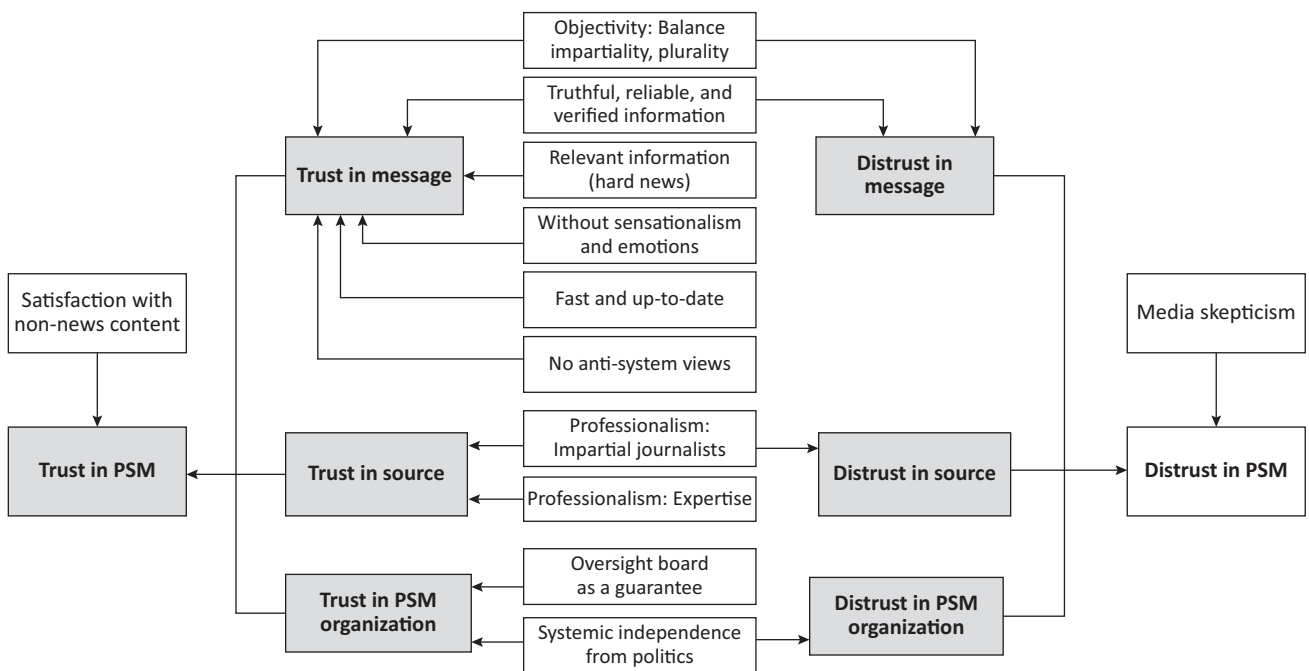


Figure 1. Sources of trust and distrust in Czech PSM.

disagreed on how they judged PSM performance in this regard. Here, the match between the media coverage and their personal experience proved to be an important criterion. Some participants argued that, although they do not have the opportunity to personally verify all of the news, the PSM news coverage is consistent with their own empirical experience:

Back in the days when it [the war in Ukraine] wasn't even talked about here, I already knew a man who was sending there [to Ukraine] bulletproof vests and things like that because his relatives were simply in life-threatening danger. So, I believe that they [PSM] are trying to be objective to the highest possible degree.

Conversely, other participants stated that they do not trust PSM because its news coverage is not consistent with their personal experience. One of them said: "A lot of the information I hear doesn't match what I know about it." Deeper questioning revealed that these participants did not suspect PSM of falsifying information or lying; rather, the problem seemed to be a different perspective on news selection. When the participants illustrated instances where PSM "did not tell the whole truth," they repeatedly used examples that did not conform to media logic and the media's common judgement of what is newsworthy. For example, when it comes to the war in Ukraine, one participant complained that Czech Television shows places where fighting is taking place but does not show places where there is no fighting:

I really have sources directly from Ukraine, and it is not as Czech Television portrays it...Yes, there is a war there. Terrible things are happening there, but they just generalize it to the whole of Ukraine. But Ukraine is a huge country...This is where I simply disagree with Czech Television, with what they are pushing into people's heads about what is happening there.

Next, we identified three reasons that are unique to trust. Some participants justified their trust in PSM on the grounds that, first, PSM news is fast and up to date, second, it delivers relevant information and hard news, and, third, PSM presents the news without sensationalism and excessive appeals to emotion. Here they contrasted PSM's news coverage with the news coverage provided by commercial television, which they perceived to be too emotionally tinged (e.g., commercial channels want to "make sure everyone watches it and is moved by the baby or the cat and dog at the end") and focused on irrelevant and sensational information (e.g., "They [Czech Television] are better than Nova or Prima...because, when you watch it, you see only murders, only violence, only something like that, but you don't learn much").

#### 4.2. *Trust in Journalists: Impartiality and Expertise*

Trust in PSM is also based on trust in its staff. The participants agreed that, to be trusted, PSM reporters and moderators should be sufficiently professional. They emphasized two dimensions of professionalism: impartiality and expertise. Some justified their trust on the grounds that PSM journalists manage to maintain impartiality and they have a high level of expertise (i.e., they are knowledgeable about what they do, tend to be well prepared for interviews, are able to respond to the interviewee's answers, and seem to have a good understanding of the topic). For instance, as one participant explained, discussions at Czech Radio "are conducted very professionally, they are not biased, no one is foisting anything on anyone....I think the moderators are capable and have good qualifications for their position."

From the perspective of other participants, PSM journalists fail to maintain impartiality, which then leads to their distrust of PSM. They mentioned interrupting guests, jumping in, being aggressive when asking questions, repeating the same question, and misinterpreting what a guest says (e.g., "putting something in the guest's mouth without the guest meaning to say it") as indicators of the lack of impartiality. One participant summarized it as follows: "I ask a person a question, I comment on his answer, but I don't impose my own opinions, which unfortunately happens on Czech Television today and every day."

#### 4.3. *Trust in Public Service Media Organizations: Independence and Supervision*

Trust also derives from trust in PSM as an organization. At this level, the participants reflected on the structural position and regulatory framework of PSM. As elsewhere in the world, the Czech PSM is supervised by specialized bodies, specifically the Czech Television Council and the Czech Radio Council (i.e., these are the bodies through which the public's right to control the activities of PSM is exercised). Some participants justified their trust in PSM by the existence of these councils and the stricter oversight that PSM are subject to compared to that of commercial media: "For both institutions, there are those councils above them that, if something were to happen, would step in. This is not the case with the commercial media. I don't trust them very much, I must admit." On the contrary, the opposite, where the activities of media councils would lead to distrust, was not noted.

In addition to the existence of media councils, the second (and related) factor at the systemic level was the broader independence of PSM from political power. Some of the participants who trusted PSM justified this by its systemic independence from political power, which stems, among other things, from the regulatory framework. On the other hand, some critical participants argued that the Czech PSM is, in practice, too subservient to politicians. For example, the Czech

parliament (i.e., the Chamber of Deputies) directly elects the members of the media councils, who then elect the directors general of PSM. The lack of an adequate barrier between PSM and politics was a reason for distrust among some participants: “Czech Television is not objective, Czech Television is governed by the Chamber of Deputies, the majority, I mean the majority in the Chamber of Deputies. That means Czech Television is not objective and the news is not objective.”

#### *4.4. What Else to Consider: Media Skepticism and Non-News Content*

In addition to the reasons for trust and distrust related to the three levels—message, source, and PSM as an organization—the analysis revealed two additional important aspects, one specific to building trust and the other to distrust. First, it seems that the reputation and trust in PSM can be enhanced and strengthened by high-quality non-news content. Even the participants who otherwise had many reservations about PSM usually appreciated its non-news programs, such as documentaries, films, series, entertainment programs, sports, and educational programs.

Second, distrust in PSM is not necessarily the result of a negative assessment of its performance. It may reflect a personal tendency towards skepticism. The testimonies of several participants suggest that complex and polarizing issues, such as the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic, have led them to be unsure about what to believe. This, coupled with the inability to personally verify information, leads to the tendency to distrust PSM and the media: “I don’t think there’s anything that’s 100% true, certainly when it comes to the war in Ukraine or the Covid...because everybody thinks something else....There’s nothing 100% reliable, so I don’t completely trust anything that’s said anywhere.”

### **5. Conclusions**

The four focus group discussions with the Czech public revealed several reasons that lead to trust and distrust in PSM. In line with previous literature (Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Williams, 2012), they can be grouped into three main categories: trust/distrust in the message (i.e., the PSM content), trust/distrust in the source (i.e., the PSM journalists), and trust/distrust in PSM as organizations. In general, the participants justified their trust or distrust with references to traditional journalistic standards as described in previous literature (Campos-Rueda & Goyanes, 2022; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Knudsen et al., 2022; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Livio & Cohen, 2018; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Wilner et al., 2022). In addition, we identified two aspects that are specific to trust/distrust in PSM: the existence of an oversight board as a guarantee of PSM quality and the systemic independence of PSM from politics (i.e., the perceived effectiveness of the regulatory framework).

The participants agreed on the importance of four key aspects that can lead to both trust and distrust, depending on how they assess the actual PSM performance in this regard: objectivity, the provision of truthful information, the professionalism and impartiality of PSM journalists, and the systemic independence of PSM organizations from politics. While the distrustful participants justified their position on the grounds that PSM is not objective, does not provide truthful and verified information, has journalists who are not professional and impartial, and the PSM organizations are not sufficiently systemically independent from politics, the trusting participants argued the opposite. We also identified several reasons that were exclusively related to trust but no reason that would lead solely to distrust.

Interestingly, the participants declared higher trust in Czech Radio than in Czech Television, mainly due to the perceived higher objectivity. Without further research, it is difficult to say to what extent this assessment actually reflects the different degrees of adherence to the principles of objectivity by Czech Television and Czech Radio, to what extent this assessment can be influenced by the rhetoric of populist politicians who question the objectivity of Czech Television but not so much of Czech Radio, and to what extent radio, as a medium, can make it easier to maintain the appearance of neutrality and impartiality due to the absence of visual components (e.g., the sympathies or antipathies cannot be deduced from body language).

This study has several implications that are worth discussing. First, it supports previous literature (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Tsfati & Cappella, 2005), which suggests that, when audiences think about and evaluate “the media,” they often actually refer to the news media. Similarly, the participants in our research justified their trust and distrust in PSM primarily on grounds related to its news content. This does not mean that they would reduce PSM to news and current affairs. On the contrary: Even those who otherwise had many reservations about the functioning of PSM usually appreciated its non-news programs, such as documentaries, films, series, entertainment programs, sports, and educational programs. This is an important message for PSM management because it means that the reputation and trust in PSM can be enhanced and strengthened by high-quality non-news content. If PSM wants to maintain legitimacy and popularity, in addition to the mission to inform, it should pay equal attention to the other two parts of the Reithian triad (i.e., to educate and entertain), because audience goodwill built upon these two pillars can mitigate potential dissatisfaction with the news.

Also, the media should think better about their strategy for dealing with opinions and information that can be labeled as conspiratorial or disinformation because, as this study shows, simply ignoring them weakens the trust of part of the audience. Ideally, these elements should be given space and refuted.



Second, one of the most obvious differences between trusting and distrusting participants was the latter's demand for the coverage of anti-system views for the sake of media objectivity. Their distrust in PSM stems from the lack of doing so. This is consistent with studies that examine low trust in PSM in Western Europe, where authoritarian populists accuse PSM of being biased against their anti-system views (Holtz-Bacha, 2021; Sehl et al., 2022). Thus, although our study is based on data on PSM audiences in the Czech Republic, its conclusions may have more general validity.

Third, the declared distrust in PSM is not necessarily the result of a negative assessment of PSM performance or the belief of malicious intent on the part of the PSM. It may also reflect a personal tendency towards skepticism. For some participants, this tendency seemed to be reinforced by two recent agendas in particular: the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic. In both cases, these are highly polarizing issues where it is difficult to verify the information personally, which leads to a general uncertainty among several participants about what to believe and a feeling that no medium (not just PSM) can be fully trusted. However, being skeptical and critical does not necessarily equal a total rejection of the media as such (Quiring et al., 2021).

Fourth, our findings are consistent with the model of trust developed by Mayer et al. (1995), according to which trust is related to the trustor's propensity to trust (e.g., as we show, personal tendency towards skepticism plays a role here) and to the (perceived) characteristics of the trustee: its ability (i.e., the perceived professionalism of PSM journalists), benevolence (i.e., the perceived intention of PSM to benefit the public, as, e.g., some participants believed that the PSM deliberately withheld some information), and integrity (i.e., perceived adherence to the usual standards of journalistic quality and ethics). As our study demonstrates, systemic guarantees of ability, benevolence, and integrity can be added as additional factors that go beyond this model. Some participants justified their trust by the existence of an oversight board to guarantee PSM quality and by the regulatory framework that maintains the independence of PSM from politics.

Fifth, the reasons that lead to trust in PSM were not identical (only inverse) to the reasons that lead to distrust; some of the identified reasons led to both trust and distrust, but others led only to trust. Our findings seem to suggest that trust and distrust are not two sides of the same coin, but rather two largely related but distinct concepts, as Engelke et al. (2019) suggest. However, interpretive caution is necessary here. The participants were given the task of first declaring their level of trust or distrust and then explaining their reasons, so it is possible that the reasons given have the character of a backward rationalization of trust as a deeper and more stable attitude.

In addition, although some reasons were given only by participants to justify their trust (e.g., the provision of timely and relevant information without sensationalism),

this does not necessarily mean that these aspects (if PSM fails in them) cannot lead to distrust. It may only mean that the distrusting participants do not have reservations about PSM's performance in this regard, but this is not enough for them to trust it. Thus, several concepts were conflated in the participants' statements: trust/distrust and the actual assessment of the PSM performance (overall trust/distrust was not always a perfect reflection of how participants evaluated PSM performance; even those who declared their distrust appreciated some aspects of PSM and vice versa). However, as Prochazka and Schweiger (2019) note, while trust is related to perceptions of quality, these are two distinct concepts. All of this points to the breadth and vagueness of the concept of trust, which seems to have the character of the deeper attitude and orientation of the individual (not necessarily based on a rational assessment of media performance) and which then serves as a projection screen for all sorts of reasoning and interpretations.

To separate trust and performance assessment, further qualitative studies could focus on trust and distrust in the media, in general, without reference to a specific medium. For example, the participants could be asked what qualities and characteristics a media outlet should generally have to be trusted, and conversely, what characteristics lead to distrust. However, such an abstract discussion may be more challenging for participants. Another option would be to discuss trust and distrust in different media outlets so that deeper common reasons can be better identified and more easily distinguished from specific quality assessments.

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### 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 authors (unedited).

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Article

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

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### 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

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### 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).

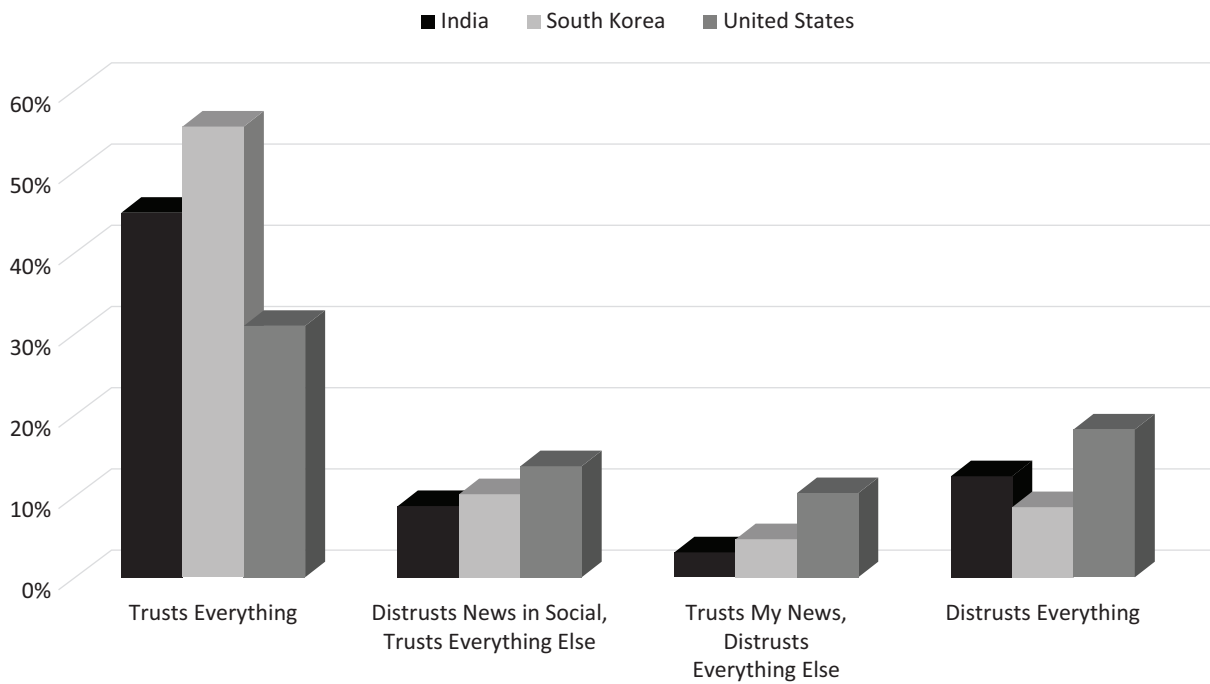
#### 3.2.1. Analysis

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*.

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## 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).

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Article

## Confusing Content, Platforms, and Data: Young Adults and Trust in News Media

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### Abstract

News media trust, and the lack thereof, has been a prominent topic of discussion among journalism scholars in recent years. In this article, we study young adults' trust in news media from the perspectives of platformisation and datafication. For the empirical study, we collected interview data from 23 Finnish 19–25-year-old young adults and analysed it inductively with applied thematic analysis. Our analysis reveals that trust negotiation is relational and entails not accepted, but forced vulnerability in relation to news media and the platforms on which they operate. Unclarity about the agency of news media on social media platforms causes young adults to experience powerlessness and anxiety in the face of data collection, which in practice translates into indifference toward their data being used by both news media and social media platforms. We show that young adults face a variety of challenges when navigating the online (news) media environment, which as we identify, can result in three trust-diminishing confusions about content, platforms, and data. This may have profound effects on how journalism is viewed as a cornerstone of a democratic society.

### Keywords

data confusion; datafication; news; news trust; platformisation; social media; vulnerability; young adults

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Young adults worldwide are withdrawing from direct brand-based news consumption to news consumption on social media platforms (Newman et al., 2022). These datafied platforms affect how journalistic content is shaped; therefore, the difference between journalistic content and other media content is often blurred (Valaskivi, 2022). Further, for young adults, news consumption is often a by-product of spending time on social media, i.e., they consume news incidentally (Mitchelstein et al., 2020). Incidental news consumption is linked to young adults' dependence on personalised news sources, meaning that algorithms increasingly define how they understand the world around them (Swart, 2021). Hence, this article examines young adults' news media trust, which is inevitably shift-

ing due to the rapid changes in the current datafied media landscape.

In many Western countries, news media trust, i.e., the degree to which audiences trust news outlets as credible sources of information, is declining (Newman et al., 2023). Proposed reasons for this include decreasing interest in news, news avoidance (Villi et al., 2022), and exposure to fake news (Ognyanova et al., 2020). Additionally, recent crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have raised, in an unprecedented way, the question of the veracity of journalistic or seemingly journalistic content in the online environment. From an audience perspective, a key issue in the changing news environment is negotiating trust, both in relation to news content and its sources. However, it is not only a question of individuals' willingness or ability to trust the content distributed on platforms, because in

the data-driven environment, the agency of both journalistic content and content producers is largely constructed on terms dictated by the platforms themselves (van Dijck et al., 2018).

In this article, we examine how young adults negotiate trust in the platformed and datafied news media environment. In doing so, we contribute to an understanding of the role of digital intermediaries in the trust relationship between young audiences and news organisations. We go beyond merely looking at whether news media trust exists to examining how relationships to data and platforms are negotiated and affect trust in news media. Our empirical study context is in Finland, which, by international comparison, stands out as a country with particularly high levels of news reach and trust (Newman et al., 2023). Finland is characterised as a media welfare state in that the whole population has access to news that is diverse in content and enjoys editorial independence (Syvertsen et al., 2014). In addition, almost half of the Finnish population trusts news media in handling their personal data (Newman et al., 2023). Finland thus provides an interesting context for trust research because high trust in news media also seems to include trust in news organisations' use and handling of audience data.

We focus on young adults between the ages of 19–25, often referred to as “social media natives,” because they grew up surrounded by social media and their news consumption habits differ from those of previous generations (Newman et al., 2022). We exemplify how young adults' platformed news consumption causes them to experience content and platform confusion, i.e., what counts as news and who is the original producer of the news is not always clear when news is encountered in a stream of social media content. Additionally, we show that in the data-driven news media environment, young adults experience data confusion. This relates to how, for the studied young adults, it was often difficult to distinguish who collects their data, and in particular, what the specific role of news media as data collectors is when contrasted with platform companies. Whereas content and platform confusions have previously been identified by other scholars (e.g., Ross Arguedas et al., 2022; Valaskivi, 2022), data confusion and the related concept of forced vulnerability are novel outcomes of our empirical analysis. These concepts emerged from our adopted perspective to study audience perceptions of news organisations' data collection, which to our best knowledge, is not previously considered in literature in contrast to the growing literature on journalists' perceptions and use of audience data (e.g., Lamot & Paulussen, 2020; Salonen et al., 2023; Tenor, 2023). Our study thus contributes to the understanding of the platformed and datafied news environment, where young adults navigate and negotiate their trust and relationship to data and news media.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. News Media Trust and Young Adults

News media trust, and the lack thereof, has been a prominent topic of discussion among journalism scholars in recent years (e.g., Fisher et al., 2021; Park et al., 2020). Comparative studies (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2023) have pointed towards a decline in trust in legacy media and professional news journalism in many Western countries. At the same time, there is a lot of variation in the level of trust between countries (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). News media trust can also vary between different time periods in one country, depending on the developments of the country's political and media spheres (Brosius et al., 2022).

The concept of trust entails accepted vulnerability in relation to the trusted party (Baier, 1986). News media trust can thus be understood through the lens of audience vulnerability to news media's choice of what the audience should know and how this knowledge is delivered (Grosser et al., 2016). In the news media context, we understand vulnerability as a value-free (not particularly negative) affective relationship. Trust is also future-oriented and connected to the journalistic expectations that people have towards news media (Vanacker & Belmas, 2009). Taking expectations and vulnerability into account, in this article we rely on Hanitzsch et al.'s (2018, p. 5) definition of news media trust as “the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner.”

Trust in news media is often linked with trust in a functioning democracy (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). Polarisation of the political climate is theorised to cause a decline in trust, driving people to alternative sources of news (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). It has been suggested that the high level of news media trust in our empirical context, Finland, can at least partly be explained by a non-polarised media landscape (Newman et al., 2022). Finns broadly trust national news media and they place their trust particularly in individual media brands (Matikainen et al., 2020).

On an individual level, high news media trust is often associated with high political trust (Brosius et al., 2022), high interest in news, and low levels of active news avoidance (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Newman et al., 2022). In the past five years, news avoidance among young adults has risen globally, which can be linked to the fact that those under 35 trust news less than older generations (Newman et al., 2022). A decline in trust, especially in this age group, has also been observed in the Finnish context (Ojala & Matikainen, 2022). A recent qualitative study conducted among Finnish young adults (aged 18–29) showed that trust in news media is eroded by the news media's overt market orientation, experienced information overload, and a lack of diverse views and opinions (Hasala et al., 2023). At the same time,

Hasala et al. (2023) emphasise that trust negotiation in relation to news media is a complex, nuanced process that is anchored on individuals' values, habits, and social environment.

## 2.2. Trust in a Platformed and Datafied News Environment

The context for consuming news is increasingly digital, platformed, and datafied for most audiences, and especially so for younger generations. Platformisation can be defined as "the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276). In short, platforms are becoming the dominant online infrastructures, and they are infiltrating and converging with the institutions and practices of different social sectors (such as journalism) through which democratic societies are organised (van Dijck et al., 2018). Van Dijck et al. (2018) suggested that as platforms have gained increasing power over people's everyday lives, platforms have come to form a "platform ecosystem," which is fuelled by the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, circulation, and monetisation of user data. This process is known as datafication, which, more broadly, refers to a societal transformation where different data streams are used to collect and produce information about people, which is then used as a basis for business (Kennedy, 2018). In the news media context specifically, datafication is manifested in "journalism's transformation towards a more and more data-based, algorithmicised, metrics-driven or even automated practice" (Loosen, 2021, p. 361). Research shows that audience data increasingly shapes journalistic decision-making in news organisations, for example, in the selection of news headlines and the formulation process of news stories (Lamot & Paulussen, 2020; Salonen et al., 2023). However, some journalists are ambivalent towards data use and highlight the professional values of news selection (Salonen et al., 2023; Tenor, 2023).

The trinity of platformisation, datafication, and algorithmisation (Latzer, 2021) has led to a situation where much of the news consumption on platforms takes place incidentally, i.e., news consumption is a by-product of consuming other content online (Boczkowski et al., 2018). Incidental news consumption has been theorised to lead (young) audiences to disassociate between the sources of information from their journalistic origin (Hasala et al., 2023; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022), and cause difficulties in identifying different content genres, and the motives behind producing them (Valaskivi, 2022). Empirical studies on audiences (e.g., Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018; Swart et al., 2017) confirm that the boundaries people draw between news and other content on social media platforms are blurred and shifting. Furthermore, research shows that when audiences are incidentally exposed to news on social media

platforms, they are less likely to remember the source of the news (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019).

Regarding trust, research shows that the context in which news is consumed is integral for the experience of trust, i.e., consuming news through social media platforms shapes audience perceptions of trust toward news, often in a negative fashion (Park et al., 2020). For example, people find news less credible when they are exposed to it through Facebook as opposed to a news media's website (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023). At the same time, studies show that people are more likely to trust news content on social media platforms when the sharer of news is an opinion leader (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018; Turcotte et al., 2015). Additionally, research indicates that social endorsements of news not only increases people's trust in news content online, but also the likelihood that they will seek out more information from the endorsed news sources in the future (Turcotte et al., 2015).

Consequently, negotiating trust in a platformed, datafied environment is a complex process that relates to people's understanding, perceptions, feelings, and experiences about the system and the drivers behind it (Steedman et al., 2020). This means, for example, that people may trust the news institution but not the broader data ecosystem that guides news media's data-related practices (Steedman et al., 2020). Similar results have been found in the Finnish context: In Finland, there is no evidence that the emergence of social media platforms as mediators of news would have caused a decline in trust in individual news brands, but surveys indicate a general scepticism towards social media as news platforms (Matikainen et al., 2020; Reunanen, 2020).

Recent research has indicated that the ways individuals navigate amidst datafied media environments are often rather messy, arousing feelings of anxiety, creepiness, and irritation (Pink et al., 2018; Ruckenstein & Granroth, 2020). Despite the challenges associated with data-driven environments, possibilities for opting out are limited. As a result, the pressure to trust datafied media is becoming increasingly ingrained in people's daily media consumption habits (Pink et al., 2018). Consequently, individuals adopt various improvisatory actions to cope in these settings (Pink et al., 2018) and build trust in datafied environments. These include, for example, withdrawing from interaction on social media platforms or deleting apps altogether (Talvitie-Lamberg et al., 2022). Research on young adults, specifically, shows that they have developed a variety of tactics and strategies to mitigate inconveniences and discomfort that data collection causes, including limiting information disclosure or avoiding interaction with targeted advertisements (Holvoet et al., 2022).

