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Journalism, trust and credibility

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Introduction

At the heart of concerns about the functions that journalism fulfills in society are worries about the trustworthiness of the press and credibility of public information. To fulfill a watchdog function vis-a-vis political institutions, the media need legitimacy, which they derive from public trust. To accomplish the information function, the press needs to provide the public with credible information about important societal and political developments. Acknowledging the importance of trust in journalism, researchers and commentators have expressed concerns about declining levels of trust in the mainstream news media. This decline in trust has been most clearly observed in the United States (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Ladd, 2011), but is also present in other parts of the world (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). The absence of trusted mainstream media creates a climate where there is no agreement on what trustworthy information is. In such a climate, fake news, conspiracy theories and misinformation might be perceived as just as credible as information from the mass media (Szostek, 2018).

At the same time, the decline in trust in the press is not a universal phenomenon, and in large parts of the world, the press still receives considerable support from the public (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). While low levels of trust are often attributed to the failure of the press in living up to its democratic functions, trust in the press is not necessarily highest in countries where the media are free and the press autonomous. This underlines the complexity of trust in journalism, which does not lend itself for mono-causal explanations and simple conceptualizations. As argued by Hanitzsch (2013, pp. 207-208) “the troubled nature of the relationship between news media performance and trust in journalism

might well have to do with our quite limited knowledge about the nature of trust and what it essentially means to have trust in an institution."

Against this background, this chapter examines the related concepts of trust in the press and credibility of information. The chapter starts with a conceptualization of trust in the press and credibility of information, highlighting the similarities and differences between these two concepts. This is followed by a historical overview of how research in credibility and trust has progressed over time. While research in the 1950s focused on credibility, researchers started to focus more on trust around the 1990s. In the 2010s, low levels of trust in the press in combination with concerns about fake news and misinformation on social media networks put credibility back in focus. Finally, methodological issues and directions for future research are presented. The chapter takes an audience perspective and focusses on trust in the press and credibility of information, rather than the trust relation between journalists and their sources (See Brants et al. 2010; Hanitzsch & Berganza, 2012; Mancini, 1993; Tejkalová et al., 2017; Van Dalen et al., 2011).

Conceptualizing trust and credibility

In journalism studies and the communication literature more broadly, the terms trust and credibility are closely connected. Some see the terms as synonyms and use them interchangeably (See Self, 1996 for an overview). Other researchers see trust as an antecedent of credibility; we find information credible if it comes from a trustworthy source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Others argue the other way around; we trust a source when its information time after time proofs to be credible (Sobel, 1985). In this chapter, trust and credibility are seen as distinct, though partly overlapping concepts.

The concept of *trust in the press* finds its roots primarily in sociology and psychology. Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995, p. 712) define trust as "the willingness of a trustor to be vulnerable to the actions of a trustee based on the expectation that the trustee will perform a

particular action, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party." Building on this general definition of trust, trust in the press can be seen as "the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory matter". (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5).

Trust is *oriented towards the future*. To trust the news media means to expect that we will be able to rely on the information which the media provide, even though we cannot keep an eye on all the decisions and choices made in the news-making process. When the audience trusts the media, it takes a *risk* (Giddens, 1990; Grosser, 2016; Luhman, 1979), since it cannot be fully verified whether journalists in practice do what the audience expects them to do. If the media do not live up to the expectations, the audience risks getting wrong information about important developments, missing out important events or making badly informed decisions.

Trust in the news media can be seen as a form of *institutional trust*, comparable to trust in other public institutions such as the government, parliament or the police. The term trust in the press is used to refer to "generalized trust towards the news media system as a whole" (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2017). This generalized trust towards the news media system underlies our trust in specific media outlets. Consequently, trust in different mainstream media outlets is generally strongly correlated (Kiousis, 2001). This is particularly true for the mainstream media, such as newspapers of record or the main evening news broadcast, where journalists tend to follow similar professional norms (Cook, 2006; Ladd, 2011). Trust in the press not only refers to the expectation that the media will provide reliable information, but also to the expectation that they fulfill a broader societal function in a satisfactory way, such as holding other institutions accountable as a fourth estate and facilitating a well-functioning public sphere. Trust is a relational concept, as the degree of trust in the press is just as much determined by the news media (the trustee) and by the public

(the trustor). Like other forms of institutional trust, trust in the press is a rather stable psychological trait.

