

Understanding the Public's Animosity Toward News Media: Cynicism and Distrust as Related but Distinct Negative Media Perceptions

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Abstract

This study proposes that media distrust and cynicism are two related but distinct perceptions that indicate qualitatively different ways in which audiences relate to news media. To substantiate this, we developed a new instrument to measure media cynicism. Factor analyses showed that the indicators of media distrust and cynicism are not influenced by the same underlying dimension. Structural equation modeling indicated that while distrust appears to be predominately caused by perceived media responsiveness, media cynicism may be susceptible to a wider range of factors.

Keywords

media cynicism, media distrust, media perceptions, audience-media relationships

Audiences' negative perceptions of the news media are a recurring topic in both the academic and the public discourse (McLeod et al., 2017). Communication scholars typically discuss these perceptions in terms of declining media trust (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Although a universally agreed-upon definition does not exist, to trust the news media, at its core, means to believe that the media possess the capacity and motivation to deliver a range of desirable outcomes, such as objective, impartial, and complete news coverage (Coleman, 2012; Thurman et al., 2019; Tsfaty & Cohen, 2005).

Yet, it appears elusive to describe the contemporary trend of increasing public animosity through the conceptual lens of media trust. Some may argue that

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deteriorating media trust is not a problematic development. Democracies thrive on critical citizens who do not take information at face value, but question it and demand evidence regardless of its source (e.g., Usher, 2017). At the same time, we also ascribe some important normative functions to news media in democracies, such as monitoring the government and informing citizens about relevant political developments (e.g., Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Trust plays an important role in promoting audience cooperation and facilitates exposure and attention to the news, ultimately allowing the news media to effectively perform these functions (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). From this perspective, the increasing public distrust in news media appears more troubling as it indicates potential disengagement from the system of political information. The normative solution for this conundrum would be to encourage citizens to be critical but also to trust the media when trust is warranted, that is, to be open to the possibility that the media could be trustworthy in the presence of evidence. However, current definitions and indicators of media trust lack the specificity required to determine whether a given manifestation of media distrust is an expression of a critical outlook that bestows trust contingent on evidence or rejection of even the possibility of the media being trustworthy. Therefore, based on the current literature, one can only speculate—as many already have—whether the diagnosed distrust reflects “healthy skepticism” or “corrosive cynicism” (see Pinkleton & Austin, 2004; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Usher, 2017).

This study focuses on the importance of properly describing and identifying cynicism in the context of media perceptions and understanding its similarities to and differences from media distrust. To do so, we revisit the concept of media cynicism and reconceptualize it as more specific and intense compared with media distrust. Cynicism refers to the perception that the self-interest of media actors is the only driving force behind news reporting and a definitive belief that the media system has already failed citizens beyond repair (see Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hopmann et al., 2015; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Cynical news audiences reduce all news coverage to the perceived malicious intent of the news media, which is not necessarily the case with all distrusting audiences. Such a cynical outlook may occasionally serve as an efficient strategy for reducing vulnerability to coverage that violates professional and ethical journalistic standards. However, cynicism may also play a more detrimental role by encouraging citizens to discount professional news reporting even when it successfully performs the normative functions of journalism in a democracy.

The aims of this study are to show that the compositions of media distrust and media cynicism differ qualitatively and to explore how common predictors of media distrust relate differently to media cynicism. Data for the analyses were collected through an online survey of adult citizens in Serbia, a transitioning democracy whose citizens have had complex and troubling experiences with news media (Pjesivac, 2017; Rupar et al., 2021). By explicating the relationship between media distrust and cynicism, we hope to increase the conceptual clarity of these constructs and improve the analytic tools that public opinion researchers use to study audiences' perceptions of news media.

Conceptualizations

Media (Dis)Trust

In social sciences, trust is commonly understood as a relational phenomenon. It denotes a relationship between the subject (i.e., trustor) and object (i.e., trustee, target) in which the latter performs an action of interest to the former who has no control over such action. Therefore, a trust relationship is always bound in risk or uncertainty because it can result in harm instead of benefit for the trustor (PytlikZillig & Kimbrough, 2016). This understanding of trust is different from dispositional trust, which refers to the propensity to trust others, regardless of target.

Relational trust is commonly described as *confident positive expectations* regarding the trustee's conduct (Lewicki et al., 1998). This understanding has been echoed in most conceptualizations of media trust as well (e.g., Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2018; Peifer, 2018; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). For instance, Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (2018, pp. 615–616) define media trust as “the perception of the media being objective, impartial, accurate, or unbiased.” Yet, extant definitions refer to different aspects of media activities relevant to the trust relationship, which has prompted some debate over the dimensionality of media trust (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020). These definitions encompass varying numbers and types of dimensions including assessments of fairness, accuracy, completeness, reliability, selectivity, or community affiliation. Strömbäck et al. (2020), however, note that empirical analyses usually employ a one-dimensional structure despite some theoretical reasons to consider media trust multidimensional.

On the contrary, the basis for assessments evaluating the trustworthiness of the media has not received nearly as much scholarly attention as the discussion on the scope of trust. Indicators used to measure media trust are typically framed in terms of perceived outcomes (e.g., how objective, impartial, or complete the news reporting is) without scrutinizing the criteria audiences use for such evaluations (e.g., how knowledgeable, skillful, honest, reliable, or principled the media are when it comes to performing the expected functions). Therefore, existing approaches conceptualize trust as a comprehensive, global evaluation of the extent to which news media meet a range of citizens' expectations.

In recent literature, media trust is typically applied as a conceptual lens in the study of perceived rising animosity toward news media. Scholars commonly treat the concept of media trust as a continuum comprising distrust and trust at opposite ends without explicitly defining media distrust (but see Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). To preserve consistency with the extant literature, we follow the same approach to the study of media distrust and discuss the implications of this decision in the concluding section.

Media Cynicism

Attribution of self-serving motives. A review of multidisciplinary definitions reveals that the core element of cynicism is a negative perception of the motives driving the behavior of others (Agger et al., 1961; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989).

Cynics view the target's motives as exclusively *instrumental*, which Robbins (2014) defines as motivation based on the potential costs and benefits of a behavior. This is the opposite of *expressive* motivation, which refers to the value system driving behavior beyond profiteering. Examples of expressive motives include benevolence and integrity. The former suggests the target's intent to act in the best interest of the observer, while the latter indicates that the target reliably abides by a clear system of values (Mayer et al., 1995; Robbins, 2014).

To think about the motivations of the media means to focus on *why* the media report certain stories, interview specific individuals, or ask certain questions. To meet the normative expectations of journalism in a democracy, media actors are often expected to maintain strong expressive motivation. Simultaneously, most news outlets face difficulties as for-profit organizations in the increasingly competitive market of public information. Therefore, the media are likely to have diverse competing motives that could change depending on the circumstances. Significant differences between news organizations and journalists are also likely to exist in terms of the degree to which they are driven by instrumental and expressive motives. In some cases, reporting that is both profitable and consistent with professional and ethical journalistic standards may indicate complementary rather than mutually exclusive interests. However, media cynics are not interested in making nuanced judgments regarding the motives of the media. They see an *a priori* malicious intent behind any action of the media and reject the idea that adherence to journalistic values and standards could be a legitimate motive in journalism.