Uncertainty about how social media platforms operate and make use of data not only causes individual feelings of powerlessness and distrust (Draper & Turow, 2019), but also distrust in journalistic content disseminated on the platforms, and the organisations that

operate on them (Steedman et al., 2020). Ultimately, it is a question of (lack of) trust in journalism as an institution, and thus, in the preconditions for democracy to function. Weakening trust can drive young audiences away from journalistic content, toward alternative sources of information (Ojala & Matikainen, 2022), and thus towards different and polarised social realities.

Overall, the platformisation and datafication of news consumption highlights a situation where the perceived trustworthiness and legitimacy of news media lies not only in the hands of journalists nor traditional media institutions, but rather in a much more decentralised network of audiences, platform companies, legislators, and their interaction (Seuri et al., 2022). As recent research on datafied news environments and their increasingly algorithmic news design has shown, decisions on news content have partly moved into the hands of data scientists, developers, and ultimately algorithmic models (Schjøtt Hansen & Møller Hartley, 2021). User data is naturally what matters behind these models and suggests to us that the relationships users build with the data (trust as one possibility) are becoming a critical point in the current media landscape. However, surprisingly there seems to be a lack of research on users' trust in data, particularly in news environments. Against this background, we examine what qualities Finnish young adults associate with trustworthy media, and how they define and build trust in news content and the media in the platformed, datafied media environment. To that aim, we pose the following two research questions:

RQ1: How do young adults perceive (dis)trust toward news media on social media platforms?

RQ2: How do young adults perceive (dis)trust toward data collection by news media?

### 3. Materials and Methods

Our data consists of semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in May–June 2022. The interviewees were Finnish 19–25-year-old young adults. Of the 23 interviewees, 15 identified as female and 8 as male. At the time of the interviews, all interviewees were enrolled university students in communication, economics, social, or educational sciences. The interview sample was convenience-based: An invitation to participate in the interviews was circulated on student mailing lists with the compensation of a €25 reward voucher. All participants were interviewed online via Zoom by the first author. The interviews lasted on average 50 minutes (ranging from 30 to 80 minutes).

In the interviews, we asked the young adults about their perceptions and experiences relating to news consumption, news media trust, and personal data collection. As a supplementary data-gathering method, we used news repertoire mapping (Merten, 2020). Using an online collaborative platform, the interviewees were first asked to freely name their sources of news on digital post-its and to place these sources in the order of importance as news sources on an ego-centric map consisting of five concentric circles. Following this, the interviewees were asked to indicate on the map how often they encountered news from each source and whether they received news from each source intentionally or incidentally.

Figure 1 shows an average of the 23 interviewees' repertoire maps. The aggregated map contains the three innermost circles and those news sources that more than a third of respondents placed on their individual maps. The public service broadcaster, Yleisradio (YLE), and the leading daily newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS), were the most important and the most often followed news sources for our respondents. The two national

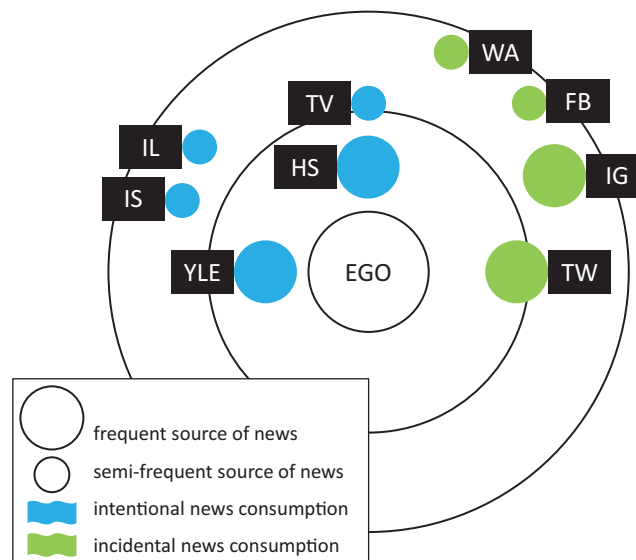


Figure 1. Aggregated news repertoire map.

evening tabloids, *Ilta* (IS) and *Ilta-lehti* (IL), were also considered as somewhat important and were semi-frequently followed by our interviewees. The interviewees reported that they mainly consumed news via news organisations' websites and applications, but they only used the free versions of these services, i.e., they did not pay for subscriptions. Additionally, they watched public service and commercial television news (TV) semi-regularly and considered them to be somewhat important sources for them.

In addition to consuming news directly and intentionally from news media's own platforms, young adults in our study consumed news incidentally via social media platforms. More than a third of respondents mentioned Twitter (TW), Instagram (IG), Facebook (FB), and WhatsApp (WA) as news sources. Additionally, some interviewees mentioned TikTok, LinkedIn, YouTube, Snapchat, or Google as news sources. Of all social media platforms, Twitter and Instagram were considered the most important sources of news. The repertoire maps confirmed that young adults in our sample have a news media diet that mirrors studies conducted on larger populations of Finnish youth (Matikainen et al., 2020; Sormanen et al., 2022). The completed maps were used as a starting point for further discussion on news consumption and news media trust.

We analysed the interview data inductively using the method of applied thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012). First, we divided the transcribed interview material into three topical modules that were (a) news consumption, (b) news media trust, and (c) personal data collection. Some parts of the material overlapped between different modules. For each topical module, we had a separate analytical question that guided the coding process. The respective analytical questions were (a) How do the interviewees relate to news content on social media platforms?, (b) What aspects do the interviewees highlight when talking about trust in the news media?, and (c) How do the interviewees perceive and experience personal data collection by news media? The coding was completed solely by the first author, after which the joint authors gathered to discuss the themes that emerged from the data. The final stage of the analysis process was focused on examining the interrelationships between the coding categories and between the three topical modules. In Section 4, we describe these interrelationships in detail.

#### 4. Findings

In accordance with previous studies (Hasala et al., 2023; Matikainen et al., 2020; Ojala & Matikainen, 2022), young adults in our study showed high levels of trust towards Finnish news media and journalism as an institution. The majority of participants named the public service broadcaster, YLE, as the most trustworthy media because, as argued by IW18, "they have the expertise, and they are non-commercial." The interviewees negoti-

ated trust in news media through former positive experiences and mental images, which is highlighted in the statements of IW7: She trusted "big and recognised media houses" that "people generally consider reliable."

Young Finns distinguished national news media from international media. Some of them recognised that high trust in national media stemmed broadly from trust in Finnish society and its democratic system. IW5 reflected that the trust in media comes early from childhood since "in school they taught us that [legacy media] are reliable." Learned and accumulated experience of reliable news media maintained interviewees' trust towards it. IW13 reflected:

If you think about these kinds of foreign [news] sites, I don't dare to read them, because I have the feeling that from some sites like the *Daily Mail*, I don't have 23 years of data on what kind of information is available there. Somehow the whole trust building should start from scratch.

High levels of trust in national news media often led to confidence that news media would also handle audience data ethically and within legal boundaries. IW1 described how her trust in news media as data collectors is based on how "they make good journalism, good news." IW8 elaborated further:

I don't know to what extent data goes back and forth in practice, but on the level of feeling, it's more pleasant to hand over [data] to a Finnish [media outlet], or if not Finnish, then European. Or, if not European, then to anyone other than companies collecting and selling data.

At the same time, the interviewees were active users of international commercial social media platforms, which also formed a visibly present part of their news repertoires. In the following subsections, we first analyse how trust is perceived in such a platformed news environment and then analyse what dimensions datafication brings to trust negotiation. We highlight that consuming news via social media platforms causes young adults to experience not only content confusion (what counts as news) and platform confusion (what is the journalistic origin of the news), but also, what we call data confusion. By that we mean that the participants in our study could not easily distinguish news media's data collection practices in isolation, but saw them as a continuum to other data collected and used online.

##### 4.1. Trust Negotiation and Content–Platform Confusion

News media visibility on social media platforms increased young adults' awareness and knowledge of news brands, and thus made news media more trustworthy. If news media were not visible on social media platforms, it would, as expressed by IW5, "probably be much

harder for them to get their news out to the public,” and then, as stated by IW21, “to what extent would people really get the news from reliable sources?” IW10 elaborated how the presence of news media on social media platforms is especially important “for those who don’t necessarily read newspapers or otherwise pay attention” because it “creates a lower threshold for them to get information on current affairs.”

Young adults’ attitudes towards incidental exposure to news, amidst other social media content, were largely positive. Through social media platforms, they become informed fast and in an entertaining format. Interestingly, at the same time, they were concerned about news content overlapping with commercial and entertainment content on social media platforms. IW14 evaluated Twitter as a news source:

It’s kind of the fastest, but also the most confusing. You see Sanna Marin [at the time the incumbent prime minister] in Butcha [Ukraine], and a funny dog video, and return on equity figures right after one another. There’s no logic, no internal structure, it’s kind of chaotic. Maybe that’s part of the charm. But as a sole source of news, it doesn’t make sense to me. The news should be more organised, a pre-chewed entity, like a newspaper article.

IW3 further elaborated on the discrepancy between wanting news content in an entertaining format and being wary of the consequences:

There is nothing entertaining in the news, or maybe not entertaining, but something that motivates me to read them. So then when [news] is [on social media] among everything else, I find they are more interesting. You don’t necessarily go and get them, but they come to you. But then when the news content gets mixed up with the other content, and when the other content is sometimes so unreliable you don’t really know what to believe anymore.

Distrust toward news content on social media platforms resulted both from content and platform confusion. When news content, produced to cohere with social media design and affordances, converged with the aesthetics of other social media content, young adults faced difficulties distinguishing what counts as news and who is the original producer of the news. Platformed news consumption thus seemed to obscure not only news media organisations’ agency on social media platforms, but also trust towards particular organisations.

The way in which young adults seemed to overcome platform and content confusion and the distrust it caused was that they negotiated trust in news content in relation to other users and their views. Young adults talked about the role of family, friends, public figures, and influencers as news producers, distributors, and commentators. They agreed that the news item sharer

often has the strongest influence on framing the news. IW13 summarised how “the comment of the person who shared the story has an impact on the kind of glasses you wear when you read the whole news story.” IW21 further elaborated on how the way influencers frame news based on their subjective viewpoint and experiences is related to trust:

Influencers often have a view, or a particular perspective, on the news because it affects them in a particular way. When their followers continue to share those experiences that reiterate the point of a news story, when dozens of people share it, it creates concreteness. It creates a sense of trust or humanity around something, but at the same time, you have to keep in mind that this is just one perspective.

The interviewees noted how such particular, and often-times personal, perspectives on news items could either reinforce or question the trustworthiness of the original news item. For example, IW16 explained how she re-evaluated news on the impact of food choices on climate change after she saw an influencer commenting on it:

An influencer on Instagram could explain how this news was made. I know that this person is really familiar with these things and has a track record of being an expert on them. Then I would believe in the expertise of someone else instead of a journalist.

Trust in influencers sharing news was also largely dependent on the particular news aesthetics they used for backing up their arguments. IW3 talked about the use of background videos (i.e., the green screen effect) on TikTok:

[Influencers] often talk over it, they are half in the picture and in the background is the source they are talking about. You can read it yourself from the background. Usually, they have highlighted the part of it that they want to talk about. That’s the so-called confirmation.

Furthermore, news shared by a trustworthy circle of people could easily be trusted. IW22 said that he is not interested when “random people comment on news,” but likes when his friends share or comment on news because he “can assess their understanding and influencing factors” that may affect how the news is framed. Other interviewees felt differently. IW20 said he “consider[s] friends and family trustworthy in many things, but that doesn’t mean that they are trustworthy as experts in a certain field.” Additionally, and in contrast to the qualitative assessment of a news sharer, IW3 highlighted the quantity of user information in assessing the reliability of news:

If there are thousands of people who agree on the same thing and the comments are similar, you'll believe it. It creates a lot of trust. But if there are more opposing opinions, than not. And if there is a mix of both, in such cases the original news item seems to be based on an opinion.

In summary, the findings suggest that young adults experienced platform and content confusion in that they had difficulties recognising journalistic content and its origin in the stream of social media content. From a news organisation's viewpoint, this would suggest that news organisations do not have a clear role in relation to audiences when news is consumed on platforms. Our interviewees indicated that direct contact between audiences and news organisations is weakened by those in between: the platforms, their aesthetics, and the news content disseminated by peers on platforms. A solution for young adults amidst this confusion is to navigate relying on peer relations: Trust in content is based on what the trustworthy peers trust, or on public opinion about a news item.

#### 4.2. Trust Negotiation and Data Confusion

The interviewees experienced a sense of ignorance, powerlessness, and anxiety in the face of data collection by news organisations and social media companies, which in practice translated into indifference toward their data use. The participants described data collection in general as "annoying," "worrying," "scary," "nasty but not terrible," or as a "necessary evil." In the news media context, IW1 told us how she usually does not "have the energy to read all the cookie stuff, because it's such a long list." She continued explaining how she views news media data collection practices: "I've just got used to the idea that, 'Yes, accept, accept, accept,' let me read the news, please."

Young adults did not easily recognise news media as data collectors, and they had a varied understanding of what kind of data news media have access to. In other words, they experienced what we call data confusion. When IW13 was asked about her perceptions of data collection, specifically in the news media context, she, like many of her peers, circled back to general data collection:

I think they probably collect roughly my age, my gender, my location, they probably collect what kind of things I've googled, what kind of websites I've browsed, whether I've looked at any products. Then, I'm sure, the phone records conversations, and then uses them to target me with ads the next time I open Instagram.

In a similar manner, IW23 hesitated over the boundaries of data collection:

I don't know if that's the case, but if Facebook collects information when I'm using the YLE app, I wouldn't

like it, but it probably doesn't. It probably can't. I don't know. Maybe they can. Google at least is capable of everything.

Young adults often referred to social media platforms' data collection practices in a negative sense, but they did not reflect on the fact that news media may also collect data through social media. When asked about the difference in preference for handing personal data over to news media versus to social media platforms, IW2 made a comparison:

My first thought would be that I don't mind as much giving my data to a news organisation as I do to TikTok, but then in the end I don't know how big the difference is, whether it's just a misconception in my mind that *Helsingin Sanomat* uses my data smarter.

IW15 further justified in what sense news organisations' data collection practices could be seen as more morally justifiable compared to social media platforms:

Instagram is trying to hook you and make money through it. Between the two, I'd rather give the data to the news media. After all, they can use it more for good. It's more important for them [to gather data] so that the important news can then be recommended to me.

The interviews also showed some unclarity about the business logic of commercial media. IW19 told us that targeted content "helps [her] find more information on a topic of interest," and that, according to IW11, "makes browsing so much easier." Later, both interviewees expressed that they disliked consumer profiling. Similarly, IW4 said that for him it is "a big problem" if he starts "seeing ads on news sites whose content mirrors [his] page history." IW1 elaborated further how "it just feels too extreme when I get ads for things I've been thinking about, things I haven't even talked to anyone about." Shortly after she noted that "it's part of this age of the internet and social media that we pay for the services with our data."

Overall, young adults' concerns about news media's agency as data collectors and users were ambiguous and fleeting, and hence, reflect the data confusion that they experienced. Their practical solution to data confusion, and the uneasiness it caused, was to give up. However, as our analysis reveals, under the seemingly shallow feelings of indifference, there were much deeper experiences of powerlessness and anxiety that eroded overall trust in social media platforms, and simultaneously in the news organisations present on them.

Consequently, our findings show that trust negotiation in the datafied news environment entails, not accepted, but forced vulnerability in relation to news media and the platforms on which they operate. Whereas accepted vulnerability "refers to an active

decision to depend or rely on a trustee” (Fawzi et al., 2021, p. 155), in our research context, young adults feel that there are no alternatives to giving up their personal data if they want to read news digitally or follow current affairs on social media platforms; they are forced to be vulnerable.

This sense of powerlessness was palpable when the interviewees talked about the future. IW15 commented that regarding data collection his “generation just happens to fall through the net in this time period.” Unclarity about news media’s data collection practices forced young adults to lean more firmly on Finnish society and democratic institutions, and legislation as a visible guarantee of it. As IW22 elaborated:

I think the EU has started to intervene in some of those issues quite well. It may not necessarily help me anymore, but it might help future generations. When things were new, we didn’t know so much before and nobody’s rights were considered. So, it may be a matter for future generations that they will be able to protect their own data better in some way.

In the current situation, young adults felt compelled to trust that news media would collect and handle their personal data in a responsible manner. In the face of data confusion, they were forced to draw on their trust in Finnish society and its democracy rather than place trust squarely upon news media as collectors of data. Relatively stable trust in societal institutions, such as journalism, led to an expectation that Finnish news media were worthy of this trust, also in regards to personal data collection.

## 5. Discussion

This study examined young adults’ perceptions of news media trust in the platformed and datafied media landscape. Our analysis shows that young adults experience uncertainty and confusion in relation to data collection and online news content, but that they have learned to cope with these inconveniences and discomforts by using various strategies. Below, we elaborate on the three types of confusions (platforms, content, and data), their related coping strategies, and the outcomes for news media trust.

Platform confusion arose from the blurred boundaries of news media’s own sites and social media platforms. Oftentimes this led to unclarity about the origin of news, and thus obscured news organisations’ agency on social media platforms. We found that young people generally enjoyed being exposed to news through social media. This was part of their daily media repertoire, in which news content was mixed with other social media content (Sormanen et al., 2022; Swart et al., 2017). At the same time, young adults expressed their concerns over content confusion. They noted that news items were often mixed aesthetically with other (social) media con-

tent on the platforms. This, in turn, caused hesitation over the trustworthiness of news items. The practical solution to platform and content confusion was to evaluate news content in relation to peers’ actions and reactions. In this sense, our findings align with those of previous research that has highlighted the role of opinion leaders, as well as close ones in influencing the trustworthiness of news on social media (e.g., Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018; Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023).

Data confusion, in turn, seems to be an outcome of an overall attitude towards platforms and their data-related practices. Young adults were ambivalent about news media’s data collection practices because they placed news media on a continuum of data collection along with global data platforms. Data was handed over to news media because young adults felt that nothing else could be done. The resulting indifference and a sense of a loss of agency over one’s data is also seen in other research on datafied environments (e.g., Draper & Turow, 2019; Pink et al., 2018; Ruckenstein & Granroth, 2020).

Our analysis reveals that trust negotiation in the platformed and datafied news environment entails a forced vulnerability. By that, we mean that individuals have no other option than to involuntarily disclose their data and become exposed to the ways their data is used in practice, for example, in the form of algorithmic news recommendations. In order to gain access to journalistic content in the online environment, users are forced into a vulnerable position. In a society where trust in a functioning democratic system is strong, as in our research context in Finland, forced vulnerability may not be particularly risky. Individuals rely on how institutions are rather trustworthy, and journalism is a good example of such an institution. However, if datafied news environments are built on the idea of forced vulnerability, it is reasonable to ask whether this may be the opposite of the key societal justification for journalism. Enhancing a functioning democracy through informed and active citizenship, and granting access to information, are some of the core building blocks upon which the media welfare state is argued to be grounded (Syvertsen et al., 2014). It is thus alarming that our participants felt a loss of agency.

Remarkably, like trust negotiation for young adults reflects forced vulnerability, the dependence of media organisations on the platforms represents one as well: News media have to succumb to the commercial algorithmic logic of social media platforms if they want to operate there. They have no ultimate decision-making power over the affordances, the algorithms, or the logic by which platforms circulate their news content. This may have striking consequences, not only on the individual sense of agency on datafied platforms, but also on the sense of agency of the institutions and organisations operating on them. However, it is also to be noted that news media organisations, and journalism as an institution, benefit from being on social media platforms as they gain intangible assets: access to audiences that they



could not otherwise easily reach. Hence, in this new type of media ecology, the relationship is not as unilateral as it might first appear.

Social media's intermediating role in news dissemination has been observed to strengthen and weaken democracy concurrently (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). Our results show that young adults are keen on receiving news through social media because it lowers their threshold to become informed about the world around them (see Boczkowski et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). A recent study (Salonen et al., 2023) made the same observation from the viewpoint of news media: They see delivering news through social media as an act of democracy and equality. However, social media algorithms can also create a new kind of digital divide (Cinnamon, 2020): Due to the algorithmic logic of datafied platforms, access to accurate information is not guaranteed as it is dependent on what news each user encounters on the platform. News organisations' use of social media platforms and analytics tools, for example, increases their dependence on the platforms' operating logics (see van Dijck et al., 2018), which, in turn, may further contribute to the widening of the digital divide. This is particularly alarming given the importance of journalism as an advocate for a pluralistic social reality and a cornerstone of a democratic society.

In our study, data confusion and the resulting indifference were mitigated in the Finnish context by a strong confidence in society and a functioning democracy. As all our study participants were enrolled university students, they, however, do not reflect their whole age group in the study's national context. Our participants' media literacy skills, for example, could be assumed to be higher than their peers in non-university settings. Also, in the Finnish context, it has been found that those with lower education levels are more likely to think that news content on social media platforms can usually be trusted (Reunanen, 2020). This leads us to assume that the three types of confusions we identified in our study may also exist among others in the same age group, but that there might be some variation in the strategies used to overcome the confusions. Regarding data confusion, similar results have been found in studies dealing with data anxiety in different age groups (e.g., Pink et al., 2018), making it likely that news-related data confusion is typical not only for this age group. Instead, more research is needed on datafied environments, and on whether news-related content and platform confusion are common in different age groups, or if they only concern young people.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article

# Trust Signals: An Intersectional Approach to Understanding Women of Color’s News Trust

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## Abstract

Journalism scholars have increasingly become concerned with how our changing media environment has shifted traditional understandings of how news outlets create trust with audiences. While many scholars have focused on broad avenues of building trust with audiences through transparency, community engagement, and funding, arguably less attention has been paid to how audience members’ social positionality—determined by factors such as race, class, and socioeconomic status—can shape their varying understanding of what makes a news source trustworthy. Thus, in this study, I conducted focus groups with US women of color, a community marginalized minimally along race and gender, to understand how their positionality shapes how they conceptualize news trust. Through eight focus groups with  $N = 45$  women of color, I found while participants used known antecedents of news trust, these were often more specifically rooted in their own experiences with racism, heterosexism, and classism. Further, participants had varying conceptualizations around antecedents of trust, such as accuracy and bias. Through these findings, I suggest how news organizations can better establish trust across marginalized communities.

## Keywords

digital media; intersectionality; marginalized communities; news trust; women of color

## 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).

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## 1. Introduction

Audience trust in news globally has steadily declined over the past few years in reaction to increasing political divisions, changing news business models, and the proliferation of mis- and disinformation in our digital news environment (Brenan, 2022; Newman & Fletcher, 2017). In response, journalism scholars have called on journalists to reconceptualize how they create trust, highlighting the need for journalists to develop stronger relationships with the communities they report on (Fenton, 2019; Lewis, 2019; Robinson, 2019). However, these audiences are often conceptualized broadly without accounting for how audience members’ positionality may shape how they conceptualize news trust.

Scholars have long recognized that mainstream news’ historical attachment to institutions of power and role as an institution of power itself that has historically

used editorial selection, the process of selecting what occurrences to cover, to erase the lived experiences of marginalized peoples, has led to a distrust of mainstream news by marginalized communities (Gans, 1979; Murphy, 2019; Wallace, 2019; Wenzel, 2020). Studies have found holding a marginalized racial or gender identity can differentially shape audience perceptions of news trust and credibility (Andsager & Mastin, 2003; Arguedas et al., 2023; Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Klaas & Boukes, 2022; Robinson & Culver, 2019; Spence et al., 2013). However, these studies’ overwhelming focus on a single axis of marginalization, such as race or gender, and reliance on quantitative methods that ambiguously define trust, may limit what they reveal about the relationship between marginalized audiences and news trust.

Thus, this study draws on intersectionality as a theoretical framework to conduct focus groups with 45 US

women of color (WOC) to examine how various axes of marginalization can interactively shape how audiences perceive news trust to better understand how news institutions can build trust with these communities.

## 2. Literature Review

Trust is the psychological state in which a person, the trustor, is willing to be vulnerable with and places trust in another person or entity, the trustee (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). Trust in public institutions is often determined by past experiences that inform the trustor's future expectations of the trustee (Coleman, 2012; Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Thus, trust in media institutions is defined as "the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5).

Trust allows audiences to learn from and internalize the information provided by news (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022). Thus, trust in news is foundational to our democratic citizenship because "citizens not only need to become informed themselves but to trust that others around them are similarly civically informed" (Coleman, 2012, p. 27). Therefore, at stake in news trust is the news' ability to fulfill its fundamental role in creating an informed citizenry.

Several factors can influence news trust, such as trust in the veracity, credibility, and unbiased nature of the information provided, trust that news will cover and contextualize events in a way that is relevant to the trustee, and trust in a journalist's professionalism and assessment of facts (Knudsen et al., 2022; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). However, our increasingly saturated digital news environment, brought about by the ease with which any individual can quickly create, post, and share information online, especially via social media platforms, makes it harder for audiences and journalists to know what information to trust (Fisher, 2016). Thus, developing antecedents of trustworthiness in online news is increasingly difficult (Grosser, 2016).

Empirical studies have examined how elements of online news impact perceptions of trustworthiness. Research has found that familiarity with a news brand offline translates to trust in the brand online (Toff et al., 2021). Further, using user-generated content in online news can lead to lower trust in a news item (Grosser et al., 2019). Studies have also shown that the inclusion of transparency cues online, like opinion labels and statistical information, can lead to increased news trust (Henke et al., 2020; Otis, 2022). However, Karlsson (2020) found that existing media trust is often a precursor to accepting transparency cues, highlighting the role of trust in accepting transparency measures meant to increase said trust.

Studies have also investigated how social media, specifically, impacts news trust. The dissemination of news through social media platforms can negatively affect readers' perception of the information's credibil-

ity and an increased use of social media to find news can lead to a decline in news trust generally (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023; Park et al., 2020). However, studies have shown that who shares a news item on social media plays a larger role in perceived trustworthiness than the source itself (Rosenstiel et al., 2017; Sterrett et al., 2019). Additionally, studies have found that younger, female, and heavy users of social media are more likely to trust news they encounter on social media, highlighting the cyclical relationship between social media news use and social media news trust (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017; Warner-Søderholm et al., 2018).

To understand how digital media can be more trustworthy, The Trust Project interviewed individuals across the US and Europe to understand how they assess news trust. Based on these interviews, the project put forth eight trust indicators, including if (a) news organizations disclose policies and standards for independent reporting, (b) a journalist has clear expertise, (c) a news organization clearly labels different types of news, (d) a journalist provides their sources and cites their claims, (e) a reporter discloses their methods, (f) a journalist is a part of the community they are reporting on, (g) a news item includes diverse voices and perspectives, and (h) a news organization incorporates audience feedback in their reporting (The Trust Project, 2018). However, news trust is hard to generalize as "trust is not a universal relationship but a socially differentiated" (Coleman, 2012, p. 37), meaning it is situational and contextual (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Thus, when considering how news trust is formed, we must consider the impact of social positionality.

