

Caught in the Nexus: A Comparative and Longitudinal Analysis of Public Trust in the Press

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Abstract

Despite signs of declining press trust in many western countries, we know little about trends in press trust across the world. Based on comparative survey data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and European Values Study (EVS), this study looks into national levels of trust in the press and identifies factors that drive differences across societies and individuals as well as over time. Findings indicate that the widely noted decline in media trust is not a universal trend; it is true for only about half of the studied countries, with the United States experiencing the largest and most dramatic drop in trust in the press. Political trust has emerged as key factor for our understanding of trust in the press. We found robust evidence for what we called the *trust nexus*—the idea that trust in the news media is strongly linked to the way publics look at political institutions. The link between press trust and political trust was considerably stronger in politically polarized societies. Furthermore, our analysis indicates that the relation between press trust and political trust is becoming stronger over time. We reason that the strong connection between media and political trust may be driven by a growing public sentiment against elite groups.

Keywords

press, media trust, political trust, comparative analysis

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Studies across the western world point to a considerable decline of public trust in the media (Gronke and Cook 2007; Jones 2004; Müller 2013). Gronke and Cook (2007) argue that this trend holds true in most developed democracies. In other parts of the world, however, people still seem to have considerable faith in the news media (Xu 2012). The erosion of media trust is often attributed to a persistent pattern of negativity and cynicism in the news established for a large array of western countries (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Lengauer and Vorhofer 2010; Torcal and Montero 2006). This media malaise, it is believed, fosters public cynicism, pessimism, alienation, and estrangement (Robinson 1977). Researchers have argued that such negative reporting may actually backfire, and negatively affect trust in the news media (Hopmann et al. 2015; Müller 2013). Media scandals such as revelations of plagiarism and fabricated quotations by former *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair in 2003 are not just “acts of journalistic fraud,” as noted by the newspaper itself (Barry et al. 2003), but also contributed to a growing negative sentiment against the media. Furthermore, political actors often create antipathy toward the press when they feel unhappy with its reporting (Brants et al. 2010). Most recently, the label of “fake news” is widely and recurrently used by U.S. President Trump to discredit media coverage critical of his presidency.

If it is true that audiences are losing confidence in the media, then this could have important consequences. Media trust drives the selection of news outlets by the audience (Tsfati and Cappella 2003), and it is a necessary precondition for the news media to have effects (Ladd 2012). On the economic side, trust can be understood as an asset on which news organizations capitalize to generate reputation and economic profit (Vanacker and Belmas 2009).

Yet our knowledge about how trust in the press develops over time and the factors that drive these developments on a global level is still limited. Existing explanatory longitudinal studies originated in the United States (e.g., Gronke and Cook 2007). There is reasonable doubt, however, that these studies have established a universal trend. Recent comparative research shows that media trust is strongly influenced by factors emanating from the media system, political system, and political culture (Ariely 2015; Müller 2013; Tsfati and Ariely 2014). Despite their important contributions, existing cross-sectional studies so far do not allow for drawing conclusions about trends in media trust across different types of societies—western and nonwestern, democratic versus authoritarian, and developed versus less developed.

To address this lack of research, this article seeks to expand existing work based on longitudinal data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the European Values Study (EVS). We start with a comparative overview of trust in the press across a vast number of different societies. U.S.-centric research seems to suggest that the erosion of trust found among American audiences marks a general trend for most western societies, or even the world. We question this assumption and ask to what extent this decline in media trust is a universal phenomenon. Second, we further build on Gronke and Cook’s (2007) argument according to which it makes little sense to analyze media trust in isolation from public perceptions of other institutions. The erosion of media trust may go hand in hand with a decline in political trust or even a more general

disenchantment with social institutions. Different from Ariely (2015), who looked at the effect of trust in the press on political trust, we argue that political trust and media trust are caught in what we believe is a race to the bottom in some contexts, and an upward spiral in others. Furthermore, there are specific political conditions—such as a strong ideological polarization—that may substantively shape audience faith in the media. Finally, we go beyond existing studies by taking a longitudinal perspective, studying how the relation between press trust and political trust develops over time.

Our focus on press trust may seem somewhat anachronistic in a time when television coverage, online news, and social media content have outpaced printed media on many parts of the world. After all, the press is only one “dish” in people’s daily media diets, and for many audience members and in many countries, it may well be not the most important one. However, newspapers and news magazines may not everywhere be the most popular media outlets, but they do have an important role of shaping a country’s political discourse by driving the media agenda (McCombs 2005). Furthermore, combining available data for trust in the press and television in one measure may produce spurious results, as studies point to considerable differences in public confidence in different types of media (EBU 2017; Flanagin and Metzger 2000). Since the measure used for this study asks for confidence in “the press,” it is reasonable to assume that most respondents considered professional journalism as a whole when answering the question.

