

# Concepts, causes and consequences of trust in news media – A literature review and framework

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## **Abstract**

Research on trust in media is on the rise. However, communication scholars have addressed related concepts (e.g., media credibility) for decades, and these concepts have often been used interchangeably with that of trust. This practice has resulted in a confusing field of research, with studies using different labels and drawing on various theoretical backgrounds. This article aims to improve conceptual clarity. On the basis of a literature review, we first propose a broad conceptualisation of trust in news media and disentangle it from related concepts. Second, we develop a framework that identifies individual- and societal-level causes and consequences of trust in various media objects. Third, we review the current state of research on social, political, and media-related correlates of trust.

Keywords: framework of media trust, credibility, media scepticism, media cynicism, hostile media perception

A well-informed public is crucial to the functioning of democracy. Individuals depend on accurate and reliable information from the media to gain knowledge about current developments and to make informed political decisions (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). However, because people cannot verify the correctness of most news reports themselves, they have to trust journalistic media, their news selection, and their production. News media, in turn, are dependent on the audience to trust their information; otherwise, recipients would have no reason to use (and pay for) them (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Over the past several years, media criticism has been on the rise in many Western democracies, and changing levels of trust can be observed in many countries (see also Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Although these changes have led to increased scholarly attention to trust in news media, the research on media trust lacks theoretical clarity, and there has been no overview of the empirical evidence on its causes and

consequences. Whereas trust research has a long tradition in other disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, and political science), communication scholars have generally turned to related concepts such as media credibility, hostile media perceptions (HMP), and journalistic quality perceptions. However, these concepts often overlap (and some are even used interchangeably) with trust. These concepts are also used to measure trust, leading to overall confusion in the field. To identify empirical (as well as theoretical and methodological) shortcomings in the literature (see also Engelke et al., 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020), it is necessary to take a step back and to systematically bundle the existing evidence on the correlates of trust in news media and related concepts. On the basis of a comprehensive literature review, this article aims to provide clarity by disentangling the concepts to offer a framework of trust in news media because trust, its causes, and its consequences are often confused (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 709). Thus, the goal of this article is to propose a conceptualisation of the social, political, and media-related correlates of trust in news media at the individual and societal levels.

To this end, we conducted a comprehensive literature review. The aim of this review was to include as much research on trust in the news as possible. The literature review therefore includes peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, edited volumes, and monographs published in either English or German.<sup>1</sup> We included studies explicitly conceptualising *trust* in news media and those investigating related concepts. We opted for this broad selection criteria for two reasons: First, some conceptualisations of trust assume that media credibility and HMP or, more commonly, perceptions of journalistic quality, *reflect* trust in news media and thus can be used as indicators of it. Second, because these constructs are closely related to trust, we can infer conclusions about the potential correlates of media trust.

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the authors' backgrounds and the large amount of research published in German, we decided to include German-language studies to make the results of this research available to an international audience.

In selecting the studies, we used a qualitative, multi-step sampling process. Because trust in news media is a fuzzy research area with many adjacent constructs and terms often used synonymously, this seemed like a sensible approach. As a first step, the 16 authors, who are well versed in the aforementioned research areas, identified the most important empirical work published in articles, monographs, and edited volumes written in English or German. Second, we supplemented this corpus of studies using the snowball method, identifying additional works from the reference lists of previously selected works. Third, we conducted additional searches in the Communication & Mass Media Complete and JSTOR databases, using the abovementioned research areas (i.e., media trust, media confidence, media scepticism and cynicism, credibility, and hostile media perception) as keywords. To identify literature that often is not listed in such databases (e.g., edited volumes and monographs), we also conducted additional library catalogue research and searched the reference lists of these selected works to identify prominent monographs on trust in news media published in German or English. We continued this process until all of the authors agreed that theoretical saturation had been reached (Saunders et al., 2018), meaning that we found no more studies that brought to light additional findings regarding the correlates of media trust. This multi-stage procedure allowed us to 1) include various types of publications, including grey literature and reports, that would have been neglected if we had searched only databases; 2) identify German-language works and make these findings accessible to an international audience; and 3) include findings in related research areas that were informative for media trust research.

### **Defining Trust in News Media**

Although there is no universal definition of trust in news media, three commonalities are largely agreed upon. First, trust is the willingness of a trustor to be vulnerable to a trustee based on past experiences and positive expectations (Blöbaum, 2014; Grosser, 2016; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Jakob, 2012a; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Mayer et al., 1995; Misztal, 1996; Müller, 2013; Rousseau et al., 1998; Schlenker et al., 1973). Accepting vulnerability in

this case refers to an active decision to depend or rely on a trustee (Mayer et al., 1995; Misztal, 2011, pp. 364–365). This decision is made by the trustor while reflecting on critical alternatives (Luhmann, 2017). Thus, trust serves to bridge the gap between knowing and not knowing (Vanacker & Belmas, 2009). Regarding media trust, the expectations and past experiences upon which trust is based refer to the normative, democratic functions of the media and to perceptions of journalistic quality (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). In a process of justification, the trustor assesses whether the trustee ‘will perform a particular action, both before he can monitor such action and in a context in which it affects his own action’ (Gambetta, 2000, p. 217).