This cynical sentiment has been uncovered by previous research. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) asked participants in their study to comment on political news coverage, and many focused primarily on the perceived self-interests behind journalists' professional decisions. These respondents believed that newsmen make decisions that help them maximize profit and protect their and their patrons' financial interests. In more recent research conducted in three Balkan countries, Pjesivac et al. (2016) identified a prevalent perception of corruption in news media or a lack of professional integrity. Many participants in this study believed that the media yield to the demands of media owners or external political and economic sources of power when making professional decisions.

Pessimism about the object's future conduct. Consistent with extremely negative views of the object's motives, cynicism also implies expecting only the worst from the object. According to Krouwel and Abts (2007), political cynicism is characterized by a much stronger degree of close-mindedness (lack of receptivity) toward political actors compared with other expressions of political discontent, such as distrust and skepticism. The authors explained that the distinguishing feature of political cynicism is that it does not leave any room for the possibility that political actors could perform in a satisfactory manner. Dancey (2012) similarly described cynicism as a *definitive* pessimism about human nature. While trust is only relevant in uncertain situations—defined by the trustor's lack of control over the outcome—cynicism is characterized by the perceived lack of uncertainty. Cynics, unlike skeptics, are certain that the object

is corrupt and solely motivated by advancing their own interests (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989). Therefore, they habitually expect the worst from others. This is similar to how Luhmann (1979) described the difference between trust and confidence—in terms of the presence/absence of uncertainty. Some interactions and relationships can develop habitually reliable outcomes, seemingly erasing the uncertainty that is typical for the context of trust. If a person habitually expects a certain (positive) outcome, we are not dealing with trust but confidence. Similarly, it can be said that if a person habitually expects that interaction with the target will result in a harmful outcome, this may indicate cynicism rather than distrust.

Communication scholars have also described this kind of pessimism in the public's perceptions of news media. Pjesivac et al. (2016) found that some respondents were resistant to the mere idea that the media could be trustworthy; they were certain that the media are highly corrupt. Van Duyn and Collier (2019) described a similar perception as *media nihilism*, which is characterized by a strong certainty that the information coming from the media is dishonest. Therefore, pessimism in the current context implies that one feels so disappointed with the media system that they do not believe in the possibility of improvement anymore. This kind of rigidity is what makes cynicism potentially more dangerous than distrust. It implies that the audience do not see the media system as worth saving anymore because any such attempt will fail and lead to future disappointment.

Defining media cynicism. Based on the literature review presented earlier, *media cynicism* can be defined as a generalized antagonism toward mainstream news media characterized by the following two components:

- *perceived self-serving motives of news media actors* (the belief that news reporting is always the product of the opportunism of newsmen incompatible with altruistic considerations, i.e., benevolence, goodwill, or adherence to professional values and ethical standards) and;
- *pessimistic expectations of journalistic conduct* (the belief that professional journalism is ultimately incapable of meeting acceptable standards and that any attempts to improve it will be meaningless).

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 proposed conceptual definition of media cynicism reflects another point on which cynicism can be distinguished from distrust—the stronger emotional overtone of the former (Dean et al., 1998). Eisinger (2000) argued that cynicism is more than simple distrust because it involves a visceral contempt for the target. He criticized

commonly used measures of cynicism for lacking content validity and failing to capture intense negative emotions, such as contempt, antagonism, and hostility. The component perceived self-serving motives—defined in terms of manipulative and malicious intent and disregard for public interest—can logically be associated with the public's contempt and anger toward news media already documented in the contemporary literature (e.g., Ladd, 2012). Similarly, the pessimism component implies disappointment with the observation that the news media are unable to meet positive expectations.

As the abovementioned literature review has shown, there is a theoretical basis for considering media distrust and cynicism as related but distinct phenomena. It is unclear whether this distinction accurately describes the structure of the public's media perceptions. To explore this question, it is necessary to develop a new instrument to measure media cynicism and to examine the extent to which the indicators of media cynicism and media distrust converge and diverge in the same measurement model. The following research questions (RQs) were developed to help guide these analyses:

RQ1: How can media cynicism be measured in the general population in a reliable and valid manner?

RQ2: Can indicators of media distrust and media cynicism be empirically distinguished?

Exploring Potential Predictors of Media Distrust and Cynicism

If media distrust and cynicism are indeed distinct perceptions, it is important to understand why some people become distrusting and others turn cynical. A growing body of literature has proposed a variety of factors that could be causing declining media trust in democracies around the world (see McLeod et al., 2017). Given the theoretical overlap between media distrust and cynicism, this exploratory investigation starts by examining how plausible factors of media distrust associate with media cynicism. Common factors explaining media distrust in the literature can be grouped into three categories: individual audience dispositions (e.g., generalized trust), the quality of the audience-media relationship (e.g., perceived media responsiveness), and contextual cues (e.g., discussion network media hostility).

Generalized (Social) Trust

Cultural theories posit that people's trust in public institutions is an extension of their propensity to trust others (Mishler & Rose, 2001). *Generalized (social) trust* is a concept that describes this tendency to trust others, not based on people's experience with the specific object of interaction but based on their projected expectations of the nature of people and institutions. Different socialization experiences can impact one's expectations of others and ultimately affect the extent of one's generalized trust. Following

this line of argumentation, scholars have contended that people tend to (dis)trust the media because they were socialized to (dis)trust others in general (e.g., Pjesivac, 2017; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Kanter and Mirvis (1989, p. 301) argued that “[c]ynics project their own suspicions of human nature onto authority figures and other people.” Indeed, previous research has found that a cynical disposition can predict political and organizational cynicism (Chiaburu et al., 2013; Pattyn et al., 2012). In societies that have experienced oppressive regimes, as Serbia has, individuals with low generalized trust may be particularly wary of the motives of others, trying to protect themselves from being taken advantage of. Therefore, citizens with low generalized trust may be inclined to evaluate others primarily in terms of vested interests rather than competence or performance. Accustomed to perceiving others as an *a priori* threat, distrusting citizens may become suspicious of the potential of people and institutions to change. It can thus be expected that those with low generalized trust will be both suspicious of the motives of media actors and pessimistic regarding the prospect of change in journalism.

Perceived Media Responsiveness

Many have argued that media trust has declined as a result of the detachment of the media from communities they are meant to serve (e.g., Fink, 2019; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). By doing so, the media have demonstrated a lack of devotion to the public and realignment with elite actors. A concept commonly used to describe the quality of a relationship is a perception of the partner’s *responsiveness*, that is, the extent to which the object is seen as attentive to the subject’s wants and needs (Esaiasson et al., 2015). Having a responsive partner is considered a sign of a healthy relationship in which making oneself vulnerable (i.e., trusting) is justified (e.g., Torcal, 2014). Responsive media listen to their audiences and take their feedback seriously (de Haan, 2012). Audiences are more likely to trust the media if they perceive the media as a partner who treats citizens fairly and with respect, knowing and understanding citizens’ problems and concerns.

