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# Trust in Media and Journalism

## Introduction

*Kim Otto & Andreas Köhler*

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### Abstract

Across Europe and the world, communication scientists are reflecting upon the issue of trust in journalism and the media. A significant body of analysis and research provides new perspectives on the reasons, impacts and consequences of trust or mistrust in the media and journalism. The present anthology aims to provide an overview of the empirical research on trust in media and journalism, the new perspectives, methodological approaches and current findings discussed among communication scientists at European and international scientific conferences. The anthology presents studies and findings on ethics and norms, influences on trust and the effects of populism.

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## 1 Dimensions of the debate on trust in the media

Both public news coverage and in the academic discipline of communication studies have focused increasingly upon human beings' trust in the media over the past three years. The "crisis of trust in the media" has been part of public discourse since the conflict in Ukraine (Reinemann & Fawzi, 2016). The media's credibility and the trust placed in them also became a topic of discussion following the debate on fake news, including in the 2015/16 U.S. presidential election campaign. Trust

in the media and in journalists has recently been the subject of heated debate, with terms such as the “lying media”, “the media that are part of the system”, and “state-controlled broadcasting” being used. The topic was taken up by the press, broadcasting and the internet, and the media subjected both themselves and their recipients to intense scrutiny. Three main dimensions emerged from the debate, the problems inherent in which were thematised in connection with people’s loss of trust in the media. These dimensions are ethics and norms, factors of influence and populism:

- *Journalistic ethics and normative guidelines* constitute a key area of research on journalism. Among other things, media ethics investigates the normative standards to which professional journalists are held and how concrete journalistic actions implement these standards; on the level of media politics, it analyses the influence exerted by the media system and media corporations; and on an (overlapping) personal level, it studies journalists’ scope for shaping the media as well as the participation of media recipients (Thomaß, 2016). Recently, the media’s credibility has been the focus of debates on journalistic misconduct and the possibly overly great influence of the state and politics on media content and the implementation of journalistic norms. A disregard for ethics and norms was cited as a reason for the loss of trust in the media. In a representative study carried out in Germany by the Bayerische Rundfunk (Bavarian State Radio) in 2016, 48 percent of participants stated that they saw public service television as not independent or not really independent; 47 percent said the same of daily newspapers, and 57 percent judged private broadcasting to be not or not really independent (BR, 2016, p. 27). 24 percent were not convinced that the media give an accurate picture of reality, citing exaggeration, incompleteness and false reports as reasons among others (BR, 2016, p. 36). Accordingly, the debate on trust in the media is conducted within the dimension of journalistic ethics and norms.
- *Factors of influence on trust in the media* have also been discussed frequently in recent years. Here, the key question is: why do human beings (not) trust the media? What reasons are there for this that lie beyond journalistic performance? When possible influences on trust in the media are enumerated, recipients’ frustration with the media is cited as the cause of their dissatisfaction, and the media’s complexity and the fact that they overtax their audiences also play a role. In addition, the intensity with which journalists are now attacked in the internet is seen as one of the main reasons for the perception of a crisis in trust (Reinemann & Fawzi, 2016). This apparently is leading journalists to take their recipients’ criticism much more seriously than before. Public debate on

recipients' trust in the media examines these possible factors of influence and enquires into the reasons for a loss of trust in the media on this level.

- Last but not least, the European debate on trust in the media is closely linked to the revival of political *populism*. It is primarily right-wing populist parties and politicians that criticise journalists with the express aim of contributing to the media's loss of credibility and trustworthiness. In a survey of "Pegida" participants, over a third (34.5 percent) of those surveyed (n=397) cited the desire to criticise "the media" and the structure of public discourse as motivating their participation in demonstrations organised by the right-wing populist movement. In this survey, journalists' work was often massively criticised and generalised – in line with the defamatory slogan of the "lying press" or *Lügenpresse*. Right-wing populist movements' media criticism – often voiced aggressively – is nothing new and can be seen as part of a more general development (Vorländer et al., 2016, p. 114).

These dimensions and problems of the public debate on trust in the media and journalists will not be reproduced in the present volume, although they will be touched upon. Current studies produced by scholars from a range of European countries provide new empirical insights into problems of the abovementioned dimensions, helping to bring current research on trust in the media and journalism up to date.

The introduction to this volume will first describe the concept of trust in the media and mention the most important points of reference. Subsequently the key areas of research and relevant studies in these fields that the research findings in this volume follow on from will be mentioned. Finally, the individual essays will be introduced and placed within the context of these research fields and dimensions.