Theorizing Media Trust

Studies of trust in public institutions are rooted in theories of public engagement (Easton 1965), which assume that “the greater the level of trust within a community, the greater the likelihood of cooperation. And cooperation itself breeds trust” (Putnam 1993: 171). Three theoretical assumptions about trust inform most definitions: First, theorists generally emphasize that trust is based on past experiences that lead to expectations about (and the assessment of) how another person or institution will perform in the future (Misztal 1996; Vanacker and Belmas 2009). Second, this process involves risk and uncertainty because outcomes or intentions of actors are not fully known, which makes trust essential specifically where verification is most difficult. Third, trust reduces social complexity by generalizing expectations of future behavior (Luhmann 1979). Thus, trust in the media is a “psychological state comprising the intentions to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations” of a trustee’s future actions, which cannot be controlled by the trustor (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al. 1998: 395). Regarding media trust, audiences are taking risks when they decide to trust the media because they are not able to verify news content on their own (Tsfati and Cohen 2005), and they do not know whether journalists and news media adhere to professional norms (Tsfati and Cappella 2003). For the purpose of this study, we therefore define media trust as a form of institutional trust; it is *the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner*.

The literature has established a variety of factors that account for differences in institutional trust—and in media trust by extension. Two schools of thought dominate the discussion, advancing an institutional versus a cultural explanation. *Institutional theories* argue that trust is endogenous; it is seen as a consequence of institutional performance (Mishler and Rose 2001). In this line of thought, the erosion of media trust is explained by a degrading performance of the news media (Müller 2013). Research has indeed shown that cynical stories, game-framed news, as well as horserace coverage and tabloid coverage created antipathy toward the press (Hopmann et al. 2015; Ladd 2010). *Cultural theories*, on the other hand, hypothesize that institutional trust is exogenous and an extension of social trust, learned early in life and, much later, projected onto public institutions (Hudson 2006; Mishler and Rose 2001). Several studies have indeed found evidence for this assumption: People have more trust in the news media when they generally trust others (Müller 2013; Tsfati and Ariely 2014).

The Trust Nexus: Ideological Polarization and Political Trust

This article shifts the focus to two additional explanations of media trust, ideological polarization, and political trust. *Ideological polarization*, also known as attitude polarization, refers to “the extent to which opinions on an issue are opposed in relation to some theoretical maximum” (DiMaggio et al. 1996: 693). As a process, polarization causes audience members to change their issue positions, ideological convictions, or partisan sentiments to represent less centrist, more sharply opposed politically relevant attitudes (Prior 2013). Ideological polarization constitutes a threat insofar as it induces alignment along multiple lines of potential conflict and organizes individuals and groups around exclusive identities and opposite factions (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008). In the context of party identification in the United States, research points to an affective separation based on partisanship, resulting from a tendency to classify opposing partisans as members of an outgroup and copartisans as members of an ingroup, which Iyengar and Westwood (2015) refer to as affective polarization. In the process of unfolding ideological polarization, people are likely to take extreme positions in politically relevant discourses (Prior 2013), which in the following, we will refer to as ideological extremity. Ideological extremity is thus an individual disposition, ideological polarization is a process taking place on the aggregate level.

The rise of both the level of ideological extremity and ideological polarization has potential to backfire on the media and, hence, may breed distrust in the press. People with strong partisan sentiments, often activating high levels of involvement, have an inclination to perceive otherwise neutral stories as biased against their point of view. This mechanism is commonly referred to as hostile media phenomenon (Vallone et al. 1985). As a consequence, it is reasonable to think that individuals with ideologically extreme positions likely perceive the “mainstream” media as biased and reporting in favor of the opposing partisans, which is why they find it difficult to trust “the media” as a whole. Such perceived media biases and presumptions of media effects can

diminish trust in the overall fairness of the news media, argue Tsfatı and Cohen (2005). Jones (2004) also demonstrated that partisanship and media trust are related. According to Cook and Gronke (2001), media trust among U.S. audiences has declined most among people with strong party identification, which was particularly true for conservatives. Hence, we advance our first set of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): People have less trust in the press (a) when they hold more extreme attitudes, (b) when they live in societies with high levels of ideological polarization, and (c) as societies become more polarized.

The second explanation we would like to advance in this article is what we—in the absence of a better term—tentatively call the *trust nexus*. We argue that media trust is not a phenomenon isolated from public perceptions of other public institutions. Rather, the erosion of trust in the media is broadly connected to a public disenchantment with and widespread sense of disdain for social institutions more generally but for political institutions most particularly. Mair (2006) notes that never before in the history of postwar Europe have governments and their politicians been held in such low regard. Cappella and Jamieson (1997: 209) contend that this public cynicism is “contagious”: Public distrust of political institutions may have attached itself to the news media. And indeed, Cappella (2002) as well as Tsfatı and Cohen (2005) found media trust to be closely related to confidence in democracy and political institutions. The decay of trust in the media may therefore go hand in hand with a drop of public confidence in political institutions (Bennett et al. 1999).