A perceived lack of responsiveness could trigger suspicion about the media’s motives. If the media are seen as detached from the audiences they serve, this may indicate that they have some other interests to protect. In contrast, increased receptiveness and engagement with audiences could help the media make a case for their devotion to the public interest. It follows that low perceived responsiveness could lead to media cynicism by raising doubts about the media’s devotion to serving the public interest. Furthermore, high perceived media responsiveness could reduce pessimism about journalism because it would signal that the media are attempting to provide better service (see Brants & de Haan, 2010).

Discussion Network Media Hostility

A variety of factors exogenous to the audience–media relationship could provide important cues for the media’s trustworthiness and ultimately impact public trust in

news media. One such factor may be the public's criticisms of the media. Previous research has found that exposure to popular parodies of mainstream news and the anti-media rhetoric of political elites decreases public trust in news media (Ladd, 2012; Peifer, 2018). The audience could also be susceptible to similar criticisms coming from members of their discussion networks. Ognyanova (2019) showed that young people are susceptible to such antimedia cues coming from their peers. Using a longitudinal design, she demonstrated that due to social influence mechanisms, people are receptive to what others close to them think about the media. The author concluded that members who share a social network tend to converge toward the majority position in terms of media trust.

It is noticeable that the most effective public criticisms of news media focus specifically on the corrupt nature and motives of the news media, whether these criticisms are coming from alternative news outlets or politicians. Opinion leaders frequently target audiences' perceptions of media integrity and benevolence when they allege that the media are corrupt and dangerous for society (Flew, 2019). If this kind of rhetoric is replicated in ordinary people's conversations about the news media, we can expect that people who have media cynics in their discussion networks will be exposed to harsh criticisms toward news media. If their immediate social environment frames media motivations in terms of the media's self-interests, social influence could also make individuals with excessive media hostility in their discussion network more cynical about news media.

The review above discussed several commonly proposed explanations of media distrust. To explore the commonalities and differences in factors that could be leading to media cynicism and media distrust, the following RQ was asked:

RQ3: How do predictors of media cynicism differ from those of media distrust?

The Context of the Study

The empirical data for the analysis were collected in Serbia. In the second half of the 20th century, Serbia was a part of Yugoslavia, a socialist country in which the media were owned by the state and subjected to direct censorship by the Communist Party. During the 1990s, multipartyism was restored in Serbia and the state lost its monopoly on the ownership of the media. However, in the same decade, Yugoslavia was disintegrated in a series of wars, while Serbia was governed by the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević. During this time, the mainstream media continued to engage in propaganda and remained closely tied to the state, while a number of independent news outlets emerged practicing independent journalism more in line with established professional standards (Pjesivac, 2017; Rupar et al., 2021). Democracy in Serbia was restored after the Milošević regime was overthrown in the popular uprising of 2000. After that, the media sector underwent comprehensive privatization, the national broadcaster started transitioning from being a state-owned propaganda tool to a public broadcasting service, and media regulations were changed to match the EU standards (Milutinović, 2017). However, even two decades later, the media system is

still burdened by serious problems including a lack of transparency in the ownership structure, strong political and economic pressures, and increasing tabloidization (IREX, 2019). It should not come as a surprise, then, that Serbian citizens hold their press in such a low regard, an observation consistently confirmed by opinion polls (IPSOS Global Advisor, 2019; Markov & Min, 2020; Pjesivac, 2017).

Serbia is a relevant case for studying diversity in negative media perceptions because its citizens are likely to form qualitatively different expectations informed by their attitudes toward democratic values and experiences with media in the context of rapidly changing political and media environments. The study of media trust is inherently tied with normative democratic theories of journalism developed in Western democracies. An important assumption in these studies is that normative journalistic functions—such as objective, impartial, or fair reporting—hold the same importance for audiences/respondents as they do for scholars. Yet, Serbian society is polarized when it comes to public support for democratic values. On the one hand, the popular protests of the 1990s that brought about a change in regime embodied a civic demand for the democratization of Serbian society. On the contrary, a consensus on the desirability of democratic values in Serbia was never formed. Around 43% of Serbian citizens agree to some extent that although flawed, democracy is still better than other available systems (CeSID, 2014). At the same time, previous research has found that some citizens attribute highly negative characteristics to democracy, such as contention, chaos, and a lack of order (Fiket et al., 2017). Although the mainstream categories of media trust may be relevant to understanding animosity toward media from some audiences, they may be less adequate for other citizens. If we use typical media trust instruments to survey citizens with a distaste for liberal democratic values, the findings may obscure more than they illuminate. If we ask a person how impartial they think the media are, our knowledge about their media perceptions will be limited if they essentially do not believe the media could or should be impartial. The literature would benefit from a more adequate tool to study the grievances of such audiences as well. We suggest studying media cynicism not as another catch-all category but as an important step in the diversification of the analytical framework available to study media perceptions.

Method

Procedure and Participants

To validate the developed measure of media cynicism, an online survey of adult Serbian citizens ($N = 502$) was conducted between August 17 and 20, 2020. In the observed period, the internet penetration rate in Serbia was 78.4%.¹ Although the digital divide in Serbia is steadily decreasing, the internet population is still better educated, younger, and more urban compared with the general population.

Ipsos Strategic Marketing, the polling agency used for data collection, runs a diverse online panel of approximately 35,000 participants in Serbia. However, similar to most online panels in general, the structure of this panel is influenced by the

characteristics of people with online access and a propensity to join such panels. Most notably, the panel includes few members of the oldest and least educated citizens, limiting the potential of sample quotas to produce representative data. To reduce these biases and increase the diversity of the obtained sample, quotas for sex, age, type of settlement, and region were set to match the characteristics of the internet population in Serbia according to the official assessment of the Statistical Office of Serbia.

An email invitation to participate in the survey was sent out to approximately 3,500 panel members. Thirty-two respondents terminated their participation before completing the survey, 171 respondents agreed to participate but were unable to do so because the relevant quotas were filled, and 13 cases were screened out due to the low quality of their responses. The number of points awarded to those who completed the survey was worth approximately US\$2. After all quotas were filled and the desired number of respondents was reached, data collection was terminated. The within-panel participation rate was 14.5%.²

The final sample comprised men (51%) and women (49%) almost equally. The average age of respondents was 38.5 ($SD = 11.70$), ranging from 18 to 70 years. In terms of regional representation, 27.1% of participants were from Vojvodina ($n = 136$), 25.5% from Belgrade ($n = 128$), 26.5% from Central-West Serbia ($n = 133$) and 20.9% from South-East Serbia ($n = 105$). More respondents reported living in urban (63.7%) compared with rural areas. The highest percentage of respondents reported completing high-school education (42.2%), followed by university degree (35.1%), some college (14.5%), and graduate school (8.2%). Overall, the final sample is diverse and comparable to the general population in terms of gender, geographic region, and type of area, but it is younger and better educated than the general population. A comparison of sample characteristics with characteristics of the general and internet populations can be found in the supplemental material.