This chapter understands *credibility* as perceived believability. In the words of Bentele and Seidenglanz (2008, p. 49) credibility is "a feature attributed to individuals, institutions or their communicative products (written or oral texts, audio-visual presentations) by somebody (recipients) regarding something (an event, matters of fact, etc.)." Following this description, the object of credibility is more narrow than the object of trust. While trust in the press refers to trust in the media as a whole, credibility refers more narrowly to a message, event or piece of information. Credibility also has a narrower focus than trust. Credibility only refers to the perceived truthfulness of information, while trust refers to the expectation that the media will satisfactorily fulfill several societal tasks, one of which is providing truthful information. Trust and credibility also have different time frames. While trust is a predictive judgement, referring to the future, credibility is an evaluative judgement of information or messages which one is exposed to (Rieh, 2002). When assessing whether we perceive information as credible, we take three aspects into account: who is the sender of the information (source credibility); through which channel is the information presented (media credibility) and how is the message formulated (message credibility) (Hellmueller & Trilling, 2012).

Interest in source credibility goes all the way back to ancient Greece. In his work *The Rhetoric,* Aristotle introduces ethos, logos and pathos as three means by which a speaker can persuade the audience. Ethos refers to the credibility and authority of the communicator. In the 1950s interest in persuasion led to a growth in empirical research into source and message credibility. O'Keefe (2002, p. 181) argues that it is better to talk about perceived credibility than seeing credibility as an intrinsic characteristic of a source or a message. Compared to trust in the press, perceived credibility is a less stable personality trait and perceived credibility may vary widely across different messages and sources. As we will see later in this chapter, the proposed distinction between media trust and credibility is particularly relevant in

today's media environment, where the source of information encountered on social media is often unclear and the number of communication channels have multiplied far beyond the limited number of mainstream media which traditionally were the dominant source of information.

Historical development

Source credibility

Communication researchers and journalism scholars started to study the related concepts of credibility and trust in the middle of the 20th century (See Self, 1996 for an overview). Interest in the persuasive power of media and communication led to empirical research into the influence of credibility on the effectiveness of persuasion. In a famous experiment, Hovland and Weiss (1951) exposed participants to information by either high-credibility sources (like Fortune Magazine, or the New England Journal of Biology and Medicine) or low-credibility sources (like a movie-gossip columnist). Directly after exposure, people were more likely to be persuaded by the high-credibility sources. Surprisingly, this effect faded over time. When the researchers revisited the participants four weeks later, the participants had accepted the information from the low-credibility sources to the same degree as the information from the high-credibility sources. This is referred to as the "sleeper effect". Over time people forgot the source of the information, while the information itself was remembered.

This research was groundbreaking, since it provided a systematic test of the influence of source characteristics on the effectiveness of persuasion. Although Hovland and colleagues already noted that the perceived credibility of a source may differ from person to person, the emphasis in this type of research was mainly on the impact of characteristics of the sender, the channel and the message (See also Hovland et al., 1953, McCroskey, 1966, Shaw, 1973). This research should be seen in the context of the powerful media effects paradigm, which

dominated thinking about the media's role in society at the time. Communication was mainly seen as a stimulus-response process, where the effects of communication are triggered by the message characteristics and sender of the message, with a more passive role for the receiver of the information.

Later empirical research questioned this powerful media effects paradigm, acknowledging that the effects of communication are at least as much determined by the receiver as by the sender. A similar change of perspective can also be observed in credibility research. In 1969, Berlo and colleagues challenged the idea that sources can be classified as credible or less credible based on objective characteristics. They argued that it is better to speak of perceived credibility, acknowledging that credibility is in the eye of the beholder. Based on a factor-analytical approach, they assessed the different dimensions which the audience uses to evaluate source credibility. Following their work, numerous other researchers have applied factor analysis to distinguish underlying dimensions of credibility of information (e.g. Meyer, 1988; Yale et al., 2015; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Beyond the promotion of the factor analytical approach, the research by Berlo and colleagues was influential, since it triggered more interest in credibility as a relational concept, seeing perceived credibility as the result of the interaction between the message and source characteristics on the one hand and audience characteristics on the other hand (See also Edelstein & Tefft, Gunther 1992, Westley & Severin, 1964).

Trust in the press: American malaise

In the second half of the 20th century, trust in the press became a new topic of scholarly interest. This line of research originated mainly in the United States and grew from applied research, often sponsored by newspaper organizations (Self, 1996). Trust in the traditional mass media has been a concern since the 1970s and 1980s. Between the end of the Second World War and the late 1970s, the American press had generally been held in high

esteem. Trust in the press trailed not far behind trust in esteemed institutions like the Supreme Court and the military. At the time, more people trusted the press than political institutions such as congress or the president. Based on a comprehensive historical analysis, Ladd (2011) argues that this era of high trust in the mainstream press was an exceptional period in American history. The low degree of media competition at the time fostered the development of a professional and autonomous press with little pressure to attract audiences with partisan and entertaining news. Attacking the mainstream media can be a fruitful strategy for politicians to strengthen their own position. In the mid-twentieth century, Ladd argues, such attacks were limited due to the low degree of polarization in the party system.