This may have a number of reasons: For one, politics has become gradually media-tized since the late 1960s and early 1970s, when politicians especially in the United States have learned to play by the rules of the media (Strömbäck and Esser 2014). Second, audiences seem to be increasingly aware of the interplay between politics and the news media. We argue, however, that the major link between media trust and political trust is the growing presence of anti-elitism in political discourse. Anti-elitism is commonly seen as a core feature of populism as “thin” or “thin-centered” ideology (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008). It is predicated on an antagonistic relationship between “the elite” and “the people.” Although seemingly a new phenomenon, the celebration of “the pure people” and denigration of “the corrupt elite” has a long tradition. In a now classic populist fashion, the emerging Greens have despised the political elite in the early 1980s. Mudde (2004) reasons that as a consequence of the egalitarianism of the 1960s, citizens today expect more from politicians, and feel more competent to judge their actions. Such cognitive mobilization has led citizens to stop accepting that the elites think for them, and to no longer blindly swallow what they tell them. This leads us to expect that the relation between trust in the press and political trust has grown stronger over time. Furthermore, we tend to think that the impact of anti-elitism may have greater power in societies that exhibit higher levels of ideological polarization, especially as ideological divides in many parts of the world are shifting to anti-establishment versus pro-establishment.

On the empirical side, Ariely (2015) has indeed found a robust relationship between media trust and political trust in thirty-two European countries. The correlation is more or less pronounced depending on media autonomy, journalistic professionalism, and party/press parallelism. He found media trust and political trust less strongly related in countries with higher media autonomy and journalistic professionalism. Overall, we advance a second set of hypotheses as follows:

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): People have more trust in the press when they are more confident in political institutions.

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): The relation between political trust and trust in the press is stronger in ideologically polarized societies.

Hypothesis 2c (H2c): Over time, public trust in the press shrinks as political trust decreases.

Hypothesis 2d (H2d): The relation between trust in the press and political trust becomes stronger over time.

At this point, one might wonder whether political trust and media trust are indeed distinct at all. We believe there is strong reason to think so based on theoretical and empirical grounds. On the conceptual level, the news media and politics are arguably two institutions with different functions and logics (Norris 1999; Rothstein and Stolle 2008). Journalists are working according to a distinctive media logic guided by news-making routines, technical requirements, and professional norms (Altheide and Snow 1979). Although the news media play an important role in the political process (and operate under tight political control in some countries), it is not a political institution such as the government, the parliament, or political parties. Likewise, although political actors increasingly tailor their actions to anticipated media coverage, they still represent political interests and act in the political domain. Furthermore, there is solid empirical evidence supporting the idea that publics do indeed distinguish between political institutions and the media. A number of American and comparative studies have empirically verified the distinctness of political and media trust through means of exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (Ariely 2015; Cook and Gronke 2001; Tsfati and Ariely 2014).

Finally, the literature has established a number of individual factors related to media trust, though empirical evidence was often inconsistent: While gender was not related to media trust in some studies, others found trust levels to differ between men and women (Gronke and Cook 2007; Jones 2004). The same holds true for education, political interest, and news media consumption, where findings were inconsistent (Bennett et al. 1999; Gronke and Cook 2007; Ladd 2012; Tsfati and Ariely 2014; Tsfati and Cappella 2003, 2005). Our analysis was not substantively interested in these factors, and hence, we include them as controls.

Method

Our analysis is based on longitudinal data collected through the WVS (1981–2014) and EVS (1981–2008). Antecedents of trust in the press were studied using the sixth

WVS wave, for which representative surveys of the general population were conducted in fifty-three countries between 2010 and 2014. To trace changes in trust in the press, we compared trust levels of these countries with trust levels obtained during previous WVS waves, and conducted a multilevel analysis with the whole longitudinal WVS data set including all six waves (ninety-three countries). Wherever possible we supplemented this data set with equivalent data from the EVS. Information about the six survey waves, countries covered, and years of data collection can be obtained from the GESIS Data Archive.¹

Individual-level Measures

The WVS measures institutional trust in the press using the following question wording: “I am going to name a number of organizations. For each, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them.” The relevant category in the questionnaire was “the press.” We recoded answer options (“none at all,” “not very much,” “quite a lot,” and “a great deal”) into a scale ranging from 0 to 3. Political trust was measured in the same way; it consisted of three items: trust in the parliament, the government, and the political parties. We established metric invariance for this index through multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .013; comparative fit index [CFI] = .985; Tucker–Lewis index [TLI] = .978).²

We accounted for ideological extremism by looking at the extent to which people have extreme positions on four questions about redistribution and the role of the government in the economy. In the survey, respondents were asked—on a ten-point scale—to indicate their agreement with statements regarding income equality, private versus government ownership of business and industry, government versus individual responsibility, and competition. Following Lindquist and Östling (2010), we calculated a combined ideological extremism score on the individual level for the four questions, based on the distance of the respondents’ answers from the center of the scale. Respondents choosing the middle positions (5 or 6) received a score of 0 (i.e., low extremism), 4 and 7 were recoded to 1, 3 and 8 to 2, 2 and 9 to 3, and 1 and 10 to 4 (i.e., high extremism).

