

## Research Summary

### Subject

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#### **Subject:**

- The Global Trust Deficit: Declining Institutional Trust and Its Societal Implications

#### **Citation:**

- Flew, T. (2021). *The Global Trust Deficit Disorder: A Communications Perspective on Trust in the Time of Global Pandemics*. *Journal of Communication*, 71(2), 163–186.

#### **Other studies referenced in this summary:**

- Edelman Trust Barometer (2020)
- Gallup Confidence in Institutions Survey (2018)
- Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy (2019)
- Hosking, G. (2014). *Trust: Money, Markets, and Society*.
- Levi-Faur, D. (2012). *The Oxford Handbook of Governance*.
- Luhmann, N. (1979). *Trust and Power*.
- Rosenvallon, P. (2008). *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*.

### Introduction

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#### **Background:**

- There is increasing global concern about declining trust in institutions such as government, business, and the media. The United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, has described this phenomenon as a "Trust Deficit Disorder," linking it to political polarization, the rise of populism, and the spread of misinformation, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Edelman Trust Barometer and other surveys confirm a persistent decline in institutional trust across multiple countries.

#### **Research question:**

- How has trust been understood in communication studies, and how does the global trust deficit impact media, governance, and public confidence in institutions?

#### **Hypothesis (if applicable):**

- The study suggests that trust is a critical factor in the effectiveness of governance, media credibility, and societal cohesion. A decline in trust can lead to increased populism, misinformation, and social fragmentation.

### Methodology

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- The study is based on a review of interdisciplinary literature on trust, drawing from communication studies, sociology, political science, and economics.
- Analysis of global trust surveys, including the Edelman Trust Barometer, Gallup Confidence in Institutions Survey, and national trust studies.
- Case studies of different nations' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic to illustrate how trust impacts governance effectiveness.
- Examination of media trust trends, including shifts in reliance on digital platforms and the spread of misinformation.

### Results / Discussion

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#### **Findings:**

- Trust levels vary significantly by socioeconomic status, with wealthier and more educated populations exhibiting higher trust in institutions.

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- Governments are generally trusted less than businesses, while NGOs are trusted more than both.
  - There is increasing skepticism about the truthfulness and independence of traditional media.
  - A shift is occurring from institutional trust to "networked trust," where individuals place more faith in personal connections and digital communities than in formal institutions.
  - Fear outweighs hope in global attitudes, driven by economic inequality, corruption, technological disruption, and social change.
  - Digital platforms both erode and reconstruct trust: while they spread misinformation, they also create new mechanisms for public discourse and engagement.

#### **Conclusions:**

- Trust is foundational for societal stability, governance, and media credibility.
- The erosion of trust leads to political instability, misinformation, and increased populist movements.
- Nations that successfully managed COVID-19 had stronger public trust in governance and expert advice.
- Addressing the trust deficit requires integrating trust-building measures at the interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels.

#### **Limitations:**

- The study relies on secondary data from trust surveys, which may have methodological biases.
- The global nature of trust studies means that regional differences may not be fully accounted for.
- The role of digital platforms is still evolving, making long-term trust trends difficult to predict.

### **Commentary by Trustmakers**

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There are two possibly competing observations in this paper and in the trust communication research in general. One is that trust in the news media has declined to a small but significant degree worldwide over the past few decades. The second is that news accessed through the traditional news media is more trusted than news accessed through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. What this suggests is that the traditional news media is down but not out, that it is less trusted than it used to be but more trusted than social media as a source of news.

In examining the reasons for this, a theme emerges that echoes much of what we here see in practice, that exposing your audience to factual information, or countering misinformation with facts and data, is not enough to build trust.

Flew refers to studies of "fake news" that reveal the two reasons why we consume the news: to benefit from accurate information, and to reinforce our already existing "shared mental models" of how things work or should work. As a result, Flew indicates that the provision of truth, fact checking, and correcting misinformation, while at the core of our expectations for the news media, exclusively focusing on these activities will not fully address trust issues with the news media.

Another example of how only exposing people to factual information does not alone build trust has to do with conspiracy theories. One idea that leaped out to us here is when Flew points out that we're playing "whack-a-mole" with conspiracy theories and misinformation, fact checking and debunking them, and not exploring in sufficient depth as to what is behind the rise of such things – the decline in public trust. Flew suggests that "we could instead be looking at the factors that are promoting distrust of social, economic and political institutions."

As this study points out, while "truthful interactions characterize trustworthy people and are a pre-requisite for trust relations", trust is not synonymous with truth. It has been our experience here that just sharing accurate facts is not the same as building trust. While truth and accuracy are essential starting points, open and other-focused communication and dialogue helps to build trust in a way that the "just the facts" approach cannot.