Key Variables

All variables³ were measured with a 7-point scale unless otherwise noted. *Media cynicism* was measured using 15 items developed based on previous indicators of cynicism in different fields and insights from research on media perceptions (e.g., Agger et al., 1961; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Pattyn et al., 2012; Pjesivac et al., 2016; Wanous et al., 2000). We reviewed the extant measures of cynicism, examining how well they represented our proposed conceptual definition and to what degree they could be adapted to fit the current context. We adapted such items with the highest degree of face validity, for example, "Our political leaders are prepared to lie to us whenever it suits their purposes" from Pattyn et al. (2012) by changing their object. Additional items were created purposefully to operationalize the proposed conceptual definition of media cynicism (e.g., "The news media intentionally report in a divisive way because it is more profitable") with an aim to specifically reflect the crisis in the audience-media relationship as indicated in previous qualitative research of news audiences (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Pjesivac et al., 2016; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2016). The object in indicators of media cynicism was intended to represent the whole

system of professional journalism. An attempt was made to use the same referents used by audiences in everyday life to denote generalized media targets, such as “journalists,” “the media,” or “news media.” The mean and standard deviation for each item measuring media cynicism are presented in Table 1.

To increase the content validity of the measure, we consulted a panel of experts in relevant fields. An invitation to assess the proposed conceptual and operational definitions of media cynicism was sent on June 23, 2020, to 15 scholars who have published some of the most influential articles on cynicism and distrust in leading communication and political science journals. Five experts responded commenting on the proposed definitional components and indicators of media cynicism. We used this feedback to revise 10 of 15 proposed media cynicism items.

As shown in Table 1, all proposed 15 indicators of media cynicism show acceptable corrected item-total correlations, but most items display a moderate to high negative skew. According to Hair et al. (2014), skewness larger than $|1|$ is considered substantial, although it may have a negligible influence considering the sample size. Seven media cynicism items had skewness values below -1 . However, given the exploratory stage of the media cynicism index development, we decided not to exclude these items, but to transform them to reduce the deviation from normality. This was achieved by taking the cubed terms. Based on the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) results, which will be explained in detail in the following section, the total number of items was reduced to 10.

Media trust ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.30$, $\alpha = .85$) was measured using a common 5-item instrument originating from research on media credibility in the 1980s and 1990s (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; West, 1994). In the current study, the instrument was adapted according to work by Strömbäck et al. (2020) to measure trust in news media in general so that it would have a target compatible to that in the media cynicism index. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with five statements including “The news media are fair when covering the news” and “The news media are unbiased when covering the news.” In the subsequent analyses, the use of the term media distrust indicated that the media trust index was reverse-coded.

Generalized (social) trust ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.39$, $\alpha = .82$) was measured with a standardized 3-item instrument used frequently in large-N surveys. Items included “In your opinion, to what extent is it generally possible to trust people” and “Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair.” *Perceived media responsiveness* ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.29$, $\alpha = .86$) was measured using the operational definition proposed by van der Wurff and Schoenbach (2014). Respondents were asked to report how successful news media are at responding to audience complaints, considering the wishes of their audiences, building up good relationships with their audiences, and siding with ordinary people when reporting on conflicts. Finally, the name generator technique was used to measure *hostility toward media in respondents’ discussion networks* ($M = 3.57$, $SD = .83$, $\alpha = .69$). First, respondents were asked to report the initials or nicknames of up to three people with whom they discussed politics or current events in the last 6 months. Then, for each discussant, respondents were asked to recall how often their contacts

Table I. Descriptive Statistics for Media Cynicism Indicators.

Item	M	SD	Corrected item- total correlation	Skewness (SD = .11)	Kurtosis (SD = .22)	Skew after transformation (cubed term)
News organizations only operate to maximize their profits. (Mot1)	5.62	1.42	.52	-0.95	0.42	
Journalists are prepared to lie to us whenever it suits their purposes. (Mot2)	6.17	1.24	.66	-1.70	2.88	-0.85
The news media pretend to care more about people than they actually do. (Mot3)	6.04	1.28	.69	-1.41	1.63	-0.64
The news media intentionally report in a divisive way because it is more profitable. (Mot4)	6.04	1.29	.65	-1.40	1.59	-0.65
The news media do not care about the damage their reporting will cause as long as it serves their interests. (Mot5)	6.08	1.37	.60	-1.80	3.21	-0.81
The news media do not care about protecting the interests of regular people. (Mot6)	5.94	1.36	.71	-1.36	1.62	-0.53
Even if a news report appears professional, this is only because the news organization had something to gain from it. (Mot7)	5.17	1.55	.64	-0.47	-0.67	
The idea that the news media could have integrity is laughable. (Mot8)	4.90	1.76	.55	-0.47	-0.62	
Journalism in this country always ends up failing the public. (Pess1)	4.79	1.61	.74	-0.54	-0.15	
The system of professional journalism as we have it today will never be able to adequately inform the public. (Pess2)	5.30	1.55	.73	-0.78	0.12	
Most of the measures that are intended to improve how the news media in this country cover the news will not do much good. (Pess3)	4.99	1.55	.71	-0.44	-0.28	
The news media in this country will never be better at informing the public. (Pess4)	4.42	1.78	.61	-0.30	-0.71	
Corruption will always be present in the news media in this country. (Pess5)	5.74	1.50	.65	-1.08	0.49	-0.35
You can never get truly informed by reading the mainstream news in this country. (Pess6)	5.78	1.56	.62	-1.19	0.68	-0.48
All journalists are bad—some are just worse than others. (Pess7)	3.30	1.83	.51	0.32	-0.83	

Note. N = 502. Based on the results of exploratory factor analysis, items Mot2, Mot3, Mot4, Mot5, Mot6, Pess1, Pess2, Pess3, Pess4, and Pess7 were included in the final solution.

criticized the work of news media (from 1 = *never* to 5 = *every day*). Media hostility in one's discussion network was then calculated as the average score to the latter question. Respondents who reported at least one discussant accounted for 77.5% of the overall sample ($n = 389$).

