



Media Trust in Europe

Breaking News and Polarized Views

Introduction

Over the last decade, trust in news media has become an increasingly important topic. Among the reasons are perceptions that news media trust is declining, that populist political actors increasingly attack and seek to undermine trust in news media, and the rise of right-wing alternative media that often harshly criticise mainstream news media and likewise seek to undermine trust in them. At the same time, a free media is an inherent part of liberal democracy, and for the news media to be able to inform people, it is necessary that they are both widely used and trusted. Research also shows that news media trust influences the extent to which people use, learn from, and accept the veracity of information coming from news media. In contemporary media environments, where social and political alternative media are more important sources of information than ever, and where the prevalence of misinformation is on the rise, understanding news media trust and its antecedents and effects is therefore crucial.



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Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of research on news media trust in Europe. More specifically, I will assess what we know in terms of levels of news media trust in European countries and factors that can help explain news media trust. Throughout, the term news media refers to traditional mainstream news media such as newspapers, television, and radio.

Conceptualising and operationalising media trust

Before discussing empirical findings on news media trust, it is important to recognise that it is a complex concept and that there are discrepancies in how it is measured in different studies (for overviews, see Fawzi et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Part of the problem is that there are many related concepts, such as media credibility. Sometimes these are used interchangeably with media trust, and sometimes they are considered subdimensions or antecedents of news media trust (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Yale et al., 2015).

At the broadest conceptual level, there is nevertheless broad consensus that “news media trust refers to the relationship between citizens (the trustors) and the news media (the trustees) where citizens, however tacit or habitual, in situations of uncertainty expect that interactions with the news media will lead to gains rather than losses” (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 142. See also Fawzi et al., 2021; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003).

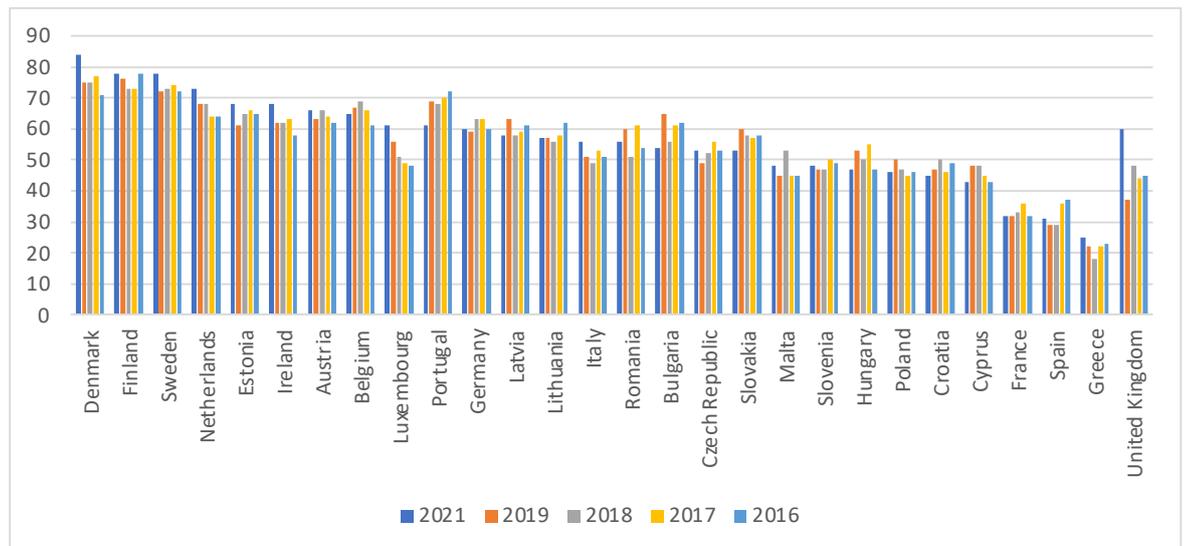
This still leaves one key question open, namely what “media” or “news media” refer to. Thus far, most research has relied on surveys and focused on news media at the general or institutionalised level, asking people about their trust or confidence in unspecified media such as “the press” or “the media”, or in different media types such as “newspapers” and “television”. This holds particularly for cross-national research. For example, in the European Values Study, people are asked “how much confidence” they have in a set of institutions and organisations, among them “the press” and “social media”. Similarly, in the Eurobarometer, people are asked “I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain media and institutions. For each of the following media, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it”. In more recent surveys, the media asked about are “television”, “radio”, “the written press”, “online social networks”, and “the internet”.