Second, trust is oriented towards an unknown future. It is, therefore, inherently risky and involves uncertainty, as the trustor has no control over the trustee and there is a risk that positive expectations will lead to disappointment (Blöbaum, 2014; Grosser, 2016; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Hardin, 2006; Jakob, 2012a; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Luhmann, 2017; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Sztompka, 1999). Thus, trust is important specifically when trustors are unable to verify the information provided or when they have incomplete information, which is why trust, third, reduces social complexity (Barber, 1983; Bierhoff, 2002; Luhmann, 2017; Offe, 2001). Following Hanitzsch et al. (2018, p. 5) and Dernbach (2005, p. 137; see also Grosser, 2016; Prochazka, 2020), *trust in news media* can be defined as *the individual’s willingness to be vulnerable to media objects, based on the expectation that they will perform a) satisfactorily for the individual and/or b) according to the dominant norms and values in society (i.e., democratic media functions)*. This definition refers to individuals at the micro level and can also be aggregated to higher levels to identify the level of media trust in a social milieu or a society.

### **Trust and Related Concepts**

Terminology and the conceptual framework guiding it are major challenges in trust research. There are several concepts related to trust (Engelke et al., 2019; Fisher, 2016; van

Dalen, 2019); the most prominent of which are confidence, credibility, scepticism, distrust and mistrust. Although trust and confidence are sometimes used synonymously (Cook & Gronke, 2001), most scholars argue that trust is characterised by an active decision, whereas confidence is not (Norris, 2017; Sztompka, 1999). Some scholars contend that *trust* in institutions (including the media) is not possible because of the lack of immediate reciprocity, allowing only for confidence in institutions (Hardin, 2006; Levi, 1998). However, this perspective has received relatively little support in the literature (Kohring, 2004; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Müller, 2013; Offe, 2001).

Trust and credibility have also often been used interchangeably or been treated as dimensions of each other (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Currently, credibility is mostly understood as a concept that is narrower than trust: credibility concerns a specific evaluation of media content (i.e., the perceived accuracy of information at a given point in time) and is therefore not oriented towards the future (Engelke et al., 2019; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; van Dalen, 2019).

Studies also deal with terms describing a lack of trust in news media. Most notably is Tsfati's (2003) media scepticism approach, defined as 'the feeling that the mainstream media are neither credible nor reliable, that journalists do not live by their professional standards, and that the news media get in the way of society rather than help society' (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003, p. 506). Because this approach investigates evaluations of the media that are not oriented towards the future, it is not synonymous with trust. Scholars also distinguish distrust and mistrust in the media (Ladd, 2010), although the line between the two concepts is often blurred (McKnight & Chervany, 2001). Some posit that mistrust means systematic and rational doubt and might be regarded as equivalent to scepticism (Norris, 2017; van der Meer & Zmerli, 2017). Distrust, however, is associated with (but not identical to) negative suspicion and cynicism, and it embodies the firm belief or conviction (with no evidence or rationale needed) that the object is not trustworthy (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Hardin, 2006;

McKnight & Chervany, 2001; van der Meer, 2017). This leads to the question of whether no trust is equivalent to distrust. Different scholars claim that distrust is the absence of trust (Levi, 1997), its opposite (with mistrust as a neutral middle category; Schoorman et al., 2007), or a separate concept (Luhmann, 2017).

### **Dimensions and Objects of Trust**

There is agreement in the literature that trust must be differentiated into two dimensions: specific and generalised trust. Whereas specific trust refers to the trust a trustor gives to concrete trustees (e.g., journalists who are known personally; Bierhoff, 2002; Newton et al., 2018), generalised trust allows the trustor ‘to move out of familiar relationships’ (Brehm & Rahn, 1997, p. 1008) and ‘go beyond specific personal settings’ (Stolle, 2002, p. 397). Thus, it is generalised from concrete situations and trustees to a general attitude towards others (e.g., groups or institutions; Bierhoff, 2002; Newton et al., 2018; Stolle, 2002).

Accordingly, a generalised form (i.e., the institutional trust people have in news media or in journalism as a whole) and a specific form (i.e., the trust people have in specific media objects) of media trust can be differentiated (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati & Cappella, 2005). Consequently, specific and generalised media trust can refer to various objects. These objects can be either individual persons or groups of persons, where *interpersonal* (or social) trust is at play (Rothstein, 2013; Rotter, 1967). However, most research on trust in news media deals with media trust as a form of *institutional* trust (i.e., the trust people have in public institutions and professional roles). As such, media trust can be either specific (e.g., trust in a journalist or a newspaper) or generalised (e.g., trust in the news media). Depending on the object, the literature differs across the following topics<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> From an institutional perspective, trust in news media is often used synonymously with trust in journalism (see also Hanitzsch, 2013).

- trust in the news media system as a whole (e.g., Jakob, 2012a; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Matthes et al., 2010);
- trust in news media as a public institution (e.g., Lee, 2010; Pingree et al., 2013; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019);
- trust in media corporations or organisations, which also includes trust in media ownership (e.g., Williams, 2012);
- trust in media types (e.g., newspapers and television; e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Hopmann et al., 2015; Jakob et al., 2019; Kouts et al., 2013);
- trust in specific media outlets, brands, programmes, or newsrooms (e.g., the *New York Times*; e.g., Daniller et al., 2017);
- trust in media coverage (e.g., Williams, 2012), which is directed towards specific subject areas or concrete topics (e.g., Blöbaum, 2018; Jakob et al., 2019), with the media content being the representative, performance, or output of the media system (e.g., Grosser et al., 2019; Williams, 2012); and
- trust in (prestigious) journalists (e.g., Blöbaum, 2018; Williams, 2012).