Several studies have examined how race and gender identity shape perceptions of news trust. These studies frequently examine whether congruence between an individual's race or gender and the race or gender of the news reporter increases trustworthiness and credibility, often finding it does not, and, that African Americans and women often found White and men reporters, respectively, to be more credible, highlighting a potentially paradoxical relationship between identity and trust (Andsager & Mastin, 2003; Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Klaas & Boukes, 2022; Miller & Kurpius, 2010; Spence et al., 2013). However, recent studies have found that marginalized people often feel mainstream news coverage of their communities is biased (Arguedas et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2021). Further, while White reporters see it as their responsibility in reporting on communities of color to remain objective, the communities of color they report on emphasize the need for news organizations to build trust with their communities and hire more Black journalists, highlighting an important disconnect between mainstream news and marginalized communities that could lead to mistrust (Newman et al., 2017; Robinson & Culver, 2019).

While these studies provide important insight, they often have two critical shortcomings. First, they often rely on quantitative surveys and experiments

that standardize the definition of trustworthiness, not accounting for how participants' identities and lived experiences may lead to differential notions and barometers for trust (Knudsen et al., 2022). Second, they mainly investigate how trustworthiness is shaped along one axis of marginalization, such as race or gender, and thus cannot account for how holding multiple marginalized identities may shape understandings of trustworthiness in nuanced ways. Thus, this study uses focus group methods using intersectionality, an analytic born out of Black feminist theory, to understand how experiencing multiple forms of marginalization shapes indicators of news trust.

Black feminism is a political orientation developed from the unique marginalized experiences and positionality of Black women that is "actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression," and aims to develop an "integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that major systems of oppression are interlocking" (Combahee River Collective, 1978, p. 210). Thus, Black feminist theory, as an intellectual tradition, lays the analytical foundation for the distinctive standpoint towards society, community, and self, born out of the similarly marginalized yet diverse and multifaceted lived experiences of Black women that aims to oppose oppression. Further, as Collins (2000) argues, a Black feminist intellectual tradition has historically aimed to foster Black women's activism. Thus, Black feminist theory highlights the connection between experiences, social consciousness, and orientations towards social justice and activism (Collins, 2000). Intersectionality is an analytic derived from Black feminist theory and critical legal studies that contends that any single axis of analysis, such as race or gender, cannot fully account for our lived experience, and argues for concurrent analytical consideration of how multiple axes of oppression can shape people's lives in dynamic and often unforeseen ways (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Thus, this study focuses on how US WOC, who minimally experience marginalized along the lines of race *and* gender, conceptualize news trust to better understand how experiencing multiple axes of marginalization may shape how they determine news trust.

One recent study that gives insight into the value of this approach is a focus group study conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, with participants from "disadvantaged" communities in the UK, Brazil, India, and the US, to examine how participants' experiences and expectations of mainstream news may intersect with their sense of trust (Arguedas et al., 2023). The study divided groups by gender to analyze data along intersectional lines; however, the authors note that this perspective was not the central focus of their report. The study suggests that to build trust, news organizations attend to the distinct needs of and provide more positive and complete coverage of these disadvantaged communities, reduce bias towards privileged communities, and improve diversity in newsrooms. Extending the valu-

able insight this study provides, I asked participants *what makes news more or less trustworthy* to understand how their lived experiences shape their conceptualizations of news trust.

### 3. Methods

I conducted focus groups with WOC 18 and older, where "of color" was defined as identifying as racially non-White, including self-identifying as Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Indigenous, and non-White Latinx, as part of a larger study on WOC's news information seeking habits. Qualitative focus groups allowed me to directly ask participants how they assess news trust. Further, because WOC represent a range of racial, gender, sexual, age, and class experiences, focus groups allowed me to put multiple WOC in conversation to understand the scope of how their identities may influence news trust (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Questions about news trust asked participants what attributes made news trustworthy or untrustworthy.

To recruit participants, I posted flyers in public areas and universities around the Midwest city where I was located, online via social networking sites, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Redditt, and emailed them to organizations that serviced women and/or communities of color. Flyers instructed potential participants to fill out a screening questionnaire on the survey platform Qualtrics, which was used to assess eligibility for participation. Individuals were asked to confirm that they identified as a WOC, were 18 or older, and spoke English. The survey also asked participants to identify their race, age range, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and highest level of education, as other dimensions of identity that can shape news trust; however, individuals were not required to answer these questions to participate. I contacted all eligible individuals and invited them to participate in one focus group.

This resulted in eight focus groups of four to six participants each, for a total of  $N = 45$  participants, attributed P1–P45 throughout the manuscript (see Table 1) conducted via Zoom from July to November 2020. While various demographic factors may shape news trust, such as socioeconomic class and education level, in this study focus groups were divided by age, based on previous research demonstrating the importance of age in dictating digital news consumption and social media news trust, which could shape how participants differentially conceptualize news trust in a digital news environment; and political and civic orientations, which could also influence perceptions of news trust (Cilluffo & Fry, 2019; Forman-Katz & Matsa, 2022; Parker et al., 2019). Four groups had participants aged between 18 and 35 and four had participants aged 36 and older (36–60+). Age ranges were determined based on research on age variation in digital news usage (Shearer & Matsa, 2018). Focus groups lasted an average of 95 minutes and were recorded with participants' permission via a consent

**Table 1.** Participants.

Participant	Racial identity	Age range	Sexuality	Class	Highest education level
P1	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Undefined	Upper middle class	Some advanced education
P2	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Queer	Upper middle class	College graduate
P3	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper class	Advance degree graduate
P4	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Advance degree graduate
P5	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Queer	Upper class	Some advanced education
P6	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Heterosexual	Working class	Some advanced education
P7	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Queer	Lower middle class	Advance degree graduate
P8	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Middle class	College graduate
P9	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	x	x	x
P10	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Some advanced education
P11	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	x	x	x
P12	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	College graduate
P13	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Bisexual	Upper middle class	Some advanced education
P14	Indigenous	18–35	Pansexual	Middle class	Advance degree graduate
P15	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Bisexual	Middle class	College graduate
P16	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Lower middle class	Some advanced education
P17	Black	18–35	x	x	x
P18	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	College graduate
P19	Black	36–60	x	x	x
P20	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Upper class	Some advanced education
P21	Black	35–60			
P22	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P23	Black	36–60	x	x	x
P24	Black	36–60	x	x	x
P25	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Middle class	College graduate
P26	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P27	Black	36–60	x	x	x
P28	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	Some advanced education
P29	Indigenous	18–35	Pansexual	Middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P30	Black	18–35	Homosexual	Upper middle class	College graduate
P31	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Heterosexual	Middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P32	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Bisexual	Lower middle class	Some college education
P33	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Some advanced education
P34	Indigenous	36–60	x	x	x
P35	Asian/Pacific Islander	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P36	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Upper class	College graduate
P37	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Working class	College graduate
P38	Asian/Pacific Islander	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P39	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P40	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P41	Asian/Pacific Islander	36–60	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P42	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Some advanced education
P43	Non-White Latinx	36–60	x	x	x
P44	Non-White Latinx	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P45	Indigenous	Over 60	x	x	x

Note: X = participant chose not to disclose.



form approved by the Institutional Review Board at a mid-sized Midwestern university. After a focus group, I sent each participant a \$20 e-visa gift card as remuneration for their time spent participating in the study.

Groups included a range of racial, economic, and educational diversity. While focus groups were racially diverse, in the 18–35 range, the majority of participants self-identified as Asian/Pacific Islander and, in the 36+ range, the majority of participants identified as Black, which potentially reflects the larger number of Black and Asian/Pacific Islander populations in the US compared to other minoritized racial groups (US Census Bureau, 2020). Further, no women in the 18–35 range identified as non-White Latinx, however since Latinx is an ethnicity, not a race, Latinx participants in these groups could have used a different racial identification, such as Black or Indigenous. Of the participants who disclosed their education, all identified as having at least some college education. Of participants who disclosed their socioeconomic class, 55% identified as middle or upper middle class. All participants identified as cisgender and 53% identified as heterosexual. While I did attempt to sample for demographic variation, reaching diverse participants was made harder by the ongoing Covid-19 global pandemic, the implications of which will be discussed.

I transcribed focus group recordings using the secure transcription platform Rev. I coded transcripts using qualitative thematic coding, in which I grouped participants' answers into initial thematic codes based on the central themes expressed in each statement and then combined codes into larger themes, and subsequently grouped pervasive themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Initial codes were derived deductively from the literature on news trust, including transparency cues, past experience with an outlet, veracity, and attributes of the journalist or news sharer. Additionally, the coding scheme was also left open to allow new codes to arise that may specifically pertain to WOC's assessments of trustworthiness. In analyzing data, I also used intersectionality as a form of critical social theory to "explain...not simply describe" (Collins, 2019, p. 51) WOC's conceptions of news trust by situating participants' conceptions of trustworthiness within their self-identified or self-described racial, gender, and classed experiences.

#### 4. Statement of Positionality

As a study centering on Black feminism, it is important to acknowledge how my own positionality and lived experiences shaped the below analysis (Evans-Winters, 2019). I am a Black, heterosexual, middle-class cisgender woman with an advanced degree and past experiences working at a national mainstream news broadcast. My experiences as someone who has considered news trust as a researcher, media professional, and woman of color news consumer shaped how I thought about the potential intersectional dimensions of news trust. Specifically, during focus groups, I was aware of how

news trust could be shaped by individual positionality in relation to systems and institutions of power and past experiences with news as an institution of power. To this end, during focus group sessions, I used both my insider position as a woman of color and my outsider position as a researcher and former news producer, to advance conversations and comments that could more deeply explain not only how but why participants defined news trust in the manner they did and what sites of power were shaping these beliefs. At the same time, I was keenly aware of how my potential assumptions as an insider could influence my findings, and thus often asked participants to elaborate on comments in ways that directly revealed the reasons behind their perceptions (Young, 2004).

#### 5. Findings

Participants were active news consumers, with 35 participants regularly seeking out news. Many participants grounded their understanding of their high news consumption in their marginalized positionality. Echoing a sentiment many participants expressed, P36 commented: "I want to know more than someone who doesn't look like me, what's happening to people who look like me." In this way, as WOC, participants saw high information seeking as an important way to combat the various forms of social, political, and economic marginalization they face.

However, as research has shown, information seeking from a source does not necessarily precipitate news trust (Tsfati & Cappella, 2005). Thus, several factors contributed to whether participants found a news outlet or item trustworthy.

##### 5.1. Familiarity

Participants often used the preexisting reputation of and familiarity with a news outlet as a heuristic for establishing trust in their on- and offline news usage:

If it just generally has a track record of being well-known or prestigious or acclaimed in some way....So sometimes it might just be the number of followers it has. The big news sites...like *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, probably some others, have won Pulitzer Prizes and have broken really major news stories over the years. So that gives me a sense of trust in them. (P29)

Similarly, P13 said: "A news outlet that has been established for a long time, or that other people know and trust as well, that makes me want to trust it." Thus, for participants, a large part of being able to trust a news outlet resided in its previous track record based on their own experiences with the outlet, awards, and large audience followings. As a result, participants regularly sought out news from large, mainstream media outlets, particularly *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, CNN, and NPR.

## 5.2. Journalists' Positionality

However, in using these news sites, participants often placed trust in specific journalists. For instance, P26 said: "Whether I read *The New York Times*, whether I read *The Daily News*, I also look at the journalist or the person who's actually writing the story. Certain ones I trust more than others." For many participants, trust in individual journalists was tied to a perceived sense of shared cultural background and experience:

Within media outlets from *The New York Times*, there's some people who I'm like, "Why would you choose that headline? Why would you do that? Or that picture..." But then let's be real, part of it too is, does this author's interpretation match my own politics? This is why Nick Estes is so far up my list. He's an Indigenous scholar, he's a socialist, he cares about the same stuff as I do, and his interpretation of events is on point with my own politics. (P14)

Thus, while P14 acknowledged that she evaluated individual journalists' trustworthiness in terms of how they frame and present a story, this assessment was also tied to her racial and class politics as an Indigenous woman and whether she felt a journalist, like Estes, would reflect those experiences. Likewise, other participants noted placing more trust in journalists with multiple marginalized identities such as Angela Rye and Yamiche Alcindor, Black women, and Don Lemon, a gay Black man, arguably because they could accurately reflect their raced, gendered, sexual, and class experiences in reporting and framing news stories.

## 5.3. Business Practices and Motivations

Participants' conceptions of trust were also shaped by the financial incentives of news organizations. P30 said distrust stemmed from "reading an article and there's so many ads all over the page." For many participants, these commercial motives seemed to not only signal reporting interest outside of informing the public but potential culpability in supporting institutions interested in "maintain[ing] a system" (P15). For instance, P7 noted of local news coverage of anti-racist protests at the time:

The police brutality toward the protesters was fucking gnarly; and so, to me, that is more about protecting capitalist interests. NBC News is proudly sponsored by local businesses....There's a lot more money involved in that. So, I get really skeptical with the bigger news sources because I wonder what are they serving? What is it that their newsroom is protecting?

Similarly, P33 commented: "I've just been confronted with how news sources are funded by people that want to maintain a system, like Jeff Bezos funds *The Washington Post*." Thus, how participants perceived

financial incentives to influence reporting, especially if it means a news outlet would be influenced to uphold institutions of power, became an indicator of trust. Broadly, participants saw reporting that potentially privileges classed, capitalist, and commercial interests as a reason not to trust a news outlet or reporter. In turn, some participants noted an increased trust in non-profit and publicly funded news outlets such as NPR or BBC, which they felt had a greater "responsibility to the public" (P29).

## 5.4. Accuracy and Bias

Finally, participants across focus groups said that accuracy and unbiased reporting were indicators of news trust. However, participants often conceptualized and defined these terms differently, particularly as they related to age.

### 5.4.1. Factual Accuracy and Bias

For many older participants (ages 36–60+), accuracy was defined as a news outlet's ability to fulfill traditional journalistic norms of providing verified information. For instance, in conceptualizing accuracy, many of these participants talked about their knowledge of whether a news organization had fact-checkers and other systems in place to verify the information. P44 said: "For me, [trust is] fact-checking, just having hired a fact-checker." Likewise, P39 noted: "It's important to feel as someone is going through with their telling of the story, they are saying this is where the information came from."

Further, many older participants used news outlets' use of retractions to signal veracity, like P37, who stated: "When they retract the story...they said we misreported or something...I think that gives them credibility. Right?" Explaining how she used retractions as a heuristic for assessing which news outlets were and were not trustworthy, P44 said:

PBS will start it with, "Yesterday we made a mistake. We said this when it was this." So, for me that accountability and willingness to say, "I made a mistake we were wrong." To me that carries so much weight. I don't often hear Fox News saying we did something wrong, we got it wrong. So, fact-checking and then being accountable to themselves, for me are the biggest things.

Thus, for many participants over 35, accuracy, as an indicator of trust, was closely tied to transparency cues around information, such as retractions, citing their sources, and disclosing reporting methods which signaled trustworthiness.

Older participants' understandings of accuracy were also tied to perceptions of "unbiased" news. In describing untrustworthy "biased" news, P23 noted: "The ones that have nothing but opinion and lack all facts." Similarly, P24 stated that a news source was trustworthy if it was

“impartial and unbiased,” explaining: “You’re going to get facts, and even if you get some opinion, you still get all of the facts versus just one side, just facts related to inform.” For P24, “unbiased” news did not mean news had no opinions or biases, but rather more often than not it tried to be as unbiased as possible, signaled by a news outlet reporting on more than one perspective of an event and focusing on facts over opinion. In turn, P24 explained she often sought out news from multiple mainstream news outlets such as *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* that would consistently give her “75% of the story” to piece together the most “unbiased,” and thus trustworthy, version of the event. These signals of more “unbiased” news reflect traditional journalistic practices of signaling objectivity, such as balance, often defined as presenting multiple sides or perspectives on a story in reporting or giving “just facts,” reporting without underlying opinion (Mindich, 1998).

In turn, a news organization perceived to have multiple reporting inaccuracies, became an antecedent of mistrust, as exhibited in this exchange between P25 and P27:

P25: I’m becoming increasingly disappointed with the news that I used to trust....I would trust *The New York Times* more than I would trust a lot of other news sources...I am for the first time in, I don’t know how many years, thinking of not paying to get *The New York Times* because I don’t find them to be any more accurate or trustworthy than anybody else.

P27: Can you explain why that is? I know I’m a *New York Times*-er myself....But I think for me it’s like NPR and *The New York Times* are my...okay, these are the sources that I can trust.

P25: They [*The New York Times*] are not as balanced as they say they want to be....The second thing is that they’re not accurate. I mean, a lot of the things I read in *The New York Times* have been refuted elsewhere, and I’ve been getting a lot of the Apple newsfeed. And I was starting to think about that because it’s a variety of news sources.

Since *The New York Times* was no longer fulfilling P25’s barometer for the minimal signals of trustworthiness, defined as not properly “balanced” or verified information, in part based on conflicting reports from other sources in her Apple newsfeed, she began losing trust in them, and instead began turning to other outlets they felt more “comfortable” with due to perceived higher levels of balance and veracity, such as NPR. In this way, reduced bias in reporting through balance and indicators of veracity played a large role in how older participants conceptualized trustworthiness.

In turn, many older participants were distrustful of the news they encountered on social media, which they felt lacked transparency around sourcing and fact-checking (e.g., P30, P18, P21, P34, P36) and did not

present the same “balanced” reporting, especially due to the perception that news on social media was filtered through “algorithms [that] tend to highlight what is extreme because they’re trying to get as many clicks as they can” (P36).

#### 5.4.2. Socio-Political Accuracy and Bias

Contrastingly, for many younger participants (18–35), while news trust was tied to their perception of a source’s accuracy, accuracy was often defined in terms of how their reporting reflected the realities of systemic racial, gender, and sexual oppression in shaping news events. For example, P7 stated:

I try to look at the framing and see who they’re attributing the power and “victimhood” to. If they’re attributing it to, “Oh, poor CPD officers, this thing happened to them.” I go, “okay, well, I can see CPD officers are killing people. So actually, that’s not how the power source works, or the power dynamic works here.” I try to keep an eye out for that as a way to know whether this is a trustworthy site because, for me, trustworthiness has to do with acknowledging what the systems of oppression are within our country in order to be able to dismantle them.

In this way, P7 defined accuracy in terms of whether a news outlet recognized the power dynamics between institutions of power and racially marginalized people. Likewise, P32 commented: “I think a pretty green flag for me is just someone who is totally anti-fascism, anti-Proud Boys, anti...all of these stupid neo-Nazi people, just being anti that is already a flag for my trust.” These comments underscore just how, for many younger participants, accurate reporting was not only about verifiable facts or reporting both sides, but specifically acknowledging how multiple forms of power and systemic oppression, such as racism, antisemitism, and class all shape the facts being reported based on their own experiences with these systems of oppression. In turn, this expression of accuracy reflects a different definition of “unbiased” news, as news not biased towards institutions of power.

In turn, many younger participants said mistrust could stem from news outlets sensationalizing their reporting around marginalized communities. As P30 commented:

Usually, when you’re reading an article online, there’s some kind of imagery to catch your attention...depending on the choice of visual, it can feel very off-putting....I see that a lot with a lot of articles about the trans community. Sometimes there’s irrelevant imagery, like a woman putting on lipstick or someone putting on high heels, and then the story is about something within the trans community that’s in no way related to makeup or hair or clothes. And I’m like, “Well, what was the purpose of this?”

In this way, P30, who is a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, was mistrustful of news organizations that sensationalized and othered marginalized communities she was a part of using what she perceived to be stereotypical or incendiary imagery.

For this reason, some younger participants supplemented their mainstream news use with news from alternative news outlets such as ProPublica and Truthout and social media platforms, particularly ones that allowed them to curate the news they were exposed to, such as Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, and where they could follow unfiltered reporting by social justice activists and citizen journalists. As, P3 noted: “I think a lot of these big newspapers, even though we may describe them as left-leaning or right-leaning, always strike hard right down the middle in ways that can feel very dismissive of particular experiences,” such as the experiences of people of color, women, and queer folks. Additionally, participants noted social media and alternative news outlets often engaged in “on-the-ground” reporting in a way participants felt was better able to reflect the needs and concerns of marginalized peoples. For instance, P6 said: “I need humans to tell me what’s happening that are on the ground that’s seeing what’s happening. People who are part of the protest, journalists that are doing the work and not mainstream media sources.” For this reason, she stated:

I cannot trust any sources that I would otherwise consider reliable like *New York Times*, like BBC....For things like that, I put my trust “on the ground” journalists like people who are actually there in Palestine, or actually covering what’s happening in Palestine and seeing what they have to say because news sources are so heavily funded and have an agenda. (P6)

Thus, unlike participants over 35 who often questioned the trustworthiness of news on social media, participants 18–35 believed “the immediacy definitely lends some credibility to [social media]” (P8) by allowing them to see unfiltered news from entities they trust who they perceive to not share the hegemonic biases of mainstream media.

## 6. Conclusion

I conducted focus groups with 45 self-identified US WOC about what they perceive makes news trustworthy or untrustworthy to understand how experiencing multiple axes of marginalization shapes news trust. Findings suggest that participants trusted mainstream news outlets on and offline based on their reputation and familiarity with the brand, echoing previous literature that trust in public institutions is, in part, defined by past experiences with those institutions (Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

However, participants’ news trust also was connected to their perception that reporting in these outlets reflected their lived experiences. In this way, a key indica-

tor of trust was a journalist’s expertise and assessment of facts (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; The Trust Project, 2018). For these participants specifically, this expertise was cultural: Could a journalist acknowledge the role of multiple forms of systemic oppression in shaping news events, based on a similar lived experience? This finding reflects and expands recent literature on the importance of journalists of color for building trust with communities of color, by highlighting not only the importance of race, but also class, gender, sexuality, and class of journalists in building trust with WOC.

Additionally, in line with previous literature noting the role of editorial independence as a signal of trust, participants said the perceived financial incentives of a news organization also shaped perceptions of trustworthiness (Knudsen et al., 2022; The Trust Project, 2018). However, for WOC participants this concern for editorial independence was specifically rooted in concern for how news organizations’ capitalist interest was upholding sites of systemic class, racial, and gender oppression.

Thus, this study reveals how intersectional analysis illuminates the specific ways communities that face multiple forms of systemic marginalization conceptualize antecedents of news trust. Specifically, findings suggest that how WOC participants conceptualize news trust, while seemingly similar to more general antecedents of news trust, is often connected to signals that implicate a news outlet in upholding hegemonic systems of oppression across multiple dimensions of marginalization, as opposed to privileging specific signifiers of oppression such as racism or sexism.

Further, by putting a range of WOC in conversation, findings reveal that participants’ conceptions of news trust are not monolithic. While participants relied on accuracy and bias as indicators of trustworthiness, they presented two distinct ways of conceptualizing these signals. While older participants (36–60+) often defined accuracy, through signals of fact-checking, disclosure transparency and unbiased reporting through, as much as possible, giving just the facts or presenting both sides of a story, younger participants (18–35) often grounded their understanding accuracy in how a news outlet or journalist covered stories about marginalized communities, including people of color, women, and the LGBTQIA+ community, and thus was not bias towards privilege (Arguedas et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2017). These assessments of trustworthy news were based on a new outlet’s acknowledgment of how systems of oppression, broadly, shape events. To be clear, this does not mean older participants were unconcerned with how mainstream media covered marginalized communities, but rather these concerns were less salient indicators of news trust than factual accuracy and perceptions of balanced and less opinionated reporting. This finding highlights how news trust is linked to different audiences’ attitudes toward traditional journalistic norms and values (Robinson & Culver, 2019; Rosenstiel et al., 2021). Additionally, extending the trust signal of “including

diverse voices,” this understanding of accuracy reflects not only a desire for individual diverse voices in reporting but also an acknowledgement of how multiple forms of systemic oppression can shape the event being reported on (The Trust Project, 2018).

These different conceptualizations of accuracy may be due to several factors. Due to the fact that younger participants were Millennials, who, as a generation, are more likely to say people racialized as Black are discriminated against and be critical of gender norms, they could have a more critical analysis of the institutions that uphold forms of systemic discrimination (Parker et al., 2019). Also, since focus groups were conducted in the summer of 2020, as anti-racist protests were taking place across major cities in the US, these events could have more readily shaped younger participants’ view of the accuracy of news reporting, as more active participants in these protests (Barroso & Minkin, 2020).

Additionally, younger participants were more willing to trust news on social media, echoing findings on the importance of alternative news sources for marginalized people (Arguedas et al., 2023). This finding may reflect how younger individuals, generally, and as heavier users of social media users, are more willing to trust news on social media (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017; Forman-Katz & Matsa, 2022; Warner-Søderholm et al., 2018). Further, for younger participants, the lack of fact-checking on social media may be secondary to their trust in the people they get news from on social media, such as activists and people “on the ground” (Rosenstiel et al., 2017; Sterrett et al., 2019).

Building on the suggestion from Arguedas et al. (2023) that to grow trust with marginalized communities, news institutions should focus on accuracy and fairness, I argue that this requires attention not only to the veracity of facts but also attentiveness to how the presentation of these facts acknowledges the struggles and lived experiences of marginalized communities. When considering how to create news trust with marginalized communities, news organizations must think along multiple dimensions of marginalization and lived experience to consider varied and sometimes competing strategies for conceptualizing and building trust.

However, interestingly, across racial identifications, participants did not present distinct conceptions of trustworthiness. This is arguably because, despite their specific racialized experiences, participants were still centrally concerned with how news represented or failed to represent those experiences outside of a White, hetero-patriarchal.

While this study provides important insights, its findings are based on a limited sample of WOC in the US. This socially and culturally specific understanding of news and systemic oppression may have influenced participants’ orientation towards news trust. Further, due to limitations caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, class, educational, and gender diversity within the sample was limited. Most participants were well-educated, which can

be a predictor of news literacy, or the “knowledge of the personal and social processes by which news is produced, distributed, and consumed, and skills that allow users some control over these processes” (Tully et al., 2022, p. 1593), which gives consumers’ ability to critically analyze and evaluate media messages and information (Tully & Vraga, 2018). Thus, the higher level of education amongst this group of participants could have resulted in a more critical analysis of news media and traditional indicators of news trust. This level of media literacy could have also been increased because participants were generally high news consumers. I also cannot account for response bias, or how participants’ answers may have been influenced by wanting to appeal to others in the group. Future studies should expand on these findings through more representative open-ended surveys with comparative groups of marginalized communities utilizing an intersectional analytical lens.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

# The Awkward Moment When You Agree With News Outlets That You Normally Distrust

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## Abstract

News source attribution in selective exposure has been examined in many contexts, but rarely in the context of selecting news from distrusted sources. As such, 800 US adults were asked to select one of two headlines attributed to CNN and/or Fox News. Results showed some people selected news from a distrusted source, but only under very specific circumstances. Others avoided the awkward moment of siding with a distrusted source, even when that meant selecting news from a trusted source that was counter-attitudinal to the source's typical slant on global warming.

## Keywords

distrust; news content; news expectancy; news sources; news trust

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

News consumption is riddled with difficult choices in the current media ecology. Humans are bombarded with news messages with only limited capacity to interact with them (Arendt et al., 2019). There are situations in which particular messages directly compete with each other for attention, for instance, in the way that online news aggregators such as Google News, Yahoo!, or MSN present news options in the form of headlines. These news websites and portals are part of the media diets of many relatively moderate US news consumers. Although most people visit these websites for activities not related to news (e.g., email) or just seek out primarily non-political news, they are still exposed to political news from a variety of sources with varying ideological leanings as there are many political stories to choose from in the form of headlines (Guess, 2021; Mummolo, 2016; Tyler et al., 2022). This study focused on such competitive settings to explore the extent to which people seek out news from distrusted sources over news from trusted ones.