Using such broad measures is often a necessity in cross-national research, where it would be untenable to ask about individual media and where asking about individual media might hamper comparability. It should however be noted that they are problematic. To begin with, it is unclear what people have in mind when they respond to the questions about their trust in e.g., “the media” or “the written press”. In addition, people often trust some media over others, and in such cases, it is unclear how it affects their responses when asked about general media trust. Research also shows that people express far lower trust when asked about unspecified media compared to when asked about specified media (Daniller et al., 2017). Broad measures of general media trust furthermore neglect that trust may differ depending on whether the object of trust is (news) media in general, different media types, different media brands, or different topics of news coverage.

For these and other reasons (Strömbäck et al., 2020), broad measures of general or institutional (news) media trust suffers from several problems. The finding that people express lower trust when asked about unspecified compared to specified media also suggest that the usage of this kind of measures underestimates how much people trust media and overestimates the decline in media trust (Daniller et al., 2017). This should be kept in mind when assessing empirical findings on (news) media trust.

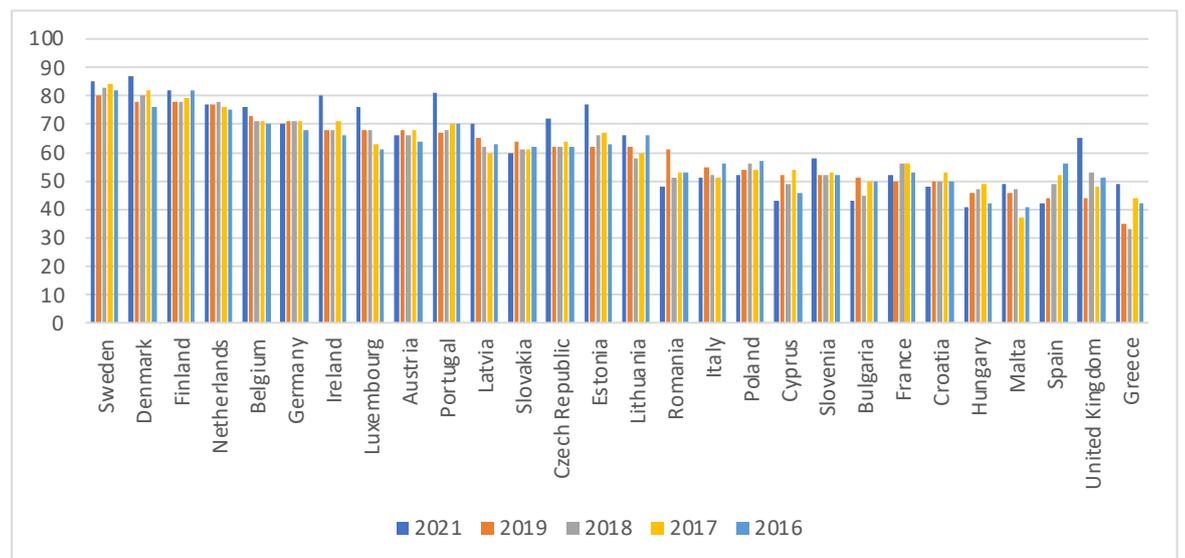
Media trust in Europe

Turning to media trust in Europe, I will rely on the Standard Eurobarometer for two reasons. First, it covers all EU member states, and second, it regularly asks questions about people’s media trust. Thereby it allows studies of changes over time, although the broad measure is problematic. Questions about media trust are usually asked once a year, and the results for television, radio, and the written press in the Eurobarometer during the last five years can be found in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

Figure 1. Trust in television across member states of the EU, 2016-2021 (%).