A number of controls was included in the final model. We measured social trust through the question “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people” (recoded into 1 = *most people can be trusted* and 0 = *can’t be too careful*). To measure newspaper exposure, we used the following question: “For each of the following sources, please indicate whether you use it to obtain information.” Possible answers were “never” (0), “less than monthly” (1), “monthly” (2), “weekly” (3), and “daily” (4). To account for political interest, the WVS used the question, “How interested would you say you are in politics?” with answer categories ranging from “not at all” (0) to “very interested” (3). Since education systems vary greatly, we recoded the information about formal education into “higher education” (i.e., obtained at least some university education = 1) and “no higher education” (0). Finally, gender was coded 0 for “male” and 1 for “female.”

Society-level Measures

For ideological polarization, we again followed Lindquist and Östling (2010) by using the standard deviation of political preference related to the above-mentioned four policy questions as a proxy. Across countries, high standard deviations then indicate stronger disagreement among the population and, therefore, stronger ideological polarization, whereas lower standard deviations point to stronger ideological cohesion. In our analysis, we averaged standard deviations across the four questions as they were sufficiently correlated (between $r = .62$ and $r = .84$). Finally, we calculated aggregated scores for trust in the press and political trust for the longitudinal analysis. Trust in the press was operationalized as the percentage of the population who indicated to have “quite a lot” or “a great deal” of trust in the press. For political trust, we aggregated individual answers to the above-described scale across countries.

Finally, we also incorporated democratic development as country-level control. The relevant data was obtained from the Economist Intelligence Unit’s 2015 “Index of Democracy.” The scale ranges between zero and ten, with higher values indicating greater democratic development.

Analysis

In addressing our research questions, we carried out four sets of analyses. First, we compared the percentage of the population who trusts the press over the different waves in the combined data set. For this analysis, we included forty-five countries in which questions about trust in the press were asked in wave 6 and at least one other wave of the survey. We tested for differences across time in each of these countries through Chi-squared tests.

Second, we built a multilevel model to test the hypotheses concerning predictors of trust in the press across the individual and societal levels. Multilevel modeling was the appropriate method in this context as respondents were nested within countries, which allows for the partitioning of variance into individual-level and country-level variance (Bryk and Raudenbush 1992). For this analysis, we used data from fifty-two countries included in the sixth wave of the WVS.

Third, to trace changes in press trust over time, we calculated differences in trust levels between waves 6 and 5 (2005-2009).³ To test H1c and H2c, we looked whether the changes in press trust were significantly related to changes in ideological polarization and political trust over the same period. We repeated this analysis for change between wave 6 (2010-2014) and wave 4 (1999-2004). It should be noted, however, that this kind of data does not allow making claims about causality. In the analysis, we additionally test whether correlations remain significant after controlling for potential intervening exogenous factors.

Finally, we tested H2d using the whole longitudinal WVS data set. This data set has a hierarchical structure with the following three levels: individuals are clustered within waves per country, and these country-waves are clustered within countries (see Fairbrother 2014). Because of this hierarchical structure, we conducted a multilevel

analysis, testing whether the second level variable “time,” operationalized by the wave in which the data were collected, moderates the relationship between political trust and press trust, after taking relevant control variables into account (see Hooghe and Kern 2015 for a similar approach).

Findings

Table 1 shows which percentage of the population trusts the press in forty-five countries worldwide. Looking at trust in the press reported by the last wave of the WVS, we can see that there are differences across countries along socio-political lines. Australia, the United States, and New Zealand—representing the Anglo-Saxon world—were among the five countries with the lowest trust levels; the four countries with highest trust levels were all from Asia (Japan, China, India, and the Philippines). Although caution is required, we think it is safe to say that the decline in trust in the press is not a universal trend. In fact, trust in the press improved significantly in fourteen countries; the increase in press trust was largest for Japan. At the same time, however, trust in the press has indeed decreased in twenty-four countries. In the United States, for example, trust more than halved between 1990 and 2011.

To identify the main factors associated with differences in press trust on the societal and individual level, we built a multilevel model using the software HLM6 (see Table 2). The “null” model without predictors yielded a significant variance component for the societal level, which means that multilevel regression should be preferred over “flat” ordinary least squares (OLS) regression (Bryk and Raudenbush 1992). The variance component indicates that cross-national differences contribute 11.9 percent to the overall variance in trust in the press. We then moved on with building the multilevel model through stepwise inclusion of sets of predictors (models 1–4). All models were estimated based on standardized data. Model 1 only includes controls to establish a baseline for comparison. As Table 2 indicates, people tend to have more trust in the press when they are interested in politics, when they are regularly exposed to press contents, and when they trust other people. The effects of education, age, and gender are, while significant due to the large sample size, rather negligible.

In model 2, we added both ideological polarization (at the societal level) and ideological extremism (at the individual level). Only ideological extremism yielded a significant though weak effect, which was rendered insignificant on inclusion of further predictors. Thus, H1a and H1b were not supported. Once political trust was added to the model, however, relationships changed somewhat drastically. Model 3 impressively demonstrates how the effect of political trust on trust in the press ($\beta = .415$) trumps all other effects in the equation. Most specifically, the effect of political interest shrunk to almost zero. H2a was therefore confirmed. Finally, model 4 includes interactions between political trust and the two contextual predictors, ideological polarization and democracy. As Table 2 indicates, H2b was confirmed, too. The relationship between trust in the press and political trust was indeed more pronounced in more strongly polarized societies.