## **A Framework of Media Trust**

Causes of media trust can be traced back to two competing paradigms: *cultural theories* assume that trust stems from interpersonal trust as a result of early individual socialisation, and *institutional theories* assume that it arises from the (perceived or actual) performance of institutions.

Cultural theories are rooted in political culture research (Almond & Verba, 1965) and use the key concepts of socialisation, social capital (Putnam, 1993), and value change (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). The main assumption of these theories is that trust in institutions originates outside the public sphere and is rooted in cultural norms, early-

life socialisation, and interpersonal trust, which is transferred to public institutions (Mishler & Rose, 2001). At the individual level, cultural approaches assume that differences in trust are dependent on personal experience, gender, and social background, which leads to differences in trust within a given society. At the societal level, these approaches assume that there is little variation in trust among individuals because of similar experiences among a specific population (Mishler & Rose, 2001).

Institutional approaches are rooted in theories of political economy and political support (Coleman, 1990; Easton, 1965, 1975). They assume institutional trust to be performance-based, originating from a positive and satisfactory performance of the institution. At the individual level, institutional theories assume the subjective evaluation of the performance (e.g., the perceived functioning of democracy) to determine institutional trust. At the societal level, these theories assume the actual performance (e.g., the quality of democracy) to primarily determine institutional trust within a society (Mishler & Rose, 2001).

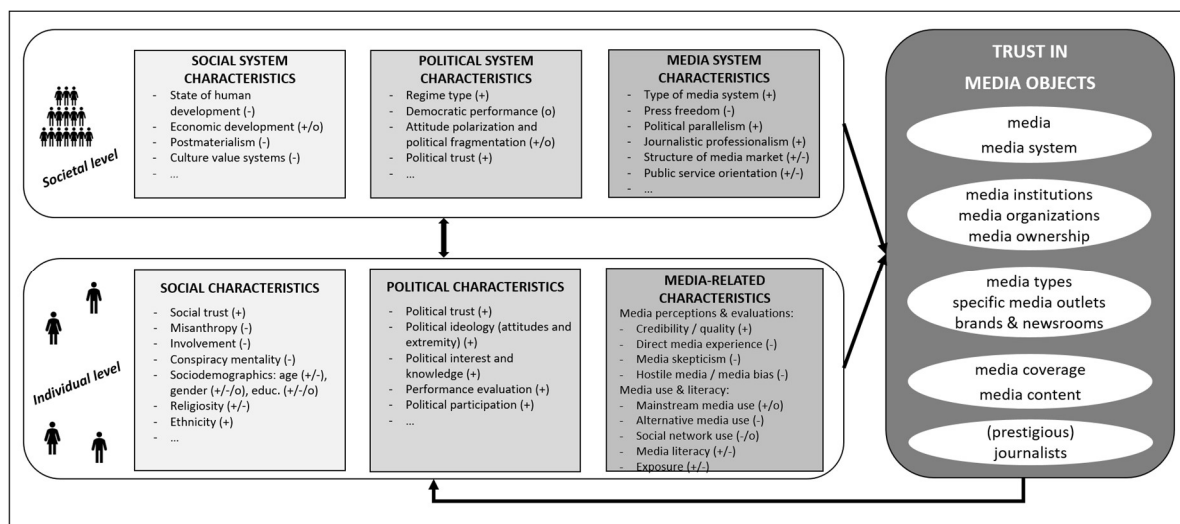
Building on these theoretical insights, it is also necessary to consider both cultural and institutional perspectives concerning the antecedents of trust in news media (Jackob, 2009). Under both perspectives, three groups of factors can be distinguished: social (system) characteristics, political (system) characteristics, and media (system) characteristics. These factors directly and indirectly influence trust in various media objects. Thus, some of the determinants of trust might also be consequences, as, in reality, the formation and change of trust are long-term, circular processes.

Figure 1 depicts our framework, which considers these reflections, structures the following literature review, and includes an overview of the most important findings. This framework is explained and clarified in the following sections.

### **Individual-level Causes and Consequences of Trust in News Media**

In line with our proposed framework on the causes, objects, and consequences of media trust (see Figure 1), we introduce the empirical findings on individual-level characteristics related to trust in news media in the following paragraphs. We identified *social*, *political*, and *media-related correlates* of trust in news media, and we report the central findings in each of these areas in the following three subsections. It should be noted, however, that the classification of correlates as either *predictors* or *consequences* of media trust in the cited studies is often based on theoretical assumptions rather than empirical findings, as trust research relies mostly on cross-sectional data.

Figure 1. A framework of causes, objects, and consequences of media trust



Note. (-) negative, (+) positive, (o) no association with media trust based on literature review.

## ***Social Characteristics***

With a fair amount of consistency, studies have shown that *interpersonal trust* is positively associated with media trust (Jackob, 2012b; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) and credibility (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Lee, 2010; Lucassen & Schraagen, 2012; Pjesivac, 2016). In contrast, *misanthropy* (i.e., the tendency to generally distrust the human species) goes hand in hand with lower perceived media fairness and trust (Bennett et al., 2001). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that *involvement* (i.e., the personal relevance of and connectedness to an issue; Rhine & Severance, 1970) increases the perception that issue-specific media coverage is hostile or untrustworthy (Gunther, 1992; Hansen & Kim, 2011). Other studies have shown that a *conspiracy mentality* is associated with less trust and more cynicism towards the media (Jackob et al., 2017).