As media competition and party polarization increased around the 1980s, however, trust in the press started to drop (See figure 1) (Izard, 1985; Jones, 2004), and in the middle of that decade, press trust fell below trust in other institutions. After the 1990s, levels of trust in the media continued to drop, and dropped far below trust in other institutions. This decline was temporarily stopped after 9/11, but continued soon after (Ladd, 2011). The declining trust led to a growth of research into the antecedents of trust in the press.

-Figure 1 about here-

Commercialized news and trust in the press

One of the foci of research on trust in the press following the declining levels of trust in the United States was on the effect of commercialization of the press. As the American press became more commercialized, media coverage became more sensationalistic, focusing more on negativity and covering politics as a game, where political decisions are explained by strategic motives rather than genuine concerns about the well-being of society. This was seen as one of the reasons why trust in the press declined.

Cappella and Jamieson (1997) argue that when the media cover politicians as strategic actors, this might impact cynicism about the media, which is closely related to media distrust. When politics is presented as a game, motivated primarily by a quest for electoral gains and increase in power, the audience will see politicians as self-interested and, thus, less trustworthy. This makes the audience cynical about political institutions and, by extension, of the mass media: "Public distrust of political institutions and processes may have attached itself to the bearers of information about those institutions – the news media themselves." (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996, p. 83; see also Bennett et al., 1999). This is referred to as 'contagious cynicism'. In line with this argument, Hopmann, Shehata, and Strömbäck (2015) have shown that the exposure to game coverage has a negative effect on trust in the press. Ladd (2011) also showed that people became more hostile towards the press when exposed to horse-race or tabloid coverage, where politics is seen as a strategic game. Another explanation for the relation between commercialized media coverage and low levels of trust in the press is dissatisfaction with the type of coverage provided. When people feel that the media do not live up to their obligations of providing neutral reliable information, they may not trust them to do what is right in the future.

Increased economic pressures on the media might provide a breeding ground for media scandals (Broersma, 2013), such as cases where journalists knowingly fabricate information (for example Janet Cooke at *The Washington Post* or Jayson Blair at *The New York Times*), or violate other ethical rules (such as the phone-hacking scandal at *News of the World* in Britain). Such scandals could potentially have a profound impact on trust in the press, especially if they are reoccurring and media critics raise their salience.

Psychological explanations for trust in the press

While Cappella and Jamieson focused on the effects of specific characteristics of media coverage of trust in the press, others like Gronke and Cook (2007) focus on the

backgrounds of the trustor. According to this perspective, trust in the press is strongly shaped by the predispositions, attitudes and personal values of the individual. Analyzing General Social Survey data collected between 1973 and 1998, Gronke and Cook (2007) showed that trust in the press is first of all an extension of general confidence in other public institutions, like political parties, the parliament or the government. A second psychological explanation for trust in public institutions, including the mass media, is political identity. Trust in political institutions is higher for people who support the party in government than for people who oppose this party. An opposite winner/loser gap has been observed in relation to trust in the media, since people who support the party in government are more critical of the press, which operates as a watchdog of government (Gronke & Cook, 2007).

Furthermore, ideological extremism and strong partisanship are associated with lower levels of trust in public institutions, including the mass media (Berlo et al., 1970; Gronke & Cook, 2007; Lee, 2010). The underlying mechanism might be an overall feeling of anti-elitism, which affects both trust in political institutions and in the media. Another explanation for lower levels of media trust among people with strong partisan identities is the hostile media effect: people with strong partisan identities will perceive neutral coverage as biased against the party which they support (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Perceived partisan bias is indeed an important aspect of media distrust (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). Attacks on the media by partisan politicians may further feed this distrust of the media among partisan actors. In an experiment, Ladd (2011) showed that highly educated partisans are less approving of the mass media when they read that politicians of their party accuse the media of being biased.

Golan and Day (2010) showed that the importance of identity for the understanding of media trust is not limited to partisan identity. They found that religiosity is associated with lower levels of trust in online news.

