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# Trust and the Media: Arguments for the (Irr)levance of a Concept

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides a discussion of some of the recent research on media trust focusing on arguments for why media trust matters. What are the arguments for why trust is important? Are there reasons to accept these arguments? We identify three distinct arguments in the literature. First, that it is important for media organizations and for the media as an industry. Secondly, that media trust is essential for democratic citizenship and for bringing forth informed individuals with the capacity for political engagement. Lastly, that media trust is similar to other forms of (social) trust and connected to a wider existential discussion on ontological security. None of these arguments are totally convincing when inspected more closely and in light of empirical research. The article thus concludes that there is a lack of strong arguments for why falling levels of trust in the news media are legitimately described as a crisis or a problem. A supposed “trust crisis” mainly exists when viewed from what must be described as a rather narrow ideological and normative perspective.

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## Introduction

A long-standing research tradition within media and journalism studies concerns the question of the publics’ trust in the media. During the last decade, researchers’ attention on the issue of trust in the media have increased. This interest must be understood against the background of reports on falling levels of trust in many countries (but not in all) around the world, increased social and affective polarization, the rise of so-called “fake news” and new forms of alternative online media, as well as the commercial challenges for legacy media. The increased attention on the issue of trust in media and journalism has generated a vast literature, both on measuring trust and on explaining trust—or lack thereof (e.g., Fink 2019; Flew 2019; Ireton 2018; Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019; Park et al. 2020; Peters and Broersma 2013; Tsfati and Ariely 2014; Usher 2018).

Although this research generally suggest that the lack of trust is a “challenge” (Fink 2019) or a “crisis” (Moran and Nechushtai 2022), the literature is lacking a more sustained effort to theorize and explain in what sense—and for whom—a lack of trust in the media

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is problematic. The importance of news media trust and the problems with falling levels of news media trust is sometimes taken for granted, but even when it is not, the arguments for its relevance are often supplied somewhat dutifully and without extensive discussion.

This omission is confusing, not least considering how the topic of news journalism is treated in other parts of media and journalism studies. Researchers within other sub-fields would arguably never themselves proclaim complete trust in the news media, without reservations. Journalism as such can—and is—often defined by researchers in the field as itself being a problem (Örnebring 2019). Careers have been built on distrusting the news and to convincingly show how, for example, the dynamics and structure, as well as ownership patterns and technological affordances of the media tend to lead to sensationalism (e.g., McQueen 2018), biased reporting (e.g., Shultziner and Stukalin 2021), commercialization (e.g., Kristensen 2021), a lack of autonomy and professionalism, and that journalism takes form through opaque methods of selecting and framing the news (e.g., Entman 1993) and is shaped by ideological narratives and political influences (Forde, Gutsche Jr, and Pinto 2022; Kim and Jin 2022). Furthermore, for a century, the field of media and journalism studies has taught us in general to be critical towards the media, and highlighted the importance of media literacy in order to foster competent, distanced and critical—or in another word: distrustful—media users (Clark 2013) (however, the success of media literacy in fostering responsible and critical media users has been subject to debate [e.g., Boyd 2017; Mihailidis 2009]).

This seeming paradox, or tension, within the research field makes it important to clarify what is really at stake when levels of trust are measured, and when studies suggests that trust levels are falling globally. Cannot audiences be trusted to mistrust? Is this a privilege reserved for media and journalism scholars?

The main object of this article is to provide a further clarification concerning the issue of why and in what sense media trust is important, and if it is reasonable to think of reports on falling levels of media trust as a problem. The article asks the following questions: What arguments for why trust is important has been put forward in previous research? Are there reasons to accept these arguments?

The article proceeds through a review of the literature in which we identify three distinct arguments that have been put forward for why media trust matters. Although there are other arguments for why news media trust matters, we see these as among the most important and most common arguments within the field. The three distinct arguments that we will discuss in this article are first, that media trust is important for media organizations and for the media as an industry. Secondly, that media trust is essential for democratic citizenship and for bringing forth informed individuals with the capacity for political engagement. Lastly, a more general claim that connects media trust to other forms of trust (such as social, political and institutional trust) and to a wider existential discussion on ontological security.