News headlines from CNN and Fox News are frequently featured on these news websites and portals.

They are among the best-known news sources in the US and are also exceedingly polarizing in the present-day political climate. In one study, Fox News was the only outlet that a majority of Republicans trusted; 20 other news sources were distrusted more than trusted, especially CNN. However, CNN was the most trusted news source for Democrats and Fox News was their most distrusted outlet (Jurkowitz et al., 2020; see also Hoewe et al., 2023). Source attribution to prominent news sources, such as CNN and Fox News, has been regarded as an important shortcut for exposure and avoidance of news stories, as well as for the perceptions of those reports once accessed. Therefore, it is vital to study source cues of cable news and their effects on perceptions of reality (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012).

Because of a widespread desire to hold accurate beliefs, exposure to opposing viewpoints or sources could trigger a state of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). This discomfort can be alleviated by paying attention to pro-attitudinal news and avoided by ignoring counter-attitudinal news because of confirmation bias (Garrett, 2009). In this study, participants negotiated a combination of favorable or unfavorable content and/or news sources, though communication scholars

have often not made a “critical distinction” between trust in sources and trust in messages (Barney & Reich, 2022, p. 197; see also Hoewe et al., 2023). Given trust in sourcing can affect trust in messaging, communication research pioneers have warned that persuasion or believability cannot be fully understood without taking *both* elements into account (e.g., Asch, 1948). Later research has provided additional evidence that interactions between sources and content have been vital in explaining message perceptions (Blom, 2021a). Nonetheless, much scholarship has focused primarily on the relationship between source trust on attitude change. The results showed that people are ordinarily more convinced by messages from trusted sources than sources that they do not trust. However, this is not always the case: Distrusted sources can be more persuasive than trusted sources, but mainly *when messages are unexpected* (Sternthal et al., 1978). Therefore, Republicans may consider some CNN headlines more believable than Democrats, and vice versa for Fox News, in particular when people are highly surprised by a headline’s slant (Blom, 2021b).

In the current study, participants were exposed to two headlines (attributed to CNN and/or Fox News) and had to decide for which headline they wanted to read the full story. All headlines focused on global warming, but some were slanted with a frame depicting global warming as a large threat and others with global warming as a low or nonexistent threat. This made it possible to examine headline selections of voters in different configurations based on message slant and source attribution—most importantly, situations in which pro-attitudinal news was attributed to a distrusted source and counter-attitudinal news to a trusted source. Notably, some participants were inclined to choose news from a distrusted source, whereas others chose a headline they likely would not have selected when both headlines would have been attributed to the same, trusted or distrusted source. This provided a stepping-stone for future research on selective exposure and avoidance of political news headlines in competitive news environments.

## 2. Literature Review

Tully et al. (2020) interviewed 22 US adults about their perceptions of bias in a news article on climate change attributed to Fox News and another such story attributed to *The New York Times*. They found that political news consumers relied heavily on source cues—as shortcuts—to determine bias and viewed stories mainly through an ideological lens. The source cues led many participants to expect liberal or conservative biases for *The New York Times* and Fox News, respectively, even when a story published by the latter outlet was in actuality a wire story by the Associated Press. As the researchers observed: “Source cues colored then expectations of the stories with little critical evaluation beyond suggesting that each outlet has a partisan perspective” (p. 219). Hence, a news

source’s trustworthiness can affect the validity of its messages as perceived by its audience. As Kim and Grabe (2022) specified, the “origin or source from which information flows is a central cue in triggering heuristics for news selection” (p. 2). A source becomes trusted when it typically provides believable news and distrusted by providing unbelievable information. This is because most people want to be accurate and assume their beliefs to be true. They also think truthful information can only come from sources they therefore deem credible. This has resulted in a “belief force equals credible source” heuristic that influences people’s perceptions of news quality (Fragale & Heath, 2004, p. 233). Baum and Gussin (2008) argued reliance on source heuristics in news selection “raises the possibility that an individual’s ex ante assessment of the ideological orientation of a specific media outlet will condition subsequent responses to the information it provides” (p. 4). Therefore, scholars have maintained that the *messenger* can often be regarded as the *message* (Turner, 2007).

As a result, audiences have selected trusted sources more often than distrusted sources in competitive news environments. In the case of trusted sources that is largely because of their pro-attitudinal content (Metzger et al., 2020). Pro-attitudinal content from a trusted source is often seen as fair and balanced, whereas counter-attitudinal content from a distrusted source is often seen as less informative (Arceneaux et al., 2012). For that reason, people often prefer content from like-minded news outlets (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Metzger et al., 2020). That said, just because there generally is a preference for pro-attitudinal information does not mean that counter-attitudinal information is fully ignored (Jang, 2014; Winter et al., 2016). In fact, many news consumers are exposed to heterogeneous perspectives (Garrett, 2009) and fears of echo chambers or filter bubbles have been overblown (Bruns, 2021). Yet, access to mixed messages does not automatically equate to avoiding biased news as it is still possible to exclusively select pro-attitudinal news from trusted sources from the overall news mix (J. W. Kim & Kim, 2021). However, this could sometimes lead to moments of dissonance, because (trusted) news outlets cannot always present news favoring their ideological slant (when even those organizations are constraint by the real world), and people may be surprised about these *unexpected* reports—without their usual ideological slant—which could affect the believability of those news stories.

### 2.1. Expectancies

The cognitive basis of surprise is unexpectedness when messages disconfirm expectations or contradict implicit beliefs. The more the messages differentiate from previous experiences or positions, the larger the unexpectedness—hence, the larger the ensuing surprise (Reisenzein et al., 2019). The principal aspect of expectancy violations is the pre-existing representation,

not the actual message. Without a pre-existing representation, it is not possible to assess (un)filled anticipation, regardless of whether that position is based on long-term memory or an instant judgment (Casati & Pasquinelli, 2007). In essence, surprise is “one of the basic and universal of human emotions” (Maguire et al., 2011, p. 176) and plays a key role in ongoing sense-making and representational updating processes once it becomes challenging to square new messages with prior representations, which affects learning and decision making (Barto et al., 2013).

The most likely inference from expectancy violations is that messengers reveal their true selves because people usually do not make claims against their self-interest, whereas messengers with expected messages do not reveal any additional information. According to Burgoon (2016), counter-attitudinal messages that violate expectations may be preferred over pro-attitudinal messages—depending on the source. For instance, distrusted sources with counter-attitudinal messages could be highly effective in persuading an audience—even more so than trusted ones with the same (thus pro-attitudinal) message. The former has been considered more sincere and honest than the latter because of the expectancy violation, and sources with expected messages are considered more biased (Eagly et al., 1978). Therefore, Petty et al. (2001) stated: “The merits of the message must have overcome the source’s desire to act in his or her own personal best interest” (p. 419). They also found trustworthiness positively correlated with selflessness. E. J. Lee and Shin (2021) concluded that “(in)congruity of the message with the audience’s preexisting attitudes seem to set the tone before any other considerations” (p. 4). Consequently, observed expectancy violations caused liberals to believe a news headline from a distrusted conservative news source more than a trusted liberal source, and vice versa (Blom, 2021b), which raised questions about the consequences for news selection of partisan news users: To what extent are people willing to select news from distrusted sources? And to what extent do expectancy violations play a role? This warranted further investigation of source *and* content heuristics in news selection. As Westerwick et al. (2017) said: “Differentiation between content cues’ and source cues’ impacts will ultimately help to reconcile inconsistent prior findings in the flourishing research on selective exposure to political messages and subsequent impacts on attitudes” (p. 344).

## 2.2. Selective Exposure

Bias perceptions could affect what news people expose themselves to or explicitly avoid. Selective exposure is the act of seeking out specific (news) content and selective avoidance is the act of deliberately ignoring specific (news) content. Surprisingly, many news stories that served as experimental stimuli in selective exposure studies have not been attributed to a news source or were attributed only to fictional outlets (e.g.,

Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020). Yet, as stated earlier, people have always assessed the truth of statements by drawing inferences from their perceived knowledge about the message content *and* source (Brashier & Marsh, 2020). For instance, an experimental design involving content attributed to CNN and Fox News found that distrusted news sources could enhance the believability of news messages relative to a more trusted news source (Baum & Groeling, 2008). Others have also found that distrusted sources could be persuasive with unexpected messages, even more than trusted sources (Bergan, 2012).

There are also studies that found results contradictory to the vital role of source trust on story believability. For example, Austin and Dong (1994) found no source effect on the believability of fictional articles attributed to *The New York Times*, a tabloid magazine, and a fictional source, although that study was conducted in a pre-internet era with less polarization in media bias perceptions, which may have played a role. Selective exposure studies integrating real-world sources also found that confirmation bias was not always moderated by source cues (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015; Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2019), yet many of those studies focused on blogs and non-profits, not major news outlets with well-known political-ideological slants. A study involving such news outlets, such as Fox News, MSNBC, and *The New York Times*, found that political partisans prefer pro-attitudinal sources over counter-attitudinal sources (M. Kim & Lu, 2020); however, this study did not control for source slant matching expected content slant. This was also the case for Arendt et al.’s (2019) study in which participants were asked to choose between two headlines, one attributed to Fox News and one to MSNBC, as well as Mummolo’s (2016) study comparing exposure to headlines of those news networks and *USA Today*. Headline stimuli did not always address clear ideological slants in some of those studies, making it much more ambiguous to predict expectancies among and between partisan groups interpreting the headlines. Hence, those studies found that explicit and implicit attitudes toward news sources predicted headline choice, but did not control for content in relation to potential expectancy violations. The current study intended to bridge this gap, because source heuristics may play a larger role when news consumers develop expectancies about what kind of stories and underlying slants could be expected from news sources they trust *and* do not trust.

A major difference in the emphasis of the current study in relation to prior work was comparisons on the macro (group) level, whereas the aforementioned studies mainly focused on the individual level. Evidently, those studies focused on differences among partisans (i.e., liberals vs. conservatives, or Democrats vs. Republicans), and the current study is not an exception; however, the gravity here was on the behavior of each voter block (i.e., Biden *and* Trump voters) in their selections when they were constraint by source-message

combinations that could cause dissonance (e.g., a believable headline attributed to a distrusted source and another less believable headline from trusted sources) in comparisons to conditions in which the same headlines were both attributed to one source. Thus, to better understand the extent voters are willing to expose themselves to distrusted sources, we ask: How did partisans in the form of voting groups—each collectively—grapple with news selection in situations with or without unexpected source–message combinations?

### 2.3. Headline Selection

Headlines have always played an important role in news environments (Ng & Zhao, 2020) because news consumers are essentially “shoppers of headlines” while determining which stories they want to consume fully (English, 1944, p. 217). Headlines may play an even larger role today, especially because smartwatches and mobile phones have only limited space to report news at a glance (Luo et al., 2022). Whereas the main story accompanies a headline on a printed page, often it is up to digital news consumers to click on a hyperlink to reach the whole story. Hence, news consumers need to make decisions on news utility based on headlines (Winter et al., 2016). Süßflow et al. (2019) posited that source characteristics play an especially large role in situations with limited content, for example, for headlines and social media news posts. They found high source trustworthiness increased exposure to short online news posts and was a decisive factor in selecting full stories.

This study focused on the selection of headlines from trusted and distrusted news sources based on whether the headline content was expected or unexpected on a group level between presidential candidate voters. It was anticipated that these voter groups would make different news choices when both trusted (for one group but not the other) and distrusted (in the reverse order) news sources provided unexpected headlines in comparison to other combinations of content and source. This is because, in the opposite scenario (two sources present a pro-attitudinal headline), the more believable headline from the trusted source would likely be preferred over a less believable headline from a distrusted source. When the situation is the other way around, the choice is between incongruent source–message combinations for both the trusted and distrusted sources. Even though the voter groups could gravitate to different headline preferences, this could mean that these voter groups respond similarly to the task by selecting opposite headlines.

This study explored headline selections for voters of Democratic nominee Joe Biden and voters of Republican nominee Donald Trump based on the 2020 US presidential election. As aggregate groups with opposing positions on news source trust for CNN and Fox News, as well as positions on global warming (see Tully et al., 2020), it was expected that they behaved contrarily in

selecting headlines. In fact, as congruent headlines have usually been considered more truthful than incongruent headlines (Mourão et al., 2023), in many instances, it would be anticipated that Biden voters would mainly prefer one headline and Trump voters prefer the other when the headlines depict opposite positions on global warming. However, that difference may only disappear because of a substantial group of people’s need to avoid selecting headlines from a distrusted source even when such headlines are considered congruent with the individuals’ beliefs. In other words, even though news consumers generally prefer pro-attitudinal news over counter-attitudinal news (Hart et al., 2009), selecting one from a distrusted source may be too much of a constraint for some voters. Thus, on the aggregate (voter group) level, there would be less polarization in the headline selection in comparison to a situation in which the same headlines were attributed to the same source. In the latter situation, there may be a 90% to 10% selection in favor of the pro-attitudinal headline, whereas it may be 60% to 40% in favor of that headline when attributed to a distrusted source—It may even be that the counter-attitudinal headline attributed to a trusted source may be more popular in such situation (e.g., 40–60%). Thus, it would be expected that the selection outcome is less polarized (90–10% vs. 60–40% or 40–60%) for each voter group within these hypothetical scenarios. Therefore:

H1: (a) Biden voters and (b) Trump voters display a different headline selection pattern when both a trusted and a distrusted news source provide unexpected headlines compared to other news source and message configurations.

H2: In conjunction, there is less polarization between Biden and Trump voters when both a trusted and a distrusted news source provide unexpected headlines compared to other news source and message combinations.

As explained above, the crossover conditions (choice between a CNN headline vs. a Fox News headline) can be reflected in terms of the percentage of voters selecting distrusted sources, in particular, because same-source conditions cannot reflect a choice on source trust as both headlines are attributed to the same source. Therefore, in this study, someone distrusting CNN (Fox News) always selects a news source of a distrusted source in the CNN/CNN (Fox News/Fox News) condition. Hence, it was explored to what extent voters would entertain the possibility of selecting a headline from a distrusted source in crossover conditions within the study design:

RQ1: What percentage of (a) Biden voters and (b) Trump voters selected a headline from a distrusted source in the crossover (i.e., CNN vs. Fox News) conditions for each of the story selection pairs?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Sample and Procedure

##### 3.1.1. Sample

This study was conducted in June 2021 by YouGov by surveying 1,334 US adults online who were then matched down to a sample, based on the full 2018 American Community Survey one-year sample, of 1,200 to produce the final dataset. A subset of 800 participants were analyzed for this study based on the headline content they were exposed to. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The average participant was born in 1972 with a range from 1927 to 2002. A quarter of the participants was born before 1959, whereas another quarter was born after 1987.

There were slightly more female participants (53%) than male participants (47%). Two-thirds of the participants identified as White (67%), other significant groups were Hispanic (14%) and Black (11%). The median income was between \$40,000–49,000 and reported higher levels of education than is the case for the entire population. Democrats (38%) outnumbered Independents (30%) and Republicans (22%). That resulted in more voters supporting Joe Biden (47%) than Donald Trump (32%) in the 2020 presidential election; 18% did not vote.

##### 3.1.2. Procedure

The participants started the study by answering questions about the extent to which they trust CNN and Fox News in covering global warming. They were later exposed to two news headlines accompanied by a logo of CNN or Fox News, with the task to select one headline for which they wanted to read the entire news story. This was similar to other studies asking participants to choose between headlines attributed to specific news sources, such as Fox News, that were selected by the researchers and randomly presented (Arendt et al., 2019; M. Kim & Lu, 2020; Mummolo, 2016). The respondents did not know there were two pairs of headlines to test the hypotheses, yet each participant only read one pair of headlines. The headlines were collected from actual news coverage on global warming from both conservative (e.g., Fox News and Breitbart) and non-conservative (e.g., *Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Times*, *USA TODAY*, *The Washington Post*) news sources over the years. There were headlines in both liberal and conservative outlets that supported the existence of global warming and that put doubt on it, or at least hinted at a slower process than described by other experts. Based on the results of pre-studies with student and MTurk samples (not depicted here), four headlines were selected:

- Pair A: “Hurricane Florence not Caused by Global Climate Changing” (Headline 1) and

“Research: World’s Warming, Expect More Intense Hurricanes” (Headline 2);

- Pair B: “Climate Change: ‘I Cannot Think of a Greater Health Emergency’” (Headline 3) and “New Study Says Threat of Man-Made Global Warming Exaggerated” (Headline 4).

The news source attribution of the two headlines was experimentally manipulated in four conditions (CNN/CNN, CNN/Fox News, Fox News/CNN, and Fox News/Fox News). After the participants had indicated which headline they preferred, they were asked whether they could indicate which news source was attributed to the news headline they had selected and the extent to which they expected each of the headlines to be published by its attributed news source.

After completing all questions, participants were debriefed about the deception in source-headline attribution and the need for the experimental design. They were informed that they had the right to have their data removed from the data analysis; no participants opted for exclusion.

#### 3.2. Operational Definitions

The experimental manipulation hinged on participants’ perceptions of trust in news sources, in this case CNN and Fox News. Prior research had established that Fox News is perceived as presenting a conservative slant in its reporting, whereas CNN is perceived as non-conservative (S. Lee & Cho, 2022). Trustworthiness is the result of credibility, which is associated with terms such as bias, fairness, accuracy, and believability (Sundar, 1999). Therefore, study participants responded to four statements for each news network, “CNN [Fox News] is \_\_\_\_\_ when covering news about global warming,” with the blank representing: fair, unbiased, accurate, and believable. They answered on a seven-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). Confirmatory factor analysis indicated the items formed a coherent scale for both networks. Cohen’s alpha was 0.97 for each news outlet.

The experimental manipulation also hinged on participants’ perceptions of news content expectancy, in particular the extent to which they were surprised or unsurprised that CNN or Fox News was the source of a particular news. News content expectancy was measured after the participants were exposed to the headlines with source attribution. Participants answered four questions, “To what extent do you think it is \_\_\_\_\_ that this news organization published this news story?” with the blanks representing: expected, predictable, anticipated, and unsurprising. They answered on a seven-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). The headline and a news network logo accompanied the questions. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the items formed a coherent scale for both networks, and they were closely aligned together:

Cohen’s alpha was 0.95 for the expectancy assessment of the first headline they were exposed to and 0.96 for the second headline.

For RQ1a and RQ1b, individual news source trust scores for CNN and Fox News were retracted from each other to assess whether participants considered CNN more or less trustworthy than Fox News. This outcome was compared with the headline selection they made as part of this study. If a participant favored CNN (Fox News) and selected a CNN (Fox News) headline, it was considered a congruent source selection (also described as “same source” in this manuscript); however, participants favoring CNN (Fox News) selecting Fox News (CNN) was categorized as incongruent source selection. Participants who were equally trusting CNN and Fox News were excluded from these analyses.

The political leaning of the participants was probed in several ways: political partisanship (e.g., Democrat vs. Republican), political ideology (e.g., liberal vs. conservative), and political vote (e.g., Biden vs. Trump). All three measures had significant missing data or otherwise undesirable data for large group comparisons because of respondents indicating non-partisanship or partisanship outside the Democratic or Republican parties, non-ideology or undecided or moderate ideology, and voters for third-party candidates or non-voters. Because of their opposing views on global warming among the 2020 presidential candidates—Trump has called it a hoax, whereas Biden wanted to reverse Trump’s environmental rollbacks (Phillips, 2020)—it was decided to use the 2020 political vote for the partisan group comparisons.

### 3.3. Statistical Analysis

Participants were asked to identify the news source of the headline they selected after they made that decision and answered the items generating the discomfort scale and items measuring believability and news content expectancy: 80% of the participants correctly identified the news source of the news headline they selected. The statistical analysis presented below only includes data from people who identified the headline source correctly.

The manipulation checks were conducted with independent-sample *t*-tests. Differences in news source trust for CNN were examined between Biden and Trump

voters. The same was the case for news source trust for Fox News. Differences in headline content expectancy were examined by comparing each headline attributed to CNN and the same headline attributed to Fox News. Effect sizes were reflected with Cohen’s *d*. Chi-square analyses were conducted to examine news headline selection differences among Biden and Trump voters based on the news source(s) experimental conditions participants were assigned to (H1a and H1b). Fisher’s exact tests were conducted for the remaining analyses.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Manipulation Checks

#### 4.1.1. News Source Trust

As expected, Biden voters trusted CNN ( $M = 5.27, SD = 1.27$ ) to a much higher degree than Trump voters on global warming news coverage ( $M = 1.99, SD = 1.37$ ). An independent-sample *t*-test found a statistically significant difference between those means,  $t(779) = 34.19, p < 0.001, d = 1.31$ . In contrast, Trump voters trusted Fox News to a much higher degree ( $M = 4.76, SD = 1.52$ ) than Biden voters ( $M = 2.03, SD = 1.53$ ), with  $t(779) = -24.46, p < 0.001, d = 1.52$ .

#### 4.1.2. News Content Expectancy

After exposure to the attributed headlines, participants were asked to what extent they expected a particular headline to be published by CNN or Fox News. Table 1 shows that Headline 1 was considered more expected for Fox News and Headline 2 was considered more expected for CNN. This order was reversed for the second headline pair (Headline 3 vs. Headline 4). All mean differences were statistically significant with large effect sizes.

### 4.2. News Selection

For most Biden voters it was a relatively easy choice between Headline 1 and Headline 2 when the news source did not play a role. Table 2 demonstrates that 90% of Biden voters selected Headline 2 in the CNN/CNN condition and 88% in the Fox News/Fox News condition. In the Fox News/CNN condition, it was an even easier

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations, and *t*-test results for news content expectancy for each headline.

	Headline 1		Headline 2		Headline 3		Headline 4	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
CNN	2.90	1.61	5.55	1.26	4.93	1.34	3.12	1.66
Fox News	5.09	1.48	3.37	1.76	2.85	1.70	4.86	1.74
	*** <i>d</i> = 1.5		*** <i>d</i> = 1.5		*** <i>d</i> = 1.5		*** <i>d</i> = 1.7	

Notes: For *t*-test results,  $p < 0.001$ ; effect sizes indicated with Cohen’s *d*;  $N = 800$ .

**Table 2.** Percentages of headline selection for each experimental condition based on headline source(s).

First headline Second headline	CNN		CNN Fox News		Fox News CNN		Fox News Fox News	
	Biden	Trump	Biden	Trump	Biden	Trump	Biden	Trump
Headline 1	10% (n = 3)	79% (n = 23)	38% (n = 15)	48% (n = 14)	02% (n = 1)	71% (n = 17)	12% (n = 4)	62% (n = 16)
	***		n.s.		***		***	
Headline 2	90% (n = 28)	21% (n = 6)	63% (n = 25)	52% (n = 15)	98% (n = 45)	29% (n = 7)	88% (n = 29)	38% (n = 10)
Headline 3	75% (n = 36)	17% (n = 3)	89% (n = 41)	08% (n = 2)	58% (n = 21)	38% (n = 11)	84% (n = 31)	12% (n = 3)
	***		***		n.s.		***	
Headline 4	25% (n = 12)	83% (n = 15)	11% (n = 5)	92% (n = 22)	42% (n = 15)	62% (n = 18)	16% (n = 6)	88% (n = 23)

Notes: Percentages presented vertically per headline selection pair, per sub-group based on experimental condition and voter partisanship with 522 participants total (Headlines 1–2, Headlines 3–4); n.s. = not significant, \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

pick, as the second headline was attributed to (more trusted) CNN, whereas the first headline was attributed to (less trusted) Fox News. As a result, almost all Biden voters selected Headline 2 (98%), yet the CNN/Fox News condition was quite a different story. Although a majority still selected Headline 2 (63%), once Fox News was attributed as the news source of that headline, the other headline (the one most Biden voters stayed away from in the other conditions) became a more desirable choice when attributed to CNN (38%). A similar pattern was visible for Trump voters, although the ratios were not as extremely lopsided as for Biden voters. However, the CNN/Fox News condition was problematic for Trump voters as well, which resulted in a slight preference for Headline 2 (52% vs. 48%). A chi-square goodness of fit test was calculated for the frequency of selecting Headline 1 and Headline 2 in the four news source(s) conditions. The selection pattern deviated significantly for the Biden voters in the CNN/Fox News condition ( $\chi^2 = 22.30, p < 0.001$ ), which provided evidence in support of H1a. However, the relationship was not statistically significant for Trump voters ( $\chi^2 = 6.65, p = 0.121$ ), which provided no statistical support for H1b.

The second headline pair (Headlines 3 and 4) showed a reversed preference for the first and second headlines. Biden voters generally liked Headline 3. That was especially noticeable in the CNN/Fox News condition, in which 89% selected that option. In contrast, 92% of the Trump voters preferred Headline 4 in that same news source(s) condition. The same pattern held for the CNN/CNN and Fox News/Fox News conditions, but not the Fox News/CNN condition. The majority for both groups was still aligned with the preferences in the other conditions, but not as lopsided. Almost half of the Biden voters selected Headline 4 (42%) and 38% of the Trump voters selected Headline 3. A chi-square test found a statistically significant difference in the selection pattern of the Fox News/CNN condition compared to the other con-

ditions for both Biden voters ( $\chi^2 = 12.06, p = 0.007$ ) and Trump voters ( $\chi^2 = 9.29, p = 0.026$ ), supporting both H1a and H1b.

Comparisons were also made between Biden and Trump voters for their news headline selection patterns for each condition within each headline pair. It was expected that in almost all sub-groups, the majority of Biden voters would select a different headline than the majority of Trump voters, except in the double-incongruence condition (CNN/Fox News for the first headline pair and Fox News/CNN for the second headline pair). The data in Table 2 indicated this was indeed the case for both headline pairs, which provided evidence in support of H2.

Selective exposure research has rarely focused on the question of whether news consumers would select news from a source they usually distrust over other options for which the content is less desirable but from a trusted source. RQ1a and RQ1b were proposed to probe the extent to which voters would be willing to select a headline from, what they consider, a distrusted news source. This test focused on each participant's news source trust levels (CNN minus Fox News); not just their voting partisanship to allow for individual differences within the Biden and Trump groups based on their media bias perceptions as a vote for a particular candidate may actually be more of a vote against the other. Table 3 illustrates that a majority of Biden (63%) and Trump (52%) voters selected a headline from a distrusted news source in the CNN/Fox News condition, whereas none of the Biden voters and only 21% of the Trump voters did so in the Fox News/CNN condition. A Fisher's exact test was calculated comparing the frequency of selecting a headline from a distrusted source between the two crossover conditions. There was a statistically significant difference for Biden voters ( $p < 0.001$ , Fisher's exact test) but not for Trump voters, although the difference (52% vs. 21%) was in the expected direction. There was also a large difference

**Table 3.** Percentage of selecting Distrusted News Source based on News Source Trust level.

First headline Second headline	CNN Fox News		Fox News CNN	
	Biden	Trump	Biden	Trump
Headline 1/2	63% ( <i>n</i> = 24)	52% ( <i>n</i> = 13)	0% ( <i>n</i> = 0)	21% ( <i>n</i> = 4)
Headline 3/4	05% ( <i>n</i> = 2)	18% ( <i>n</i> = 4)	55% ( <i>n</i> = 17)	69% ( <i>n</i> = 18)

between the crossover groups for the second headline pair. Majorities for Biden voters (55%) and Trump voters (69%) selected an opposite source in the Fox News/CNN group, whereas these percentages were much lower in the other condition, 5% and 18%, respectively. There were statistically significant differences between Biden ( $p < .001$ , Fisher’s exact test) and Trump voters ( $p < 0.001$ , Fisher’s exact test) for the headline pair.