This volume aims to present new insights into the topic of trust in the media and thus open up new perspectives both in the abovementioned dimensions of public discourse and in scholarship's key areas of research on trust in the media.

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## 2 The concept of trust and points of reference

In everyday language, "trust" is a very broad term. Often it is linked to a belief in something or someone, but involves expectations directed at the future to a greater extent than the concept of credibility. When we trust, we do not simply hope or expect that an event will occur – we rely on it. The plethora of terms such as trust,

credibility, hope, expectation, and reliability shows that trust is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to differentiate (Dernbach & Meyer, 2005, p. 15–16).

There is a lack of clear definitions in the scholarship, too, where the term “trust” is used in an unsystematic and vague manner (Barber, 1983, 3f.). Critics point out that many definitions replace “trust” with confidence, belief and similar terms (Kohring 2004, p. 128). The two constructs of “credibility” and “trust” are scarcely differentiated, used side by side and even used synonymously in the majority of cases (Seidenglanz, 2008). While some groups of researchers have explicitly used the term “media trust” in their works in the last 15 years (e.g. Kiouisis, 2001; Lucassen & Schraagen, 2012; Tsfati 2010), they mainly draw upon studies on media credibility, rather than media trust, when discussing the state of research (Kohring & Matthes, 2007).

Kohring defines trust by its purpose. Trust is needed to reduce the complexity of the vast range of existing communicative processes and thus enable actions that follow on from said processes. These actions are only possible on the basis of selection, and thus we trust in other actors’ anticipated selection. An act of trust simulates the occurrence of a certain future, reacting to a selection expected to take place in the future. This selection is made by other social actors. Accordingly, trust expresses the expectation that other actors will behave in a certain way. Trust is thus first and foremost a trust in selectivity. The need to adopt selections made by others is the result of modern societies’ differentiation and specification. Selecting information is such a complex task that it is passed on to others. Instead of selecting ourselves, we select the selections made by others; selection is delegated. Trust is an act that compensates for risk and thus preserves options for action (Kohring, 2004). Trust reduces complexity through this enabling of follow-up actions: “[trust] overdraws the information gained in the past and risks defining the future. The complexity of the future world is reduced by the act of trust” (Luhmann, 1989, p. 20).<sup>1</sup>

Credibility is understood as “a trait ascribed to human beings, institutions or their communicative products by someone in regard to something” (Bentele, 2008, p. 168). Accordingly, credibility is not an “inherent” or objective characteristic of communicative products, but a trait that is perceived by recipients and is thus relational. As an ascribed trait, credibility forms part of the phenomenon of trust. By contrast, trust describes a “relational dimension” between the subjects and objects of trust and is procedural in nature (Bentele, 1994, p. 141). Trust is a relationship

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1 Orig. „Vertrauen] überzieht die Informationen, die es aus der Vergangenheit besitzt und riskiert eine Bestimmung der Zukunft. Im Akt des Vertrauens wird die Komplexität der zukünftigen Welt reduziert.“

between actors that is known and accepted not only by the subject of trust (the trustor) but also by the object of trust (the trustee). This means the expectations held by the subject of trust in the object of trust need to be known to the latter. Deficits in communication and information can be the cause of problems or failure in this relation (Kohring, 2004, p. 133).

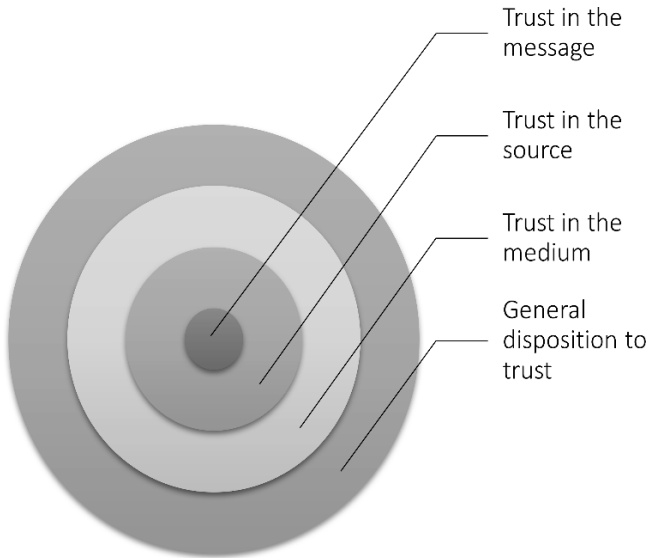
The subjects of trust – media recipients – place trust in the selectivity of the object of trust – journalism. Journalism’s correct functioning forms the basis of trust and is expressed in the audience’s expectations of journalism’s actions and performance (Kohring, 2004, p. 141). Accordingly, trust in journalism is always trust in journalistic selectivity. Kohring (2002, p. 105) lists four factors resulting from the performance of the system of journalism:

- Trust in thematic selectivity
- Trust in factual selectivity
- Trust in factual correctness
- Trust in explicit evaluations

Accordingly, trust in journalism is defined by how trust is assessed in regard to these factors. The model thus lists the key criteria of evaluation. These can be applied to different points of reference within the performance system of journalism. They focus upon

- the message or media content in itself,
- the content’s source or communicator,
- and the channel or the medium used to disseminate the message.

These points of reference can be seen as layers of trust in the media (Lucassen & Schraagen, 2012). The individual layers constitute specific aspects of media trust, with trust in the message at their core. The layers interact, influencing one another both from the inner to the outer and from the outer to the inner layers (cf. Figure 1).



**Figure 1** *The reference points of trust*  
(image based upon Lucassen & Schraagen, 2012, p. 569)

This means that there can be no trust in the message if there is no trust in the medium itself. The channel of mediation is thus crucial. The next step, the source or communicator, is likewise significant. Here, the communicator's or source's coherence and expertise are at the fore. Trust in the message constitutes the core and is dependent upon the preceding points. Thus the individual layers either influence one another directly or mediate between the individual layers as an interlink (Lucassen & Schraagen, 2012; Vogel, 2015, p. 313).

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### 3 Fields of research

The complex field of trust in the media and journalism and the research on it can be structured systematically based upon the differentiated points of reference mentioned in the model. Much research has been produced on the specified dimensions of medium, source, and content. In the following, we will attempt to give an overview of the key studies to show which dimensions of existing research the empirical studies included in this volume relate to.

### 3.1 Trust in the media

Media organisations such as publishers and broadcasting companies create journalistic products such as newspapers, television programmes and radio shows. Most studies examining trust in the media as mediating channels compare the different channels (such as television, the press, radio and internet), examining the levels of trust in the respective channel. Furthermore, trust in the media is often compared with trust in other institutions.

The comparison of different media in regard to their credibility is based on the Roper survey (1985). Roper was the first to investigate differences between the respective credibility of TV, radio and the press, showing that between 1959 and 1988, trust in television was markedly higher in the USA than trust in the press and radio. This was attributed to the medium's visual nature. The Roper question was incorporated into the long-term study on mass communication in Germany (Krupp & Bräunig 2016). In Germany, too, TV's credibility was higher than that of radio and the press between 1970 and 2015. Conversely, however, the results of the Eurobarometer show that trust in radio has been higher than trust in television since 2002. In 2016, 67.8 percent of people trusted the radio, 60.5 percent trusted television and 55.7 percent trusted the press (Otto & Köhler, 2017).

The internet has frequently been included in these comparisons since its rise to the status of a mass medium. Recent findings show that this medium is hardly trusted at all. Thus the internet – probably due to the vast heterogeneity of its content – has comparatively low credibility ratings (Ridder & Engel, 2005, p. 432, 2010, p. 548). In the long-term study *Massenkommunikation 2015* (Mass Communication 2015), the internet came last behind television, radio and daily newspapers in regard to its credibility (ARD/ZDF, 2015).

A number of recent studies have likewise investigated trust in the different channels of communication. In contrast to public debate, these studies show that trust in the press, radio and television remained mostly stable over the past years and recently has even risen. The studies were able to identify different ascriptions of trust using sociodemographic traits, such as recipients' position on the political spectrum or their age. Ascriptions of credibility and trust always depend on the recipients (Otto & Köhler, 2016; Otto & Köhler, 2017).

Furthermore, assessments of the credibility of the news depend on the political views of those surveyed. Survey participants with liberal political views felt news coverage was fair, while conservative participants accused news coverage of bias (Lee, 2010).

Other studies see the recipients' sociocultural characteristics as a relevant factor (Schenk, 1987; Jäckel, 1999; Norris, 2000). These studies show that recipients'

trust in individual media depends on their sociocultural and sociostructural context. Elsewhere, external influences are examined (Köhler & Otto, 2016).