In order to answer the second research question, we draw on previous empirical research that contradicts normative beliefs on the importance of media trust. The ambition is not to present a full and comprehensive literature review of previous research, but we aim to introduce studies and empirical findings that helps us to problematize and critically discuss the (often) implicit arguments and beliefs about the importance and virtue of trust in the (news) media that this article identifies. Furthermore, we also discuss the inconsistencies between empirical findings and normative beliefs using political and social theories on trust, which shows that these inconsistencies are not surprising but

rather expected. The article thus concludes that there is a lack of strong arguments for why falling levels of trust in the news media are legitimately described as a crisis or a problem. A supposed “trust crisis” mainly exists when viewed from what must be described as a rather narrow ideological and normative perspective.

Following from this review and discussion of previous literature, the article goes on to discuss the broader issues of why it is necessary to take a more measured approach to the importance of trust, and what implications this might have for empirical research. The article is thus an invitation to other researchers to think harder about why and how news media trust is important and for whom?

### **Trust, News, Media—a Note on Contested Concepts**

We will say a few words about the concepts—trust, news, and the media—before developing the article’s main arguments.

Trust is a longstanding concept in social theory (cf. Simmel 1908/1950), and it has been defined in a few different ways. One central definition in trust research is that trust is a social mechanism that derives from the basic fact that humans in society must act under conditions of uncertainty and a lack of knowledge (Simmel 1908/1950; Luhmann 1968). Following from this, Rosanvallon (2008) refers to trust as an “institutional economizer” (4). A social function of media trust is thus to save time and labor for media audiences through their reliance on journalists to provide them with information. This is also a necessary function in some instances, since audience members do not have access to the same sources as journalists have. The definition of trust as an “institutional economizer”, however, suggests that a trusting audience—if an audience with complete trust in the media were to be found—would be a passive audience. The efforts of fact-checking and verification or comparing different news frames and narratives to each other is “saved” by the decision to trust. From this theoretical definition of trust, it is thus debatable if trusting audiences should be celebrated. In other corners of journalism and media studies, it is instead the active audience that is celebrated. It has been said that the internet has paved the way for a more active, participatory, and engaged audience, and that this is a positive social outcome of digital networked media (Bruns 2008), even though this positive narrative has begun to fade away more recently. It should also be noted here that an audience characterized by total distrust is also a passive audience, since distrust is also an economizer, but it works the other way around, leading to disengagement and indifference.

We think that Luhmann’s and Rosanvallon’s definition of trust provides a useful way to think about media trust, and we will return to its implications in the following discussion. The discussion in the article is, however, not reliant on binary distinctions between active vs. passive, or trust vs. mistrust. The article is about more specific arguments about the positive social outcomes of media trust, and part of the argument, which we will develop below, is that media trust and mistrust are often found together; they are gradual, and they can both have positive and negative social outcomes.

It is also important to recognize that different researchers in media and journalism studies employ different definitions of media trust, and thus it doesn’t make sense in an article like this, which draws upon different bodies of research to discuss and question the received understanding of media trust, to rule out other definitions already from the

start. Furthermore, although theoretical definitions are crucial in formulating research questions, survey questions, and interview questions, we argue that it is equally important to understand how audiences define and talk about trust. Understanding “folk theories” (Schmidt, Heyamoto, and Milbourn 2019) of trust is of utmost importance for empirical research on trust. Since however well researchers formulate their surveys or interview questions, respondents will answer these questions based on their own understandings of words and concepts, and with intentions that might differ from the researchers’ ideas about what it means to trust. This is a point that we will return to in the final discussion.

Another central problem in media trust research, apart from its definition, is that the media as such (the target of trust) is in fact made up by several different components. Following Sztompka’s (1999) discussion of the multidimensionality of trust, to trust the media could be to trust *social roles* (for example, the role of the journalist), it could be to trust *institutions and organizations* (for example specific media companies), it could be *procedural trust* (that is trust vested in institutionalized practises, such as fact-checking or news selection criteria), it could be trust in *technological systems* (radio, the internet) and it could be a form of trust that is related to the *social system or social order* in general (“I trust the media because they are a part of the system that I trust”). We will highlight this conceptual problem when relevant for the argument.

Similarly, news is a multidimensional and contested concept. News can no longer be defined solely by the gate-keeping practices and boundary work of journalists (Carlson and Lewis 2015), but it is understood in different ways by different people, not the least among young media audiences (Bengtsson and Johansson 2021). In this article, however, we are mainly interested in news as a product of professional news organizations.

