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Research Summary

Subject

Subject:

- Trust in Communication Research: A Systematic Literature Review

Citation:

- Flew, T., & McWaters, C. (2020). Trust in Communication Research: A Systematic Literature Review of Trust. *Journal of Communication*, 70(2), 206-231.
- Paper presented at the School of Communication and Information Symposium, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA, January 23, 2020.

Other studies referenced in this summary:

- World Economic Forum (2018)
- Edelman Trust Barometer (2019)
- Gallup Confidence in Institutions survey (2018)
- Various studies on political trust, media trust, and institutional trust from philosophy, sociology, economics, and communication research

Introduction

Background:

- There is a widespread crisis of trust in social institutions, particularly in media, government, and business.
- While disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, and political science have extensively studied trust, communication research has not been prominently acknowledged in this discourse.
- The study seeks to systematically analyze the contributions of communication research to trust studies.

Research question:

- How has trust been studied in leading communication journals?
- What are the key themes and insights derived from these studies?

Hypothesis (if applicable):

- Communication research has made significant contributions to trust studies.
- The role of communication research in trust studies has been underestimated.
- Communication scholars focus more on truth than trust, affecting how trust is conceptualized.

Methodology

- Systematic literature review of three leading International Communication Association (ICA) journals: *Journal of Communication*, *Communication Theory*, and *Annals of the International Communication Association* (formerly *Communication Yearbook*).
- Analysis of 157 articles that engage with trust at societal (macro), institutional (meso), and interpersonal (micro) levels.
- Articles were categorized based on relevance, conceptual focus, and level of analysis.

Results / Discussion

Findings:

- The study identified three major periods of increased trust-related research in communication studies: the 1970s, the 2000s, and the current period.
- Trust research in communication has focused on:
 - **Macro-level:** Trust in political communication, media credibility, and societal institutions.
 - **Meso-level:** Organizational trust, public relations, and digital platforms.
 - **Micro-level:** Interpersonal trust, online deception, and media consumption behaviors.
- Recent scholarship emphasizes populism, misinformation, and post-truth narratives, highlighting the evolving role of digital platforms in shaping trust perceptions.
- Communication scholars have historically framed trust discussions around **truth** rather than focusing on trust as a distinct concept.
- Journalism and media studies have contributed significantly to trust research by exploring media credibility, agenda-setting, and public perceptions of news sources.

Conclusions:

- Communication research has made substantial, though underrecognized, contributions to trust studies across individual, institutional, and societal levels.
- The role of communication scholars in interdisciplinary trust research should be expanded, particularly in areas of media influence, misinformation, and digital trust.
- Future research should explore how emotional and affective factors contribute to trust beyond traditional empirical and rationalist approaches.
- The development of more dynamic and behavior-based trust metrics is necessary to complement traditional opinion polls.

Limitations:

- Focuses only on three ICA journals, potentially omitting relevant studies from other communication or interdisciplinary sources.
- The study relies on literature review methods, limiting empirical validation of the identified trends.
- The distinction between trust and truth in communication research remains complex and requires further theoretical exploration.

Commentary by Trustmakers

Trust as an academic subject can be an elusive concept because it crosses many different disciplines. Defining the concept and studying it systematically poses a lot of challenges. We are very interested in how the research unfolds, particularly in the area of media, “fake news”, and digital media, and will continue to review it in these summaries.

Getting a handle on the concept *in practice*, however, may be an easier task. As individuals, we don’t trust in people who are always scamming and trying to benefit themselves at the expense of others. We don’t trust people who tell lies and mislead others, or whose words and actions don’t match. People who are unreliable, who you can’t count on to be there when you need them, are untrustworthy. We generally don’t trust people who self-aggrandize, don’t care about others, and don’t take responsibility for their words and actions.

If we ask ourselves what the organizational equivalents of those behaviours are, we can get some practical insight. Ask yourself, if your organization was a person, would you trust it? Would others? It is a simple way to start thinking about the importance of trust for your business or group.



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There are two other questions in this vein that can help you to take a look at your organization. What are the consequences for the untrustworthy person and is that person always aware that any negative outcomes, or lack of positive ones, are the result of their own words and actions? We suggest that the outcomes for the person are frequently not good, and that the untrustworthy person doesn't always see those outcomes as the result of their own behaviours. Since it is hard to prove a negative, both individuals and organizations can begin by asking themselves what would be different if others trusted them more? What would happen if you replaced the trust-killing behaviours with trust-making ones? Ask yourself, what would that look like?