Most studies of media trust have also included *sociodemographic variables*, although often as control variables and with inconsistent findings. Whereas some studies have found that *gender* is not associated with media trust (Arlt, 2018; Bennett et al., 1999; Bennett et al., 2001; Chung et al., 2012; Lee, 2010), others have reported that men express lower levels of media trust than do women (Eveland & Shah, 2003; Hopmann et al., 2015; Lee, 2005; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), or that women express lower levels of media trust than do men (Livio & Cohen, 2018; Schultz et al., 2017). Moreover, these effects differ depending on the media object. Ibelema and Powell (2001) found that women express higher levels of trust in television than do men, whereas Johnson and Kaye (2000) suggested that men find online newspapers more credible than do women but identified no gender differences regarding online television.

Inconsistencies also exist regarding *age*. Matthes (2013) found that younger participants partly showed stronger HMP, which can be linked to lower media trust (see also Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). In two of four waves of a representative German survey, Granow and colleagues (2018) discovered that older respondents expressed lower levels of media trust.

Apparently, the effects are contingent on the object: younger people have been found to consider television and online news more credible, whereas older adults express higher levels of trust in newspapers (see also Abel & Wirth, 1977; Bucy, 2003). Fawzi (2019) found that older people put less trust in tabloid and commercial media but are more satisfied with media performance overall.

Various studies have linked higher levels of *education* and *income* to lower levels of media trust and increased levels of media cynicism (Abel & Wirth, 1977; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Ladd, 2012; Pfau et al., 1998; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). However, some research found no such associations (Chung et al., 2012; Schultz et al., 2017), and other studies found that people with low levels of education expressed low media trust and more media cynicism (Gronke & Cook, 2007) or specifically reported more trust in the tabloid press (Fawzi, 2019), television (Greenberg, 1966), and online news (Johnson & Kaye, 2002). Furthermore, *religiosity* has been found to partly decrease media trust (Golan & Day, 2010), with people who strongly identify with their religion being more likely to perceive a hostile media bias (Ariyanto et al., 2007). Finally, in some studies, individuals who see themselves as part of a distinct *ethnic group*, such as African Americans in the United States, have been found to express relatively low levels of media trust (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2005; Stroud & Lee, 2013), whereas another study found relatively high levels of media cynicism among Whites in the United States (Cook & Gronke, 2001).

Taken together, the results show that low trust in news media is not a phenomenon that is exclusive to particular social groups. Rather, we find low and high levels of news media trust among citizens of all ages, genders, and levels of education. However, trust in news media has stable associations with psychological characteristics such as interpersonal trust and conspiracy mentality.

### ***Political Characteristics***

A large body of research has addressed the relationship between *trust in public institutions* and trust in media, often showing a strong correlation between them. People with higher levels of trust in democratic structures and processes tend to have higher levels of media trust (Ariely, 2015b; Bennett et al., 1999; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Jakob et al., 2019; Obermaier, 2020; Prochazka, 2020; Stroud & Lee, 2013; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005; Ziegele et al., 2018). *Political cynicism* has been found to be strongly correlated with lower levels of media trust and higher levels of media cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Carr et al., 2014; Pinkleton et al., 2012; van Eimeren et al., 2017; Ziegele et al., 2018), as well as with stronger HMP (Ho et al., 2011; Lee, 2005), political alienation, and disenchantment (Schultz et al., 2017). Thus, despite the use of varying measures, the positive association between trust in public institutions and trust in media is consistent.

*Political ideology* is also strongly related to media trust. More specifically, individuals' media trust varies by their political attitudes and the strength of these, as well as their position within political camps (Gunther, 1988; Ladd, 2012). In most studies, largely conducted in the United States, strong conservative political *attitudes* correlate with low levels of media trust or credibility (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Lee, 2010; Robinson & Kohut, 1988; Yamamoto et al., 2016) and more intense HMP (Lee, 2005). Liberals, in contrast, express higher levels of media trust (Livio & Cohen, 2018). Political extremity and right-wing populist attitudes also negatively predict media trust (Fawzi, 2019; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Jakob et al., 2017; Stroud & Lee, 2013). An equivalent pattern emerges for *party identification and preference*, with supporters of more extreme left- and right-wing (populist) parties showing lower levels of media trust and stronger HMP (Cook & Gronke, 2001; Eveland & Shah, 2003; Jakob et al., 2019; Jones, 2004, 2005; Ladd, 2012; Lee, 2010; Livio & Cohen, 2018; Moy et al., 1999; Schindler et al., 2018; Ziegele et al., 2018). Individuals have been found to be more likely to trust media institutions that represent their political ideology, which may contribute to these

results (Stroud & Lee, 2013). Moreover, it seems that individuals most readily associate (liberal) news media with the trust referents often used in surveys (such as ‘the media’; Daniller et al., 2017), potentially contributing to the lower levels of mainstream media trust among conservative respondents.

Another set of correlates consists of *political interest and knowledge*. Many studies have shown that interest in politics or political issues is positively associated with trust in the media (Fawzi, 2019; Gunther & Lasorsa, 1986; Jakob et al., 2017; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Furthermore, subjective estimates of political knowledge also correlate positively with media trust (Moy et al., 1999; Schultz et al., 2017), and high *political involvement* is positively related to media credibility (Gunther, 1992).