## Media Trust, Media use and the News Industry

The economic crisis of the news industry has been discussed at length during the last decades. The falling rates of advertising expenditure has largely been blamed on the rise of digital media companies, more particularly search engines, social media platforms and how advertising online has been nearly monopolized by a few key players from the tech industry (Geradin and Katsifis 2020). Some have noted however that, in some markets at least, falling rates of advertising expenditure can be traced back as far as the 1920s. Regarding other economic measures for the newspaper industry, such as market penetration and circulation, these started to fall in the 1970s (Ryfe 2012). The situation today seems to be that some niches within the news industry are doing well, at least if considered from a longer historical perspective (Picard 2018), while others—particularly local news (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019)—are under increasing pressure. The pattern is consistent with how the media industry as a whole is developing, i.e., towards increased capital concentration.

Still, falling levels of media trust are being posited as one explanation for the economic hardships of the news industry (Fisher et al. 2021; Flew 2019; Vanacker and Belmas 2009). The reasoning is simple and straightforward. If citizens do not trust the news media, they have no incentives to invest their time or money into the news industry’s products. Vanacker and Belmas (2009), however, also note that there is a difference between

trusting that a news outlet will provide light and entertaining news products, or correct weather reports and sports results, and trusting that it will provide the necessary insights and knowledge for informed citizenship. Consequently, they jump to the conclusion that falling levels of general trust in the news media will lead to less media consumption. Audiences might begrudge the political bias and lack of objectivity in the “hard news” section, while still enjoying and using other goods that news outlets offer. Despite the fact that the field of journalism values investigative journalism and political news over sports and lifestyle-journalism, in fact, most journalists do not work in the most valued sub-fields (Mellado and Van Dalen 2014). Thus what the field of journalism mostly produces might not be affected by falling levels of trust, depending on how specific measures and the kind of research methods that are used to analyze media trust.

There is also research that has tried to directly measure the relationship between media trust and media use, but the majority of this research has, for understandable reasons, focused on how media use impacts media trust rather than the other way around. Schranz, Schneider, and Eisenegger (2018) concludes that news consumption is positively correlated with trust in the media system. Similarly Tsfaty and Ariely (2014) main argument is that consumption of mainstream media leads to higher media trust, although they only found weak support for this hypothesis. These empirical findings make sense in light of theoretical elaborations on the concept of trust, which often link familiarity with trust (Misztal 1996). In general, the more we get to know something or someone, the more we are likely to develop a trusting relationship with them. In a more recent response to this question, Strömbäck et al. (2020) argues, however, that we are likely seeing a double-sided causality, where media use leads to media trust, but also vice versa, and that the weak correlations for these measurements in previous studies are probably based on faulty methodologies. They also argue, that previous studies such as Tsfaty and Cappella (2003), which found that even those that are most skeptical of the mainstream news media still consume more mainstream news media than alternative news media, might have become outdated in a high-choice environment. This is a valid concern, but at the same time, it does not automatically follow that a lack of trust in the news media is correlated with trust in “alternative” media. In fact, Hameleers, Brosius, and de Vreese (2022) found an increased consumption of alternative news media among those who perceived an increase in disinformation and misinformation, but no increase in alternative media consumption related to general media trust.

But maybe there are other reasons why empirical research has failed to demonstrate strong correlations between media use and media trust. The assumption that distrust leads to an unwillingness to engage seems to be based on the belief that trust and distrust are opposites. Luhmann (1968), however, argues that trust and distrust are functionally equivalent, and both act as institutional economizers. As highlighted above, trustful audience member does not need to spend time double-checking stories, and that he/she trust that they can successfully act on the information received from the media. Similarly however, even a distrustful audience member can use the media to navigate social reality, as long as the audience member trusts its own capacity to read critically. Distrust is not a barrier to information gathering if an audience member believes in its capacity to read between the lines, to look behind the surface meaning, and/or to assess the political biases of the journalist. That this is how many news consumers both consume the news and how they think of their own critical abilities has also been shown in previous

research (Aharoni et al. 2022). To distrust a source of information is not the same as distrusting a person who asks you to lend out money. Lending out money is a yes or no situation. Trusting or distrusting the news is a much more complex situation in which an audience member can gain (or lose) something, without taking a definitive stance (Swart and Broersma 2022, 411). Suspicion and distrust can furthermore lead to more information-gathering and news engagement. In order to verify a story a distrustful news consumer can double-check the story with other news sources, thus leading to more news consumption. In some cases, this might of course lead the news consumer to “alternative” media sources, but it might as well lead to engagement with more professional news outlets. For the argument here however, the important point is that when trust and distrust are not seen as opposites, but as complementary attitudes, then it seems logical that it is difficult to establish a strong correlation between media trust and media use.