### 5. Discussion

Many voters would like to see highly believable news from highly trusted sources within their news diets. However, the findings indicated that a considerable number of voters were also welcoming perspectives from distrusted sources. As expected, the selection of news was not a matter of attention to just the source or just the content for most participants, but that did not mean that the participants selected news from distrusted sources easily. It was primarily in the condition with a believable headline attributed to a distrusted source and a less believable headline attributed to a trusted source that the partisans behaved differently. Still, a considerable group of voters chose the headline with less believability, possibly to avoid selecting a distrusted source. Although this study did not elaborate on the reasons for why individual participants selected exposure or avoidance of these news headlines on global warming, both Biden and Trump voters showed differences in headline selection—as groups—based on constraints of the source-content combinations presented to them with varying levels of expectancy violations.

Notably, on the group level, selective avoidance was not centered on content, unlike much research on selective exposure and avoidance. In this study, avoidance was focused on the news source. For instance, whereas a particular headline was popular among Biden voters in all other conditions, once it was attributed to Fox News (and the other option was incongruent with what would be expected from CNN) that headline was suddenly not so popular in that specific condition. These findings indicated that it is important to consider source *and* message attribution combinations to a higher extent in future research on selective exposure and avoidance because some participants in this study would rather choose an unexpected message from a trusted news—and conse-

quently a headline that is likely counter to their own position on global warming—than selecting news from a distrusted source. That said, it should also be noted that one-fifth of the participants did not recall (correctly) the origin of the news source. This may indicate that a considerable group of US adults pay no attention to news source information at all, which could lead to reliance on disreputable sources voicing mis- and disinformation.

This study did not probe participants to explain *why* they chose a particular headline. It certainly could be possible that someone selecting an incongruent news headline from a trusted source did so to update their opinion and beliefs—if the article provided any reason. Someone motivated to hold accurate opinions and beliefs may well be seeking out news coverage that challenges their knowledge on the matter. However, if that was the case in this study, the data should have discovered similar patterns in other news source(s) conditions. It should not have stopped such participants from choosing a counter-attitudinal headline from CNN (Fox News) in a condition in which both headlines were attributed to CNN (Fox News). This was rarely the case, which suggested selective avoidance (on a group level) is the likely explanation for the distinctive headline selections in crossover conditions with a more believable headline attributed to a distrusted source. Future research should take into account other potential selective exposure and avoidance mechanisms, such as attentiveness, entertainment-value, topic-curiosity, prior knowledge, or issue salience, as well as accuracy, impression, confirmation-seeking, and truth-seeking motivations (see Mourão et al., 2023; Winter et al., 2016).

Future research should focus on explaining motivations for longer deliberation times. It may be that certain people are motivated to develop accurate beliefs and knowledge. Others may be more motivated to defend their existing beliefs and knowledge. Source trust has been considered an important heuristic in perceptions of news, yet it is still unclear how news source attributions prime accuracy and defense motivations, or how some motivations may become more dominant based on attribution to specific news sources. Future research could also explore whether unexpected headlines and news stories from distrusted sources could enhance the trustworthiness of those sources in the short and long term. It would benefit society when people accept factual



information and reject fiction, regardless of whether the source is trusted or distrusted. This study found that accurate (factual) information is frequently dismissed when attributed to a distrusted source, whereas the actual merit of the content deserved a different decision otherwise.

This study was conducted with a large random sample that was designed to reflect the population of US adults, yet by excluding participants missing a manipulation check, as well as non-voters and third-party voters, the overall sample size decreased considerably. Additionally, sub-samples became even smaller because data for hypothesis testing and answering research questions were generated by splitting participants into four news source(s) conditions among two headline pairs. This resulted in statistical tests with relatively low samples and statistical power. Additionally, the headlines only focused on one political topic and were not representative of all news output (yet global warming is a polarizing topic between liberals and conservatives). CNN and Fox News are also not representative of the average US news outlet. It may be that audience perceptions of other media and their content are different. This study also only focused on written headlines, no audio-visual information was added, except network logos.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

## Factors Affecting Trust in Chinese Digital Journalism: Approach Based on Folk Theories

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### Abstract

Trust in online digital news has become a significant concern affecting social cohesion in China. Under the framework of folk theories, we interviewed urban and rural residents' perceptions and imaginations of digital news credibility in China's digital journalism environment. The study finds that digital media giants in China are utilised by both urban and rural residents. Regarding the behaviour of news avoidance, scepticism of digital news accounts for only a tiny fraction of the reasons held by news avoiders. Chinese urban and rural residents have similar perceptions about the impact of news forms, quality of information, and individual stances on digital news, while rural residents show uncertainty about the transparency of news production, which may be related to their education level and media literacy. The relationship between recommendation algorithms and news trust is overlooked by respondents. In addition, news seekers are more likely to display herd behaviours, which may mislead their judgment of news credibility. News avoiders may refuse to consume news because of their distaste for China's digital news atmosphere, such as the ubiquity of unpleasant emotions, preconceived opinions, and attention-grabbing clickbait headlines.

### Keywords

constructive journalism; digital journalism; folk theories; news avoiders; news seekers; news trust; social cohesion

### 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).

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### 1. Introduction

Digital media has reshaped the process of news production and distribution, and digital news in the form of new media and self-media has ushered in great prosperity. Misinformation has become a critical variable plaguing digital journalism in many countries, leading to a decline in the credibility of government agencies (Lovari, 2020) and trust in mainstream media (Lee et al., 2023). Fake news producers deliberately associate information discourse with news to deceive audiences (Träsel et al., 2019), and social media has become a breeding ground for them to spread false information. During the 2016 US election, there were seven types of misinformation on social media networks, including false connection, false

context, manipulated content, satire or parody, misleading content, imposter content, and fabricated content (Wardle, 2018), which misled and confused the public. The prevalence of global social media such as Twitter and Facebook accelerates the dissemination of news information, leading to an extensive influence of false news as well.

Massive quantities of digital news distract the public's attention, and it is often of low quality, causing the public to doubt the authenticity of the news. The trust issue of online digital news has become a common problem in Western society (Grosser, 2016). Ross Arguedas et al. (2022) conducted interviews with journalists from Brazil, India, the UK, and the US, showing that digital platforms such as search engines, social media, and

chat software have undermined traditional norms of trust, weakening the authority of news brands, exacerbating distrust of news worldwide. In the network society, untrustworthy news widens the gap between professional news and citizens (Hermans & Drok, 2018). People are increasingly starting to avoid the news, as they believe that professional news has become irrelevant and untrustworthy (Shehata et al., 2016).

We followed the framework of folk theories and used semi-structured interviews to investigate the perceptions of Chinese urban and rural residents on digital news and its credibility. On the one hand, we compared news seekers and news avoiders in the two levels of digital media preferences and attitudes towards digital news. On the other hand, we integrated Chinese residents' beliefs about digital news trust and explored the key factors that affect the trustworthiness of digital news. Our study may improve the public's ability to assess news credibility in a complex digital media environment and reduce "dark participation" (M. N. Nelson et al., 2021) in participatory journalism.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. News Avoidance, News Trust, and Social Cohesion

News avoidance has become a critical problem faced by mass media organisations. Algorithmic news reduces information overload, and those who believe that "news finds me" are more likely to perceive that social and user-driven algorithmic news is usually the most relevant, so they will tend to avoid other types of news (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2022). We define news avoidance as a phenomenon in which audiences do not have direct contact with news media or do not even pay attention to the news. The former means that audiences abandon the direct means of getting news: television news channels, newspapers, news websites, and news apps, instead choosing digital intermediaries like social media or search engines to access information via distributed discovery (Toff & Nielsen, 2018). The result is that many do not watch the news at all. Due to their distaste for the news or their preference for other content, they watch the news very infrequently (Gorski & Thomas, 2022; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020) and even consume no news within a certain period (Blekesaune et al., 2012). As digitalisation changes the media environment, information becomes highly selective, and there is a trend toward news avoidance (Karlsen et al., 2020), which is exacerbated by factors such as information overload, emotional stress, and lack of trust in the news (Schäfer et al., 2023). The popularity of social media news is closely related to the reduction of news credibility, and this mistrust may be more serious (Park et al., 2020). As Toff and Nielsen (2018) have shown, distributed exploration of audience behaviour (distributed discovery) is affected by trust in digital news, forming the folk theory called "I don't know what to believe." Reduced trust in

media will lead to people increasingly avoiding the news and choosing non-journalistic alternative news sources, resulting in more information isolation and public polarisation (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019).

In traditional news democratic theory, trust is often regarded as the premise of public connection. That is, the fulfilment of citizenship must first rely on trust in the news (Swart & Broersma, 2022). Democracy loses its informed foundation when the public no longer trusts the news and thus avoids it (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). Citizens' awareness of current events affects their political knowledge and participation (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006). At the same time, trust in news is crucial for enhancing social cohesion. Only credible news media can play the role of public opinion supervision, consensus building, and political stability (Usher, 2018). In China, traditional institutional media and mainstream media guide public opinion and build social consensus. According to Cai (2020), China's mainstream media has distinct characteristics, such as addressing the mainstream members of society, representing mainstream ideology, disseminating crucial public information, and having strong credibility and influence. The news practice of China's mainstream media is predominantly guided by the Marxist view of journalism, which mainly comprises four core concepts: party principle, people-centred, news law, and correct public opinion (Yang, 2017). The people-centred concept requires the news media to care about the work, life, and interests of the people (Yang, 2017). With the prevalence of mobile new media technology, the public is increasingly shifting their attention toward social media (Hunt & Gruszczynski, 2021). Traditional mainstream media has started the process of media convergence to maintain and improve its influence among the public (Triko & Nurfathiyah, 2022; Zhao, 2017). Nevertheless, user-generated content is increasingly becoming an influential news source (called citizen-generated news) that may compete with curated news from official media sources (Wang & Mark, 2013). Drawing on a survey of news users from 35 countries, Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019) have found that using social media as a primary news source correlates with lower levels of trust in news. Thus, in the intricate and perplexing digital environment, the reliability of digital news, especially that of mainstream media, is seriously challenged; social opinions appear more unstable and fragmented (Pham et al., 2020). It is vital to rebuild trust in digital news, as it constitutes a critical component of the social infrastructure (Moran & Nechushtai, 2023). Although digital media reduces the credibility of news, journalists can also use digital means and combine sources of information to restore trust in news production (Christensen & Khalil, 2023; Zahay et al., 2021). Trust in social media helps the audience come across news (Goyanes, 2020), while enabling the effective function of public connection with digital journalism (Penney, 2023; Swart et al., 2017).

Factors affecting trust in digital news can be divided into news production and consumption. As for news

production, previous studies concentrated on objective attributes of the media, including source trustworthiness, competency and objectivity of media personnel, audiovisual characteristics of the media, and accuracy and fairness of information (H. Zhang et al., 2014). In the digital environment, the algorithm has become an essential topic in digital news. Wölker and Powell (2021) found that automated news is as credible as human-edited news when algorithms are added to automated news production. Furthermore, machines as news sources have little impact on credibility (Graefe et al., 2018). News source is an essential factor affecting credibility and is moderated by partisan leaning. Pennycook and Rand (2019) pointed out that political laypeople trust mainstream media far more than hyper-partisan websites, and using the algorithmic ranking mechanism to prioritise highly credible content is an essential means of combating misinformation. Transparency is another crucial topic that scholars concentrated on, which has been shown to increase audience trust in news in some studies (Chadha & Koliska, 2015; Lu & Zhen, 2023), while other studies cast doubt on it (Henke et al., 2021; Koliska, 2022). In addition, social navigation features such as likes, comments, and shares significantly impact the trust evaluation of social media news (Seckler et al., 2015).

As for news consumption, audiences' individual characteristics and psychological cognitions are essential factors that affect news credibility. For those who care about current affairs, the watchdog performance evaluations are related to the degree of trust in the news (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2022). Robinson et al. (2021) believed that four dimensions of audience news literacy are conducive to fostering trust in public information exchange: civic consumption, amateur co-production, professional information production, and algorithms/technology. Moreover, political ideology and partisanship influence the degree of news trustworthiness (Jones, 2004). In the context of China, Xu (2013) found that the education level, exposure to online news, and the audience's trust in the government are correlated with trust in state media. Apart from education level, other demographic factors of the public like gender, age, place of residence, and socioeconomic status, also contribute to news trust (Westley & Severin, 1964). In terms of audience perception, perceived media values have been shown to affect trust in social media brands differently, which include information value, entertainment value, social networking value, social status value, and organisational communication value (M. Zhang et al., 2022). These studies provided us with insights to find a solution to build trust in digital news from the audience's perspective under the framework of folk theories.

## 2.2. *The Framework of Folk Theories*

A solution to address the distrust in journalism is to develop constructive journalism, also called solutions journalism. However, the crisis of trust in digital jour-

nalism also affects it to some extent. Christians et al. (2010) proposed that the traditional press has four normative roles: monitorial, facilitative, collaborative, and radical. The fifth normative role, a constructive role, refers that the press offers a vision of how society should move forward, shifting focus from problems to solutions (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018). Constructive journalism must be legitimised as a trustworthy and necessary form of journalism because its news coverage aims to be rigorous, accurate, representative, and comprehensive (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018). As a relatively new movement, constructive journalism, indebted to civic journalism, advocates a more public-oriented approach than the traditional press (Hermans & Drok, 2018). That is to say, in order to make up for the gap between citizens and institutions, constructive journalism puts ordinary people at the centre of journalism, hoping to enhance the relationship between citizens and professionals (journalists, editors, etc.), even between citizens and their community (Hermans & Drok, 2018). The audience-based orientation differs from traditional professional journalism which encompasses characteristics of newsroom work, news gatekeeping, and reporting techniques (Waisbord, 2013).

It was a new attempt in line with the audience-based orientation of constructive journalism that we applied the framework of folk theories to the study of trust in digital news. Moreover, it helped to address the gap in previous studies that rarely studied trust from the audiences' perspective (Knudsen et al., 2022). Folk theories are intuitive and informal (Ngo & Krämer, 2022), referring to non-authoritative conceptions of the world that develop among non-professionals (also called laypeople and the general public) and circulate informally (Eslami et al., 2016). First-hand experience and social interaction are the main ways ordinary people acquire their own theories regarding the world around them (Kempton, 1986). Following Kempton (1986), we recognise that folk theories are distinct from institutionalised theories used by professionals and acquired from scientific literature and controlled experiments. Unlike studies drawing on behavioural data, direct observation, and survey research, folk theories tell us what the actions of ordinary people actually mean to them instead of what scholars think they mean (Toff & Nielsen, 2018). Furthermore, folk theories, embodying cognitive biases that affect thought and action, are applied to categorising things, making predictions, and guiding behaviour (Gelman & Legare, 2011; Kempton, 1986).

The framework of folk theories has been applied to biology and developed into folk biology earlier, representing people's everyday knowledge about the biological world (Medin & Atran, 1999). Focusing on folk theories in journalism helps define journalism's legitimacy, recognised role, and perceived public value (Palmer et al., 2020). Folk theories on news consumption, as culturally available symbolic resources, reveal how news consumers access news in an increasingly dispersed

environment and how news avoiders separate from traditional mass media by using distributed discovery in their daily lives (Toff & Nielsen, 2018). Ordinary users often believe algorithms are confining, practical, reductive, intangible, and exploitative (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Regarding algorithmic recommendations, Siles et al. (2020) found two folk theories: First, users impersonate the platform (Spotify), and second, users regard it as a well-resourced system. Algorithms have long been regarded as a “black box” (Pasquale, 2015), leading scholars to think about algorithmic operations. Dogruel (2021) identified five folk theories of algorithmic operations: economic orientation theory, personal interaction theory, popularity theory, categorisation theory, and algorithmic thinking theory. Furthermore, Eslami et al. (2016) disclosed several folk theories on how people reason and talk about their thoughts on algorithmic operations by focusing on seamless designs of feed curation algorithms.

Folk theories suggest that it may improve trust in news by changing people’s self-telling stories about news (J. L. Nelson & Lewis, 2021). Nonetheless, few studies on folk theories paid attention to trust in digital news. In an exceptional study on Twitter’s shadowbans, Jaidka et al. (2023) showed that lack of transparency can lead to folk theories speculation among Twitter users, regulatory agencies, and policymakers and further to accusations of ideological bias in platform censorship policies, which jeopardises user trust and the long-term development of the platform. That involved folk theories on the relationship between algorithmic transparency and digital news trustworthiness, but it was only briefly mentioned. At the same time, most previous studies on folk theories focused on social media platforms and users’ cognition of algorithms. Few studies cared about other extensively available digital news channels, such as online news websites and news aggregator apps. To this end, this study focused on the trust issues of various digital news channels under the framework of folk theories. In addition, at the level of audiences, existing studies on news trust have focused on the characteristics of news avoiders while paying less attention to news seekers. Accordingly, this study explored how the public interpreted trust in news, so-called folk theories, in China’s digital journalism. We proposed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the digital media usage patterns differ between news seekers and news avoiders?

RQ2: What factors affect the credibility of digital news in folk theories?

RQ3: How do news seekers and news avoiders perceive digital news trust differently in folk theories?

### 3. Research Design

In this study, news is defined as information about recent events, regardless of whether the source is an institution

or an individual. The acquisition of folk theories needs to understand the real opinions of audiences, and in-depth interviews are a suitable research method to meet that target. Guided by the folk theoretical framework, we used semi-structured in-depth interviews to discover the public’s trust in digital news. We identified two types of respondents through purposive sampling: news seekers and news avoiders. News seekers actively watch the news to keep up with current events. In contrast, news avoiders refer to those who do not actively watch the news in daily life and only come across news occasionally or even intentionally avoid the news. The interviews were primarily to explore the status of digital media use, the factors that affect trust in digital news, and the differences between news seekers and news avoiders. Before formal interviews, we told every respondent that digital news refers to news presented and disseminated by digital technologies such as computers and networks. Moreover, common digital news carriers include news websites, mobile news apps, social chat apps (such as WeChat and Weibo), short video apps (such as Douyin [Chinese TikTok] and Bilibili), podcasts, electronic newspapers, etc.

The main steps of the interviews were as follows. First, we asked the respondents whether they had systematically studied related knowledge of journalism and communication. Individuals with professional knowledge in journalism are likely to perceive digital news very differently compared to those with other professional backgrounds. To ensure folk theories of trust in digital news best reflect the beliefs of ordinary citizens and laypeople, those with a professional background in journalism respondents were not included in the list for subsequent interviews. Second, we asked respondents about their digital news consumption behaviours and media usage preferences. In this step, we divided the respondents into news seekers and news avoiders. More specifically, the categorisation entirely depended on their replies—People who claimed to watch the news actively were considered news seekers; otherwise, they were considered news avoiders. Third, we questioned respondents about their opinions on the factors influencing trust in digital news, including recommendation algorithms, news sources, news forms, quality of information, individual stances, transparency in news production, and others. All interviews were conducted through the online chat software WeChat in April 2023. We used the social chat software to ask Chinese friends in the address book whether they actively obtained news to determine the initial respondents. We then commissioned initial respondents to recommend news seekers and avoiders in their network of friends to participate in the interviews. With this snowball sampling, we received 77 responses and finally identified 30 as our interviewees, including 17 Chinese urban residents and 13 rural residents, 18 news seekers and 12 news avoiders. Interviewees’ ages, education, occupation, region, knowledge of current events, and

perceptions of the authenticity of news were taken down alongside their nicknames to protect their privacy.

Theoretical discoveries emerge from open-ended problems by emergent coding (Young et al., 2023). The coding work completed by three authors involved two steps. Firstly, one coder read and labelled the responses into several categories, each with common properties and elements (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). We analysed all 10 open-ended questions to determine the category list, which included views on factors influencing trust toward digital news. Secondly, the category list was shared with the other two coders to review the applicability of each code (Tracy, 2019). Some multi-category responses were aggregated to assess the frequency of various topics. Ultimately, we generalised folk theories on digital news trust, combining topics and specific texts.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Media Usage Preference and Digital News Consumption Behaviour

Most interviewees came from Beijing, Sichuan Province, and Guangdong Province in China, while a few came from Tianjin City, Henan Province, with an age range of 20 to 36 years old. As for the educational background, 12 had a bachelor's degree, 15 had a master's degree, and three had a junior college degree or below. Their occupations included students, civil servants, programmers, workers, farmers, freelancers, and job seekers. Overall, although the respondents came from different regions and had diverse occupations, they had a relatively good academic background with a certain level of knowledge and civic literacy. That facilitated our interviews to unearth folk theories of trust in digital news.

Regarding RQ1, we found that news seekers tended to watch the news frequently by using popular social media in China. WeChat was the platform they mentioned most, followed by the microblogging platform Sina Weibo. Many news seekers indicated that the short-video social media Bilibili was used to obtain information and news, followed by Douyin. In addition to social media platforms, news seekers used specialised news apps to watch news, such as mobile news clients (like Xuexi Qiangguo, People's Daily, CCTV News) and news aggregators (like Jinri Toutiao, called TopBuzz worldwide). Mobile news clients are news distribution platforms built by traditional media in the digital transformation, while news aggregators refer to apps that aggregate news from various sources. In addition, many news seekers chose search engines like Baidu to obtain news. A few declared they accessed news through Zhihu (similar to Quora) and Xiaohongshu (similar to Instagram), which are vertical social media dedicated to specific niche fields. An interesting finding was that several current students, regarded as news seekers, said they sometimes watched news through Twitter, Telegram, and YouTube. Furthermore, a news seeker mentioned using

a newsletter to obtain news of interest. As for news consumption time, most news seekers said that the average daily time spent on news in the past week was between 30 minutes and two hours, and half of them said that they watched the news for one hour or so.

For news avoiders, digital media was a communication and entertainment tool rather than a news source. There were four main folk theories regarding why they did not actively watch digital news. First, "fragmented information meets needs." News avoiders could see news when using digital media by accident and thought it satisfied their need to keep up with current affairs. Xiang Rong, a civil servant from Chengdu, Sichuan Province, candidly mentioned, "Fragmented information from Douyin can fulfil my news requirements, and there is no need to watch news deliberately." Secondly, some individuals asserted, "I don't have time." They were busy with work and family affairs without extra time to watch news. As Jia said, "I (recently) have been busy reading professional books and have no time to watch the news." Thirdly, "The news is too boring," many mentioned this reason. Fourthly, a few said, "I doubt the authenticity of the news." That was, their reluctance to watch the news stemmed from doubts about the authenticity of digital news. For example, Z explained, "On social media, some news comments contain fake content published by the cyber army. Negative news will affect my emotions." The differences in media use habits between news seekers and news avoiders can be seen in Table 1.

### 4.2. Folk Theories of Trust in Digital News

For RQ2 and RQ3, we conducted a qualitative content analysis on the interviewees' corpus and summarised the general folk theories on the influencing factors of digital news trust. We also analysed differences in perceptions of the factors between news seekers and news avoiders. Table 2 shows folk theories on factors influencing digital news trustworthiness among different identities.

Regarding recommendation algorithms, the most common folk theories were "it's more convenient" and "all kinds of news are worth watching." Most interviewees did not directly respond to the relationship between algorithms and news trust. They focused on the pros and cons of the algorithm itself and the trust in the algorithm. Fifteen believed in the proactive recommendation mechanism of the platform, and nine disagreed with it. At the same time, six held a neutral opinion and thought that the recommendation algorithms were worth further improvement to play a positive role effect. Supporters of algorithms believed that algorithmic recommendations could help them quickly get content of interest. Miles said: "This (the recommendation algorithm) allows me to get the content of my interest faster." Opponents of algorithms believed it would lead to an information cocoon effect, preventing users from paying attention to other types of news. As Ni said, "I still remember that after the China Eastern



**Table 1.** Differences in media use habits between news seekers and news avoiders.

Preferred platforms and consuming time	Identity category	
	News seekers	News avoiders
Relation-based social media	WeChat, Weibo	Tools for communication and entertainment rather than digital news
Short video social media	Bilibili, Douyin	
Mobile news clients	Xuexi Qiangguo, People’s Daily, CCTV News	
News aggregators	Jinri Toutiao	
Search engines	Baidu	
Vertical social media	Zhihu, Xiaohongshu	
Time length of news consumption	30 minutes to two hours, mostly	Very short

Airlines crashed a year ago, I saw a few pieces of related news on social media, and then I browsed all similar information. That made me feel very sad and irritable.” Regarding the information cocoon effect, some believed that “it does not actually restrict users from browsing dissimilar news” (Hai). The centrists put forward constructive suggestions for improving the algorithm. As Happy Free said, “The platforms can improve its algorithm and make it optional. They should add algorithmic mechanisms that can recommend multiple types of news and avoid the problem of information cocoons.” There were more news avoiders among those who favoured the algorithm, while there were more news seekers among those who were against the algorithm. In addition, the Chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = 2.056, p = 0.358$ ) showed no significant difference in the attitude towards recommendation algorithms among respondents from rural or urban areas.

Both news seekers and news avoiders agreed that news sources affected the credibility of digital news. There were two prominent opinions: One was that news from official and mainstream media was more reliable; the other was that the entry threshold of self-media was low, which resulted in internet information being

too chaotic to be deemed credible. Take Mei’s reply as an example, “People generally think that official government news is more credible. Sometimes when a negative incident breaks out from the media or other platforms, everyone will wait for the official announcement.” Zhou analysed, “The news media you watch can sometimes be misleading. It is difficult for you to understand the ins and outs of things, and maybe what you see is just taken out of context.” Most people believed that the credibility of news in traditional media, such as TV and newspapers, was still higher than that of digital media. This is because, as stated by Xiang Rong, “the content in traditional media needs to be strictly checked and the responsibilities within media organisation are clear, compared with digital media.” Furthermore, views of news sources differed little between urban and rural Chinese residents.

As for news forms, both news seekers and news avoiders unanimously agreed that “combining pictures and texts is more reliable,” no matter whether they were urban or rural residents. Most agreed that news forms affected news credibility. The reliability of pictures and videos is higher than that of pure text, and combining multiple modalities can improve trust. For example, Hai

**Table 2.** Folk theories on factors influencing digital news trustworthiness among different identities.

Factors influencing trust in digital news	Identity category	
	News seekers	News avoiders
Recommendation algorithms	“All kinds of news are worth watching.”	“It’s more convenient.”
News sources	“Officials are more reliable” and “online information is too mixed.”	
News forms	“Combining pictures and texts is more reliable.”	
Quality of information	“Fuzziness is fake.”	
Individual stances	“Republicans don’t trust Democrats easily.”	
Transparency in news production	“I don’t care.”	“Transparency is good for supervision.”
Other folk theories	“I have a herd mentality.”	1. “Emotions resonate”; 2. “Preconceptions dominate”; 3. “Headlines are misleading.”

said: “Words are the most unreliable, and the combination of pictures and texts together with audio and video evidence will make news more reliable.” A few thought that news forms did not affect credibility, and they were all news seekers. A typical reason was “any form can be faked, so it doesn’t matter anymore” (Ni). Nevertheless, the opposite point of view was that multi-modal news was just a means for news publishers to confuse the audience. As Zhou said, “People are more easily confused by video news because it is more reliable. Furthermore, news producers use it to hypnotise audiences.”