Moreover, people who express higher levels of *external political efficacy* tend to have greater trust in the media (van Eimeren et al., 2017). Trust in the media also seems to vary depending on *attitudes towards political issues* (Gunther, 1988). For example, United States citizens who are concerned about climate change express higher levels of media trust (Hansen & Kim, 2011), whereas Germans opposing refugee immigration have lower levels of media trust (Jakob et al., 2017).

There is also evidence that media trust can moderate the associations of news exposure with *political cognition* and *political affect*. For instance, individuals with high levels of media trust are particularly likely to form *attitudes* on political issues (e.g., climate change) and *affective reactions* (e.g., worries about war) in accordance with depictions and arguments presented in news coverage (Jakob, 2012a; Ladd, 2012; Wise & McLaughlin, 2016). Likewise, the climate of opinion suggested in news coverage influences high-trusting individuals’ perceived climate of opinion (Tsfati, 2003).

Although individuals with low media trust evaluate *political performance* more in line with their political ideology than do individuals with high levels of trust (Ladd, 2012), fewer studies have suggested that media trust corresponds to *political participation*; however,

previous work has found that individuals with low media trust are more willing to vote in line with their party identification (*'partisan voting'*; Ladd, 2010, 2012) and more likely to participate (e.g., by signing online petitions or voicing their opinions in user comments; Fletcher & Park, 2017; Schindler et al., 2018; but see Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2018).

Additionally, low media trust increases HMP, which can stimulate political discussion, especially with people who hold different views (*'corrective actions'*; Barnidge & Rojas, 2014). In contrast, individuals who are highly engaged in *political discussions* with similar-minded persons seem to perceive stronger media bias (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Ho et al., 2011).

### ***Media-related Characteristics***

At the individual level, researchers have studied a broad variety of media-related correlates of trust in news media. Media-related characteristics can be categorised as people's general media perceptions and evaluations, media literacy, media use, and exposure to specific content.

Most studies treat media trust and *perceptions of news quality* as synonyms and/or measure trust by assessing quality perceptions (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). Thus, we know little about how quality perceptions relate to trust. A qualitative study conducted by Kantar Media (2016) identified perceived accuracy, impartiality, tonality, expertise, and integrity as quality perceptions that increase trust in the news, whereas Schielicke et al. (2014) showed that news media trust grows with the perceived expertise of journalists, but, surprisingly, they found that the perceived relevance, neutrality, and independence of news media are not associated with media trust after controlling for demographic characteristics, news media use, and interest in news in a multivariate model (see also Newhagen & Nass, 1989). Prochazka (2020) found that generalised trust in news media is positively affected by perceptions of accuracy, perceived relevance of topics, separation of facts and comments, and perceived seriousness; among all of the quality perceptions examined, perceived accuracy

seems to be the most readily associated with trust. Additionally, Park (2005) showed that newspapers and television and Internet news are perceived as credible when people consider them to be fair and accurate. Jakob (2009) found that trust in the media is lower among individuals who consider journalistic mistakes a frequent phenomenon and attribute them to structural rather than individual circumstances. However, he found no correlation between people's recall of specific flaws in media reports and generalised media trust. This result resonates with findings on recipients' news quality judgements showing that people rely on peripheral cues such as media brands (Urban & Schweiger, 2014) or user comments more than actual news articles when judging news quality (Dohle, 2017; Prochazka et al., 2018).

*Direct experiences with the media* (e.g., as a source or bystander) are also considered relevant. Maier (2005) found that many people who are quoted in the news perceive the relevant news reports as inaccurate, leading to lower perceptions of the credibility of the news outlets issuing the reports. Similarly, Livio and Cohen (2018) found that people directly experiencing an event reported by the media tend to perceive a discrepancy between the coverage and their own experiences. This discrepancy is negatively related to trust in news media.

Additionally, evidence has shown that *perceptions of bias* can hamper people's media trust. In an international comparative study, Newman and Fletcher (2017) asked individuals why they distrusted the news. In open responses, participants mentioned perceptions of bias as the main reason. Other work has shown that perceptions of bias are particularly prevalent among partisans engaged in social conflicts (Perloff, 2015). Researchers have also established a relationship between partisans' HMP and their media trust: less trust in news media by individuals corresponds to a higher likelihood that they will perceive media as hostile towards their own opinions (Choi et al., 2009; Tsifti & Cohen, 2005). There is also strong evidence for a source effect: irrespective of content, news reports are more likely to be seen as slanted when they are attributed to an outlet that recipients expect to have a certain bias, which

increases when this perceived bias runs counter to the individual's partisanship (Ariyanto et al., 2007; Arpan & Raney, 2003; Baum & Gussin, 2007; Coe et al., 2008; Urban & Schweiger, 2014; Yun et al., 2018). Exposure to news reports perceived as biased causes an erosion of trust in the news outlet (Fico et al., 2004) and in media professionals (Arceneaux et al., 2012).