Cross-national comparative research

The second decade of the 21th century saw a growth in interest in cross-national variations in trust in the press. Expanding the geographical scope beyond the United States, Tsfati and Ariely (2013) explored cross-national variations in trust in 44 countries worldwide. Later, Hanitzsch et al. (2018) analyzed developments of trust in the press in 45 countries worldwide based on World Values Survey data gathered between 1980 and 2015. Apart from the US, press trust showed a significant decline in 23 other countries, including two other Anglo-Saxon countries (Australia and New Zealand) and countries like Estonia, Poland and Slovenia, where the initial optimism of the first post-communist years seems to have been replaced by disillusionment with institutions in general, including the press. The opposite pattern of the US is seen in several Asian countries, most notably China and Japan, where trust in the press is high and continues to increase. After Asia, Africa is the geographical region with the second highest levels of trust, followed by Europe and Latin-America (See Figure 2).

-Figure 2 about here-

Such comparative research (see also Ariely, 2015; Müller, 2013; Newman et al., 2017) allows to study the impact of societal level factors on trust in the press. Drawing on insight from comparative sociology, Tsfati and Ariely (2013) and Hanitzsch et al. (2018) assess the impact of institutional and cultural explanations. According to the *institutional theory approach*, trust in public institutions is a consequence of the performance of these institutions, most notably economic performance such as economic growth or low levels of unemployment, and democratic performance such as government stability. Positive performance should translate into higher levels of trust, while unsatisfactory performance decreases trust. Contrary to this expectation, Tsfati and Ariely (2013) and Hanitzsch et al.

(2018) found that performance-based explanations such as democratic freedoms and freedom of the press, or economic development, have limited effect on cross-national differences in trust in the press.

According to the *cultural theory approach*, trust in public institutions does not necessarily reflect the performance of these institutions, but rather broad cultural values in society, such as levels of social trust. Following this theoretical perspective, institutional trust is high when people generally trust each other, while low interpersonal trust is accompanied to lower levels of trust in political institutions. Trust in the media is indeed strongly related to trust in other public institutions, and cross-national differences and longitudinal trends strongly mimic country-level political trust and cultural values (Ariely, 2015; Tsfati & Ariely, 2013; Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Cultural shifts in advanced industrial societies have led to an increasing importance of post-materialist values, such as autonomy, self-expression and freedom of speech (Inglehart, 1990). This is accompanied by a greater distance from authority and higher expectations, especially among younger generations and better educated parts of the population, who in turn have less confidence in public institutions (Dalton, 2005). In line with this argument, Hanitzsch et al. (2018) showed that the younger generations and people with higher education are less trusting of the press. Tsfati and Ariely (2014) have shown that trust in the mass media is generally lower in countries where post-materialist values are embraced.

Consequences of low trust in the press

News is a so-called experienced good, since the value of a communication product cannot be assessed a priori, but only by reading or watching it. Therefore, the expectations that the audience has towards the product are likely to determine whether it will be bought or watched. Thus, from an economic perspective, trustworthiness is an important asset of the media (Vanacker & Belmas, 2009). In line with this, Tsfati and Peri (2006) have shown that

people who are less trusting of the mainstream media are more likely to turn to alternative sources. While this suggests that trustworthiness is one antecedent of media use, it is not a necessary condition (Tsfati & Cappella, 2005). This can be seen from the large audience numbers for distrusted news sources like tabloid newspapers or social media.

Independent of how trust in the press affects media use, trust in the mainstream press is a necessary condition for the legitimacy of the press. Legitimacy can be defined as "a generalized perception of assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). The authority, functions and procedures of the media are not laid down in formal regulation to the same degree as for other institutions, like parliaments or the government. This makes public trust even more important for the press than for other public institutions (Gronke & Cook, 2007). If the press is not trusted, it is easier for politicians to ignore criticism from journalists or obstruct efforts by the media to hold them accountable.

Trust and ontological security

Low levels of trust in the press do not only undermine the watchdog function of the media, but may also negatively affect the surveillance function of the media (Lasswell, 1948). Given the enormous amount of information which is available nowadays, trusted mass media fulfill an important function filtering the relevant information, thereby pointing out important developments of which citizens need to be aware of. Trust has been described as "an institutional economizer" (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 4, see also Coleman, 2012). Trustworthy media take away the need to continuously monitor, verify and absorb all information that is available. When the media are trusted to give relevant information, it reduces the effort which needs to be made to stay informed. Without trustworthy media, keeping track of and interpreting relevant developments would become a daunting task for the individual. This is equally important on the societal level, as trustworthy media provide what Coleman (2012, p.

36) describes with a term by Anthony Giddens as ‘ontological security’: “belief in a shareable reality”, which forms the basis for a collective sense of community and citizenship.