News quality is also recognised as a factor affecting credibility, as most claimed that “fuzziness is fake.” The vague description of the story makes people doubt the writer’s intention and suspect that this kind of news is “concealing and misleading” (Z and Ni). Xiao Wan said: “High-quality news can enhance the audiences’ viewing experience and make it easier for people to believe it subjectively.” Lve said bluntly: “We-media news that cannot speak clearly would be directly treated as spam, and videos that are too vague can also be treated as fake.” In addition, some thought “the low quality of news content will make people doubt the website’s professionalism” (FQ). News seekers and news avoiders had similar views on how information quality affects trust in digital news, and the same was true for urban and rural residents.

Most people believed that “Republicans don’t trust Democrats easily.” Individual stances refer to the initial leanings and preferences of the audiences when watching news that includes several sides. Political partisans are one aspect of individual stances. Most believed that individual leanings would affect their judgment of news credibility. They would change their views on the authenticity of the news, drawing on whether they like the source and the protagonist of the news. Miles said: “Republicans (in the US) will never trust newspapers run by Democrats easily.” Chen Jieying’s reply is the most representative. She said: “If I have the same view as the news publisher, I will feel enlightened and think that the author is very reasonable. Otherwise, I will think that the author is talking nonsense.” A few believed that individual stances did not affect news trust. It only represented a personal attitude and had nothing to do with the facts” (Xiao Wan). There was no significant difference in views on individual stances between news seekers and news avoiders or between urban and rural residents.

Most respondents believed that transparency in news production is another critical factor affecting trust in digital news. As Wen said, “After all, the higher the transparency of news production, the stronger the monitoring, and the lower the possibility of news falsification.” However, there are also problems with the transparency of news production. As Xing said, “Although the opaque news production process will raise doubts in the audience, it is also difficult to completely make news production transparent because it will undoubtedly affect the efficiency of news production.” A few news seekers

said: “I don’t care about this. It is unnecessary to understand how news is produced; after all, the production process of reported news may not be true. I only believe what I actually see” (Xing Chen). It is worth mentioning that urban residents generally believed that transparency would affect the credibility of the news, but a higher proportion of rural residents expressed uncertainty about this.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, interviewees also raised other elements that impact trust in digital news, primarily at the psychological and news intention levels. The first discourse held by most news seekers is “I have a herd mentality,” reflecting an opinion market in the digital news environment. Other people’s evaluations could affect our judgment of news credibility, primarily influenced by majority opinion. Ni said: “There are various opinions in the comment area of Weibo. The more opinions there were, the more I thought. When I found someone doubting, I might also suspect the news.” Moreover, news seekers and rural residents showed a greater tendency to herd mentality. The second psychological factor affecting news credibility is “emotions resonate.” Individual emotions affect the judgment of news credibility. Xing Chen said that he “easily sympathised with some sensational and inspirational news at night,” and this empathy increased his trust in relevant news. Third, “preconceptions dominate.” The sequence in which news appears has a more significant impact on the credibility of digital news. This impact comes from preconceived stereotypes. Happy Free explained: “For the same event, the news we saw before will affect the judgment of the credibility of the news we see later. Often, the information obtained first will dominate.” Fourth, “headlines are misleading.” This theory reflected the seductive and induced nature of vulgar and novelty news. Some news producers using clickbait headlines deliberately amplified one side of the news facts, resulting in partial distortion. This method of naming news to defraud traffic made some interviewees dissatisfied. For example, Z pointed out:

In some self-media news headlines, women are the main objectives in negative events (such as domestic violence, car accidents). They (newsmakers) think it is more attractive than using the word “men,” but it neglects men’s mistakes and faults, only covering up part of the truth.

The last three folk theories were similar among urban and rural residents and were shared by a greater proportion of news avoiders.

## 5. Conclusions

We studied the issue of trust in digital news under the framework of folk theories and defined two types of audiences—news seekers and news avoiders. After comparing their differences in media usage preferences and

digital news consumption behaviour, our main conclusions are as follows.

First, ambient news thrives (Gorski & Thomas, 2022) in the digital context; the most critical channels for news seekers to obtain digital news include two categories: relationship-based social media and short video social media. WeChat and Weibo typify the former, while Bilibili and Douyin represent the latter. Other vertical social media (such as Zhihu, Xiaohongshu, etc.), mobile news clients, news aggregators, and search engines are supplementary channels for news seekers to watch news. In China's internet environment, both urban and rural residents use digital media giants, and people's media preferences show similarities.

Second, we find that scepticism (distrust) of digital news accounts for only a tiny fraction of the reasons held by news avoiders. News avoidance is not only associated with news trust (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2022) but is also affected by other factors. We conclude three main explanations from the audiences: (a) "Fragmented information meets my needs," (b) "I don't have time," and (c) "the news is boring." Moreover, whether or not people actively watched the news had no relationship with their ability to judge its authenticity; even though news seekers came across more news, it did not improve their ability to judge it.

Third, regarding the influencing factors of the credibility of digital news, we find that news sources, news forms, quality of information, individual stances, and transparency in news production have been reflected in folk theories. As for the recommendation algorithms, most individuals do not directly respond to the relationship between the algorithm and news trust. They focus on the pros and cons of the algorithm itself and the trust in the algorithm. Satisfaction with the news recommendation system increases trust in the algorithm, making users more willing to use the system (Shin, 2020). This kind of discussion on algorithmic trust is to see whether the recommendation system can provide users with accurate and satisfactory news. However, establishing trust in news content through algorithms needs further research. It may be a feasible idea to use algorithmic ranking mechanisms to increase the priority of highly credible content (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Urban and rural residents in China have similar perceptions about the impact of news forms, quality of information, and individual stances on digital news. Rural residents display uncertainty regarding the transparency of news production, which we deduce could be linked to their lower average education level and media literacy compared to urban residents.

Fourth, regarding other potential factors affecting the credibility of digital news, most of them are elucidated through psychological aspects and news intent. We have identified four primary folk theories: (a) "I have a herd mentality," (b) "emotions resonate," (c) "preconceptions dominate," and (d) "headlines are misleading." Partisan consistency positively affects trust in the news

(Suiter & Fletcher, 2020), and our findings suggest that emotional consistency also affects judgments of news trust. Consistent with previous findings, others' comments impact news credibility under the model of participatory journalism (M. N. Nelson et al., 2021; Seckler et al., 2015). Furthermore, our findings reveal the influence of majority opinion on individual judgments of news trust. If the news or comments expressing opinions are obtained by users earlier, that earlier opinion will dominate the judgment of the credibility of subsequent news. This finding validates the psychological effect of preconceived ideas—Trust beliefs are initially formed based on first impressions and subsequently adjusted or confirmed through ongoing experiences (Yu et al., 2014). Finally, the prevalence of clickbait headlines in self-media significantly undermines news trust. In comparison, news seekers are more prone to display herd behaviour, which can potentially distort their assessments of news credibility. News avoiders may refrain from consuming news due to their aversion to the digital news environment in China, characterised by the pervasive presence of negative emotions, preconceived opinions, and attention-grabbing clickbait headlines.

This study has several limitations, primarily stemming from three aspects. Firstly, our interviews were only conducted with a limited number of individuals, and the folk theories about digital news trust should be further verified by follow-up research with larger sample sizes. Secondly, news avoidance may only be occasional for some people. News avoiders and news seekers can switch identities under certain conditions. Thirdly, although we redefined folk theories of digital news trust based on existing literature, some newly discovered theories concerning emotions, herd psychology, first impressions, and clickbait headlines may require additional methods to demonstrate their effectiveness.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

# Free Press Under Pressure? Experiences and Consequences of Hateful Harassment on Journalists in Germany

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## Abstract

The rise of populist movements all over the world and various global crises in recent years have led to a sharp increase in distrust in news and the media. Although this development is tangible globally, it seems pertinent to take a look at a Western liberal democracy with a comparatively good journalistic infrastructure such as Germany, where hateful harassment and attacks on journalists are on the rise. These issues have been widely discussed publicly in Germany. However, it would be useful to take into account the perspective of those affected by these phenomena. To contribute to the discourses on hate against journalists, the current contribution presents data from a survey of active journalists in Germany ( $n = 322$ ). The questionnaire comprised both standardized and open-ended questions, focusing specifically on hateful harassment and attacks experienced by journalists, including the ways through which they are transported and whether hate can be politically localized. The results reveal that hate and attacks are mainly attributed to right-wing individuals and groups. In addition to verbal hate, various responding journalists reported having been physically attacked or having received death threats. Given the frequency of experienced hateful harassment, most respondents fear that the freedom of press in Germany is in jeopardy (62%), and about half have considered self-censorship to avoid being the target of hate. The severity of experienced hate is illustrated by open-ended questions in the form of personal accounts that are analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The results are discussed in light of the role of a free press in modern democracies, as well as recent research on devaluing attitudes towards the free press in Germany.

## Keywords

far-right; Germany; hateful harassment; journalism; qualitative analysis

## 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).

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## 1. Introduction

While scholars consider free press, journalism, and media in general as important democratic institutions—e.g., by coining the term “fourth estate” to describe its importance in modern democracies (Schultz, 1998)—trust in news media and journalists has been declining for some time now (e.g., IPSOS, 2019). Recent developments on a global scale are contributing to what various institutions and scholars have termed a “crisis,” which is not only affecting overall trust in news reporting but also leading to a broader devaluation of journalists and the media. These developments include the

global rise of far-right actors and populist movements, which are disseminating narratives and promoting discourses with a strong anti-media message (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Panievsky, 2022). For some time now, open attacks on journalism and media outlets have become a feature of right-wing populists and far-right actors (Farhall et al., 2019). Most notably, the term “fake news” has become something of a battle cry for the far-right to undermine journalism and media outlets in the US, Europe, and beyond (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). While mistrust in reporting and the devaluation of journalists and the media are attitudinal phenomena, there is also a behavioral



side to the growing anti-media sentiment, with serious consequences: Journalists around the world are facing more and more obstacles in carrying out their work freely, as journalists increasingly become the target of harassment and hostility (Waisbord, 2019). While attacks and persecution of journalists and media workers have been a problem in autocratic regimes for years, hateful harassment and attacks on journalists have also increased sharply in democratic countries (International Federation of Journalists, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). This development is also noticeable in Germany. While the overall environment and infrastructure in Germany are comparatively good, Reporters Without Borders (2023) points out that in Germany “violence and verbal attacks are on the rise” and “journalists have been increasingly threatened, harassed and physically attacked.” In addition to hateful harassment and attacks, journalists in Germany face growing mistrust in their reporting (Jacob et al., 2019; Y. Rees & Papendick, 2021).

The public discourse on these issues in Germany is substantial and has been ongoing for some time. Hateful harassment and attacks on journalists have been the subject of numerous reports in all major news outlets (e.g., “Attacken auf Journalistinnen,” 2021; Holly, 2023), several nationwide political debates, and especially in the German parliament (Bundestag, 2021). However, empirical studies from the perspective of affected journalists and media workers in Germany are scarce. Nevertheless, some valuable studies provide insight into how journalists in Germany are affected by hateful harassment and attacks, and how they and the institutions with which they are associated deal with these phenomena (Post & Kepplinger, 2019; Preuß et al., 2017). This article aims to contribute to the existing research and the public debate in Germany, focusing on the following key research questions:

RQ1: What experiences of hateful harassment and attacks do German journalists, most of whom are members of journalists’ unions, report?

RQ2: Where do they politically localize hateful harassment and attacks?

RQ3: What are the personal and professional consequences of hateful harassment and attacks experienced by journalists in Germany?

This research is based on a survey of active journalists and media workers in Germany ( $N = 322$ ). The questionnaire focused on how those affected experienced and responded to hateful harassment and attacks. In addition to standardized questions, the questionnaire included several open-ended questions to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences in personal accounts that are the focus of the analysis. In the first step, we will take a closer look at the theoretical background and the German context (Section 2). After an introduction to data

and methods (Section 3), the empirical section (Section 4) focuses on the extent and nature of hateful harassment and attacks experienced by journalists and media workers in Germany online and offline, as well as the personal and professional consequences of these experiences. While the main focus of the analysis is on three open-ended questions about the experiences and consequences of hateful harassment and attacks on affected journalists and media workers, key quantitative descriptive findings of the study are also presented. Finally, the discussion section (Section 5) identifies the limitations of the current study and closes with a conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Context

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework

Journalism is generally considered to be an important part of a functioning democratic society. The ability of journalists to work freely, safely, and autonomously has therefore become an important feature of several indices of democracy (e.g., Freedom House). As hateful harassment of journalists has been globally on the rise for some time (Waisbord, 2019), the empirical focus of mainly studying the situation of autocracies or historically weak democracies (e.g., Chalaby, 2000; Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020; Tapsell, 2012) has shifted to research that also focuses on liberal democracies (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Miller, 2023; Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Preuß et al., 2017). In this regard, Nilsson and Örnebring’s (2016) study, which provides insight into the Swedish case, is highly relevant to the study of hateful harassment of journalists in a Western liberal democracy, both empirically and theoretically. In general, research has shown that harassment of journalists has to be understood as a democratic problem, as it potentially limits journalists’ freedom and professional autonomy (Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). Following Nerone (1994), Nilsson and Örnebring (2016) argue that harassment and attacks on journalists must be seen as external factors that limit journalistic autonomy. At the same time, hateful harassment of journalists can be seen as political in nature and its ultimate goal is to silence journalists altogether. Therefore, it seems pertinent to investigate the political background of the perpetrators. Conceptually, the phenomenon of hateful harassment of journalists is obviously directed at individual journalists, with the bulk of the harassment directed at groups that have been historically discriminated against, such as women and ethnic minorities (Stahel, 2023; Waisbord, 2020). Being the target of hateful harassment—whether online or offline—has been shown to affect both personal and professional well-being (Holton et al., 2023). However, while the individual consequences of hateful harassment are already severe, if hateful harassment of journalists is seen as an overarching democratic problem, then the institution of journalism is surely a target as well (Kim & Shin, 2022). Thus, hateful harassment

of journalists has serious negative consequences for the individual journalists involved as well as for the democratic institution of journalism. This is vividly illustrated by the “*Lügenpresse*” narrative popular in Germany, in which the “lying” press is constructed as an enemy of the people (Koliska & Assmann, 2021).

Following conceptualizations of the phenomena in other research examining harassment or audience hostility toward journalists (Kim & Shin, 2022; Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016), hateful harassment and attacks in the current study include all forms of hateful audience responses, ranging from verbal harassment in the form of insults, for example, to violence in the form of physical attacks. While harassment has both online and offline aspects, physical violence is understood as direct, face-to-face interaction.

## 2.2. The German Context

Anti-media sentiment has long been a pillar of right-wing populist and far-right agitation around the world. It comes as no surprise that this development is also widespread in Germany. Like no other term, *Lügenpresse* (lying press) stands for distrust, devaluation, and hatred of journalists and media workers on the one hand, and of the free press as a democratic institution on the other. While the term *Lügenpresse* as a political slogan or chant, as well as a narrative aimed at devaluing journalists and the free press, has a history of more than 100 years and was also used by the National Socialists (Seidler, 2016), it re-emerged in the 2010s and peaked during the 2015 refugee migration to Germany (Haller & Holt, 2019; Maurer et al., 2019). It was, and still is, a major feature of anti-media protests in Germany and has since become a key narrative of far-right actors and organizations across the country. Most notably, it has been continuously used by the far-right protest group PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident) based in the German Federal State of Saxony, as well as its local offshoots in other regions, and has become a far-right “rallying cry” (Volk, 2020). The term specifically aims to discredit trust and devalue the press and its democratic role and has become a common slur at far-right demonstrations as well as in online attacks against journalists (Koliska & Assmann, 2021). However, *Lügenpresse* has not only become a buzzword for the far-right but has also spilled over into the broader political discourse. Subsequently, the underlying distrustful anti-media sentiment seems to be widely shared among the German general population, as several large-scale studies suggest (Jackob et al., 2019; Jakobs et al., 2021; Y. Rees & Papendick, 2021). For example, Jakobs et al. (2021) found that in 2019, 28% of Germans were somewhat or completely distrustful of the media in general, which was the highest level of media mistrust since this long-term study began in 2008. More recently, Y. Rees and Papendick (2021, p. 125) found, in a representative sample from 2021, that about 25% of the German pop-

ulation believed that “media and politics are in cahoots together.” These figures reveal a widespread anti-media sentiment that is particularly prevalent among populist and far-right segments of the German population. In a study, focusing specifically on responses to accusations of *Lügenpresse* by journalists and editors of several high-profile German news outlets, Koliska and Assmann (2021) found that the main responses are strategies to re-legitimize journalism on a professional level. However, whether these efforts are effective in countering anti-media sentiments and distrust remains unanswered.

While the phenomena of anti-media sentiment, distrust of the media, and devaluation of journalists and media workers are prominent at the attitudinal level, there is also a far-reaching behavioral side that needs to be considered. In recent years, hateful harassment and attacks specifically targeting journalists have increased around the world (Ewen & Shane, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). This includes both analog forms of violence and online hate speech—e.g., on social media or in direct messages. Both have a serious impact on the work of journalists around the world. This global trend can also be observed in Germany, where attacks on journalists have increased significantly since 2020. This development is illustrated by official statistics: In 2020, the German government registered 252 crimes against journalists (Federal Government, 2021). In 2021, the number rose to 276 (Federal Government, 2022) and peaked in 2022 with 320 registered crimes (Federal Government, 2023). However, journalist organizations in Germany estimate that the actual number of attacks targeting journalists could be much higher (European Center for Press & Media Freedom, 2022). While the majority of physical attacks take place during demonstrations and protests, forms of online hate and hate speech, including threats, abuse, and incitement to commit crimes experienced by journalists and media workers, are also on the rise (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). As noted above, while public discourse on these issues is ongoing in Germany, few empirical studies have considered the perspective of journalists affected in this country. For example, Preuß et al. (2017) found that of the journalists surveyed, 42% reported having been the target of verbal and/or physical attacks in the past. Approximately two-thirds reported that hateful harassment and attacks had increased in recent years. However, a deeper insight into the personal and direct consequences of the experienced hateful harassment and attacks is still needed. The aim of the current study is therefore to systematically explore the hatred and attacks that journalists in Germany experience, as well as the consequences and reactions to these experiences—both on a personal and professional level—through the eyes of those affected.

## 3. Data and Methods

This article draws on data gathered from a survey ( $N = 322$ ) of active journalists and media workers.

The main objective of the study was to systematically capture the experiences of journalists and media workers who have been subjected to hateful harassment and attacks. To this end, an online survey was conducted between October 2019 and January 2020. In order to reach the target group, the survey was first shared with the two main unions representing journalists and media workers in Germany, the German Union of Journalists and German Federation of Journalists, who were informed about the project in advance. In the second step, other journalist associations and organizations were also contacted. The online survey was distributed primarily through the organizations' internal mailing lists, newsletters, and other information channels. About half of the respondents were male (52%) and 39% were female. Since there are no official statistics on the number of journalists or media workers, it is not possible to compare the gender response with national figures. However, in its most recently published country report for Germany from 2016, the *World Journalism Study* found a share of 40.1% of female journalists in Germany (Hanitzsch et al., 2016). The average age of the respondents was 48. Approximately 11% of the respondents reported having an immigrant background. The survey took around 20 minutes to complete. The estimated response rate, based on people who received access to the survey link through outreach, was 14.8%. Professional experience was quite high, with an average of 20 years. Table 1 shows the professional background of the respondents.

**Table 1.** The professional background of the respondents.

Professional background	Share in %
Print newspaper	45.7
Online outlet	34.5
TV	34.2
Radio/broadcasting	31.7
Magazine	28.3
News agency	8.7
Advertising paper	4.3

A total of 322 respondents completed the entire questionnaire, which included closed standardized questions as well as open-ended questions focusing on the key issues of how hateful harassment and attacks are conveyed, the nature of the hateful harassment and attacks experienced, and the individual consequences and coping strategies of affected journalists and media workers. The open-ended questions were included to allow participants the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences in the form of personal accounts. While the standardized questions help show general trends, these personal accounts provide deeper insight and allow for qualitative analysis. Since no further instructions were given, the participants' responses varied in length and detail. While some responses were brief and only a few sentences long, others are lengthy and detailed.

The responses to three open-ended questions are the focus of this analysis:

Q1: We would like to ask you to describe a case in which you have experienced a personal and/or institutional handling of attacks, i.e., insults, hostility, or incitement to crime and/or violence. ( $N = 132$ )

Q2: Could you please describe the physical attack and its context? ( $N = 56$ )

Q3: Could you please describe the extent to which you feel mentally or physically burdened by attacks in your daily journalistic work? ( $N = 168$ )

While Q1 focuses on experienced hatred and hostility in a broader sense, Q2 focuses exclusively on physical attacks. Q3 asks about the personal and professional consequences of experiencing hateful harassment and attacks. A total of 356 open-ended responses were analyzed for this article. Previous methodological work has highlighted the value of open-ended questions in survey studies (e.g., Friberg & Rosenvinge, 2013; Singer & Couper, 2017; Züll, 2016). In particular, they can "encourage deeper cognitive processing" (Singer & Couper, 2017, p. 124) and are especially useful for mental health research (Friberg & Rosenvinge, 2013), a topic touched upon in the current study. Responses to the open-ended questions were uploaded into MAXQDA 2020 qualitative analysis software. The analysis was conducted according to qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2004). This methodological approach was chosen because it is best suited to a structured research design such as the current study, as opposed to grounded theory, for example, which is particularly helpful in analyzing open-ended qualitative datasets such as narrative interviews. Furthermore, content analysis methods are most appropriate when analyzing open-ended questions (Popping, 2015). The coding process followed a semi-structured methodological approach, combining deductive codes derived from the three open-ended questions, such as "mode of attack," and inductive codes derived from the open-ended responses. Various codes and subcodes emerged from the material. Examples from the material are presented to illustrate key findings (Chenail, 1995). The examples given have been translated from German into English. While the open-ended questions are the focus of the analysis, some key descriptive quantitative findings of the study are also presented. The findings are presented thematically.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Extent, Channels, and Political Context of Hateful Harassment and Attacks

The respondents generally reported high rates of experiencing hateful harassment and attacks. Figure 1

illustrates the frequency and perceived increase of experienced hateful harassment and attacks. More than half said that attacks on journalists had generally increased throughout their careers. Approximately two-thirds reported that they perceived attacks on journalists to have increased over the past 12 months. These findings already indicate that overall, hateful harassment and attacks had increased over time in the perception of the responding journalists. In terms of the extent of attacks they had personally experienced, 60% of the respondents said that they had been attacked at least once, while 41% reported having been attacked on a regular basis. Those who experienced regular hateful harassment and attacks reported particularly severe personal and professional consequences.

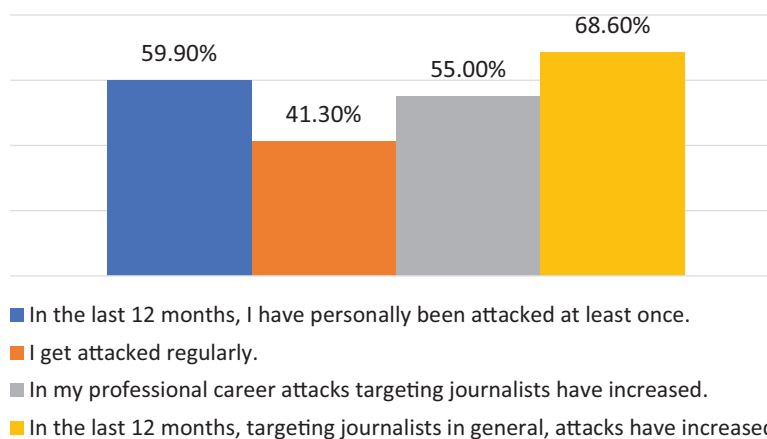
Of particular concern are death threats and physical violence against journalists and media workers. Of the responding journalists, 16.2% reported having been physically attacked on the job at least once, and another 15.8% had received death threats. Contrary to some studies (e.g., Miller & Lewis, 2022; Posetti et al., 2021), no clear pattern emerged in the quantitative data indicating that female journalists reported higher levels of hateful harassment. Of the 125 respondents who identified as female, 56.8% reported having been victims of hateful harassment (compared to 61.8% of men). This trend has also been found in other systematic studies of hateful harassment against journalists (Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016). Furthermore, among respondents with a migration background, 52.9% reported having been attacked in the past 12 months, compared to 59.7% of those without a migration background.

The personal accounts analyzed corroborate the quantitative findings on the extent and frequency of hateful harassment and attacks but also reveal various deeper insights from the affected journalists. In the personal accounts, responding journalists reported that being a regular target of hateful harassment and attacks was particularly exhausting for journalists and led to constant feelings of unease, as reflected in this passage:

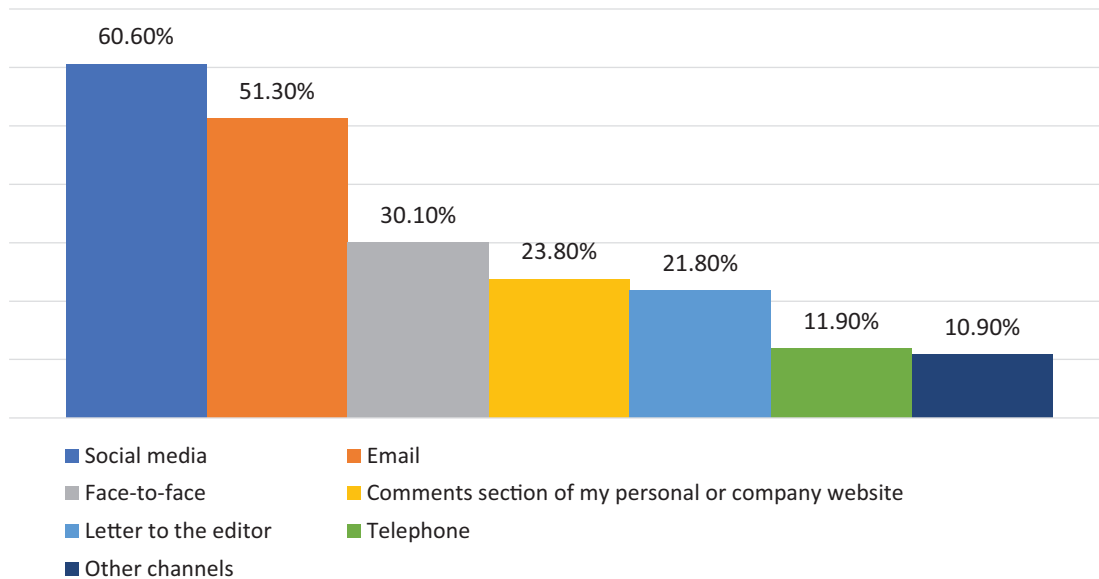
This [experiencing hateful harassment] leads to a permanently increased mental tension when doing the work, the fear of making mistakes is great, the feeling of isolation as well. In the long run, this condition does something to one, one's own worldview is deformed negatively. (Q3\_47)

In addition to the severe negative consequences (negative worldview) alluded to in Q3\_47, the quote also illustrates the fact that journalists who regularly face hateful harassment and attacks are particularly affected by negative consequences simply because of the sheer amount of hateful harassment they experience in their daily work. Looking more closely at the channels through which the responding journalists were attacked (Figure 2), the digital facet of hateful harassment and attacks becomes apparent. Most respondents reported being attacked either through social media (60.6%), email (51.3%), or the comments section of their personal or company website (23.8%). The high rate of hateful online harassment and attacks experienced by the responding journalists is consistent with other research that specifically highlights the critical role social media platforms play in the spread of hateful messages targeting journalists (e.g., Nelson, 2022). Other channels through which the respondents have experienced hateful harassment and attacks include face-to-face (30.1%), letters to the editor (21.8%), and phone calls (11.9%). The extent and regularity of hateful harassment and attacks experienced online are further reflected in the personal accounts of respondents whose daily work includes managing the social media presence of their respective outlets or news organizations. These two accounts serve as examples:

[Hateful harassment and attacks] mainly occur in the comment sections under our contributions on social media (Facebook, YouTube). There, the media company for which I work, or the journalists, are defamed and insulted across the board. The daily mass of verbal attacks alone leads to the impression that journalists are generally considered liars and



**Figure 1.** Extent and frequency of hateful harassment and attacks. Note: Only “yes” responses are shown.



**Figure 2.** Channels of hateful harassment and attacks. Note: Multiple answers were possible.

idiots by large sections of the audience, readers, and users, which in turn sometimes makes me personally doubt the meaningfulness and appreciation of my work. The constant confrontation with extremely negative comments and discussions without inhibitions among users is also personally stressful and affects my own mood at work. (Q3\_36)

For example, when you edit comments and read, approve, or disapprove racist remarks, attacks on the supposedly controlled media, etc. all day long, it's exhausting and frustrating. (Q3\_127)

These two exemplary accounts reveal a sense of regularity when it comes to the hateful harassment and devaluation of the professionalism experienced in their daily work. This is specifically indicated by expressions such as “across the board,” “daily mass,” or “constant” in Q3\_36 or “all day long” in Q3\_127. Both quotes emphasize the negative effects of being confronted with this hateful content on a regular basis, targeting journalists and the media in general (e.g., “stressful,” “exhausting,” and “frustrating”). The two quotes highlight a certain sense of normality of anti-media sentiment and far-right, in this case, “racist,” far-right narratives when being confronted with the social media comment sections of their respective outlets’ articles. At the same time, the personal accounts also reflect upon the quantitative finding that most of the hateful harassment and attacks on journalists and media workers are transported via social media.