Another correlate of trust is people's general views on how news media work—their *knowledge about media* and news production. Research on the association of media literacy with trust in news media, however, is scarce, and there seems to be no simple linear relationship. Studies conducted in Germany have shown that people with low levels of media trust, on average, have slightly less knowledge about the media than do those with higher levels of trust (Prochazka, 2020; Ziegele et al., 2018), whereas research conducted in the United States has shown that knowledge about the media is associated with a more critical stance towards journalism (Robinson & Kohut, 1988). These results point to a distinction that was made by Gaziano and McGrath (1985), but that has largely been neglected in subsequent research. Gaziano and McGrath identified two types of people with low trust in the news, namely 'sophisticated skeptics' with high levels of knowledge about the media but with a critical stance and the 'less well informed and suspicious'. These two types of people with low levels of media trust have also been largely confirmed in research in Germany (Prochazka, 2020). Similarly, there have been mixed results on the relationship between individuals' media literacy and their perceptions of the *credibility of news items (message credibility)*. Research shows that media literacy training can increase people's perceptions of message credibility and trust in the news (Vraga et al., 2012) while decreasing their media bias perceptions (Vraga et al., 2009). Ashley et al. (2010) showed that knowledge of media ownership can decrease perceptions of message credibility, potentially fostering a more informed but also more critical stance towards news media. On the basis of selective exposure theory, some researchers have assumed that people tend to consume media they trust and

avoid media they do not trust (Tsfati & Peri, 2006). Accordingly, media trust is expected to be positively related to high levels of *exposure to mainstream news media*, typically conceived as newspapers and broadcasts, and their online services. However, the research reveals mixed results. Most studies have found modest correlations between people's exposure to mainstream news media and their trust in these media (Jones, 2004; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Ladd, 2012; Moy & Pfau, 2000; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014); however, some studies have shown no significant associations (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2016; Bennett et al., 2001; Prochazka, 2020), and others have found only partial evidence for an association, finding that the use of some media types (primarily television) predict general trust in news media (Arlt, 2018). Overall, studies have shown that more trust in specific media types (e.g., television or newspapers) corresponds to more use of these media (Kioussis, 2001; Yamamoto et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the effects remain small and inconsistent (Rimmer & Weaver, 1987). However, studies have found stronger associations between trust in *specific outlets or brands* and media exposure to these (Matthes et al. 2010; Stroud & Lee, 2013). Thus, it seems plausible that measures of trust in *abstract categories* (e.g., the media or television news in general) are only marginally related to measures of media use because they comprise a broad range of diverse sources, and individuals may not see these sources as a uniform block (Baum & Gussin, 2007). Instead, people may develop more differentiated attitudes, trusting some outlets while distrusting others. This assumption is supported by research showing that news coverage in general is perceived as more biased and less accurate than is coverage from specific sources (Pew Research Center, 2011), suggesting that users tend to trust the outlets they frequently use but that they do not perceive *their* media as representative of *the* media, as Daniller et al. (2017) have confirmed. Their findings may also partially explain an apparent loss of trust in news media in the United States, which probably reflects changes in what people perceive as 'the (mainstream) media' rather than an actual loss of trust in the media people use most.

Another explanation for the limited effects of people's media exposure is that people use mainstream media despite their mistrust (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Tsfati & Peri, 2006). Tsfati and Cappella (2005) found that people with low levels of trust in the news use mainstream news they do not trust because they enjoy thinking critically about its content, and Jamieson and Cappella (2008) found that these people continue to use mainstream media when alternatives are lacking. Additionally, Ladd (2012) suggested that instead of a decline in mainstream media use, low trust can be expected to be associated with higher levels of exposure to other sources. Thus, research has addressed the relationship between trust in mainstream news and exposure to *non-mainstream, partisan, or alternative media*, although conceptualisations of these alternative media differ substantially. Some have defined them as Internet sources in general (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) or online-only news brands (Fletcher & Park, 2017), showing that exposure to these types of media is related to lower levels of trust in mainstream media. However, the studies differentiating online media have not painted a consistent picture: some have shown that using social network sites for political news does not predict mainstream media trust (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2016; Arlt, 2018; Elvestad et al., 2017), whereas others have found positive (Johnson & Kaye, 2015; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019) or negative (Schranz et al., 2016) effects. Similarly, scholars have found exposure to blogs and citizen journalism sites to be positively related (Arlt, 2018), negatively related (Johnson & Kaye, 2015), or not related to trust in traditional media (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2016). These heterogeneous results may be explained by the diversity of the content that can be found on blogs and social media, making it subject to considerable variation in the specific kinds of information users consume there.

Another line of research conceptualises *partisan or alternative media* as outlets exhibiting a clear partisan profile and an oppositional stance towards the mainstream. In these studies, for instance, it is well documented that the audiences of conservative talk radio in the United States tend to have more negative attitudes towards news media in general (Barker &

Knight, 2000; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Jones, 2004; Ladd, 2012; Moy & Pfau, 2000; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Studies have replicated this finding for exposure to ideological news websites in a variety of countries (Jackob et al., 2019; Mourão et al., 2018; Prochazka, 2020; Schindler et al., 2018; Schultz et al., 2017; Tsfati, 2010). Additionally, foreign news is conceived as ‘alternative’ because it may offer perspectives that deviate from the domestic mainstream. Accordingly, exposure to foreign news has been found to be higher among people with low levels of trust in the news (Elvestad et al., 2017; Tsfati & Peri, 2006).

Jamieson and Cappella (2008) argued that the relationship between alternative media use and trust in mainstream news media should be mutually reinforcing. Analysing panel data, Hutchens et al. (2016) supported this perspective by showing that distrust can influence information seeking, which, in turn, amplifies distrust. Additionally, Ladd (2012) demonstrated that distrust in mainstream news media motivates people to consume partisan media, and exposure to conservative talk radio has been found to reduce trust in traditional media (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008).