Studies such as the Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung (GfK) *Global Trust Report* (2017) ask somewhat undifferentiated questions concerning trust in the media, but then compare it with trust in other institutions such as administration, offices and authorities, political parties, the police, the government and currency. This analysis of media trust is overly generalised. Trust is too complex a structure to be measured directly. Questions on trust in journalistic performance or about a concrete journalistic offer possess higher validity (Kohring, 2004, p. 137).

### 3.2 Trust in the source

For traditional media, various studies have shown that sources are experienced as credible if they possess expertise – that is, if they have the ability to make correct and valid statements – and if they are trustworthy – that is, if media users are able to trust that the information the source regards as correct and valid is actually passed on (Bentele, 2008, p. 173). For this, recipients need to see the communicators as competent: recipients' evaluation is based among other factors upon the communicators' age, associated experience, position and level of education. Such ascriptions are evident in TV coverage, where the focus on individuals as communicators is much stronger than in the print media. Communicators' key competencies can be transferred to other sources, too: expertise, problem-solving competence, communicative adequacy, open communication, social responsibility and responsible ethics (Bentele, 2008, p. 173).

The seminal studies carried out by the Hovland (1954) group laid the foundations for the communicator perspective in trust research. The American researchers carried out studies of recipients in the 1940s and 1950s, identifying and naming a number of factors on the basis of which trust is placed in communicators. Communicators are ascribed *expertness* and *trustworthiness*; *dynamics* was added later as an additional factor. In stimulus-response experiments, the same statements were ascribed to different sources and presented to recipients who attributed the statements' credibility to characteristics of the sources.

However, later studies show that there are no objective credibility criteria that can be applied to communicators; rather, credibility is constructed dependently of communication processes. Furthermore, variable traits of the recipients, such as their political stance or their views on different topics, also play a role (Görke, 1993).



Other studies investigate the links between political knowledge and the trust that media users place in professionally trained journalists on the one hand and in amateur or citizen journalists on the other. Interestingly, the studies show that high levels of trust in professional journalism correlate negatively with political knowledge. The authors conclude that lower levels of trust leads to a more careful and varied selection of information sources and to a more critical questioning and more elaborate processing of the information received. Therefore, studies dealing with trust in communicators cannot ignore recipients' starting positions (Kaufhold, Valenzuela & De Zúñiga, 2010).

### **3.3 Trust in the content**

Journalism science's model of mass communication advocates differentiating between the communication and the mediation process (Nawratil, 1990). The mediation process takes place via the media. Assessments of the credibility of the media and of the communicators are based on their mediation performance. On the level of content – the communication level – the competencies the mediators require become evident. In the main, this involves aspects of objectivity, a requirement for descriptive texts. The key aspects listed are truth, completeness, structuring, transparency in regard to sources and personal evaluations as well as the separation of news and opinion. Communication scientists show that media content is able to influence trust through its manner of depiction and evaluation. Thus journalistic quality standards are linked with the trust placed in journalism (Bentele, 1994, p. 307). The criteria mentioned correspond with many media quality criteria lists, including for television, which are derived from legal requirements (Schatz & Schulz, 1992), for newspapers, derived from democratic, theoretical journalistic requirements (Rager, 1994; Arnold, 2009), or derived from general requirements of communication processes (Bucher, 2003).

When analysing content, some studies refer to objects of coverage, differentiating between first- and second-order trusting acts. The first-order trusting act is the choice of medium, the second-order trusting act the acceptance of the medium's message. Empirical tests confirmed this theoretical classification: trust in messages has an effect on media usage (Matthes, 2007). Further studies discovered that trust in news coverage and the acceptance of content has an effect on political trust (Matthes, 2010).

## 4 Structure of the volume

This volume aims to provide new perspectives and insights on two levels. On the first level, these insights relate to the abovementioned dimensions of norms and ethics, influences on media trust, and populism; on the second level, they refer to the research fields of content, sources and media. New perspectives are revealed through new insights and new methodological approaches in the present volume's essays, which correspond to these two levels.

These essays by scholars from Sweden, Australia, Switzerland and Germany show that the topic of trust in the media and journalism has developed significance for and is addressed by communication science research across Europe and beyond.

As an introduction, *Caroline Fisher* of the University of Canberra, Australia, provides an overview of concepts of trust in the media, using selected interdisciplinary literature to give an account of the concept's evolution over the last 80 years. She identifies a growing separation between the normative ideal of informed citizens, the complex demands made of media products and the citizens' ideal of being able to trust the media on the one hand and their own necessary skills of reflection and control on the other. Furthermore, Fisher's contribution shows different ways of measuring media trust. This essay thus covers the many different approaches to the topic of trust in the media, providing insights into the dimension of values and norms and specifically addressing recipients' perception of content on the level of the research areas.