Other respondents emphasized that hateful harassment—especially online—also reaches them in their free time, creating a sense of both omnipresence of hate and “helplessness,” as the two brief quotes below illustrate: “Attacks on social media reach you in your free time. Mood depressed” (Q3\_139) and “Comments

in social media create a certain helplessness, you can't wind down in the evening” (Q3\_40).

While this online side of hateful harassment and attacks on journalists is the most prevalent, as confirmed by the quantitative findings on the channels used to communicate hateful harassment (Figure 2), it could be argued that personal, face-to-face attacks are even more severe in their consequences. Several of the personal accounts reveal that threatening and violent incidents are also a regular occurrence for some journalists. The following quote illustrates the extent and regularity of face-to-face attacks experienced:

As a reporter, you are almost always attacked at so-called street polls or demonstrations. You're mobbed, the microphone is knocked out of your hand or you're pushed away. In our editorial department, it's up to you whether you go there or not. It's my decision when I say no, I won't do it. (Q1\_60)

The respondent's perception in Q1\_60 that “you are almost always attacked” during street polls or demonstrations is also echoed by several studies that focus on violence against journalists worldwide, which is a particularly tangible phenomenon during protest events (e.g., Chinweobo-Onuoha et al., 2022; Miller & Kocan, 2022). Indeed, most of the personal accounts in the present study involving violent physical attacks took place in or around protest events.

Due to the ongoing public discourse in Germany, where hateful harassment and attacks on journalists are politically localized (e.g., “Angriffe auf Journalisten,” 2020), this topic was also included in the questionnaire. A clear picture emerged: Nine out of ten respondents (92.5%) believed that hateful harassment and attacks on journalists were politically motivated, with around 80%

of respondents placing the perpetrators in the far-right spectrum (Figure 3).

In personal accounts, responding journalists and media workers generally confirmed the notion that perpetrators of hateful harassment and attacks often have a far-right background. This is particularly evident in those accounts that report direct violent encounters. These encounters, especially with far-right protest groups and individuals participating in protest events, are most often described as violent in terms of their overall atmosphere and the protesters' behavior. The following quote serves as an example:

During demonstrations of the PEGIDA movement, my camera team was pushed or shoved several times. During riots in front of a refugee shelter in Heidenau, Saxony, my team was pelted with stones. During the riots in Chemnitz in September 2018, my team was attacked and I was pushed down a flight of stairs. (Q2\_12)

Q2\_12 illustrates both the severity and extent of physical attacks, as well as the political context of hateful harassment and attacks reported by responding journalists. As shown above, the majority of hateful harassment and attacks among responding journalists are attributed to far-right actors. The fact that Q2\_12 specifically mentions the PEGIDA movement is not surprising and is consistent with research showing that journalists and media workers have been regularly attacked directly and indirectly by the far-right group (Dostal, 2015). A specific prominent far-right protest event, the "Chemnitz riots," was also mentioned in Q2\_12. Here, thousands of far-right protesters violently marched through the Eastern German city of Chemnitz in 2018, leaving several people injured and making headlines in various news reports in Germany and beyond (Perrigo, 2018).

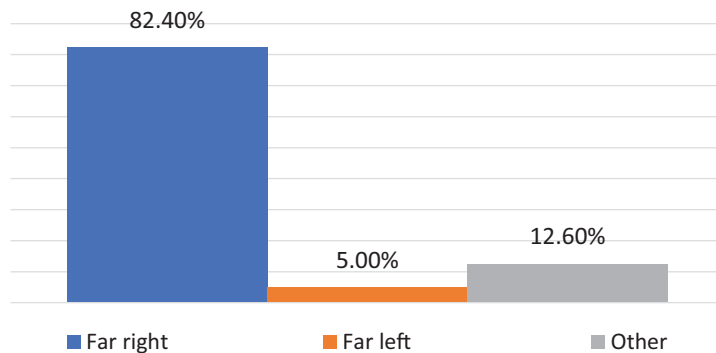
#### 4.2. Personal and Professional Consequences of Hateful Harassment and Attacks

Several studies have found that hateful harassment and attacks faced by journalists and media workers had seri-

ous personal and professional consequences (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Miller, 2023; Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016; Preuß et al., 2017). This was also reflected in the current data, with nearly two-thirds (63.3%) of responding journalists reporting that "the attacks have had a negative impact on my psychological well-being." The severity of the personal consequences was also discussed extensively in the personal accounts. The consequences of being the target of hateful harassment and attacks were described as multifaceted. In particular, respondents mentioned mental or emotional distress that affects both their professional and private lives. These include uncertainty, stress, fear, or frustration, leading to what most respondents described as exhaustion, generalized anxiety, or even panic. A key observation in the personal accounts is the fact that most respondents who reported mental or emotional distress also emphasized the difficulty of separating the personal and professional levels when it comes to the consequences of hateful harassment and attacks on the job. Most responding journalists attributed this to the fact that hateful harassment targets the individual personally as well as their professionalism and work ethic, as this example illustrates:

The regular and also very personally formulated attacks on me, my professionalism and work create a high stress level, which manifests itself in burn out and exhaustion symptoms, which of course also take on physical proportions. Continued humiliation also has an impact on my self-esteem—both personally and professionally. Sometimes I have to ask myself whether I even have the strength to write a certain text, to take a certain stance. Sometimes I decide against it. (Q3\_141)

The quote above highlights the severe personal and psychological consequences of hateful harassment and attacks in terms of "stress" and "symptoms of exhaustion." This is consistent with other studies in democratic countries indicating that journalists who are the targets of hateful harassment and attacks suffer severe emotional and psychological consequences (e.g., Holton et al., 2023; Kim & Shin, 2022). In addition to revealing



**Figure 3.** Political localization of hateful harassment and attacks. Note: "Where would you politically place the person(s) who attacked you?"

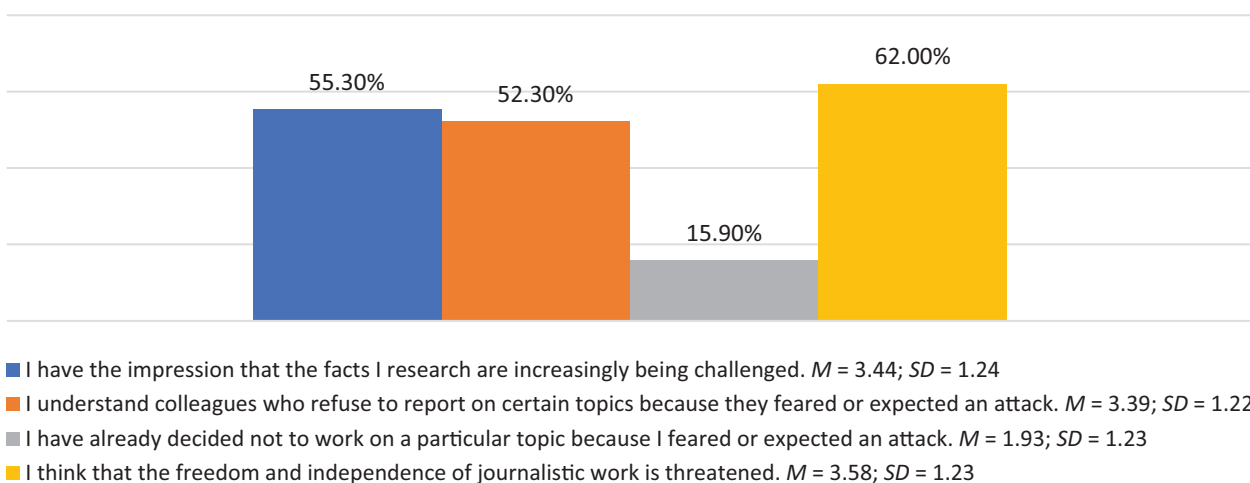
these personal consequences of hateful harassment, the quote also illustrates the fact that the consequences of hateful harassment and attacks manifest themselves on both a personal and professional level. Of particular note in this quote is the self-censorship mentioned for fear of hateful harassment and attacks as a result of reporting. As noted in Q3\_141, sometimes one simply does not have “the strength to write a certain text” and to deal with anticipated hateful harassment. This highlights the fact that the intentional avoidance of topics for fear of receiving hateful messages as a form of forced self-censorship may be a potential outcome of the hateful targeting of journalists in Germany. Some classic studies have already examined (unintentional) self-censorship by journalists as a means of avoiding general pressure (e.g., Gans, 1979). While recent empirical studies focusing on the issue of forced self-censorship for fear of hateful harassment, physical violence, and state repression have long focused on autocratic countries or historically weak democracies (e.g., Chalaby, 2000; Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020; Tapsell, 2012), several studies focusing on a number of Western liberal democracies (e.g., Sweden, Estonia, and Israel) have also examined forced self-censorship by journalists, either to avoid hateful harassment (Ivask, 2020; Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016) or as part of a strategic distortion (Panievsky, 2022) in response to populist attacks. As the current analysis shows, this issue also arises in the German context. Enforced self-censorship among responding journalists leads to what various respondents perceive as obstruction of journalistic freedom in a more general sense, as these two brief examples illustrate: “[One is] no longer free in the choice of topics—giving a lot of thought in order to not aggravate anyone” (Q3\_2) and “You contemplate more, you are no longer free and uninhibited in your reporting, you think about it even more for fear of reprisal” (Q3\_77).

The issues outlined above are also tangible on a quantitative level: Figure 4 shows the consequences of hateful harassment and attacks on a professional level. Consistent with other studies on mistrust in the news media (e.g., IPSOS, 2019), about 55% of the journalists surveyed reported that, in their view, the facts they research are increasingly being challenged. About 50% sympathized with colleagues who refused to report on certain topics because they feared or expected hateful harassment and attacks as a result of their reporting. Some respondents also reported that they had avoided a particular topic in the past. These figures show that forms of self-censorship for fear of hateful harassment and attacks are certainly an issue in the German context. Finally, there is a widespread perception among responding journalists (62%) that the freedom and independence of their work are threatened by hateful harassment and attacks.

In this context, respondents elaborate on their belief that free journalism is deeply hampered by hateful targeting and attacks. As the following quote shows, not only the choice of topics is affected by this forced self-censorship, but also the choice of words in reporting:

In the editorial department, the attacks and extreme media skepticism of the public, including inquiries from the AfD in the Broadcasting Council, sometimes result in a special caution in the choice of words, in the selection of topics. This endangers journalistic self-confidence. (Q3\_68)

Q3\_68’s quote underscores the fact that journalistic self-confidence, and thus journalistic authority, is at risk due to the hateful harassment and attacks they experienced and the prevailing anti-media atmosphere in a more general sense. Q3\_68’s allusion to media-skeptical and anti-press inquiries by AfD members to



**Figure 4.** Consequences of hateful harassment on professional work. Notes: “To what extent do you agree with the following statements?” Five-point Likert scale: *I strongly disagree*, *I disagree*, *neither/nor*, *I agree*, and *I strongly agree*; only approval (*I agree* and *I strongly agree*) is shown.

the Broadcasting Council, which serves as the supervisory board for public broadcasting in Germany, is consistent with research showing that public broadcasting and its members are specifically targeted by the far-right in Germany (Hien & Norman, 2023; Y. Rees & Papendick, 2021).

In their study of how journalists are under populist attack, Koliska and Assmann (2021) emphasize the importance of re-legitimizing journalistic work, its norms, and thus authority in combating anti-media narratives. This notion is also found in several of the personal accounts. However, as the example below illustrates, even when journalists do everything they can to avoid being a target for attacks, apply high work standards, and adhere to journalistic authority, they still face distrust, devaluation, and hateful harassment:

I chose the profession of journalism because I wanted to make my contribution to opinion-forming and information. I see our work as an important task in democracy. I studied journalism and have high standards for my work. I do extensive research, make sure that I always look at a topic from several sides, and always look for several interview partners, especially when it comes to controversial topics. Nevertheless, I am called the lying press, my work is questioned (happened several times during interviews with AfD members of parliament). It used to be that people looked with respect on a journalist from public radio, now often with contempt. (Q3\_66)

Q3\_66's quote also refers to the perception of a general decline in journalistic authority as a possible consequence of hateful harassment and attacks. Another aspect of the impact on a personal level is that it is often reflected in the accounts that hateful harassment and attacks affect journalists during work hours, but also long after work hours, e.g., in their private or free time. Some interviewees gave vivid examples of how they adapted to constant hate and attacks in order to reduce the "risk" during private activities, in this case, vacation:

Continuous insults and threats lead me to consider whether I should give my name and address to hotels or campsites or bicycle rentals, for example, when engaging in certain activities, including private travel. I need to realistically assess the risk of danger to my family. I have to develop strategies to block out the insults and threats so they don't bother me too much. I have started to exercise more to be able to defend myself if necessary. (Q3\_13)

In Q3\_13, the respondent also stated that they had started exercising "to be able to defend myself if necessary," again emphasizing the extent of hateful harassment and attacks, and their expected potential violent consequences. As noted in the quote above, the extent to which experiences of hateful targeting at work spill

over into the private sphere is a common theme in the personal accounts analyzed. This direct consequence of hateful harassment and attacks leads to difficulties in what various respondents call "switching off" from the intensity of their daily work, as highlighted in this example: "The inner state of tension is often so high that anxiety or panic states occur. The subsequent processing has become complicated in contrast to the past, switching off is hardly possible" (Q3\_76).

In addition to the inability to switch off, some personal accounts illustrate the severity of the consequences of hateful harassment and attacks, on the one hand, and the widespread prevalence of anti-media narratives, on the other hand, through the spillover into their personal social environments. Some even state that personal relationships have been affected by attacks:

If private personal relationships suffer because of these verbal attacks or the perception of the media, including one's own work, then that already burdens me. When relationships break down because the partner or friends are also of the opinion that I work for the lying press....When in some environments one no longer dares to name one's profession, then this does not pass without leaving a trace. You don't even need to be physically attacked. (Q3\_110)

Being confronted with attacks and anti-media narratives by members of one's social environment was described as particularly severe in Q3\_110. In the concluding remarks, it was even alluded that these particular and immediate consequences of hate and attacks are somewhat comparable to physical assaults.

## 5. Conclusions

### 5.1. Discussion

This article sought to explore the extent, channels, and backgrounds, as well as the personal and professional consequences of hatred and attacks directed at journalists and media workers, most of whom are organized in journalists' unions in Germany. Both the quantitative descriptive and qualitative analyses show that hateful harassment and attacks on journalists are generally perceived by those affected as a serious obstacle to free and safe reporting. The free press seems to be under increasing pressure in Germany. While the quantitative descriptive findings serve to provide a general overview of the hateful harassment and attacks experienced by journalists, the personal accounts allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the severity and consequences of hateful targeting of journalists and media workers in Germany. The analysis shows that experiencing hateful harassment and attacks leads to several serious consequences for journalistic work. As research in other national contexts has also shown, these consequences include stress, fear, and frustration in the workplace;



these outcomes particularly affect those journalists who regularly face hateful targeting. However, the personal well-being of journalists is not only affected at work but also spills over into their private lives, making it difficult to “switch off.” The professional consequences of hateful harassment and attacks are just as severe as the personal ones. In their personal accounts, journalists reported that hatred and attacks had the effect of restricting the freedom of journalistic work, for example in the choice of topics. In particular, the perpetrators of hateful harassment and violent attacks on journalists in Germany are, in the eyes of the responding journalists, localized on the far-right spectrum. In Germany, far-right hate crimes have been on the rise for some time, as shown by official statistics (Ministry of the Interior, 2023). While historically disadvantaged social groups targeted by the far-right in Germany have faced the most hostility and violence, such as refugees (J. Rees et al., 2019), there is certainly reason to believe that journalists are increasingly being systematically constructed as an enemy group by far-right actors as well.

As the current study and many others focusing on different national contexts have shown, one potential consequence of hateful harassment and attacks on journalists in Germany is self-censorship by not reporting on certain topics for fear of hateful harassment as a result. Since silencing journalists appears to be the ultimate goal (Waisbord, 2020) of perpetrators, this notion is particularly troubling. Consistent with other research focusing on the harassment of journalists in Western liberal democracies (Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016), however, no significant gender differences in the experience of hateful harassment can be reported for the current study. This needs to be discussed, as a number of studies have found that female journalists face more and different forms of hateful harassment than men (cf. Chen et al., 2020; Posetti et al., 2021). One possible explanation could be that while hateful harassment is obviously directed at individual journalists, it could be argued that at its core it is directed at the free, perceived “liberal” press as a democratic institution (Dahlgren, 2018; Kim & Shin, 2022). At least in the German context, a link between anti-media sentiment and negative opinions about democracy and its institutions as a whole has already been examined (Y. Rees & Papendick, 2021). However, this link needs to be further explored and contextualized. Another facet related to this notion is the fact that the current sample is heavily composed of members of journalists’ unions. Empirical research suggests that union members tend to hold more liberal political beliefs, e.g., regarding democracy in general, support for the welfare state, or tolerance, and may even help shield their members from far-right beliefs (cf. Frymer & Grumbach, 2021). Unions themselves can be understood as “micro-democracies” (Frymer & Grumbach, 2021, p. 227). Union membership may therefore have an effect on the political beliefs of the respondents in this study, causing them to lean toward more liberal ide-

ologies, work for more liberal institutions, and consequently be more like to experience hateful harassment and attacks. However, this needs to be further investigated since this study is unable to control respondents’ personal political ideologies.

## 5.2. Limitations

The current study is certainly not without several limitations. First, the sample size of 322 responding journalists cannot be considered representative of either journalistic diversity or journalists’ experiences of hatred and attacks in Germany on a general level. It is possible that a response bias may distort the picture, for example, it may be that respondents in the study presented have been more directly affected by hateful harassment and attacks, or simply believe it to be a more important issue than others. As discussed above, one reason for this could be their union membership. Therefore, the present research is not conclusive but could serve as a starting point for a deeper and more systematic investigation of hateful harassment and attacks faced by journalists in the German context. Second, while there are several methodological advantages to analyzing personal accounts given in open-ended questions in an online questionnaire, such as the high number of responses that provide a rather rich dataset or “encourage deeper cognitive processing” (Singer & Couper, 2017), it could be argued that they are not as fruitful for qualitative analysis as, e.g., open-ended interviews. Certainly, more in-depth, qualitative interviews with affected journalists would provide a more nuanced dataset than what was analyzed for this article, as the social and psychological mechanisms of experiencing hateful harassment and attacks, as well as their personal and professional consequences, are more amenable to open qualitative methods. Personal interaction in an interview setting might help to better understand the phenomena at hand. Third, because the data were collected before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, this article cannot answer the question of how the dynamics associated with it, e.g., Covid-19 protests and the strong anti-media sentiment among the protesters, affect hatred and attacks on journalists. Research shows the importance of Covid protests for the far-right in general, but also for the spread of anti-media sentiment (Vieten, 2020).

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

# Doctors Fact-Check, Journalists Get Fact-Checked: Comparing Public Trust in Journalism and Healthcare

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## Abstract

Public trust in journalism has fallen disconcertingly low. This study sets out to understand the news industry’s credibility crisis by comparing public perceptions of journalism with public perceptions of another institution facing similar trust challenges: healthcare. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 31 US adults, we find that although both healthcare and journalism face public distrust, members of the public generally tend to feel more trusting of individual doctors than they do of individual journalists. This is because people (a) perceive doctors to be experts in their field and (b) engage more frequently with doctors than they do with journalists. Consequently, our interviewees described treating their doctors as “fact-checkers” when it comes to health information they find online, demonstrating trust in their physicians despite their lack of trust in healthcare more broadly. Meanwhile, the opposite unfolds in journalism: Instead of using legitimate news sources to fact-check potential misinformation, people feel compelled to “fact-check” legitimate news by seeking alternative sources of corroboration. We conclude that, to improve their credibility among the public, journalists must strike the right balance between persuading the public to perceive them as experts while also pursuing opportunities to engage with the public as peers.

## Keywords

engagement; expertise; healthcare; journalism; news audiences; public trust

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

By many accounts, the level of public trust in US institutions is alarmingly low. Journalists, doctors, scientists, and academics—once perceived as professionals who have valuable training, skills, and the public’s best interest in mind—now tend to be seen as disconnected elites (Merkley, 2020), politically compromised (Flores et al., 2022), or some combination of the two. The past few years have revealed that these circumstances have dangerous implications for civic society and public health. About 15% of US adults refuse to vaccinate themselves against the coronavirus (Monte, 2021) due in no small

part to distrust of the vaccine and concerns about side effects. At the same time, three in ten Americans continue to believe that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from former President Donald J. Trump (Kamisar, 2023).

This skepticism raises important questions. First, why has public trust in society’s institutions fallen so much? Second, what are the variables that determine the extent to which members of the public trust these institutions in the first place? Finally, what steps should these institutions take to repair their relationships with the public?

This article works toward answering these questions by comparing public perceptions of two institutions facing credibility crises: journalism and healthcare. Drawing

on interview data collected from 31 US adults in late 2022, we find that although a lack of trust exists in both healthcare and journalism, members of the public generally tend to feel more trusting of doctors than they do of journalists. This is due to (a) the public's perception of doctors being experts in their field and (b) the fact that members of the public engage more frequently with individual doctors than they do with journalists. In light of these findings, we argue that, contrary to ongoing discussions within journalism that tend to view expertise and engagement as two distinct paths to trust-building, successfully earning public trust likely must entail a fusion of both.

## 2. Literature Review

Healthcare and journalism stand on the frontline of the public's self-governing (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014) and serve as crucial institutions for distributing information in the public interest. In an analysis of professions, Abbott (1988) contended that the fundamental and distinguishing trait of professional occupations is their reliance on the creation and dissemination of knowledge, which serves as the basis for their claim to exclusive right over specific work activities—their expertise. Amid the coronavirus pandemic, the expertise of healthcare workers and journalists has been challenged, as made clear by the rise in vaccine hesitancy and people feeling compelled to “do their own research” when it comes to news generally and health information specifically (Meppelink et al., 2019; Nelson & Lewis, 2023). As people increasingly view institutions such as journalism and healthcare with skepticism, their approach to these institutions is to seek out their own sources to corroborate (or refute) claims that come to them from news organizations and healthcare providers.

To be sure, these professions are very different. For starters, healthcare providers have obvious markers of expertise baked into their occupations in the form of specialized training, knowledge, and practices. Journalistic expertise, on the other hand, is much less pronounced and more difficult to articulate. Indeed, as Anderson and Schudson (2019, p. 88) have rightly pointed out, the link between journalists' “everyday work and their heavily qualified claim to possess a form of professionalized knowledge” is hard to describe, much less so than when it comes to medical professionals.

Yet, focusing on the distinction between markers of expertise within journalism and healthcare runs the risk of overlooking the important similarities between the two, especially as those similarities relate to the public's perception of either. Journalists and healthcare providers, as we argue in the sections that follow, depend on effective communication with the public to fulfill their jobs. That communication's effectiveness depends in no small part on earning the trust of the people these professionals seek to serve. The question, then, becomes: How can journalists and healthcare

providers earn that trust in the first place? To that end, while we acknowledge the unique settings and contexts in which these institutions operate, we also believe there is much to be gained by a comparative study that examines their similarities, specifically when it comes to how those working within each profession attempt to build trust with the public and the challenges they face in maintaining institutional credibility.

In the following sections, we explore the public trust challenges confronting each of these institutions.

### 2.1. *The News Industry's Credibility Crisis*

Journalism faces an ongoing—and, in many ways, intensifying—credibility crisis. In 2022, only 34% of Americans reported having a great deal or fair amount of trust and confidence in newspapers, television, and radio news reporting (Brenan, 2022). Scholars have explored factors such as the loss of public trust in mainstream media in today's hybrid media landscape (Chadwick, 2013) and the challenges posed to journalistic expertise based on objectivity and accountability in a so-called “post-truth era” (Keyes, 2004; McIntyre, 2018). Furthermore, the global rise of populist distrust toward news media (de Vreese, 2017; Fawzi, 2019) has intensified these concerns. In this context, the issue of how journalists can uphold institutional authority and ensure the future relevance of journalism has become increasingly critical and complex (Carlson et al., 2021).

The discussion surrounding public trust in journalism is deeply intertwined with how journalists position themselves (Moon & Lawrence, 2023). Mellado (2015) presents three underlying orientations that shape journalistic norms: the level of journalist intervention in their own voice, the positioning of journalists in relation to those in power, and the approach to the public as consumers or citizens. The first two dimensions emphasize objectivity and accountability, which have been established as professional norms within journalism; however, the extent to which journalism relates to communities and individual community members has, until recently, been less rooted. Lately, though, there has been a greater interest in journalists' *relationships* with their audiences.

As news outlets struggle to maintain their relevance and improve their connections with their audiences (Lawrence et al., 2018; Wenzel, 2020), journalism scholars have argued that news companies should focus on strengthening their ties with their communities (e.g., Robinson, 2023; Ward, 2018). Many terms exist to advocate for this approach to news production, including “engaged journalism” and “solidarity journalism” (Lewis, 2020; Varma, 2020). At the heart of this approach is a kind of journalism that “puts the building and maintaining of relationships with publics it normatively serves at the center of its work” (Lewis, 2020, p. 347). In other words, the appeal of engagement-focused news production is that trust will be established through the nurturing of community relationships, especially in the current

digitized media environment where people can easily find information anywhere and at any time.