Research in the United States has indeed shown that distrust of the mainstream media is related to the replacement of a shared reality by increased polarization (Ladd, 2011, see also Kreiss, 2017). Not only do people who distrust the mainstream media consume more partisan news, they are also less likely to learn from the news about current developments. People who distrust the media have less correct perceptions of important national developments, like economic trends or military conflicts. Both Democrats and Republicans with high trust in the press generally correctly perceived these developments. However, there were large differences in perception depending on political leaning among people with low trust. This suggests that people who distrust the media rely on partisan reasoning rather than mainstream media coverage. This in turn makes it less likely that they hold the president accountable for real economic developments in presidential elections.

When the mainstream media are not trusted to provide reliable information, this can lead to a situation where nothing is automatically accepted as true, and every piece of information is treated with the same degree of skepticism, independent of whether it comes from traditionally authoritative sources or whether it is based on rumors. Szostek (2018) has documented that in Ukraine, where news consumers are confronted with highly conflicting narratives from Russian and Western sources, news users do not rely on authoritative mainstream media to distinguish true information from false information. Instead, people assess every individual piece of information for its credibility using rules of thumb, such as the consistency across sources, perception of persuasive intent, or reference to personal experience or memory. This illustrates that when the function of trust in the press as ‘institutional economizer’ is lost, a heavy mental burden is placed on the audience, who relies on other criteria to assess the credibility of information, which are not necessarily the best source of guidance.

Social media, credibility heuristics and fake news

To some degree, the Ukrainian situation of low trust in the press is combined with conflicting narratives resembling the social media environment. Trust in social media is notably lower than trust in more traditional sources like the printed press or even the internet (EBU, 2016). The growing importance of social media networks as sources of (political) information have led to concerns about the spread of misinformation, fragmentation of the audience and polarization of perceptions of reality. The question of how the credibility of information is assessed in such an environment is particularly pressing in relation to the spread of fake news, which can be defined as "entirely fabricated and often highly partisan content that is presented as factual news" (Pennycook et al., 2017).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) provides a general framework that helps to understand how credibility judgements are made (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2004). According to the model, people assess new information according to two routes. When they process information through the central route, people rationally weight different arguments and assess the strength of different opinions. This central route of information processing requires a high degree of mental effort. In practice, people try to minimize mental effort and use the peripheral route of information processing when they encounter information they do not feel strongly about: instead of weighting all the evidence, they assess the quality of information by relying on cues such as the reputation of the source or characteristics of the message. Such cues are referred to as heuristics, which can be defined as "practical rules or guidelines that aid in problem solving, decision making, and discovery (…), and as such tend to reduce mental effort" (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2004, p. 1470).

The source of information is one important heuristic which the audience uses to assess the credibility of information when information is processed through the peripheral route. When trust in the mainstream press is low, people will turn to other heuristics to assess

whether information can be trusted. Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders (2010) distinguish between four main heuristics used by the audience to assess the credibility of information online apart from the credibility of a source: endorsements by known or unknown others; consistency of information across sources; violation of expectations about the form or content of a site; and a perception that a commercial or ulterior motive motivates the message (See also Metzger & Flanagin, 2013).

Pennycook et al. (2017) argue that people use the peripherical route when they encounter information on social media. Correspondence with one's political identity and world-view is an important heuristic used by the audience to assess whether information is credible. Another powerful heuristic is the familiarity heuristic: information is perceived as more credible when people have heard or seen it before. Pennycook et al. (2017) argue that this is one of the main reasons why fake news is problematic: people rate fake news headlines as more credible when they read them for the second time, even when they were previously told that the information is false. These results resemble the sleeper effect which Hovland and Weiss found almost 70 years earlier.

As the work by Pennycook and colleagues illustrates, the way people assess the credibility of information is again high on the research agenda, as a consequence of the decline in trust in the mainstream press combined with the increasing amounts of people who gain their information from low trusted online and social media sources (See also Berinsky, 2017; Li & Sakamoto, 2014; Tandoc, 2018).

Methodological issues

Given the complex nature of trust in the press and credibility of information, it is not surprising that the question of how to best measure these concepts has been the subject of considerable debate (e.g. Hellmueller & Trilling, 2012; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Yale et al., 2015). While there are validated and broadly used scales for social trust, there is no such scale

for trust in the press (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2017). Comparative and longitudinal analyses often rely on single-item measures of trust in the press (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Hanitzsch et al., 2018). An example of this is the World Values Survey question, which simply asks respondents whether they have a great deal, quite a lot, not very much or not very much at all trust in the press. The wording of this question leaves it to the respondents to interpret what is meant by "trust" and by "the press". Another downside of such a single-item questions is that no metric equivalence can be established: it is not possible to assess whether differences across countries or time might be due to different interpretations of the question.