In addition to demographic variables, the questionnaire included standard measures of *political interest* ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.77$), *political ideology* ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.13$), and *political trust* ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.59$, $\alpha = .94$), which were used as control variables. We measured news media exposure as the number of days in the previous week during which a respondent used 10 different channels to get informed about politics. EFA was performed on 10 items using the principal component (PC) extraction and direct oblimin rotation method, which yielded three components with eigenvalues larger than 1. *Mainstream news exposure* ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 2.05$, $\alpha = .76$) comprised exposure to a public broadcasting service, print media, and network TV. These are the most popular and long-lasting news outlets in the Serbian media environment (IREX, 2019). The second component was labeled *exposure to alternative news media* and included following news on cable TV, websites and apps of traditional media, and online-only news outlets ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.08$, $\alpha = .71$). Some of the most popular cable TV and digital-born outlets practice investigative ("watchdog") journalism frequently critical of the government. Therefore, these outlets are not an alternative to professional journalism, but to the mainstream news outlets in Serbia, which are mostly recognizable for their strong progovernment bias or more balanced and neutral coverage (IREX, 2019). Finally, *social media-based news exposure* ($M = 6.03$, $SD = 1.99$, $\alpha = .74$) encompassed using messaging apps, social media, and online video sharing platforms for information.

Analysis and Findings

Analyzing the Reliability and Validity of the Media Cynicism Measurement

To answer **RQ1** and **RQ2**, the structure of the data was analyzed using EFA and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). We examined the reliability of the measure of media cynicism by assessing its internal consistency. The convergent and discriminant validity of media cynicism were explored in relation to media distrust. Given the amount of theoretical overlap between the two constructs, we expected to observe a strong positive correlation between media cynicism and media distrust (**RQ1**). By testing different measurement models, we examined whether the model that distinguishes cynicism from distrust shows a better fit than the unidimensional model (**RQ2**).

Initially, EFA was performed on a randomly selected half of the sample ($n = 251$) using the PC extraction method and direct oblimin rotation with all 15 original media cynicism items. Three items with communalities below .5 and 2 items with significant cross-loadings (above .2) were removed. The final 10 media cynicism items loaded on two components that accounted for 70.1% of the variance. All items had communalities $>.5$ and factor loadings $>.7$ with no cross-loading issues.

When five media distrust items were added to the EFA of the remaining 10 media cynicism items, three components with eigenvalues above 1 were extracted with 69.1% of variance explained. Media distrust items loaded on a separate factor from media cynicism items, which loaded on two dimensions for perceived self-serving motives and pessimistic views about journalism. All items had acceptable communalities and high factor loadings (for the final model, see Table 2; for a complete summary of EFA results, see the supplemental material). When the same EFA was repeated with the number of extracted factors set to two, media distrust and cynicism items loaded separately.

In the next stage of the analysis, the structure of the data was examined by performing CFA on the other randomly selected half of the sample ($n = 251$). To understand which structure best represents the data, several competing measurement models were tested (see Figure 1). A single-factor model (Model 1) showed poor fit, $\chi^2(90) = 657.17, p < .001$, CFI = .723, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .159, standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) = .102, and indicated that the variance in indicators of media cynicism and distrust cannot be attributed to a uniform underlying dimension. In contrast, a two-factor model (Model 2) showed an improvement in all model fit indices, $\chi^2(89) = 388.19, p < .001$, CFI = .854, RMSEA = .116, SRMR = .074. The test of chi-square difference showed that this improvement of fit is significant. However, the two-factor model did not achieve acceptable goodness-of-fit values. Although it provides a better explanation compared with the unidimensional model, the two-factor model appears to be an inadequate illustration of the relationship between media distrust and cynicism.

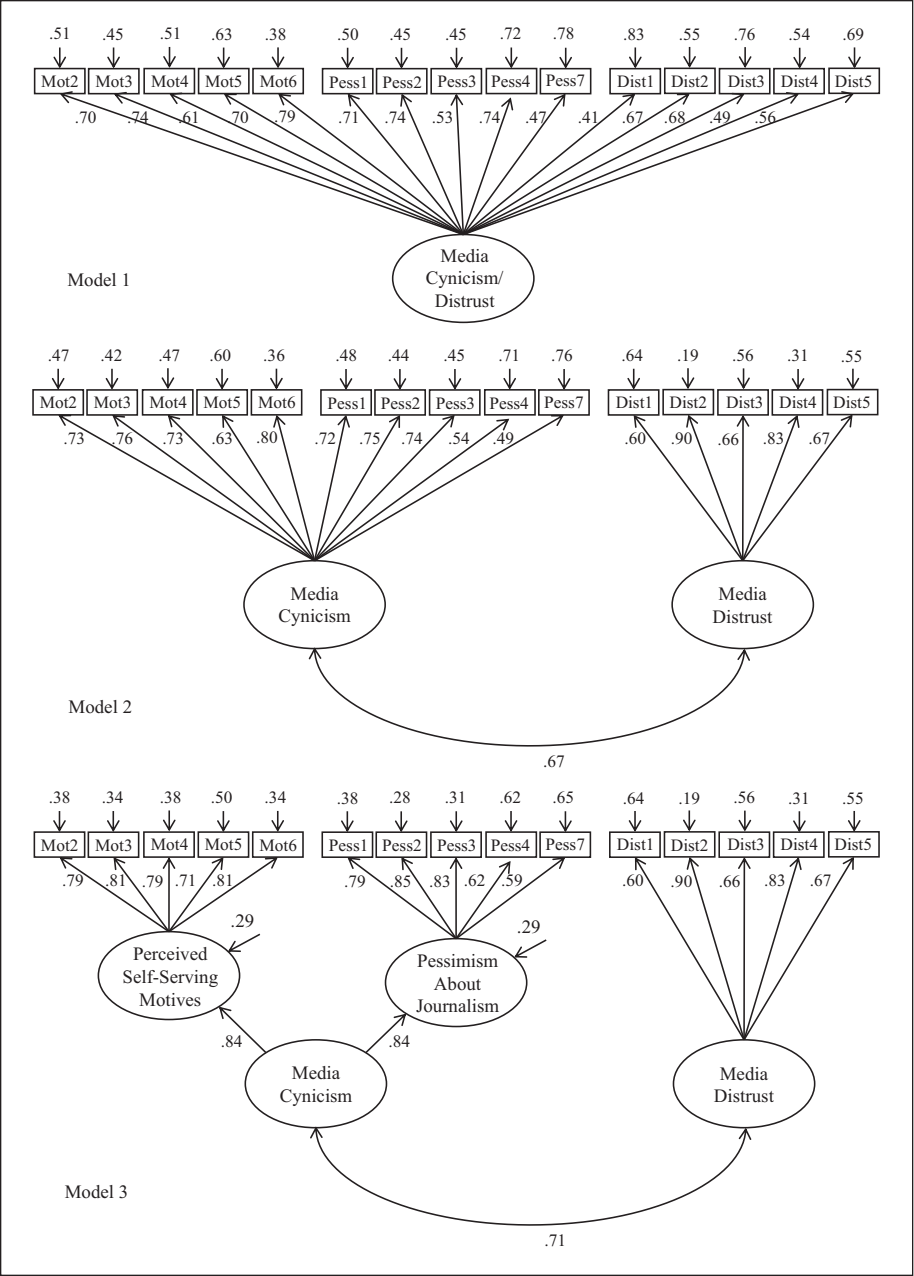
To further examine the dimensionality of media cynicism, an alternative possibility was explored—that there is a hierarchical structure in the data. A common hierarchical alternative to the previous models is a latent factor. It could be argued that media cynicism is a second-order latent factor comprising two first-order factors: perceived self-interest of news media and pessimism about journalism. This structure would mean that media cynicism cannot be directly observed but can be inferred through the two first-order factors. This is a plausible explanation, and it is consistent with an influential conceptualization of media trust as a second-order latent factor (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). While we have only two dimensions of media cynicism that can be considered first-order factors, modeling a second-order structure may require three first-order factors for the model to be just-identified (Kline, 2016). However, Chen et al. (2012, p. 226) describe two situations in which it is possible to identify a second-order factor using only two first-order factors. The first one is when the loadings of the second-order factor are equally constrained. The other is when the second-order factor is related to an external variable. Since the purpose of this study is to consider media cynicism and distrust simultaneously and in relationship with other variables, the latter applies to the current case (for a similar application, see Choi, 2016).