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 86, 88, 90, 92 and 94. The figure shows the share of respondents saying that they tend to trust television.

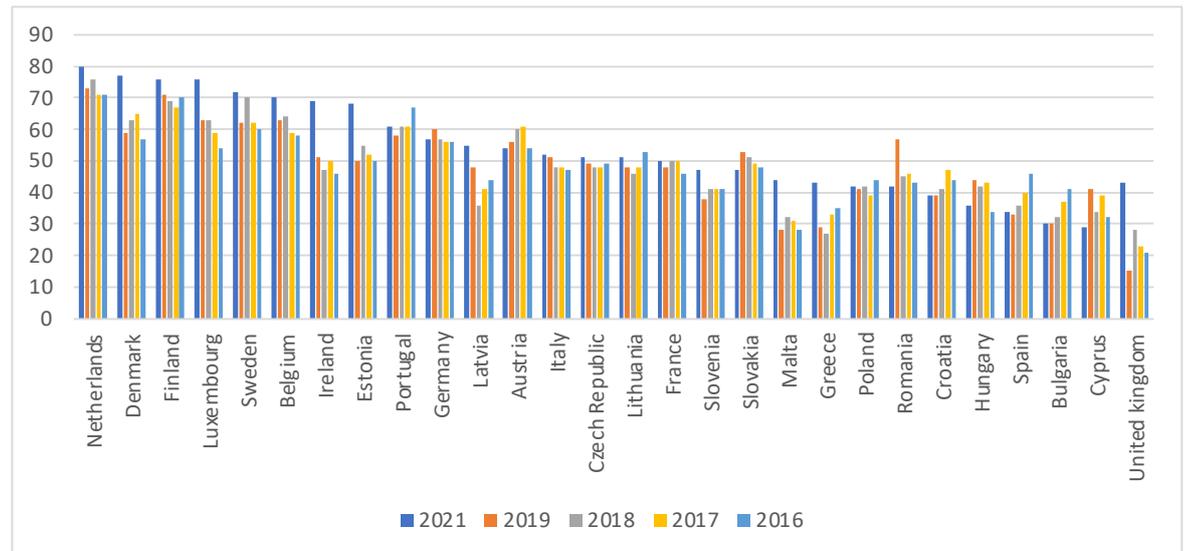
Beginning with trust in television and comparing trust levels in 2016 and 2021, the results show that trust increased in thirteen countries, decreased in eight, and was the same in seven countries (even though some changes were very small). It should be noted though that trust within many countries fluctuated between these years. Beyond that, three findings are worth noting. First, the average level of trust in television across all countries was basically the same throughout the years, hovering around 50%. Second, trust in television differs substantively between countries. Third, the results show that trust in television increased in about 14 countries between 2019 and 2021.

Figure 2. Trust in radio across member states of the EU, 2016-2021 (%).

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 86, 88, 90, 92 and 94. The figure shows the share of respondents saying that they tend to trust radio.

Turning to trust in radio, and comparing trust levels in 2016 and 2021, the results show that trust increased in 16 countries, decreased in 10, and stayed the same in three countries – although the changes in some cases were small. Again, it should be noted that levels of trust in radio fluctuated within many countries between 2016 and 2021. Like television, the average level of trust in radio across all countries was stable across the years, shifting between 57% and 59%, but this time trust increased between 2019 and 2021 in 16 countries.

Figure 3. Trust in the written press across member states of the EU, 2016-2021 (%).



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 86, 88, 90, 92 and 94. The figure shows the share of respondents saying that they tend to trust the written press.

With respect to trust in the written press, findings show that trust increased between 2016 and 2021 in 18 countries, decreased in nine, and stayed the same in one. Thus, more countries experienced increasing trust in the written press compared to radio and television, even though the results also show fluctuations within countries between those years. On the average level across all countries, trust in the written press was quite stable across the years, hovering around 46-47% with an increase to 51% in 2021. Finally, trust in the written press increased in twenty countries between 2019 and 2021.