Table 1. Trust in the Press across time (in Percentage).

Wave	1 1981–1984	2 1990–1994	3 1995–1998	4 1999–2004	5 2005–2009	6 2010–2014	χ^2 (df = 1)
Algeria				47.9		32.1	60.086***
Argentina	46.8	27.3	32.8	38.5	34.8	36.3	22.661***
Armenia			34.2		33.3	29.4	7.218**
Australia	28.7		16.4		11.5	16.5	57.124***
Azerbaijan			31.6		69.9	51.5	108.698***
Belarus		25.4	41.4	40.5	44.5	39.0	50.225***
Brazil		54.4			43.5	46.0	22.728***
Chile		42.7	51.3	47.3	46.0	53.9	30.157***
China		54.8		69.2	71.8	69.7	60.976***
Colombia			45.4		44.4	36.6	38.121***
Cyprus					36.8	48.5	37.762***
Egypt				69.4	64.5	41.7	310.963***
Estonia		63.5	54.8	42.3	34.4	45.2	80.518***
Germany	30.3	29.1	17.5	37.2	29.8	42.6	52.377***
Ghana					56.4	59.5	2.986 n.s.
Hong Kong					60.8	40.6	89.704***
India		65.6	63.1	70.3	75.8	68.0	2.571 n.s.
Japan	53.1	55.5		73.0	74.6	73.8	149.757***
Jordan				61.2	67.1	33.5	178.922***
Malaysia					63.7	68.6	6.685*
Mexico	36.2	48.7	50.9	42.7	50.1	29.9	17.349***
Morocco				35.5	49.8	48.5	37.223***
The Netherlands	28.2	35.8		56.0	36.8	35.5	17.482***
New Zealand			33.7		27.1	27.2	8.992**
Nigeria			55.6	64.2		62.3	16.785***

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Wave	1 1981–1984	2 1990–1994	3 1995–1998	4 1999–2004	5 2005–2009	6 2010–2014	χ^2 (df = 1)
Pakistan			54.0	52.5		41.6	27.865***
Peru			29.8	23.0	18.6	31.3	0.606 n.s.
Philippines			71.9	69.8		66.9	7.029**
Poland		48.4	46.3	48.4	37.3	28.5	99.790***
Romania		27.8	35.9	38.5	43.3	28.2	0.065 n.s.
Russia		43.6	39.6	30.1	36.5	34.4	38.442***
Rwanda					70.6	51.7	112.088***
Slovenia		49.5	43.0	61.2	47.2	23.4	153.947***
South Africa	44.8	50.0	51.1	55.4	58.7	55.8	52.701***
South Korea	69.2	66.4	64.7	65.7	61.7	60.7	16.403***
Spain	47.3	48.3	43.1	41.2	39.1	31.8	75.852***
Sweden	27.3	32.8	28.7	46.7	34.5	37.3	33.528***
Taiwan			40.9		17.3	29.4	27.146***
Thailand					43.9	44.9	0.259 n.s.
Trinidad/Tobago					21.4	30.1	19.477***
Turkey		41.8	50.7	33.6	31.3	40.8	0.271 n.s.
Ukraine			43.6	46.6	41.8	53.9	40.703***
The United States		55.9	28.5	26.4	24.2	22.8	466.935***
Uruguay			61.2		50.4	46.1	45.266***
Zimbabwe				54.5		34.8	88.892***

Note. Percentage of population saying that the press can be trusted. Based on the combined WVVS and EVS data sets. If data from both data sets were available during one of the waves, data from the WVVS are used. χ^2 tests comparing wave 6 with first available wave. WVVS = World Values Survey; EVS = European Values Study.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Table 2. Predictors of Trust in the Press across Countries (Standardized Betas).

	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Societal level					
Ideological polarization			-.010	-.003	-.006
Democracy		-.049	-.054	.001	.011
Individual level					
Political interest		.065***	.066***	.006	.005
Newspaper exposure		.082***	.081***	.067***	.066***
Education		-.027***	-.027***	-.018***	-.016***
Gender (1 = female)		.011**	.010**	.000	.000
Age		.027***	.027***	.019***	.019***
Social trust		.057***	.057***	.021***	.025***
Ideological extremism			-.012*	.002	.003
Political trust				.415***	.402***
Interactions (Political trust x . . .)					
Ideological polarization					.033*
Democracy					-.023
Variance components					
Societal level	.120***	.115***	.117***	.054***	.052***
Individual level	.888	.873	.873	.745	.739
Political trust (slope)					.008***
Variance explained (R^2)					
Societal level ($n = 52$)		.040	.025	.549	.564
Individual level ($n = 62,594$)		.019	.018	.206	.215

Note. Coefficients are standardized betas.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

In the next step, we tested the hypotheses concerning factors driving change in press trust over time. As it turned out, the changes in press trust were not related to changes in polarization at the societal level ($r = .08$, n.s); hence, we found no support for H1c. H2c, on the other hand, was supported: We found that changes in political trust were strongly related to changes in trust in the press over time ($r = .61$, $p < .01$). To test whether these results might stem from exogenous changes, we regressed trust in the press on political trust while controlling for change in level of democracy and change in the level of economic development (results not shown). After controlling for democratic change and economic development, the relation between change in trust in the press and change in political trust remains significant ($\beta = .64$; $p < .001$). Studying change between waves 4 and 6 of the WVS, too, showed a robust correlation between change in press and political trust ($r = .65$; $p < .01$), thus supporting H6c.