When cynicism was modeled as a second-order factor and correlated with media distrust (Model 3), the model showed a superior fit compared with the previous models, $\chi^2(87) = 182.33, p < .001$, CFI = .953, RMSEA = .066, SRMR = .053. Furthermore, the model fit was acceptable based on guidelines by Hair et al. (2014).

Table 2. Exploratory Factor Analysis of Media Cynicism and Media Distrust Indicators.

Item	Factor loading		
	1	2	3
Factor 1: Perceived self-serving motives			
Journalists are prepared to lie to us whenever it suits their purposes. (Mot2)	.86	.05	-.09
The news media pretend to care more about people than they actually do. (Mot3)	.86	.04	-.07
The news media intentionally report in a divisive way because it is more profitable. (Mot4)	.90	-.09	.05
The news media do not care about the damage their reporting will cause as long as it serves their interests. (Mot5)	.79	.02	.11
The news media do not care about protecting the interests of regular people. (Mot6)	.78	.08	.03
Factor 2: Pessimism about journalism			
Journalism in this country always ends up failing the public. (Pess1)	.14	.76	.04
The system of professional journalism as we have it today will never be able to adequately inform the public. (Pess2)	.12	.67	.19
Most of the measures that are intended to improve how the news media in this country cover the news will not do much good. (Pess3)	.12	.73	.10
The news media in this country will never be better at informing the public. (Pess4)	-.05	.87	-.03
All journalists are bad—some are just worse than others. (Pess7)	-.06	.81	-.08
Factor 3: Media distrust			
The news media are fair when covering the news. (Dist1, R)	.01	-.11	.78
The news media are unbiased when covering the news. (Dist2, R)	.11	.07	.82
The news media tell the whole story when covering the news. (Dist3, R)	.01	-.08	.81
The news media are accurate when covering the news. (Dist4, R)	.02	.10	.84
The news media separate facts from opinions when covering the news. (Dist5, R)	-.10	.13	.69

Note. $n = 251$. The extraction method was principal component analysis with an oblimin rotation. Factor loadings above .50 are in bold. 69.1% of variance explained. Reverse-scored items are denoted with R.



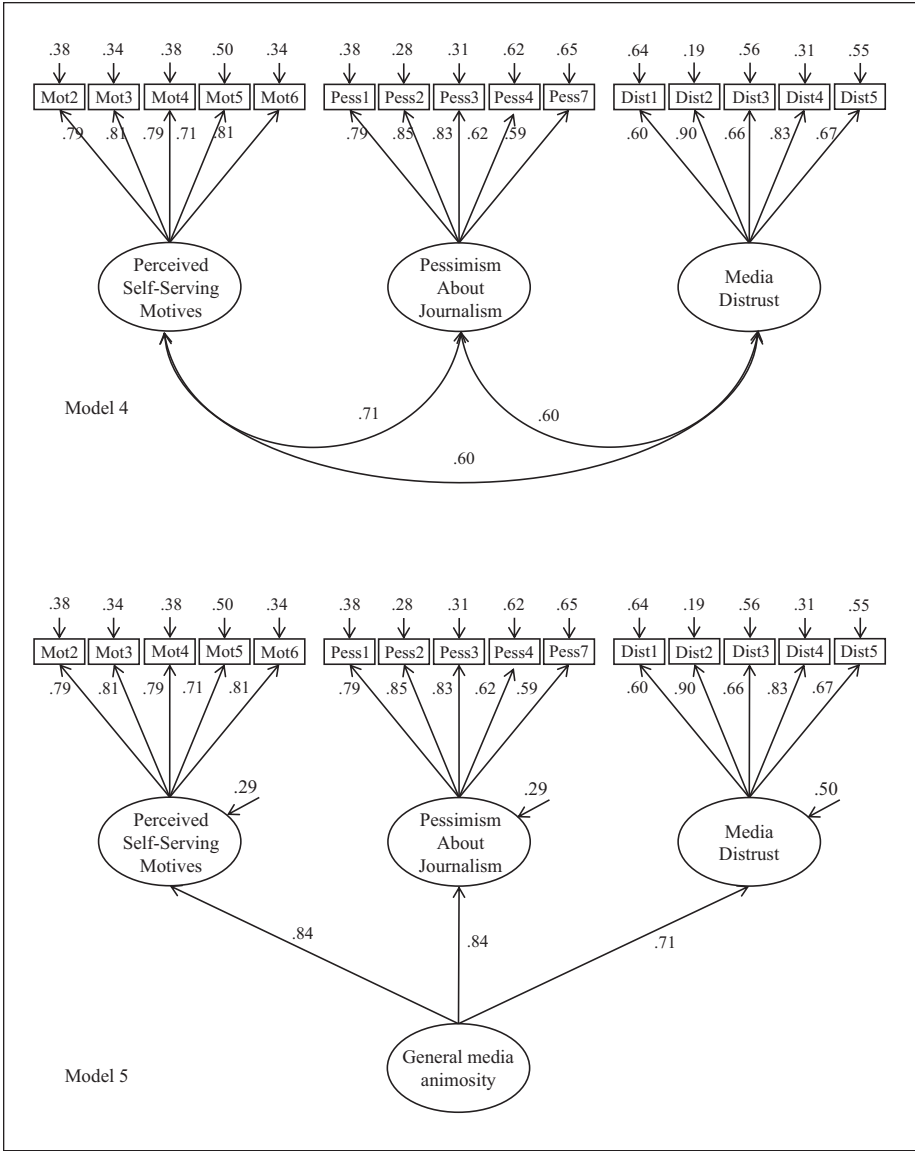


Figure 1. Competing measurement models of media cynicism and media distrust.
Note. $n = 251$. All estimated paths and covariances are significant at $p < .001$.

The coefficient between media distrust and cynicism was .71. The composite reliability for every factor in the model was above the recommended threshold of .70 (perceived motives = .89, pessimism about journalism = .86, media cynicism = .83, media distrust = .85), indicating acceptable internal consistency of the measure

(Hair et al., 2014). Furthermore, all factors had average variance extracted greater than the common cutoff value of .5 (perceived motives = .61, pessimism about journalism = .55, media cynicism = .71, and media distrust = .55), suggesting acceptable convergent validity (Hair et al., 2014).