To summarize, it is established that parts of the news industry is suffering economically (e.g., Franklin 2014; Pickard 2020). This is related to changes in the advertising market, but also to changes in patterns of media consumption. There is more competition for the attention of the audience than ever. Media trust might play a role in why the news industry is failing in attracting larger audiences. The question, however, is how much emphasis we should put on media trust when trying to explain why media users are turning to alternative news or to social media platforms instead of legacy news outlets. There are probably a number of reasons for why previous research has failed to demonstrate the strong impact of media trust on media use. Even distrusting audiences might find mainstream use both informative and useful, if members of the distrusting audience trust themselves in being able to critically evaluate the news.

## Media Trust, Democracy and Citizenship

A reasonably informed citizenry is, according to most democratic theories, necessary for a functioning democratic society. In modern societies, it is one of the roles of the news media to provide citizens with relevant information (de Zúñiga 2015). This, however, requires that the citizenry, at least to some extent, trusts the information that the media convey or at least trust that the media aims at informing them, even though they do not always succeed (Jones 2004). From this perspective, media trust is necessary because without it, people will not take part in the news media (see however the discussion in the previous section) and because without trust there will be disagreements over facts, which will make it more difficult to reach agreements in policy debates (Haas 2018) and will hinder policy-making in general (Rekker 2021). A related claim is that trust in the media and in information is necessary for active citizenship, since facts are the “currency of citizenship” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 8). The same argument is made for political trust and for social capital, which also are seen as making possible political participation and involvement in the communities we live in (Uslaner 2002; Putnam 2000). Here we are, however, interested in the more specific claim that relates media trust to citizenship, which Coleman (2012) describes as such:

Unless we can trust the news media to deliver common knowledge, the idea of the public—a collective entity possessing shared concerns—starts to fall apart [...] Trust is, therefore, the

*foundation of the social relationship that we call citizenship.* (Coleman 2012, 36–37, added emphasis)

One difficult problem for the suggestion that news media trust is strongly linked to democratic citizenship is the fact that trust in the media has been shown to be higher in more authoritarian societies. In countries such as China (177 of 180 on the Press freedom index 2021), Indonesia (113 of 180) and Saudi Arabia (170 of 180), trust in media is widespread. Between 65% and 80% of the population in these countries display trust in the media. However, more democratic societies with a stronger press- and media freedom, such as the US (44 of 180 in Press freedom index 2021), the UK (33 of 180), France (34 of 180), and Germany (13 of 180) are countries in which the population display a rather low degree of media trust (ibid.). In fact, in a country such as Russia (150 of 180 in Press freedom index 2021), in which it is well-known that the television is mainly a propagandist system imposing state ideas and working in the interests of the (political) power elite, as much as 51% of the population express that they trust television news, a figure that trumps those in many countries with a high degree of media freedom (Malakhov 2018, 70). The general picture is hence that in societies with a low degree of media freedom—although survey studies in authoritarian countries should be viewed with skepticism—people tend to trust the information they get from the media to a higher extent than in societies with a high degree of media freedom. The exception here are the Nordic countries, which have some of the strongest systems for media freedom in the world and high trust in the media among citizens (Syvertsen et al. 2014).

Why do the empirical facts not seem to validate the normative literature on media trust? There are certain strands of the literature on democracy and the public sphere that explains this rather well. Rosanvallon (2008) makes the case that democracy has always had an intimate relationship with distrust. Liberal democratic theory relies on institutionalized forms of distrust of power, often referred to as a system of checks-and-balances. What Rosanvallon analyzes, however, is something else: what he refers to as *democratic distrust* and how this is expressed and organized in democratic societies. The book is an attempt to provide a “more diverse understanding of democratic activities [...] by adding the terms vigilance, assessment, pressure through revelation, obstruction, and judgment” (17f). Thus rather than seeing distrust as a danger for democratic societies, Rosanvallon claims that the different forms of democratic distrust make up a counter-democracy, which is not in opposition to democracy, but a support for and complement to the electoral-representative system. This makes sure that it performs as it should, and criticizes it when it oversteps its boundaries, acts too little or acts too late, or shows other signs of dysfunctionality. Distrust, organized and expressed in this way, Rosanvallon argues, should be recognized as a legitimate political form.