The relation between change in political trust and press trust is illustrated in Figure 1. In nineteen countries, the demise of trust in the press is indeed strongly related to people having less trust in political institutions. This development is clearest in Jordan and Azerbaijan.⁴ On the other side of the spectrum, we find ten countries where both trust in the press and political trust increased, most notably Germany and Taiwan.

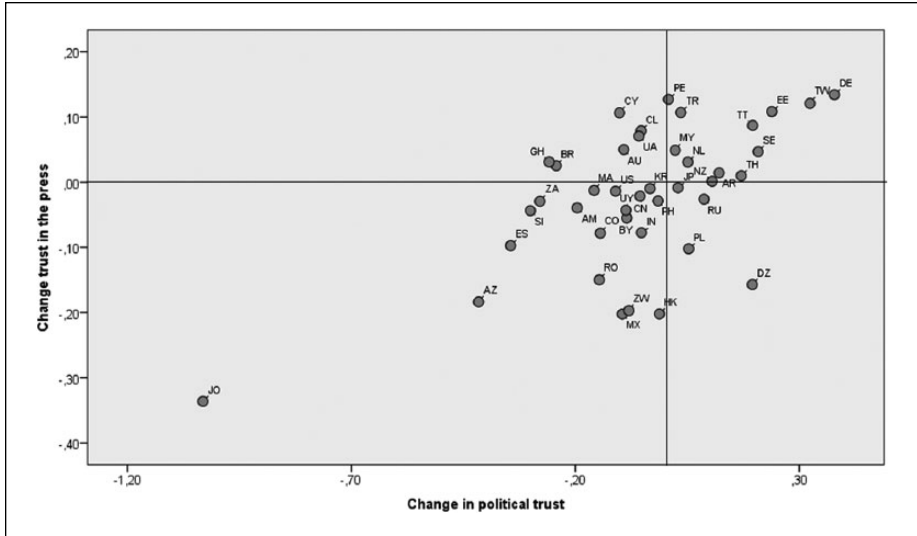


Figure 1. Change in press trust compared with change in political trust.
Note. Change between wave 5 (2004–2009) and wave 6 (2010–2014) of the WVS and EVS, on a scale from -3 to +3. WVS = World Values Survey; EVS = European Values Study.

Given the strong relation between trust in the press and political trust, both at the individual level and over time, we now turn to our final analysis, testing whether the relationship between press and political trust has become stronger over time. Table 3 reports the results of a three-level random intercepts model, which tests this hypothesis. The baseline model (model 0) shows that individual-level differences contribute most to the variance of press trust. In comparison, the variance found at the country level and the variance between different waves within each country is considerably smaller. Model 1 includes political trust and the other variables that were significant according to the multilevel analysis of the sixth wave WVS data.⁵ In addition, the waves in which the data were collected were included as a linear time trend. The model shows a strong effect of political trust on trust in the press, confirming the analysis of the wave 6 data. The time trend was significantly negative ($p < .05$). This indicates that, across all countries, there was a small decline in press trust over time. As we have seen in Table 1, this trend varies from country to country, though. More importantly, model 2 points to an interaction effect between political trust and time. The significant interaction shows that the relation between political trust and media trust has become somewhat stronger over time, which supports H2d.

Discussion

On the descriptive level, this study presents strong evidence to support the idea that media systems around the world travel on different trajectories. Despite the impression one might get from the literature, the story of a dramatic loss of public faith in the

Table 3. Predictors of Trust in the Press across Countries and Time (Standardized Betas).

	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2
Country-wave level			
Time (wave)		-.037*	-.036*
Individual level			
Education		-.007***	-.007***
Age		.007***	.007***
Social trust		.028***	.028***
Political trust		.392***	.388***
Interaction			
Political trust × Wave			.019***
Variance components			
Societal level	.104***	.049***	.049***
Country-wave level	.031***	.022***	.021***
Individual level	.861	.740	.740
Variance explained (R^2)			
Societal level ($n = 93$)		.524	.524
Country-wave level ($n = 197$)		.473	.478
Individual level ($n = 233,241$)		.186	.187

Note. Coefficients are standardized betas.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$

media is not a universal story. We saw a significant drop in press trust in about half of the countries studied. Thus, our results echo Norris' (2011) findings according to which political trust has not eroded consistently around the world. That being said, our study does indeed point to a decline in people's confidence in the press in a substantive number of societies.