Although it is possible to estimate the measurement model consistent with our theoretical arguments, the specification issues remain. Namely, with only three first-order factors, it is impossible to distinguish this model from two alternative ones: the model in which three first-order factors are correlated (Model 4) and the model in which a single higher-order latent variable encompasses three first-order factors (Model 5). Both alternative models have the same model fit as Model 3 and appropriately illustrate our data. We decided to use Model 3 in further analyses because it is the most consistent with our theoretical arguments and it achieved an acceptable model fit with performance no worse than other acceptable models.

In conclusion, in exploring **RQ1**, some evidence was found that the final 10 items present a reliable and valid measure of media cynicism, which should be modeled as a second-order latent variable. The EFA and CFA results consistently showed that media distrust and media cynicism items always load better on their respective factors rather than on the same factor, providing initial evidence of discriminant validity (**RQ2**).

Predicting Media Distrust and Media Cynicism

To answer **RQ3**, a structural equation model (SEM) predicting media distrust and cynicism was specified with generalized trust, media responsiveness, and discussion network media hostility entered as predictors, $\chi^2(814) = 1449.00, p < .001$, CFI = .941, RMSEA = .039. As shown in Figure 2, the analysis indicated several differences between the predictors of two media perceptions. While generalized trust was a strong negative predictor of media cynicism, it was only marginally associated with media distrust. The critical ratio for pairwise comparison of the two estimates was 2.15, which is significant at the $p < .05$ level. Low generalized trust indicated increased cynicism about media significantly more than did media distrust. Media hostility in one's discussion network was a significant predictor of media cynicism but not distrust. Based on a formal test of statistical significance, we can conclude that this factor plays a more important role in the formation of cynicism compared with the formation of distrust. In contrast, perceived media responsiveness was strongly associated with both media distrust and cynicism. The critical ratio for the difference between the estimates of perceived media responsiveness was -1.01 , which is not statistically significant at a conventional level.

Examining the statistical significance of control relationships provides additional insight into the structure of predictors of media cynicism and of distrust. Both cynicism ($\beta = -.26, p < .001$) and distrust ($\beta = -.32, p < .001$) were strongly predicted by political trust. Cynicism was, in addition, predicted by lower education ($\beta = -.09, p = .04$) and stronger conservative attitudes ($\beta = .11, p = .01$). Distrust was, in addition, predicted by less frequent exposure to mainstream ($\beta = -.23, p < .001$) and more frequent exposure to alternative news outlets ($\beta = .19, p = .02$).

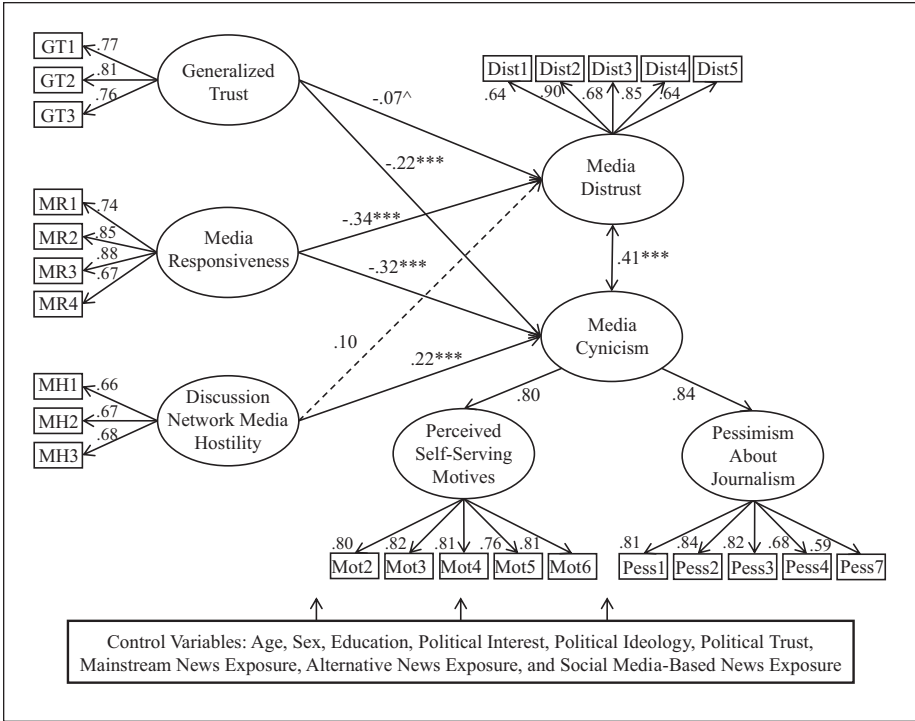


Figure 2. Structural equation model predicting media cynicism and media distrust.
Note. $N = 502$. Statistics are standardized coefficients. The model also includes covariances between all exogenous variables. The covariance between media cynicism and media distrust was drawn between the error terms of these variables.
 $^{\wedge}p < .10$. $^{***}p < .001$.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the nature of and relationship between media distrust and cynicism. Analyzing different measurement models showed that indicators of cynicism and distrust are not influenced by the same factor. Moreover, SEM results indicated several differences in the structures of predictors of media cynicism and media distrust. These findings support our arguments that although related, media cynicism and distrust can be empirically distinguished, and this distinction could have important implications for how audiences perceive and relate to news media.

Our findings indicate that reintroducing media cynicism to the study of public perceptions of news media could help us to better understand the contemporary crisis in the audience-media relationship. Factor analyses showed that indicators of media distrust and media cynicism cannot be explained by the same underlying dimension. The most important implication of this finding is that it is not justified to equate media distrust with cynicism. Distrusting the media does not necessarily involve believing

that newsmen have malicious intent or that the media are not capable of performing any better. According to our results, Serbian citizens appear unconvinced not only of the objectivity, fairness, and accuracy of the news media but also that the media are even attempting to meet these professional standards. Previous studies of media trust have typically been informed by democratic theories of journalism (see Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014) that ascribe important social functions to professional news media (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Our findings question whether citizens still consider these functions to be relevant for the reporting of professional news outlets. This finding calls for expanding our analytical focus beyond the public's expectations regarding normative media functions and scrutinizing citizens' changing views about the purpose and functions of the news media in modern democracies.

In line with the previous conclusion, media cynicism—as defined in this study—cannot be fully explained by common indicators of media distrust. The instrument proposed here is imperfect, but it provides a foundation to continue advancing a reliable and valid measure of media cynicism with appropriate refinement and further testing. Above all, several indicators were substantially skewed toward extreme values. This may be due to the context in which data were gathered. It could be that public perceptions of news media in Serbia have reached such a low point that it has become commonsensical to strongly agree with even the most antagonistic statements about news media. Responses to the same indicators might achieve a more normal distribution in societies with more favorable media perceptions on average (e.g., Northern Europe). However, to improve the performance of the instrument across contexts, problematic indicators should be reformulated or replaced, making sure to reflect appropriate theoretical meaning with statements that are less likely to be considered commonplace.