On the other hand, researchers have developed and validated multi-item scales to measure several dimensions of trust in the press or credibility. Kohring and Matthes (2007) used factor analysis to validate a theory-driven media trust scale, which distinguishes between trust in the selectivity of topics, selectivity of facts, accuracy of depictions and journalistic assessments. Similarly, Abdulla et al. (2005) evaluate newspaper credibility with a three-dimensional scale assessing perceptions of balance, honesty and currency.

While acknowledging the usefulness of theoretically built and validated scales, Yale et al. (2015) warn that the search for multiple trust or credibility dimensions might also be partly misleading. In practice, subdimension of the trust scales are often strongly correlated, which indicates that trust is an underlying, latent factor, which influences the assessments of the different subdimensions. From this they conclude that it might theoretically make sense to distinguish between different subdimensions, but in practice assessments of credibility and trust are made more heuristically. Therefore, they warn against using the different subdimensions as distinct variables when studying trust (See also Prochazka & Schweiger, 2017).

Another point of debate is the question of how to operationalize the object of trust. Researchers have asked about trust in 'the press', 'the media', but also about trust in specific news outlets. While acknowledging that people have an abstract conception of 'the press',

Gronke and Cook (2007, p. 273) have also argued that trust in the mass media is significantly lower than trust in the media one uses. Daniller et al. (2017) confirmed this in an experimental study and argue that this is due to accessibility bias: when assessing the media in general, people will place more weight on negative assessments than on positive experiences. Thus, researchers have to think carefully about what the object of trust should be depending on the purpose of the research.

By either leaving it up to the respondents to interpret what is meant with trust and credibility, or by asking about quality dimensions such as accuracy or lack of bias, most scales of trust do not directly measure people's willingness to take risk when relying on information, which is central in the definition of trust in the press. A fruitful avenue for future development of scales measuring trust in the media might make the element of risk or assessments or information under conditions of uncertainty more central when measuring trust. An interesting question in this respect comes from the 1984 British Election Study where respondents were asked "Suppose you saw or heard conflicting or different reports of the same story on radio, television and in the [paper respondent reads]. Which of the three versions do you think you would be most likely to believe?" (See Newton & Saris, 2003). This is an interesting way of asking about trust in the press, since it simulates an uncertain situation in which people are confronted with conflicting report and thus risk relying on the wrong information.

In addition, qualitative research into media trust and credibility can give interesting insight into how people assess trust in the media in general as well as the credibility of specific information (Coleman et al., 2012; Metzger et al., 2010). Instead of asking directly about press trust, Coleman et al. (2012) asked respondents about their conception of and expectations towards news in general. In this way, they were able to show that trust is more complex than merely a reflection of people's perceptions of accuracy of journalistic information. Using this constructivist approach, they showed that distrust in the media was

often associated with concerns about representations of reality and a feeling of being treated by the media as outsiders. Such qualitative research offers a fruitful way to get a more complete assessment of the meaning of trust in the press. Similar approaches could also give more insight into which media people think about when they think about 'the press' and which criteria they use to distinguish such outlets from non-mainstream outlets.

Directions for future research: trust and credibility in the age of post-truth politics

Three broad societal trends are profoundly challenging the political media system and raise new questions to the study of trust and credibility of news. First, the rise of authoritarian populism (Norris, 2017) has led to a growing sense of anti-elitism, which translates into a growing dissatisfaction among the population with societal institutions, including the mass media. Second, the fragmentation and polarization of media audiences limit the reach of the mainstream media, while enlarging the reach of alternative outlets (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Van Aelst et al., 2017). Third, the boundaries around the journalistic profession are fading, challenging the authoritative position which professional journalists once had as main providers of authoritative accounts of the day's most important events (Lewis, 2012). Together these trends lead to a situation which has been described as post-trust politics (Suiter, 2016), "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."[1] While these trends are more or less profound in different political media systems, they present the media around the world with a complicated challenge. On the one hand, facing growing competition from other sources, trust is more important than ever for the mainstream media to retain their legitimacy as an important public institution. On the other hand, cultural changes and the changing media environment make it more difficult for the mainstream media to

[1] Definition of post-truth from the Oxford English Dictionary. In 2016 Oxford Dictionaries chose 'post-truth' as Word of the Year.

claim an authoritative position and distinguish them from other sources of information. This leads to four broad directions of future research.