Another media-related characteristic is the role of specific features of news reports. Because alternative or partisan news sources often feature *media criticism* (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Holt & Haller, 2017; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), it seems reasonable that these news sources would have a detrimental effect on people’s trust in mainstream news. Ladd (2010) found that priming media criticism can damage attitudes towards the news media; however, others have shown that the persuasive potential of media criticism is limited (Peifer, 2018; Pingree et al., 2013). Fact-checking reports can even enhance people’s trust in the news when they are accompanied by articles valuing journalists (Pingree et al., 2018).

Alternative media often contain *depictions of reality* that are at odds with those found in mainstream coverage (Holt, 2020; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), which may erode trust by interfering with an individual’s need for ontological assurance (Coleman et al., 2012). Cozzens and Contractor (1987) demonstrated that conflicting information from different

sources negatively affects judgements of credibility. Further, alternative media often promote conspiracy theories as explanations for social problems (Ylä-Anttila, 2018), persistently affecting trust (Kim & Cao, 2016).

In addition to content, scholars have also examined presentation styles in the media, finding evidence that tone (or the perception of tone) may play a role for trust. Among United States citizens, a high level of exposure to negative presidential news was shown to be related to low levels of confidence in the news (Kioussis, 2002). Other studies have looked at the effects of news frames, showing that portrayals of politics as a strategic game can decrease people's trust in news media (D'Angelo & Lombard, 2008; Hopman et al., 2015) and that exposure to sensational and emotional tabloid styles can harm credibility (Molyneux & Coddington, 2019; Otto & Maier, 2016).

There is also evidence that news content and perceptions of this content may be especially important during key events (Brosius & Eps, 1995). Reporting on highly salient events (e.g., the refugee crisis in 2015) tends to be highly criticised (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2016), and these events may be defining moments for many people in terms of their level of news media (dis)trust (Blöbaum, 2018; Jakob et al., 2019).

### **Societal-level Causes and Consequences of Trust in News Media**

Although communication researchers have comprehensively studied the correlates of trust in news media at the individual level, relatively little attention has been paid to the societal level. This lack of research is especially surprising given that two established annual surveys, the Edelman Trust Barometer (2018) and the Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2019), as well as available academic studies in the area (Ariely, 2015a; de Zúñiga et al., 2019; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Macek et al., 2018; Müller, 2013; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), have shown differences between countries in their long-term development of media trust. In fact, multilevel analyses have demonstrated that a considerable share of between-country

differences can be attributed to country characteristics (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Müller, 2013; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). However, it is worth noting that these studies have typically used a measure of generalised trust in ‘the (mainstream) media’, which yields relatively low trust levels, at least in countries with diverse media systems.

Public perceptions of the news media, including trust, depend on a variety of contextual factors referred to as opportunity structures, a concept that communication scholars have recently been using more frequently in comparative research (Ernst et al., 2019). At the macro level, opportunity structures fall into the domains of the social (and cultural) context, the political system, and the media system (see Figure 1). Each of these domains can be further divided using the analytical features of structure and performance. These contextual factors can directly or indirectly impact media content and/or the criteria by which the audience judges this content. The literature shows that these factors are often interrelated and that they influence levels of trust in complex ways, generally suggesting that contextual factors contribute to higher levels of trust when they enhance the congruence between what people expect of their media and what they actually get.

### ***Social System Characteristics***

Not many social factors have received scholarly attention. However, studies including such factors show that some are of crucial importance to media trust. De Zúñiga et al. (2019) found trust to be highest in countries scoring low on the Human Development Index. Likewise, Tsfati and Ariely (2014) found that media trust is lower in countries with more advanced economic development (i.e., higher gross domestic product), the relationship becomes non-significant after controlling for other factors. Most importantly, Tsfati and Ariely (2014) found that post-materialism consistently predicts media trust, with trust in the press and television being lower in societies scoring higher on post-materialism, which is typically relatively high in advanced Western democracies. The influence of emancipative values, however, has been investigated only at the individual level. Müller (2013) discovered

a negative correlation between emancipative values and trust in the press and noted that value change is most effective in authoritarian regimes, whereas it is less pronounced in democratic regimes. He concluded that a loss of trust in the press could best be explained by industrial and post-industrial societal development, which also corresponds to Tsfaty and Ariely's (2014) findings.

### ***Political System Characteristics***

Democratic performance is a significant predictor of media trust. Müller (2013) found democratic quality, based on the Freedom House Index, to be negatively related to media trust. Tsfaty and Ariely (2014) came to a similar conclusion but noted that this association becomes non-significant after controlling for other factors. Hanitzsch et al. (2018), however, included democratic performance as a control variable and did not observe any effect on press trust. One reason for this difference may be the different sets of variables included in these studies. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that, overall, it is not democracy per se that influences levels of trust, but rather the changes in values and economic prosperity that come along with it.

In the same study, Hanitzsch et al. (2018) also investigated the effect of attitude polarisation and the extent to which political trust covaries with the level of trust in the press over time. They found a robust correlation between changes in press trust and political trust between 1999–2004 and 2010–2014. Moreover, the relationship between trust in the press and trust in politics was found to be stronger in countries with stronger attitude polarisation.

### ***Media System Characteristics***

The impact of national media systems has been the focus of only a few studies. Müller (2013) concluded that media trust was especially low in countries belonging to Hallin and Mancini's (2004) North Atlantic or Liberal models of media systems. Notably, he also found an inverted relationship between press freedom and press trust and argued that a fully commercialised media system may be detrimental to general media trust. This may be

explained by the fact that these media systems produce a great deal of low-quality journalism or breed a politically polarised media landscape. When people are asked to assess their overall trust in ‘the media’, both of these factors might negatively impact public judgment. Along the same lines, Ariely (2015a) noted that the relationship between press trust and political trust is weaker in countries with higher levels of media freedom.