What Rosanvallon shows, even though he does not discuss the news media directly, is that it is not strange, and not necessarily worrying, that citizens in democratic countries are more distrusting towards media institutions than citizens in non-democratic societies. Journalistic ideology typically sees itself as part of the system of checks-and-balances and as a guarantor that the political system is held accountable. In an increasingly mediatized society however, the news media have in themselves become a center a power, and it is thus a legitimate political action to be vigilant, and to assess, and put pressure on the news media, as much as on the political institutions. To this argument of democratic

distrust, we can also add Dean's (2002) discussion of the public sphere and the ideal of publicity. In a similar way to Rosanvallon, Dean argues that distrust has always been an integral part of the system of publicity that democratic theorists has identified as the public sphere (i.e., Habermas 1962). The institutionalized ideal to publicize, to make public, is premised on the idea that there is something secret, something hidden, and thus that there are grounds for a certain amount of distrust. The idea of the secret cannot be contained and is only seen as connected with political institutions. But the publicists are themselves always in danger of being called-out for not revealing the whole truth, for only telling part of the story, and for not being open about their own agendas and hidden biases. The secret, and the distrust that comes with it, is not something that can be wished away, but is that which motivates and drives the entire publishing system. Once again, the high levels of media trust in undemocratic countries and low trust in democratic countries need not be interpreted from this perspective as a sign of weakness for the democratic system.

To conclude this section, and to strengthen the argument that democratic citizenship has an ambiguous relationship with media trust, we will look at some empirical studies that have analyzed this relationship. First, has trust in the news media, in empirical studies, been observed to correlate with informed citizenship? The studies that exist in this area suggests that the answer is negative. Kaufhold, Valenzuela, and De Zúñiga (2010) showed that there was a negative correlation between trust in professional journalism and political knowledge. This finding was surprising for the researchers, but they commented on the result by saying that "being distrustful may provoke a more careful and reflective reading of the news and perhaps spur the seeking of alternative sources of information" (524). This finding is also in line with what we have argued above; that distrust does not necessarily lead to a disconnection from the sphere of news journalism, rather it can equally be a motivation to engage with additional news sources. Hutchens et al. (2021) found similar patterns in a study of the consumption of political information: a lack of trust (what they call "skepticism") led to *increased* information seeking and *increased* political knowledge. These results, it must be stressed, comes from a specific context (the USA) and it would be unwise to generalize these findings too broadly. Correlations between becoming informed and media trust may play out differently in other places. One important contextual factor is the existence of "alternative" news sources. It is important to recognize that in many cases, there are no alternatives to professional journalism. Certain issues—climate change, vaccination—have created alternative information ecologies. However, apart from these extreme cases, citizens often have to rely on professional journalism for their information needs. A lack of alternatives can lead to cynicism and apathy, but it can also lead to acceptance, even when there is an element of distrust involved. Consequently, being informed and being are not mutually exclusive, even if they can create tensions and cognitive dissonances. Additionally, when alternative news sources and disinformation are abundant, and audience members chose to adopt viewpoints from such alternative media ecologies, it is not necessarily a lack of trust in mainstream media that leads them there. Political and ideological convictions also play an important role, and in this case, a distrust of mainstream media is a symptom rather than the cause of turning to alternative media outlets.

Secondly, we ask, does research show that people with high levels of media trust are more civically engaged? There exist numerous studies of forms of trust in relation to civic

engagement, and the most common approach is explaining the existence of trust as an outcome of participation in civil society (Brehm and Rahn 1997, Putnam 2000). The idea in this line of research is that by partaking in activities, organizations and communal life, etc. trust in other people is enhanced, and then it is generalized to fellow citizens at large. This—it is often argued—leads to a host of positive outcomes both on an individual and societal level (Putnam 2000). There are, however, those who have questioned the direction of this causal connection. Uslaner and Brown (2005) have, for example, argued that the causal relationship instead runs the other way: from trust to participation (cf. Uslaner 2002). Using a longitudinal series of data from the USA, they show that participation in civic life has no effect on trust, but that general social trust might predict whether or not people take the step to become civically engaged. The strongest predictor for trust/mistrust, as their statistical analysis demonstrates, is the level of inequality in society (the more equal, the more trust). If we see media trust as part of, or a subcategory to, general social trust (trust in fellow citizens in general), then this seems to add some support for the idea that media trust is also a “foundation” for civil engagement and hence for citizenship. To understand media trust as somehow related to general social trust is not too far-fetched, since much comparative work on media trust has shown that levels of media trust in a society tends to follow or correspond with the levels of general social, political and institutional trust in that society (e.g., Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018).