Many believe that the public's disdain for journalism stems from the public seeing journalists as elitist and out of touch, and argue that journalists must counter these perceptions by making deliberate efforts not to talk down to their audiences, and to instead treat interactions with those audiences as genuine conversations rather than as one-way lectures (Nelson, 2021). Indeed, "paternalism" has become almost an insult in contemporary discussions surrounding journalists' approaches to their audiences (Thomas, 2016). Implicit in the growing calls for journalists to bring the public into news production is the notion that journalists should assume their audiences know more than they do, rather than the other way around. The result is a situation where expertise and engagement appear pitted against one another when it comes to earning public trust.

There is another institution that is not only dealing with a comparable credibility crisis but is also grappling with the best way to bridge expertise and engagement: healthcare. We turn to that institution next.

## 2.2. A Parallel Trust Crisis in Healthcare

Healthcare faces a similarly significant crisis in trust, one that has grown more intense and obvious since the coronavirus pandemic began. However, the decline in public trust in healthcare is not a new phenomenon. It has been observed for several decades, as a study conducted between 1966 and 2012 found that the proportion of Americans who expressed great confidence in the leaders of the medical profession decreased from 73% to 34% during this period (Harris Interactive Polls, 2012, as cited in Blendon et al., 2014). The trust decline within the healthcare sector has been attributed to various factors, including the corporatization or privatization of healthcare (Ferris, 2021) and the reduction in the amount of clinical time devoted to patients (Overhage & McCallie, 2020).

Interestingly, despite the decreasing trust in medical professionals, the public's perception of the integrity of physicians has remained high. A Gallup survey conducted in 2013 found that 69% of respondents regarded the honesty and ethical standards of physicians as *high* or *very high* (Blendon et al., 2014). In alignment with this trend, more patient-centered communication has gained attention, characterized by a two-way conversation involving the use of open-ended questions and collaborative decision-making, and has been discussed as the solution for helping patients trust their healthcare providers (Ward, 2018). In addition, research found that patients are also seeking healthcare specialists to be more personal and engaged in their own medical care, which ultimately fortifies public trust in the medical profession (Levey, 2015). This patient-centered approach, much like the engagement approaches that are being advocated for within journalism, calls for a deepening of

one-to-one relationships through customized communication (i.e., based on knowledge about the patient) and physicians who are more approachable, altogether fortifying public trust in the medical field (Qudah & Luetsch, 2019; Ward, 2018).

Again, it is important to acknowledge the differences between journalism and medicine. Each of these professions has its own institutional foundations in terms of their knowledge and interactions with the public. According to Starr (1978), the evaluation of journalistic knowledge influences the perception of journalism's "cultural authority." Moreover, journalistic expertise tends to be constructed through discourse, primarily relying on journalistic narratives and the assertion of professional objectivity (Zelizer, 1993). Journalistic expertise also may be manifest in "interactional expertise," whereby reporters specialize in "interactions with their sources on one hand and audiences on the other" (Reich, 2012, p. 339). However, because of the contested status of journalism as a profession—one which lacks certain protective attributes commonly associated with fields like medicine (e.g., licensing, required, formalized training)—the nature of journalists' expertise remains somewhat ambiguous. While journalists are acknowledged for their specific skills, such as storytelling and reporting, these attributes alone do not necessarily indicate their expertise in a particular subject matter (Anderson & Schudson, 2019). In short, journalists' expertise is looser and less clearly defined than that of healthcare providers. However, this does not mean that journalists do not have expertise; instead, it simply suggests that this expertise is not as widely understood, with perhaps significant implications for public perceptions of the profession as a whole.

Despite these differences, each of these institutions faces similar (and similarly troubling) public trust challenges. We believe these similar challenges are no coincidence, but are instead rooted in the similar mechanisms by which the people in these professions do their work. To put it bluntly: Both professions depend on effective communication. Indeed, both are "narrative professions that deal in information—gathering, synthesizing, and presenting it" (Miller & Nelson, 2021, para. 2). This view emphasizes the narrative implications of the relationships through which trust is acquired (Camporesi et al., 2017). In light of the similar trust crises that journalism and healthcare face, as well as the similar discussions within each profession surrounding the role of engagement in mitigating these crises, our research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How do the public perceptions of journalists and medical doctors differ, and what situational differences contribute to this gap?

RQ2: What roles do expertise and engagement play when it comes to public perceptions of journalism and healthcare?

### 3. Data and Method

To explore public perceptions of journalism and health-care, we conducted Zoom-based interviews with 31 adults in the US. Working with the survey company Cloud Research, we secured a list of randomly selected individuals ( $N = 968$ ) who identified themselves as news users (regardless of the medium type) who also have visited healthcare facilities and communicated with medical professionals in the past 1–2 years. Once we assembled our sample, we sent recruitment emails to all 968 respondents to see if they would participate in research interviews. As we approached data saturation, we expanded our outreach to individuals to increase the number of interviews conducted and to ensure that our sample closely represented the demographic ratios of the US population. As a result, we were able to secure interviews with 31 people.

Interview participants were all aged 18 and older, and represented a cross-section of age (younger, middle-age, seniors; aged 40 and under: 32.3%, 41–60: 35.5%, older than 60: 32.3%), political leaning (very conservative: 12.9%, conservative: 12.9%, somewhat conservative: 16.1%, neither conservative nor liberal: 16.1%, somewhat liberal: 12.9%, liberal: 16.1%, very liberal: 12.9%), which approximate standardized quotas used by survey research firms to match US demographics (Nelson & Lewis, 2023). This sample comprised a wide range of news trust and distrust expressions with both frequent and infrequent news consumption (see Schwarzenegger, 2020), and it also varied in terms of geographic, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds, as well as in levels of interest in news (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019; Toff & Nielsen, 2018). These depth interviews lasted about an hour and the recordings were transcribed fully by a professional transcription service. The resulting transcriptions were analyzed following the best practices for qualitative communication research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Interview protocols were semi-structured, with a set of questions about interviewees' interactions with the news in their daily lives, interactions with healthcare providers, and attitudes toward both journalism and healthcare. All interviews were audio-recorded using Zoom and documented after securing participants' verbal consent. To maintain the privacy of the interviewees, we use pseudonyms throughout our findings section.

Our data analysis followed grounded theory, meaning the themes we identified were derived inductively through the systematic collection and analysis of qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) with a focus on extracting the "deep stories" (Hochschild, 2016) until significant themes arise from the participants' responses. To develop codes, patterns, and themes, we conducted a meticulous analysis of the textual data using established techniques for qualitative social research, as outlined in Luker's (2010) guidelines, the process of investigator triangulation. Specifically, this involved continual discussions among the authors throughout the interview

process, individual reading and coding of transcripts, and joint analysis to identify emerging themes and nascent theories. Afterward, we revisited the demographic data of each respondent to investigate possible connections between the recurring themes and any deviations from them.

One final note: Findings from qualitative data collection and analyses are never wholly consistent. On the contrary, data collected from interviews, observations, and other qualitative methods are typically messy. It is up to those collecting and analyzing the data to identify consistent threads within that messiness. The same is true here, which is to say that the themes we uncovered referred to most, but not all, of our interviews. Our intention is not to present our respondents as speaking with one entirely consistent voice, but to instead identify and analyze the consistent threads that emerged throughout these interviews.

### 4. Findings

Overall, interviewees' descriptions of their trust in healthcare and experiences with doctors stood in stark contrast to their descriptions of their trust in journalism and experiences with journalists. To be clear, people consistently described feeling distrustful of journalism in ways that echoed their distrust of healthcare; however, their distrust toward healthcare was mitigated by their personal, positive encounters with their own healthcare providers. And we found that it appears to be linked to two different key factors: personal engagement and specialized expertise.

#### 4.1. People Trust Doctors Because They Trust Expertise

People's positive associations with their immediate providers stemmed from the explicit demonstrations of specialized knowledge (i.e., expertise) that unfolded throughout those interactions. People seemed especially put at ease when diagnoses were accompanied by empirical data in the form of test results, even if they did not fully understand what those tests or results actually meant. For example, people we interviewed described receiving a doctor's diagnosis along with a blood test or MRI, which people perceived as evidence corroborating the accuracy of their diagnosis. This suggests that they felt assured that their doctors were trustworthy because of the specialized knowledge those doctors brought to their interactions. As one interviewee said:

I trust [them] because most of the cures we have today for illnesses was through [science]...That's why most times, even if they come up with those assumptions, they love to run tests to make sure that they're correct. (#VL)

While people described the tools that doctors use as instruments in the service of experts (e.g., MRIs and



other tests and procedures doctors implement), they tended to describe the tools and evidence that journalists use to support their reporting—including audio and video content—as something volatile that could be altered or taken out of context at any time. In other words, while medical diagnostic tools were evidence of expertise, the tools that journalists depend on to maintain the accuracy of their reporting were instead viewed as reasons why people should be skeptical of the news. The result was a situation wherein respondents felt that journalists lacked any substantive expertise.

Consequently, respondents described feeling much less confident in the accuracy of information they observed in the news than they did in the accuracy of the information they obtained from their doctors. Instead, respondents perceived news media as non-professionalized content, even if it came from a known news outlet, and often performed their own, improvised “fact-checking” of the news, which typically entailed seeking out information from a range of other sources to ultimately decide whether to trust the media.

#### *4.2. More Opportunities for Engagement Means More Public Trust*

Meanwhile, our interviews showed that more engagement through patient-centered conversations, the deepening of one-to-one relationships through customized communication (i.e., being well-informed about a patient’s medical history), and efforts to become more approachable all contributed to people feeling more trusting of their doctors. Equally important was the observation that these engagement strategies appeared even more impactful toward building trust when they were accompanied by perceptions among the public of doctors maintaining specialized knowledge.

Even as a number of interviewees criticized the healthcare system as a whole, they went out of their way to clarify that they did not hold those criticisms against the medical providers whom they knew personally from previous interactions. Even if people complained about unpleasant or frustrating experiences within the medical system, these ordeals did not affect their already-established trust in their healthcare providers. This was due in large part to the personal engagement that people experienced during their interactions with their healthcare providers. These interactions inspired meaningful connections between members of the public and healthcare professionals that superseded feelings of distrust about the institutions as a whole. As one interviewee said about one such encounter:

My doctor listened very well. I felt like I was able to get everything off my chest that I needed to say. It was a very satisfying, satisfying experience. It’s something I’m really appreciative of....We both spoke very honestly to each other. I was able to be very honest with him and even joke a little. And he was hon-

est with me right back, and joking right back. And it was almost like meeting a family member or someone that I felt at ease with...immediately. And so, I want to keep that relationship. I told him a lot of information about my lifestyle, my habits. And so, I just feel like he knows a lot about who I am. So I definitely plan to keep that relationship. (#JA)

In light of these findings, it appears that, once members of the public feel a sense of trust toward a doctor, they can distinguish the quality of the services they receive via the healthcare system from their feelings about the doctors they are encountering along the way. As one of our interviewees explained:

I was having trouble booking an appointment with my primary care physician, and my doctor’s office told me, well, I could call every morning and see if anything opened up, or I could come in for a walk-in. And it just became very frustrating, but I like my primary care doctor. (#JA)

However, there was no equivalent opportunity for engagement within journalism. As interviewees pointed out, most people have limited access to journalists (if they have any access at all), so journalists exist for them only through screens or behind bylines. This keeps people separated from journalists and prevents them from feeling that journalists are advocating on their behalf the way they feel about their own personal healthcare providers.

The lack of engagement that people felt when it came to journalists led some interviewees to believe that more engagement on the part of journalists would improve public trust in the profession. Some pointed to ways that journalists could make the setting by which news is reported and consumed more immersive for their audience to give them a sense of presence similar to the way that doctors do with patients. One interviewee described his experience of the news as lending a feeling that journalists invite viewers to the table of their TV news show:

PBS has a really nice effect because the anchors are sitting at a table. BBC, also because they’re sitting at a [round] table, they have their guests. Their guests are generally sitting at the table, oh, and they’re almost sitting on the same side. So then does the viewer. You feel like you’re sitting. It’s a feeling where you feel like you’re at the table and that your opinion matters as much as the other people at the table. It’s a really cool effect. (#JA)

This interviewee’s description of the appeal of PBS suggested that the act of closing the distance between the public and professionals—of increasing the sense of personal engagement between journalists and members of the public—would be an important step toward improving trust in news. Yet, even though it appears people

would like to see a more personally engaged form of journalism that emulates their encounters with healthcare providers, journalism has historically been carried out in a way that deliberately puts distance between news producers and audience members. This separation, much to the chagrin of those who advocate for it, may have the opposite effect and actually lead to increased suspicions about the integrity of journalists. For instance, one of the interviewees, who showed strong trust in his primary care doctor but did not trust journalists or prominent healthcare public figures like Anthony Fauci, said it is because he believes that these journalists are financially motivated and do not have the needs of ordinary people in mind.

In contrast, people stated that they could easily find a sense of humanity with their personal doctors. When doctors establish a connection with their patients through gestures such as listening attentively or allowing them to share personal details about their habits and everyday life, these experiences accumulate and form the basis for long-term trust. This trust inspires confidence in patients, leading them to accept their doctor's words as credible, regardless of the situation they may find themselves in (e.g., navigating the insurance system, or dealing with the inconveniences of making an appointment). This element of humanity could also be introduced in journalism and utilized in various ways. For example, one interviewee suggested that when journalists admit they have made mistakes, it makes those journalists seem more human, and makes the interviewee feel more positive about journalism. Although it is through journalists' rational, calm style of delivery that sincerity is conveyed to the audience, the human act of admitting their limitations and issuing corrections can help create empathy for journalists among viewers, a feeling which could ultimately result in trust:

An apology from a sincere anchor goes a long way because, you know, if you identify or feel close somehow to the anchor and they make a sincere apology, you want to accept it because you realize that that's a hard thing to do. Okay, I got to be careful about what I believe. But on the other hand, I appreciate it. (#JA)

#### 4.3. Doctors Fact-Check While Journalists Get Fact-Checked

The significance of the success that doctors have when it comes to maintaining the balance between engagement and expertise relative to journalists became clearest when members of the public discussed how they determine the accuracy of information that they stumble upon online. When it comes to health information, people describe conducting their own research on health issues prior to meeting with a doctor. Yet, they do not feel as confident in what they have found within their own improvised attempts at research as they do in what their doctor ultimately determines to be the actual diag-

nosis. So, in effect, people arrive at their doctor's office with symptoms to be examined and hypotheses to test. The doctor determines what the symptoms mean and whether the patient's educated guess is accurate or not. The patient's confidence in their doctor overrides their confidence in their ability to use sites like WebMD.

The opposite is true when it comes to journalism. Instead of deferring to what journalists report, our interviewees described using news reports as information that needs to be independently corroborated. So, while doctors' diagnoses trumped members of the public's fact-checking abilities, the public's fact-checking abilities trumped journalists' reporting. As one of our interviewees said:

I just have confidence in my ability to tell what is accurate and what is not. I don't mean to say that I'm always right. But I can judge whether a story is handled well or not....I do have to have a fair amount of confidence in what comes out on the bottom. (#KB)

People describe treating their doctors as "fact-checkers" when it comes to health information they find online, demonstrating their trust in their doctors despite their lack of trust in healthcare more broadly. The opposite unfolds in journalism: Instead of using legitimate news sources to fact-check potential misinformation, people feel compelled to "fact-check" legitimate news by seeking alternative sources of corroboration. To put it more succinctly: Doctors are fact-checkers, while journalists are fact-checked.

## 5. Discussion

This article is one of the first to look at the public perception of two institutions comparatively. We find that, while there is a lack of trust in both healthcare and journalism, members of the public generally tend to feel more trusting of doctors than they do of journalists. This increased trust in the former as compared to the latter appears to be linked to two key factors: personal *engagement* and specialized *expertise*. Our interviews showed that more engagement through patient-centered conversations, the deepening of one-to-one relationships through customized communication (i.e., being well-informed about a patient's medical history), and efforts to become more approachable all contributed to people feeling more trusting of their doctors.

Equally important was the observation that these engagement strategies appeared even more impactful toward building trust when they were accompanied by people's perceptions of doctors' specialized knowledge. Despite criticisms of healthcare as a whole, people appreciate their own doctors' expertise and engagement. The lack of personal interaction within journalism, by contrast, makes people feel less connected with the profession. One possible reason is that journalists can mostly only have parasocial relationships with their audience;

meanwhile, news organizations tend to focus more on building their brand rather than increasing the visibility of their reporters. And even as engagement as a goal has increased throughout newsrooms across the globe, that engagement tends to be approached as an alternative to expertise rather than as a complement. Furthermore, engagement within journalism is costly, and journalists rarely have the resources necessary to pursue engagement at the individual level that doctors enjoy with their patients.

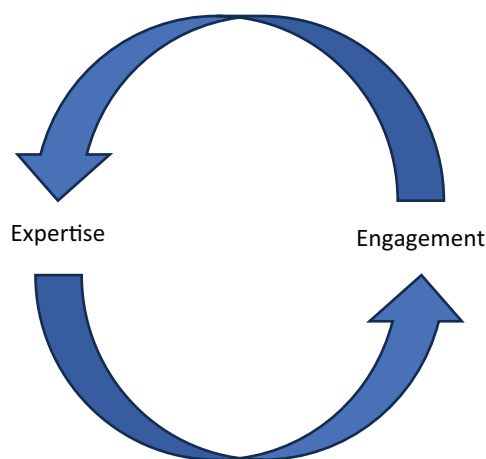
These differences suggest a number of important implications. First, our observations about the connection between expertise and engagement suggest a path to building trust that journalists and other professionals suffering from credibility crises among the public might consider pursuing. As Figure 1 shows, we believe that expertise and engagement should no longer be viewed as distinct approaches to winning public trust. Instead, journalists should attempt to emulate doctors, who successfully present themselves as experts to their patients even as they also attempt to meaningfully engage with them. For many in journalism, engagement is an alternative to expertise.

Indeed, arguments in favor of engaged journalism tend to come with the implicit (or sometimes even explicit) assumption that journalists actually are not experts at all, and that community members are the true experts about what is happening around them. Our findings suggest that this approach might do little to improve trust in journalism since whatever gains might come from increased engagement might be counteracted by losses in confidence in journalists' skills when it comes to actually reporting and producing the news. To be sure, journalistic expertise is very different from medical expertise—there is no formal credentialing in the former, no educational requirement, and no lengthy list of jargon committed to memory. However, journalists are still professionals just as doctors are, and our findings suggest that expertise—when combined with engagement—is seen as a reason for trust rather than an argument against it. In light of these findings, we con-

clude that journalists would do well to promote—rather than downplay—their expertise, especially as they continue to find opportunities to engage with the members of the public whose trust they are attempting to earn. Journalists must strike the right balance between persuading the public to perceive them as experts while also pursuing opportunities to engage with the public as peers.

We do not mean to suggest that the engagement/expertise dichotomy is the only means by which scholars and practitioners might make sense of journalism's trust crisis. On the contrary, we are grateful for the growing literature focused on other aspects that contribute to people's trust/distrust of journalism. These aspects include the rise of anti-journalism populism across the globe and the rise of a right-wing media apparatus that frequently makes a point of painting traditional news media as inherently untrustworthy (Carlson et al., 2021). While both healthcare providers and journalists attempt to present themselves as ideologically neutral and objective, that task is a tougher challenge for the latter than it is for the former. Journalists must frame news stories about political issues, therefore constantly opening themselves up to criticisms that they are not to be trusted because they are presenting the news of the day in biased, ideological terms.

Furthermore, the ongoing discussion surrounding trust in journalism and healthcare also includes legitimate grievances that people have regarding the way in which journalism historically has been produced and healthcare has historically been practiced. For example, scholars are increasingly working to understand the implications of a news media environment that has traditionally comprised journalists and newsroom managers from a much less diverse background than the people those professionals hope to represent in their news coverage. The result of this situation is that news produced by primarily white, male, and middle- and upper-middle-class people are justifiably perceived by people of color, women, and those from lower economic classes with a great deal of skepticism. People



**Figure 1.** Trust-building as a cycle.

of color also have historically faced worse health outcomes in the US, which has understandably resulted in people of color feeling more skeptical of US healthcare providers than their white counterparts (Lavizzo-Mourey & Williams, 2016).

In other words, our framework, while useful, cannot tell the whole story. However, what this framework can do is help institutional stakeholders make sense of the balance they must seek out when it comes to establishing trustworthy relationships between themselves and the people they seek to serve. For journalists, this means two things. First, journalists must prove to their audiences that they want to meaningfully engage with them to improve their news coverage. Second, they must demonstrate to those same audiences that journalists have meaningful expertise to draw on to produce that coverage in the first place. Finding this balance will only become more important as journalism continues to move in the direction of more active engagement with news audiences. Recently, more newsrooms have begun to embrace engagement as an overarching goal (Robinson, 2023).

To that end, they have utilized different forms of engagement, including digitally based mechanisms such as journalists' use of social media to engage with members of the public. Other newsrooms—most often small, local ones with more niche, narrowly targeted audiences—attempt offline approaches to engagement such as “public newsrooms” where journalists and community members meet to get to know one another better, or Q&A sessions where journalists encourage community members to ask questions about how the news is produced (Nelson, 2021). This engagement is an invaluable piece of building trust in journalism, as it allows members of the public to enter meaningful, personal discussions with the people who produce the news, which, as our findings suggest, is an important reason why healthcare providers can maintain strong ties with their patients even if those patients feel distrustful of healthcare as a whole. However, as our findings also show, that engagement must be accompanied by journalists' efforts to persuade the public that they are indeed experts and that their expertise helps make their reporting trustworthy.

This is a difficult task for journalists for a number of reasons. First, journalists' efforts to engage with the public are often situated as an attempt to democratize news production by making it a collaborative endeavor, which implicitly suggests that *everyone* is qualified to make the news. Doctors' efforts to engage with their patients, on the other hand, begin from a social dynamic where one person clearly has expertise and the other is seeking out that expertise. Journalists, in other words, have to thread a needle, where they make it clear that they want to build stronger connections with the public, while also making it clear that the pursuit of those connections is not intended to replace journalists' expert knowledge and skills with the public's. In short, more work needs

to be done for journalists to determine what their expertise entails and how best to demonstrate that expertise to the public.

That work might begin with analyses of journalists who appear to be finding a great deal of success in fusing their own expertise and engagement with their audiences. These journalists include Matt Taibbi, Bari Weiss, Anne Helen Peterson, and Roxanne Gay—people who have leveraged their own brands as experts, cultivated by their professional experiences at legacy news media, to discover novel ways of reaching their audiences. The newsletter subscription platform Substack, in particular, has allowed such journalists to build large audiences and, equally important, sustainable revenue. What is perhaps most interesting about this approach to trust building is that those who have found the greatest success have done so by pitting their credibility against the credibility of the news media environment as a whole. Glenn Greenwald, for example, has one of the most popular Substacks and routinely displays an antagonistic approach to traditional news organizations. Examining how these journalists build trust with their audiences would not only reveal how they present their expertise and approach audience engagement, but also how they attempt to persuade those same audiences to understand the role that expertise plays in journalism more broadly.

### 5.1. Limitations

Our findings should be taken with some circumspection. Despite our best efforts, our interview sample does not represent all Americans. Furthermore, our interviews were only about an hour long. While this is a typical interview length for studies that explore people's relationship with journalism, it might be too short a window for interviews focused on comparing people's perceptions of two distinct professions. We intend to complement this study with additional work focused on further unpacking the similarities and differences between journalism and healthcare and the relationship that each of these professions has with the public. We encourage others to do the same.

More generally, an interview-based approach to understanding public trust faces challenges and obstacles that other methods can address. For example, people interviewed about a research project focused on trust in journalism and healthcare might feel compelled to describe themselves as skeptical toward each of these institutions, even if that skepticism is inaccurately exaggerated. If people are exaggerating their skepticism, that exaggeration is still meaningful, as it suggests that people feel societal pressure not to trust public institutions. However, to understand the extent to which this exaggeration is unfolding, we encourage scholars to pursue other methodological approaches to understanding trust in public institutions, such as observing people as they actually interact with journalists and healthcare

providers, engage with journalism and healthcare information, and/or talk to their friends and family members about those interactions and experiences.

## 6. Conclusion

Taken together, our interviews paint a picture of pervasive public distrust of two institutions upon which a functioning democratic society depends: journalism and healthcare. We have known since the start of the coronavirus pandemic that trust in these institutions had taken a hit, and we have seen the ramifications of these professions' declining credibility. Yet, examinations of the public's distrust of these professions have unfolded largely in silos, with scholars exploring distrust in medicine and journalism separately. This project sought to investigate the interplay between the public and each of these institutions, to uncover the extent to which distrust unfolds similarly across these professions, as well as to explore potential opportunities to mitigate that distrust that can be replicated from one profession to the next.

Examining people's perceptions of medicine and journalism revealed an important similarity and an even more significant difference. While people approach both journalism and healthcare with a great deal of skepticism, they feel a personal connection to their own healthcare providers in a way that has no parallel within journalism. The result is a situation where people feel comfortable seeking their doctor's guidance when it comes to health information that they find online. The opposite is true of journalism—people who consume news from reputable news sources then feel compelled to "fact-check" that news against alternative sources (Nelson & Lewis, 2022). To put it more succinctly: For members of the public, when it comes to determining what's true, doctors have the final say, but journalists are just the first step.

The reason why doctors appear to have this special bond with members of the public that journalists do not is that they have found an invaluable way to balance the two variables that our research shows most contribute to trustworthiness: expertise and engagement. Although people view the institution of healthcare skeptically, less as one that has their best interests in mind and more as an industry overly influenced by insurance and pharmaceutical companies and much too focused on revenue, they see individual healthcare providers as being both knowledgeable and exceptionally focused on the well-being of their patients above all else. In this view, the healthcare system is flawed, but the doctors are trustworthy. This is in large part due to the face-to-face interactions that people have with their doctors, and, equally important, the way that doctors use those interactions as opportunities to meaningfully connect with their patients on a human level.

Journalists do not enjoy the same level of trust as doctors for two reasons. First, their knowledge is not as respected as that possessed by physicians. Second,

journalists do not often get these opportunities for connection. People do not make appointments with journalists the way they do with doctors. Furthermore, as the news industry has continued to face economic headwinds, newsrooms have been downsized or shuttered altogether, which has further diminished the opportunities for people to encounter journalists in their daily lives. To be sure, changes to both journalism and healthcare have resulted in people having fewer opportunities to engage with representatives of each institution. In medicine, appointment slots are much shorter than they once were, and doctors must spend those shorter windows jotting down notes on a computer screen rather than engaging more meaningfully with their patients.

Yet our findings show that even as these institutions have faced similar constraints, and even as these constraints have been accompanied by drops in trust for each of these institutions as a whole, healthcare providers have still managed to maintain a high level of trust among the public by meeting people in person and making those people feel that providers have both the expertise necessary to help them with their health troubles as well as the connection necessary to ensure that those troubles are genuinely understood. Journalists have not enjoyed the same opportunities. These results show that, in order to help people trust institutions more, those institutions must find ways to demonstrate that their expertise is legitimate and trustworthy, and that means balancing that expertise with deliberate efforts to meet people where they are. With that in mind, solving institutional distrust must begin with finding ways for institutional stakeholders to meaningfully engage with the public while asserting their expertise, even at this current moment where they have increasingly limited time to do so.

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## Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Dr. Thomas B. Ksiazek (Villanova University) and Anita Varma (University of Texas at Austin). The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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