

Research Summary

Subject

Subject:

- Changing News Consumption and Its Impact on Public Trust

Citation:

- Fletcher, R., Andi, S., Badrinathan, S., Eddy, K. A., Kalogeropoulos, A., Mont'Alverne, C., Robertson, C. T., Ross Arguedas, A., Schulz, A., Toff, B., & Nielsen, R. K. (2024). The Link Between Changing News Use and Trust: Longitudinal Analysis of 46 Countries. *Journal of Communication*, 00, 1–15.

Other studies referenced in this summary:

- Newman et al. (2023) on global trust in news trends
- Ross Arguedas et al. (2022) on journalist perspectives on trust decline
- Fawzi et al. (2021) on societal-level trust in media
- Hanitzsch et al. (2018) on political trust and news media
- Kohring & Matthes (2007) on trust as an expectation of journalistic integrity

Introduction

Background:

- Trust in news has declined globally since 2015, though trends vary by country.
- Changes in media consumption patterns, particularly the decline of television news and rise of social media, may be contributing factors.
- Researchers aim to understand whether these structural shifts in media environments influence public trust in news organizations.

Research question:

- How has trust in news changed over time across 46 countries?
- What factors contribute to fluctuations in trust?
- Is the shift from traditional news sources to digital and social media linked to trust decline?

Hypothesis (if applicable):

- Trust in news has declined globally since 2015.
- Countries with decreasing reliance on television news and increasing reliance on social media will experience greater declines in trust.
- Individual factors such as age, education, and interest in news influence trust levels.

Methodology

- Data collected from 2015 to 2023 across 46 countries using the Digital News Report survey (N = 667,001).
- Comparative, longitudinal study utilizing random effects within-between (REWB) models.
- Measures include trust in news, media consumption habits, demographic variables, and structural media environment changes.
- Country-level controls for political polarization, media bias, and press freedom.

Results / Discussion

Findings:

- Global trust decline: A small but significant decrease in trust in news since 2015.
- Demographics & trust:
 - Older individuals, women, and those with high interest in news exhibit higher trust levels.
 - Those with lower education levels tend to trust news more.

- News consumption habits:
 - Television news users tend to have higher trust in news.
 - Social media news users exhibit lower trust in news.
- Media structure effects:
 - Countries where television news use has declined show lower trust.
 - Countries where social media news use has increased show lower trust.
- Cross-national differences:
 - Democratic corporatist countries (e.g., Nordic nations) maintained stable trust levels.
 - Polarized pluralist and hybrid media systems saw sharper trust declines.
- Structural influence:
 - The way news is accessed, rather than political factors alone, strongly correlates with trust trends.

Conclusions:

- The decline in trust in news is partially explained by shifts in news consumption patterns.
- Structural media changes, particularly the rise of social media, contribute to trust erosion.
- Political factors, while significant, do not fully account for trust changes—media environment shifts play a key role.
- Future research should investigate causal mechanisms, as media consumption and trust levels may influence each other bidirectionally.

Limitations:

- Survey data relies on self-reported news consumption, which may include recall biases.
- The study focuses on countries with high press freedom, limiting generalizability to authoritarian media systems.
- Causality is uncertain - trust in news may shape media habits rather than vice versa.

Commentary by Trustmakers

We took note of something in this study that has been found in a number of other research sources we've looked at: trust in news is lower for social media than the traditional news media.

For example, in a paper called "Global Trust Deficit Disorder: A Communications Perspective on Trust in the Time of Global Pandemics", Terry Flew from the University of Sydney wrote: "... while the shift to social media as a primary source of news has occurred, particularly among younger users, survey findings also consistently find higher levels of mistrust of news sourced from major social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter than of mainstream news media"

While reviewing this research, we also received an email from the President of the Canadian Association of Journalists expressing deep concerns about "the increasing and persistent restrictions governments, public officials, and other political actors are placing on journalists in Canada." He goes on to share some recent examples.

This is something that organizations, officials, and their communications advisors should consider. While they may not always see the questions and coverage by the traditional news media as fair and reasonable, social media is not a blanket replacement for the traditional news media. In other words, officials need the news media as much as the news media need officials. While that relationship is sometimes messy, tense, and uncomfortable, and the outcomes are not always what the officials hope for, those officials can build trust by engaging with the news media and not actively working to restrict their access in the belief you can just go around them and exclusively use social media instead.