This argument, however, is very general, and for example, Coleman’s (2012) point on the relation between media trust and citizenship is more specific. He states that media trust is not only an abstract and generalized trust in “the media” but also in that they “deliver common knowledge”, which makes it possible for us to see ourselves as a “public” who share “common concerns”. Implied in this formulation is the Habermasian ideal of a public, forming within civil society and acting politically. Here however, the above-mentioned study by Uslaner & Brown (2005) raises some concerns. Their study shows that while trust might have an influence on some forms of civic engagement, this is not applicable to all forms of civic engagement. When it comes to the more specific form of political engagement, in contrast to other forms of “communal engagement”, the opposite hold true: political action thrives on mistrust rather than on trust:

People will be more likely to get involved in political life when they get mad and believe that some others, be they other people or political leaders, cannot be trusted. When people are upset, they are more likely to take direct action in their communities (875)

This finding is also supported by other studies, for example Warren (1996) and notably Tsfati (2002) who found that media mistrust is correlated with higher political participation. Building on empirical material from an interview study on media mistrust, Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou (2022) furthermore argue that news media content that is deemed untrustworthy can have an activating effect, making people more politically engaged. If these different findings hold true, it would be necessary to qualify the notion that media trust and citizenship are connected. It might be true for some forms of civic engagement and active citizenship, but not for other forms, which in that case is an empirical question yet to be resolved.

The fact that the relationship between citizenship and media trust is far more complicated than what has been suggested by normative theories on media trust, e.g., Coleman

(2012), is further underlined by the numerous studies of various forms of political action and active citizenship despite, or even due to, a lack of trust in the media. Research on alternative media (Atton 2019), media activism (Pickard and Yang 2017), and media reform movements (Freedman et al. 2016) are some examples of how people come together as a collective entity with shared concerns, while at the same time (at least in some cases) uttering fierce critique against, and displaying an almost total lack of trust, in the (mainstream) media.

In conclusion, this section of the article has suggested that whether people trust the media or not has a rather loose connection to democratic citizenship, both when it comes to the extent in which citizens are actually being informed by the media, and the extent to which they participate actively in society. This implies that the relationship between trust/mistrust and citizenship is complex and that there are no immediate reasons to assume that mistrust towards the media would annihilate or suspend citizenship as such.

### Media Trust and Media Life

The sense that there is order and continuity behind events as they unfold in our everyday life—and the sense that we live in a world that we share with other people—is what Laing (1965) and Giddens (1991) has referred to as “ontological security”. In order to achieve such a sense of security, we need to develop trust in other people. In an oft-cited essay, Coleman (2012) links the concept of ontological security to media trust, which has led other researchers to claim that trustworthy news media are necessary for achieving ontological security in a world that is overflowing with information that citizens need to orient themselves around (Van Dalen 2020). Even more than a pre-condition for democracy and citizenship, media trust has thus been proposed as a necessary existential condition for surviving in a modern world that is fraught with risks and insecurity.

The proposal that media trust is necessary for ontological security might look reasonable from the perspective of media and journalism studies. These disciplines like to remind us that we live our lives both with and through the media (e.g., Deuze 2012). There are people who try to opt-out or disconnect from the media, but these attempts at living life without the media are based on individual life choices and cannot be generalized to society as whole, since the connected world we live in is largely reliant on mediated forms of communication (Kuntzman and Miyake 2019). Indeed, there are also theoretical (Silverstone 1993) and ethnographic (Georgiou 2013) studies that have argued that media technologies can function as a way to achieve ontological security. To claim that media can be used to achieve ontological security is not the same, however, as to say that media are *necessary* for establishing a secure footing in the world.