Taken together and on the aggregate level, these findings show that trust in radio tends to be higher than trust in television, with trust in television being slightly higher than trust in the written press. They also show that media trust tends to be quite stable on the aggregate level. That said, there are many differences between countries and much less stability within countries. Nevertheless, it is more common that media trust is increasing than decreasing. This might seem surprising given a common discourse that media trust is declining, but such impressions might be unduly influenced by declining trust in the United States (Brenan, 2020).¹ Relevant in that context is that research by the Reuters Institute

¹ It should be noted though that trust in the mass media in the US rebounded after hitting a record low in 2016 (Brenan, 2020).

shows that media trust is lower in the US than in any other of the 46 countries in their annual survey (Newman et al., 2021). In that survey, respondents are asked how much they think they can trust “most news most of the time” and “most of the news that I consume most of the time”. In 2021, 44% responded that they think they can trust the news most of the time, while 50% responded that they think they can trust the news they use most of the time. This was an increase since the year before, but similar to 2019 and 2018. This also suggests that there is no general trend toward decreasing media trust (see also Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

Beyond this, the results show that trust levels differ substantively between countries. While there are differences depending on media type, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands are among the countries with the highest media trust. In contrast, Mediterranean countries such as Spain, France and Greece are among the countries with the lowest media trust. That raises the question: what can explain levels of media trust?

Factors that might explain news media (mis)trust

Before discussing factors that might help explain media trust, an important caveat is that comparative studies in this area relies on cross-sectional surveys. While such studies can establish correlations between media trust and other factors, they cannot establish causal relationships. That said, a distinction should be made between country-level and individual-level explanatory factors. Country-level factors may, for example, be related to differences across countries with respect to the media system and the political system (Fawzi et al., 2021). Based on data from the World Values Survey, studies suggest that about 12-13% of the variance for explaining media trust lies at the country level (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Individual-level factors thus seem to be more important. A noteworthy finding is however that there is very little consistency across studies with respect to the impact of specific individual-level factors. That holds particularly for sociodemographic factors (e.g., Gronke & Cook, 2007; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Jakob, 2010; Ladd, 2012; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). For example, some studies find that gender or age is a factor whereas others do not. Similarly, some studies find that education is positively related to media trust whereas others find that it is negatively related or insignificant. Partly such inconsistencies may be explained by differences related to, for example, populations surveyed and operationalisations of media trust. Even so, findings suggest that “we find low and high levels of news media trust among citizens among all ages, genders, and levels of education” (Fawzi et al., 2021, p. 6).

More consistent findings have been found when investigating the impact of political factors such as political trust, political ideology or partisanship, and political interest. For example, a repeated finding is that political trust – such as trust in the parliament – is positively associated with media trust (Ariely, 2015; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Jones, 2004; Lee, 2010; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). There is also some evidence suggesting that the relation between political trust and media trust has become stronger over time. In their comparative study, Hanitzsch et al.

(2018) thus conclude that the “political environment seems to play an important role in the formation, maintenance, and decline of trust in the press” and that “press trust and political trust seem to be connected in an upward spiral in some countries and a downward spiral in others” (p. 17). Important in that context may be the level of media autonomy and journalistic professionalism, and the extent to which media environments are characterised by partisan newspaper bias. Thus, Ariely (2015) found that the linkage between media trust and political trust was stronger in media environments with less media autonomy, less journalistic professionalism, and more partisan newspaper bias. This suggests that the more aligned the media system is with the political system, the stronger the linkage between media trust and political trust.

Another pattern is that general political interest is associated with greater media trust (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). The mechanism at work may be that those who are politically interested are more interested in political news than others, and this leads them to both use and trust the news media. Some research also shows that there are reciprocal relationships between media use and political interest (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010).

“... general political interest is associated with greater media trust.”

Numerous studies furthermore show that there are positive correlations between using mainstream news media and media trust, and that use of alternatives to mainstream news media (such as talk radio, political alternative media, and social media) is related to less trust in mainstream news media (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Jakob, 2010; Jones, 2004; Kalegoropoulos et al., 2019; Newman & Kalogeropoulos, 2018; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019; Tsfati, 2010; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). In general, those who do not trust news media use them less while using other alternatives more, and vice versa.