The decline in trust is strongest in the United States, in continuation of a trend already identified since the 1970s (Gronke and Cook 2007), with a substantive drop by almost 30 percent in the 1990s. Gronke and Cook attribute this drop to, among others, the Levinsky scandal and subsequent impeachment of then U.S. President Clinton as well as to a growing public sense of the news media as exercising too much influence. Australia and New Zealand, the other two countries from the English-speaking world included in Table 1, have also suffered from a substantive drop in press trust. Together, these three countries broadly belong to a specific type of media systems that Hallin and Mancini (2004) have classified as "liberal." As Müller (2013) has noted in another comparative study, media systems in the Anglo-Saxon world have a particularly strong tendency to breed distrust in the press. One reason for this, we believe, is the relatively long history of a two-party system in many of these countries, in which two major political ideologies struggle over political dominance (e.g., Democrats and Republicans in the United States, Labor and the Coalition in Australia, and National and Labor in New Zealand). Two-party systems are arguably more vulnerable to ideological polarization than ideologically more diverse political systems.

In countries with a democratic-corporatist tradition, such as Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands, levels of trust fluctuated over time and fared relatively stable around 30 percent. In comparing data from the first survey in the 1980s with the recent wave, we can see that trust levels have actually grown in these countries. Notably, the Netherlands mark an exception here, since a loss of trust was recorded after the fourth wave. This development might be traced back to the launch of free dailies in 1999 as well as to media scandals such as the one involving the daily *de Volkskrant*, which was accused of manipulating the 2006 elections through publishing a hoax about Dutch soldiers torturing prisoners in Iraq.

Furthermore, similar fluctuations in trust but with a positive development of press trust in the last wave can be found in parts of South America (e.g., Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Peru). For Argentina, this increase might be traced back to recent improvements in media law and media pluralism. Chile, too, has made significant progress during the past years. While the country still struggles with corruption and media concentration, it shows the highest respect for free speech in the region (RSF 2017). Likewise, we found that trust in the press has increased in parts of Asia (e.g., Japan and China) or remained relatively high (e.g., India and Philippines).

Generally, it seems that change in press trust is also related to the volatility of the political environment. Confidence in the media has substantially eroded in countries that went through political transition, regime change, and massive political uncertainty. Egypt is a case in point: Since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2010, trust in the press levels dropped by more than 20 percent. Similarly, press trust in Mexico sharply plummeted after President Calderón initiated the war on drugs in 2006.

Likewise, people lost faith in the press in several post-Communist societies in Eastern Europe, most notably in Estonia, Poland, and Slovenia. Mishler and Rose (2001) argue that these countries needed time to adapt to the new political system because authoritarian values may still have persisted for a generation or more beyond the collapse of the old regime. Also, low levels of institutional trust may have resulted from lack of experience with the new political order. When transition began for these countries in the early 1990s, the initial “honeymoon effect” of people’s excitement with new freedom was followed by a rapid decline of institutional trust (Catterberg and Moreno 2005)—and increasing disillusionment with the media by extension. At the same time, rising public aspirations and expectations with regard to democracy, governance, freedom of choice, as well as a long-term erosion of social trust and community networks may encourage people to look more critically at the news media and the content it produces (Mudde 2004; Norris 2011; Welzel 2013).

The political environment seems to play an important role in the formation, maintenance, and decline of trust in the press. More specifically, press trust and political trust seem to be connected in an upward spiral in some countries and a downward spiral in others. Our multilevel analysis points to an exceptionally strong association between political trust and trust in the press. Looking at countries individually (after controlling for all other individual-level variables), standardized effect sizes of political trust vary between a low of .22 (the Netherlands and Argentina) and a high of .71 (Uzbekistan) and .61 (Azerbaijan). Effect sizes were greater than .30 for forty-six out

of the fifty-three societies. Regression coefficients were larger than .50 for Algeria, Azerbaijan, Colombia, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Uzbekistan, and the United States. Our study therefore found substantive support for what we tentatively term the *trust nexus*, according to which the erosion of trust in the press is connected to a broad public disenchantment with and widespread sense of disdain for social institutions, most specifically for political institutions. In this view, both media trust and political trust are bound by a common destiny; they are caught in an inescapable relationship that can turn out to be a downward spiral of trust—or a race to the bottom—in some contexts or an upward spiral (or a virtuous circle; Norris 2000) in others. When interpreting these results, however, it has to be taken into account that the WVS data does not entitle us to draw conclusions about directions of causality because each wave has surveyed different samples of respondents. A systematic assessment of causal assumptions about the individual-level relationship between political trust and press trust is impossible with the data at hand.

Furthermore, our results pointing to a trust nexus are in line with evidence reported by Ariely (2015), Cappella (2002), and Tsfaty and Cohen (2005). In a number of countries, most notably the United States, it is probably journalism's own sowing of the seeds of public cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson 1997) that backfires on the media by punishing the messenger for the message conveyed and the way it is communicated. Furthermore, as political processes are increasingly mediatized and tailored to the logic of the news media (Strömbäck and Esser 2014), audiences may therefore perceive the media as heavily interlinked with politics. The temporally growing strength of the association between political and press trust speaks to this view. Although most audience members do still meaningfully distinguish between political and media actors, they may increasingly see both institutions as being part of the same game—a game that is based on rules that often work to the detriment of the public good.