The assumption that political biases in the media may reduce general trust is also supported by Ariely (2015a), who discovered a small positive effect of political parallelism on media trust. Arguably, these biases negatively affect trust levels among a) people preferring coverage consonant with their own political views and b) people favouring objective journalism even if it confronts them with opposing views. However, as in the case of freedom of the press, the relationship between press trust and political trust turned out to be more robust in countries where newspapers exercised stronger party–press parallelism. The relationship between press trust and political trust is also stronger in countries with lower levels of journalistic professionalism.

With respect to the impact of ownership, studies have shown a nuanced and complex picture. Tsfaty and Ariely (2014) revealed a positive and significant effect of the state’s share of the press and television on media trust, but this association becomes non-significant after controlling for democracy and economic development. However, their analysis also pointed to an interesting interaction: state ownership of television is positively associated with media trust in democratic societies, whereas this relationship is negative in non-democratic contexts. The reason is that state ownership in democratic contexts often means that public service media ensure diverse and quality news coverage, whereas state ownership in non-democratic contexts usually equates to state propaganda.

## Conclusion

Our literature review demonstrates that the field of trust in news media lacks clarity, both theoretically and empirically. Moreover, the different underlying theoretical assumptions, definitions, labels, analysed objects of media trust, and operationalisations contribute to the confusion. Thus, in this article, we aimed to provide a review of the knowledge produced to date, to identify its deficits, and to extract commonalities to gain a clearer picture of the conceptualisation of media trust by disentangling it from related concepts, such as media credibility.

The first conclusion drawn from our review is that a shared definition of trust is needed. On the basis of interdisciplinary trust research and the literature on media trust, we suggest defining trust as the willingness to be vulnerable to media objects based on the expectation that they will perform a) satisfactorily for the individual and/or b) according to the dominant norms and values in society. Second, we combined the causes and consequences of media trust drawn from our literature review into a framework that analyses the social, political, and media-related correlates of trust at both the individual and the societal levels, also considering different objects of trust (see Figure 1). We hope that the overview provided by this review will be fruitful for future endeavours in media trust research in pointing out the field's methodological and thematic deficits:

- (1) The studies are mainly based on (only partly representative) quantitative surveys, and evidence on the correlates of trust in news media generated from survey (and/or vignette) experiments or multi-method approaches (e.g., panel surveys combined with content analyses) is rare.
- (2) The studies mostly rely on cross-sectional data, making statements regarding causality impossible, while panel data are missing. Studies using longitudinal evidence mostly represent secondary analyses of publicly available survey data (e.g., the American National Election Studies or the European and World Values Survey).

- (3) Many studies use direct, single-item measures of trust in certain media objects, which might be one reason for the lack of clarity in the field. This applies in particular to secondary analyses. Only a few studies rely on reflective measures of trust in news media (Matthes & Kohring, 2007) or media credibility (Gaziano & McGrath, 1985; Meyer, 1988).
- (4) Although many studies focus on the predictors of media trust, there is almost no research considering its consequences. For instance, with regard to political factors, we do not yet know the extent to which trust in news media affects political knowledge, perceptions of reality, or political behaviours, or what influence these factors in turn have on media trust.
- (5) Most of the studies focus on the United States and some parts of Europe resulting in a Western bias of trust research. Studies in the global South and internationally comparative studies are rare (or at least are not published in English or German).
- (6) As trust objects, most studies deal with trust in (mainstream) journalism or in the news media; less common are studies on trust in specific media genres (e.g., newspapers, public service and private television, and online sources and social media) or on trust in journalists. Moreover, detailed analyses comparing trust and its implications in these genres are missing from the literature. Studies of this type could ask, for example, who has more trust in partisan media than in mainstream media, and why.
- (7) Regarding the causes and consequences of media trust, most studies include single groups of factors (e.g., only political or only media-related factors), which is partly because of the lack of a theoretical foundation for these correlates. Hence, we do not know much about the relative importance of these factors. At the same time, it is important to note that the majority of variables used in previous research have yielded mixed findings, which may be explained by different objects of media trust (e.g., trust

in the news media or in different outlets), operationalisations, contexts, and other elements.

- (8) To date, analyses at the meso level have been largely neglected. Investigating the amount and role of media trust in different socio-political or communicative milieus is an important endeavour to address current societal developments such as the fragmentation of the political public sphere and the stratification of the citizenry.
- (9) Finally, most studies investigate individual-level factors; only a small number of contextual factors such as media or political system characteristics have thus far attracted interest from researchers with respect to media trust. There is little to no systematic evidence on the extent to which factors such as journalism culture, social inequality, or type of democracy affect individuals' trust levels.

Although we included a large number of studies in our review, it is worth mentioning again that we focused explicitly on studies dealing with media trust or the abovementioned related concepts in the context of media trust. As a consequence, we excluded more specific studies, as work on each of the related concepts has produced an extensive body of research. This article contributes to the existing literature by providing a systematic framework on the causes, objects, and consequences of media trust, with reference to the knowledge the scientific community has produced to date in this area. Because media trust is both a cause and a consequence of various political, social, and media-related factors, this literature review highlights the importance of media trust in a high-choice media environment for social cohesion and for the functioning of democracy.

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