Our exploration of alternative measurement models indicates a high degree of flexibility of the instrument presented in this article. The accepted measurement model is most consistent with our theoretical arguments, but the two empirical alternatives also provide adequate representations of the data. Future studies may employ the three first-order factors as discrete but related variables to investigate relationships between specific media perceptions and external variables. Alternatively, each first-order factor can be seen as providing an independent contribution to the more abstract concept of animosity toward media. What is most important for the current study is that the indicators of media cynicism and distrust never load onto the same factor.

The current instrument was intended to measure cynicism at the level of news media in general. We used several referents (e.g., “news media,” “professional journalism,” and “journalists”) to designate such an abstract target in line with common practices in public discourse. However, some respondents may have applied different frames of reference for these targets (e.g., people/workers for journalists and organizations/management for news media). Until in-depth empirical data on the nature of the public's understanding of abstract media targets is available, future studies should keep the referent in all items consistent. It would also be valuable to explore how cynicism is formed and manifested toward more specific targets, such as different types of outlets in terms of journalistic style or editorial policy, specific news outlets, or even journalists.

Some readers may question why we used the mainstream approach to measuring media distrust as the low end of a media trust index. Across social sciences, there is a debate over whether trust and distrust represent opposite sides of the same construct or whether they should be considered distinct constructs (e.g., Schoorman et al., 2015). Similar discussions have been rare in communication studies. Recently, Engelke et al. (2019) argued that media trust and media distrust should be conceptualized and measured as related but distinct constructs. At the same time, the authors reported that they were not aware of an instrument developed specifically to measure media distrust. In such circumstances, communication studies routinely use reversed trust indexes to measure media distrust. Given the exploratory stage of our research, it made sense to contrast our new measure of media cynicism with arguably the most standardized way to record media distrust in the extant literature. Following the direction suggested by Engelke et al. (2019), as new conceptual and operational definitions of media distrust become available, it will be important to repeat the analyses from this study using more sophisticated measures of media distrust.

Our exploration of predictors of media distrust and cynicism revealed both similarities and differences. The findings indicate that both perceptions have a strong relational component, as perceived media responsiveness emerged as the strongest predictor of both media distrust and cynicism. Yet, the relational aspect appears more pronounced in media distrust, which, unlike cynicism, is also heavily driven by exposure patterns. In contrast, we discovered that more stable individual characteristics and environmental features may have a more profound influence on shaping media cynicism than distrust. Most notably, generalized trust was strongly associated with cynicism but only marginally related to distrust. Among control variables, conservative attitudes predicted media cynicism but not distrust. To further investigate how strongly media cynicism is based on personal characteristics, future studies should consider including generalized cynicism as another predictor in addition to generalized trust.

In addition, we found only cynicism to be sensitive to criticisms about news media in one's environment. One implication of these findings is that contemporary social, political, and technological conditions may continue to incentivize the spread of media cynicism rather than media distrust. As audiences increasingly turn to social media to get the news, they are likely to encounter a variety of informal sources that are competing with professional news media for credibility in truth-telling (Flew, 2019). These sources, whether they are populist leaders, alternative news outlets, or influential pundits, often build their reputation by demonizing professional news organizations and presenting themselves as the only actors who understand and care about the interests of the people. In societies in which generalized trust has already been severely eroded, citizens may be particularly vulnerable to such anti-media rhetoric.

An important limitation of our SEM is that it does not include a straightforward measure of media performance, which the extant literature recognizes as a major factor of media distrust (Pjesivac, 2017; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Survey research is suitable for testing performance theories of media trust at the micro-level—that is, the idea that individual evaluations of media performance influence media (dis)trust. There are several available variables that could be used to operationalize evaluations

of media performance, such as perceived media performance (Peifer, 2018), media quality (Fawzi, 2019), and perceived ethical performance of news media (Culver & Lee, 2019). However, the discriminant validity between these variables and the common measure of media (dis)trust used in this study is questionable. This limitation is relevant beyond our study—it is a reminder that widely accepted instruments of media trust still face problems distinguishing trust from its antecedents (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). To improve theory building in this area, more effort is needed to explicate the relationship between media (dis)trust and evaluations of media performance.

Furthermore, the relationship between media cynicism and media distrust in our SEM is modeled through correlated errors of the two variables. In this way, we wanted to improve the model specification and acknowledge that the two variables are correlated to a meaningful extent, but questions about the direction of this relationship remain. Does cynicism breed distrust or do prolonged experiences of distrust lead to cynicism? For instance, Mayer et al. (1995) place perceived benevolence and integrity of the object among antecedents of trust, which appears to be consistent with the idea that cynicism drives distrust. However, this relationship has not been thoroughly explicated in the extant literature and remains an important question for future studies.

Several additional limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. The online survey used a self-selected sample of participants in an online panel. Although quotas were used to increase the diversity of the sample and its similarity with the general population, this sampling strategy likely favored participants who are more efficacious and interested in the news and politics compared with the general public. Although some previous studies have suggested that age and education may be relevant factors in shaping media (dis)trust, the evidence has been inconsistent and inconclusive. Nevertheless, our sample was skewed toward younger and more educated respondents, and future research should replicate our design on a more representative sample.

Similarly, although media cynicism was explicated relying on insights from international literature, this study used empirical data from a single country. To examine the extent to which media cynicism represents a universal phenomenon, it is important to gather evidence from contexts with diverse properties of and relationships between the audience, media, and politics. We may expect to observe similar patterns in countries experiencing democratic backsliding. In such societies, it is not rare for news media to be branded as a part of the corrupt elite that produces and deepens social problems rather than solves them (Flew, 2019). This kind of environment may have implications for how citizens think about news media, and considerations about the media's vested interests may become more relevant compared to normative expectations of journalism.

This study aimed to promote the discussion on variations in public animosity toward news media. We have demonstrated the importance of understanding media cynicism as a form of public negativity more unambiguously detrimental than distrust. Future studies should strive to explicate the relationship between media distrust and more desirable forms of criticality toward media (e.g., skepticism). These

efforts will contribute to developing precise conceptual and analytical categories necessary to illuminate the extent, nature, and implications of the crisis in the audience–media relationships, and to promote realistic democracy-supporting public perceptions of news media.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-US/oblasti/upotreba-ikt/upotreba-ikt-pojedinci>
2. The obtained sample is a self-selected, nonprobability sample, and it is not representative of the general population in Serbia. According to the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR, 2010), the appropriateness of a nonprobability online sample should be judged based on the study objective. This kind of sample would be inappropriate if the goal of the study was to accurately estimate population values. Yet, AAPOR considers nonprobability online samples to be an appropriate choice for methodological research and for research aiming to investigate the relationships between individual characteristics and other survey variables, which is consistent with the goals of our study.
3. The survey instrument used in this study is available as a part of the supplemental material.

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