As we have argued above, however, the major force behind the fortified link between media trust and political trust, we believe, is a growing anti-elitist sentiment in many societies, which has become a fertile ground for populist political movements. Populist discourse deliberately constructs an antagonistic relationship between “the people” and “the elite,” in which the press is construed as essentially elitist institution. This impression is further cultivated by journalists expressing a condescending attitude toward those who conceive of themselves as being marginalized in the “mainstream” media (Hochschild 2016). Notably, the United States is an illuminating example; among the western democracies studied, it is the country where press trust and political trust are particularly strongly related. Ideological polarization does not appear to affect media trust directly; however, when political conversation takes place in a highly polarized climate, the association between trust in the press and political trust is indeed stronger.

From a normative perspective, declining levels of trust in the press, as observed in countries such as the United States and Australia, are most worrisome if they result from general anti-elitist attitudes and few but attention-grabbing media scandals rather than the performance of the press in general. Trust is essential for most processes of political communication: If people do not trust the institutions that deliver the news, how could they make informed decisions in the political domain? At the same time,

however, excessive media trust may be just as undesirable from a normative point of view. Democracy greatly benefits from the public's critical attitude and a healthy sense of skepticism toward politics and the news media.

Conclusion

Based on the current state of research on media trust, two major questions have motivated this analysis: To what extent is the decline in press trust a universal phenomenon and what are the factors that drive differences in trust in the press across societies and individuals as well as over time? Considering the first question, we can provide a clear answer: No, the widely noted decline in trust in the press is not happening everywhere in the world. Trust in the press is continuously eroding in a smaller proportion of the investigated societies, while for most countries, it seems rather fluctuating in somewhat modest terms. Of all countries we studied, it is the United States that experienced the largest and most dramatic decline in trust in the press. Even and especially in the western world, the United States is likely an exception rather than the norm when it comes to developments of media trust. Hence, using the American experience as "exemplar" of western democracies and extrapolating it to other (western) nations can produce seriously misleading conclusions.

Second, political trust has emerged as key factor for our understanding of trust in the press. Our study found robust evidence for what we called the *trust nexus*—the idea that trust in the news media is tied to the way publics look at political institutions. The decay of trust in the media, therefore, goes hand in hand with the erosion of public confidence in political institutions, as Bennett et al. (1999) noted almost two decades ago. We furthermore found that the relation between press trust and political trust is becoming even stronger over time. This has important implications. Discussing trends in media trust in isolation from the larger institutional context obviously misses the point. If there is a crisis in public confidence, the news media is not the only institution that falls victim to this trend. Conversely, the erosion of media trust may be a marker of substantial issues with public confidence in a country's social institutions, most likely driven by a growing anti-elitist sentiment.

Finally, we would like to make note of some important caveats of the study presented in this essay. For one, using secondary data, we had to rely on a somewhat simplistic measure of press trust despite the fact that trust is actually a much more complex construct, and even increasingly so in a changing media environment (Daniller et al. 2017). Moreover, "the press" itself is anything but a monolithic category, especially when considering the important distinction between broadsheets and tabloids as well as newspapers and magazines. Furthermore, the use of secondary data restricted our choice of potential determinants when it would have been productive to also account for a rapidly changing digital media-scape (e.g., by including data about social media use).

Finally, our study raised several questions that need to be addressed in future studies. One of these questions is related to causality in assessments of media trust vis-à-vis political trust. Such an analysis would require some kind of experimental setting or

panel design to get at the heart of causality. Central to further studies should be to clarify the extent to which political trust, in addition to its direct effect, also mediates the relationships between trust in the press and other predictors. We nonetheless think that our analysis has demonstrated the potential of combining cross-sectional and longitudinal data to furthering our understanding of media trust and its development over time. These dynamics should be the subject of further studies, ideally using a multi-wave panel design. Such a design allows making stronger claims about causality and studying the nexus between media and political trust.

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Supplemental Material

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Notes

1. European Values Study 1981-2008, Longitudinal Data File, GESIS Data Archive, Cologne, ZA4804 Data File Version 2.0.0 (2011-12-30) DOI:10.4232/1.11005. World Value Survey 1981-2014 Longitudinal Aggregate v.20150418, 2015, World Values Survey Association, Aggregate File Producer:JDSystems Data Archive, Madrid.
2. The three item political trust scale had a better fit than a scale in which press trust was added (differences in Akaike information criterion [AIC]: 1778; Tucker–Lewis index [TLI]: .009; comparative fit index [CFI]: .011), which supports the argument that press trust and political trust are separate factors.
3. For Algeria, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, and Zimbabwe, no data were collected during the fifth wave, while data were available for the fourth wave. For these countries, we used data from the fourth wave.
4. The significant correlation between change in political trust and press trust is confirmed in an analysis where the outlier Jordan is excluded.
5. Newspaper exposure could not be included, since it was only measured in wave 6.

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