The essay by *Gunnar Nygren and Andreas Widholm* of Södertörn University and Stockholm University, Sweden, deals with verification as a formal journalistic norm found in many guidelines and codices. Trust in factual correctness is a basic building block of trust in a medium. The media are able to increase this trust through verification. The authors enquire into journalists' stances towards this norm of verification. Specifically, they ask whether the understanding of verification differs between online journalists and journalists of other platforms, and whether there are differences in the way different cultures and media systems deal with verification. They compare the results of surveys of Swedish, Polish and Russian journalists and come to the conclusion that generally there are high levels of approval for the verification of facts. However, online journalists believe that their audience has lower expectations in regard to verification. This allows fascinating conclusions to be drawn concerning trust in factual correctness in online journalism. Where our dimensions are concerned, this essay thus provides highly interesting insights into the way journalists deal with ethics and norms; on the level of the research fields, it offers insights into communicators' work methods.

Together with *Stefan Stieglitz and Milad Mirbabaie* of the University of Duisburg-Essen, *Sanja Kapidzic and Christoph Neuberger* of the Ludwigs-Maximilians-Universität Munich, Germany, analysed whether tweets posted upon Twitter measure up to journalistic standards. More specifically, they investigated impartiality, the gatekeeper role and the tweets' reliability. Only few tweets made use of the option to provide links, rendering their sources visible – even though transparency is able to increase trust in the journalistic selection of topics and facts. In their essay, the authors highlight the problems that occur when traditional journalistic norms are transferred to new channels and media. Potential consequences for the trust in these channels can be deduced from these problems. The essay provides important insights into the area of ethics and norms and the research fields of content and sources.

*Mario Schranz, Jörg Schneider and Mark Eisenegger* of the Forschungsinstitut Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft (Research Institute for the Public Sphere and Society) in Zurich, Switzerland, investigate and compare the aspects on which recipients' trust in the media depends. They observe that media consumption is significant in this regard. Individuals who regularly use traditional information media develop greater levels of trust in the media system. Conversely, trust is lost if the ritualised consumption of news breaks down and individual media brands lose significance due to the unbundled consumption of news on social media. This finding is confirmed both for Switzerland and in international comparison. At the same time, positive trust in the media system increases users' willingness to pay for news and to accept advertising (e.g. in online media). Thus the study provides new insights into influences on media trust, falling within the research field of trust in the media as organisations and thus adopting a macro perspective.

*Andreas Köhler and Kim Otto* of the University of Würzburg, Germany, analyse the influence of economic developments on trust in the press, radio and television in Spain and Greece. The aim of this essay is to show the influence of external events – in this case the European sovereign debt crisis – on trust in the media. Köhler and Otto are able to show that the levels of trust in the press, radio and television correlate with the gross domestic product and that this effect was increased in the crisis year 2009. Using the example of the sovereign debt crisis, the essay is able to show that trust in the media also depends upon external influences. Thus it contributes to knowledge in the research field of media and in the dimension of factors of influence.

*Lukas Otto, Fabian Thomas and Michaela Maier* of the University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany, engage with the concepts of media credibility and media scepticism. Their essay investigates whether media credibility and media scepticism are stable positions learned in childhood that media performance is unable

to alter. The authors observe that media credibility is not completely dependent on media reception but behaves dynamically. Furthermore, they show that media scepticism and the rejection of individual media are related. Their essay provides relevant insights on factors of influence on media trust and touches upon the research fields of trust in the media and trust in sources.

*Benjamin Krämer* of the Ludwigs-Maximilians-Universität Munich, Germany, analyses journalism's reactions to right-wing populist criticism of the media. He describes the ideological foundations of this criticism and the challenges of dealing with populism. Why do right-wing populist actors obviously not trust the media and journalism? And how do journalists in turn deal with this openly displayed lack of trust? The author delineates strategies for dealing with right-wing populist criticism using examples and calls for a differentiated debate on media performance. Krämer's essay casts light on the dimension of populism in the context of the research fields of trust in the media and in sources.

*Markus Beiler and Johanna Kiesler* of the University of Leipzig, Germany, study the "lying press" or *Lügenpresse* accusation, a key expression of the loss of trust in journalism in Germany. Using a content analysis of four national daily newspapers, they investigate how the media accused of lying report on those raising this accusation, the right-wing Pegida movement. This essay provides findings relevant to the dimension of populism and the research field of content.

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