Firstly, it has to be recognized that the foundation for ontological security is laid early in life through the development of trusting relationships within the family or in relation to other significant persons (Giddens 1991). Empirical research on trust has also been able to establish that people who show trust in one area often also are able to exhibit trust in other areas of social life (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018). There can be many different explanations for this empirical finding. However, it makes sense from the theoretical perspective of ontological security that people who have managed to develop

trusting relationships in early life can also develop trust in social institutions. From this perspective, media trust can consequently be seen as a consequence of ontological security, rather than its cause.

In general, the media are both a source of and a threat to ontological security. Silverstone (1993) discusses, for example, how television provides a sense of continuity and stability through its integration into our everyday lives. Today, we might only need substitute “television” with “mobile phone” to understand his analysis. The mobile phone is always there, at the bedside table or in our pocket, instantly connecting us to our family, friends and the world at large. Always in a familiar format and in an ordered way, shaped by the graphical interface and by algorithms that provides us with updates and stories that we can make sense of and that have an air of familiarity. The feeling of ontological security provided by the mobile phone thus partly works in the same way as the electricity grid or the water system. It gives us a sense of infrastructural security—we are so sure that we can rely on these systems that we do not reflect on the fact that they are functioning, as long as they are functioning. This is then, of course, also the way that these systems threaten our ontological security. When infrastructures break down, panic and chaos can ensue. But this sense of ontological security has little to do with news journalism. We can debate, argue, and criticize the news, without being disturbed in our belief that the world will continue to function as before.

There is, however, also another side to the role of the media in relation to ontological security that is not related to the infrastructural aspects, but to the informational aspects of news and journalism. It can be argued, as we have above, that news journalism is one of the primary ways that we receive information about the world. In order for us to then construct a reliable and trustworthy image of the world, we need to trust the media that provides us with the basic building blocks to construct that image. This argument suffers, however, from a certain amount of media-centrism and disciplinary blindness. We can argue that the news media is one of the best ways we have to receive correct, reliable and relevant news and information, but that is not the same as arguing that the news media are necessary for establishing ontological security, since that argument fails to take into account the sense of continuity and stability we can get from other social institutions, e.g., the home (Dupuis and Thorns 1998), family (Botterill, Hopkins, and Sanghera 2020), church (Öztürk 2022), and indeed from our digital social networks and from online platforms (Areni 2018). Furthermore, the news media is also a source of ontological insecurity because of the way that it frames social and political developments (i.e., Altheide 1997). Populist crisis narratives that are specifically framed to produce a sense of immanent catastrophe and social disorder are not only disseminated directly by populist political actors (Homolar and Scholz 2019), but they are also attractive to media outlets since they fit well with journalistic values of urgency and relevance.

Using news media to achieve ontological security is also a double-edged sword in a political environment prone to polarization and an information environment that lets news audiences construct their own information bubbles (Bruns 2019), which has lead Roberts (2017) to call attention to the problematic aspects of “tribal epistemologies”. In order to break free from information bubbles, overcome polarization and not rely on tribal epistemologies, we might need to break with the familiar sources that we usually trust. Distrust can be needed as a way to gain new perspectives, to recognize “Otherness”

(Untalan 2020), and to cultivate a more self-reflective use of news and information, even if this can be challenging for our search for ontological security.

### **Does Media Trust Matter, in What Sense and how Can we Study it?**

We have argued in this article that the relevance and importance of media trust is sometimes taken for granted and that a more robust theory of the origins and consequences of media trust is needed. The case for media trust as a sufficient and necessary condition for a blossoming news industry, informed citizenship, democracy and ontological security should be seen as a matter of open debate, rather than as an article of faith.

What we have not argued in this article is that general trust, political trust and media trust does not have any positive social outcomes. On a general, existential level, it is of course entirely reasonable that some form of basic trust is at the center of the human condition (Løgstrup 1956). Trust also has a specific meaning in modern, large scale and complex societies as it is one of the foundations for social organization (Simmel 1950). On this more foundational level, trust—and trust in the media—is tied to the very idea of modernity itself. As Coleman also argues, trust in the media is not only about trusting the media to do their job (reporting the news, giving accurate information, and so on), but it also involves a shared understanding of what the role of the news media is in modern societies. Hence, trust in the media is part of what Taylor (2004) has described as the modern “social imaginary”. The Web of underlying assumptions and values, which are tied to discourses, institutions and behaviors, that “enables, through making sense of, the practices of society” (2). The discussion in this article should therefore not be taken as an argument that trust, as such, is an unimportant social phenomenon or insignificant for the study of media and journalism.