First, since credibility assessments are often not a rational process, more research should study how people can be better prepared to distinguish misinformation from trustworthy information. More research should look into the effects of the initiatives social media platforms are taking, like collaborations with fact-checking organizations; advise for readers on how to spot fake news; or the use of algorithms. Here, not only the effect on skepticism towards fake news, but also the potential increase of skepticism towards news from mainstream sources should be investigated.

A second area of investigation is the way in which the mainstream media are changing their practice in an attempt to restore trust in their work and distinguish themselves from other outlets. Several news organizations have become more transparent about the sources which they use, or in acknowledging mistakes which they have made (Karlsson et al., 2014; Mor & Reich, 2017). This fits with the broader changes in journalism which in many societies is becoming more responsive and accountable (Brants, 2013; de Haan & Bardoel, 2011). More research is needed into the effects of such efforts on the credibility of the information provided by the mainstream media, as well as trust in the way they function as an institution. First findings indicated that the effect of these measures on trustworthiness is limited at best. Karlsson et al. (2014), for example, showed that transparency about corrections did not increase the public's trust. Referring to economic theory, de Haan and Bardoel (2011) even argue that greater media accountability can function as a substitute for trust in the press. On the one hand, more openness makes mistakes and shortcomings from the press more visible. On the other hand, an essential element of what it means to have trust is being willing to rely on the actions of a trustee without being able to monitor them. When the media open up and become more transparent, people have the chance to monitor them, thus replacing trust.

Third, if accountability and transparency do little to increase trust, research should look further into the changing expectations of the audience towards the mainstream media, and a potential mismatch between the roles that journalists and the public expect the media to fulfill (Coleman et al., 2012; Johnson, 1993). Cultural changes like the rise of anti-elitism and the growing importance of post-materialist values might affect the expectations of the audience towards the news media, be it in completely different ways. If mainstream media are to restore trust in the way they fulfill their societal role, they need to take serious public concerns such as feeling treated as outsiders, 'bad news fatigue' or feelings that journalists lack empathy towards the people who they cover. Such concerns might be the results of diverging expectations toward the news. This would be particularly interesting to study from a cross-national comparative perspective, analyzing how the expectations of journalists and the public in different media systems may vary and whether this relates to different levels of trust in the press (Waisbord, 2006).

Fourth, more research is needed into the relation between trust in the media and how much people learn from the news. Ladd (2011) has shown that, in an American context, people who distrust the media have less correct perceptions of national developments. It is important to replicate this study in other media contexts, especially in countries where the media are less independent from political powers. Likewise, it would be important to know more about whether people who are more trusting in the media in general are also less skeptical towards information they may encounter on social media. More insight into how trust in the press affects how people learn from the news would be a first step towards disentangling under which circumstances trust in the press is either normatively desirable and an indication of a healthy media system, or rather an expression of misplaced trust.

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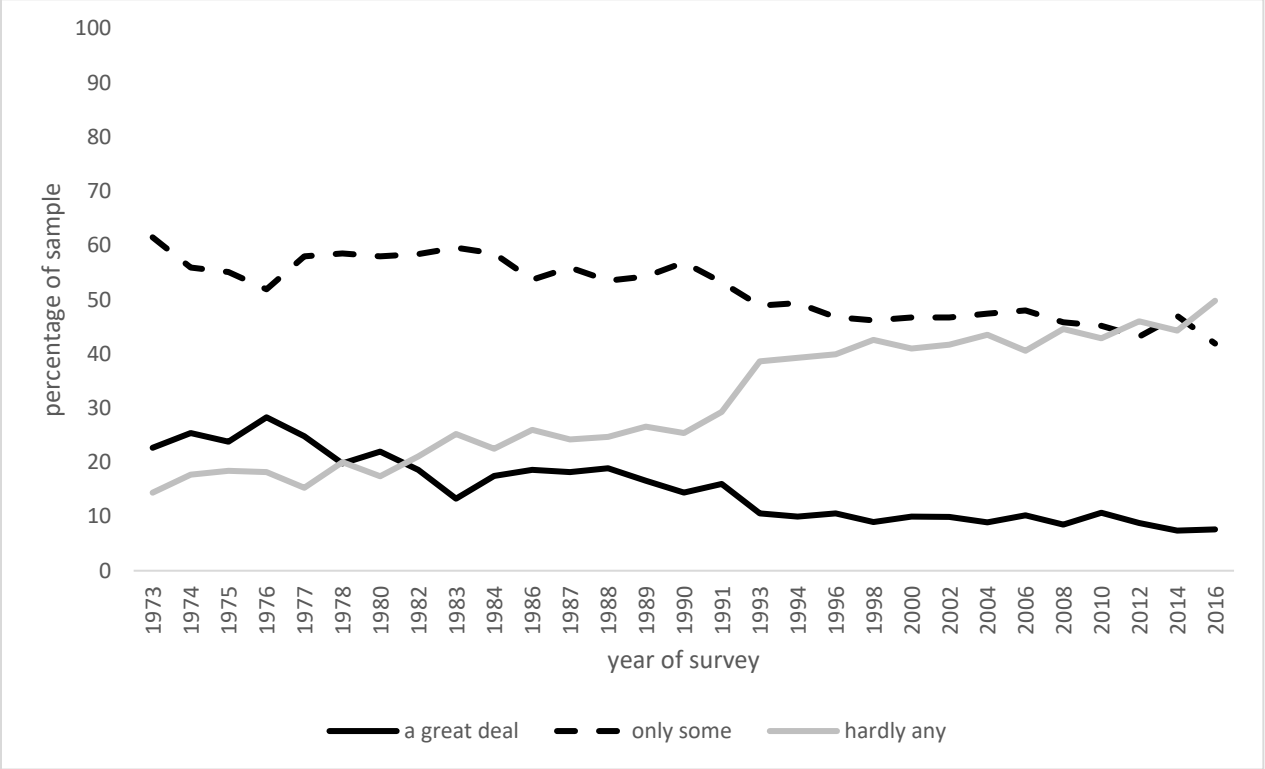
Figures