Although there is a lack of research tracking this relationship across time, there are hints that this relationship has become stronger as alternative information sources has proliferated. In the old, low-choice media environment, people did not have much choice if they wanted to know what was going on in society – they had to turn to mainstream news media no matter if they trusted them or not. In current high-choice information environments, people can find numerous alternatives to mainstream news media.

Many of these alternatives are so called political alternative media, referring to media with political agendas that proclaim to be alternatives to and challenge the dominant mainstream news media (Holt et al., 2019). These range from online media to talk radio to TV-channels and have generally become more important, although there are clear differences across countries (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). Especially for people with a stronger preference for news and political information that confirm their attitudes and beliefs, such media are attractive.

Not surprisingly, research also shows that those who use such partisan alternative media are more distrustful towards general news media (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Schulze, 2020). Moreover, particularly right-wing partisan media are often highly critical toward and seek to undermine trust in traditional news media (Benkler et al., 2018; Fawzi, 2019; Figenshou & Ihlebaek, 2019), thereby further decreasing trust in mainstream news media among their users.

Consequently, research furthermore suggests that there is a linkage between political ideology or partisanship and news media trust. This is most evident in the US, where conservatives or Republicans have less trust toward mainstream news media compared to liberals or Democrats (Gottfried, Stocking & Grieco, 2018; Jurkowitz et al., 2020; Lee, 2010). Similar results have been found in Sweden and other countries, where supporters of radical right parties and people with populist attitudes trust mainstream news media less than others (Andersson, 2021; Fawzi, 2019). Comparative research also shows that partisans in general tend to have less trust in news overall but more trust in the news they use (Suiter & Fletcher, 2020). The mechanism might be that those who are more politically involved have a stronger tendency to be influenced by the hostile media effect, referring to the perception that the media is biased against their side in a political conflict (Perloff, 2015). Such perceptions naturally influence the extent to which people trust the media.

Conclusions

Summing up, this review offers at least six key takeaways. First, there is no universal trend toward decreasing media trust. Instead, comparative research suggests that media trust is either fluctuating or increasing. Second, sociodemographic factors have inconsistent and limited explanatory power when trying to explain media trust. Third, political trust and media trust are linked to each other, particularly in countries where the media system is closely aligned with the political system. Fourth, political interest is usually associated with greater trust in the media. Fifth, media use matters in the sense that those who trust mainstream media use them more whilst using alternative media less, whereas those who mistrust mainstream media use various alternative – not least politically partisan – media more. Sixth, those who harbor populist attitudes and sympathise with (radical) right populist parties usually have less trust in mainstream news media.

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Given the assumption that trust in mainstream news media is desirable, the results point in both positive and negative directions. This assumes, of course, that news media act in ways that warrant trust. What is worrying is that mainstream news media are increasingly becoming the target of politically motivated attacks from political actors and political alternative media to the (radical) right, particularly as these political actors and media have become more influential over the last decade. As shown by Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2018), these are often guided by propaganda

feedback loops, where the veracity of news and other information is subordinate to whether the information strengthens partisan narratives and goals as well as whether they reinforce peoples' political identities. Using such media may thus lead to an increase in misperceptions as well as to a downward spiral of less use of and less trust in mainstream news media. It may also strengthen public acceptance of efforts to curtail the independence of the news media.

To counter such a development, it is important that all policymakers who care about liberal democracy respect, strengthen whenever needed, and repeatedly emphasise the importance of free and independent media. When criticism toward the media is warranted, such criticism should be specific to avoid strengthening partisan narratives about the untrustworthiness of “the media” in general. Weaponised terms such as “fake news” should also be avoided. Finally, it is imperative that efforts are made to strengthen the ability of news media to fulfil their most important democratic function: providing people with the information they need to be free and self-governing and acting as watchdogs against abuses of power. Given the major challenges contemporary democracies are facing, the need for news media that provide true and relevant information is as great – if not greater – than ever.

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ISBN: 9782390670216

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