What we have argued is that the underlying claims of why trust matters that we have found in previous research, upon closer inspection, have difficulty finding sufficient support through empirical evidence. The results from empirical work are mixed (to say the least) in terms of trust being a sufficient and necessary condition for a blossoming news industry, informed citizenship, democracy and ontological security. The fact that the results from empirical work are mixed might also have to do with how trust has been researched: which operationalizations, theories and methods have been used. It might, for example, be the case that distrust in the media is only malign under some specific social or cultural conditions. It might be that there are different forms of distrust that reflect different sentiments and/or positions in the social space, or it might be that distrust in general is a much more multifaceted phenomena than what has been captured in previous media and journalism research. The survey-based research that dominates the field, with its rather weak conceptualizations of trust (Strömbäck et al. 2020), has not really been able to tackle these issues. From the results of this research, it seems as if distrust in the media might, on the one hand, spur democratic participation and news consumption, while on the other, fuel news avoidance and disdain for democracy. This, we argue, needs to be explained and better understood through further empirical and theoretical work in this area. It is necessary, we think, for media and journalism research to both engage with theoretical discussions on the concept of trust based on political and social theory in order to develop better operationalizations of trust, while also engaging more with other research methods

(qualitative) and approaches (more exploratory) than those that have dominated the field, in order to gain a more nuanced appreciation of the benefits and problems of trust and distrust in the media.

Qualitative research on news media trust should purposefully explore why normative expectations about the importance of news media trust are not always confirmed by empirical studies. There are several qualitative research studies pointing in this direction, some of which have already cited in this article, for example Swart and Broersma's (2022) study on why news media trust and news media use are not necessarily related; Aharoni et al.'s (2022) interview study, which makes explicit the link between news consumers' trust in their own ability to navigate a complex information environment and their use of both trusted and non-trusted news sources; and Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou's (2022) article on mistrusting and politically engaged "alarmed citizens". There are thus several interesting case studies that have begun to pursue the questions raised in this article (see also Coleman, Morrison, and Anthony 2012; Toff et al. 2021). What all of these studies highlight, however, is that both trust and mistrust are concepts that are highly contextual and sensitive to changes in the surrounding media landscape as well as changes in the political landscape. There is thus still a need, we think, for more qualitative studies to complement the still dominant quantitative paradigm in this area of research. Following from this, we also need to ask other research questions than the ones that are usually asked. We do not only need to know the answer to various variations of the question: do you trust the news media? We also need to know more about what people really mean, how they reason, and what they think that they are responding to when asked about their trust in the media. Some work has been done in this direction (i.e., Coleman, Morrison, and Anthony 2012; Schmidt, Heyamoto, and Milbourn 2019), but we suggest that more such research is necessary. Consider, for example, the change in public discourse since the 2016 presidential election in the USA and the way that media skepticism and even hatred of the news media has become part of a political identity (Carlson 2018), but consider at the same time, the academic (Krzyżanowski 2020) and popular criticism of the news media's complicity in normalizing the kind of rude and uncivilized rhetoric associated with the former and the calls for the news media to push for more civilized forms of debate. Both populist media criticism and criticism of media's complicity in spreading populism involve a mistrust of the current functioning of the institution of journalism, but the reasons for and the implications of these different forms of distrust are likely very different. Furthermore, if we do not know what people mean and what their intentions are in answering surveys, how meaningful is it to compare surveys on media trust from 10 years ago with surveys administered today? How do we capture the changes in public discourse that might be behind the changes in how people respond to such surveys? How can we theorize the consequences of levels of trust if we do not know why people answer opinion polls in the way they do, and what they are signifying with their answers? It is one thing to say that you don't trust the media as a political statement, in order to signal your political allegiance or as a protest against the powers that be, and another to signify a lack of trust because you disbelieve anything that you learn from the news. The social and political consequences of those positions differ as much as they differ in what they signify. Research on media trust thus needs to dig further and to take into account the political context and the discourses through which statements about trust and distrust are made. Therefore, we are

issuing a general call for more empirical research—both qualitative and quantitative—that seeks to integrate empirical findings with normative democratic theories about journalism, since as we have argued, news media trust is likely an important component of democratic culture, but its exact role in upholding democratic societies still needs further clarification and specification.

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