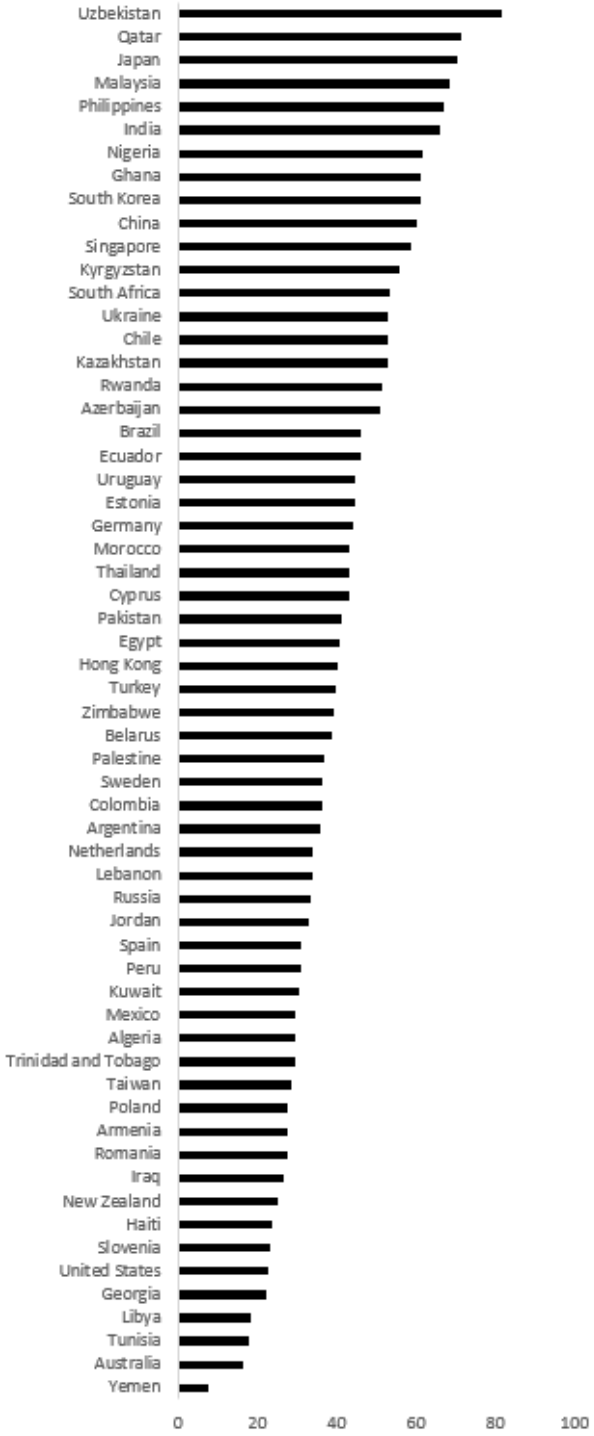
Figure 1: Confidence in the press in the United States (1973-2016)



Note: Source: General Social Surveys (Smith et al. 2018). Question wording: I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?: Press.

Figure 2: Confidence in the press around the world

(% saying quite a lot or a great deal of trust in the press, 2010-2014)



Note: Source: Word Values Survey, wave 6. Question wording: I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all?: The press.